

## The Image Behind the Music: Visual Elements in Ligeti's Oeuvre<sup>1</sup>

"Do you dream in color?"<sup>2</sup> This is a perfect question for Ligeti, a composer who constantly glanced toward the visual arts in search for inspiration. It is also the right question to address to a self-confessed synaesthete, who sketched in sounds a *Self Portrait with Reich and Riley*, while keeping Chopin in the background. However, Ligeti should not be regarded as someone who merely replicated paintings, or made visual representations, but rather as an artist who took what he needed to absorb technical ideas from the fine arts and optical effects. Such a means of conversion eventually served to enrich his compositional palette – one capital sin according to Adorno<sup>3</sup>, who strongly argued against of what he called "pseudomorphism". By that he meant any kind of boundary transgression between the different artistic mediums. His concept also made the investigation of such connections thoroughly unpopular and risky to the scientific approach, especially when combining the temporal arts (*nacheinander* according to Lessing<sup>4</sup>) with the spatial arts (*nebeneinander*), completely incompatible in their aesthetic function.

Indeed, this didn't stop many artists making use of this manoeuvre and indulging themselves in a pan-aesthetic adventure. On the one hand we can observe the duality of arts in the case of an artist such as Pound, a poet who composed music, or Kokoschka, a painter who wrote an opera *libretto*. To the same category we can add Schönberg, the Romanian Marcel Mihalovici and the Lithuanian Čiurlionis – all of whom successfully alternated the compositional pen with the paint brush.

Still more interesting, but in equally flagrant disregard of Adorno's ideas, should be considered the fusion between artistic mediums: Mondrian paints geometric shapes which echo the steps of the foxtrot by means of the "explosive syncopation against the frame"<sup>5</sup>; Kandinsky conceives his color-tone drama *Yellow Sound*, Varèse operates a transposition of technology to music, in a *dada* manner, launching a new concept called "machine aesthetic". Morton Feldman defines his own oeuvre as being something between painting and music<sup>6</sup> and Skryabin sets a synesthetic event with light, colors and music in his piece *Prometheus*. Today, his idea might seem in line with Bertrand Castel's creative efforts of inventing the "ocular harpsichord" (*Clavecin pour les yeux*, 1725), Alexander László's patented device "color-piano" and his book *Farblichtmusik*<sup>7</sup> (*Color-Light Music*) or Carol Bérard's vision of *Chromophonie* (1925), where he pleads for the union of sonorous and luminous vibrations.

In Ligeti's case one can analyze the fusion between music and the fine arts at a multitude of intersecting points, from the naturalistic manner in which he evokes the Carpathian landscape in his *Romanian Concerto*, at the beginning of his composition career. In the same way, but using a much more complex musical language with a surrealistic tone, he sets a vividly sonorous depiction of Breughelland in the opera *Le Grand Macabre* with Breughel's pictures in mind: *The land of Cockaigne* and the *Triumph of Death*.

However, his oeuvre contains an increasingly wide array of examples in which sounds and images blend with even greater subtlety.

On closer inspection one has to acknowledge a criss-crossing of the discursive boundaries in Ligeti's music: literature and philosophy generated visual sensations which later became musical substance. A lecture of Krudy's and Carl Popper's writings sparked the composer's imagination and he converted the literary text into an image of the precise mechanisms measuring the time, and finally going wrong. Pieces such as *Poème symphonique* for 100 metronomes, *Clocks and Clouds*, fragments from the *Chamber Concerto* and *Les Horloges Démoniaques* from *Nou-*

<sup>1</sup> The paper is carried out within the M.I.D.A.S. Project (Musical Institute for Doctoral Advanced Studies) of the National Music University in Bucharest, code 89/1.5/S/62923, being financed by P.O.S.D.R.U.

<sup>2</sup> ROELKE, E., 2003. *Träumen Sie in Farben? György Ligeti im Gespräch mit Eckhard Roelke*. Vienna: Zsolnay Verlag.

<sup>3</sup> ADORNO, Th., 1973. *Philosophy of Modern Music*. Translated by Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster. New York: Continuum. Original German edition, as *Philosophie der neuen Musik*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1949.

<sup>4</sup> LESSING, G. E., 1984. *Laocon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Translated, with an Introduction and Notes by Edward Allen McCormick. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>5</sup> COOPER, H., 2002. Popular Models: Foxtrot and Jazz Band in Mondrian's Abstraction. In J. LEGGIO, ed. *Music and modern art*. New York: Routledge, 185.

<sup>6</sup> DUCHAMP, M., 1973. The 1914 Box. In M. SANNOUILLET and E. PETERSON, eds. *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. New York: Da Capo Press, 25.

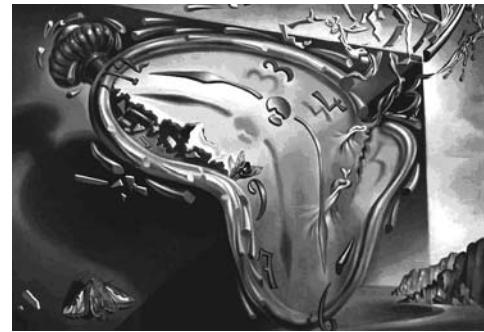
<sup>7</sup> BAKER, J. M., 2002. "Prometheus" and the Quest For Color-Music: The World Premiere of Scriabin's "Poem of Fire" with Lights, New York, March 20, 1915. In J. LEGGIO, ed. *Music and modern art*. New York: Routledge, 85.

*velles Aventures*, all represent landmarks of Ligeti's style in the 60s and the 70s. Clocks which end up not agreeing with each other contrast with moments of suspended time placing the listener in a limbo between music and the most concrete imagery. The transition between a well-defined multiple beat and the diffusion of the regular ticking into an indefinite temporal flow calls for another associative value in the fine arts, evoking Dali's soft watches (Example 1).

Ligeti's well known dynamic and static pieces rely themselves upon the visual support of optical effects; the composer's explanations of his piece *Continuum* for harpsichord refer to a continuous landscape "sliced" into very small pieces, as if seen through a fence. The fast succession of the small cuts generates eventually the perfect continuity of the whole, as the composer himself explains this musical yet optical phenomenon in a film produced in 1975 by the BBC<sup>8</sup>.

It would however be thoroughly inadequate to proceed in search of visual displays in Ligeti's works; instead the absorption of painterly effects and optical techniques as applied to music should be subtly emphasized. The habit of fuzzing the lines encounters a creative stimulus in the Impressionist techniques, and especially in Cézanne's paintings (the so called "movement without movement"), but at the same time in the optical effect known as "blurring function" which the composer studied in Cologne, at the Studio for electronic music. It is not only the micro-polyphonic fabric which generates this sensation and neutralizes both harmony and rhythm, but also the manner in which Ligeti plays with unequally-tempered intonation; micro-intervallic distortions are meant to deceive the auditory focal point of the listener, as if it were an unclear vision. Such a thing occurs in the *String Quartet No. 2*, the *Double Concerto* or in *Ramifications*. The micro-intervallic accidentals are precisely marked in these scores, coexisting with the same notes in their natural pitch, thus the acoustic outcome is a "hazy" sonority (Example 2).

Example 1. György Ligeti. *Chamber Concerto*, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement



Salvador Dalí: *Soft Watch at the Moment of First Explosion*. Ink on paper, 1954

Example 2. György Ligeti. *String Quartet No. 2*, 2<sup>nd</sup> movement, bars 10-12

<sup>8</sup> All Clouds are Clocks, 1975. Film. Produced by Barrie GAVIN. London: BBC.

Maurits Escher's graphics inspired too some of Ligeti's works; he brilliantly rendered in music the optical illusion of continuous metamorphosis as well as the stairs which ascend and descend in an endless loop. No other piece better conveys this image than the Piano Etude *Vertige* where the composer makes use of the Shepard's scales in order to create the same acoustical illusion of perpetual falling or climbing (Example 3).

*dédicée à Mauricio Kagel*  
**Étude 9: Vertige**  
Auftragswerk der Stadt Gütersloh

**Prestissimo \*)sempre molto legato,  $\textcircled{O} = 48$  (very even / sehr gleichmäßig) \*\*)**



(4)



Example 3. György Ligeti

Maurits Cornelius Escher. *Relativity*.  
Litograph, 1953

Constructing similar metaphors which spring from potent visual images, Ligeti becomes inspired by the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși; he "knocks over" on the piano keyboard the *Endless Column* and also erects a *Devil's staircase* in sounds. By means of the most exquisite compositional craftsmanship, he brilliantly renders the essential features of the visual in music (Example 4).

*dédicée à Vincent Meyer*  
**Étude 14: „Columna infinită“**  
Kompositionsauftrag der westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität, Münster

**Presto possibile, tempestoso con fuoco,  $\textcircled{D} = 105$  \*)**

18      **fff sempre con tutta la forza, legato possibile**



3



Example 4. György Ligeti

Constantin Brâncuși.  
*The Endless Column*.  
Târgu Jiu, Romania, 1938

Ligeti's laboratory reveals his habit of constructing a work initiated by a simple drawing as mnemotechnical device, accompanied by verbal references and only then supplanting the general design by a score. This process is clearly explained by the composer in the same film<sup>9</sup> produced by the BBC, in 1975, where he reveals this sequence of steps until reaching the final score.

Features of Pop Art and cartoon movies attracted Ligeti's attention for musical adaptation; he converts the *Ten pieces for woodwind quintet* into a sequence of colored cartoons just as the *collage* technique and the use of *objets trouvés* constitute a common practice in *Le Grand Macabre*. Regarding his opera, the composer stated: "I take bits of actual music or signals, put them in an unfamiliar context, distort them, not necessarily making them sound humorous but interpreting them through distortion, just as a surrealist painting presents the world"<sup>10</sup>.

There is no doubt that Ligeti's understanding of music was largely visual, in the most subtle sense possible. There is solid proof in the *Nonsense Madrigals* or in the triptych of *Hölderlin Phantasies*; Ligeti's way of providing a musical-visual correspondent to the words he is employing, as in the *decoratio* of musical rhetorics, refers back to the Eye-music times<sup>11</sup>, augmenting the pieces' power of expression.

Always receptive to the new scientific theories as well as to the newest advances in technology, Ligeti created aesthetic links between music and the fascinating world of the fractal geometry, chaos theory, the blow-up principle (*Piano Etude Désordre*), window technique or computer generated images, all acting as a hidden visual armature of his music, especially from the mid 70s onwards.

If all these might be viewed as pure speculation, the abundance of explicit references to the Fine Arts in Ligeti's manuscripts vindicate the legitimacy of the topic and prove that his music intimately intersects a multitude of visual references.

The documents stored at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel serve as an excellent testimony to the manner in which Ligeti's music is sustained by his visual imagination. Randomly choosing a few manuscript pages, we focus on the sketches of the *Piano Concerto* which include Ligeti's following remarks:

"Klee, Hundertwasser, Bosch-Breughel (cluster), like a Cézanne's water<sup>12</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> Movement Gaudi"<sup>13</sup> – the last one combined with some surprising jazz references such as Charlie Parker's *Ornithology* or *Yardbird*.

The *Violin Concerto* also keeps the visual as an undercurrent, the manuscript pages being extremely rich in such elements: one of the versions Ligeti imagined for the 1<sup>st</sup> Movement considered as reference points van Eyck's art, Grünewald's Colmar angel wings<sup>14</sup> (kept in the French city at the Unterlinden Museum), Seurat technique, while the 4<sup>th</sup> Movement alludes to the shifted grids<sup>15</sup>, and also to the screen-computer – stroboscope film<sup>16</sup>.

The poetics of synesthesia can equally be traced in the sketches of some uncompleted works, showing that Ligeti relied on visual *stimuli* until the last phase of his creative life: in the manuscripts of the opera *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* the composer marks, again, the name of Breughel the Elder and his painting *The Land of Cockaigne* (*The Land of Cockgaigne* – but luminous<sup>17</sup>), he continues to evoke Picasso's paintings *Guernica* and *La Danse*, associated with the word "Violenza", but also the syntagma *objets trouvés* and the name Pollock<sup>18</sup>.

*Labyrinth*, another uncompleted work, intended as an extended piece for large orchestra for the conductor Esa Pekka Salonen, makes reference to the Raster System as well as to the painters Seurat, Signac, Turner and Cézanne, the composer noting in the sketches the words "Lights and colors or Sea change"<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> All Clouds are Clocks, 1975. Film. Produced by Barrie GAVIN. London: BBC.

<sup>10</sup> LIGETI, G., VÁRNAY, P., HÄUSLER, J., SAMUEL, Cl., 1983. *György Ligeti in conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel, and himself*, London: Eulenburg, 59.

<sup>11</sup> LOBANOVA, M., 2002. *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics*, Berlin: Ernst Kuhn Verlag, 263; 321; 326.

<sup>12</sup> Hungarian original: "mint a Cézanne viz".

<sup>13</sup> Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Dossier: Konzert (Kl., orch. 1985–1988) Skizzen und Entwürfe.

<sup>14</sup> Hungarian original: "angyalszárnnyak".

<sup>15</sup> Hungarian original: "eltolódó rácsok".

<sup>16</sup> Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Dossier: Konzert (Vl., orch. 1990) Skizzen und Notizen.

<sup>17</sup> Hungarian original: "Schlaraffendland de fényegető".

<sup>18</sup> Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Dossier: Skizzenbuch Braun (Oktav) 1990–2003 and Dossier: Werkprojekte und fragmente. Alice in Wonderland – Skizzen und Notizen.

<sup>19</sup> Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Dossier: Skizzenbuch Braun (Quart) 1992–2001.

The same piece makes reference to the avant-garde artist Tinguely with his *Enfer Mécanique*, to the optical effect given by the superposition of two grids at a small angle, known as the “Moiré pattern”<sup>20</sup>, and also to the pixel idea as part of the imagery absorbed by Ligeti in his music.

His sketches of the unfinished *String Quartet No. 3* build more bridges between sound and image; “Alhambra ornaments”, “in Escher’s metamorphoses footsteps”<sup>21</sup>, speaking of Ligeti’s un-dogmatic approach to composition.

That Ligeti clearly developed a system of musical and visual inter-dependence becomes increasingly evident as we draw closer to the composer’s manuscripts. It is astonishing how he combines apparently contradictory stylistic worlds, from music and the fine arts, blending his sources of inspiration with amazing virtuosity. The manuscripts of his piece *Ramifications* surprisingly place next to each other the names of Bosch and Fahlström<sup>22</sup>, while the *Requiem* finds a visual basis again in Bosch, but in the same time in El Greco or in the mannerist and Baroque painters<sup>23</sup>. Ligeti’s own words compare the *Dies Irae* to “a colourful picture-book, with new images conjured up all the time, in every third line”, also adding: “Here I definitely wanted to paint pictures in music; my aim was a virtual representation”<sup>24</sup>.

Given all this, Ligeti would seem the ideal artist to have commissioned by the city of Nürnberg, in 1971, a piece celebrating the 500 years anniversary of Albrecht Dürer, to which the composer’s response was the piece *Melodien*.

But his connection with the fine arts reaches towards the performance of his pieces. The composer discusses in terms of painting the choice of performing artists, as well as the way his music should remain recorded for the posterity (see the Sony Ligeti Edition collection). According to the composer’s words<sup>25</sup>, his works should be presented as if in a gallery exhibition, exactly as pictures are displayed in the best light possible, thus providing both audience and performers with a series of reference models.

While the composer described his pieces as open windows capturing fragments of an ever-changing landscape, allowing us to see his oeuvre as a *trompe l’oeil* of 20th century music, we could also say that the world as seen through Ligeti’s “looking glass” definitely seems to be a brilliantly bizarre maze twisted in upon itself, forever inviting us to solve its puzzle in order to unlock and parcel out new levels of meaning. Moreover, it could provide Douglas Hofstadter with fresh ideas for writing a new book entitled “Popper, Escher, Ligeti”, extending his eternal golden braid into infinity.

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<sup>20</sup> Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Dossier: Skizzenbuch Braun (Quart) 1992–2001.

<sup>21</sup> Hungarian original: “metamorfózisok Escher nyomán”, Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Dossier: Skizzenbuch Braun (Quart) 1992–2001.

<sup>22</sup> Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Dossier: Ramifications (Skizzen).

<sup>23</sup> Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Dossier: Requiem 1/6 (Skizzen).

<sup>24</sup> LIGETI, G., VARNAI, P., HÄUSLER, J., SAMUEL, Cl., 1983. *György Ligeti in conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel, and himself*, London: Eulenburg, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Interview avec György Ligeti, 1998. Film. Produced by ARTE: Paris, France.

### Santrauka

#### Vaizdas už muzikos: vizualiniai elementai G. Ligeti kūryboje

Joks kitas šių laikų kompozitorius taip plačiai nenagrinėjo garso ir vaizdo sąsajų kaip G. Ligeti. Laikydamas save sinestetu, visoje savo kūryboje rémési ir akivaizdžiai, ir numanomais vizualiniai veiksnių. Pradedant natūralistinius Karpatų peizažais „Rumuniškame koncerte“ arba Breughellando miesto vaizdais operoje „Didysis siaubūnas“ (*Le Grand Macabre*), jo kūriniuose, ypač sukurtuose po apsilankymo Kelne, išryškėja subtilios vaizduojamojo meno technikos. Nemažas įkvėpimo šaltinis jam buvo ir literatūra – čia jis rado laikrodžių ir mechanizmų aprašymų, kuriais rémési kurdamas savo muziką. Tapybos ir grafikos kūriniuose jis ieškojo dekoratyvumo, o kompiuteriu kuriami vaizdiniai, tokie kaip Mandelbroto ir de Julia aibės, taip pat inspiruodavo nemažai kūrybinių minčių.

Būdamas pripažintas vaizduojamojo meno žinovas (nuo Canaletto ir Guardi iki Picasso, Margritte'o ir Peterio Blake'o koliažų), savo muzikoje Ligeti tarsi sujungė regos ir klausos pojūčius ir sukūré muzikos komponavimo metodus – tapybinę techniką ir vizualinius efektus. Iš Esherio jis pasiskolino kristalografijos principus ir nuolatinio transformavimo techniką, iš Cézanne'o – dažų suliejimo manierą, o kurdamas savo muzikinius koliažus naudojosi popmenui būdingu vadinamuoju *objets trouvés* principu. Negana to, į garsą jis perkélé *blow-up* (protrūkio) ir *strange loop* (keistos kilpos) principus, „Trijose fantazijose pagal Fr. Hölderliną“ ir „Beprasiškuose madrigaluose“ subtiliai panaudojo žodžių pertekimo metodą *Augenmusik*, taip pat nutapė abstraktų „Autoportretą su Reichu ir Riley“. Bet originaliausia yra tai, kad Ligeti naudojosi piešiniais kaip pirminiais komponavimo etiudais, iš kurių tik vėliau atsirasdavo partitūros. Taigi šiuo atveju muzikos ir vaizdo sąsaja tampa kūrybos proceso pagrindu.

Visos šios vizualinės charakteristikos leidžia Ligeti muziką priskirti unikalai tarpjausminei sričiai, kurioje svarbiausia yra sinestetinė poetika. Pats kompozitorius savo kūrybą vadina langu į amžinąjį garsų peizažą, kuriamojo kūrinių tampa nuostabiaisiai XX a. muzikos *trompe l'oeil* (optinė iliuzija) pavyzdžiai.