

Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* : an experiment in Postmodernism?

In this paper, I will examine some stylistic and structural features in Ligeti's opera *Le Grand Macabre* (1974-7), to show how the work initiates a significant change of compositional approach for Ligeti. This change can be characterised as the 'death' of Ligeti's previous main technical approach, micropolyphony, and the 'birth' of a new style and technique. This new style and approach appears to show characteristics of postmodernism, although Ligeti stated at the time, that postmodernist music was anathema to him. I will be examining two sections of music from the opera to assess whether or not the opera can be considered postmodernist.

Before looking at the Ligeti's music, I will attempt to provide a definition of postmodernism in relation to music. As Jonathan Kramer points out in relation to this issue:

Among musicians as among critics and practitioners of [architecture, literary theory, and social criticism], there is little agreement on just what the word means. The problem of definition becomes particularly acute when we understand postmodernism as neither a straightforward rejection nor simply an extension of modernism, but rather as having aspects of both.¹

Kramer goes on to suggest that there are two kinds of postmodernism: neoconservative (or antimodernism) exemplified by George Rochberg, and radical postmodernism which Kramer identifies in the music of John Zorn. The former suggests a rejection of modernism and a re-animation of past musical elements and forms, whereas the latter avoids organic unity through stylistic pluralism. Kramer also makes the point that "aspects of postmodernism, modernism, and antimodernism sometimes mingle in the

¹ Jonathan D. Kramer, "Beyond Unity: Toward an Understanding of Musical Postmodernism" in Elizabeth Marvin, and Richard Hermann *Concert Music, Rock and Jazz since 1945*, Rochester: University of Rochester, 1995, p.21

works of one composer (Luciano Berio, for example).”² This suggests that it may not be useful to categorise particular composers or even particular works as purely postmodernist or modernist. Ligeti’s own view expressed in 1990 was that:

we live in an age of artistic pluralism. While modernism and even the experimental avant-garde are still present, ‘post-modern’ artistic movements are becoming more prevalent. ‘Pre-modern’, however, would be a better word to describe these movements, for the artists who belong to them are interested in the restoration of historical elements and forms.³

He was even more forthright two years later stating: “I hate neo-Expressionism and I can’t stand the neo-Mahlerite and neo-Bergian affectations, just as I can’t stand post-modern architecture”.⁴ It is clear that Ligeti appears to have no sympathy for the aesthetics of postmodernism, therefore it would be contradictory if his music from *Le Grand Macabre* actually shows postmodernist traits.

Le Grand Macabre is unique in Ligeti’s output because of the way in which it mixes very different musical styles within the same composition. It is the first work by Ligeti in which clear-cut melodic writing is used, and that explores a relatively consonant harmonic language, than in any work since the mid 1950s. According to Ligeti,⁵ this change in style is caused partly by the nature of modern opera, which puts major economic restrictions upon the composer in terms of rehearsal time⁶. But the change of style is also partly caused by Ligeti’s growing dissatisfaction with his established micropolyphonic style. He does use his early micropolyphonic style briefly in *Le Grand*

² Ibid. p. 23

³ Ligeti, György, ‘Ma Position comme compositeur aujourd’hui’, *Contrechamps*, 12/13, 1990, pp.8-9, cited in Taylor, Stephen, *The Lamento Motif: Metamorphosis in Ligeti’s Late Style*, DMA, Cornell University, 1994, p. 146

⁴ Szitha, Tünde. ‘A Conversation with György Ligeti’. *Hungarian Music Quarterly*, vol 3, pt 1, 1992, p. 14

⁵ Compact Disc notes for Sony S2K 62312 recording of *Le Grand Macabre*

⁶ In terms of the amount of rehearsal time the orchestra and particularly the singers are given. It is perhaps difficult to put on operas today which involve extreme technical demands because of this practical

Macabre, but here it seems to be used ironically or as scene setting. For example, where the court astronomer Astradamors is observing the stars in Scene Two, Ligeti uses a micropolyphonic texture similar to that of his works of the 1960s but without the usual arhythmic pitch canons. It seems as if he is parodying himself, in a similar way to how he raids other composers' music in the rest of the opera, composers that include Liszt, Schubert, Monteverdi and Scott Joplin.

There is a parallel between the opera's main subjects of death and rebirth, and the development of Ligeti's approach. His micropolyphonic technique dies, and there is a 'rebirth' of a more traditional approach. This 'rebirth' consists of: a rediscovery of melody, historical musical structures, and a more consonant, triadic harmonic language. This is a rediscovery rather than something completely new, because the music he wrote in Hungary up to 1956 shows many of these characteristics. The music of the 1950s and that of the late 1970s is not the same, however, because Ligeti is approaching these similar elements from a new perspective.

Ligeti started with the intention of writing an anti-opera, somewhat in the manner of Kagel's *Staatstheater* (1970). This is in keeping with Ligeti's other music-theatre works *Aventures* (1962) and *Nouvelles Aventures* (1965) where there is no recognisable text; the language is invented by the composer. Dibelius, in his 1991 CD note for the opera, makes the point that by 1972 there was a "... change of course [in terms of the over-arching approach to the opera], one which now dismissed the self-imposed abstract principles⁷, recognising them as an outdated leftover from the sixties."⁸ There is also a

consideration; however, *Le Grand Macabre* does require very demanding technical skills almost throughout. Is Ligeti trying to justify his stylistic changes upon rather flimsy grounds?

⁷ Dibelius implies that these abstract principles involved the use of a created language, incomprehensible to an audience in a similar manner to *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*.

parallel shift in the nature of the musical language towards something less abstract and including historical musical references. The plot of *Le Grand Macabre* is surreal and meandering, with many farcical moments (particularly between Mescalina and Astradamors in a sadomasochistic second Scene), and it concerns the apparent end of the world in imaginary Breughelland. The libretto is based on the play *La balade du grand macabre* by the Belgian surrealist playwright Michel de Ghelderode, and was written jointly by Ligeti and Michael Meschke (director of the Stockholm Puppet Theatre).

In spite of Ligeti's original radical intentions, *Le Grand Macabre* retains several characteristics of traditional opera, namely: a recognisable plot⁹; clearly separated arias; music which reflects the meaning and moods of the text; a narrative which is sometimes set in a recitative-like fashion; and separate orchestral sections. This is not an opera which exploits 'real' characters or 'real' situations¹⁰, but one which explores surreal ideas and imagery, although influenced by Ligeti's experiences in pre-1956 Hungary and its totalitarian regime. The music mirrors this distortion of reality by using a large range of styles and compositional approaches, including quotation or distorted quotation, from a range of past historical music. None of Ligeti's music up to this point shows such an eclectic attitude to other composers' music¹¹.

I will now focus upon two sections from the opera which exemplify new features in Ligeti's music. Both examples use similar historical forms, a ground bass, and a

⁸ Ligeti, György, *Le Grand Macabre*, Wergo WER 6170-2 (286 170-2), 1991, p. 10

⁹ The plot is, however, a rather meandering affair with long episodes that are relatively insignificant to the underlying narrative.

¹⁰ Such as is found in the operas of John Adams and Philip Glass.

¹¹ *Monument* (1976) for two pianos which Ligeti completed during the composition of *Le Grand Macabre* has a movement entitled *Selbstportrait mit Reich und Riley (und Chopin ist auch dabei)*, which suggests that his stylistic approach was moving into new domains.

passacaglia, and both are processional. The first example is the collage in Scene Three, and the second example the final passacaglia at the end of the work.

Collage

In the section of music from figs. 451-473 in Scene Three entitled *Collage*, Ligeti uses the device of distorted or false quotation: taking historical musical fragments and twisting them for his own dramatic ends. He also takes existing styles of music and similarly distorts them to create something new. In the drama, *Collage* heralds the arrival of Nekrotzar (*Le Grand Macabre*) at the back of the auditorium with his entourage of devils, demons and four solo musicians. This is one of the climactic points of the opera, in which Nekrotzar announces the end of the world. As the title suggests, the structure is that of a large scale collage, in which very disparate musical materials and styles are combined in an apparently random-like manner. The historical models for this section appear to be: the ball from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*,¹² Act One Finale, with its three dance orchestras in three different times, but with a tonally coherent whole; Charles Ives'¹³ use of temporal multi-layering in works such as the Fourth Symphony; and Ligeti himself in his Chamber Concerto (1969-70), second movement, which consists of several layers running at different tempi.

The underlying structure consists of a four-bar-long isorhythm which uses a 12-note row color over 3½ bars (see Example 1).

The bass line is also clearly a parody of the bass line in the last movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony, but projected onto a 12-note row. The use of an isorhythm and a color

¹² Kostakeva outlines Ligeti's usage the model of the ball scene from Mozart's *Giovanni* with respect to the earlier *Bourrée perpétuelle*, at fig. 229 in Kostakeva, Maria *Die Imaginäre Gattung: Über das Musiktheatralische Werk G. Ligetis*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996, p. 167, and also the section *Galimatias* at fig 534, *ibid.* p. 202.

which are different lengths, makes the bass-line sound unique on each repetition, therefore it creates a built-in variation (see Example 2). Four contrasting musical elements are superimposed over this repetitive structure: an atonal rag; a Byzantine church hymn; a samba/flamenco; and a Scottish/Hungarian March¹⁴. The first solo is a strange, atonal ragtime on the solo violin which uses an almost identical rhythmic structure to Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer* (see Example 3). Later in the section the orchestra starts to play a Cuban chachacha as a further layer to add to the *melée*. [Audio example 1]

In this section Ligeti is using a historical musical structure, the *passacaglia*, with superimposed melodic elements which consist of distorted quotations of existing music or styles, several of which are tonal. This would seem to show postmodernist features, although it is closer to Kramer's second definition of radical postmodernism.

Finale: Passacaglia

The Finale is based upon a dyadic *passacaglia* of 24 major/minor sixths (Example 4), which is used by Ligeti to hang other musical elements; mainly of a melodic nature. The *passacaglia* unfolds through a gradual accretion of extra pitches onto the dyadic base. This includes additional octaves and completed "tonal" triads, normally completing the triad by adding a pitch within the interval of a sixth. The triads created are always first or second inversions, never a root triad. There are examples of root triads later in the *passacaglia*, but only when a seventh is also present in the chord. Rests are also gradually filled, at first with single melodic notes, and later by fuller harmonies. The major or

¹³ Ligeti alludes to this in *Ligeti in Conversation*, London: Eulenberg, 1983, p. 120.

¹⁴ *Ligeti in Conversation*, p. 59

minor sixths are normally preserved at the bottom of the texture; and by fig. 687, tetrachords and more complex harmonies begin to appear.

The main chord types which Ligeti uses in the Finale are as follows:

Major sixths;

Minor sixths;

First inversion major/minor triads;

Augmented triads;

Second inversion major/minor triads;

Third inversion minor $b7^{\text{th}}$ tetrachords;

First inversion minor $b7^{\text{th}}$ tetrachords;

Second inversion triads plus fourth;

Cluster-based harmony (mainly whole-tone). [OHP1]

The above tonal chords are not used in a tonal functional manner, and the triads are seemingly generated from the dyadic passacaglia structure to create tonal confusion and ambiguity. As the section progresses, the harmonic vocabulary becomes increasingly rich and less predictable, almost in a 'chaotic' manner similar to Ligeti's earlier *meccanico* movements, where the music gradually 'breaks down' like a malfunctioning machine: for example, in the third movement of the Chamber Concerto. There is a gradual increase in tension up to fig. 685, after which the density thins out again, very much like a recapitulation of the opening of the passacaglia at fig. 674. This allows Ligeti to build up the tension again for the ending, although the 1996 revised edition avoids the obvious

climactic ending of the 1977 version; rather it slows down the rhythmic structure and allows a rich pedal chord built upon superimposed perfect fifths to dominate.

Each dyad generally has two possible triadic/tetrachordal harmonisations: major and minor, and a major/minor third away from each other. The added note is rarely placed at the bottom of the chord, therefore the bass line of the passacaglia is largely preserved throughout. The following table shows the variant harmonic expansions for each of the various dyads:

A1: G/Aug	A2: D/bm	A3: Ab/cm	A4: c#m/E	A5: f#m/D	X2: Db/bbm
B1: gm/Eb	B2: B/whl/aug	B3: Bb/dm	B4: C/whl	B5: A/f#.	Y2: E/g#m/c#m
C1: Gb/ebm	C2: cm/Eb	C3: Bb/gm	C4: c#m/A	C5: fm/Db	Z2: am/F
D1: C/em	D2: bm/G	D3: B/ebm	D4: Ab/fm7	D5: dm/F	W2: Gb/bbm

OHP2

Play audio eg 2

Ligeti creates a sound world which uses the harmonic building blocks of the tonal language but without its syntax. His harmonic language has shifted from dissonant cluster chords into an approach which allows a far larger harmonic palate. Ligeti alludes to tonal music in the passacaglia but avoids neoconservatism by transforming the triads through an atonal context. In *Le Grand Macabre* Ligeti flirts with postmodernism through the use of traditional structures and tonal harmony, but avoids becoming purely antimodernist in Kramer's terms by transforming these existing elements into something genuinely new; thus preserving his relationship with modernism. His considerable and varied output since the opera, has shown that the transformation has been a positive effect on his

compositional technique. It is true to say, however, that his criticisms of postmodernist composers seem rather misplaced, given his own similar preoccupations of the time.