

**Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music**  
**Doctoral school (7.6 Art of Music)**  
**MARIANN MARCZI**  
**GYÖRGY LIGETI'S PIANO ETUDES**  
*doctoral thesis*  
**THESIS ADVISER: MÁRTA PAPP**

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## **I. Antecedents of research**

I started to investigate the piano pieces of György Ligeti at the end of 2001 during my postgraduate studies in Berlin. I more than once played two of the Ligeti etudes (*Fanfarses, Fém*) in concerts. My interest was focussed not only on learning and performing the pieces but also on researching secondary literature on these works. I found studies mainly about the first book of the etudes, while surprisingly few sources were to be found about the remainder, though by 2001 Ligeti had already composed the 18th etude. Later this fact led me to investigate and analyze all of Ligeti's piano etudes. The work on my doctoral thesis discussing Ligeti György's piano etudes as a DLA student at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music started in the spring of 2005 and ended in 2008, under the lead of Márta Papp as thesis adviser.

In the analysis of the first book I made use of disposable secondary literature and the advice and suggestions of researchers and pupils of Ligeti, music scholars and composers from the United States. (Mentioned by name in the Acknowledgements.) However, in the analysis of the first book a major difference can be found between my approach and those of the consulted works: having processed these works I wished to apply other points of view or to apply the ones I came to know in the course of my research, but in a broader, more detailed, more consistent way, from the first note to the last. The regularities discussed in more than one sources turned out to be true and applicable only to the beginning and certain other sections of the etudes, but they could be only partly, if at all, observed in other parts of the pieces.

There were significantly less sources available discussing the second book, while there was no available published material at all dealing with the third one. In the case of these etudes I applied methods that had proven applicable in the investigation of the previous pieces.

## **II. Methods of research**

The thesis includes the analysis of the three books of Ligeti's etudes, altogether 18 pieces. These analyses shape the central part of the thesis.

Prior to the analyses, the origins, development and main features of the etude as a genre are introduced, showing its alterations from the early baroque to the 21st century, the gradual transformation from a technical study or exercise into concert etudes, concert pieces or into composer practice where etudes not only provide practice in a particular technical skill, but also allow the unfolding of a musical idea or problem.

György Ligeti's ars poetica, that he often expressed in public (performances, programme brochures, interviews, CD booklets), in relation to composing the etudes, shapes another part of my investigations. I consider it important to

highlight the following influences among the many: the works of Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Liszt, Debussy and the folk music of the Balkan from the European tradition; Middle African, Javan, Sumatran, Gamelan, Cuban and jazz music from non-European musical traditions; Conlon Nancarrow's etudes for mechanical piano from contemporary music literature; Maurits Escher's graphics from fine arts; the structure of mathematical fractals from science; and the works of D. R. Hofstadter from philosophy.

The analyses of the etudes are structured in a similar fashion. First of all the origin and the circumstances of the first performance and relating data, then the titles, their origins and symbolic meanings are going to be discussed. The analyses focus on the rhythmical structure, tonal systems, scales and register of the etudes, as key concepts of the extraordinariness and novelty represented by this set of 18 pieces. The complexity of rhythm, metrum and tempo posed one of the most significant problem, which Ligeti solved by resorting to one single instrumental artist. In the further sections of the analyses the formal structures and the dynamic proportions of the pieces are going to be investigated. This chapter also deals with the relationship between certain etudes and other works of Ligeti: mainly *Trio – Hommage à Brahms*, *Piano Concerto*, *Violin Concerto*, *Three Pieces for Two Pianos* and *Continuum* are going to be used to show common features. During the analyses the discrepancies between manuscripts, facsimile editions and music sheets published by Schott are going to be observed. When comparing these sources I had limited means, as the facsimile editions of etudes no. 15, 16 and 17 were not available.

The conclusions are summarized in a separate chapter. The eighteen etudes may be grouped differently on the basis of certain similarities, such as that of the rhythmical structures or the unfolding of similar musical ideas that build on similar scales, tonal systems or intervals. Other etudes can be discussed on the common platform of piano-technical approaches, while others are related by similarities in tonal images and tonal patterns.

An episode chapter deals with the influence these etudes have on fine arts. During the research period, I participated in and, by providing musical illustrations, also contributed to two exhibitions of Hungarian painter István Nádler. A selection of his pictures can be found attached to the present thesis. I also made an interview with him, in the course of which we talked about how these etudes can be interpreted by the means of visual language. In my thesis I have also included and illustrated a short talk with Hungarian sculptor Katalin Csányi about her series in progress, which was inspired by Ligeti's works.

In another major chapter of the thesis the sound-recordings of the etudes are going to be examined. The interpretative aesthetic part of the thesis does not touch upon all existing recordings of the Ligeti etudes, it only presents a selection of these. I attempted to include recordings of indisputable musical value. Ten artists' interpretations are discussed. In Pierre-Laurent Aimard's and Fredrik Ullén's performance the whole series is available. In Louise Sibourd's performance unreleased recordings of all etudes were at my disposal. Toros Can recorded and released all of the etudes with the exception of the 18th. Erika

Haase and Idil Biret recorded books 1 and 2 of the etudes. Volker Banfield and Lucille Chung both recorded one book each, Gábor Csalog recorded a selection and Gianluca Cascioli recorded two etudes. In this chapter short guides can be found about the records and recordings along with a selection of relating criticism and reviews.

The last, short chapter of the paper includes concise guides and biographies of people to whom Ligeti dedicated his etudes. I have found it important to include this chapter for all the people who were given the honour of being the dedicatee of one or more of Ligeti's etudes, are outstanding figures of the 20th and 21st century's music, science or art, and in my opinion this hall of fame is strongly related to the spirit of the etudes.

The Appendix includes a List of Works Consulted, a Discography of Ligeti's etudes and a list of sources of sheets music consulted.

### **III. Conclusions**

One of the most important results of the research is that I have gained a deeper understanding of these works. The research has also resulted in a paper analyzing all etudes composed by Ligeti, therefore filling a major gap in both the national and the international secondary literature. While some of the etudes have already been investigated, so far a comprehensive analysis has not been published.

Besides providing an in-depth analysis of the etudes I also attempted to interpret the role these individual pieces play within the structure of the cycles and to shed light on the internal connections, structure and spiritual message of the three books of etudes. These eighteen pieces keep the blueprint of the artist's pathfinding in his last creative phase and also synthesize the conclusions of his earlier works. The etudes therefore bear key importance from the point of view of the complete oeuvre. Ligeti's three books of etudes are the results of fifteen years of labour. The three series extend from chaos to canon: the title of the first piece is *Désordre*, the last one is entitled *Canon*. The investigation of composition technique of the etudes reveals that in Ligeti's music the amazing mixture of order and disorder finally evokes the sense of a superior order. The first book ends in the collapse-like coda of the *Automne à Varsovie*. At the beginning of the second book the idyllic, celestial vision and magnificent Gamelan sonority of *Galamb borong* is in sharp contrast to the demonic atmosphere of *L'escalier du diable* which is resolved by the final piece of the second book, the soaring *Columna infinită*. The pieces of the last book are all canons, featuring slow introductions and coral-like sections. The expression of faith and humility reaching back to old musical forms is interestingly combined with the perception of a modern composer.

Ligeti's etudes shed light on the relativity of our perception. They broaden our perception and provoke reflection. Ligeti's compositions are full of effects that

play trick on hearing. One can hear such rhythmic and melodic configurations which are not actually played, being only the results of two or more different phrases layered on top of each other. These illusory formations are similar to the impossible perspectives of Maurits Escher's graphics. Ligeti is the representative of synesthesia among composers. In the background of his compositions one may encounter the urge of visual and tactile ideas. These works are quasi sound-sculptures creating their own "tone-scenes". Ligeti's childhood experiences and science (chemistry, physics, mathematics), which always stood in the centre of his attention, also left their traces on the études, whose themes stem from a wide range of fields, such as literature (as in *Der Zauberlehrling* based on a Goethe ballad), hidden symbols of the titles (pendulum, ladder) (*En suspens* és *L'escalier du diable*), ethnology (*Fanfares*, *Galamb borong*), sculpture (*Columna infinită*), painting (*White on White*), the perception of different states of mind (*Désordre*, *Vertige*), politics (*Automne à Varsovie*), materialism (*Fém*, *Entrelacs*), nature (*Arc-en-ciel*), film (*À bout de souffle*), music (*Fanfares*, *Cordes vides*, *Canon*), piano technique elements (*Touches bloquées*, *White on White*).

One can approach Ligeti's music from a variety of angles, but however detailed the investigation might be, one cannot ignore the fact that behind the notes Ligeti's whole personality unfolds. If one opens up to the message of these pieces, one may equally be touched by their genius, humanity and playfulness. What one may hear when listening to Ligeti's music is not only unequalled formal fulfillment and a watchmaker's precision but also an ability to evoke so far unknown achievements of the mind and to make both the listeners and performers of these works capable of hearing, seeing and dreaming.

#### **IV. Publications in relation to the thesis**

**Ligeti, György – Marcsi, Mariann – Nádler, István.** *Nádler-Ligeti*, Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2008.

**Marcsi, Mariann.** „Ligeti György *L'escalier du diable* című etűdjének elemzése”. in *"Mielz valt mesure que ne fait estultie", ünnepi kötet Horváth Iván 60. születésnapjára*, szerk. Bartók István, Veres András, Szentpéteri Márton, Horváth Béla, Szegedy-Maszák Mihály. *Budapest: Krónika Nova Kiadó*, (2008): 168–173.;

#### **Activities in relation to the thesis**

2004: Montage of György Ligeti's works as musical illustration for Hungarian painter István Nádler's exhibition entitled *Egyedi grafikák papíron, Hommage à Ligeti György 80*, organized in Dorottya Gallery in Budapest.

2008: The foundation of Ligeti-award at the fifth Ifjúsági Kortárszenei Estek (IKZE) organized in Óbudai Társaskör. This award is intended to recognize young composers for composing the best piece in piano chamber music.

#### **List of miscellaneous academic publications**

**Marcsi, Mariann (Ann Airam).** „Térerős zongorista, térszűkítő hangmérnök. Piotr Anderszewski Szymanowski-felvételeiről”. *Hangjegyzet* 9 (2005. ősz) 12–13.;

**Marcsi, Mariann (Ann Airam).** „Chopiniana. Dinu Lipatti és Cziffra György Chopin-felvételeiről”. *Hangjegyzet* 10 (2006. tavasz) 15–16.;

**Marcsi, Mariann (Ann Airam).** „Csajkovszkij interpretációk. Herbert von Karajan, Sir Thomas Beecham és Antonio Pappano Csajkovszkij szimfónia-felvételeiről”. *Hangjegyzet* 12 (2007. nyár) 15–17.;

**Marcsi, Mariann – Mesterházi Gábor (Mc/Dc).** „Macizene. A *Bach for My Baby* és a *Mozart for My Baby* című válogatásokról”. *Hangjegyzet* 12 (2007. nyár) 31. ;

**Marcsi, Mariann (Ann Airam).** „Hegedűversenyek D-ben. Leonyid Kogan és Nathan Milstein albumairól”. *Hangjegyzet* 13 (2008. tavasz) előkészületben

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*György Ligeti in conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and himself.* London: Eulenburg Books, 1983.

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**Roelcke, Eckhardt.** »Träumen Sie in Farbe?« *György Ligeti in Gespräch mit Eckhardt Roelcke.* Wien: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2003.

**Roelcke, Eckhardt–Stahnke, Manfred.** *Találkozások Ligeti Györggyel, Beszélgetőkönyv.* Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2005

**Sabbe, Herman.** *Ligeti György.* Budapest: Continuum, 1993.

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