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5 Canon as an agent of revelation in the music of Ligeti

Amy Bauer

Twentieth-century modernist composers from Stockhausen, Messiaen and Penderecki to Jonathan Harvey have proven that the language of modernism is compatible with religious expression, producing works of deep religious conviction and spiritual transcendence. But few would argue that most modernist composers pursued a more materialist and secular aesthetic. As Carl Dahlhaus noted, historical and cultural agendas drove the twentieth-century musical avant-garde towards a developmental model based on the notion of scientific progress.¹ Within this model, successive avant-garde works served primarily as documentation of a problem history directed by instrumental reason toward a refined ideal. As a series of novel solutions to the problems of musical language and form, this history typically focused on compositional materials and processes at the expense of – and perhaps as a substitute for – hermeneutic meaning or function. One reaction to this extreme formalism was the growing political conscience of new music in the 1960s, which led journalists to routinely consign new works to opposed camps. At one end of the spectrum lay socially engaged composers such as Nono or Henze; at the other, composers like Boulez or Stockhausen were portrayed, and portrayed themselves, as solipsistically focused on their role in advancing contemporary musical language. Rarely did a work seem to point beyond its historical moment towards a more universal – much less spiritual – goal. Michael Tippett summarizes this position as one affecting modern artists in general, whose role has shifted from that of restoring the ‘spiritual order’ to presenting the ‘polarity of knowledge obtained through intellectual process (the knowledge of scientists) and that obtained from deep inner sensibilities (the knowledge of creative artists)’.²

1 Carl Dahlhaus, *Schoenberg and the New Music*, trans. Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 21.

2 Michael Tippett, *Tippett on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 246, cited in Arnold Whittall, *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 119. Tippett’s views echo C.P. Snow’s famous lecture on ‘The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution’, published in 1961 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). My thanks to Robert Sholl for pointing this out.

György Ligeti projected this image of a modern composer steeped in the ‘knowledge obtained through intellectual process’ and trained sensibilities. In numerous writings and interviews he detailed a thoroughly materialist practice, one that spanned from his earliest experimental compositions to his late works.

I don’t write music naively. But I imagine music as it sounds, very concretely. I listen to it in my inner ear. Then I look for a certain system, for a certain construction. ... And I never think in philosophical terms, or never in extramusical terms.³

It’s about writing a composition and then I am concentrating on a composition and I have certain constructive ideas. It’s not only naïve, it has to be consistent – not consistent as mathematics, consistent as a natural language. And this applies for a certain piece and then I am ready with the piece, and then comes the next piece where I revise my working method.⁴

Be it the micropolyphonic webs of *Lontano* (1967), the automated surface of *Continuum* for harpsichord (1968) or the fractured mechanisms of the *Chamber Concerto* (1969–70), Ligeti’s compositional techniques established a certain objective distance between listener and work, what the composer often called his tendency toward ‘deep-frozen expressionism’.⁵ His penchant for ‘certain constructive ideas’ went hand-in-hand with often puzzle-like pitch and rhythmic constructions that have proved irresistible to analysts of his music. Such intricate structures accommodated ever more far-reaching intertextual references from art, literature, non-Western music and science, resisting facile comprehension and spiritual interpretation in equal measure.⁶ As the composer explained in a 1966 radio address:

3 Ligeti interviewed in Richard Dufallo, *Trackings: Composers Speak with Richard Dufallo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 334.

4 Ligeti interviewed by John Tusa for the BBC in 2001, archived at http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/ligeti_transcript.shtml, accessed 21 February 2012.

5 György Ligeti, *Ligeti in Conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and Himself*, trans. Gabor J. Schabert, Sarah E. Soulsby, Terence Kilmartin and Geoffrey Skelton (London: Eulenburg, 1983), p. 19.

6 To my knowledge, the question of spirituality in Ligeti’s music has only been broached regarding the *Requiem*. Early comments from Ove Nordwall and Erkki Salmenhaara refer to the ‘spiritual struggle’ represented by the four-movement ascent from the opening Introit (Erkki Salmenhaara, *Das musikalische Material und seine Behandlung in den Werken “Apparitions”, “Atmosphères”, und “Requiem” von György Ligeti*, trans. Helke Sander [Regensburg: G. Bosse, 1969], p. 162), to the great ‘dignity which refuses to accept annihilation’ of the *Lacrimosa* (Ove Nordwall, trans. Hans Eppstein, *György Ligeti: Eine Monographie* [Mainz: Schott, 1971], p. 58). See also Wolfgang Marx, “‘Make Room for the Grand Macabre?’ The Concept of Death in Ligeti’s Oeuvre”, in Louise Duchesneau and Wolfgang Marx (ed.), *György Ligeti: Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011), pp. 71–84 and Wolfgang Marx, ‘Requiem sempiternum? Death and the musical requiem in the twentieth century’, *Mortality*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2012), 119–29. Marx cites a radio interview in which Ligeti dates his desire to compose a requiem back to his the early days of Hungarian Socialism, and the sense that he was part of a ‘private resistance movement’ (‘Nah und fern zugleich: Jude-Sein in der Musik: Ein Gespräch zwischen

It seems paradoxical, that when I compose I never think of other people, nor of myself, but only of the issues at hand [*an die Sache*]. I only think about what I would like to make. That is a very egoistic, as it were, ivory-tower conception. But only by this absolute egoism will one become actually ego-free.⁷

This cool detachment pervaded not only instrumental but most vocal and theatrical works. The stylized and often surreal *Three Weöres Songs* (1946–47), the opera, *Le Grand Macabre* (1974–77, rev. 1996), the late choral works, and the song cycle *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedüivel* (2000) may not be as abstract as the signature works of the 1960s, yet all avoid the confessional and trite at every turn. And the texts Ligeti set – whether pre-existing poems or (as in the case of the theatrical works *Aventures*, *Nouvelles Aventures* and *Le Grand Macabre*) original libretti – rarely betray a clear metaphysical longing. The sacred texts of his only work explicitly linked to religion – the four-movement *Requiem* (1963–65) – are overshadowed by its rogue settings of the *Kyrie* and *Dies Irae*, and a blatant theatricality that paints the Day of Wrath in primary colours, splintered into a five-voiced polyphony of glittering shards (the sound-colours of choir and orchestra contributing to this ‘imaginary perspective’).⁸

Many scholars are tempted to draw a direct connection between the dispassionate, unsentimental surface of Ligeti’s music and a conflicted relation to his past. Rachel Beckles Wilson finds a correlation between Ligeti’s use of labyrinthine compositional techniques and those ‘acts of creative memory’ that establish a somewhat fictionalized personal history, while Richard Steinitz calls Ligeti’s *lamento* motif ‘the companion of [his] inner seclusion’.⁹ And Monika Lichtenfeld reads the *Drei Phantasien nach Friedrich Hölderlin* as biographical texts, documents of ‘self-analysis’ at a critical stage of Ligeti’s life.¹⁰ Of course Ligeti himself encouraged such readings in interviews, offering that, ‘Anyone who has been through horrifying experiences is not likely to create terrifying works of art in all seriousness. He is more likely to alienate’.¹¹

Juan Allende-Blin, Mauricio Kagel und György Ligeti’, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 3 November 1990, cited in ‘Make Room for the Grand Macabre?’, p. 73).

7 ‘Deep-frozen expressionism’ was Ligeti’s own term for this approach; see for instance György Ligeti, ‘Musik auf neue Art gedacht. Sechzehn Jahre «das neue werk»’, in Monika Lichtenfeld (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1 (Mainz: Schott, 2007), p. 20.

8 György Ligeti, programme notes for performances of the *Requiem* in 1966–67, reproduced in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2, p. 231. Ligeti considered the *Requiem* – and specifically the *Dies Irae* – the best work he’d composed at the time (p. 227).

9 Rachel Beckles Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 183–5; Richard Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), p. 254.

10 Monika Lichtenfeld, “‘Und alles Schöne hatt’ er behalten”: Fragmente zu Ligetis Ästhetik’, in Otto Kolleritsch (ed.), *György Ligeti: Personalstil – Avantgardismus – Popularität* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1987), p. 123. See also Ulrich Dibelius, ‘Ligeti alludes to himself everywhere with Hölderlin’s verses’, in *Ligeti: Eine Monographie in Essays* (Mainz: Schott, 1994), p. 211.

11 György Ligeti, *Ligeti in Conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and Himself*, p. 21.

Ligeti's regard for each element of construction, no matter how minor, explains the care with which he crafted his personal narrative as well as his music. If we accept, as the composer implies, that the frozen expressionism of the *Requiem* was a necessary step towards resolving 'all my own fear ... my real life experiences, a lot of terrifying childhood fantasies', then Ligeti's invitation to enter an 'alienated' landscape signifies his utmost sincerity: his desire to identify with and reclaim the tragic quality that his music seems to deny. From this vantage point, micro-cans, 'kaleidoscopic' gestures and extreme registral contrast take on the character of talismans, which function to ward off an existential dread too intense to be summoned directly. Were these compositional devices to coalesce into a homogenous, intelligible whole, they would appear as one more symptom of modernist, fetishistic disavowal. But as a tacit admission of trauma – of that dimension which cannot be assimilated within a pre-determined system or received genre – they take on an ethical force, pointing beyond the work toward the unknowable Other. Therefore Ligeti's *Requiem*, while it may recall noble ancestors by Mozart or Verdi, bears only a contingent relation to conventional religious works. The *Requiem* bears witness to the Absolute despite – rather than because of – its resemblance to a proper Mass.

I will examine how one of the technical devices used in the *Requiem*, canon, leads to a traumatic rupture in three stylistically-varied compositions of Ligeti's middle and late periods: the *Kyrie* of the *Requiem*, 'Abendphantasie', from the *Drei Phantasien*, and the final etude for piano, 'Canon' (2001). Each work employs canon as an objective, abstract device that nevertheless retains a specific historical charge. As the canon unfolds, it reaches a point where its referential function collapses, to open an unbridgeable gulf between the work and its historical ground. The sound that results has the character of a revelation; no longer bound by history or tradition, its stubborn materiality is all the more universal in import. My analysis draws from psychoanalytic theory, particularly Eric Santner's *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, on the German-Jewish philosopher and contemporary of Freud Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929).¹²

Rosenzweig's crowning achievement, *The Star of Redemption*, mapped an ethical philosophy rooted in Judaism, but not explicitly religious. Santner reads *Star* through a psychoanalytic lens, revealing a far-reaching ethics of responsibility to and openness toward the Other rooted in monotheism. Rosenzweig made room for the role of art in this process, mapping the Judeo-Christian theological categories of creation, revelation, and redemption onto the various life stages of the artwork. The redemptive phase equates to the reception of a work by a community that does more than simply witness it in a particular context. The act of reception changes a work; even if wildly misread, it assembles a community that not only responds to the work but is called into being by it.¹³ This singular response accords the work

12 Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

13 Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*, pp. 132–33.

of art a position 'beyond the order of knowledge'. Through the act of reception the work retroactively becomes more than the sum of its formal parts, more than a pastiche of historical elements and stylistic choices. The work of art thus becomes akin to a subject in the Lacanian sense; it bears something within it that is 'more than itself', something uncanny [*unheimlich*], a singular island that yet speaks to a universalized community, carrying the burden and the promise of redemption.¹⁴

Ligeti's works reveal canon as both historically and formally overdetermined, as befits its original definition as, 'a rule which, without any respect, reveals the secrets contained in the music'.¹⁵ As a compositional tool rooted in traditional practice, canon has always borne the potential to point beyond its historical moment and structural role in a composition. In the three works under discussion, the self-regulating, mechanical replication of a canon realizes this potential; canon generates an uncanny excess that cannot be contained by either its origins in historical practice or the harmonic context in which it arises. A modern listener who recognizes this mysterious surplus hears not a dry, dessicated effect but a surfeit of affect. For the hypothetical member of the community 'called into being' by Ligeti's challenging works, this uncanny excess intimates a realm outside of linear history, a dominant language or personal style, and points toward the redemptive potential of the musical work.

The *kyrie* of ligeti's *requiem* (1963–1965)

In a series of groundbreaking works in the 1960s Ligeti introduced a musical device he termed micropolyphony: the superimposition of highly chromatic canons, confined within a narrow melodic compass, at the octave or unison. Although each canon in a micropolyphonic texture boasts a strict pitch succession, the internal rhythm of individual lines varies. These textures served two paradoxical ends in Ligeti's music. In accordance with the composer's dictum that 'There must be some kind of order, but not too much of it and it should not be dogmatic',¹⁶ canon acted as a determinate, historically-sanctioned 'rule' that generated an unpredictable outcome from a minimum of source materials. Yet the application of this abstract rule generated a singular, highly-textured sound, almost oppressive in its materiality, with no audible connection to its historical model. Ligeti traced his particular technique to Ockeghem, whose elegant proofs of abstract canonic formulae engage a fundamental paradox of canonic technique: strict polyphony that produced a homogenous, uninterrupted, almost unvarying 'waves' of sound.¹⁷

14 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 243.

15 Angelo da Picitono, Chapter 23, *Fior Angelico di musica* (1547), p. 166.

16 György Ligeti, *Ligeti in Conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and Himself*, p. 52.

17 Detlef Gojowy, 'György Ligeti über eigene Werke: Ein Gespräch mit Detlef Gojowy aus dem Jahre 1988', in Constantin Floros, ed. Hans Joachim Marx, Peter Petersen, *Für György Ligeti: Die Referate des Ligeti-Kongresses Hamburg 1988* (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1991), p. 354.

The second movement of the orchestral work *Apparitions* (1958–59) explicitly recalled Ockeghem, or the dense combination of polyphony and homophony that rules Thomas Tallis's 40-voice *Spem in alium* (c. 1570). The large, stationary form that results has a palpable presence, confirming Ligeti's assertion that

The involuntary conversion of optical and tactile into acoustic sensations is habitual with me: I almost always associate sounds with colour, form, and texture; and form, colour, and material quality with every acoustic sensation. Even abstract concepts, such as quantities, relationships, connections, and processes, seem tangible to me and have their place in an imaginary space.¹⁸

The 'timelessness' represented by canon as a device relates directly to this imaginary space, for Ligeti wants us to understand his micropolyphonic music as a static event or object; in essence 'a window, that opens out to particular details in this time-process'.¹⁹ Ligeti's seminal 1967 work *Lontano* for orchestra references not only Renaissance technique but also that of nineteenth-century symphonists who transcended traditional, more developmental models of form. Here micropolyphony opens up an imaginary space that includes an organ-like 'registration' reminiscent of Bruckner, and a germinal neighbour-motive on A₁ that recalls the opening of the Adagio movement in Bruckner's eighth symphony. Adolf Nowak writes of the liturgical figures that – like Ligeti's canons – animate the 'hedonistic art' of Bruckner's Adagios: an ecstatic intensification of sequential repetition that promotes 'a voluptuous indulgence in the embodiment of sound' quite at odds with their ascetic connotation.²⁰ In Bruckner's case, as in Ligeti's, the sacred model and the predetermined canon serve a similar end. Both techniques produce a startlingly visceral result while remaining themselves imperceptible as discrete generators of musical form.²¹

This triply coded aesthetic – one that takes history, scientific calculation and perception into account – describes the effect of canon in the Kyrie movement of Ligeti's *Requiem*. Similar to its mannerist antecedents, the Kyrie is a union of opposites towards a dramatic end, its wild, almost incoherent virtuosity grounded in an objective compositional design. Five fugal voices take part in both a Kyrie and Christe to form a massive double fugue. The four individual parts in each

18 György Ligeti, 'States, events, transformations', trans. Jonathan W. Bernard, *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Winter 1993), 165; originally 'Zustände, Ereignisse, Wandlungen', *Melos*, 34 (1967), 165–9.

19 György Ligeti in conversation with E. Lackner in *FAZ Magazin*, No. 393 (11 September 1987), 20.

20 Adolf Nowak, 'Die Wiederkehr in Bruckners Adagio', in Christoph-Hellmut Mahling (ed.), *Anton Bruckner: Studien zu Werk und Wirkung. Walter Wiora zum 30. Dezember 1986* (Tutzing: H. Schneider, 1988), p. 166.

21 I pursue this connection further in Amy Bauer, *Ligeti's Laments: Nostalgia, Exoticism and the Absolute* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 131–55. See also Hans-Christian von Dadelsen, 'Hat Distanz Relevanz? Über Kompositionstechnik und ihre musikdidaktischen Folgen – dargestellt an György Ligeti's Orchesterstück *Lontano* (1967)', *Musik und Bildung*, No. 7 (1975), 502–6.

fugal voice enter in strict canonic imitation at the unison, while the fugal voices themselves overlap, as if in competition for the same registral and tonal space. The canons and fugues pulse in synchrony; at any moment two to five voices of the canon may intersect with two to five voices of the fugue.

Prevailing norms of serialism inspire Ligeti's use of determinate pitch series, to a point. Neither the canons nor any other musical parameters obey a universal rule. Traces of dodecaphony in the Kyrie, for instance, function more as an ironic repurposing of serial technique, a convenient means of coordinating registral and formal boundaries. The pitch entrances of the Kyrie and Christe canons follow a 12-tone series, while canon entrances preserve an inversive relationship at T_7I between adjacent dyads.²² The second section of Kyrie entrances is an inversion of the first series at T_1I , with pitch overlap on E in the bass (b. 45) and $D\sharp$ in mezzo-soprano (b. 60; the second series omits order no. 2 of the original series, and reverses order nos. 5 and 6, and 10–12; Example 5.1).

This series of entrances bears no relation to the underlying canonic structure, although it embeds a chromatic wedge: the first canon of the Kyrie and Christe enters on $B\flat_3$, while the second canon enters a semitone lower on A_3 .²³ Correspondingly, the second canon of the Christe enters on $A\flat_4$, with the third canon of the Kyrie entering a semitone *higher* on B_4 . Thus it is likely that the step-wise enlargement of registral space – and not a serial order per se – determined the pitch-entry series. On a global scale this wedge seems designed to reflect the gradual unfolding of the Kyrie canon itself, as well as its further expansion outward to encompass octaves 2 to 5 (Example 5.2).

The uneven contours and fitful progress of the Kyrie are evidence of the canon's inherent drive towards excess and disorder, as indicated by a range graph of the Kyrie's first half (bb. 1–58), showing the gradual expansion of the movement

Example 5.1 György Ligeti, *Requiem*, serial arrangement of canonic entries in the Kyrie.

22 That is, each adjacent pair of pitch-classes adds up to 7, or G, reflecting symmetry around a theoretical axis represented by a line bisecting the 12 pitch-classes between $A/B\flat$ and $D\sharp/E$. Jonathan Bernard discovered the pattern of these entries with their corresponding canonic transformations labeled 'Grundtypus' in Ligeti's sketches for the Kyrie. Jonathan Bernard, 'A key to structure in the Kyrie of György Ligeti's *Requiem*', *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung*, 16 (2003), 44–7.

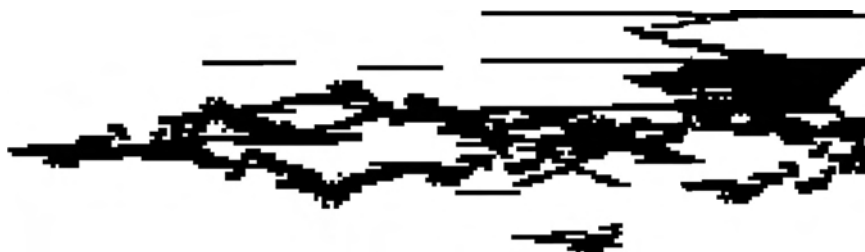
23 I use scientific pitch notation throughout this paper (middle C = C4).

Alto 1

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

12 13 14 15 16

Example 5.2 Ligeti, *Requiem*, global expanding wedge reflected in the Kyrie canon.



Example 5.3 Ligeti, *Requiem*, range graph of the Kyrie's expanding form created by canonic replication, bb. 1–58.

outward from the central B \flat .²⁴ Each individual canon is recursively-generated from a small kernel; this germinal cell is repeated and transformed with slight alterations that are amplified in the course of the canon. A whole step is approached by two half-steps in the same direction to enlarge the ambitus of the canon by a minor third up or down, mirroring the long-range cycle of minor thirds that underlies the movement: B \flat , D \flat , E, G. The initial descending neighbour motion of the alto canon, A, B \flat , is extended by one ascending semitone, B \flat , A, B \flat , C \flat , to create an ascending neighbour B \flat , A, B \flat , C \flat , B \flat , augmented further by a descending semitone and whole step: B \flat , A, B \flat , C \flat , B \flat , A, G.

On closer examination, even the symmetry implied by this overarching arrangement of thirds slowly unravels. The alto canon follows a wedge shape outward, beginning on B \flat_3 and ending – after 56 changes of direction – on C $_4$ (the final pitch in Example 5.2). Despite the ordered, large-scale patterns formed by the 12-tone series of entrances, the long-range cycle of thirds, and the composer's assertion that he worked by rules 'as strict as those of the Flemish composers',²⁵ the Kyrie canon generates an opaque curtain of static polyphony in five voices. In place of the complexity and symmetry sought by serial practice, the unpredictable progress of the opening B \flat_3 by only two different intervals creates an irregular, undulant form that seems to defy any objective scheme.

The rule of the Kyrie's canon thus carries a surplus of address over meaning. That is, it carries the force of an injunction, void of any particular semantic content and unmoored from a historical context, its urge to replicate independent of subjectivity or a determined outcome. And, as with every system of public law, the rule of the canon is undermined by the Kyrie's unreserved identification with it.²⁶ In his influential article 'Metamorphoses of Musical Form', Ligeti memorably wrote that 'Total, consistent application of the serial principle negates,

24 My range graph was inspired by the analyses of Jane Piper Clendinning, 'Contrapuntal Techniques in the Music of György Ligeti' (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1989).

25 Ligeti in *Conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and Himself*, p. 50.

26 Slavoj Žižek discusses the law's excess in *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 60–75, among other writings.

in the end, serialism itself'.²⁷ Similarly, as the Kyrie canon abjures metric and harmonic order, its mechanical repetition at every pitch level introduces danger and irrationality into the heart of a work conceived by utterly rational means. The dodecaphonic introduction of voices simply urges a chaotic replication of the canon in all direction, and produces, in Ligeti's terms, 'dirty patches' that dissolve the bounds of equal temperament.²⁸ The unique sonic image that results bears no audible relation to the logic of the canon and its associated rules, or indeed to any perceivable structure. In this the mechanical canon functions rather like a modernist unconscious, generating 'mistakes' and an uncomfortable, almost suffocating proximity to sound itself, which threatens to usurp any formal claims made upon it. Rancière might say that it reveals the contradictory logic of the aesthetic unconscious, as an 'inarticulatable truth whose imprint on the surface of the work undoes the logic of a ... rational composition of elements'.²⁹ The Kyrie movement offers a comic subversion of both serialism, as a 'sacred cow' of modernist music, and of Western contrapuntal traditions that approach the sacred sublime via rational means. Such a performative gesture, in Santner's terms, endows a work with a life 'beyond the order of knowledge', and sets it in a category of its own.³⁰

'Abendphantasie', drei phantasien nach friedrich hölderlin (1982)

The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed an extraordinary flowering of post-war compositions inspired by a revival of the German poet Hölderlin. These works were part of a larger movement begun in the 1960s to re-appropriate Hölderlin from the Nazis and demonstrate his relevance to contemporary intellectual debates concerning language and subjectivity. By the time Henri Pousseur composed *Mnemosyne I* (1968) for solo voice, Hölderlin had become both a philosophic and revolutionary ideal, whose struggles with meaning served as an allegory for the post-serial composer's loss of a unified language. Adorno's Hölderlin lectures in the 1960s extolled the virtues of Hölderlin's later work in particular, and had a profound influence on composers like Pousseur.³¹

27 György Ligeti, 'Wandlungen der musikalischen Form', *Die Reihe*, 7 (1960), 5–17; trans. Cornelius Cardew as 'Metamorphoses of Musical Form', *Die Reihe: Form-Space*, 7 (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 1965), 5–17.

28 Ligeti in *Conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and Himself*, p. 53.

29 Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, trans. Debra Keates and James Swenson (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p. 63.

30 Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*, p. 133.

31 David G. Blumberg chronicles these musical works in "'Singen möchte ich ...": Hölderlin's Echo in New Music', PhD dissertation (Berkeley, CA, 1996). See also Brent Wetters, 'Bruno Maderna's Adaptation of Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion*', *Nineteenth Century Music*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2012), 172–90, and Robert Ian Savage, *Hölderlin after the Catastrophe: Heidegger, Adorno, Brecht* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008) for an authoritative history of the Hölderlin's post-1945 influence.

Ligeti joined this elegiac movement fully aware of the cultural import of Hölderlin reception during the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast to his contemporaries, he claimed not to have consciously plumbed the poems' philosophical depths, but instead to have adopted the passive stance of an objective recording vessel. Ligeti let music 'choose' the text, selecting parts of poems from three eras, and weeding out abstract and philosophic images in favour of the concrete and sensual.³² The opaque canons of the *Drei Phantasien* also break with the more ascetic text-setting conventions of Ligeti's colleagues. The narrow micropolyphony of the 1960s is largely forsworn in favour of canons with a much stronger rhythmic and melodic profile that breathe with the text. Tonal fragments and motives animate the chromatic haze, establishing a periodicity foreign to the pulseless canons of the Kyrie. Canons often repeat at the second or third, or according to a non-cyclic interval pattern that expresses a diatonic harmony. Audible pitch and rhythmic motives, attached to prominent words and phonemes like bobbing corks, establish associations within and across subsections of each work, while Ligeti's so-called 'pillar' harmonies, once limited to stark intervals or the 'Ligeti signals' (the pitch-class sets (024) and (025)) now include tonal triads and octatonic harmonies.³³ An extravagant, madrigalesque word-painting highlights the vivid images and movements of the texts, and the canonic and half-canonic lines flirt with microtonal inflections.

The final song of the *Drei Phantasien* is based on Hölderlin's 'Abendphantasie'. Like the first song, 'Hälfte des Lebens', 'Abendphantasie' is in Alcaic metre (a four-line stanza of tetrametric lines), although it was written much earlier than the other two poems in the set, during Hölderlin's 'Erlebnislyrik' period in 1799. Ligeti prunes away all of the plot-driven narrative and surface subjectivity of the lyric, selecting three stanzas that match the later poems in their oblique contrast between sublime nature and existential angst. In contrast to the first two movements, 'Abendphantasie' opens in a grand style, marked Maestoso. A unison G in eight voices begins a homophonic introduction to the evening sky that rises to fortissimo with a dense octachord that introduces the glories of spring. The 'blooms in the heavens' travel upward in fast-moving diatonic harmonies that settle on a six-note D₅ major collection, and rest on a white-note pentatonic chord with 'Spring'. Once this brief progression opens the sky, as it were, a strict canon begins.

The canon quickly expands to 14 parts, referencing Renaissance technique visually and aurally as it travels upward from bass to soprano over a sustained F₂. The 'countless roses bloom' on the page as they ascend, and cycle through the total chromatic to repeat bass 1 and 2 in soprano (bb. 4–8; Example 5.4).

32 Discussion following Lichtenfeld, 'Und alles Schöne hatt' er behalten', p. 133.

33 These particular sets represent the whole-tone trichord and a diatonic trichord that includes a whole-step and minor third. Ligeti used these trichords, along with the semitone-major second (013) as focal points in his canonic micropolyphonic works of the early and mid-1960s. The three octatonic collections (the 8-note collection formed from alternating semitones and wholetones), will be referenced by a unique pitch-class dyad; e.g., OCT(0,1) is the collection that includes pitch-classes C and C \sharp /D \flat .

sub. a tempo

Sop 1 - ling auf! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen,

Sop 2 - ling auf! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen,

Sop 3 - ling auf! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen,

Sop 4 - ling auf! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen,

Alt 1 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen,

Alt 2 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und

Alt 3 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru -

Alt 4 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru - hig

Ten 1 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru - hig scheint

Ten 2 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru - hig scheint

Ten 3 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru - hig scheint

Ten 4 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru - hig scheint

Bass 1 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru - hig scheint die

Bass 2 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru - hig scheint die gold -

Bass 3 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru - hig scheint die molto exp.

Bass 4 - ling! Un - zäh - lig blühen die Ro - sen, und ru - hig scheint die molto exp. gold -

Example 5.4 Ligeti, 'Abendphantasie', from *Drei Phantasien nach Friedrich Hölderlin*, bb. 4–8.

Nature is not only transcendent in Hölderlin's 'Abendphantasie' but also 'peaceful'. Hence a new, rising canon includes a microtonal inflection on 'scheint' (bb. 7–10), as though bursting through equal-temperament to introduce the 'golden world', where all voices unite on C/G \flat . An impersonal description of bountiful nature in bb. 9–10 is rent by the sudden *fortississimo* 12-part cry 'O take me

there!’, harmonized by chords that express an OCT(2,3) collection (bb. 11–12).³⁴ In the first movement this progression introduced winter, and mere memories of spring; here it leads directly to the overwhelming intensity of a crimson sky.

Much has been made of Ligeti’s comment that the sun beaming through the clouds in Altdorfer’s famous painting *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* (1529) influenced the composition of both *Lontano* (1967) and the *Drei Phantasien*.³⁵ The orchestral work created a purely musical analogue to the light and space of Alexander’s battle, but here Hölderlin’s carmine skies invoke Altdorfer’s ‘mad’ cloudscape, to create a multidimensional sensory image that overloads the musical and verbal circuits of the work. The colour crimson is a synecdoche for the clouds, whose immensity escapes both proper verbal description and the logical form of the prevailing canons. Instead they take the form defined by Jane Piper Clendinning as ‘pattern meccanico’, the repetition of canon-like lines constructed from small groups of pitches, rapidly repeated in a mechanical fashion with gradual changes of pitch content.³⁶ But unlike the variable groups in earlier works, the meccanico texture in ‘Abendphantasie’ is driven by 328 repetitions of the word ‘purpurne’, fetishistically repeated on rotating, mostly diatonic trichords.

A dense hocket-like texture results, as an accented three-note tritone and octave motive (B₄–F₄–F₅) accompanies each repetition of ‘purpurne’. After two appearances of this motive, one note is replaced, and the process continues through all 12 pitches, undergoing different permutations in each voice, as indicated by an annotated excerpt of Soprano 3, bb. 12–21, in Example 5.5.

più mosso, agitato

Sop 3

12 *ff sempre* B F F B^b E E^b G^b G D A^b

pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne

15 D^b C^b A

pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne

18 C

ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, pur-pur-ne, sub. Wol-ken, Wol-ken! *molto fff*

Example 5.5 Ligeti, ‘Abendphantasie’, ‘purpurne Wolken’ canon.

³⁴ See footnote 33 for octatonic labeling conventions.

³⁵ Ligeti in *Conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and Himself*, 93; Ligeti, programme notes for performance of *Drei Phantasien*, Styrian Autumn Festival, Graz, 4 October 1984, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II, p. 285.

³⁶ Jane Piper Clendinning, ‘The pattern-meccanico compositions of György Ligeti’, *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1993), 194–5.

The static cloud paradoxically appears to accelerate as eighth-note triplets evolve into sixteenth-notes, then reverse speed. Here that which resists comprehension – Kant’s mathematical sublime, in the form of an impossibly complex mechanical process – communicates an aural picture of that which resists representation: the dynamic sublime of nature as an implacable force.

By b. 19 tenor and bass halt on ‘Clouds’ with an ‘almost whole-tone’ hexachord (013579) that resolves into an (0236) tetrachord in the upper voices (in OCT(2,3), bb. 20–21). Homophonic phrases between voice sections alternate in a call and response fashion, highlighting the alliteration between the ‘Lieb und Leid!’, which the narrator wishes would vanish into ‘Licht und Luft’. Yet the subject’s desire to lose himself in the sublimity of nature ultimately fails, marked by an OCT(1,2) harmony and the symptomatic descent of low voices in a lament on ‘dark’ (altos on E_3/F_3 -D $_b$; basses on E_{b2}/A_2 -D $_b/G$ -C/F/G \sharp , bb. 25–27, shown in Example 5.6).

The final section rushes toward the acceptance of maturity, with ‘Come then now, you gentle slumber!’ set to a gently percolating canon that expresses B major, yet accelerates to a close on an OCT(1,2) tetrachord (b. 34). An increasingly diatonic picture of old age is riven with ambiguous expression, voicing and harmonies. ‘My heart desires too much’, voices ‘heart’ with a tutti tritone (bb. 35–36). ‘Youth ... you’ll finally burn away!’ splits ‘Jugend’ between female voices and falsetto males. A final seven-part canon begins in Alto 3 (pickup to b. 40) as a 15-note row spans all 12 tones, its restless quality mimetically expressing the text as it travels up by semitone, *subito più mosso, agitato con fuoco*. The movement enters its final passage marked ‘Hymnisch – grandios’, *forte fortissimo*, followed by a coda marked ‘quasi eco’ (b. 46). Here ‘old age’ echoes the dreams

(sub Lento $\text{♩} = 50$)

25 *fortissimo possibile* OCT(1,2) OCT(2,3) *pp*

Alto 1, 2 Dunk - - - kel - - - *dolce espr. pp*

Alto 3, 4 *fortissimo possibile* Dunk - kel - - - *pp* Komm

Bass 1, 2 *f* Dunk - - - kel - - - *dim. poco a poco - - - mf* wirds, und ein

Bass 3, 4 *fortissimo possibile* Dunk - - - kel - - - *poco dim. - - - mf* wirds un

(sempre *f* possibile)

$F\sharp m \frac{4}{3}$ B

Example 5.6 Ligeti, ‘Abendphantasie’, bb. 25–27 (altos and basses).

Example 5.7 Ligeti, 'Abendphantasie', coda.

of youth, moving serenely down by semitone through a sequence of seventh chords and a final, microtonal lament in tenor and bass. 'Restless dreams' hint of a peace only in death, recalling the instrumental lament that succeeded Dido's death in Purcell's opera (shown in a reduction of the 'Abendphantasie's coda in Example 5.7).³⁷

A deep nostalgia for the past pervades the musical substance and forms (roughly ternary) of the *Drei Phantasien*. Yet Ligeti's appropriation of late Renaissance canonic technique is overshadowed by the work's connections to his own past. The opposition of diatonic, octatonic and symmetrical chromatic collections resemble Ligeti's choral works of the mid-1950s, which drew freely on Bartók for inspiration, while contrasts in tempo, dynamics, and pacing recall micropolyphonic works like the Kyrie. Yet the reactionary conceits of the *Drei Phantasien* give way to chaos in the final section of 'Abendphantasie', as Ligeti's subject leaves behind the comfort of historical convention, representational cues and personal reference. Canons replicate at every possible pitch level, expressing the trauma occasioned by a complete loss of meaning and sense. Here the canon functions as a material instance of the 'mechanical sublime', an incarnation of an unforgiving and deterministic nature. But it also marks the failure of Logos, as a hundred tonal variations fail to express the true colour of the sky. This kind of beauty moves us, as Santner notes, because it produces more 'reality' than it can contain.³⁸ The subject's anxiety in the face of these 'purpurne Wolken' signals a shift to spiritual concerns, as the intense materiality of the canonic texture assumes a sublime appearance. The clouds no longer screen but seem to reveal the infinite; they serve as a faint representation of the impossible beyond hermeneutic understanding, and perhaps beyond death.

37 Ligeti made use of lament topics, genre tropes, and formal schemes throughout his career, as one means of bridging the gulf between a self-reflexive musical persona characterized by irony and alienation and an authentic voice of mourning (See Bauer, *Ligeti's Laments*).

38 Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*, p. 140.

'Canon', *études pour piano*, III (2001)

Although canonic technique was central to Ligeti's music from the *Idegen földön* of 1945 onward, the discovery in 1980 of Conlon Nancarrow's canons for player piano inspired Ligeti to envision music of similar complexity for one human interpreter.

This impulse culminated in three books of 18 études for piano, which left a profound and lasting mark on the contemporary solo piano repertoire. In the tradition of the nineteenth-century étude, each foregrounds a compositional device, and introduces one or more technical challenges. Several common elements link these disparate works: 1) a fusion of Romantic hemiola with additive rhythmic techniques inspired by non-Western and extra-musical sources, 2) neo-Baroque fugal design, and 3) the implicit use of canonic imitation or other contrapuntal techniques which – in tandem with the stratified rhythmic patterns – imparts a kinetic forward motion to works often based on modal or static harmonic backdrops.

Book I of the *Études* incorporates canon as an ancillary, almost subliminal element alongside passacaglia (No. 2), ostinato (Nos. 4 and 6), 'chaotic' structure (No. 1), and blocked-key technique (No. 3). A kind of 'tempo fugue' animates the repeated modal melodies and rhythmic talea juxtaposed in right and left hand in the first étude 'Désordre'. 'Cordes à Vide' (No. 2) implicitly reverses a typical Baroque imitation scheme: rather than a stepwise melody answered at the fifth, Ligeti writes a line composed of fifth-steps, but answered at the distance of a step. Étude No. 3, 'Touches bloquées', repeats an eight-note melody in the right hand with subtle variations that hint at a disguised canon in the left hand, a defective imitation full of holes and silent replies. The fifth étude 'Arc-en-Ciel' is notable for its jazz-like harmonies, the nonfunctional result of staggered, descending chromatic lines (Ligeti's recurring lament topic). Ostinato and the lament topic both figure in the sixth étude, 'Automne à Varsovie', where every three-phrase statement of the lament motif is constructed as a mini-fugue that describes a relation of 5:4 against the background ostinato.

Canon emerges as an audible process in the second book of piano études, as pitch sequences become explicitly periodic, and terraced variations in tempo suggest the augmentation and diminution of constituent voices. The ninth étude, 'Vertige', expresses the giddiness of a never-ending descent as a falling chromatic scale in even eighth notes beginning on B₄ and ending on A₃, in canon, *prestissimo, sempre molto legato, very even, ppp una corda*. By contrast, the 13th étude for piano, 'L'escalier du diable', is based on a chromatic scale that travels ever upward from B₁ in a Sisyphean ascent that never completes, against a whole-tone countersubject. The 'Devil's staircase' metaphorically echoes the mathematical function that bears its name, progressively 'filling in' gaps in its ascent with versions of itself at smaller *x* and *y* values.³⁹ In all 14 études of Books I and II, minute variations on simple gestures build towards (as did the canons of the *Kyrie*) a singular structure with an uncanny physicality, all the more striking to the audience who recognizes their ties to tradition.

39 See Bauer, *Ligeti's Laments*, pp. 87–90.

Ligeti's use of looser imitative techniques befits the mission of the first 14 etudes, as an exploration of technical problems that pays tribute to the Romantic etude and its concomitant narrative of man against infernal machine. From the vantage point of the late twentieth century, the *Etudes* redefine the relation of virtuosity – in both composition and performance – to the mechanical and the grand gesture, as they trace a narrative from the worldliness of 'Désordre' (No. 1) to the hermetic stillness of 'Canon'. In all of these works the incipient kitsch and social affectation of the Romantic etude – as a performative act of virtuoso heroism – give way to an intensely personal, subjective vision. The rigor of canonic imitation directs the excesses of technique towards a singular, if seemingly irrational, end, one 'full of life and yet alien to life', as Rosenzweig states, 'category to itself, not akin to any other thing, even to any other work of art'.⁴⁰

'Vertige' recalls the Kyrie, as the recursive structure of individual canonic voices subverts its own identity, reaching a point of harmonic, melodic and rhythmic saturation. By contrast, the thirteenth etude recalls the climactic moment of the Hölderlin songs. Whereas the fevered invocations of 'purpurne Wolken' strained to express the failure of language in 'Abendphantasie', the bells that chime wildly when 'l'escalier du diable' reaches the upper limit of the piano's range, volume, and density express a structural failure: that point at which both the instrument and its host must admit defeat, yet comically continue, willing an ideal image of nature – here coextensive with the mathematical ideal – to appear in the music.⁴¹

But the final book of etudes strips the imitative conceit bare. Although Ligeti finished only four etudes before ill health forced a premature end to the series, the final volume is all of a piece. Three of the four etudes are written as canons at the octave, as two voices physically constrained by right and left hands. Each begins in an explicit mode that accrues chromatic tones in the course of its development. And all four etudes proceed in even note values, which – in the manner of a proportional canon – shift value and tempo to create formal divisions, further emphasized by terraced dynamic changes between successive sections.

Etude 18 was originally to be called finger-breaker, after Jelly Roll Morton,⁴² but ended up as the eponymous 'Canon', which appears at the octave at the distance of a quaver, and continues for 185 straight eighth-note dyads at *vivace poco rubato*. 'Canon' distills the basic kernel of all imitative etudes: it begins in an unadorned mode, here C major, presents an easily grasped melodic idea with rhythmic clarity, and proceeds to vary that idea while obscuring the harmonic and metric language established by the theme. The etude begins with opposed fifths as both hands rise in tandem. The upward thrust of the whole work, pitted against the contrary motion of a descending scale, is similar to other etudes in Book III: 'White on White' (No. 15), 'Pour Irina' (No. 16) and 'À bout de soufflé' (No. 17). Yet despite multiple overlapping entries, the number of voices remains consistent,

40 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 243.

41 Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination*, 307–8.

42 Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination*, 313.



Example 5.8 Ligeti, *Études pour Piano*, Book III, 'Canon', canon tones 148–155 in RH and 146–153 in LH.

even as each moves further from the opening mode, as though slipping sideways into an alternate chromatic universe.

The initial 'subject' returns at the close, accompanied by terraced dynamics that, in this etude, operate within, rather than between, each canon (as shown in Example 5.8). Unlike earlier examples, the canon is marked on the music's surface, with the entire piece – all 185 beats – repeated at *Prestissimo*. This repetition functions as the minimal difference that separates the canon from itself, and confuses the ontological consistency of the work. Was the first 'performance' merely a trial run? Or does the repetition of this otherwise undifferentiated section function as a shadow canon, a sinister doppelgänger whose inhuman speed confers a strange sublimity on the whole? The *Prestissimo* is followed by an eerie coda marked *Lento con tenerezza*. The coda's juxtaposition of diatonic, diminished and augmented half-note harmonies (in the form of 027, 036 and 048 trichords) summons the ghost of Olivier Messiaen, to close the etude with the barest hint of an authentic cadence on A minor.

The canons that drive the Kyrie movement's double fugue, that express 'Abendphantasie's crimson clouds, and that delineate the Canon's two sections are vastly different in size, scope and voicing. Yet all three reveal a traumatic rupture in the formal and representational language of musical modernism. If serial technique never properly acknowledged its debt to the rule of the canon, Ligeti's practice recognizes their kinship, as the embodiment of an ahistorical kernel within Western musical history that sought to efface the composer from the work. And Ligeti's practice recognizes that the site of historicity is the tension between this ahistorical kernel and its appearance in the works of composers as diverse as Ockeghem, Tallis, and even Mozart.⁴³ With no singular addressee, the rule of the

43 In Mozart's Adagio and Allegro in F minor K. 594 (1790), for instance, a descending lament motive appears in diminution, retrograde, canonic strett, and a quasi-permutational transpositional scheme to completely overwhelm the Adagio's 'super-rational harmonic scheme', Laurence

canon carries the force of an 'enigmatic signifier', a form of defense with respect to the anxiety occasioned by the past, as Santner elaborates.⁴⁴ Yet the enigma of the canon in Ligeti's works leads ultimately to a traumatic break, one that resists capitulation to easy categories, or integration into a pre-determined universe of meaning. The preservation of such a traumatic rupture equates to revelation, defined by Rosenzweig as an intervention into the very syntax by which values are determined. That is, revelation paradoxically opens up to what is 'demonic' in us, whether that be the Other as an independent subject or vanishing traces of a lost symbolic tradition, 'hieroglyphs in the desert'.⁴⁵

Such acts of revelation are not spiritual in a religious sense, but they are decidedly ethical: they maintain a link between the particular and the universal, as well as a status of opening to the Other in its radical unknowability. In this Ligeti might be seen as one of the heirs to Hölderlin, whose late work Adorno recognized as employing a kind of performative disruption of the classic dichotomies between form and content, the abstract and the concrete, and the name and the concept. This negation of surface meaning becomes the path to a redemptive truth, but only if its addressee recognizes this refusal of meaning as a rhetorical strategy, one designed specifically to rescue the artwork from its semblance character, or status as a sensuous illusion.⁴⁶ In much the same way canon joins the lament topic and other devices in Ligeti's music as a subversive agent of revelation that militates against traditional formal and historical categories. As an ahistorical kernel active within highly charged genre works, Ligeti's canons maintain the redemptive possibility of contemporary music, in the face of facile postmodernisms – particularly the surface sheen of post-minimalism and holy minimalism – that would collapse truth and meaning into a closed, homogenous surface.

Dreyfus, 'The Hermeneutics of Lament: a Neglected Paradigm in a Mozartian Trauermusik', *Music Analysis*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1991), 336–7.

44 Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*, p. 92.

45 Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*, pp. 96–7.

46 Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 112; see also Savage, pp. 110–36.