

Györgi Ligeti (1923-2006)

*Lontano* for full orchestra

Program Note by Anna Reguero

A snapshot of Györgi Ligeti's output might put him into the category of a madman: he wrote a piece for 100 metronomes, took eerie fascination and inspiration from dysfunctional machinery, and wrote music so chilling that it has accompanied some of the most fear-inducing films. But in fact, Ligeti was one of the 20th century's most enduring and celebrated figures in experimental composition, whose music admired not only for its underlying construction, which is unlike that of any other composer, but also for its aural affect: his music is often ethereal and hauntingly beautiful.

Born in 1923 to a Hungarian Jewish family in Transylvania, later occupied by Hungary, Ligeti began life as a composer under strict lockdown. Only music in affirmation of social norms set by the ruling socialist government stood a chance to be performed. With his music banned for its dissonances, drawing influence from the rustic out-of-tune flavor of Hungarian folk bands, and the compounding political discord leading up to the Hungarian revolution, Ligeti fled to Vienna by foot in 1956.

Western Europe proved to be a much friendlier atmosphere for Ligeti, where avant-garde composition was seen as a way to rebuild culture following the Second World War. Exposure to the most current music and composers of the time, including Stockhausen, led him to an electronic music studio in Germany where he began experimentation in electronic sounds. It didn't stick; Ligeti soon returned to instrumental writing. But he was forever changed. The properties and possibilities of electronically produced sound never left his ears and shifted his aesthetic.

The aesthetic he emerged with was one that elevated timbre and color, where the highly controlled compositional elements were hidden by a sheer and hazy overlay and where density of sound provided developmental force. Ligeti wrote, "I conceived a kind of synaesthetic music, with visual associations of colour and light, and tactile associations of matter, density, volume and space replacing motifs, melodies, harmonies and rhythm."

*Lontano*, which means "far away" or "in the distance," was written in 1967, at the height of Ligeti's developed aesthetic. With the forces of an entire orchestra (minus percussion), Ligeti opens the piece with a unison, stark A-flat that gradually expands to nearby pitches that first seem to disturb the meditative, static plane, but eventually morph into and dominate new areas of sonic lightness or darkness. Though Ligeti does, in a sense, cycle through all 12 pitches of a chromatic scale, the work remains grounded in traditional harmony – chords and snippets of melody emerge out of the texture that reminisce with the music of Wagner and Bruckner.

Underneath the thick and static texture is a complex system of polyphony, not all unlike that of Bach's fugues, where so many elements are gradually shifting that deciphering the individual, minute changes is impossible. Rather, the listener focuses on the totality of the effect. Ligeti wrote, "I rather imagined a vast space of sound in gradual transformation, not through dense chromaticism but through a

constantly changing pattern of colour like a moiré fabric.” As *New Yorker* music critic Alex Ross so eloquently states, “The music hovers out of reach, teasingly imprecise, yet viscerally beautiful. Each sonority hangs in the air like the smile of the Cheshire cat.”

*Lontano* may at times draw comparisons with atmospheric movie soundtracks. Though not composed for the purpose (Ligeti has been clear in interviews that there’s no story or program for the piece), the work has been appropriated as a backdrop for film and radio. *Lontano* features in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shinning*, Martin Scorsese’s *Shutter Island*, and also made the British airwaves for the original radio version of the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Sci-fi and horror flick fans can unite in a shared claim to one of Classical music’s greatest contemporary composers.