It is well documented that György Ligeti experienced a significant creative block following the composition of his opera *Le Grand Macabre* (1974-77, revised 1996). In the fallow period between 1977 and 1982, the only new works composed were two short pedagogical compositions for harpsichord in 1978: *Hungarian Rock* and *Passacaglia ungherese*. The subsequent transformation of his compositional style, beginning with *Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano, “Hommage à Brahms”* (1982), has fascinated musicologists interested in unraveling the circumstances that caused Ligeti to re-embrace several traditional musical elements in his late work after spending a decade associated with the avant-garde. In his book, Michael Searby takes the position shared by other scholars, including Jane Clendinning and Richard Steinitz, that Ligeti’s creative stasis constituted a stylistic crisis in which personal, political, and historical factors collided, causing him to critically evaluate the artistic direction he would take in the following decade.  

Searby argues that Ligeti found inspiration to move forward from the stagnant micropolyphonic techniques that dominated his output during the late sixties by redefining his relationship to traditional tonality through the composition of *Le Grand Macabre*. Central to Searby’s argument is an analysis of the opera that examines the use of pastiche, collage, and quotation as evidence.

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of Ligeti’s changing relationship with the musical past. He also explores Ligeti’s integration of triadic harmonies and greater emphasis on melody throughout the opera—both of which appear prominently in his music for the first time since he escaped Hungary in 1956. By tracing the changing roles of triadic harmonies and overtly melodic material in the works composed between 1974 and 1985, Searby arrives at the conclusion that the process of composing the opera launched the development of Ligeti’s mature style, allowing him to preserve polyphonic techniques central to his earlier texture-based pieces while facilitating more diverse harmonic palettes and formal structures.

The book spans 201 pages and comprises five chapters, the middle three of which provide detailed musical analyses of Ligeti’s pieces written between 1974 and 1985. Searby’s arguments rely on musical evidence from sophisticated analyses of specific musical structures, rendering this book most suitable for students and scholars who possess at least a rudimentary background in atonal analytical techniques and who are already somewhat familiar with Ligeti’s work. Chapter 1 situates *Le Grand Macabre* in relation to the tonal aspects of Ligeti’s early works and the micropolyphonic pieces written between 1956-1973, such as *Atmosphères* (1961) and *Requiem* (1963-1965). The chapter closes with a comprehensive discussion of Ligeti’s music in relation to the elusive concept of “tonality.” The overall effectiveness of this chapter is marred by the occurrence of minor but careless biographical errors, such as the indication that Ligeti transcribed Hungarian folk music at the Bucharest Institute in 1949, when it was actually Romanian folk music. Further, Searby is ambiguous about defining his analytical approach, indicating that “paradigmatic analysis is used to show how segments of music recur and evolve over a section or work, and is an effective way to show thematic or motivic connections.” (25) Unfortunately, this is the only explanation Searby offers for “paradigmatic analysis,” though he seems to assume the reader will be familiar with this term. According to Nicholas Cook, paradigmatic analysis, (the first step in semiotic musical analysis), involves “extrapolating the units of significant structures in the music” and creating tables of related structures removed from their rhythmic and temporal contexts. It does not appear to me that Searby used semiotic analysis, and given that he deemed it necessary to provide footnotes to explain who Schenker is (61), what a pedal point is (61), and that classical music refers to pieces written by eighteenth-century composers such as Mozart or Haydn (84), it seems strange that he does not provide more clarification about his use of this term. As a result, the reader may be left confused about the book’s target audience.

Some of the most meaningful contributions of this volume are the thorough analyses of traditional phrase structures and harmonies in *Le Grand Macabre*, offered in Chapter 2. Prior to the publication of this volume, the only extensive musical analysis of

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Ligeti’s opera was contained in the German text written by Maria Kostakeva, making Searby’s the first English text to provide a detailed analysis of the underlying musical structures and processes of this piece. The most convincing aspect of Chapter 2 is the meticulous analysis of triadic material in the passacaglia that closes the opera, which reveals a uniform distribution of the twenty-four major and minor triads behaving outside of the rules of tonal syntax. Searby explains how “a broad examination of the passacaglia shows that each chord functions as a specific color or sound object, and has no longer-term harmonic function.” This idea resurfaces throughout the remainder of the book, since Searby posits that Ligeti’s tendency to employ triadic material outside of tonal contexts in his late works can be traced to this first instance in the passacaglia. This chapter also contains a very convincing phrasal analysis of the love duet between the characters Amanda and Amando. Searby observes that “the overall phrase structure of the duet shows significant examples of repetition of intervallic shapes or contours which relate to more traditional concepts of the development of musical material.” He uses this evidence to support his suggestion that Ligeti’s tendency to use overtly melodic material in his later works stemmed from his treatment of melody in the opera.

Unfortunately, not all elements of Searby’s analysis in Chapter 2 are equally convincing. His discussion of the traditional use of pitch centres in the opera is particularly insubstantial. He asserts that pitch class B is significant because of its occurrence in the bass of the harmony at the end of both scene one and the final scene, and also insists that C is structurally important because the characters Nekrotzar and Mescalina both perform laments around this pitch class. Searby explains that Ligeti chose these pitch centres arbitrarily as a “skeletal framework to support the compositional process.” However, Amy Bauer offers a compelling case that pitch class C is related to the self-contained dramaturgy of the opera as well as to operatic history, stating the character Piet’s “mocking reference to death as worse than sobriety (on a prescient middle C, rehearsal number 55+5) foreshadows Nekrotzar’s threat intoned on middle C—the same note assigned to the Oracle in Mozart’s Idomeneo.” Bauer’s example serves to indicate that Searby’s analysis of musical structures in the opera may have been more informed had he taken Ligeti’s dramatic motivations into consideration.

The minimal consideration of the dramatic elements of the opera becomes increasingly evident in Chapter 3, which is devoted to an exploration of each instance of direct quotation, imitative pastiche, distorted quotation, and self-quotation that appears in the opera. Searby insists Ligeti’s use of quotation in Le Grand Macabre is significant because it “allows him to re-engage with past musical materials in a direct way” and that “using quotation and pastiche allowed Ligeti to free himself from a purely atonal

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harmonic background, so he could explore new harmonies.” (83) This argument seems contrived considering the complex, overlapping collage structures in which the quotations appear. Often, the chaotic sound masses containing the quotations juxtapose elements of the musical past and do not explore the sound properties of traditional triadic harmonies. Furthermore, although there is truth in Searby’s proposal that the postmodern climate of thought and the influence of composers like Luciano Berio and Mauricio Kagel played a role in instigating Ligeti’s use of quotation and pastiche, the specific pieces Ligeti quoted were chosen largely to contribute to the “grotesque and existential irony” at the heart of the opera’s dramatic conflict, and to “function as both an homage to and a critique of operatic conventions through the ages.” As such, readers may find that Searby’s discussion of pastiche and quotation comes across as incomplete, since the influence of Ligeti’s dramatic goals on the selection of specific musical quotations is not explored.

In Chapter 4, Searby presents analyses of works composed after the opera up to 1985, including Monument—Selbstportrait—Bewegung: Three Pieces for Two Pianos (1976), Passacaglia ungherese and Hungarian Rock for harpsichord (1978), The Horn Trio (1982), Drei Phantasien nach Freidrich Hölderlin (1982) and Magyar Etüdök (1983) for unaccompanied sixteen-part choir, and Étude for piano, no. 4 “Fanfares” (1985). Building on the evidence presented in Chapters 2 and 3, Searby comprehensively investigates Ligeti’s employment of triadic harmony and classically influenced phrase development, while drawing attention to the continued use of Baroque dance forms and polyphonic textures in the later pieces. He relates these stylistic elements to the musical processes he uncovered in the opera, pointing to their continued and more developed appearance in the late works as evidence that Ligeti’s stylistic crisis was ultimately resolved. The detailed analytical work in this chapter is commendable, and Searby’s perspectives about Ligeti’s compositional processes are elucidating. This is particularly true regarding the harpsichord pieces, often overlooked because Ligeti has been known to discuss them as “ironic comments in the discussion [he] was having with [his] students” instead of as legitimate contributions to his body of work.

Searby discusses Ligeti’s relationship to postmodernism in Chapter 5, citing the intersection of new currents of postmodernist thought in the 1970s and the exhaustion of Ligeti’s micropolyphonic techniques as the primary instigating factors behind the stylistic crisis. He also proposes that the clear vocal lines demanded by the operatic genre might have obliged Ligeti to explore new avenues of melodic expression—an idea only casually remarked upon previously in the book. This chapter does not add significant depth to Searby’s argument and the section feels repetitive since most of the main ideas reiterated here appear scattered unsystematically at numerous points earlier in the text. In this


section it becomes evident that Searby’s choice to discuss the opera as a turning point
gives rise to the idea that Ligeti’s stylistic evolution was composed of distinct periods
delineated by historically and biographically significant moments in time. This view is not
shared by all scholars and is dismissed as a gross oversimplification of the truth by many.
For example, in her detailed analysis of Ligeti’s stylistic evolution, Marina Lobonova states:

It gradually became clear that his “evolution” contained no such “turning
points;” furthermore, in the normal sense of the word, it was incorrect to
speak of “artistic evolution” at all, as works which at times seemed
irreconcilably different were in reality the various products of a single
aesthetic world, an unchanging aesthetic code, a strict logic and a rigidly
systematic approach.\(^8\)

Other scholars believe that an authentic discussion of Ligeti’s style should not fail
to consider the musical characteristics that remained consistent over his life. Ligeti often
explored new possibilities of previously composed material resulting in many examples of
intertextual referencing across his oeuvre. For example, Steinitz insists the lament motif
common in Ligeti’s later works already existed within the “fan-shaped 12-note melody of
the ‘Christe’ in Requiem.”\(^9\) While some scholars describe Ligeti’s compositional style in
terms of his relationship to broader artistic movements such as postmodernism, others
tend to focus on how his style changed in relation to his own cultural past as a Hungarian
or as a knowledgeable theory professor with a great affinity for Baroque counterpoint.\(^10\)
The abundant autobiographical information available from interviews further complicates
Ligeti scholarship, since, as Charles Wilson warns, composers’ self-representations can
significantly influence historical perspectives and must be evaluated against other forms
of evidence.\(^11\) This plethora of perspectives serves to indicate issues of musical style can be
examined through many lenses. Often, a number of points of view must be considered in
order to pursue the clearest possible conception of truth.

Regrettably, Searby’s arguments often lack the subtlety and sophistication required
to faithfully explore the idea of stylistic evolution, and the answers he provides to his
research question appear oversimplified. Although it would be convenient to explain the
changes observed over Ligeti’s career in terms of the permissibility of triads and melody,

\(^8\) Ibid., 1.


\(^10\) For discussion of these viewpoints see: Rachel Beckles Willson, Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music
during the Cold War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 163; Friedemann Sallis, An Introduction to the
Early Works of György Ligeti (Cologne: Studio, Dr. Gisela Schewe, 1996), 196.

the ‘running of course’ of micropolyphony, and the historical exhaustion of modernism, ultimately such a summary falls exceedingly short. Readers should be skeptical of theories that seek to explain changes in style almost exclusively in terms of a single piece. Searby’s arguments may have come across more effectively if he had taken more care to structure them systematically over the course of the book and to connect them more clearly with his selection of musical examples. These criticisms aside, Searby’s adept musical analyses of individual pieces should not be overlooked, and his musical observations are of value to individuals seeking a greater understanding of the musical construction of Ligeti’s opera and later works. Ligeti’s compositions are notoriously difficult to perform and employ unique an often convoluted language that demands creative analytical approaches from scholars. Searby’s penetrating analyses should therefore be commended, and are a testament to his prodigious knowledge of Ligeti’s work and his ingenuity in finding analytical solutions. Although Searby’s encompassing theory about the evolution of Ligeti’s style is ultimately unconvincing, the work presented in this volume helps to demystify the compositions of this most unique composer and could prove to be instrumental in fostering a greater sense of accessibility toward his music amongst performers and music theorists.

For Further Reading


