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Phenomenological time as expounded by Husserl in the music of Ligeti: the unique responsibility of the creator (as Ligeti would have expressed) or the subject (the term used by Husserl) for his creation

From the beginning of my research on György Ligeti's music I searched for a way to interpret his unique creative method.¹ I wondered whether I could identify those elements of Ligeti's style which enabled him to create the impression that his compositions stream on endlessly. This impression is especially felt in his complex compositions such as the Requiem.² The basic issue that will be discussed in this article is: How did Ligeti succeed in constructing compositions that are simultaneously both static and dynamic? Ligeti described this phenomenon as "static music that appears to stand still, but within it, there are gradual changes".³ I would also like to demonstrate how Ligeti's "static-dynamic" concept is actually analogous to Edmund Husserl's description of "standing-streaming" time. Delineating the common features of the two concepts enables me to clarify this concept that these two prominent geniuses wanted to elucidate.

In order to understand Ligeti's original object of static-dynamic music, I first needed to explore the profound changes that had occurred in the language of music—changes that were the product of the creative imagination of some of Ligeti's predecessors. Ligeti particularly admired the work of three revolutionary composers—Wagner, Debussy and Schoenberg. Each of them had been able to create a smooth continuity from the traditional composition style of his era to his own personal style and yet suggest a new exotic and exceptional quality (especially in orchestration). Wagner discovered the realm of tone color;⁴ Debussy employed the actual sound-image of a musical work as an essential element in music;⁵ Schoenberg coined the definitions "musical space" and "tone color".⁶ These concepts, which are basic for Ligeti's music, became accepted grounds for modern music.

When Ligeti arrived in Germany in 1956, he was shocked by the very many innovations and inventions that had pervaded the world of music in the West. Although the possibilities available to a composer had been considerably widened, greater choice was also causing

confusion and some composers found themselves in an unending search for their proper style. One of the problems that many had to deal with was how to express one's creative mind within the act of musical composition.

At that time two prevalent and conflicting trends which were trying to offer alternatives to traditional methods of musical composition, were attempting also to cope with this issue of the composer's (subject's) position in musical composition: the first was the post-Schoenbergian system of "total serialism", a method that expanded rational organization and control, attempting to have rationality embrace every aspect of musical composition. The serialist composers, exhilarated by the magic of serialism, had the illusion that they were producing new music, when in reality they were composing technical exercises with a rationalized technique. The second trend was "chance music", originated by the American composer John Cage. Cage was radically opposed to serialism. His aim was to remove himself as the self-expressive subject from the composition, to allow the sounds to "be themselves", appearing as the world presents them. Both trends eliminated or suspended the composer's own subjective expression.

Ligeti explored these new techniques thoroughly and published articles criticizing them (1992 and 1965). He was not inclined towards either of these new approaches, preferring to remain loyal to himself and to the music that he envisaged. He established his own musical 'laboratory', thoroughly investigated each musical parameter to its foundations, and invented his own version of each parameter. Although he linked his versions to previous versions, they were in reality totally different from the previous ones. His new versions resulted from his intuition based on conscious ideas from his past. This process enabled him to remain an individual creator, freed from two ever present dangers: copying (which he abhorred) or being dependent upon the past (which he rejected). He wanted to renew every piece of knowledge, to provide it in his music with a new form, one never heard before. He searched painstakingly for his personal path as an independent creator.⁷

Ligeti explained that his artistic position lay in "the between".⁸ Severe control, the order of the post-Weberian serialism as it has arisen in Darmstadt, fascinated him; but he also sought free expression (known in chance music as "chaos") that would allow him to escape the

boundaries set by tradition. In this new territory of the in-between (which I think belongs to Husserl's field of intuitional givenness), Ligeti encountered a unity between the extremes: the whole and its parts, or a synthesis between order and chaos, that allowed him to express himself by going to extremes, a strategy which Metzger described as "turbulent momentum". Metzger comments: "[...] the massive clusters in Ligeti's 1960s works were a new sound and open to expressive interpretation and role playing, as seen in the use of the sounds in his Requiem".⁹

Although he continued searching for new means of composition, Ligeti was already steeped in compositional experiences from his time in Budapest where he had first imagined a static-dynamic kind of music that rests within itself.¹⁰ This idea, deeply implanted, remained in him as a strong and stable basis for the new compositional effects which he developed in Germany during the years 1960 -1970. Ligeti's desire to compose static-dynamic music demanded something different, a move "beyond serialism", beyond chance music, and beyond the avant-garde music movement to which Ligeti belonged during the 1960s.

The unique technique Ligeti developed—his micropolyphony—allowed him to express his individual ideas in an amazing way such that the micropolyphony was able to appear differently in each piece he composed.¹¹ His individual notes fall below the threshold of perceptibility, allowing him to produce tone colors which are significantly different from the tone colors of the normal instrument combinations. And what was very important to him is that: "the fabric is so dense that the individual voices are no longer perceptible as such and only the entire fabric can be grasped as a single overarching form."¹²

This micropolyphony enabled him to express the multiplicity of imperceptible experiences from which rises the one over-arching experience of the Now (the 'living present' in Husserl's term). In micropolyphony Ligeti looks from a distance on every human experience, yet is in contact with every detail and remains in contact with the experiences themselves, because of their influence on the Now presently existing.¹³

Ligeti always stressed the dimension of present time: in the twentieth century, as he wrote, "... the present has played a major role."¹⁴ His contact with the present includes each moment of his life. For it was, he believed, the present, containing all the experiences of an individual's past (maybe of the future also), which gave the exact philosophical meaning to an individual's personal reality. He believed that, because he was a composer, this present with its philosophical meaning had to dictate the content of his works. Ligeti insisted on giving to his personal experiences (dreams, sorrows, fears) the same important role in his composition as he gave to standard structural elements, such as rhythm or repetition. By so doing he created a unity of time based on his emotional experiences and intuitive insights. This subjective unity of time reminds us of Ligeti's words about Debussy and Mahler. Debussy's piece *Jeux*, said Ligeti, has no 'officially acceptable' form and yet has a unity, while Mahler in the last movement of his Sixth Symphony broke up, even dissolved, the schematic formal structure of the piece with the result that its cohesion comes not from structure but from an all-pervasive mood.¹⁵ Ligeti's words are evidence of the free spirit of composing at the end of nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth centuries, where the formal rules of tradition were left behind, and the individual rules of the creator were substituted for them.

Ligeti's work from the 1950s until the 1960s focused on constructing his unique model of "time as space". The idea of time 'standing still' within space haunted him, and he was searching persistently for the means to represent it in his compositions. From the end of the 50s until the close of the 60s, he wrote the orchestral works that show the clearest form of static music. The pieces are: *Apparitions* (1958-59), *Atmospheres* (1961), the organ work *Volumina* (1961-62), parts of the Requiem (1963-65), the Cello Concerto (1966) particularly the first movement, and *Lontano*, (1967). Ligeti said about these compositions that "The music appears to stand still, but that is merely an illusion: within this standing still, this static quality, there are gradual changes."¹⁶

I wish in this article to stress that Ligeti's static-dynamic music was rooted in universal human experience and therefore derived from his own personal experiences. For this I needed to go beyond the borders of music, beyond analytic musicological research, which I had found incapable of explaining the phenomenon. In fact, Ligeti's music cannot be fitted

into any classifications of musicological research. We cannot ignore the fact that Ligeti was a philosophical thinker and participated actively in all the philosophical debates during the summer courses in Cologne and in Darmstadt together with the well-known philosophers of music, Dahlhaus and Adorno.¹⁷

Being a bit at a loss to understand deeply Ligeti's music and to elucidate his originality of thought, including his total belief in his own new way, and his ability to find his own inner time, I decided to turn to phenomenology and in particular to Husserl's well-known book, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* (written by Husserl between 1893-1917).¹⁸ It should be noted that Husserl (1859-1938) and Ligeti (1923-2006) were not close contemporaries. When Husserl died, Ligeti was a 15 year old boy still in Hungary. The lack of any recorded connection between them somewhat surprises me for I found clear similarities in their views concerning space and time and even a similar use of terminology.¹⁹

Husserl's first and central description of his investigations of time is given in *The Phenomenology*. Two main issues basic to these investigations were: first, that he should not need to deal with objective time in order to analyze the concept of internal time, and, second, the great influence of his explanation as to how we perceive an enduring object. The influence of these two considerations created for Husserl "appearing time", consisting of those images that appear to a person as intuitive internal images constituted in time.

Husserl begins his inquiry into time by analyzing the perception of a present flow of time. His basic example is the perceiving of a melody. He said that we do not perceive the melody merely as a sequence of tones or, as he puts it, as "point by point". We do not perceive now a particular tone "c" to be followed by a particular tone "d", rather we experience a bundle of tones.²⁰ A melody is, in fact, a temporally extended, gradually and continuously unfolding act. In other words music is not merely a single tone or individual tones, rather it is a whole melody, or a whole sound.

My question was: How did Husserl pave the way from the series of nows, or the sequence of "tone to tone", to the experience of the whole melody or of one sound, one experience, which he later named living presence. For Husserl the now, or the immediate experience, has a perceptible extension or, one can say, a temporal field. After we perceive one tone, which no longer exists but has become the previous tone, this tone nevertheless belongs to the present consciousness. Husserl said that this previous tone is still part of the now. All co-existent

experiences partake of and are part of the same now. Husserl originally referred to the previous tone as a "fresh memory", or primary memory. This primary memory and the immediate experience are interrelated, each influencing the other. So the primary memory is part of the now phase and we have the now including a tone no longer existent. The "no longer" tone is the continuity or the extension of the now. Although Husserl called this faded away phase of time "primary memory" he later preferred the word "retention". As a technical term, retention has difficulties that I cannot go into in this short paper. It denotes the past which has a long continuity. The further back into the past one goes the more dimly primary memories are retained—they disappear into the darkness. (It may remind us the first part of the Ligeti's Requiem, the Introitus, which begins the Requiem in the darkness, far in the unknown past). Additionally, Husserl's time contains the "not yet" or the protention which is the near future. Husserl's early works on time (1893-1917), give relatively little attention to what we now call protention. For this reason, in our review of the "not yet" here I can't write more. Husserl therefore distinguished three phases of time which bond together to create one continuous, continuously extending stream (flow, flux) of consciousness as one act of present perception. Every experience of time is compounded from all three elements, and each retention has "a comet's tail (retention of retention) which is joined to actual perception of the now". Husserl said that retention is "a consciousness of the dying away, the sinking down of what we impressionally experience." In other words, it can be said that the past is part of the present perception of our consciousness, as is the future.

Husserl constantly altered his terminology in order to form broader notions of the phases and moments of time while continually stressing the present. In *The Bernau Manuscripts*, Husserl arrives at the notion of the "living present", and in *The C-Manuscripts*, the last manuscript, Husserl describes this notion as a paradox of "the fixed and the variable" or as "standing" and "streaming". What is this primal phenomenon of the "standing-streaming" time described by Husserl? It sounds like a contradiction, similar to Ligeti's "static-dynamic".

In the book *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* Husserl was alert to the problem of this kind of phenomena. He wrote: "Time is motionless and yet is flow. In the flow of time, in the continuous sinking away into the past, there is constituted a non-flowing, absolutely fixed, identical Objective time. This is the problem". (§ 30, 89). Later in

§36 he wrote that: "the flow ...is absolute subjectivity and had the absolute properties of something to be designated *metaphorically* as 'flow'" of something that originates in a point of actuality, in a primal source-point, the now and so on. For all this, we lack names." Only in *The C-Manuscripts*, the last manuscript, does Husserl explain: "the living present has its breadth, and in this breadth is a place of the source-point for the now of this breadth; this, for its part...remains unbreakable ...it stays always one...[yet] slips into the past."²¹ Streaming" indicates the primal flow of consciousness, where one find one's stream of experiences. The "standing" of the living present refers to that "now" which remains the same throughout the changing flow".

To explain the source-point, or the span of the streaming, living present, Husserl explores the phenomenon of passivity, aligning himself with the two states, or directions, of the flow, the retention and the protention given in the field of the presence: "that which is taking place in the "standing-streaming" and the passivity of the flow which necessarily is fading away". He says that the fading away state is "passive, [which] means...that the stream proceeds without the activity of the ego". The ego cannot participate; it only lets the process of fading away exist by itself. In order to clarify this process of the passive consciousness of time, "by itself and in-itself," I need to explain briefly another concept in Husserl's phenomenology—the "I". Husserl realized that "something enduring must be there in the change as well, something that makes up the identity of that which changes or that which undergoes a variation". He identified this "something" as the I. Husserl found it very difficult to identify and clearly describe this concept. I have selected three prominent states of the I from the many that Husserl used to demonstrate its role. First, the I lives as something fixed and unchanging, and does not participate in the experiences. It is outside. Second, the I lives "through the stream of experiences" and is, in fact, "dependent" on this stream. Third, the I is something central, observing events, taking a panoramic view of the phases of time, so that the I is able to remain open to its experiences, and remain in the Now, in the temporalization of the present. Husserl said that the I lives through the stream of experiences as a welling up; it appears as a primal welling middle point and endures continuously even when we do not act. This third state is the passive nature of the I, "by itself and in itself", which I think is the most phenomenological way to explain direct link between temporalizing consciousness and the I. In fact, temporalizing is the very accomplishment of the I itself.

Clarification of the states of the I allows us to attain a more profound understanding of the relationship between the composer and his own individual composition (the creation). The two main trends in the middle of the twentieth century that I chose to note, the serialists, and chance composers, opposed traditional methods of composition and tried to remove from their music any elements outside their personal experience. Ligeti, however, did not oppose tradition. He adhered to historical developments, yet continued to search for new means "to bring to the forefront hitherto unexploited musical formulations such as timbre in their own right".²² He alluded to music "from a distance and from long ago", sounds that reach us from a great spatial span as well as from an historical distance (in line with the concept of retention in Husserl). Mentioning Debussy, Mahler, Schoenberg's third orchestral piece from his Opus 16, and Wagner's *Feuerzauber*, as compositions close to his static music, Ligeti assigns a role to the past as a weight that has helped to build the music of today; as part of history; and history is an imaginary space, part of "an immense net which drags itself through the ages".

Another example that Ligeti uses to illustrate his view of space-time is Wagner's maxim "Here time becomes space". In Act 1 of *Parsifal*, Parsifal and Gurnemanz march to the accompaniment of the motive of the Montsalvat bell. Parsifal exclaims "I hardly move and already I feel far away". Gurnemanz answers "You see, my son, time here becomes space." These statements reflect a will to stretch time into one long moment, to create an extreme expansion, a fusion between time and what seems to be motionless space. Ligeti's notion of "static music" is very close to this conceptualization.

Husserl's description of the paradox of simultaneous experience, of "standing-streaming" and the variable present, illuminates Ligeti's ideas. For example, Husserl's assertion that the living present actually includes retention resembles Ligeti's allusion to the influence of the past. However, Husserl's protentional intentionality (future) which he describes "as the constancy of the streaming [of experience]: streaming away and streaming towards ...is an idea never mentioned by Ligeti although it can be felt in his music. For both Ligeti and Husserl: The I, or the now, is the constant One Now.

Finally, some brief observations concerning Ligeti's Requiem, his composition that I believe best illustrates his concept of the many faces of the static music. The Requiem is the key work within Ligeti's works, composed in the middle of the sixties, when the composer was already quite famous. Ligeti composed the Requiem only when he felt that he was ready for it, when it "sounded the bell in me", and he felt it when he received in 1961 a commission from Stockholm to write a work for choir and orchestra. I would like to show briefly how Ligeti imprinted the intricate static-dynamic image in this composition.

In my interpretation of the Requiem, I will stress three points:

1. All kinds of pianissimo (ppppp) are expressed in the low sounds of the *Requiem*, as if the composition had an intimate relationship with silence. It seems that Ligeti wanted to leave the pianissimo there as a constant element (perhaps under the influence of Debussy's *Jeux*, in which 557 bars out of 709 are marked with a preference for pianissimo). This pianissimo is the invariant, the present Now underlying the four parts (Introitus, Kyrie, Die Irae, Lacrimosa) of the composition. The pianissimo is the One which unites the whole. Or it is the "standing" of the living present which refers to that "now" which remains the same throughout the changing flow".

2. The dynamic-static environment in the Kyrie and the dynamic movement in the Dies Irae seem to express Ligeti's experiences of fears and horror in the past—"as a wound that cannot be healed". There are those who claim that Ligeti composed the Requiem without any relation to his own emotional experiences or even with a lack of emotional involvement in his composition. I do not accept this claim. For without strong feeling both as an observant and active "I", Ligeti could not have composed a piece that offers its listeners such a width and breadth of experience. In my view, Ligeti had to be in the third "panoramic" I-state while composing his Requiem—serving simultaneously both as the objective observer and yet being deeply involved.

3. All the three phases of time are included in the Requiem. The "I" of Ligeti is positioned in the center where he observes the Requiem. Introitus represents the past: the retentions—the lower tones in the beginning describe adumbrations that come from afar. The present, the now, is the Kyrie and the Dies Irae, containing aspects of the past that Ligeti says still remain

with him. He said: "The hatred against the Hitler regime and the Hungarian regime [...] I cannot forget it and it [has] never diminished—emotions of hate and disgust which in time become stronger." The *Lacrymosa* looks at the past, notices how it fades far away, and so is enabled to look with hope to the future.

4. In the *Requiem* we experience the struggle or the tension between the static and the dynamic which Husserl tries to describe in all his writings including his last three pages. Although Ligeti believe the static-dynamic mode was a constant in all experiences, just as Husserl believed the same for the standing-streaming mode, we are witness in the writing of both to the difficulties of finding the right balance between the two states.

To conclude, it appears to me that, in general, the clarification of musical composition through philosophical concepts, and, in particular, the interpretation of Ligeti's compositions through Husserl's phenomenology, offers a new path to achieving a deeper understanding of Ligeti's sophisticated message, and to grasping his concept of static-dynamic time.

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¹Ligeti was a very exclusive person. He saw himself as an outsider and rejected most of the methods of composition around him while searching for his unique way.

²Ligeti's Requiem deals with the fear and horror of death. From 1948/9 Ligeti had felt an urge to compose a requiem – not too surprising in a composer who hated the Soviet system and was also a survivor of the Holocaust. After some abandoned attempts he finally began writing the Requiem in 1963 and finished in 1965. His Requiem was not religious and not dedicated to a single person or event. He was attempting to compose a funeral mass for the whole of humanity. Steinitz in his book *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* calls the section on the Requiem: "The Requiem: A cry for humanity".

³ *Ligeti in Conversation*, 84.

⁴ Adorno 1981/1952, 71-85.

⁵ Stefan Jarocinski, *Debussy, Impressionism and Symbolism* (London: Eulenburg, 1976).

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Schoenberg 1975, 223, for musical space; 1978, 421-422, for tone color.

⁷ As he said: The avant-garde, to which I am said to belong, has become academic. As for looking back, there's no point in chewing over an outmoded style. I prefer to follow a third way: being myself, without paying heed either to categorizations or to fashionable gadgetry. (*Ligeti in conversation*, 123).

⁸ Two examples from the book *Ligeti in conversation*: "the tension between the rational, constructed element on the one hand, the visionary on the other, ... plays such an important role in composing for me". The second: "Then you don't get the sound of a harmonic, but rather something noisy: I would say something between sound and noise." (*Ligeti in conversation*, 87).

⁹ Metzger, 2009, 160.

¹⁰ György Ligeti, "Report on my own work".

¹¹ Ligeti explained his micro-polyphony: Micro-polyphony: Such was the origin of 'inaudible' polyphony, or *micro-polyphony*, in which each single part, though imperceptible by itself, contributes to the character of the polyphonic network as a whole. In other words, the individual parts and the musical configurations arising from these parts remain subliminal, but each part and each configuration is, in relation to the overall structure, transparent in the sense that all changes in detail lead to changes, however slight, in the total effect. (*Ligeti in conversation*, 137).

¹² Ligeti in Lobanova, 2002, 48.

¹³ It seems to me one of the rules of static-dynamic composition. You must be in the Now (the static) to write dynamic music.

¹⁴ Ligeti in Lobanova 2002, 374.

¹⁵ Ligeti said: What is so remarkable about *Jeux* is that it has no 'officially acceptable' form.... And yet it has a unity, as its thematic material goes back to the same basic idea. Its form is like vegetation, like a tropical tree whose wildly growing aerial roots grow downwards back into the soil (*Ligeti in conversation*, 42).

¹⁶ Ibidem..

¹⁷ *György Ligeti : Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds*: Manfred Stahnke in his article about Ligeti's style of teaching writes: "He found a third way, an otherness, a merging. Ligeti's 'teaching' (which was, when it dealt with 'music', rather a philosophy of music) was first and foremost the unmasking of petrified structures", 225.

¹⁸ Husserl 1991/1928, 11

¹⁹Comparison between the writings of Ligeti and Husserl: Husserl: In the Bernau manuscripts he speaks of the merging that occurs in the comet tail or retention attached to each now. (Mench, 81); Ligeti: "If I were to mention Debussy and Mahler, two composers whom I especially love, I would say that their music brings in its wake, as a comet in its train, a whole wide area of associations from every level of human experience." (*Conversations*, 101). Both of them saw the past as a continuity of the present. Husserl: Time is motionless and yet is flow. In the flow of time, in the continuous sinking away into the past, there is constituted a non-flowing, absolutely fixed, identical, objective time. This is the problem. (Husserl, 30, 89), and Ligeti: The formal characteristic of this music is that it seems static. The music appears to stand still, but that is merely an illusion: within this static quality, there are gradual changes. (Ligeti *Conversations*, 84). Both of them treat the problem of static dynamic as one phenomenon. Husserl: "Existing time is not the time of the world of experience but the immanent time of the flow of consciousness. ... Consciousness of space belongs in the sphere of phenomenological givens, i.e., the consciousness of space is the lived experience in which "intuition of space" as perception and fantasy takes place." (23) Ligeti: Music has often been, and indeed often still is, defined as 'art in time'. But In Ligeti's work, the concept of time is closely bound to the concept of space. In what way? Ligeti says: "Time and space [are] always being linked with each other in our imagination and thoughts ... When we imagine or listen to music, where the acoustic process is primarily temporal, imaginary spatial connections come about on several levels." Ligeti embraces additional parameters which reinforce this idea, weakening the hegemony of time and increasing the status of space.

²⁰ Husserl 1991/1928, 11

²¹ Rodemeyer 2006, 44

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