György Ligeti
GYÖRGY SÁNDOR LIGETI was born in Dicsoszentmárton (now Tîrnáveni), Transylvania, Romania, on May 28, 1923, and died in Vienna on June 12, 2006. He wrote “Concert Românesc” (“Romanian Concerto”) in 1951 on a commission from the Soldiers’ Orchestra. According to research (published 2007) by Rachel Beckles Willson, it was premiered by that orchestra on April 1, 1952, and continued in their repertoire for some time. It may have been published by the Hungarian state publisher Zeneműkiadó in 1954, but this is not certain. Prior to Willson’s research, the composer had recalled a very different history for the piece (see below). Ligeti revised “Concert Românesc” in the mid-1990s; the current version was published in 1996.

THE SCORE OF LIGETI’S “CONCERT ROMÂNESC calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, three horns (the third being seated apart from the other two and serving an “echo” function), two trumpets, percussion (two players suggested: suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, snare drum, bass drum), and strings. The piece is about twelve minutes long.

Ligeti’s family was musical, but his violin-playing father, a banker and economist by trade, strongly discouraged music as a career. By the time György Ligeti finished school, in 1940, war had broken out, Hitler’s Reich controlled Hungary, and Jews were virtually prohibited from attending the university. Ligeti was able, however, to enroll at the conservatory in Cluj, where he studied with the noted Hungarian composer Ferenc Farkas while unofficially attending university science courses. Perhaps in tandem with psychological stress due to the war, Ligeti’s difficult schedule led to nervous exhaustion. He traveled to Budapest for treatment and remained there for further musical study with the pianist and composer Pál Kádós.

In 1944, Ligeti, along with many other Jews, was pressed into forced labor for the German army in a variety of dangerous settings, including working in a munitions dump behind the front lines of the Russian advance. In October 1944 he escaped, was briefly detained by the Russians, and finally made his way on foot back to Transylvania as the war came to a close. His father and brother had died in concentration camps; his mother, a doctor, survived Auschwitz in part because her medical training was valuable. (She lived many more years.)

When “normal” life resumed in war-ravaged Budapest, Ligeti returned there to enroll at the Franz Liszt Academy, where he worked with Sándor Veress and came into contact with Zoltán Kodály, who arranged for him a position as a theory instructor. (Bartók died in New York in 1945 before he could fulfill Hungary’s hopes for his return.) He also met the composer and pianist György Kurtág, who became a lifelong friend. As the 1940s continued, the increasing political and military presence of the Soviets became oppressive in its way as the war had been. Ligeti himself was initially sympathetic to communism, which (in theory) represented a utopian ideal hostile to fascism and anti-Semitism. As Soviet control became more pervasive, however, the differences between the previous occupation and the present one became less clear.

Ligeti has commented that many of the details of genuine folk styles—unusual scales, microtonality, rhythmic irregularity, and so forth—were unpalatable for the conservative natures of those in control of musical performances; only a watered-down, stylized folk music was acceptable. Even Bartók’s music was suppressed. Ligeti’s style changed from willing compliance with social realist strictures to a more abstract, progressive approach, virtually guaranteeing that his music would not be performed.

The (1951) is one of a few pieces extant from the period before Ligeti left Hungary in 1956; much better known are his Cello Sonata, String Quartet No. 1, and Six Bagatelles for Wind Quintet. The Bagatelles are re-scoring of six of ten pieces from for solo piano, which also sees frequent performances. While the effects of Ligeti’s immersion in the music of his environs on the border of Romania and Hungary are present virtually throughout his career, they are naturally most readily audible in his music of this time, which explicitly reflects an acknowledgement of, but also clearly a questing beyond, the influence of Kodály and Bartók.

According to his biographer Richard Steinitz, Ligeti wrote the while living in the environs of Rákóczy Castle in northeast Hungary, where there were residences available for artists who needed a break from the difficulties of their usual situations. Ligeti discovered some of the piece’s themes while transcribing Romanian folk music from wax cylinders in Bucharest, but much of it is original music written in the style of his Romanian models, much as Stravinsky and Bartók borrowed elements of authentic folk music to achieve a kind of universal vernacular. Steinitz also reports that the score was evidently lost, but was reconstructed from parts in the 1960s, and according to the composer was premiered publicly in Evanston, Illinois. Ligeti’s current publisher, Schott International, shows a public premiere date of August 21, 1971,
in the Gibraltar School Auditorium as part of the Peninsula Music Festival in Fish Creek, Wisconsin, with Thor Johnson conducting the Festival Orchestra. But Rachel Beckles Willson, researching her 2007 book, located a works list from the early 1950s by Ligeti himself indicating public performances in Hungary between 1951 and 1953. Also rediscovered by Beckles Willson are minutes from meetings of the Musicians’ Union showing that the piece was considered for the prestigious First Hungarian Music Week, but rejected.

The piece is in four movements, which can be heard as pairs of slow-fast episodes, like the form of the Hungarian or. The first two are orchestrations of two pieces for two violins, Ballad and Dance, written in 1950 in a style more conservative even than Kodály’s. The melancholy first movement is scored for strings, woodwinds, and horns. Trumpet and percussion join for the romping second movement. The second pair of movements features an element that Ligeti would explore to a much greater extent in later years, that of the natural harmonic series (as opposed to the tempered harmonic series of the Western chromatic tuning system). The third movement, tied to the second via a sustained G in the clarinets, gets underway with a solo horn call. The horns here are to be played in “natural” fashion, that is, without using the valves or hand-stopping needed to make their harmonic series comply with the tuning of the rest of the orchestra. The third horn, seated separately from the solo, plays the role of echo, as though answering the soloist from across a mountain ridge or plain. English horn offers responsorial commentary, accompanied freely by the violas. Finally the whole string body joins in the series of exchanges. The finale begins with insistent muted trumpets and a snare drum shot, rushing strings leading to blistering solo passages for various instruments, a violin in the lead. The solo passages and accompanying orchestral textures evoke the free and fiery music of the Gypsy taraf bands of Central Europe.

The was one of many of Ligeti’s works whose fate as a concert piece suffered because of the political instability of Hungary under the control of the Soviet Union, and because of the composer’s precipitous flight from his home country to Vienna in 1956. This and other works of Ligeti’s early years, such as the frequently performed Bagatelles for woodwind quintet and the String Quartet No. 1, not only reveal where the composer’s roots lay, but also, as one surveys his music over the fifty years from that time to his death, many of the aspects of his aesthetic that were considered so unique and new. It’s of interest, for example, that his late-period Violin Concerto (1993) quotes a melody from his for solo piano (1953); also that many of the distinctive textures that shocked audiences and brought fame to the composer in the 1960s, among them, (used in the film), and the Requiem, were derived from his study of Renaissance counterpoint.

Although Ligeti attributed the intricate interlocking rhythmic patterns of the Horn Trio, Piano Etudes, and other late works in part to his discovery of Conlon Nancarrow and African rhythmic polyphony in the late 1970s, such patterns are already nascent in, the 1960s organ works and, the clockwork music in the Chamber Concerto, and elsewhere. The conclusion to draw here is that György Ligeti—by most lights one of the greatest and most individual geniuses of 20th-century arts—was true to his own musical voice from beginning to end.

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