

LIGETI IN COLOGNE

CHRISTOPH VON BLUMRÖDER¹ 

SUMMARY. György Ligeti's stay in Cologne from 1957 until 1959 played a decisive role in his life. After more than three decades living under more or less strict political control, finally Ligeti could experience peace and personal freedom. Many talks with Karlheinz Stockhausen, who explained his particular musical ideas and serial composition techniques in detail, and the access to the Electronic Music Studio at the West German Broadcasting Station, where Gottfried Michael Koenig would introduce him to the specific ways of theoretical thinking and the practical methods in the field of electronic composition, opened for him the domain of the New Music. And Ligeti's own realizations *Glissandi* and *Artikulation* marked an important turning point in his musical practice in general.

Keywords: György Ligeti, *Glissandi*, *Aventures*, Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Gesang der Jünglinge*, Gottfried Michael Koenig, Mauricio Kagel, *Anagrama*, Franco Evangelisti, *Incontri di fasce sonori*, Herbert Brün, electronic music.

Attracted by the fame of the Electronic Music Studio at the Westdeutsche Rundfunk – the West German Broadcasting Station – in Cologne, György Ligeti arrived there in February 1957. His stay in this city, which finally turned out to last almost three years, had been made possible by Herbert Eimert, the founder and then director of the Electronic Music Studio, who had procured a small scholarship for Ligeti, thus enabling him to work there. Looking back more than four decades later during the awarding of the prestigious Kyoto Prize in November 2001 in Japan, Ligeti commented on his former journey to Cologne with great emphasis: 'that was possibly the most incisive event of my life.'²

¹ University of Cologne, alm20@uni-koeln.de

² See Ligeti, György. "Zwischen Wissenschaft, Musik und Politik (2001)" (*Between science, music, and politics*). In *Gesammelte Schriften (Collected Writings)*, ed. by Monika Lichtenfeld, vol. 2 (Publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung, vol. 10, 2), Schott, Mainz, 2007, p. 48.



Born in 1923 to Hungarian Jewish parents in the Romanian town of Târnăveni, Ligeti had suffered a precarious existence as a member of a discriminated minority, overshadowed by the pressure of conflicting national ideologies, the horror of antisemitic persecution, and the deadly dangers of Fascist dictatorship and bloody war in the middle of the twentieth century. Other than many of his family members, he survived the fighting and pogroms during the Second World War with a great amount of luck. But as a music student and, since 1950, professor at the College of Music in Budapest, again he had to endure lack of freedom and oppression under the Stalinist regime in Hungary. Therefore, after the defeat of the political rebellion against the Hungarian government through the military intervention of the Soviet army in autumn 1956, Ligeti started a dangerous escape with his future wife Vera on the 10th of December, crossing the border to Austria on foot on the 12th, where they would finally both obtain political asylum in Vienna.

Many years later in an autobiographic short article from 1993, Ligeti, in his unique, lively as well as humorous manner of expression, gave a vivid description of the very first special Cologne moments: 'On the 1st of February 1957, I arrived in Cologne by train from Vienna, and this voyage had lasted almost two days and two nights at that time. [...] After two nights on the train, I was extremely exhausted, and I had a heavy suitcase. From the railway station I looked at the Cologne cathedral – that was an overwhelming view. With the suitcase I went to the tram stop and fell unconscious. My last thought was, this would be the end, and I should never be able to work at the Electronic Music Studio. I did not remember anything for a while, and then I woke up in a hospital bed. With the help of [...] injections, I was made awake quickly – after all I was not really sick, but only overly exhausted.'³

Mainly two reasons may be taken into consideration for an understanding of Ligeti's statement that his emigration to Cologne had played such an important role in his life. First, after more than three decades living under more or less strict political control, finally he could experience peace and personal freedom, although in a place where, on one hand, everyday life still was restrained by destructive post-war injuries; to be seen directly, for instance, in the extremely damaged city architecture caused through massive air raids between 1942 and 1945. But on the other hand, the contemporary music department of the West German Broadcasting Station in Cologne – under the guidance of Eimert and through the activities of young composers like especially Karlheinz Stockhausen – had become an international centre of New Music. Although Ligeti was extremely interested in its latest developments, he was not very well informed about them. Forced to live in complete cultural isolation, which

³ See Ligeti, György. "Mein Kölner Jahr 1957 (1993)" (*My Cologne Year 1957*). Ibid., pp. 29-30.

had been decreed by the Soviets in Hungary in summer 1948, Ligeti had already in Budapest focussed his attention on Western broadcast programmes. But these were distorted by strong interferences produced by the Soviets, who wanted to prevent that the Hungarian people would receive uncensored political messages from the free Western democracies. Hence, Ligeti only had been able to hear the high frequencies of the broadcasted New Music, with one exception which he later mentioned several times: only during the weeks of the Hungarian revolution when the state had lost total control, Ligeti could listen to Stockhausen's electronic music *Gesang der Jünglinge* on the radio set for once in an undistorted presentation, but under very peculiar circumstances: "It was on the 7th November 1956 and it was the first broadcast of *Gesang der Jünglinge*. The Soviets had come in and everybody was down in the cellars, but I went up so that I could hear the music clearly. There were detonations going on, and shrapnel, so it was quite dangerous to be listening."⁴ It seems most remarkable that Ligeti evidently remembered that particular date very well even some decades later, as this fact clearly shows how intense that musical moment obviously had been for him.

With these historical circumstances in mind, one can well imagine that the first six weeks in Cologne, when Ligeti was staying as a guest at the home of Stockhausen and his family, must have been a time of almost permanent euphoria. The many talks with Stockhausen, who explained his fascinating musical ideas and serial composition techniques in detail, and all the uncountable hours which Ligeti spent at the West German Broadcasting Station to listen 'to hundreds of music pieces on tapes,' as he did not know any works of Arnold Schoenberg or Anton Webern nor of other composers of his own age, because their music had been strictly banned in Hungary. Especially in the beginning, the Cologne broadcasting building, which was situated in the centre of the city near the cathedral, represented – as Ligeti testified enthusiastically – 'a wonderful new world,' meaning for him personally the 'opening to the world of the New Music.' And second, Ligeti finally had achieved the long-desired access to the Electronic Music Studio, where Gottfried Michael Koenig would introduce him to the specific ways of theoretical thinking and the practical methods in the field of electronic composition. Therefore, Ligeti, who then was thirty-three years old already, in his retrospective view gratefully referred to Koenig and Stockhausen as the two most important 'teachers' during his 'second schooldays,' and he named the Cologne Electronic Music Studio 'the centre of the musical world' in those

⁴ Griffiths, Paul. *György Ligeti*, Robson Books, London, 1983, p. 22. See also Ligeti, György. "Ja, ich war ein utopischer Sozialist." György Ligeti im Gespräch mit Reinhard Oehlschlägel" ("Yes, I was a utopian Socialist." György Ligeti in conversation with Reinhard Oehlschlägel). In *MusikTexte. Zeitschrift für Neue Musik*, no. 28/29, March 1989, p. 101b.

times, nevertheless adding with soft self-ironical reservation: 'at least that's how it seemed to us. Considered from an outside perspective, of course we were only a tiny crowd.' Last but not least, Ligeti emphatically praised the 'wonderful atmosphere' of the manifold artistic encounters and intellectual discussions which were happening there.⁵

Indeed, since its opening in May 1953 the Electronic Music Studio had quickly won widespread international attention which was motivating many composers, predominantly of a younger age, to visit Cologne. And the studio gained not only significance as an innovative institution for the composition of electronic music but also developed into an extraordinary open place of inspiring communication between composers and even other people who were connected with the latest trends in contemporary art. While in exile in Cologne, Ligeti became acquainted, for instance, with fellow composers Bruno Maderna, Franco Evangelisti, and also with Mauricio Kagel, who had just arrived from Argentina at the end of September 1957; likewise with the poet Hans G Helms, whose experimental literary activities impressed Ligeti (together they read and discussed James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*), and with the music theorist Heinz-Klaus Metzger, a philosophical adept of Theodor W. Adorno, the most respected author of basic critical reflections on New Music in general, and engaged in personal contacts with many composers of the young generation too.

Ligeti's first electronic composition, which he realized – technically supported by Koenig – with a duration of 7'35" from May until August 1957, already shows some characteristic aspects of his person and of his music. For he had chosen a quite special acoustic material from which arose its title *Glissandi*, although such gliding sounds were absolutely not typical for the primarily pointillistic perspective which had historically unfolded in the Cologne Electronic Music Studio by the precise serial control of every single sine wave element in a composition. With regard to that, Ligeti soon obtained a creative individuality even in these days of a new musical orientation, trying to attain an original foundation for his compositional future. On the one hand, it is remarkable that the idea of continuous sound structures establishing *Glissandi* had a conceptual similarity to the statistically constructed sound masses and swarms of Iannis Xenakis' stochastic music, which Ligeti then probably did not know since it was decisively depreciated in Cologne by Stockhausen and friends. On the other hand, one may speculate whether the choice of these quasi archetypical, highly expressive musical figures had been influenced by personal autobiographical occurrences. As the glissandi in Ligeti's electronic

⁵ See Ligeti, György. "Mein Kölner Jahr 1957 (1993)" (*My Cologne Year 1957*). In *Gesammelte Schriften (Collected Writings)*, ed. by Monika Lichtenfeld, vol. 2 (Publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung, vol. 10, 2), Schott, Mainz, 2007, p. 31.

premier piece produce a mainly disturbing impression, sometimes of loneliness, loss, sadness, and soft lament, or, in sudden loudly cumulating climaxes even fear and aggression, this is a reminiscence of the alarming sirens that Edgard Varèse was the first in music history to unleash in his work like distracting signals from the reality. To be perceived as echoes of the First World War, a semantical correspondence to Ligeti's *Glissandi* – dating from after the horrors of the Holocaust and the Second World War – becomes evident, and also a parallel to Xenakis' music in which similar glissandi may be interpreted as depressing acoustic metaphors of a heavily injured youth. However, Ligeti himself qualified *Glissandi* to be rather an etude in learning the techniques of electronic composition and therefore judged very self-critically: 'The piece is really bad.'⁶ But nevertheless, it can be taken for sure that the process of realization itself marked the start of an important turning point caused by very particular, seminal experiences in his musical practice.

After Ligeti had started a second project, which remained unfinished, he created another electronic piece in early 1958 between January and the end of March, once more with the help of Koenig and some additional support by his pupil Cornelius Cardew. It originated from the idea of using the originally abstract electronic sound material to provoke certain verbal and emotional associations within a composition that would be built up in a virtual language; in a structured course 'as if one speaks, but in an unintelligible language,' as Ligeti later explained his former musical intentions.⁷ And this aim of aesthetical concretion, in order to avoid what Ligeti used to call purist music, proved to be a characteristic attitude which has since constituted the originality of his compositions. In this context, a bon mot by Mauricio Kagel, who at the same time was busy with his own first electronic experiments in a neighbouring studio, sheds a significant light on the individualized position which Ligeti had already accomplished. Watching him at work, Kagel commented in the characteristic manner of his refined humour: 'The piece sounds like you are talking, namely Hungarian.'⁸

Apart from that, Ligeti's plan for a composition in an imaginary language also can be regarded as a general paradigm for the special atmosphere of creative exchange in the Cologne Electronic Music Studio of that time. Because

⁶ See Ligeti, György. "Auswirkungen der elektronischen Musik auf mein kompositorisches Schaffen (1968)" (*The impact of electronic music on my compositional work*). Ibid., p. 86.

⁷ See Ligeti, György. "György Ligeti über eigene Werke. Ein Gespräch mit Detlef Gojowy aus dem Jahre 1988" (*György Ligeti on his own works. A conversation with Detlef Gojowy from 1988*). In *Für György Ligeti. Die Referate des Ligeti-Kongresses Hamburg 1988 (For György Ligeti. The papers of the Ligeti Congress Hamburg 1988)* (Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft, vol. 11), Laaber-Verlag, Laaber, 1991, p.352.

⁸ See Kagel, Mauricio. *Dialoge, Monologe*, ed. by Werner Klüppelholz, DuMont Buchverlag, Köln, 2001, p. 247.

Ligeti had not only been inspired by experimental texts of Hans G Helms but also by the vocal work *Anagrama*, which Kagel was just about to finish. This composition for four solo voices, speaking chorus and chamber ensemble was constructed upon a Latin palindrome, which Kagel probably chose not least because he could be sure that hardly any listener would understand it; from of the sum of the palindrome's vocals and consonants, Kagel derived an absurd compositional method and through anagrammatic transformations in French, Italian, Spanish, and German a nonsense libretto as well. So, the composition's point lies in the fact that *Anagrama* is elaborated in five real languages, but in the end completely lacks any normal meaningful semantics. It seems not hard to recognize the quite suggestive impulse this funny conception offered Ligeti for his own project. Indeed, Rainer Wehinger has demonstrated in a profound analysis of the sketches that Ligeti proceeded with a similar process of chains of thoughtful permutations, at first producing a basic sound repertoire of sine waves, glissandi, so-called 'dry' (which meant without reverberation) and 'wet' (reverberated) impulses, up to different types of noises, which all were identified in peculiar categories like 'coughing', 'sneezing', or 'barking'.⁹ In keeping with this very significant imaginative disposition, for the next steps in building up the final tape Ligeti employed a playful system of pasting and cutting different 'phonemes', 'texts', 'words', 'speeches', and finally 'sentences' in many different lengths and combinations.¹⁰ In that last respect, he obviously also benefited from the occasionally attended lectures in phonetics and information theory given at the university in Bonn by Werner Meyer-Eppler, who also had played a prominent role in the history of electronic music as an influential theoretical mentor of not only Stockhausen but also other young composers who came to Cologne.

For the montage of the final composition with a duration of 3'46", Ligeti followed an overall plan which outlined a course from musical heterogeneity at the beginning to a mixture in the end. And, once more, here one can clearly detect a further inspiring effect given by the example of another composer – already mentioned – who was working at the Electronic Music Studio. For Franco Evangelisti had conceived his composition *Incontri di fasce sonore* 1957 in a very similar way within a comparable short duration of 3'20", seeking to realize contrasting complexes of sine waves and impulses in a flow of 'meetings of sound bundles', as the Italian title suggests. The obvious parallels of the musical constructions are underlined by Ligeti's declared high regard for *Incontri di fasce sonore*, explicitly calling it 'one of my favourite pieces' in

⁹ See Wehinger, Rainer. *Ligeti. Artikulation, Hörpartitur (Ligeti, Artikulation, Listening Score)*. Schott, Mainz, 1970, p. 11a.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18a.

1988.¹¹ Finally, Ligeti also made use of the special technological possibilities at the Cologne Electronic Music Studio to record a composition with the integral quality of fixed spatial constellations. So, he distributed all the different electronic sound transformations in a special order on four tracks of a tape recorder, which also would be used for the later performance in the concert hall via four corresponding channels with loudspeakers in the front, on both sides left and right, and in the back around the audience seated in the centre of the hall. And Ligeti used this spatial aspect in a kind of theatrical function. Thus, he created a musical event of imaginary monologues, dialogues, and many-voiced conversations, of single sighs, exclamations, and joint whisper, of bird-like speech and whimsical, sometimes quite witty utterances; producing an emotional atmosphere of diverse human characters, behaviours, and changing mental states. The conversational processes start at the front, move through the auditorium in carefully varied constellations like questions and answers, until in the end a last babbling disappears to the right. And it may not seem completely superfluous to point out here in a marginal note that such a choreographic structure clearly demonstrates the necessity of a multi-channel performance to unfold the music's complete aesthetical potential.

Thus far, one last component of Ligeti's second electronic composition in Cologne has yet remained unmentioned, and that is its title, which was not conceived by him but again emerged from the collaborative situation at the Electronic Music Studio. Another witness to the communicative atmosphere was Herbert Brün, who had also been present in Cologne since 1957, as it was he who suggested the designation *Artikulation*, which in the meaning 'division of speech', or 'divided pronunciation' fitted well with Ligeti's musical construction. The first performance of *Artikulation* took place in a concert at the grand hall of the West German Broadcasting Station on the 25th of March 1958 and belonged to an exquisite programme with other electronic contributions by Gottfried Michael Koenig, Bruno Maderna, Henri Pousseur, and Luciano Berio, and also among them Evangelisti's *Incontri di fasce sonore* and, at the end of the concert, Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge*. About sixteen months after Ligeti's first radio encounter with that work in Budapest 1956, he probably now experienced the actual concert situation, which even included a composition of his own, being moved by quite special deep thoughts and emotions.

After Ligeti left Cologne in 1959, he never again would create any electronic work, instead concentrating further on the instrumental and vocal

¹¹ See Ligeti, György. "György Ligeti über eigene Werke. Ein Gespräch mit Detlef Gojowy aus dem Jahre 1988" (*György Ligeti on his own works. A conversation with Detlef Gojowy from 1988*). In *Für György Ligeti. Die Referate des Ligeti-Kongresses Hamburg 1988 (For György Ligeti. The papers of the Ligeti Congress Hamburg 1988)* (Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft, vol. 11), Laaber-Verlag, Laaber, 1991, p. 352.

spheres. But this fact should not lead to the conclusion that his studies at the Electronic Music Studio had resulted in a fiasco. On the contrary, his stay there, on the one hand, can serve as a general paradigm for the historical phenomenon that within the second half of the twentieth century the establishment and knowledge of electronic practise caused a fundamental change in the concept of music towards a completely new direction. For the generation of music would no longer be restricted to composing with single notes, but advanced to composing sound as the central object of forming. In this sense, when talking about his later orchestra works *Apparitions* and *Atmosphères* Ligeti frankly stated that the typical combinations of single parts in a 'global texture' were indebted above all to his 'experiences in the electronic studio.'¹² And in an even closer comparison, he considered 'the single instrumental and vocal parts as an element corresponding to a series of sine tones' in order to obtain out of 'combinations of parts a composed timbre.'¹³

On the other hand, without any doubt one may count *Artikulation* together with *Gesang der Jünglinge* among the successful productions to have originated from the early history of the Electronic Music Studio in Cologne. Despite being quite short in duration at less than four minutes only, it has proven to be a highly convincing work giving every listener much pleasure, which is not something that can be said about all of the usual electronic pieces from this period. And the curious individual conception of building up the composition in analogy to an imaginary language, but without using any real components of speech, by the way, can be understood as an original forerunner of the later psychic-theatrical labyrinth *Aventures*. Including a kind of paradoxical moment which not seldom seems to be a significant quality of Ligeti's music in general.

REFERENCES

Griffiths, Paul. *György Ligeti*. Robson Books, London, 1983.

Kagel, Mauricio. *Dialoge, Monologe*, ed. by Werner Klüppelholz. DuMont Buchverlag, Köln, 2001.

Ligeti, György. "Auswirkungen der elektronischen Musik auf mein kompositorisches

¹² See Ligeti, György. "Auswirkungen der elektronischen Musik auf mein kompositorisches Schaffen (1968)" (*The impact of electronic music on my compositional work*). In *Gesammelte Schriften (Collected Writings)*, ed. by Monika Lichtenfeld, vol. 2 (Publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung, vol. 10, 2), Schott, Mainz, 2007, p. 87.

¹³ See Ligeti, György. "Musik und Technik. Eigene Erfahrungen und subjektive Betrachtungen (1980)" (*Music and technology. Personal experiences and subjective observations*). In *Gesammelte Schriften (Collected Writings)*, ed. by Monika Lichtenfeld, vol. 1 (Publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung, vol. 10, 1), Schott, Mainz, 2007, p. 253.

- Schaffen (1968)" (*The impact of electronic music on my compositional work*). In *Gesammelte Schriften (Collected Writings)*, ed. by Monika Lichtenfeld, vol. 2 (Publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung, vol. 10, 2), Schott, Mainz, 2007. pp. 86–93.
- Ligeti, György. "‘Ja, ich war ein utopischer Sozialist.’ György Ligeti im Gespräch mit Reinhard Oehlschlägel. 1978/88" (*‘Yes, I was a utopian Socialist.’ György Ligeti in conversation with Reinhard Oehlschlägel*). In *MusikTexte. Zeitschrift für Neue Musik*, no. 28/29, March 1989, pp. 85–102.
- Ligeti, György. "Musik und Technik. Eigene Erfahrungen und subjektive Betrachtungen (1980)" (*Music and technology. Personal experiences and subjective observations*). In *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Monika Lichtenfeld, vol. 1 (Publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung, vol. 10, 1), Schott, Mainz, 2007, pp. 227–261.
- Ligeti, György. "György Ligeti über eigene Werke. Ein Gespräch mit Detlef Gojowy aus dem Jahre 1988" (*György Ligeti on his own works. A conversation with Detlef Gojowy from 1988*). In *Für György Ligeti. Die Referate des Ligeti-Kongresses Hamburg 1988 (For György Ligeti. The papers of the Ligeti Congress Hamburg 1988)* (Hamburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft, vol. 11), Laaber-Verlag, Laaber, 1991, pp. 349–363.
- Ligeti, György. "Mein Kölner Jahr 1957 (1993)" (*My Cologne Year 1957*). In György Ligeti, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Monika Lichtenfeld, vol. 2 (Publications of the Paul Sacher Stiftung, vol. 10, 2), Schott, Mainz, 2007, pp. 29–32.
- Ligeti, György. "Zwischen Wissenschaft, Musik und Politik (2001)" (*Between science, music, and politics*). *Ibid*, p. 33–50.
- Wehinger, Rainer. *Ligeti. Artikulation, Hörpartitur (Ligeti, Artikulation, Listening Score)*. Schott, Mainz, 1970.

