

Proposal for a 30-minute presentation at

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Presentation Title:

Musica Ricercata: Germinal Ideas of György Ligeti

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The music of György Ligeti seems to defy all attempts at categorization. From the micropolyphony of *Atmosphères* and *Lontano*, to the “cooled expressionism” of the Requiem, and even the asynchronous ostinati of the notoriously difficult *Études* for piano, every new piece seems to explore a completely different idea. It is no wonder that none of these pieces could really be associated with a historical style for as Ligeti notes himself “in the Darmstadt of the late ‘50s...I was considered a particularly traditionalist composer. ... Now in our much more conformist times... I appear very experimental. I do not think I am much influenced by prevailing fashions.”¹ His music shrugs off, just as easily, any linearly evolutionary view of his output. What musical thought, if any, connects *Le Grand Macabre* to the Piano Concerto? The one quality that is common to all of his music seems to be that they all excel at being unique, individual, and thus highly difficult to relate to one another in a coherent or logical manner.

Part of this problem, no doubt, is that Ligeti is still a relatively “young” composer and thus studies devoted to his music are understandably few. There have been, however, many recent studies of Ligeti’s music, in addition to an ever expanding list of biographical resources.² Most notably, Jonathan Bernard’s articles have shed light on a variety of structures and theoretical ideas in Ligeti’s music.³ But despite theoretical insights into *individual* pieces, we are still at loss when it comes to relationships between pieces separated by a large chronological span. Are there such connections? Are there

¹ Ligeti, G., P. Várnai, et al. (1983). *György Ligeti in conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel, and himself*. London, Eulenburg, pg. 29.

² A decent biography exists in Richard Toop. *György Ligeti*. Phaidon: London, 1999. Other resources can be found in the bibliography for Ligeti’s entry by Paul Griffiths in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed.

³ Jonathan Bernard has done the most detailed and extensive theoretical work on Ligeti’s music. Notable articles include:

Bernard, J. W. (1987). "Inaudible structures, audible music: Ligeti's problem, and his solution." *Music Analysis* 6(3): 207-236.

Bernard, J. W. (1994). "Voice leading as a spatial function in the music of Ligeti." *Music Analysis* 13(2/3): 227-253.

Bernard, J. W. (1999). "Ligeti's restoration of interval and its significance for his later works." *Music Theory Spectrum* 21(1): 1-31.

Bernard, J. W. (2003). "A key to structure in the Kyrie of Gyorgy Ligeti's Requiem." *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung*(16): 44-47.

musical ideas that Ligeti develops throughout his life or is each new group of compositions completely new? Are there theoretical bases to these ideas? These are all important questions in the formation of our view of Ligeti and his music.

This paper will discuss some possible answers to the above questions. The starting point of my explorations will be *Musica Ricercata*, a series of 11 short piano pieces composed in 1951-1953.⁴ I choose *Musica Ricercata* because it is one of the earliest serious pieces Ligeti wrote, as well as being one of the more technically accessible.⁵ Using a variety of analytical approaches including harmonic analysis, scalar content analysis, pitch content analysis, and rhythmic analysis, I uncover germinal ideas that exist in multiple movements—ideas that Ligeti must have found intriguing enough to repeat despite the parsimonious nature of the music. One example of such an idea is “altered modes.” Ligeti sometimes flips a mode upside down (an inverted Dorian scale, for example) and sometimes adds members to a mode so that there is modal ambiguity (in other words, more than one mode can be perceived from a uniform texture).

After a discussion of this piece and ideas found therein (which are in and of themselves worthy of study and of characteristic Ligeti wit and humor), this paper will explore connections between later works and *Musica Ricercata* through these musical gestures. For example, a more developed version of the “altered mode” idea appears later in such works as the Piano Concerto, where a fully chromatic texture is divided into two separate “modes”: one on the white key and one on the black keys. This paper will present this and other such connections in more detail, connecting chronologically distant compositions in a coherent manner, thus contributing to a broader understanding of Ligeti’s music.

⁴ Precious little has been written about *Musica Ricercata*. One mention of it appears in Sallis, Friedemann. *An Introduction to the early works of György Ligeti*. Studio Köln: Cologne. 1996. pp. 103-104. pp.288-289 gives references for the remaining literature on *Musica Ricercata*.

⁵ *Musica Ricercata* was written during a period of despotism in Hungary. That these were, at first, “drawer” pieces hidden away from official eyes attests to the seriousness and the musical conviction with which Ligeti wrote these pieces.