

Utopias and Their Discontents: Ligeti's Reception History as Modernist Meta-Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Conservative critic John Borstlap cited Ligeti as a partisan in his fight against the modernist myth of progress in the arts, based on the famous citation “I am in a prison. One wall is the avant-garde, the other is the past. I want to escape.” Ligeti’s ambivalence reflected his distaste for art linked to utopian socialist ideals, and for all that was reactionary. Yet he admitted that his own youthful utopian strivings evolved into a desire for complex music that often defied audibility. This essay traces Ligeti’s reception history from the late 1950s onward as a reaction to the thwarted utopian strains in his music. For some, Ligeti’s music of the 1960s seemed to define “the contemporary problem itself.” But the composer’s increased visibility in the 1990s led to demands that he deal with his Jewish heritage and wartime trauma, and cease writing music with a broad appeal. I argue that Ligeti’s works reinscribe the past, the personal, and the extramusical as a conscious expression of his prison. They express the nonlinear notion of progress that defines modernism: a vast “tear in the historical process” able to lift music above the scrum of political-aesthetic skirmishes, to a “region which lies elsewhere.”

KEYWORDS

Ligeti, reception, utopia, modernism, failure

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In one of those revisionist juxtapositions that seem endemic to our age, the conservative British composer and cultural critic John Borstlap cited Ligeti as his support in a recent argument against the dangerous modernist myth of progress in the arts.¹ According to Borstlap, Ligeti insists that the avant-garde must be transcended, and petrified modernism “overcome,” as a dead-end. Ligeti’s example proved the danger of a historical, linear perspective to new composition, rather than one “trying to achieve a better artistic quality, by following superb examples of a glorious past.”² Borstlap’s paraphrase of Ligeti is, not surprisingly, longer than the original citation. That quote – “I am in a prison. One wall is the avant-garde, the other is the past. I want to escape”³ – is memorable in a distinctly Ligetian fashion: it promotes a vivid image, couched in a direct address, and conveys the essential restlessness that drove the composer’s art and discourse. Ligeti’s ambivalence was far more complex than Borstlap’s gloss implies; it reflected his distaste for art linked to utopian socialist ideals, as well as for all that was retro or reactionary. Yet Ligeti freely admitted his own utopian strivings, childhood visions of the perfect society which evolved into a desire for music whose complexity often defied its audibility.⁴

The following essay explores Ligeti’s recent reception history among cultural critics as an inevitable reaction to the thwarted utopian strains in his music. Borstlap and fellow traveler philosopher Roger Scruton stand on the historicist side of the debate in their fulminations against a modern culture that thwarts the proper renewal of our musical tradition. Scruton turns to Foucauldian networks of relations of power and knowledge – commercial music and the “dictatorship exerted on behalf of difficult music” – while avoiding any acknowledgement of the chief architects of modernist musical thought. A psychoanalytically-informed critique would call out Adorno and Schoenberg as the pathological supports for Scruton’s own desire.⁵ But Borstlap offers a dialectical solution to our current predicament: the adoption of “Classical Modernity,” a phrase that absorbs and renders modernism inert by its modifier, as a mere accident of history, rather than as the highly charged term that has vexed generations of critics and scholars.⁶

1. LIGETI AND THE CONTEMPORARY PROBLEM

But what of those who have come not to bury but to praise modernism, and see Ligeti’s music as a foremost expression of it? In 1958 he was but one of ten Hungarian mid-century composers surveyed by John Weissmann for *Tempo*, meriting but a paragraph noting the debt to Webern in his latest works.⁷ Stefan Weiss traces the canonization of Ligeti from his 1963 appearance on

¹BORSTLAP, “The Myth of Progress.”

²BORSTLAP, *The Classical Revolution*, 84.

³ROSS, Alex. “Critic’s Notebook: Searching for Music’s Outer Limits,” *The New York Times* (March 20, 1993), 11–12.

⁴György LIGETI, “Ja, ich war ein utopischer Sozialist:” György Ligeti im Gespräch mit Reinhard Oehlschlägel,” *MusikTexte* 28/29 (1989), 90.

⁵SCRUTON, *Music as an Art*, 221.

⁶BORSTLAP, “Classical Modernity,” <<http://www.futuresymphony.org/classical-modernity/>>, (accessed: September 15, 2023).

⁷WEISSMANN, “Guide,” II, 21–27 and III, 29.



Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt's "Music in the Technical Age," and Ulrich Dibelius's 1966 edition of *Moderne Music*, and its German reception.⁸ The "tone colors in a shaker" composer was perceived as "that timbre composer" for years.⁹ Yet the kernel of Ligeti's early reception remained the notion that he had taken what was valuable from serialism – its concern with construction and process – and married it to a sensual ideal. As Ulrich Dibelius put it, his early works in the West were "always an experiment by example," searching for the solution to an equation with at least two unknowns, and which always considered the sounding appearance of a work apart from its technical impulses.¹⁰

Dibelius's characterization of Ligeti's approach as a concerted rapprochement between serial practice and sonic ideal saw perhaps a natural transition to Ligeti's music as emblematic of modern music *tout court*, for good or ill. By 1969 British musicologist Hans Keller saw Ligeti's *Continuum* for harpsichord in particular as a metaphor for "the contemporary problem itself:" an illusion of perpetual change that offers no new musical substance.¹¹ Keller recalls telling patrons at the premiere of *Atmosphères* that the work was nothing but "sound effects on the highest possible level; the very concept of sound effects made respectable – yet sound effects and nothing but sound effects." Yet Ligeti's "unswerving, utterly specific ear" won him over, and by 1969 Keller felt that Ligeti might be the only composer addressing "what do we do about musical sense?"; sense in sound which, for the hearing listener, does not need verbal explanations or justifications.¹² Here the view of Ligeti's technique as following a scientific model of progress or "problem history"¹³ opens up into a notion – far before its time – of new music as materialist practice, a practice whose meaning and essence derive from its treatment and understanding of sound apart from pre-compositional frameworks and systems.

The year 1969 also featured the premiere of Ligeti's Second Quartet; its synoptic concision and stylistic resonances provoked a variety of responses bound up with the politicization of all art at a moment when "every factual statement was understood as taking sides."¹⁴ A year earlier Wolf-Eberhard von Lewinski had written "Probably at no other time in the history of music can composers of the same generation be so neatly divided into two opposing camps."¹⁵ The West European avant-garde was seen as implicitly, if not directly, allied with the aspirations of political radicals, and Ligeti's new works promised possible confirmation of his engagement with larger issues. The second quartet's evident reverence for genre models was a problem for critics like Martin Zenck,¹⁶ while Gianmario Borio¹⁷ and Harald Kaufmann¹⁸ celebrated that fact. Zenck

⁸WEISS, "Der kanonisierte Ligeti," 221–238.

⁹WEISS, "Der kanonisierte Ligeti," 221. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰DIBELIUS, *Moderne Musik*, I, 185–186.

¹¹KELLER, "The Contemporary Problem," 27.

¹²Ibid., 28.

¹³DAHLHAUS, *Schoenberg and the New Music*, 20.

¹⁴GRÜNZWEIG, "Vom Glauben ans Nichtnegative," 311.

¹⁵LEWSINSKI, "Where Do We Go," 204.

¹⁶ZENCK, "Entwurf einer Soziologie," 253–279.

¹⁷BORIO, "L'eredità Bartókiana," 289–307.

¹⁸KAUFMANN, "Ligeti's zweites Streichquartett," 181–186.



found the overly-stylized language of the quartet too “artificial and rigid” to transform its subjective engagement with a tradition that stretched from Beethoven to Debussy into value judgements that take an objective form.¹⁹ Borio by contrast viewed the quartet’s critical reflection on the genre’s history as its great strength, as Ligeti’s abstract gestures both reference and augment Bartók’s expansion of Beethoven’s formal models and practice of continuous variation.²⁰ Kaufmann stressed the newness of the quartet’s approach to tradition: Ligeti’s compressed sense of form in which “gesture becomes the subject,” and the full thematic idea is micrologically assembled.²¹ According to Kaufmann, Ligeti’s figures can but point at familiar categories like theme and embellishment: empty placeholders for an absent subject, as in Beckett’s *Endgame* or Ionesco’s *The Chairs*.

Ligeti spent a good deal of the 1970s working on *Le Grand Macabre* (1974–77; rev. 1996), but the orchestral works *Melodien* (1971), the Double Concerto (1972), and *San Francisco Polyphony* (1974) introduced a new melodic clarity that was immediately remarked upon.²² *Monument – Selbstportrait – Bewegung for Two Pianos* (1976) offered even more explicit allusions to music of both past and present (as in the full title of the second movement: “Selbstportrait mit Reich und Riley (und Chopin ist auch dabei)”). For Hermann Sabbe, the new compositions of the 1970s move both towards hyperchromatism and the diatonic, toward an increase in the complexity of rhythms and a simpler individualization of melodic figures. *Monument*, for example, fixes attack points and pitch, which will control the harmony as well.²³ Yet these works were but further exemplars of Ligeti’s systematic method, in which each parameter of the composition conditioned another, within an objective order that left little room for subjectivity or outward engagement. In contrast, Zenck noted that Ligeti’s earlier orchestral works had created a “padded and hermetic world of expression,” that allowed allusions to shine through.²⁴ The new style of *Melodien* marked a complete reversal: from sound to thematic composition, from reference to explicit homage.

2. THE 1980S AND THE “AESTHETIC OF CURRENTNESS”

The 1980s saw both a major shift in Ligeti’s style and the beginning of retrospective appraisals of his work. Jeffrey Bossin articulated the party line as such: the development of post-war music, viewed as a historical continuum analogous to that of the natural sciences, emphasizes the perpetual advancement of new methods rather than unique instances. This “aesthetic of currentness” binds each new work to a particular moment in history, while paradoxically denying it a place in the future it prescriptively foreshadows.²⁵ Ligeti’s continual search for the new fits this narrative on a technical and aesthetic plane, and explains his turn towards incorporating elements of the past and the non-Western in works from the Horn Trio onward.

¹⁹ZENCK, “Entwurf einer Soziologie,” 269.

²⁰BORIO, “L’eredità Bartókiana,” 295–307.

²¹KAUFMANN, “Ligeti’s zweites Streichquartett,” 181–184.

²²PLAISTOW, “Ligeti’s Recent Music,” 379–381.

²³SABBE, *György Ligeti*, 24.

²⁴ZENCK, “Die ich rief.”

²⁵BOSSIN, “The Berlin Festival’s Ligeti Retrospective,” 238.



Like Zenck, Rudolf Frisius's contribution to the 1987 collection *György Ligeti: Personalstil – Avantgardismus – Popularität* discussed the difference between personal style and musical language in Ligeti.²⁶ Frisius drew comparisons with Messiaen, both in Ligeti's process and in his influence, and noted that some of Ligeti's students had joined the "New Simplicity" movement. This lineage makes sense if we observe how certain simplifications of his musical language served to establish Ligeti's personal style, foremost among them an undialectical interplay between continuous local structures and discontinuous large-scale formal caesuras and contrasts (as in the use of extreme registral cutoffs). Where does personal style end, Frisius asks, and the negation of serial influence become a negation of the negation: a new tradition of the anti-traditional?²⁷

Writing at the end of the decade Alastair Williams and Roger Savage discussed Ligeti's music as part of an Adornian-Benjaminian critical tradition aware of its own technical and aesthetic compromises with the historical moment. Savage located in the early *Apparitions* (1958–1959) the kernel of Ligeti's challenge to post-war composition. The composer intentionally appropriated those "crystalline, syntactical musical functions" that impart tension to serial music.²⁸ By lending that syntactic process a dynamic character and "aura of depth," *Apparitions* ironically confirms that form in art is the configuration of rationality and logicity.²⁹ But its process simultaneously critiques the way such technically contrived mystique is rooted in the same dialectic that gives rise to myth. Williams rehearsed the by now rote narrative of a progressive development "in which the expelled parameters of [Ligeti's] earlier drastically reduced scores are reclaimed," striking a balance between accessibility and "exacting listening."³⁰ Yet he stresses their "immanent critique of stagnant, recalcitrant values of the culture industry," reaching towards a self-determined whole that is always out of reach. "If any transcendental signifier does look down upon Ligeti (under erasure of course)," Williams posits, "it must be that of historical necessity, an immanent distorted reflection of the social and intellectual concerns of contemporary society."³¹ Yet Hans Gerd Brill saw a break with the contemporary moment: a Piano Concerto (1985–1988) which officially declared Ligeti's "independence from both the critics of the traditional avant-garde and those of fashionable postmodernism."³²

3. LIGETI TURNS 70

Williams's view was codified and expanded by Hermann Sabbe exactly 30 years ago, in a special issue of *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* celebrating the composer's seventieth birthday. Ligeti

²⁶FRISIUS, "Personalstil und Musiksprache," 179–203.

²⁷Ibid., 202–203.

²⁸SAVAGE, *Structure and Sorcery*, 86.

²⁹Ibid., 90.

³⁰WILLIAMS, "Music as Immanent Critique," 203.

³¹Ibid., 219.

³²BRILL, "Imagination und Konstruktion," 41.



reception, Sabbe opined, assigned the composer an overall ambiguous position: “Treason everywhere. Either against ‘tradition’ or against the ‘avant-garde.’”³³ Along the lines of Williams, Sabbe argued for Ligeti as purveyor of a “critical tradition”: one that engages in a critique of continual shifts in styles and aesthetics. Stephen Ferguson saw Ligeti’s new piano music as our best contemporary example of West European polyphony at the same time that it met perfectly the pluralist assumptions of cultural life in the 1990s.³⁴ Gavin Thomas raised the stakes: Ligeti’s refusal to accept ready-made attitudes and solutions exhibits “a form of continual and heroic self-doubt. ... To talk of heroism is not, in fact, so far-fetched.”³⁵ Thomas highlighted the controversy caused by the Horn Trio (1982) and Piano Concerto. The former paired new techniques with “a vastly expanded emotional world,” adding the dimension of memory to the recovered trinity of melody, harmony, and rhythm. Of the Piano Concerto Thomas notes, “who but the very brave or the very foolish would open a work in such a jauntily swung B♭ major?”³⁶ He calls the subsequent movements “gothic constructions” which marry a simplicity of means with a richness of effect, “hardly the stuff of contemporary *Augenmusik*.” If Ligeti Hero were not enough praise, we have the utopian pronouncement that “the inventive brilliance of such works places them beyond the canons of style.”³⁷

Alastair Williams jumped once again into the fray to proffer a note of caution: perhaps, we might detect that, just occasionally, the exploration of difference and repetition in this music each collapses into its opposite. Might the constant aural illusions, the sheer exuberance of this music mask “a void constituted by the absence of an alternative,” a Derridean continual dissolution of the transcendental that effaces any sense of origin?³⁸ Yet Ligeti’s music in general became such a transcendental signifier for the *New York Times*’s Bernard Holland, who wrote, on the occasion of the composer’s seventy-fifth birthday, that “Its powerful union of lament and burlesque speaks as well of this odd century of ours as any voice I know.”³⁹

4. A PICASSO OF SOUND

Where does Ligeti reception stand on the composer’s 80th birthday? Writing in *Der Spiegel*, Werner Theurich echoed the old “accessible/exacting” dialectic with the passive construction “György Ligeti is considered to be as innovative as he is reliable in attracting the public ... a Picasso of sound” and “Living proof that you can be successful without compromising for the mass market.”⁴⁰ Musicologist Charles Wilson was highly critical of the way in which Ligeti’s “rhetoric of autonomy” had infiltrated the prose of his commentators over the years, for they not

³³SABBE, “Vorausblick,” 5.

³⁴FERGUSON, “Tradition,” 15.

³⁵THOMAS, “New Clocks,” 376.

³⁶Ibid., 378.

³⁷Ibid., 379.

³⁸WILLIAMS, *New Music*, 91.

³⁹Bernard HOLLAND, “Unnerving Master of Terror and the Absurd,” *The New York Times* (April 21, 1998), E1.

⁴⁰THEURICH, Werner. “Popstar der E-Musik,” *Der Spiegel* (May 28, 2003), <<https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/musik/gyoergy-ligeti-zum-80-geburtstag-popstar-der-e-musik-a-250625.html>>, (accessed: September 15, 2023).



only valorized his uniqueness ad infinitum but, in a more disturbing tribute, invoked that characteristic marker of the transcendental: “beyond” (the categories of style, of schools, of institutions).⁴¹ Wilson reminds us of the commercial nature of such performative rhetoric, citing Paul Griffiths’s easy association between dictatorships “brown,” “red,” and “serial” in his *New Grove* article on the composer.⁴² The composer had long claimed to write in an “ideology-free” style, one that abjures politics and biographical reflection for a music that is self-defined and stands alone.⁴³ Yet René Thun found that Ligeti’s survival of Nazism and Stalinism was indeed “reflected on the music-aesthetic level in the broadest sense.”⁴⁴ The composer’s notion of musical critique, Thun emphasizes, is pragmatic and dialogical, placing the individual imagination above the fetishization of any structure, process or institution.

Ligeti certainly trafficked in historicist narratives when it was useful, validating the appearance of order that linked one post-war work to another by locating them within a teleologically-oriented problem history. As Wolfgang Marx notes, Ligeti has long been involved in “the struggle for the interpretative sovereignty” that leads contemporary composers to direct discourse about their music.⁴⁵ The master of that trope, Stockhausen seemed at the time to have created a perpetual motion machine in which the solution to a specific compositional question generated a new work, which then provoked a new question, and a new work. New music here adopts the Lacanian discourse of the university, as an accumulation of knowledge in the form of technique, masking the inexorable pull of the new.⁴⁶ In his essay on musical form Ligeti offered a more poetic view that repudiated the linear narrative of progress in music.⁴⁷ The proper metaphor for music history took shape as a vast, disintegrating net that moved hither and yon, lightly binding composers and ideas, but ever rent by contingency. From such a position our modernist era appears as a great “tear in the historical process,”⁴⁸ and the composer’s only way out a refuge in the imaginary: the cultivation of a “formal imagination” able to lift the composer above the scrum of political-aesthetic skirmishes.

5. LIGETI’S FAILURES, LIGETI’S UTOPIAS

Ligeti’s increased visibility and veneration since the 1990s seemed to warrant a course correction in some quarters. He was faulted for not dealing directly in music with his traumatic experiences

⁴¹WILSON, “György Ligeti,” 5–28.

⁴²GRIFFITHS, “Ligeti, György,” 690, cited in WILSON, “György Ligeti,” 9.

⁴³György LIGETI and Anders BEYER, “An Art without Ideology,” in *The Voice of Music: Conversations with Composers of Our Time*, ed. by Anders BEYER, trans. by Jean CHRISTENSEN and Anders BEYER (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 1–14.

⁴⁴THUN, “Ein Versuch,” 29.

⁴⁵MARX, “Weil die Texte,” 204.

⁴⁶Bruce Fink provides a summary of the university discourse in FINK, *The Lacanian Subject*, 132–135.

⁴⁷This essay exists in several forms; citations reflect the version published as “Form in der Neuen Musik,” in LICHTENFELD (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 185–199.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 190.



surviving Nazi and Soviet invasion, and his ambivalence towards his Jewish heritage.⁴⁹ He was accused of pursuing a more accessible path to appeal to a wider public. Rachel Beckles Willson joined Charles Wilson to skillfully critique Ligeti's self-promotion, his manipulation of émigré status and, in Beckles Willson's view, questionable relation to truth, both intended in part to explain his institutional prestige.⁵⁰ Less skillfully Richard Taruskin branded Ligeti a cold-war poster boy who willfully participated in the commodification of the avant-garde.⁵¹ Michael Finnissy contrasted Ligeti's "nihilism" to Nancarrow's life-affirming energy:

It's as if something is being erased in front of you, and the composer isn't rushing to save it, or has not realized the poignancy of the moment or even what indeed is there. It becomes a mechanistic thing. Uninterestingly deviant.⁵²

Arnold Whittall urges us to hear Finnissy out, given how the "grids that underpin and control the music's evolving processes" sit on the surface of Ligeti's music.⁵³ For Whittall the mechanical aspect of Ligeti's Etudes represents an almost suffocating confrontation with the kernel of their being: no longer "filtered out," such processes lose their mystique. Whittall longs for a Ligeti who conformed to one camp or the other: the avant-garde or minimalism, more obedient, we might add, to the master signifiers of our age. Far more common in Whittall and other historians is the attention to multiplicity in Ligeti's music: those elements put on the boil in "mature" Ligeti that connote vastly different spheres of cultural life.

Whittall's and Finnissy's opinions are outliers, given his widely-held status as the greatest living serious composer before his death.⁵⁴ Yet canonical Ligeti reception in the present remains trapped in historicist narratives that reach back to the 1960s, as borne out by five platitudes repeated by most of the obituaries that marked the composer's passing in 2006. The first on that list may be "Ligeti's music flouts the puritanical streak that runs through contemporary music." In the poetic terms of British composer George Benjamin, his music could "enchant and beguile in the most immediate way"; it sparkled with luminosity, and could create "an almost tangible physical response in the listener."⁵⁵ Richard Dyer's more pedestrian take resembles most found in the mainstream press: Ligeti wrote "high modernism in an uncompromising fashion that people nevertheless liked to listen to and could absorb."⁵⁶ The second trope links his music's accessibility to its putative uniqueness, Ligeti's maverick challenges to "Darmstadt orthodoxy,"

⁴⁹See, for instance, SCHEDING, "Where Is the Holocaust," 205–221.

⁵⁰BECKLES WILLSON, *Ligeti, Kurtág*, 4–9.

⁵¹TARUSKIN, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*, 49–54.

⁵²Michael FINNISSY cited in WHITTALL, "In Memoriam," 2.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 2–3.

⁵⁴RICH, Alan. "Around Ligeti," *Variety* (April 29, 1998), <<https://variety.com/1998/music/reviews/around-ligeti-1117477438/>> (accessed: September 19, 2023).

⁵⁵George BENJAMIN, "In the Realm of the Senses," *The Guardian* (February 23, 2007), <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/feb/23/classicalmusicandopera1>>, (accessed: September 17, 2023).

⁵⁶Richard DYER, "Gyorgy [sic] Ligeti; Influential Composer of Wry, Startling Pieces," *The Boston Globe* (June 13, 2006), A23.



as the London *Telegraph* put it, and its invitation to those who would, as the London *Times* put it, admirably call him “mad.”⁵⁷ This brings us to the third truism, for to be a maverick is to open up “new expressive and technical terrain,” and even, in the case of the piano etudes, to “reinvent” how performers play their instrument.⁵⁸ Lest we fear that accessibility is incompatible with serious intent, we arrive at the fourth platitude: an attempt to see – as did Thun – Ligeti’s work as the “testament” of someone who suffered through Nazi and Stalinist regimes, and “who afterwards resisted both nihilism and dogma with tremendous courage.”⁵⁹

When these stories converge with the fifth and final narrative – one that sees Ligeti’s music as a fusion of influences from science, art, and literature – they assume their full utopian relevance, as Ligeti once said of the collage techniques of Mahler and Ives.⁶⁰ A heterogenous use of materials, the pursuit of illusion and allusion, compositional progress measured as a synoptic problem history of twentieth-century techniques, one that could “mean life itself” to those who follow:⁶¹ all are swept up in a utopian impulse, one that Ligeti admitted to in a conversation with Manfred Stahnke. “There is very often something utopian in what I do, that is, a desire for an audible result where the guarantee that it will also be heard cannot be given.”⁶² He continues to call his “new type of harmony” which incorporates scordatura instruments utopian, but admits that such an “open, unsecured harmonic system” can never be realized perfectly.⁶³

As Frederic Jameson reminds us, it is far easier to denounce such historical narratives than it is to do without them.⁶⁴ For instance, if we subject Borstlap’s oppositional pair Classical and Modernity to Greimasian analysis, then Borstlap’s “Classical Modernity” sits firmly below the semiotic square in the neutral position, while its utopian union, the “Modernist Classic” floats above (Fig. 1). Ostensibly one has read this far in celebration of Ligeti’s modernist Classics, works that implicitly justify our focus on their allure, their value, perhaps even their liberatory potential. But just what constitutes a modernist classic – composer or work – haunts every discussion of twentieth-century music, whose histories remain deeply historicist, as suggested by a revised square that posits two possible historic orders (Fig. 2).

The individual objects that populate the vast field of verbal, graphic and musical sketches in the Ligeti collection of the Paul Sacher Stiftung function as Latour litanies:⁶⁵ Banda-Linda,

⁵⁷“György Ligeti,” *The Telegraph* (June 13, 2006), 23; *The Times* (June 13, 2006), T55.

⁵⁸BENJAMIN, “In the Realm”; Mark SZWED, “Gyorgy [sic] Ligeti, 83; a Mercurial Composer Who Despised Dogmas,” *Los Angeles Times* (June 13, 2006), <<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-jun-13-me-ligeti13-story.html>>, (accessed: September 19, 2023).

⁵⁹BENJAMIN, “In the Realm.”

⁶⁰LIGETI, “Zur Collagetechnik bei Mahler und Ives,” in LICHTENFELD (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 285–290.

⁶¹György KURTÁG, “Struck by Apollo! Remembering György Ligeti,” trans. by John LAMBERT, *The Hungarian Quarterly* 188 (2007), 57.

⁶²STAHNKE (ed.), *Musik – nicht ohne Worte*, 121–152.

⁶³Ibid., 137.

⁶⁴JAMESON, *A Singular Modernity*, 5.

⁶⁵A Latour litany is the fanciful name that philosophers associated with Object Oriented Ontology use to describe collections of diverse, nonrepeating, unique objects intended to defeat any attempt at systematized description; see MORTON, “Sublime Object,” 226.



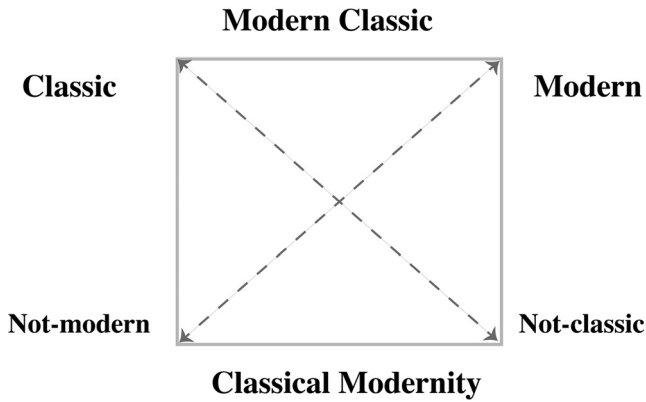


Fig. 1. The Classical Modernity semiotic square

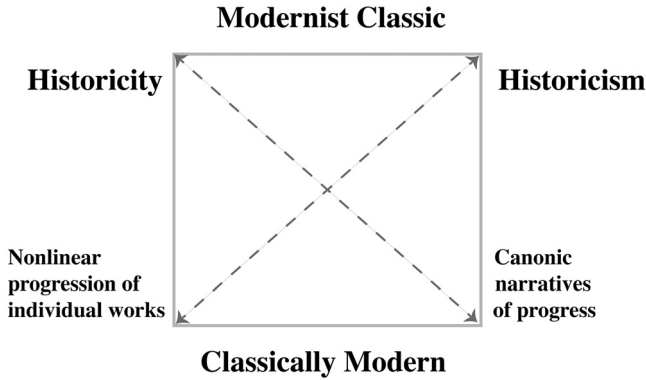


Fig. 2. The Modernist Classics square

isorhythm, Scriabin, fractals, Schumann, lament. They vibrate individually on the page, bearing witness to a potent and fertile imagination, often reduced in the scholar’s analysis to mere evocations of the past or the Other. It is telling that Whittall’s *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music* ends with a discussion of the Viola Sonata, where its “ethnic associations in dialogue with other art-music perspectives” reduce it to a twentieth-century type: one whose character derives from reactions to other music.⁶⁶ Yet Ligeti’s sonata lacks, for Whittall, the cohesion one overriding signifier might provide – ruefulness in Berio, science in Boulez, poise and refinement in Carter. It offers no resolution of emotional or stylistic conflict; in some sense it fails, even if it survives as the closing tale of his twentieth-century chronicle. Yet in his own obituary of the composer, Whittall writes “Since 1980 there has been nothing more appealing, nothing with

⁶⁶WHITTALL, *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music*, 204–205.



greater potential for serving as a model for future music, and therefore creating hopes and expectations for such music.”⁶⁷

From 1989, Seth Brodsky’s psychoanalytic reading of twentieth-century music offers a heuristic for interrogating the network of fantasy woven around the raw antagonisms of modernism and modernist music. Brodsky identifies two separate moments of modernism: one based on the fracturing of existing fantasies of progress, the other a desirous call for a New no longer beholden to the past. A certain logic binds them, in that a relentless interrogation of the past often hides a secret desire for the “messianic Unknown.”⁶⁸ This practice of repeating and re-receiving what remains unheard in its past in search of such an Unknown often appears as failure in Ligeti’s mature work – in the form of faltering tempos, performance trials, or tonal confusion. But that failure is singular to both the work and the “work” – in a larger, critical sense, that his compositions perform. They depict the irreducible gap between utopia and its failure – the incorporated sign and its meaning – by reinscribing the past, the personal, and the extramusical as a conscious expression of Ligeti’s prison. To identify with Ligeti’s failures is to understand that, contra Finnissy, his deviant and naked processes, and his alternately systematic and wildly divergent works are all of a piece. They trace a nonlinear notion of progress that defines musical modernism as it secretly exists, as a vast “tear in the historical process” that may, under otherwise reactionary circumstances, rise above the noise of the fray, to a “region which lies elsewhere.”⁶⁹

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⁶⁷WHITTALL, “In Memoriam,” 4.

⁶⁸BRODSKY, *From 1989*, 247.

⁶⁹György LIGETI, “On Music and Politics,” trans. by Wes BLOMSTER, *Perspectives of New Music*, 16/2 (1978), 22.



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