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Abstract from

“Harmonic, formal and rhythmical structures in Ligeti’s Etudes for piano” - Second Book (1988-1993), Third Book (1995-2001)

This is an abstract of the text of a multimedial lecture that uses Poweppoint slides and audio examples

[...]

We can find some elements of symmetry and continuity between the six Etudes of the First Book and the eight Etudes of the Second Book.

– the harmonic materials and often the forms are conceived according to similar principles;

– both in the First and in the Second there is one purely meditative Etude: Arc-en-ciel in the First, En suspens in the Second;

– the last Etude of the First Book ends on the lowest keys of the piano, the last Etude of the Second Book ends on the highest keys.

The four Etudes of the Third Book show many differences, in the harmony, in the form, and especially in the spirit of the compositional approach, but not so much in the rhythmical organization, – which, in effect, even in the second and in the third book is founded on the increasing ramifications of asymmetrical accents, just as we have seen for the first. We can say that the rhythmical organization is the only true common element to the three books.

For the second book, the principle Maximum Variation in Maximum Uniformity is the foundation of all compositional proceedings. We begin our analytical route by fixing some general outlines about how this principle applies to the harmony, to the form, to the instrumental writing and to the rhythm. [...]

Starting from the harmonic considerations, we can usually find two complementary harmonic fields, whose sum includes all notes. This is a way of composing in polymodal or polyscalar style that is related to some typical aspects of the hungarian tradition gravitating around Bartok.

There is normally one field for the right hand and one field for the left hand; they can be alternated, but not significantly modified.

The use of fixed harmonic fields is a factor of horizontal harmonic uniformity. However, once these fields have been defined, any interaction between them is accepted, so that there is no strong control on the individual intervals, and all intervals are possible, in equal way. This is a factor of vertical variety.

Ligeti uses frequently as complementary superimposed harmonic fields the two six-tones scales, or a scale of white keys in opposition to a scale of black keys. This kind of superimposition can generate many dissonances at the distance of an half-tone, as well as aggregations which sound like major or minor. In effect we find an interesting mix of completely or partially dissonant and completely or partially consonant combinations. We could say that this proceeding is like a sort of chemical reaction between two simple elements, the modal scales or harmonic fields, that gives rise to a composite element with multiple features, not controlled one by one, but always accepted, whatever they are – Ligeti’s interest in the science was extended to the chemistry too: that is clearly shown by his treatment of the musical material, in which all is gradually transformed, and nothing is suddenly created nor destroyed.

Naturally the high speed of the harmonic flow does not allow to perceive them individually, but the global effect gives to the listener a sensation of such a kaleidoscopic

harmonic richness, which is probably one of the reasons of the fascination exerted by Ligeti even on the public that is not so experienced in contemporary music.

In the second book the forms are generally of two types:

– A form A-B-A, or anyway a form with a main section “A” that is repeated two or more times, always with variations, that make it more and more complex, and secondary sections that connect these repetitions, like in a sort of rondò.

– An open form with continuous transitions from a section to another [...] The piece starts with simple articulations; then they become very complex. A central section comes where all is suddenly simplified, and a final section with increased complexity fades out in the disintegration of the material.

[...]

The principle maximum variation in maximum uniformity is particularly important as regards the instrumental writing. The space of the keyboard is intended as a continuous space, where the movements of the hands happen almost always with maximum gradualness, without jumping, fast extensions or sudden changes of position, which, on the contrary, are realized through a continuous translatory motion with few passages of the thumb, and with many microvariations of similar but never identical fingering's schemes.

This space can also be considered as a cyclic or circular space: a figuration that reaches its low extremity is sometimes continued at the opposite side, starting from its high extremity. It seems a jump, but it is actually a form of continuity.

A similar consideration can be extended to the dynamic space: a great crescendo to fortissimo has often as final result a pianissimo, as though this level were the following step of its progression.

The rhythmical organization is one of the most important factors of originality of these works.

It can be described in the following way: on the background of an isochronous beating the composer sets some accents, at first regular and symmetrical, then they are asymmetrically shifted, still with the same meter for both hands, and finally they are set completely out of phase, both as regards the main ictuses of the metrical structure of the piece (if there is one), and the relations between the hands.

[...]

Ligeti's taste for the sonorous illusionism reaches one of its peaks in *Der Zauberlehrling*, that is the sorcerer's apprentice. The illusionistic joke is evident in a funny writing that lets appear and disappear rapid figurations in various parts of the keyboard, and in the sudden modifications of the harmonic fields (mostly consisting of scales of white and black keys, these last recalling Chopin's *Etude op. 10 n. 5*). The form also has something magic, because it reconciles the open form with the varied rondò form – in the last reprise there is a clear simplification of the polyphonic plot.

[...]

This humour becomes often sarcasm. In Ligeti's spirit there is a sort of mephistophelean sarcasm related to the diabolic virtuosity, like in Liszt or in Paganini. This component appears clearly in *L'Escalier du diable*, one of the most famous *Etudes* of the *Second Book*.

We have to say that this approach is fairly conventional: While listening to the long chromatic ascending scales that come to a peak and then fall again in the abyss, it is difficult not to think to Dante's circles of Hell. Moreover the importance of the tritone, the ancient diabolic interval, is absolutely evident. We listen to the first cycle of chromatic motions.

The most fascinating suggestion is provided by the central section, where an obsessively repeated signal seems to represent a distorted sound of bells, like a sort of infernal bell.

This signal is recalled just at the end of the piece, for a spectacular final.

[...]

The most interesting aspect of Ligeti's sarcastic spirit concerns a deeper and more intellectual type of sarcasm.

In *Vertige*, the best example of the open form we have described, the main element is the continuous flow of spiral vortexes of restless superimposed chromatically descending motions. [...]

There is no logic in the succession of numbers that determines the length of the fragments, and therefore the rhythmical beating of the work – in effect the first notes of each fragment, that is its highest pitch, is anyway perceived as slightly accented).

These vertiginous movements seem to depict the human disorientation before incomprehensible events, while the ascending melodic lines, sometimes marked with *espressivo* or *cantabile* – what could be considered very strange in such a context – appear as an imploring thrust towards the light and the understanding of a logic order. The inexorable answer to this long imploration, that in the central section is more and more fading out, generates a despairing reaction, which shows a raging and hallucinated sarcasm: this seems to be the meaning of the final consonant harmonies, which blink like hopeless sneers, before vanishing in the sonorous ash of a dark non-sense universe.

We see now which are the main factors of distinction of the Third Book.

Firstly the harmonic material comes usually from only one field or scale, to which some extraneous notes are added during the development of the piece.

The Etude number 15, *White on White*, is composed on a completely diatonic field, only on the white keys, and some black keys appear in the final section.

The same thing happens in the numbers 16 and 17, which have as field respectively a sort of defective scale of B flat minor and a scale of C minor. This is the sign of a new compositional approach, which involves even other elements:

– a new attention to the counterpoint: both the beginning of the Etude number 15, and the Etudes number 17 and 18 are entirely in form of canon [...]

– a new structuration of the form: both number 15 and number 16 have a very slow introduction, that seems to be a memory of far past ages (a childlike lullaby in the first, an hopeless melancholic remembrance in the second)

– in number 17 this evocative trend is represented by many allusions to the last movement of Chopin's op 35, with its well-known funeral meaning. This piece really exerted a great suggestion on Ligeti, who quoted it literally in the 3 Pieces for two pianos.

In general the style of the third Book appears less aggressive, less extreme and more inward than in the first and in the second Book.

There is a strong enigmatic character, with clearly interrogative phrases used as final elements: the volatile conclusions of number 15 and 16, the sudden chords in pianissimo in number 17, the mysterious chords in pianissimo in number 18, with the surprising A minor as conclusive chord of the entire cycle of the three books.

[...]