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# THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN LIGETI AND ADORNO IN THE LIGHT OF DISCUSSIONS ON LIGETI'S POSITION IN MODERNISM – WITH A SIDEWAYS GLANCE AT *LE GRAND MACABRE*

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**SUMMARY.** "I am extremely interested in the new upheavals taking place in music - I was completely isolated from all this in Hungary"[2] , Ligeti wrote to Wolfgang Steinecke, then director of the Darmstadt Summer Course for New Music, in spring 1957. In the summer of the same year, he attended his first seminars and lectures at this internationally renowned forum - and just a few years later, he took on the same place an important role as a lecturer and source of inspiration. Despite this and many other clear indications of Ligeti's central role in new music since 1950, the references to other important European composers of the 20th/21st century are sometimes downplayed in Musicology, to simultaneously emphasize the conservative aspects of some of his statements about music. But does this help us to understand Ligeti's music? It seems to me that the answer to this question is clearly in the negative.

**Keywords:** Ligeti, Adorno, modernism, *Le grand macabre*

This article, which attempts to shed light on this, combines three perspectives:

- firstly, György Ligeti's integration into post-war modernism;
- secondly, individual aspects of the correspondence between him and the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno; and this is a matter, which has often been neglected in research on Ligeti;

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[2] Letter from György Ligeti to Wolfgang Steinecke on March 15, 1957, Archive International Music Institute Darmstadt.

- thirdly, some remarks on the opera *Le Grand Macabre*, this is a work that did not play a significant role in the dialogue with Adorno (because it was essentially written after the philosopher's death), but that has sometimes been characterized as the abandonment of all ideas of modernism.

Allow me to make a methodological preliminary remark that has to do with these three perspectives as well as with a productive distance to composer's statements that are associated with explicit or implicit attempts at legitimization and with corresponding narratives. And experience shows that, in the case of very many composers, they contribute to overly one-dimensional and superficial views of their work.

In the case of Ligeti's statements, there are many factors to be considered at this point. These include the influence of Karlheinz Stockhausen (and probably some other composers as well) on Ligeti and the fact that Ligeti tried to find a place as a composer after his move to Western Europe in the situation of awakening in the 1950s and 60s, which was characterized by many statements on the philosophy of history. But one should not underestimate at this point the influence of the discourse in musicology, for example the claim made at the 1986 Ligeti conference in Graz that Ligeti had "betrayed" the avant-garde.[3]

Ligeti's own statements, which contain a criticism of the avant-garde, have in the last decades more and more been adopted in parts of musicology. And his own music is now often even summarily categorized as non-avant-garde.[4] I don't think this categorization is correct. But above all, I think it is unnecessary and not helpful when it comes to understanding Ligeti's oeuvre.

This should be emphasized all the more because in recent times it has become increasingly apparent (even far beyond Ligeti) what blurred ideas and *dynamics* the term avant-garde has caused in the discourse on music. All too often, it has been accompanied by the assertion or at least implication of something clearly defined or even broadly unified. It should only be used if a sufficiently clear distinction is made between different movements and teleological models are set aside. This is much more common in art history than in musicology. In my contribution, I would therefore like to leave aside the equally dazzling and often polemically used term avant-garde and rather use the much more open concept of musical modernism. Based on the widely prevailing assessment in cultural studies that postmodernism is not anti-modernism either, but rather an edited, [5] productively altered modernism, it is possible to describe Ligeti's reference to it as substantial.

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[3] Cf. Martin Zenck, „Die ich rief, die Geister / Werd ich nun nicht los.... Zum Problem von György Ligetis Avantgarde-Konzeption", in: Otto Kolleritsch (ed.), *György Ligeti, Personalstil - Avantgardismus - Popularität,* Vienna / Graz 1987, S. 153-173.

[4] Cf. Manfred Stahnke, *György Ligeti. Eine Hybridwelt*, Hamburg 2022.

[5] Cf. Jörn Peter Hiekel, „Postmoderne", in: Lexikon Neue Musik, ed. by Jörn Peter Hiekel and Christian Utz, Stuttgart/Kassel 2016, pp. 514-22.

His longstanding exchange with Adorno (which was in the 1960s more intensive than between the Frankfurt philosopher and any other renowned composer) offers some important clues to this. Taking him into account can help us to better understand a number of crucial perspectives in Ligeti's work as well as the strategies of other composers. In my view, however, this has been nearly neglected in previous Ligeti research.[6]

Adorno has long been perceived not only as the most important theorist of modern music, but to some extent even as the one who was responsible for virtually *all* facets of its development. The gross one-sidedness evident here points to a major problem in the discourse on music since 1950 (this applies above all to aspects such as that of so-called "material progress" and that of "negativity").

In Ligeti's case, a sideways glance at Adorno's musical thinking can be helpful, especially when it comes to forms of composition and, in particular, expressivity. This refers to four important points:

Firstly, the critical distance is constitutive of Ligeti's own position towards a strict handling of serial music (which explicitly referred to Adorno); secondly, his novel strategies of form design can be related to Adorno's idea of a "musique informelle"; thirdly, both personalities' own deep skepticism towards decidedly political music; fourthly, an emphatic understanding of the work, which was essential for Ligeti as for almost all other formative European composers after 1950 and was a *conditio sine qua non* for Adorno in particular. Such aspects can serve to differentiate the generalized talk about the avant-garde (in the singular).

Adorno's thinking became a point of reference for Ligeti as early as 1949, when he read his *philosophy of new music* for the first time - and with enthusiasm. This prelude was then continued in several encounters and in a comprehensive reading of his writings. Above all, his reading experiences were by no means only characterized by approval. As for almost all renowned composers of the second half of the 20th century,[7] Ligeti was highly skeptical of many of the relevant one-sidedness of this writing, namely the Stravinsky view developed in it.[8]

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[6] One of the few exceptions is the following illuminating article: Peter Edwards, "Convergences and Discords in the Correspondence between Ligeti and Adorno", in: *Music & Letters* 96/2 (2015), pp. 229-258. And the relationship between Ligeti and Adorno is also discussed - albeit less based on works, but almost exclusively in relation to the convergences and divergences of theoretical writings - in: Ralph Paland, " '... a very great convergence'? Theodor W. Adorno's and György Ligeti's Darmstadt discourse on form", in: Christoph von Blumröder (ed.), *Kompositorische Stationen des 20. Jahrhunderts: Debussy, Webern, Messiaen, Boulez, Cage, Ligeti, Höller, Bayle* (Signale aus Köln, vol. 7), Münster 2004, pp. 87-115.

[7] Helmut Lachenmann once described it as "Adorno's Stravinsky debacle"; cf. Lachenmann, "Affekt und Aspekt" (1982), in: ders., *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung*, pp. 63-72, here p. 65.

[8] On this aspect, which is common in research, see Wolfgang Burde, *György Ligeti. Eine Monographie,* Zürich 1993, p. 140; later (1991), Ligeti even described Adorno's *philosophy of new music* as "party writing" (cf. ibid., p. 266) - which is probably also in line with the view of many other influential composer personalities.

However, in Ligeti's case, such reservations did not prevent him from maintaining a close exchange with Adorno from the mid-1960s until his death. In 2003, Ligeti received the Theodor W. Adorno Prize of the City of Frankfurt - the only composer besides Boulez to do so to date. Like Boulez and Stockhausen, he was one of the comparatively few influential composers after the Second World War about whom Adorno spoke enthusiastically. Above all, however, Ligeti was obviously influenced by many of the philosopher's central ideas, or at least was able to find himself reflected in them. And the latter goes far beyond the historical-philosophical habitus associated with Adorno's name, which influenced some of his sweeping statements.

As early as 1964, Ligeti told Ove Nordwall that he had reconciled with the philosopher and that his earlier, sometimes critical comments about him were now "no longer valid"[9]. For the reasons already mentioned, comments such as these should not be overestimated. And in no way should this statement be understood as a complete convergence of the two positions. Nevertheless, it should be taken seriously.

For the correspondence between Ligeti and Adorno - in particular a letter from Ligeti dated November 4, 1964, published for the first time in the year 2023 in the German journal *Sinn und Form*[10] - demonstrates a clear desire to expand the dialogue, which was primarily characterized by agreement. [11] In this letter, Ligeti explicitly reacts to the text entitled *Schwierigkeiten* (Difficulties), which the philosopher presented in lectures in the same year. It deals with a panorama of different approaches to contemporary composing - and, in line with the title, particularly with their signs of crisis. According to Adorno, this is based on the necessity of music to "first create its own language"[12] and on criticism of tendencies towards what he calls the "liquidation of the individual". In a remarkable way, his criticism is based on an assessment by Ligeti:

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[9] Ligeti to Ove Nordwall on August 2, 1964, Ligeti Collection of the Paul Sacher Foundation Basel; on this and on the Adorno-Ligeti relationship as a whole, see Edwards, "Convergences and Discords" (note 19).

[10] György Ligeti, *letter of November 4, 1964 to Theodor W. Adorno*, published (with a preliminary note by Jörn Peter Hiekel), in: Sinn & Form 4/2023, pp. 567-573.

[11] Adorno has referred to Ligeti with some persistence since this time; see, for example, the rather large number of mentions in his lecture series *Funktion der Farbe in der Musik* held in Darmstadt in 1966, in: ders., *Kranichsteiner Vorlesungen* (*Nachgelassene Schriften*, vol. 17), Frankfurt/M. 2014, pp. 447-540.

[12] Theodor W. Adorno, *Schwierigkeiten*, Part 1: "Beim Komponieren" (1964), in: Adorno, *Impromptus* (*Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 17), ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt/M. 1982, pp. 253-273, here p. 263.

> "The Hungarian composer György Ligeti, as astute as he was truly original and eminent, rightly pointed out that in effect the extremes of absolute determination and absolute chance coincide."[13]

The philosopher rarely made more enthusiastic statements about composers whose work shaped music after 1950. What is quoted here represents a central component of Adorno's own critical reflections on "techniques of relief"[14]. This aspect, which had already formed a main accent in other texts by Adorno and essentially refers to strategies of strict reduction, but at the same time the avoidance of subjectivity, also helps to understand some of Ligeti's strategies, which have to do with the opposite in a specific way: with exuberant expressivity and subjectivity.[15]

The expressive side that emerges so clearly in the opera *Le Grand Macabre* is an example of this. It seems to me that it has often been treated far too superficially, sometimes simply as a conservative attitude. Yet it's really extraordinarily novel orientation should be taken seriously. And, like Bernd Alois Zimmermann's opera *Die Soldaten*, for example, it picks up on a tendency that, on closer inspection, was already developing in the course of the 1950s (although less so in Ligeti himself). To put it pointedly, the operatic works of Ligeti and Zimmermann each in their own way increase that fire of expressivity which to a certain extent was already blazing in some works from the second half of this decade.

Stockhausen's orchestral work *Gruppen* is a famous example of this. In this respect, Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* appears as a particularly over-pointed commentary on the relevant strategies of a rigid avoidance of the first person, but at the same time as embedded in a very broad tendency (earlier serial works by Henri Pousseur, for example, could also be mentioned here). Ligeti's opera should therefore not only be perceived with its obvious differences, but also with its correspondences to other approaches, and instead of the idea of a demarcation, the model of a continuation and intensification of already existing potentials should be proposed. With regard to Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, it is worth recalling that Lachenmann enthusiastically described *Gruppen* as "a kind of *Alpensymphonie*"[16], and Ligeti's friend

[13] Ibid., p. 270f.

[14] Cf. ibid. p. 271. (in German: Entlastungstechniken).

[15] Ligeti speaks critically of the "indifference of such structures" and "indifference", cf. Ligeti "Wandlungen der musikalischen Form" in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Monika Lichtenfeld, Mainz 2007, Vol. 1, pp. 85–104: p. 91.

[16] "Aren't Stockhausen's groups - a key work of orchestral music today - with their multiple tinkling of alpine bells right into the final sound also a kind of 'Alpine symphony', with calls from various peaks in the middle, with obbligato brass and tam-tam thunderstorms, solemn

György Kurtàg said: "If Dostoyevsky said that all Russian literature comes from Gogol's *The overcoat*, then all the music of the 20th century after 1950 comes from Stockhausen's *Gruppen.*"[17]

The example of the work *Gruppen* and its resonances is brought into play here because the dialog between Adorno and Ligeti is filled with the problem of the I-saying, for which it offers a kind of proposed solution, in a special way. And it focuses both on the particularly strict serial works of the 1950s and on John Cage's approach. Both are also expressed in Adorno's text *Difficulties*. However, the distance from the strictest forms of serial composition formulated therein testifies to the knowledge that there were already substantial modifications: Adorno characterizes these as necessary counter-forces to "musical objectivity". A work like *Gruppen* is probably also meant here. In his contribution "Wandlungen der musikalischen Form", Ligeti characterized this work in particular as a way out of the one-sidedness of early serial music and probably influenced Adorno not only at this point. [18]

A further convergence of Ligeti's and Adorno's contributions concerns the criticism of John Cage. Adorno's text *Difficulties* calls Cage's composing "alien to the ego" and also speaks overall of "ego weakness"[19]. And this is precisely what Ligeti's letter of November 4, 1964 explicitly emphasizes: Ligeti highlights the agreement that exists precisely at this point and characterizes what he sees as the "'totally insecure' music of the Cage circle" as a "pretence of security"[20] .

Ligeti's praise for Adorno's text *Difficulties* is almost effusive. It is directed at the critical diagnoses as well as the sharpness of the delimitations. And some things in Ligeti's letter, such as the reference to the termination of the "agreement", even seem like a kind of anticipatory echo of Ligeti's later demarcations from certain other compositional positions. All these facets can be seen in the following text excerpt:

> "What you [...] said about the contemporary problems of composing, and what was new [...], was so extraordinarily important for me because you expressed thoughts in all clarity which had not been said before and which I myself dimly suspected without being able to formulate them exactly. The diagnosis you made about 'composing today' is spot on. In Frankfurt I mentioned to you

farewells and manifold echoes from all directions?"? - Helmut Lachenmann, "Richard Strauss - 'Eine Alpensymphonie'" [2002], in: ders., *Kunst als vom Geist beherrschte Magie. Writings*, edited by Ulrich Mosch, Wiesbaden 2021, p. 312f., here p. 313.

[17] Cf. the note in: Jürg Stenzl, *György Kurtág's Mikrokosmos*, in: Booklet to the CD "György Kurtág. Music for string instruments" ECM 1598 (Munich 1998), no page.

[18] Cf. Ligeti, „Wandlungen der musikalischen Form".

[19] Adorno, *Schwierigkeiten*, p. 270 and p. 273.

[20] György Ligeti, *letter of November 4,* p. 572. Adorno had also used the word "security" critically in his text.

> that in *Vers une musique informelle* some things disturbed me, because there you adopted a somewhat conciliatory attitude towards works which, measured against the level of the entire context of your study, deserved more criticism than approval. In the Vienna lecture, however, there was no trace of that agreement!" [21]

The agreement recognizable here also refers to Adorno's reflection on "techniques of relief" formulated in reference to Ligeti. [22] And just like the text *Vers une musique informelle* [23] mentioned by Ligeti here, [24] the text *Difficulties* can also be linked to Ligeti's composing. This applies to several aspects, each of which also includes moments of critical dissociation:

A first aspect is Adorno's distance from superficial social criticism. In the text *Difficulties*, this applies to the reference to the "degeneration of so-called cultural production into ideology", to the highlighting of "ideological moments" in composing, to the talk of "'deep' pessimism, which they sell at good prices", but also, for example, to the phrase "repetition of what has already been said a hundred times" linked to such world references. [25] The latter is given a political accent by the remark that the "East" is "thoroughly entangled with ideology"[26] a political accentuation.

Ligeti could refer to the latter as a reference to his former homeland of Hungary, but also to the Soviet sphere of power as a whole. According to Ligeti's own interpretation, this perspective also plays a role in his opera. Its piercingly critical side seems to heed the reservations highlighted by Adorno. At least at times, Ligeti's skepticism towards direct political music was combined with the conviction that musical compositions could contribute to raising awareness of social contexts. His reading of Adorno may also have influenced him in this respect. In 1964, he characterized Adorno's sociology of music as "a GLORIOUS book" and as "the sharpest and most valid analysis of the sociological situation"[27].

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[21] Ibid, p. 571.

[22] Adorno himself attributes the term primarily to Arnold Gehlen, cf. Adorno, *Schwierigkeiten*, p. 265. He even speaks here of "a history of musical attempts at exoneration".

[23] Cf. Gianmario Borio, *Musikalische Avantgarde um 1960. Entwurf einer Theorie der informellen Musik*, Laaber 1993, and cf. also Ligeti's remark to Burde about a meeting with Adorno and Boulez before completing the contribution: "I was too modest, I could not say, Professor, I have already composed something like this, in *Atmosphères,* but perhaps I should have done it." - quoted from Burde, *György Ligeti*, p.140.

[24] Cf. Adorno, „Vers une musique informelle" (1962), in: *Quasi una fantasia. Musikalische Schriften II* (Gesammelte Schriften 16), Frankfurt am Main 1978, pp. 493–540.

[25] Cf. Adorno, *Schwierigkeiten*, pp. 253, 254 and 255.

[26] Ibid, p. 254.

[27] Ligeti in a letter to Ove Nordvall from June 1964, quoted in Burde, *György Ligeti*, p. 266.

A second aspect is the "attempts to continue speaking in the traditional language of music", which Adorno characterized as "impotence"[28].

On the occasion of the example of Jean Sibelius mentioned in the text *Difficulties*, Ligeti explicitly signals his agreement with this criticism, which has long been familiar from Adorno's earlier writings.[29] It is a matter of differentiating himself from the traditionalism of some parts of newer music (as we know, this is a particularly difficult terrain and Adorno's Sibelius polemic has also often been criticized for good reasons).

A third aspect is the skepticism towards the possibility of a permanently experimental attitude, in this case specifically Adorno's consideration, based on Bartók, Strauss and Wagner, that "unique extravagances" are "neither to be repeated nor imitated by others"[30]. This aspect can be related to the perhaps at first glance disturbing otherness of a work such as *Le Grand Macabre* compared to the gesture of almost all of Ligeti's earlier works. But much of this can also be found in later works.

The already mentioned reflections on Cage's work mark the fourth aspect. For both Adorno and Ligeti, this criticism always refers to the influence of Cage's ideas on other approaches (including some of Stockhausen's activities).[31] And it is precisely this that affects the reflections on the emphatic concept of the work: Adorno is polemically directed against those new tendencies that aim at a decided broadening of the concept of music. With regard to them, he speaks of the "preponderance of the trappings, of the extra-musical in the most recent music" and of music that "through noise, through bruitistic effects, then through optistic, especially mimic means" wants to "make up for something of the immanent development that is blocked for the time being".[32]

All these aspects of Adorno's critical diagnosis obviously had a considerable effect on Ligeti. They encouraged him to continue on his path to constantly produce something new and individual in order to provide answers to the question of his own language, which Adorno so clearly emphasized. Adorno's authority was evidently even greater for Ligeti than for most of the other leading composers of his generation.

The fourth of the aspects just mentioned, supported by Cage criticism, is particularly striking. However, this aspect is by no means specific to define Ligeti's own position or even to justify a rejection of 'the' avant-garde as a whole. For in terms of the emphatic understanding of the work, Ligeti and

[28] Adorno, *Schwierigkeiten*, p. 256.
[29] Cf. Ligeti, letter of November 4, 1964 to Adorno, p. 571.
[30] Adorno, *Schwierigkeiten*, p. 258.
[31] Cf. ibid., p. 271, the assessment that Cage's piano concerto was an "extraordinary shock", but that a continuation of this path was impossible.
[32] Ibid.

Adorno are not outsiders in the field of newer and newest music in Europe, but part of a broad artistic mainstream. At this point, almost all influential European composers oft the last six or seven decades are a part of this tendency. And they all have a certain share in the fact that this tendency towards the classical concept of art still dominates European- and US- festivals or concert series with contemporary music.

Particularly when it comes to questions of what is comprehensible the differences between the various personal styles of the influential personalities in this context are enormous. And yet Ligeti is on a par with composers such as Boulez, Stockhausen, Lachenmann and even Nono (and countless others) in that they all combine the idea of the necessity of consolidating the character of the work with a pronounced sense for the exploration of new creative possibilities.[33] The rituals of demarcation that music journalism has cultivated at this point are inappropriate and not helpful for the discourse.

With regard to *Le Grand Macabre*, one can ask whether it contradicts the idea of unchallenged seriousness, so essential for Adorno (as for all the other composers mentioned), when grotesque elements emerge that temporarily suspend another seriousness, namely that on a material level. In relation to Ligeti's own work *Aventures*, these are far more than just the repetitions of "extravagances" criticized by Adorno. But at the same time, they develop a form of text presentation that betrays an effort to overcome the danger of one-dimensionality invoked in Adorno's text *Difficulties*. And in the sense of the encouragement emanating from this text, they strengthen the vital counter-forces to all structural moments aimed at objectification. In Ligeti's opera, however, this extends to the "relief techniques" emphasized by Adorno, such as the twelve-tone technique. And the mechanical, deliberately sober repetitions that play an even greater role in some of Ligeti's later works, probably inspired by minimal music, also lead to a different form of "relief".

With a view to Ligeti's opera and at the same time to convergences with Adorno's writings, another reading experience is worth mentioning. "His

[33] However, this aspect points to a matter of course for many composers and led to many gestures of decisive dissociation, especially from some of Cage's relevant ideas. Similar to Bernd Alois Zimmermann, but in contrast to many other influential personalities of modern and contemporary music, these even left their mark on Ligeti. He created several pieces that "flirt with the subversive spirit of the Fluxus movement. Cf. Dirk Wieschollek, entry "Ligeti, György", in: *Komponisten der Gegenwart* (2007); http://www.nachschlage.NET/document/17000000342 (last accessed on 25.1.2024); the author characterizes them "as exaggerated reflections of musical-aesthetic positions of the time" and offers individual striking descriptions of these pieces. See also the chapter "Fluxus and the Absurd (1961-62)", in: Benjamin R. Levy, *Metamorphosis in Music. The Compositions of György Ligeti in the 1950s and 1960s*, New York 2017. However, these are all secondary works within his overall oeuvre.

most beautiful book for me is the book on Mahler's music,"[34] Ligeti said in 2003. It is not difficult to make connections between this writing by the philosopher, which was the most inspiring for many composers of the time, and many of Ligeti's strategies. Mention should be made here of the fact, emphasized by Hermann Danuser, that the Mahler book, together with the essay *Vers une musique informelle*, was probably one of the texts by Adorno that inspired post-serial music to a significant degree.[35] [36] (And this also applies to many other composers besides Ligeti, not least Helmut Lachenmann).

In Ligeti's case, for example, the productive inconsistency and instability of Mahler's music emphasized by Adorno comes to mind. A work such as *Le Grand Macabre* can be related to this aspect. I am thinking here of those passages in which the outwardly powerful is undermined by ridiculous or humorous moments.

With a view to the Mahler experience conveyed by Adorno, another aspect of Ligeti's music should also be pointed out in a more general and comprehensive sense, which also allows side glances at numerous other composers: they all operate in varying doses and beyond the decorative with certain traces of memory or associations as well as with vague moments that can only be guessed at. In each case, the aim is to make the withdrawal of clear references and unambiguous attributions of meaning, i.e. moments of negativity, compositionally fruitful without drifting into the realm of the arbitrary or unspecific. The often-discussed requiem traces of Ligeti's orchestral composition *Atmosphères* are relevant here. [37] But also, his opera and other works offer some imaginary moments – each in a completely different way. And the same applies to those moments that are to be understood entirely in the sense of an important facet of Adorno's Mahler interpretations: as a "veiling of one-dimensional affects" or as an understanding of music that "does not allow itself to be forced into a decision"[38].

In the case of Ligeti it was not the Mahler book, which he received enthusiastically, nor the essay *Vers une musique informelle*, which was also important to him, but only the *Difficulties* text that encouraged him to describe his own compositional thinking in direct dialogue with the philosopher and

[34] G. Ligeti, "Erinnerung an Adorno" [2003], in: Ligeti, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pp. 505-507, here p. 507.

[35] Cf. Hermann Danuser, „Musikalische Physiognomik bei Adorno", in: *Adorno im Widerstreit. Zur Präsenz seines Denkens,* ed. by Wolfram Ette, Günter Figal, Richart Klein and Günter Peters, Freiburg/München 2004, p. 236.

[36] Lachenmann, for example, spoke of Adorno's "Mahler lessons"; cf. Lachenmann, "Affekt und Aspekt", p. 65.

[37] Cf. Wolfgang Marx, *The Concept of Death in György Ligeti's Oeuvre,* in: *György Ligeti*, pp. 71-84.

[38] Th. W. Adorno, *Mahler. Eine musikalische Physiognomik* (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 13), ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt/M.1971, p. 173.

even in relation to his reflections.[39] There is no question that the enthusiastic emphasis on its importance contained in this article contributed to Ligeti's courage.Allow me to conclude with a few further brief examples contained in Ligeti's important letter to Adorno of November 1964.

These include a significant description of the organ piece *Volumina*. It shows the extent to which Ligeti's interest in Adorno was directed towards his reflection on world references as well as those of the newer arts. The point of reference is a reference in the *Difficulties* text to the silencing that Adorno sees realized in Samuel Beckett. Ligeti's reaction to this accentuates remarkably clearly the aspect of negativity that is often associated with Adorno's name. The composer explicitly characterizes his work *Volumina* as a (I quote) "negation of music"[40], only to link this negation to Beckett and state: "I often thought of him while composing the piece".

Another of Ligeti's accentuations in refers back to his work *Aventures* and documents how productive, in the composer's view, the idea of negation could be, which in musical discourse was often seen all too much as a mode of destruction rather than an opening: "[...] in *Aventures* I avoided any comprehensible text, which is what made the non-text comprehensible in the first place." [41] With this interpretation, he consciously or unconsciously ties in with an explanatory pattern of Adorno's that has been common since the *philosophy of new music.*

Similarly revealing is Ligeti's attempt to include his own *Requiem* in the reflection together with *Aventures*, and thus also a work explicitly related to the theme of death. For him, as the composer explains, it was about "abolishing the ideological content of the text through musique irrégulière; the death in question is a death of music."

Can thoughts like these also be applied to later works? There is much to suggest that they are. In *Le Grand Macabre*, this applies not only to the broadening of strategies for dealing with absurd and grotesque moments, but also to the tendency to over-point and to many extremely exuberant elements that point more strongly to tradition. But if one reckons, as Ligeti did in his trenchant statement directed at Beckett and his own work *Volumina*, with the "death" of music as a possible creative path, then it does not seem absurd to understand the absurdity of the layering of other musical segments in opera in a comparable way.

In his letter to Adorno, Ligeti, one could say, accomplishes *in nuce* what his compositions, including his opera, also accomplish: he takes up the philosopher's ideas in a significant way, namely those of a "musique informelle", in order to think them through in a way that is as productive as it is idiosyncratic.

[39] Ligeti, letter of November 4, 1964 to Adorno), p. 573
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

But this has always been part of how composers react to philosophy: Usually this takes place, in their own statements, but even more so on an artistic level, more freely and speculatively than with a view to complete congruence - which would be an illusion anyway.

In the present case, this includes an interpretation proposed in Ligeti's letter, which accentuates the world-related and, as can be shown, can even be particularly strongly related to the opera. It connects the *Requiem* with other facets of the philosopher's critical reflections on the present.

> "I chose for a new composition a text that is par excellence ideological, namely that of the Catholic requiem mass. Of course, the choice of text has nothing to do with religion (this is as alien to me as any other ideology). For certain aspects of the fear of death and mourning, the aforementioned text was welcome to me (not least the neutrality of the extinct and yet comprehensible Latin language, which can be mutilated more than a living language, was handy - but precisely in the opposite sense than in the case of *Oedipus Rex*). This composition inevitably becomes Ein Jüdisches Requiem - if you allow me this bon mot, more precisely: mal mot." [42]

The insistence with which Ligeti explicitly describes the religious here as "ideology" may come as a surprise It has to do with his basic attitude as a composer, which is also expressed in his 1963 self-characterization as a "composer without ideology [...] (Stravinsky is the ideal for me)"[43]. All of this points to the ideology-critical interpretation patterns of several of his statements. And the same applies to his recommendation that the Requiem should be understood as a politically tinged work directed against both the Nazi regime and the Soviet system.[44]

However, it is precisely this possible interpretation that underlines the references of the *Requiem* to *Le Grand Macabre*, which the composer himself also emphasized. However, the critical element in this music theater work, which Ligeti even explicitly described as a "political piece"[45], emerges much more clearly than in the R*equiem*. It brings the contradictions of the underlying play by Ghelderode to a head. However, this contributes significantly to the distance between Ligeti's composition and conventional opera.

This has a lot to do with the gesture of "upheaval", which the composer himself probably perceived as early as 1957 as a productive development of previously undreamt-of energies. This makes it all the more tempting to speculate

[42] Ibid, p. 572f.
[43] Ligeti in a letter to O. Nordwall of November 1963, quoted from Burde, *György Ligeti*, p. 266.
[44] Cf. Marx, *The Concept of Death in György Ligeti's Oeuvre*, esp. pp. 72f.
[45] Thus, in a statement made to Eckhard Roelcke in 2003, cf. György Ligeti / Eckhard Roelcke, »Träumen Sie in Farbe?«. György Ligeti im Gespräch mit Eckhard Roelcke, Wien 2003, p. 172.

whether Adorno, who was an extraordinarily important dialog partner for him at times, would have seen it the same way if he had lived to see *Le Grand Macabre*. This question can hardly be answered. Presumably, however, the doubts and critical comments that Ligeti later expressed about his own opera[46] echo precisely those demands on art that he agreed on with the philosopher and which he consolidated, as it were, through his dialog with him.

The opera, like the great music theater pieces by composers such as Zimmermann, Nono, Stockhausen or Lachenmann, which were also created in the second half of the 20th century, is one of those relevant works of art that show the courage to move away not only from the often very general maxims and criteria of philosophical provenance, but also from audience expectations and many conventions. This courage is not to be confused with simple insouciance or catchiness. Rather, it is borne by the will to call for a perception of art that moves far beyond the familiar.

And it converges with Ligeti's persistent reservations about those ways of categorizing his own artistic activity with which he - like all four of the other composers just mentioned - was very often confronted. Behind all of this is probably the conviction that works of art can be more diverse, more differentiated and, as it were, more intelligent than simple patterns of interpretation, possibly based on historical philosophy or ideology. This applies not least to those patterns of interpretation that are filled with what the music journalist Holger Noltze described in a book as "lightness lies"[47]. This tendency also includes the sometimes-expressed idea of wanting to understand a work such as *Le Grand Macabre*, which is exuberant and highly vital on many levels, as a composition that is 'against' modernism. And I would argue that the same can also be said of many of Ligeti's subsequent works. The fact that the composer accepted the prestigious and highly regarded Adorno Prize in Frankfurt three years before his death is by no means surprising in this respect either.

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[46] Cf. for example Ligeti's comments on the first version, in: Denys Bouliane, György Ligeti, "György Ligeti in conversation with Denys Bouliane", in: *Neuland Jahrbuch*, vol. 55, ed. by Herbert Henck (1984/85), p. 82.

[47] Cf. Holger Noltze, *Die Leichtigkeitslüge. Über Musik, Medien und Komplexität*, Hamburg 2010.

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