

Composer Portraits

György Ligeti
The Complete Piano Etudes

Christopher Taylor, *piano*

Sunday, November 6, 2005, 3 pm
Hertz Hall

PROGRAM

György Ligeti *Etudes for Piano*

Book 3 (1995–)

- XV. White on White (1995)
- XVI. Pour Irina (1997)
- XVII. A bout de souffle (1998)
- XVIII. Canon (2001)

Book 2 (1988–1994)

- VII. Galamb borong (1988–1989)
- VIII. Fém (1989)
- IX. Vertige (1990)
- X. Der Zauberlehrling (1994)
- XI. En suspens (1994)
- XII. Entrelacs (1993)
- XIII. L'escalier du diable (1993)
- XIV. Coloana infinità (1993)

INTERMISSION

Book 1 (1985)

- I. Désordre
- II. Cordes à vide
- III. Touches bloquées
- IV. Fanfares
- V. Arc-en-ciel
- VI. Automne à Varsovie

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Over the past 25 years **György Ligeti** has devoted much compositional effort to the piano étude, a form that clearly serves his musical needs admirably. Ligeti has stated that frustration with his own (allegedly) inadequate technique underlay his efforts to twist the fingers into every conceivable contortion. To me, the astounding creativity of Ligeti's piano writing belies his self-deprecating statements. Producing marvels like these études surely requires complete mastery of the instrument's potential as well as flawless intuition concerning the hand's abilities.

Apart from being inspired by the instrument itself and by the enjoyment that the hand derives from playing it, Ligeti acknowledges various other sources contributing to his style: the polyphonic, polyrhythmic idiophone ensembles of sub-Saharan Africa; the fractal geometry pioneered by Mandelbrot and Peitgen; jazz greats like Thelonius Monk and Bill Evans; and Conlon Nancarrow, whose quirky, complex compositions figured prominently in my own performances last season. But like any great composer Ligeti transcends his influences and defies ready categorization; each of the piano études, while developing out of a simple idea and generally of brief duration, creates an inimitable effect, a mixture of astonishment and pleasure.

In Book 1 (études 1 through 6), we find a smorgasbord of fascinating and difficult pianistic tricks. In many, a mad machine-like quality reminiscent of Futurism predominates. In number 1 the right hand remains entirely on the white keys, repeating at ever higher pitch levels the same chant-like melody with rapid accompanying notes interspersed, while the left hand sticks to the black keys, performing a similar accompanied chant. Unfortunately for the pianist, the two hands almost immediately start to fall out of phase with each other, resulting in a sort of controlled pandemonium. Similar stratagems involving irregular rhythms falling out of phase occur in numbers 4 and 6; numbers 2 and 5 provide some relief with their more tranquil atmospheres (inspired by the open fifths of stringed instruments and by jazz, respectively). The third étude ("Touches bloquées," or "Blocked Keys") employs perhaps the most outlandish technique of all: after

one hand plays a chord silently, the other plays chromatic scales up and down through the same region of the keyboard. Because half of the keys in these scales are already depressed, fingers striking those notes make no sound at all; accordingly, all the listener hears is intermittent pitches, scattered in an irregular, stuttering rhythm that would be almost impossible to produce in any other way.

The manic energy of Book 1 continues unabated through the second book of études. "Galamb borong" (number 7) presents many of the bewildering rhythmic conflicts of number 1, but in a much gentler fashion (where before white keys clashed with black, here the hands complement each other with two distinct whole-tone scales). The title is pseudo-Balinese, suggesting the evocative sonorities of Indonesia. While also polyrhythmic, number 8 produces yet another, entirely different impression: brilliant, brittle, slightly jazzy (the name "Fém" is the Hungarian word for metal). Number 9 requires much fiendish fingering, even by Ligeti's demanding standards, as descending chromatic runs in ever-increasing numbers pile up in rapid succession. "Der Zauberlehrling" (The Sorcerer's Apprentice) appears to be a successor to *Continuum*, a harpsichord work Ligeti wrote in 1968 that features a tempo so rapid that the repeating patterns of notes congeal into a buzzing mass. In number 11, D-flat major overlaps with C major and 6/4 time with 12/8, combinations presented in a laid-back fashion reminiscent of number 5. The same mix of tonalities recurs in number 12, but a very different texture prevails: steady sixteenth notes tremble in the background, and isolated high and low notes chime through periodically (the pauses between them being based on prime numbers like 13 and 17). "The Devil's Staircase" (number 13) forms a sort of mirror image of number 9, with incessantly ascending chromatic scales predominant; towards the end, church-bells ring forth. Finally, étude 14 pays tribute to the work of Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi with music that, as in the preceding étude, seems to ascend forever in the manner of a barber-pole or an Escher woodcut. Ligeti originally composed the étude in a guise so fiendish that eventually he reconsidered, rewriting it with somewhat fewer notes. In the score the original version remains as

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an appendix, with the recommendation that it be performed on a player piano.

The four études of Book 3, while preserving the hallmarks of Ligeti's style, employ some new musical devices. All four études contain canons, sometimes disguised but often reasonably easy to hear. Frequently the notes derive from simple tonal scales (C major, B-flat harmonic minor, C melodic minor), though the resulting music rarely sounds very tonal. Number 15 stays almost entirely on the white keys (in contrast to number 1, in which only the right hand is so restricted); the mood moves from tranquil to boisterous, but throughout the sonorities are pure, bright, even a bit stark. "Pour Irina," dedicated to pianist and Ligeti exponent Irina Kataeva, is the darkly colored twin of its predecessor, with fragments of minor scales that move in parallel and gradually accelerate. Number

17 ("Out of Breath") is a canon in which the left hand chases the right, only one eighth-note behind, to bewildering effect. The final "Canon" pursues a similar idea (the two voices are now separated by a quarter note); initially Ligeti requests a slightly faltering tempo, but when the material repeats he demands unhesitating mechanical speed.

The études in Book 3 were published in the summer of 2005, under the heading "Book 3, Volume 1." Clearly Ligeti still has more to say about the piano's possibilities, and I of course await the next installment eagerly, if perhaps with trepidation. While this evening's 18 études may seem exhaustive (if not exhausting), I can imagine no worthier goal than to have whetted your appetites for all the future delights that Ligeti seems sure to have in store.

Christopher Taylor

György Ligeti was born in Dicsöszentmárton (today Tarnaveni), Romania on May 28, 1923, a son of Hungarian-Jewish parents. He studied at the Klausenburg conservatory with Ferenc Farkas from 1941 to 1943, later (1945–49) at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest with Ferenc Farkas, Sándor Veress, Pál Járdányi and Lajos Bárdos. Early on in his studies he developed the micropolyphony which later was to become one of the most significant features of his music. In his early pieces, such as the *a cappella* choral work *Éjszaka, Reggel* (Night, Morning, 1955) and his first successful work in the West, *Apparitions* (1958–59), this style is already distinctive.

In December 1956, after the Hungarian revolution, Ligeti left his home country for artistic and political reasons. During his work as a freelancer at the West German Radio electronic studios in Cologne (1957–58) he thoroughly studied the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mauricio Kagel, and Pierre Boulez, which found its musical expression in his work *Artikulation* (1958). *Artikulation*, as well as *Atmosphères* for large orchestra (1961), brought Ligeti immediate recognition in the West. Long international teaching activities finally led him to the Hamburg Musikhochschule as a professor of composition (1973–89).

Realizing an idea that had been preoccupying his mind for quite some time, Ligeti created his first full-length stage work *Le grand macabre* (1974–77) after a fable by Michel de Ghelderode. Ligeti's complex polyrhythmic compositional technique forms the basis of the works written in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the *Études pour piano*, which he began in 1985, the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (1985–88), the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (1990–92), and the Sonata for Viola Solo (1991–94).

Numerous prizes, awards, and distinctions are proof of the high esteem accorded to Ligeti's work and to his role as a teacher and mentor of an entire generation of composers. Apart from his membership in the Hamburg Free Academy of Arts and the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, other prizes and distinctions include the German decoration, "Pour le mérit" of Science and Art in 1975; an appointment as "Commandeur

dans l'Ordre National des Arts et Lettres," in Paris, 1988; a "Prix de composition musicale de la Fondation Prince Pierre de Monaco" (also received in 1988); the Music Award of the Balzan Foundation and the Praemium Imperiale in 1991; Ernst-von-Siemens Music Award in 1993; and a Unesco-IMC (International Music Council) Music Prize in 1996. In 1997 the Rumanian Academy conferred Ligeti Honorary Membership, and in 1998 the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris appointed him as "Associé étranger" (Associated Foreign Member). On October 9, 2000, Ligeti was awarded the Sibelius Prize of the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation in Helsinki, and in 2001 the Kyoto-Prize for Arts and Science for the body of his work. Ligeti was honored with the medal of the Senate of the City of Hamburg on his 80th birthday and the city of Frankfurt awarded him the Theodor W. Adorno Prize on September 13, 2003. In 2004 he was awarded the Polar Music Prize of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music, the Gold Medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society, the Echo Klassik 2004, and the Frankfurt Music Prize 2005.

The cosmopolitan Ligeti lives and works in Hamburg and Vienna.

The past few years have seen **Christopher Taylor** emerge as one of the nation's foremost musicians. Audiences and critics alike hail the intensity and artistry he brings to the works of masters ranging from Bach and Beethoven to Boulez and Bolcom. *The Washington Post*, for instance, deemed Taylor "one of the most impressive young pianists on the horizon today," and *The New York Times* described a recent performance as "astounding."

Numerous awards have confirmed Taylor's high standing in the music world. He was named an American Pianists' Association Fellow for 2000, before which he received an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 1996 and the Bronze Medal in the 1993 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, where he was the first American to receive such high recognition in twelve years. In 1990 he took first prize in the William Kapell International Piano Competition, and also became one of the first recipients of the Irving Gilmore Young Artists' Award.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

In recent seasons, Taylor has concertized around the globe, performing throughout Europe and in Korea, the Philippines, and the Caribbean. At home in the U.S. he has appeared with such orchestras as the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, St. Louis Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, Houston Symphony and Boston Pops, and has toured with the Polish Chamber Philharmonic. As a soloist he has performed in such venues as New York's Carnegie and Alice Tully halls, Washington's Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Ravinia and Aspen music festivals, and dozens of others. His first recording, released by Jonathan Digital in 2000, featured works by American composers William Bolcom and Derek Bermel. His most recent recording, Liszt's *Twelve Transcendental Etudes*, was released in 2003 on the Liszt Digital label.

In the summer of 2004 Taylor returned for the third successive year to the Aspen Music Festival for two concerts, including the Aspen premiere of the Viktor Ullmann Piano Concerto under the baton of James Conlon. During the subsequent 2004/05 season Taylor performed such staples of the repertoire as Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto,

four Beethoven sonatas, and Saint-Saëns's Second Concerto, along with less orthodox material such as Conlon Nancarrow's complete piano music and the Webern Piano Quintet. Of particular note was his performance of the Bach *Goldberg Variations* on the unique double-manual Steinway piano in the collection of the University of Wisconsin.

Taylor owes much of his success to several outstanding teachers, including Russell Sherman, Maria Curcio-Diamand, Francisco Aybar, and Julie Bees. In addition to performing, Taylor is currently the Paul Collins Associate Professor of Piano Performance at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He pursues a variety of other interests, including: mathematics, a field in which he received a *summa cum laude* degree from Harvard University in 1992; philosophy (he has recently published an article in the *Oxford Free Will Handbook* coauthored with the leading scholar Daniel Dennett); computing (one project being to create a compiler for a new programming language); linguistics; and biking, which is his primary means of commuting. Taylor lives in Middleton, Wisconsin, with his wife, musicologist Denise Pilmer Taylor, and two daughters.