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**THE INFLUENCE OF EAST EUROPEAN FOLK  
MUSIC ON THE MUSIC OF GYÖRGY LIGETI**

PhD thesis

English summary

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## 1. Background

Since the 1990s scholars and writers have generally agreed that the influence of East European folk music on György Ligeti's oeuvre did not confine to his Hungarian period but was latently or indirectly present after 1956 as well. However, they either mentioned this in general terms only or – when trying to draw a more specific parallel between folklore and individual works – they sometimes arrived at obviously false conclusions. It is no wonder regarding the fact that none of these authors have been familiar either with East European folk music or with the musical life of Hungary between 1945 and 1956, in which the young Ligeti gained a thorough knowledge of East European folklore, his compositional attitudes towards vernacular music were formed, and his early folkloristic works were composed and performed. Moreover, even his early folkloristic works were for the most part unknown for the public until the second half of the 1990s. Almost all that was written about this subject during Ligeti's lifetime was based on his recollections and commentaries.

While several articles have been written since 1990 about the influence of extra-European ethnic musics, especially in connection with the *Études pour piano*, which have always attracted a strong analytical interest, the first analysis of the influence of East European folk music, written by Hungarian musicologist Zoltán Farkas, was published as late as in 2006. Since then two more scholarly works have been published in this field: a book on Ligeti and popular music by Simon Gallot (2010) and an article about the folk music sources of *Concert românesc* (Romanian Concerto) by Bianca Țiplea Temeș (2013).

Having studied many unpublished works, Gallot gave a panoramic view of the period before 1956. He specifically surveyed all extant folk song arrangements from that period, and also identified the folk music sources of several of them. As for folkloristic works composed either before or after 1956 that do not contain authentic folk melodies, however, Gallot failed to analyze them, to elucidate their complex relationship to folklore, and, mainly, to interpret their references to folk music.

## 2. Methods

My dissertation focuses primarily on the following questions: In which ways did East European folk music have the function of a source of inspiration for Ligeti? Which elements and layers of folklore did he use in his compositions? What is the poetic significance of the references to folk music within the individual works? The dissertation aims at surveying the influence of East European folk music on Ligeti's music from three vantage points. Part I reconstructs Ligeti's changing compositional attitudes towards East European folk music on the basis of his written and spoken statements. Part II provides an overview and analyzes a number of works based on authentic folk melodies or

referring explicitly to folklore. Finally, Part III points out specific allusions to East European folk music in selected works from 1978 to 2000, analyzes the way elements of vernacular music are used, and attempts an interpretation of folkloric allusions.

All what has been said so far poses a crucial methodological question: how is it possible to identify folkloric influences, references, and allusions in Ligeti's music? The simplest case is when the composer himself acknowledges the employment of ethnic melodies. This is the case in the majority of Ligeti's folk music arrangements composed between 1945 and 1956, where the utilization of authentic folk melodies is indicated by the title, a subtitle or a footnote, and sometimes even the place of origin and the name of the collector of the particular melody are given. As for works not quoting authentic folk melodies, only the title of the first movement of the Sonata for Solo Viola, "Horă lungă," acknowledges a folkloristic inspiration. Statements by the composer could also hint about a quotation of or an allusion to folk music, but Ligeti – compared to his frequent statements about the stimulating effect of extra-European ethnic musics during the 1980s and 1990s – rarely mentioned the influence of East European folk music and only did it in rather general terms.

How can one then identify elements of folk music if the composer remains silent? It is of course no sufficient reason to call something a quotation or reference just because it reminds us to a specific melody, melodic segment, element, style or procedure of folk music. Nevertheless, it is not impossible to point out consciously employed folkloric quotations and allusions in Ligeti's works, as well as influences of specific folk musics that were most probably present in his mind during the compositional process. Arguments supporting the fact of a folkloric quotation or allusion can be gained from compositional manuscripts (sketches and drafts) and secondary sources which prove that the composer must have known that particular melody, melodic segment, element, style or procedure that we recognize in his work. In this case there is a good reason to presume that the quotation or allusion, even if it is hidden for most listeners, has not only been conscious but also intentional.

Ligeti's compositional manuscripts – which I have been able to study thanks to a five-month research grant at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel – proved particularly illuminating in this respect. The folk music sources of about 40% of the works based on authentic folk melodies could be identified on the basis of the extant verbal jottings and musical sketches and drafts. To those early compositions, however, that do not contain genuine ethnic melodies and thus fall into the category of "invented folklore," no such manuscripts have been found that would prove the intentionality of the supposed folkloric allusion, wherefore I could only formulate presumptions in connection with those works.

There is a relatively big amount of compositional manuscripts, among them several verbal jottings and musical sketches, to each of the analyzed works from Ligeti's late period; in the case of the Violin Concerto and the Sonata for Viola Solo they are extremely numerous. These documents – dozens of densely

written pages full of compositional ideas and associations, as well as of references to Ligeti's own music, works by other composers and different ethnic repertoires – are highly valuable for the scholar who wishes to open up the sources of inspiration of and hidden allusions within the particular works. The huge amount of information, however, can also be misleading, for many of the ideas and references were actually filtered out during the process of composition, and so they do not contribute to a deeper understanding of the work in question. As far as sources of inspiration are concerned, jottings can only be relevant for the scholar if he or she is able to find correspondences between the written words and actual musical materials, types or structures. This is often not easy, and sometimes not even possible, because for Ligeti jottings were only a means of reminding himself of a particular piece of music, as well as of a mood, feeling or idea that he associated with that piece of music. Some of the jottings are nevertheless decipherable. For instance, they can be understood if they refer to a specific place within a musical work or a particular recording of music (whether art music or traditional). They can also be deciphered if the very same word or expression appears in the draft (for example, as a marginal note), where it can unambiguously be connected with a specific melodic, rhythmic or timbral feature, or a metric structure. Relevant information can only be gained from the jottings if we know which version, movement, part or section of the given work they refer to, that is, if we are more or less able to locate them within the compositional process. Since the vast majority of Ligeti's jottings are undated, their chronology can mostly be guessed on the basis of indirect proofs.

Luckily enough, there are secondary sources that can help to understand jottings. For my research, such sources have been those five musical notebooks that Ligeti had used in 1949–50 during his ethnomusicological research trip in Romania, as well as a great number of folk music records, printed collections and ethnomusicological articles.

### 3. Findings

On the basis of Ligeti's compositional jottings, his folk music notebooks, the ethnomusicological publications that he presumably knew, as well as of the collections of the folklore institutes of Budapest, Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest, I have been able to identify the vast majority of the Hungarian and Romanian folk melodies that Ligeti had used in his works between 1945 and 1956. A catalog of these melodies is included in the Appendix to the thesis. I have also discovered the actual sources of about 40% of Ligeti's folk music settings, and have been able to give the presumed sources of an additional 30% of the works. Except for *Inaktelki nóták* and [*Hat inaktelki népdal*] (1953) based on folk songs collected by himself, Ligeti used folk melodies collected by others. He borrowed melodies mostly from printed collections but occasionally also from unpublished transcriptions from the holdings of the Bucharest Folklore Institute

(*Baladă și joc, Român népdalok és táncok, Ballada és tánc*, 1950, *Romanian Concerto*, 1951) and Ilona Borsai's personal collection (*Mátraszentimrei dalok*, 1955), as well as his own transcriptions of a few Romanian records. Ligeti also used several Hungarian folk songs that had previously been arranged by other composers as well. In these cases his sources could also be earlier arrangements. For setting widely known melodies, however, he might not have needed any acoustic or written source.

In the course of the research I have also discovered the manuscripts of three works that had previously been considered lost (*[Népdalfeldolgozások]*, *[Három tánc cigányzenekarra]*, *[Hat inaktelki népdal]*). As for another lost work, *[Ballada]*, I have argued that it might be identical with the piano piece *[El kéne indulni]*. I have also corrected data of the work catalogs by Friedemann Sallis and Simon Gallot. On the basis of archival sources and inventories of folklore institutes I have retraced previously unknown details of Ligeti's folk music research in Romania.

I have made an attempt to put Ligeti's folk music arrangements composed between 1945 and 1955 in the context of his studies and his early public activity as a composer, and have also pointed out their possible models (Kodály, Veress, Bartók) and original functions. According to their genres and various approaches of folklore I have divided Ligeti's works based on original folk melodies into four groups: strophic folk song harmonizations, folk song arrangements for a cappella choir, a cappella vocal works based on folk songs, and instrumental works using folk melodies. In the first two categories ethnic melodies are used without any substantial alteration. Compositions that fall into the third group, however, borrow only the text from the particular folk song in its entirety, while taking over only the first strophe or even only the first few notes of the melody, continuing it with an invented folkloric material (*Húsvét, Bujdosó*, 1946, *Idegen földön*, 1945–46). A cappella vocal works composed during the 1950s are characterized by unsophistication, humorous effects and the relatively free, sometimes almost utilitarian approach of folklore (*Kállai kettős*, 1950, *Az asszony és a katona*, 1951, *Haj, ifjúság!*, 1952, *Pápainé*, 1953).

In the analysis of the *Romanian Concerto*, Ligeti's most important instrumental work based on folklore, I have focused on problems of the genre, the form and the musical style. At the same time I have also argued that the composition – starting as a kind of folk song suite but ending as a multi-movement symphonic work – is not entirely conventional. Ligeti's adaptation of the traditional Romanian harmonization and accompaniment for symphony orchestra is unique, and the work's dramaturgy is not conventional either. The composition does not end with a relaxed and resolving Bartókian “round dance” finale but with a more and more rushing and disintegrating “dance rhapsody” that eventually collapses. Here Ligeti not only altered ethnic melodies and mixed them with his own thematic material but eventually deconstructed them.

As for works of 1945 to 1956 that do not contain authentic folk melodies, I have differentiated between two types of “invented folklore.” Pieces of the first

type employ characteristics of Hungarian folk songs virtually unconsciously, as if speaking a “musical mother tongue,” and so folkloric turns merge organically into their musical language (*Dereng már a hajnal*, 1945, *Idegen földön, Petőfi bordala*, 1950, Sonata for Violoncello Solo, 1948–53). Pieces of the second type, however, imitate folk songs or allude to the folklore intentionally, with a certain aim and artistic effect (*Haj, ifjúság!*, *Arany-dalok*, 1952).

I have pointed out that both Ligeti’s turning away from and the return to folk music were connected to the changes of his aesthetic ideals. While the former was a consequence of his compositional reorientation starting in 1955, the latter coincided with his definitive breaking with the avant-garde: the direct influence of and explicit references to Hungarian and Romanian folk music resurfaced first in *Le Grand Macabre* (1974–77) and then in the harpsichord pieces *Hungarian Rock* and *Passacaglia ungherese* (1978). Besides aesthetic reasons, however, there might have also been personal and emotional motives behind his compositional rediscovery of the folk music of his homelands – namely a change in Ligeti’s attitude towards his left homelands, his own past and the Hungarian musical tradition.

In both harpsichord pieces, whose titles ostentatiously emphasize their “Hungarianness,” the elements of Hungarian folk music are mixed with distant musical styles and idioms (chaconne and passacaglia tradition, elements of jazz and rock, Balkan and Caribbean rhythms). I have pointed out that both pieces contain a number of “mistuned” Hungarian folk song imitations. These are imitations of abstract melodic types rather than of specific folk songs. Moreover, Ligeti alienates them by transposing some of their notes and phrases up or down, while retaining their characteristic melodic and rhythmic features, as well as their strophic structure. I have interpreted the distorted and mistuned folk song imitations in the harpsichord pieces as metaphors of Ligeti’s ambivalent relationship with Hungary, as well as of his physical and mental detachment from his homelands, and the two works as two ironic self-portraits of the Hungarian émigré composer living in the West.

Also in the Trio for violin, horn and piano (1982) I have pointed out mistuned quotations of folk songs and folk song imitations, which are at the same time self-quotations from Ligeti’s early works (*Romanian Concerto, Inaktelki nóták, Musica ricercata*). One of the emblematic features of his late music, the so-called lamento motif, which turns up for the first time in the Trio’s last movement and appears later in almost every important Ligeti work, I have traced back to certain melodic types of the Hungarian folk lament. I have argued, however, that Ligeti’s lamento motif – which should rather be called lamento melody – only indirectly relies on ethnic models. Ligeti abstracts and alienates the elements borrowed from the folk lament by procedures such as inserting them into strictly constructive compositional frameworks. In the light of its allusions to East European folklore I have interpreted the Trio as a manifestation of Ligeti’s reflective nostalgia for his left homes that no longer exist in reality.

In the analysis of *Magyar etűdők* (1983) and *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel* (2000) I have focused on the play with Hungarian language, poetic pictures and folkloric allusions.

I have pointed out several allusions to art and folk music in the Violin Concerto (1990–92) as well; in fact, every movement references East European folk music in one way or other. In the (later jettisoned) opening movement of the work's first version of 1990 I have identified six thematic materials that can directly be associated with Hungarian or Romanian folk music. I have compared that movement to the folkloric collage of the third piece of *Magyar etűdők*, and have found that the two movements are basically different in their effects. While "Vásár" is more playful and comic, the Concerto's first movement is bewildering and tragic, for in the latter the melodies of the home gradually blur, tangle and eventually become chaotic – very much like memories. As I have demonstrated, Ligeti reused almost all of the materials of the jettisoned first movement in the concerto's lamento finale, whose middle section is again a kind of folkloric collage. Every movement of the Violin Concerto is in some way or other about passing away or vanishing; in this context, its allusions to folklore are symbols of the lost home, the irrecoverable past, of remembrance and grief.

On the basis of manuscript sources of the Sonata for Viola Solo (1991–94) I have discovered that Ligeti had been concerned with the "Hora lungă" movement, which he had completed as late as by 1994, from the very beginning of the compositional process. Thus this five-minute piece can be regarded as the central movement of the Sonata. I have compared its monophonic, melodious, expressive and modally inclined music to two *horei lungi* collected by Bartók in Maramureş, Transylvania, but have also pointed out that its cadential formula is a self-quotation from the symbolic "Aria" melody of the Violin Concerto. Partly on the basis of the compositional manuscripts I have demonstrated that "Facsar," the Sonata's third movement dedicated to the memory of Sándor Veress, is also modeled on certain pieces and idioms of art and folk music (*hora lungă* style, one particular colinda melody jotted down by Ligeti in 1949, as well as the beginning of movement II of Veress's Sonata for Violin Solo). "Facsar" is homage to Ligeti's one-time teacher, which evokes not only Veress's music but also the most intense period of their personal relationship – that is, Ligeti's own youth.

It has been widely claimed in the literature that Ligeti, when employing elements of extra-European vernacular music, did not allude to its sound or used its coloristic effects but rather borrowed certain abstract structures and concepts from it, which he transformed and built in his compositions with a mentality typical of a European composer. In his works the borrowed ethnic elements are thus no longer bound to the local or the ethnic, nor are they exotic or evoke their place and time of origin. As I hoped to demonstrate, the situation with the influence of East European folk music is somewhat different. Not that Ligeti combined them with elements of distant musical repertoires or fully

integrated them into his works. But allusions to the folk music of his homelands do have a poetic significance, even if they are hidden, for they evoke a particular place and time, to which the composer has a personal relation. Nevertheless, the poetic significance of East European ethnic melodies in Ligeti's music is independent from their original functions, texts and ethnic or regional affiliations. They are more like *objets trouvés*; it is the composer who provides them with a "meaning." This is perhaps the most important difference between Ligeti's compositional attitude to folk music and that of Bartók and Kodály, and this might be the reason why Ligeti's late works inspired by East European folk music can fully be regarded as music of our time.

#### **4. Publications in connection with the subject of the thesis**

- "A pályakezdő Ligeti György Bartók-recepciója" [Bartók reception of the young György Ligeti]. *Magyar Zene*, 46/3 (August 2008): 301–311.
- "A "new music" from nothing: György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata*". *Studia Musicologica*, 49/3–4 (September 2008): 203–230.
- (Trans. and comm.) "Ligeti György: Öninterjú" [Self-interview]. *Muzsika*, 53/8 (August 2010): 15–20.
- (Trans. and ed.) *Ligeti György válogatott írásai* [Selected writings of György Ligeti]. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2010. 480 pp.
- "Ligeti György 1949–50-es népzenei tanulmányútja" [György Ligeti's folk music research in 1949–50]. In *Zenetudományi Dolgozatok 2011*, ed. Gábor Kiss, 323–346. Budapest: MTA BTK Zenetudományi Intézet, 2012.
- "A folkloric collage jettisoned: The original version of the first movement of György Ligeti's Violin Concerto (1990)". *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung*, 26 (April 2013): 39–45.