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Michael Searby

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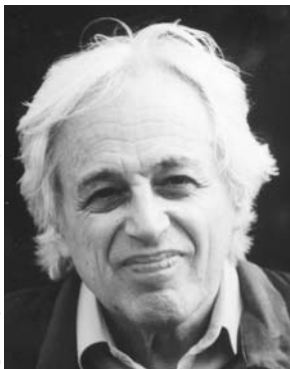
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LIGETI'S 'LE GRAND MACABRE': HOW HE SOLVED THE PROBLEM OF WRITING A MODERNIST OPERA

Michael Searby

Abstract: Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* (1974–77) is one of the most successful operas of the 20th century in terms of the number of performances. Originally, Ligeti had intended to compose an 'anti-opera' in the manner of Kagel's *Staatstheater*, but changed his fundamental compositional approach during the process of composing the work. He realised that a more traditional opera with a clear narrative (unlike Kagel's avant-garde opera) was more suitable, and it therefore became necessary for him to transform his style to one in which the text was audible to an audience. As a result there is very little of his mature micropolyphonic technique in the resulting work, but rather there is an exploration of music from the past, and the use of parody. In composing his opera Ligeti revitalised his approach through a re-engagement with history, but combined with a modernist rigour; thus he was able to create a new and fruitful musical language, and to transform his compositional technique.

György Ligeti
(photo by Peter Anderson courtesy of Schott & Co. Ltd.)



Writing an opera in the later 20th (and early 21st) centuries is problematic for composers in several significant ways. It is difficult to persuade opera companies to produce challenging new work – most focus on the music of the past (18th- and 19th-century opera), and so are less experienced in exploring contemporary instrumental/vocal techniques; and they do not have the rehearsal time to master complex scores. Contemporary composers thus have to approach writing opera with great caution: if the music is too avant-garde, most opera houses would reject it, but if it is too traditional, then the composer will be accused of destroying his/her artistic integrity. The Hungarian composer György Ligeti (1923–2006) was at the height of his powers in the 1970s, and his decision to write an opera was to impact greatly on the nature of his subsequent compositions. He was originally intending to write a radical, avant-garde opera in the mould of Mauricio Kagel's work *Staatstheater* (1970), but as the project evolved, it transformed into an opera which was far more conventional but with a clear modernist focus. Ligeti's musical style evolved during the process of composition to make it better suited to the nature of traditional opera, for example in terms of the intelligibility of the text and the narrative. Ligeti's problem was how to compose an opera which was both acceptable to the opera houses of Europe, but also allowed him to preserve his integrity and invention.

Ligeti's response to this challenge was his opera *Le Grand Macabre* (1974–77), which has become one of the most successful modernist operas written in the second half of the 20th century in terms of the number of productions.¹ It also notable because it uses quite a different

¹ To date, it has been staged by 33 opera companies across the world.

musical style and technique compared with those of the works Ligeti had composed up to that time. Written for the Royal Opera, Stockholm, the opera was based on the play *La balade du grand macabre* by the Belgian playwright Michel de Ghelderode – a surreal account of the apocalypse. The basic plot in Ligeti's and Michael Meschke's version is concerned with the appearance in a fictional Brueghelland of Nekrotzar ('The Grand Macabre' of the title), his announcement of the end of the world and the consequences for the other characters. The work's main themes include: false prophets; corrupt government; incompetent intelligence service; and a hedonistic final moral. The opera is divided into four scenes whose main elements are as follows: Scene 1, which introduces the main characters: Piet the Pot (the common man and narrator of the opera); Amanda and Amando (two star-crossed lovers); and Nekrotzar; Scene 2 is set in the house of the astronomer Astradamors, in which he first sees the comet which foretells the apocalypse; Scene 3 is set in Prince Go-Go's royal palace, and builds to a climax when a drunk Nekrotzar announces the end of the world, leading to Scene 4 where not much seems to have changed in Brueghelland and Nekrotzar is revealed to be a fraud, shrinking into nothingness. The opera closes with a long consonant passacaglia in the guise of a slow processional for the whole cast.

Ligeti's mature musical language up to the composition of the opera had been atonal, modernist and with a strong emphasis on textural evolution and timbre. The musical language used in *Le Grand Macabre*, however, is quite different because it takes a much more eclectic approach to compositional materials. Hence the opera includes quotations from existing works, parody, pastiche and tonal harmony: features that are entirely absent in the music that immediately precedes it. Yayoi Uno Everett suggests that that 'Ligeti's deployment of parody and collage in *Le Grand Macabre* resists easy categorization because of the vast array of procedures by which he transforms historical models, often appropriating styles associated with operatic conventions only to subvert them.'² There is an incredible range of different musical styles in the work, which allows a vivid and direct response to the action on stage.

Originally Ligeti started *Le Grand Macabre* with the idea that he wanted to compose an anti-opera, and was highly influenced by Kagel's *Staatstheater*, which was written for the forces of an opera house but was radically different to traditional opera. Kagel uses traditional resources but subverts their function; as Björn Heile observes 'the work is a satirical dissection of traditional opera, and more specific parodies of individual operas ... drive the point home none-too subtly'.³ Ligeti was impressed by *Staatstheater*, considering it as the foremost 'masterpiece of "musical antitheatre"'.⁴ The difficulty of this work as a model for contemporary opera was, as Heile has identified, that Kagel 'in the absence of an over-arching narrative ... faced the problem of making the interplay of visual and acoustic elements interesting and "meaningful" in and of itself, and to endow it with a sense of developmental logic'.⁵ *Staatstheater* is a work that is more discussed than actually performed, because of these difficulties.

² Yayoi Uno Everett, 'Signification of Parody and the Grotesque in György Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 31/1 (2009), p. 27.

³ Björn Heile, *The Music of Mauricio Kagel*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 58.

⁴ Richard Steinitz, *György Ligeti. Music of the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 220.

⁵ Heile, op. cit., p. 58.

When Ligeti planned *Le Grand Macabre* he realized that however important he felt *Staatstheater* to be, the concept of the latter could not be replicated successfully, and that a libretto was essential to support the opera's structure. Ligeti described *Le Grand Macabre* as an 'anti-anti-opera': therefore it becomes opera again. Kagel's opera, however, did have a profound impact on Ligeti: the intention to subvert grand opera in *Le Grand Macabre* is especially clear in the way humour is used (for example the opening fanfare for 12 car horns), the use of grotesque imagery, and a surreal libretto. There is also a similarly subversive approach towards musical language and style which may have been influenced by Kagel's approach in *Staatstheater* but more directly by his work *Ludwig Van* (1970). This latter work, commissioned for the Beethoven bicentenary, reuses and distorts music by Beethoven, giving a fresh and avant-garde perspective on the music, but has little to do with typical postmodernism. As Heile observes about *Ludwig Van*, 'this music provides anything but the soothing balm of familiarity which is often associated with the idea of "going back to tradition"'.⁶ Perhaps a work like this gave Ligeti a solution to the problem of how to explore the past without sentimentality, by dismantling it in a subversive manner.

Ligeti's established compositional approach between 1961 and 1974 was largely that of micropolyphony – a polyphonic approach which creates a dense texture of arhythmic canons, first evident in the orchestral work *Atmosphères* (1961). In his last work written before the opera, *San Francisco Polyphony* (1973–74) for orchestra, micropolyphony is still the most significant technique used, albeit with an increased melodic dimension. After the composition of *Le Grand Macabre*, Ligeti only used micropolyphony fleetingly and in a transformed manner.⁷ In the process of composing the opera, his aesthetic had been transformed into a more eclectic and apparently postmodernist approach. This change can be heard in the opera by the rich stylistic range he uses, his use of quotation of existing works,⁸ collage, and pastiche.

Another possible source for the motivation for Ligeti's change of style is the contemporaneous opera *Satyricon* (1973) written by his friend Bruno Maderna. What is striking about this work is the way it employs direct historic quotations, tonality and pastiche; all significant features of *Le Grand Macabre*. Maderna uses direct quotation from the classical repertoire including Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1, Wagner's 'Valhalla' music from *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and a tape music section entitled 'Music à la Webern with Pigs'. Both Maderna and Ligeti were heavily criticized by the musical avant-garde because of their pluralistic approach in these and subsequent compositions. Ligeti, however, hated to be associated with postmodernist music; for example in 1991 he states

I have no more faith in either modern music, or the 'avant-garde,' or the 'neo' trend ... I therefore attempt in my own modest way to find something that does not go back, but also does not advance modernity of the avant-garde.⁹

By the term 'neo trend' he means either neo-tonality or neo-romanticism, which are terms for a type of postmodernist music which resuscitates tonality and romanticism within a contemporary context. In spite of Ligeti's statements to the contrary, it is clear in his own work from this period that he had started to look to the past and neo-tonality to reinvigorate his compositional language.

⁶ Ibid., p. 109.

⁷ For example in *Drei Phantasien nach Friedrich Hölderlin* (1982) for Chamber Choir.

⁸ Only ever hinted at in his earlier works.

⁹ Marina Lobanova, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics*, trans. Mark Shuttleworth (Berlin: Verlag Ernst Kuhn, 2002), p. 362.

In the 1970s there was a general shift towards a more conservative approach in the arts, after the experimental 1960s in which the avant-garde was considered the mainstream. Ligeti had also been detached from the Darmstadt School orthodoxy (dominated by Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen) and had written articles criticizing Boulez's *Structures* and integral serialism in general as a method of composition.¹⁰ This perhaps made it easier for Ligeti to transform his compositional approach, as he had fewer ties to a particular system and aesthetic. He had already made one metamorphosis when he fled Hungary for the West in 1956, where he reinvented himself as an experimental composer of textural and tape compositions. Ligeti was also beginning to exhaust the possibilities of micropolyphony in the early 1970s. Works from this period such as the Chamber Concerto (1969–70) and *Melodien* (1971) show a gradual transformation of approach – as Ligeti suggests: '... in *Melodien* the polyphony is no longer 'micro,' yet the texture of this piece does not suggest a reversion to earlier techniques'.¹¹ It was not until the composition of *Le Grand Macabre* that Ligeti started to revert to earlier techniques and styles. By slowing down the complex lines in micropolyphony Ligeti was creating '... melodic shape, that forbidden fruit of modern music ...'¹² and melodic shapes became all-pervasive in the opera.

Another factor in the transformation of Ligeti's musical language is that the act of composing for the forces of an opera house would inevitably change the kind of music he created. The technique of micropolyphony would, if used for voices, obscure the text completely, as can be heard in his earlier choral works *Lux Aeterna* (1966) and *Requiem* (1963–65) in which it is the fragmented vowels and consonants that are significant, not the words. Therefore if the text was to be audible then the musical language employed had to be much simpler and more traditional.

In the original version of the opera (it was substantially revised in 1996), Ligeti dealt with the problem of audibility of the text by using large amounts of spoken text in the manner of a German *Singspiel*. In the revised score, however, he removed much of the spoken text to speed up the pace of the opera, and he also set some of the spoken text to music (for example the Black and White Ministers' words in scene 3).

Ligeti has also written about the issue of the lack of rehearsal time in operatic productions,¹³ which restricted the degree of complexity he could use in the vocal parts. This might appear to explain the reason for a change of style. When the vocal lines in the opera are examined, however, they seem to be very demanding; it is difficult to imagine a more virtuosic part than that of Gepopo (the Chief of Secret Police), with its hysterical leaps and apoplectic figuration using fragmented syllables.

The underlying principle in Ligeti's compositional approach in the opera is to bring the characters to life through the music – consistency of style and technique seems to be less important. He stated: 'for me, the characters in opera live both in the libretto and the music, thanks to a close combination of the two elements'.¹⁴ He considered composers such as Mozart and Verdi successful within the operatic genre because

¹⁰ György Ligeti, 'Pierre Boulez: Entscheidung und Automatik in der Structure 1a', *Die Reihe* 4 (1958), pp. 33–63.

¹¹ György Ligeti, *Ligeti in Conversation* (London: Eulenburg, 1983), p. 137.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ György Ligeti, liner notes for the compact disc recording of *Le Grand Macabre* (Sony S2K 62312, 1999).

¹⁴ Ligeti, *Ligeti in Conversation*, p.113.

they create living characters, and that is what he was trying to achieve in *Le Grand Macabre*. The music in Ligeti's opera has mostly a supporting role and intensifies the drama in a direct way. An example of this is in scene 2 in which Astradamors (an astronomer) observes the stars through his telescope and sees the comet which foretells the end of the world. The music at this point is chromatic, dense and textural, of a type described by Ligeti as 'cystoscopy' and first heard in his orchestral work *Atmosphères* (1961). It is as if Ligeti is quoting his own earlier music in a programmatic or film-like way. Ligeti's textural music has been associated with Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) where it was used extensively, but in the opera Ligeti appears to making use of that artificially imposed relationship to enhance the scene: his textural music is now identified with scenes of space.

In the above example Ligeti is referring to his past musical identity: a phenomenon that occurs elsewhere in the opera. He creates fast-moving micropolyphonic texture from fig. 79 in scene 1 when Nekrotzar tells Piet the Pot (the common man) who he is. The dramatic function of the music here is to gradually ratchet up the tension through increasing density in the texture. Here it is used in a fragmented manner, rather than as part of a large-scale unfolding of a process such as would be found in a work like *Melodien*.

Ligeti also employs quotation and distorted quotation from other composers throughout music history in *Le Grand Macabre*. These are often used to underline dramatic moments, sometimes with a humorous intent. Quotation – the deliberate insertion of other composers' work into a piece of music – is usually done to create a link between the composition in question and that which has been quoted. This can create another layer of meaning to the composition and the libretto. The preliminary sketches of the libretto for *Le Grand Macabre* show how significant historical allusions were for Ligeti, and specific titles were written in the sketch-libretto.¹⁵ Examples of annotations in the sketch-libretto include the medieval composer Ciconia, the renaissance madrigal composer Gesualdo, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, Verdi's *Falsaff*, and Mahler's First Symphony.¹⁶ Many of these allusions are quite vague and were subsequently discarded in the composition of the opera, or else greatly obscured and distorted. Their significance is that it shows that Ligeti was intending to use quotation and allusion from an early point in the work's genesis, and that these allusions are integral to the opera's overall aesthetic.

The most obvious example of the use of direct quotation is in the *Galimatias* ('nonsense') section (scene 3, figs. 534–554), in which Nekrotzar becomes drunk before he announces the end of the world. The style of music reflects Nekrotzar's state of mind, as it is triadic but with a meandering chromaticism which distorts any possible tonal coherence. The music in *Galimatias* gradually builds up through the addition of self-contained and unrelated layers in a manner reminiscent of Charles Ives. This is similar in approach to the *Collage* section of the opera at fig. 451, when Nekrotzar enters from the back of the auditorium with his entourage of musicians dressed as devils, and which also builds up with heterogeneous layers, but upon a passacaglia structure. In *Galimatias* there is one acknowledged quotation, the trio from Schubert's *Grazer Galopp* in G at fig. 544 on the celesta, but Ligeti also

¹⁵ Peter von Seherr-Thoss, *György Ligeti's Oper Le Grand Macabre: Erste Fassung, Entstehung und Deutung* (Hamburg Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft, 47, Hamburg: Wagner, 1998)

¹⁶ Seherr-Thoss, *György Ligeti's Oper Le Grand Macabre: Erste Fassung, Entstehung und Deutung*, 92.

adds several other tonal pastiches which sound like classical quotations. These consist of a minuet in F major in the strings; another galop in E major; a layer in D major for electric piano; and a second minuet in E-flat major. The layers are all heard at the same time, which creates a cacophonous combination of contrasting keys. Ligeti's comment on this feature is that

... there are some pseudo-quotations; when I was a student I had to write in different styles – minuets in the style of Haydn or Mozart, rondos in the style of Couperin – and I have gone back to these youthful pieces here. You think it's Haydn but it's Ligeti. They are fake quotations, synthetic quotations.¹⁷

Therefore Ligeti was creating false quotations as well as using genuine ones, and it is impossible to identify the latter from the former. In *Galimatias* the simultaneous combination of five different keys produces an atonal or pantonal result which undermines any tonal implications. Ligeti also explains the reason for these odd 'classical' layers by stating that 'stylistic allusions and fragments of pastiche [are] analogous to the *objets trouvés* of pop art, in this case *objets trouvés* in the history of music'.¹⁸

One of the most distinctive uses of quotation in the opera is in scene 2 at fig 172 during the sado-masochistic rituals of Astradamors and his sexually voracious wife Mescalina. In a short passage of four bars there are three deformed but recognizable quotations: Liszt's *Grand Galop Chromatique*, Schumann's *Fröhlicher Landmann* ('The Merry Peasant') and the 'Can-Can' from Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* (see Example 1). The function of this use of quoted material is to underline the ludicrousness of the characters and their peculiar sexual tastes. Mescalina and Astradamors are dancing an appalling Can-Can at the same time as the orchestra is performing their distorted Can-Can.

Example 1:

Le Grand Macabre: second bar of fig. 172 © 1997 Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany.

This kind of music, saturated with quotations, is similar to that of Bernd Alois Zimmermann's compositions of the 1960s, in which the entire fabric of a work is created through the quotation of other composers' music. Zimmermann's ballet *Musique pour les soupers du Roi Ubu* (1960) is pure collage throughout, using fragments from works by Mussorgsky, Hindemith, Bach, Stravinsky, and Schubert. His significant opera *Die Soldaten* (1963–64) also demonstrates a pluralistic approach to style in a more subtle fashion, making use of quotation and collage. As one of the most influential European operas of the 1960s, Ligeti must have been aware of its controversial stylistic innovations; it also contained scenes with multiple stages creating complex layered musical textures.

¹⁷ Ligeti, *Ligeti in Conversation*, p. 119.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In addition to using clear quotation, Ligeti also made considerable use of distorted or 'false' quotation, which has the effect of hinting at another composition but in a subtle and hidden fashion. The *Collage* section in scene 3 (figs. 451–73) contains some examples of this phenomenon. Its basic structure is isorhythmic in the bass line which has a four-bar-long talea (a repeating rhythmic pattern) superimposed onto a 12-note, three-and-a-half-bar color (a repeating pattern of pitches), as can be seen in Example 2. This is a structural principle that was popular in the medieval period and resurrected by Olivier Messiaen in works such as *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* (1940–41). The technique provides a framework which combines repetition with pitch variation, and in Ligeti's case he piles on layers of material which contrast with the isorhythmic bass-line. The bass-line itself is also a parody of the bass from the finale to Beethoven's Third Symphony, as it has an identical rhythm and contour.

Example 2 shows three staves of music. The top staff is for Double Bass (Pizz.) and Timpani, and the bottom two staves are for Double Bass. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 100. The music features a repeating rhythmic pattern in the bass line, with dynamics ranging from piano (p) to mezzo-forte (mf).

Example 2:

Le Grand Macabre: isorhythmic bass line fig. 451 © 1997 Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany.

The superimposed material includes four contrasting solo lines played by masked devils who accompany Nekrotzar; they include (according to Ligeti) an atonal ragtime on the solo violin; a Byzantine church hymn; a samba/flamenco; and a Scottish/Hungarian march,¹⁹ all progressing at different tempi in a mobile-like structure. This use of superimposed contrasting tempi is a device that Ligeti had used before in earlier works like the Chamber Concerto and *Poème Symphonique* for 100 metronomes (1962). The ragtime strand appears to be a twisted version of Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer* (see Example 3) with added augmented fourths and chromaticism to give it a demonic quality. The other solo lines are more obscure than Ligeti's descriptions appear to suggest, but combine to create a complex polytonal textural result. The purpose of this section is to build up a terrifying cacophony which accompanies Nekrotzar's procession through the auditorium²⁰ building up to a tremendous climax, at which point brass fanfares start at fig. 478.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁰ Instructions in the score that are rarely followed by directors.

Ragtime (*Le Grand Macabre*)

Violin

Piano

The Entertainer: Scott Joplin

Example 3:

The ragtime in *Le Grand Macabre* compared with Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer* © 1997 Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany.

Another significant issue for the modernist composer is how to deal with structure in such an extended genre as opera. Ligeti's earlier music tended towards works with short movements such as *Ten Pieces for Wind Quintet* (1968) or else to more extended single-movement micro-polyphonic works like *San Francisco Polyphony* (1973–74) for orchestra. In opera neither of these approaches quite solves the problem, as the former would be too fragmented and the latter would disrupt the opera's narrative flow. Ligeti's solution is relatively conventional: in *Le Grand Macabre* there are recognizable arias, recitative-like material, and instrumental interludes. Ligeti states that

my opera does not have the continuous musical texture of Wagner operas nor is it divided into distinct periodic formal sections as is the case with Italian operas or Mozart. I have two models for it, Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea* and Verdi's *Falstaff*. A series of short episodes: orchestral intermezzi alternating with very short independent music units.²¹

This is a case of Ligeti trying to appear more innovative than he really is; in his opera there are recognizable aria-like sections, for example Amando and Amanda's recurring love duet in scene 1, and longer orchestral movements such as the 'collage' and the Finale Passacaglia. Wagner's 'continuous musical texture' can also be heard in the climactic music in scene 1, figs. 79–110. Therefore Ligeti is using a range of different structural approaches to parts of his opera, depending upon his dramatic requirements. Much of the vocal music has a recitative role in terms of carrying the narrative, but with a more lyrical, flowing style which shows a clear relationship to Wagner's 'endless melody.'

The opera is divided into four scenes, although scene 3 flows straight into scene 4 without a break. Scenes 2 and 3 have dramatic similarities as they are characterized by sparring couples, and both end with a dramatic and ominous climax. In scene 2 this consists of Nekrotzar foretelling the end of the world, and in scene 3 Nekrotzar actually initiates this action. Scene 4 functions as a coda in which Nekrotzar has failed in his quest and shrivels away. The opera ends with an almost tonal dance-like passacaglia.

The most significant structural characteristic in the opera is that of repetition of material, which is against modernist principles. In scene 1 Amando and Amanda's love duet recurs twice and thus create a clearly audible, ritornello-like structure to the scene. The chromatically disorientating music used in *Galimatias* in scene 3 has already been heard towards the end of scene 2, when Nekrotzar appears to kill Mescalina at fig. 233. The brass fanfares for the Last Judgment at fig. 479 also

²¹ Ligeti, *Ligeti in Conversation*, p. 68.

function as a ritornello, recurring four times after the initial statement. These recurrences create a series of reference points that are related to the unfolding drama, but also provide musical reference points for the listener. This is quite a change for Ligeti in his structural approach as repetition was generally avoided in his works written after he left Hungary in 1956. After the composition of the opera Ligeti made further use of traditional repetitive structures including simple ternary form (ABA) which can be observed in the Horn Trio (1982). A passacaglia is also used in the Horn Trio's finale, as is also the case in *Le Grand Macabre*, and in other later works.

The use of the passacaglia form in *Le Grand Macabre* coincides with the most strikingly consonant passage in the opera. The harmonic structure of the passacaglia is made up of chains of major and minor sixths (see Example 4) divided into four phrases of five crotchets with single major or minor sixths interpolated. The aural effect is quite strange, as Ligeti has chosen a combination of sixths which creates a shifting tonal effect – many different keys are implied in a disorientating manner which avoids traditional progressions. As the passacaglia unfolds, Ligeti creates triads out of the major/minor sixths in such a way as to create fleeting glimpses of key. One segment of these progressions is as follows: E-flat major–B major–D minor–C major–A major–C-sharp minor–G-sharp minor. There are loose tonal links between these triads but the overall aural effect is one of tonal disorientation within a consonant language. Over this evolving framework Ligeti adds melodic lines in the solo voices which complement the dyads to create tonal triads. The harmony in the opera's later 1996 version becomes denser and more dissonant as the Finale unfolds. At the very end of the opera the music becomes calmer and suggests a resolution; quite unlike the original 1977 version which breaks off in mid-phrase and creates a much cruder effect.

Example 4:
Structure of the Finale Passacaglia

What Ligeti is doing in the Finale and elsewhere in his opera is to reclaim the triad and consonance for his new musical language. The change to his language provided him with a wider palette of harmony and melody in the opera, and after its composition Ligeti's musical language became transformed. Ligeti discovered that tackling the problems of composing an opera in the later 20th century changed his compositional approach thereafter, as can be seen in significant works such as the Horn Trio, the Piano Concerto (1980–88), and the Violin Concerto (1989–93).

Given the copious references to past music in *Le Grand Macabre*, can it still really be considered to be a modernist opera? The work is largely non-tonal in its musical language (tonal allusions are generally fleeting), and Ligeti is genuinely attempting to create a new mode of expression through reinterpreting past music, rather than trying to simply recreate the past; so it is reasonable to conclude that it is still part of the modernist

tradition. He has clearly been influenced by postmodern developments of the 1970s, and his public rejection of them²² suggests he is aware of the dangerous and seductive nature of art from the past. However, it does not seem to have stopped him making use of such art.

The problem for Ligeti in writing a modernist opera was how to use his existing micropolyphonic style of the early 1970s within a genre that usually required the text to be audible. Clearly one solution would be to reject his modernist style and compose in a more conservative fashion, making use of tonality and recognizable melody – essentially embracing postmodernism through a reliance on the past. Ligeti's solution, however, attempts to marry elements of his current musical language with allusions and references to music from a range of past periods. Such examples include allusions to ragtime, Beethoven's Third Symphony,²³ the *Dies Irae*,²⁴ Rameau,²⁵ and Wagner.²⁶ Ligeti is eschewing his purist attitude towards style in favour of a more eclectic approach. The advantage for the audience is that he creates a music which intensifies the drama of the opera, and also provides a fascinating critical commentary on music from the past, to discover a genuinely new style. Ligeti's solution to the problem of writing a modernist opera is to reject most aspects of his existing compositional approach in order to revisit the past – to refresh his musical language. *Le Grand Macabre* is still part of modernist tradition, but it is a modernism whose energy and momentum comes in part from its close relationship with the past.

²² Ligeti, *Ligeti in Conversation*, p.123.

²³ In the *Galimatias* section, figs. 534–59, the bass line has a clear reference to Beethoven's bass line in his Third Symphony's finale.

²⁴ In Piet the Pot's opening aria at fig. 1.

²⁵ In the Bourrée perpetuelle, figs. 225–38.

²⁶ At the end of scene 1 there is a reference to the Nibelungen's hammering on the anvils in Wagner's *Das Rheingold* which is specifically referred to in Ligeti's sketch-libretto.