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Mike Searby

Ligeti's 'third way': 'Non-tonal' elements in the Horn Trio

Claude Samuel: Is the real danger for a composer the temptation to look back or the obsession with the *Avant-garde*?

György Ligeti: I reject them both. The *Avant-garde*, to which I am said to belong, has become academic. As for looking back, there's no point in chewing over an outmoded style. I prefer to follow a third way: being myself, without paying heed either to categorizations or to fashionable gadgetry.¹

It is perhaps curious that only a year after this exchange took place in 1981, Ligeti completed his Horn Trio – which uses traditional ternary form, a passacaglia (although a disguised one), a strong melodic focus, and a harmonic language which contains clear triads and dominant sevenths in abundance. In spite of his assertions above, it does seem as if Ligeti, in addition to rejecting the *Avant-garde*, is looking to the past for major elements of his musical language.

However, in so doing he avoids the imitation of stylistic features of past music, so prevalent in neo-Romantics such as David Del Tredici and George Rochberg. Ligeti clearly detests such an approach. In an interview with Tunde Szitha in 1990, he stated:

I hate neo-expression and I can't stand the neo-Mahlerite and neo-Bergian affectations, just as I can't stand post-modern architecture.²

Ligeti's music from *Le Grand Macabre* (1974–77) onwards has few characteristics of the music of the neo-Romantics, although it does have a greater degree of melodic expression than his textural music from the 1960s. There appears to be a fundamental shift in his compositional approach in the late 1970s and 1980s, as he moved away from writing texturally based music towards a language which uses more traditional elements.

This shift is also seen in many different composers of his generation, such as Penderecki, Maxwell Davies and Pärt. In Ligeti's case, the

shift may have been caused by his characteristic approach to compositional technique, which treats musical elements experimentally. His approach to composition in the early 1960s involved completely destroying all the traditional elements of music, such as harmony, melody, and rhythm, so as to allow him to focus on texture and timbre. Once he had fully explored the possibilities of textural composition in orchestral works such as *Atmosphères* (1961) and *Apparitions* (1958–9), Ligeti started to rediscover the elements that he had previously shunned.

In *Lux Aeterna* and *Lontana*, written in 1966 and 1967 respectively, there is a clearer and richer sense of harmony, because – although it is produced largely from clusters of semitones and tones – Ligeti tends to avoid the total chromatic saturation found in his earlier works.

The clearer harmonic sense is created in spite of the music being generated through the use of complex arhythmic canons, a technique Ligeti named *Mikropolyphonie*, because of its complex web-like textures. In the Chamber Concerto (1969–70) Ligeti shows an increasing melodic preoccupation by highlighting and slowing down particular fragments of the background *Mikropolyphonie*. This creates a more lyrical and expressive dimension to the music, which is further developed in *Melodien* (1971) and *San Francisco Polyphony* (1974).

The opera *Le Grand Macabre*, completed in 1977, was a radical departure from Ligeti's established style: it employs past musical materials in an overt way, particularly triads, thirds and sixths and the passacaglia form. There is also an orchestral section entitled 'collage' which uses a parodied bass line from the last movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, and layerings of ragtime, flamenco, and a distorted Greek orthodox hymn, to create an Ivesian cacophony. The opera showed a very new, eclectic approach in which quite tonal music was placed alongside *Mikropolyphonie*, almost as if the composer was parodying himself. The significance of the opera was that it gave Ligeti the freedom to explore a quite different musical landscape – including clear tonal allusions – which he had purposely

¹ Claude Samuel, 'Entretien avec György Ligeti' (1981), trans. Terence Kilmartin, in *Ligeti in Conversation*, (London: Eulenberg, 1983), p.123.

² Tunde Szitha, 'A conversation with György Ligeti', *Hungarian Music Quarterly*, vol 3, pt.1, (1992), p.17.

avoided since the 1950s. His harmonic palette became expanded to include sounds that were forbidden to an *Avant-garde* composer of the 1960s and 1970s.

Ligeti's two harpsichord works of 1978, *Passacaglia ungherese* and *Hungarian Rock*, show that his compositional approach had been transformed by the experience of writing *Le Grand Macabre*. These works are both passacaglias, a structure which has become one of his favourite forms. *Passacaglia ungherese* is based upon a series of 16 vertical intervals constructed of thirds and sixths which create a tonally disorientating aural effect, increased by the use of mean-tone tuning (almost the aural analogue of a perception-distorting Escher drawing). This is achieved by shifting key implications, with no one key being clearly established. The lower part of the ground consists of two intervallically identical four-note chromatic clusters which causes the unsettling effect (see Ex.1). The melodic line, placed above and below the repeated intervallic structure, is similarly disconcerting as it alternates between creating consonance and dissonance with the ground (see Ex.2). The work becomes more

tonally schizophrenic as it progresses before finally disintegrating onto an E major triad.

Hungarian Rock is similarly structured around a repeated harmonic pattern consisting of a one-bar bass line harmonized in four different ways. This, too, creates tonal disorientation in the listener as there are only fleeting glimpses of possible keys. Each of the bars has the bass pattern harmonized with different inversions exploring roots, second inversions, first inversions and third inversions (see Ex.3). The melodic line is whimsical, clearly matching the underlying harmony at some points and creating strong dissonance at others. In both these works it seems as if Ligeti is improvising against a rigid harmonic framework; the improvised line is often in conflict with the harmonic basis. *Passacaglia ungherese* is clearly a parody of a baroque passacaglia whereas *Hungarian Rock* seems to be a mutant type of Hungarian-flavoured popular music; an extreme example of eclecticism.

In these works Ligeti appears to be treating triadic harmony in a non-tonal way. He is using the triad not as part of a tonal system, but as if it

Example 1

b.3 **Passacaglia Ungherese**

I C major bIII V I D major IV bVI II #3 IV I C major

Example 2

Example 3

roots 2nd inversions 1st inversions 3rd inversions

was any group of pitches: in other words, he is using the vocabulary but not the syntax of tonal music. Ligeti subverts the tonal implications of his harmonic progressions by continually shifting the fleeting pitch centres.

The subversion of the traditional function of the triad by 20th-century composers has been identified by Joseph Straus in his book *Remaking the Past*, which primarily examines the post-tonal music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Webern. He states:

When triads occur in contexts other than the traditionally tonal ones, careful critical attention must be paid. The presence of triads on the musical surface need not imply a triadic middleground and background as well.³

This observation can be applied to Ligeti's use of the triad; it is largely used as a surface sonority, colouristically rather than as part of the deeper musical structure. Straus also applied the theory of influence as anxiety (coined by the literary critic Harold Bloom) to 20th-century music, suggesting that composers react against past music by purposely misreading it.

[twentieth-century composers] ... misread the triad, striving to neutralize its tonal implications and to redefine it within a post-tonal context.⁴

This misreading takes the form of using the surface features of tonality, without the longer-range structural underpinning.

Ligeti's Horn Trio, written in 1982, is perhaps his first substantial work which extensively uses traditional musical features such as triads, ternary form and expressive melody. The work is inscribed 'Hommage à Brahms' because of Brahms's invention of this genre, but there is little in Ligeti's Trio that can be identified as direct influence from Brahms. This observation is supported by the composer:

... musically this Horn Trio does not have much to do with my opinion of Brahms; what is remembered from Brahms is perhaps only a certain smilingly conservative comportment – with distinct ironic distance. I think it has much more to do with late Beethoven...⁵

The work shows quite a shift from Ligeti's previous work, avoiding his earlier 'modernist' harmonic language and *Mikropolyphonie*. As he

remarks in the interview with Tunde Szitha (1990):

My Horn Trio marked a radical break with atonality. Now I have the courage to be 'old fashioned' ... by the end of the 1970s I had evolved a 'non-atonal' language which became obvious in the Horn Trio.⁶

The 'non-atonal' language can be characterized, as in the harpsichord pieces, as using the basic elements of tonal music but without the tonal syntax. He has also expanded his harmonic palette to include 'non-atonal' harmonies like triads and seventh chords.

I will now focus on the first section of the first movement of the Horn Trio to explore the underlying harmonic structures. The movement is in ternary form with the largely-unchanged first section returning at bar 85. It is unusual for Ligeti to repeat such a large section of music and none of his works from the 1960s up to this point shows such a traditional structure. He has seemingly rejected his past approach, based upon gradually evolving processes such as *Mikropolyphonie*.

The first movement seems to show more clear examples of triads than the other three, although the final passacaglia is also quite triadic. Music which is triadic but not tonal is problematic for the analyst as there appears to be no single entirely satisfactory analytical method. Schenkerian voice-leading reductions are unhelpful because there do not appear to be any prolonged triads here, nor the kind of linear voice-leading identified in Ligeti's micropolyphonic works by Jonathan Bernard.⁷ Classical pitch-class set analysis is not entirely suitable because of the significant, if ambiguous, tonal implications. Perhaps what is required is an eclectic approach which is more closely matched to the content of the individual work.

The texture of the first section consists of short, double-stopped phrases in the violin, and a complementary counterpoint in the horn. The piano closes phrases with a pattern derived from the violin's opening phrase (see Ex.4). The violin part is full of thirds, sixths and fifths, beginning with a distorted horn call. The horn largely outlines a series of seventh and ninth chords, and is alternately consonant and dissonant with the violin's intervals.

A statistical analysis of all the simultaneities up to bar 62 shows that 72 out of 122 are trichords and 29 are tetrachords. The most common tri

³ Joseph N. Straus, *Remaking the Past*, (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁵ Monika Lichtenfeld, 'Gesprach mit György Ligeti', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, vol.cxdv, (1984), pp.8-11 cited in Paul Griffiths, *György Ligeti*, (London: Robson Books, second edition, 1997).

⁶ 'A conversation with György Ligeti', pp.14-15.

⁷ Jonathan W. Bernard, 'Voice Leading as a Spatial Function in the Music of Ligeti', *Music Analysis*, Vol 13:2-3, (1994), pp.227-252.

Example 4: Horn Trio, movt. 1

chords are 3-3 [0,1,4], 3-4 [0,1,5], 3-7 [0,2,5], 3-11 [0,3,7], 3-5 [0,1,6] and 3-8 [0,2,6]; the most common tetrachords are 4-27 [0,2,5,8], 4-14 [0,2,3,7], 4-z29 [0,1,3,7], 4-18 [0,1,4,7], 4-13 [0,1,3,6], and the two most common pentachords are 5-z18 [0,1,4,5,7] and 5-32 [0,1,4,6,9].

The characteristics of the most prevalent tri-chords are either diatonic pitch class sets 3-11, 3-7, 3-4, and 3-8 (dominant seventh, third inversion) or chords where thirds and perfect fourths are disrupted by a semitone: 3-3, and 3-5. The tetrachords also show diatonic formations such as 4-27 [0,2,5,8] (a dominant seventh in most appearances) or disrupted triads such as 4-z29 [0,1,3,7], 4-14, and 4-18. Both the pentachords have triads embedded within them.

This process of disruption of tonal implication can be most easily seen by examining a short section of the score in harmonic reduction (see Ex.5). The horn part initially creates a diminished triad with the violin's dyad, and then an F

minor triad before disrupting this with an A \sharp . This A creates a foundation for the 'A major' triad but then the horn disturbs the violin's F \sharp -A \sharp dyad with a G \sharp . The final chord of the first phrase consists of a B flat major triad in the violin with a dissonant E in the horn (4-z29).

The above tonally-ambivalent process continues throughout the rest of this section, creating or implying triads and tetrachords, but also disrupting them through added semitones, usually by the horn. The horn part itself shows an extensive chain of seventh and ninth chords (see Ex.6). These include the following chords: F \sharp ⁷ (four times), E \sharp ^{7/9} (four times), and E \flat ⁷ (three times) which shows the importance of the dominant seventh in the construction of the horn melodies. Both the violin and horn parts make clear tonal allusions but they contradict each other, and neither supports any one pitch centre although the horn does appear to show a preferred tonal region around F, E, E \flat and D. The implied pitch centres flow freely without any apparent sense of goal orientation or progression.

The structure of the first movement is based on short phrases with points of stasis at the phrase endings. The latter (see Ex.7) tend to show triadic formations, often with added semitones which blur the tonal identity. The various types of seventh chord are the most common point of stasis, but there is also a bitonal combination at bar 12 (B major plus D flat major) and a C minor⁹ at bar 67. The fleeting tonal centres that these points of stasis generate are quite disparate, although B flat does feature at the end of all three larger sections. Leading up to the end of the outer sections, the horn has a rising pattern A \flat ⁷, A⁷, B \flat ⁷ which could be seen as

Example 5: Horn Trio, movt.1, b.1-12 (reduction)

Example 6: Horn motives b.1-13

Example 7: Points of Stasis (quasi-cadences)

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reinforcing B flat although with the flattened seventh (Ab). The evidence does not suggest that the key centre of this movement is B flat; it is perhaps merely a convenient resting point.

The middle contrasting section of the movement (bars 62-86) is short and contains two reflective interpolations of material from the first section at bars 65 and 71. It has a straightforward

intervallic structure which consists of a repeating three-interval series: major third/minor sixth, major sixth, and augmented fourth, outlining the pitch-class set 6-21 (see Ex.8), which has similarities with the violin opening. Each three-interval set is transposed sequentially down a perfect fourth and this continues throughout the middle section. The material does not have a clear

Example 8: Middle Section

Intervals: M3 M6 A4 M3 M6 D5 m6 D7 D5 M3 M6

A4 M3 M6 A4 M3 m3 D5 M3 m6 D5 M3

tonal dimension other than the emphasis on 3rds/6ths and the cycle of perfect 4ths, although from bar 76 the two-part writing becomes expanded to triads. This cycle continues, ignoring the reflective interruptions of first section material as if they were not there, in a similar way to the structure of Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Winds*. The reprise of the first section follows with an added low rumbling piano part up to bar 92, but is otherwise largely unchanged.

It seems odd that Ligeti has embraced such a traditional and conservative structure for this movement: a simple ternary form. Perhaps because the language of the harmony is almost tonal at times, the music's form should reflect this conservatism. Another reading is that the literalness of the repeat is necessary because the complexity and ambiguity of the harmonic language needs repetition to make its complete effect.

In the Horn Trio the vocabulary of tonality is important for Ligeti's musical language because of the way that he subverts its function and avoids its syntax. There appears to be a pitch-region consisting of a number of related pitch-

centres which the music inhabits, rather than one pitch centre, although perhaps B flat is very weakly implied. One of the main principles of Ligeti's harmonic language seems to be a blurring of the triad through the addition of a semitone. He also avoids any sense of harmonic prolongation and traditional voice-leading, or it appears not to be significant for him. Ligeti has integrated the 'sound' of the triad into a musical language which is non-tonal, a phenomenon which can be observed in Messiaen's modal music. The Hungarian achieves this by avoiding tonal functions and V-I progressions, or at least by obscuring them.

In Ligeti's more recent works such as the *Piano Etudes* and the Piano and Violin Concertos, there is a continuing exploration of surface triadic harmony and overt melody. What is fascinating is the way that this is integrated into a musical language which avoids any obvious tonal progressions. To quote Straus – again:

Our experience as listeners will be richer if we can simultaneously sense the triad's tonal implications and the countervailing urge toward redefinition provided by the post-tonal context.⁸

⁸ Straus, *op.cit.*, p.74.

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