Florida Ligeti Conference Oct 2013. (version Aug 30)

(paper)

Ligeti and musical form: an examination of György Ligeti’s changing approach towards form in his music.

My paper aims to examine Ligeti’s approach and attitude towards musical form, both in some of his music of the 1960s and in a selection of his writings, to highlight how his theory relates to his practice in the period.

Form in contemporary music is often quite an elusive element to discuss and analyse. Does the over-arching musical form have primacy in shaping a work, or is it the composer’s particular compositional technique or process that fundamentally generates the work’s form? In other words, can the form of a work only be perceivable by the composer once the compositional process has been completed? If a work is dependent upon a particular compositional controlling process, then this process is surely is the main driver of the musical form, which then is merely the temporal result of the ‘playing out’ of this process.

I will examine Ligeti’s various writings on form; in particular his chapter ‘Form’ in *Form in der Neuen Musik*[[1]](#endnote-1) and his article ‘Wandlungen der musikalischen Form’[[2]](#endnote-2), and I will then analyse parts of two of his compositions from this period to demonstrate how far he followed his theories in practice. I will examine the relationship between his theoretical commentary and his creative work. In ‘Form’ he makes the apposite comment in 1966 that “there are no longer any established formal schemata; each individual work is forced, by virtue of the historical constellation, to display a unique overall form adequate only to that work.”[[3]](#endnote-3) This principle can be applied to Ligeti’s own works in the 1960s inasmuch as they all appear, at least on the surface, to have a unique form. Ligeti then goes on to suggest that through the perspective of history, these “’unique forms,’ however, acquire a[sic] common characteristics which…turn the most varied individual formal realizations into members of a generic family of forms.”[[4]](#endnote-4) What he is suggesting is that over time, general patterns of formal practice become discernible, and that works from the same points in history show common features which were not observable at the time. A significant part of Ligeti’s thesis is a keen critique of total serialism and other similar systems, in which he shows paradoxically how little control the integral serial composer has over the final resulting form, and indeed of the actual local sounds of the music.[[5]](#endnote-5)

György Ligeti’s music over his life shows dramatic changes in compositional approach both in terms of his musical language, but also in the use of form to shape his works. His strategy in larger scale form seems to be inextricably linked to, and partially driven by, the nature of the compositional processes used. His large texturally-focused orchestral works such as *Atmosphères* (1961) and *Lontano* (1967) use extended single movement forms, which contrast with the later works of the 1960s, such as *Ten Pieces* for Wind Quintet (1968), which are formed from several much shorter sections or movements. This fragmentation or miniaturisation of structure can also be observed in many of his much later compositions such as in the Violin Concerto (1989-93), the *Hamburg Concerto* (1999 re, 2002) and his sets of short piano *Ètudes*. What is the explanation for Ligeti’s shift towards shorter forms in his later life? In part this may have been caused by a lack of suitable large-scale formal models for Ligeti once he had discarded micropolyphony as a technique, and perhaps the lack of a desire to write longer forms.

The problem for the composer of the later Twentieth Century is that without functional tonality, it is difficult to create a dynamic and forward-moving form. Ligeti states that form can only be understood through its relationship with the history and the example he uses is that of the coda in classical sonata form. In Bruckner’s symphonic codas the function of the coda has been expanded and “by enlarging the concluding gesture into something oversized, they postpone it and transfer it into a state of suspension, so it appears that the closure could last forever.”[[6]](#endnote-6) The only way that Bruckner’s codas can be understood is through a historical perspective. Bruckner’s sonata forms only make sense within the broader context of classical symphonic form. What Ligeti is suggesting is that the musical form of a given work cannot be considered in isolation, and that all historical forms are impacting on the present providing a context. He makes a rather attractive analogy for the history of musical form “as an immense net which drags itself through the ages: individual composers latch on to this or that place of the giant net . . . even what is seemingly without tradition has a secret connection to what has been.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

In a discussion about the relationship between musical syntax and form he suggests that in contemporary music “. . . the overall form is, in itself, usually directionless and non-developmental, and the individual components of the form are, in their function and position, interchangeable.”[[8]](#endnote-8) This implies that one can change the order of sections within a work without impacting on its coherence and essence. It is clear that Ligeti has the concept of mobile form used by Boulez and Stockhausen in mind in this discussion, where there is no fixed order for the sections/movements, but he also implies that the idea could be taken further. It also suggests the following question: what are the criteria for deciding the precise order of segments in a composition? Harrison Birtwistle’s response is that a work’s form can only start to reveal itself once there is a context; that he used to pre-plan his works in detail but once he had created the opening context, his carefully conceived plan was essentially worthless, as the work flows from that context.[[9]](#endnote-9) Ligeti does not see the shift towards non directional structures as necessarily negative as the result is that “. . . one comes across a whole series of architectural possibilities that are no less discernible than traditional formal constructions: the possibilities range from, as it were, single-room, huge empty buildings to subterraneo usly winding labyrinths and settlements scattered across a wide expanse.”[[10]](#endnote-10) But all these structures lack ‘vectorial character’ in Ligeti’s words, so he is suggesting that form in music no longer needs to have a sense of direction; rather form becomes a many faceted building in which sound lives and evolves.

Ligeti spends quite a large section of the article on form criticising music that relies on ‘preformation’, both serial and chance approaches; he concludes that “*every* kind of method working with general preformation—whatever directives may be applied—produces on the level of music as sound, apart from the isolation of individual aspects, connections that were not intended by the method in question but nonetheless appear in what results.”[[11]](#endnote-11) What he seems to be saying is that the problem with methods which generate all the pitch/durational material in advance of the actual compositional process, is that the composer has very little control of the eventual aural results. As Manfred Stahnke recollects from Ligeti’s lessons in the 1970s; Ligeti thought that “processes, which were ‘conceivable’ as musical structures, were dismissed if the sounding image, that is what one in fact heard, was meaningless. In his uncompromising judgement, Boulez’s strict serialism and Xenakis’s stochastic processes were doomed to fail.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Ligeti advocates a method of composition in which formal imagination comes first—avoiding the use of preformed material which ensures “that the hardened types of the newest music can be avoided, since unintentional matter no longer creeps in: the idea can exclude in advance every unwanted pattern.”[[13]](#endnote-13) He is suggesting a way of composition in which the composer is in control of the detail of the work rather than the system or preformation. His parting shot in the article is that it is only possible to avoid “ossification and thus the new academicism by continually thinking up something new. “[[14]](#endnote-14) The rest of this paper will examine two contemporaneous works to see how far Ligeti put his theories into practice.

Ligeti’s *Ten Pieces for Wind Quintet* (1968) were written shortly after his article on form; so how far does this work fit his theory? He seems to attempt to solve the problem of form by writing very short and highly characterised pieces. Ligeti talks about the work being entirely based on the “kaleidoscopic principle”, elements are “combined each time in different ways, exactly like the particles of a kaleidoscope, that always retain their own identity, but, when shuffled, produce different patterns.”[[15]](#endnote-15) All of the even-numbered movements are mini virtuosic solos for each of the five players and the odd-numbered movements are contrasting ensemble pieces. A main characteristic of each of the movements is that the form seems to be driven by a single distinct compositional process. An example of this is the ninth movement which is a simple arhythmic canon for 3 instruments. This process creates an automatic mechanism and Ligeti’s only decision is when and how to ‘switch it off’. Ligeti shows in this and other works of the period an interest in compositional process of various kinds, and it is these processes that generate the material which fills the temporal space, automatically creating form. The form is simply a product of the process in the manner of some of Steve Reich’s music such as *Clapping Music* (1972).

The 6th movement from *Ten Pieces* can be divided into 3 sections: bars 1-8 is meccanico material with repeated pitches; bars 9-15 is more melodic but also fragmented; and bars 16-25 appears to be a recapitulation but without pitch. PLAY EXAMPLE NOW So the form borrows from the historic ternary form (although disguised) but what is more significant to the listener is the contrast and development of the material, and its lack of predictability. Could the order of these sections be rearranged as implied by Ligeti’s assertions in the article? There is little obvious vectorial direction to the music, so you could arrange the sections to start with the middle section, jump to the opening and then finish with the last section. The opening section shows a gradual expansion in range from the major second dyad, B and C sharp, with a min-cadenza in the oboe which leads to the pitch F, coinciding with the F in the flute in the middle section. The final note of this section is also a prominent high F on the oboe which leads to the final, recapitulatory section. So although the sections could be rearranged in time as suggested by Ligeti, this would affect the underlying pitch structure. The temporal ordering in this movement has a logic driven by transitory pitch centres which punctuate the sections, and to change this would undermine a significant and audible aspect of the music.

The 8th movement is the most formally complex and varied of the ten, and the sections appear to have little in common with each other. Overall the music moves from motion to stasis; there seems to be a quasi-cadence between the two chords at bars 41 and 42 creating a resolution. The movement is in 3 parts: a minimalist-like section in bars 1-15; a more unstable but linear section bars 16-30; and a strongly melodic section in bars 31-44. PLAY EXAMPLE In terms of vectorial character, the first section has a clear sense of direction and evolution, although it would still be coherent if the section was played backwards. The middle section is fragmented and is created from strong contrasts of material; these fragments could be reordered as there is no obvious forward motion – they are isolated ‘moments’. The final section has a clear harmonic function and creates closure for the movement; it would be difficult (although not impossible) to imagine this at the beginning of the work. The last two chords progress from [E flat,F sharp,G sharp, A, B flat] to a more consonant [F,G,A, B flat], creating a quasi cadence.

In his article on form Ligeti advocates ‘formal imagination’ and avoiding the use of preformed material. What this seems to mean in practice is a free approach to form in which quite contrasting material can coexist, which is a general characteristic of music of the 1960s and beyond. Preformed material does not appear to be being used in his music but the historical pressure of serial and atonal music can be seen in the detailed choices of pitch that Ligeti makes; for example the avoidance of tonal elements and the importance of the chromatic scale in his language. The horn’s melody at bar 31 in the eighth movement of *Ten Pieces* is not serial but is full of major sevenths and augmented fourths and has an angular melodic style strongly reminiscent of the Second Viennese School. So Ligeti’s point about the significance of the ‘net of history’ which is unavoidable for all composers, applies equally to his own work.

Form in *Ten Pieces for Wind Quintet* largely consists of very short sections in the manner of a Beethoven Bagatelle; possibly because it is easier to create form over shorter time-spans where there is no over-arching compositional technique or process. So how did Ligeti deal with the problem of composing longer works in this period? *Lux Aeterna* for 16 voices (1966) is from the same period and has a duration of 9 minutes. Here he uses a very different approach to form and employs micropolyphony as his main compositional technique. This process is very simple to use but produces a potentially rich and complex result. One might say, however, that in this work the material is ‘preformed’ as the precise nature of the sounding harmony is dependent upon the nature of the generating line of pitches. The difference is that with micropolyphony the composer still has some control of the resulting sound through the control of each pitch’s duration within each canonic strand.

In formal terms *Lux Aeterna* can be divided into very clear-cut sections, often connected by Ligeti ‘signals’ (minor third plus major second). If we explore how far these sections could be rearranged in time I think we can see that there is logic to their ordering and that changes to this would be detrimental to the impact of the work. For example, the opening section sounds like an archetypal opening section because of the way the lines opens out in a fan-like fashion from the note F. The next main section at letter C would be far less successful as an opening because of its more mobile nature – it has already gained energy. The section at letter E is the most complex and unstable part of the work, so has more of the character of a development section; it contains several multi-layered canonic groups. The final section from letter H provides both a climax to the work in terms of the dynamic but also overlays the two main compositional features in *Lux Aeterna*: the minor third/major second signal heard melodically in the sopranos and tenors at letter I layered with a more intense micropolyphony in the Altos. The energy of the altos gradually dissipates leaving a low major second to die away to nothing.

If one takes Ligeti’s theory of form, would it be possible to rearrange the order of the sections in *Lux Aeterna* to produce an equally effective result? I think this would be impossible to achieve, because in this case the various sections of the work do have a clear formal function in time, so that changing the order of the material would transform the work making it less coherent. Its sections have a clear and distinct formal role in the work and they cannot be swapped with other sections without having a destructive effect. Therefore there is a vectorial dimension to this work which is connected to the specific nature of the texture and energy level of each section. One could end the piece just before the final section at letter H (as the music dies away) but that would remove the climactic section, and the final sub-section which brings the work more successfully to a point of repose. It is true that the ordering in time of sections in a work like *Lux Aeterna* has less significance than, for example, the works of the classical era; but temporal ordering in new music is still important. Through the consideration of Ligeti’s theoretical discussion in the 1960s on form in new music, it seems that in his own music, temporal and vectorial considerations are still a significant part of the compositional process.

So it appears from the above examination that Ligeti’s theoretical ideas on form in this period are not always congruent with his creative practice. To a certain extent in the essay he was commenting on what contemporary composers appeared to be doing at the time, rather than publishing a manifesto for his own practice. His music did not make extensive use of ‘preformed’ or serial material, something he heavily criticises, although there were ‘historically informed’ practical limits to the nature of his material, and the technique of micropolyphony is clearly related to ‘preformed’ practice. These limits loosened after the 1960s and his musical language became much freer and more eclectic. His later music from the 1980s onwards tends to show a greater affinity with works such as *Ten Pieces* rather than *Lux Aeterna* – perhaps because the former was not controlled by micropolyphony – a technique Ligeti gradually dropped in the 1970s. Although Ligeti did not always follow his theoretical blueprints in his creative work in the 1960s; it is clear that they had a significant impact on the nature of the music he composed and his unfolding practice.

1. Ligeti, G. ‘Form’ In Thomas, E. (ed.) *Form in der Neuen Musik* (Mainz: Darmstädter Beitrage zur Neuen Musik x, 1966), pp. 23-36, translated as ‘Form’ in Katz, R, and Dalhaus, C (eds.) *Contemplating Music: Source Readings in the Aesthetics of Music: Volume 3 Essence*, New York: Pendragon Press, 1992, pp. 781-796. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ligeti, G. ‘Wandlungen der musikalischen Form.’ *Die Reihe* 7 (1960), pp 5-19, translated by Cardew, C. as ‘Metamorphoses of Musical Form.’ *Die Reihe* 7 (1965): pp. 5-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ligeti, G. ‘Form’ p. 787 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. p. 788 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. P. 791 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. p. 784 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. p. 786 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. pp. 788-789. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Birtwistle in Conversation with Fiona Sampson at the Institute of Musical Research London 16th January 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ligeti, Op. Cit. p. 789 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. P. 793 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Stahnke, M. ‘The Hamburg Composition Class’ In Duchesneau, L. and W. Marx (Eds.) *György Ligeti: of foreign lands and strange sounds*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, p. 228 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ligeti, Op. Cit. p. 796 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ligeti, G. *Ligeti in Conversation*, London: Eulenburg, 2011, p. 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)