

“Zero point” The Beginnings of György Ligeti’s Western Career

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Abstract: György Ligeti and his wife fled Hungary in December 1956, travelling through the night of the 11 and 12, and finally reaching Vienna the following day. The existing materials dating from Ligeti’s early emigration demonstrate particularly dynamic correspondence with three Hungarian expatriates: composers Sándor Veress and Mátyás Seiber, as well as the critic John S. Weissmann. 33 letters and postcards and a further 11 replies, held in the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, comprise a body of Ligeti’s correspondence with these colleagues dating between the final month of 1956 and the end of 1958. Although evidently incomplete, this unique collection offers novel perspectives surrounding the beginnings of Ligeti’s Western career. Reflecting expectations and future aspirations, these documents trace the excitements as well as challenges of “wiping the slate clean.” Encapsulating Ligeti’s evolving compositional interests and recounting the processes through which he forged new professional relationships, this correspondence reveals insights relating to the composer’s newly-emerging public image. Emigration brought many trials, yet upheaval simultaneously presented an opportunity to radically break with the past. Ligeti could redefine his professional identity as a composer. Although Ligeti felt uneasy in Cologne, it quickly became apparent that engaging in an official capacity with the Electronic Music Studio of the West German Radio (WDR) provided an extraordinary opportunity to establish himself in avant-garde musical circles. Initially shocked by these musical experiments, it was clear to Ligeti that his own creative path lay separate from the avant-garde scene with which he became acquainted in Cologne. Ligeti’s correspondence dating from these encounters indicates that he left Hungary with preconceived musical concepts and aspirations. His experiences with contemporary music rather provided the technical tools through which he could construct and articulate his own concepts, in a manner appearing current in the context of the Cologne–Darmstadt avant-garde.

Keywords: György Ligeti, Sándor Veress, Mátyás Seiber, John S. Weissmann, emigration

György Ligeti and his wife Vera left Budapest by train on 10 December 1956, in the wake of the Soviet quelling of the Hungarian uprising. After crossing the Austrian border on foot under dangerous circumstances through the night of 11 and 12 December, the Ligetis arrived in Vienna the following day.¹ It appears that Ligeti immediately began investigating their prospects, to which end he sought advice from acquaintances residing in Western Europe. During his initial years as an émigré, three expatriate Hungarian musicians became significant correspondents for Ligeti: Sándor Veress (1907–1992), Ligeti's former professor at the Academy of Music in Budapest, who had settled in Switzerland after leaving Hungary in early 1949; fellow composer Mátyás Seiber (1905–1960), residing in the United Kingdom from 1935; and John S. Weissmann (in Hungarian, János Weissmann, 1910–1980), an active critic and writer based in London since 1937.

33 letters and postcards and a further 11 replies, held in the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, comprise a body of Ligeti's correspondence with these colleagues dating between the final month of 1956 and the end of 1958 (see *Tables 1 to 3*).² This collection is evidently incomplete; references to unknown letters are found throughout the surviving documents. Further, it is improbable that these channels of communication halted in tandem with the periods which are not represented by correspondence, at times constituting several months. During this phase, it appears that Ligeti did not preserve either received communications or copies of outgoing – mostly hand-written – letters.³ Considering his absence of a permanent address, dividing his time between Vienna and Cologne, this state of incompleteness is unsurprising. With the due caveats attached, these 44 documents nevertheless offer new perspectives when considering the beginnings of Ligeti's Western career. Simultaneously reflecting excitement and expectation alongside the challenges embodied in “wiping the slate clean,” this correspondence facilitates gleaning new insights into the composer's evolving compositional interests, the processes through which Ligeti forged new professional relationships, as well as the composer's newly-emerging public image. During this initial emigration period – although constituting a leap of faith: a shift from the respectability and financial stability as a college tutor and Budapest artist to a radical break with pre-conceived notions surrounding his reputation – such circumstances also provided Ligeti an opportunity to reinvent himself. At the age of 33, the composer could create a new persona: an opportunity presented itself to begin his œuvre afresh.

1. Richard STEINITZ, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 70–71.

2. This correspondence is preserved in the György Ligeti Collection (PSS SGL), and in the Sándor Veress Collection (PSS SSV). Original letters from Ligeti to Seiber, from which photocopies are found in PSS SGL, are housed in the British Library, London. I dedicate thanks to the composer's inheritors, Dr. Vera Ligeti, Claudio Veress, and Julia Seiber Boyd. Thanks are also due to the Mátyás Seiber Trust and the Paul Sacher Foundation, for permission to cite excerpts from these letters in the present article. I was unable to contact János Weissmann's heir.

3. The correspondence between Veress and Ligeti is preserved in Veress's estate; the latter retained copies of his typewritten letters. Seiber's surviving letters to Ligeti begin only in the fall of 1958.

TABLE 1 Ligeti–Veress correspondence, December 1956 to December 1958

Date	Correspondent	Location of Dispatch	Additional Notes
[after 13 Dec 1956]	Ligeti	[Vienna]	missing
19 Dec 1956	Veress	Bern	
Christmas 1956	Ligeti	Vienna	
10 Jan 1957	Veress	Bern	
[after 10 Jan 1957]	Ligeti	[Vienna]	missing
20 Feb 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
1 March 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
7 March 1957	Veress		letter of recommendation
1 April 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
1 Aug 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
8 Aug 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
29 Oct 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
30 Dec 1957	Ligeti	Paris	New Year's greeting
10 Sept 1958	Ligeti	Darmstadt	
3 Oct 1958	Veress	Bern	
15 Oct 1958	Ligeti	Vienna	
22 Dec 1958	Ligeti	Vienna	New Year's greeting

Between September 1945 and the fall of 1948, Sándor Veress taught Ligeti at the Academy of Music in Budapest. Upon receiving his former student's initial letter from Vienna in mid-December of 1956, Veress had for more than six years taught composition and music theory at the conservatory of Bern. Ligeti greatly respected Veress, both personally and in his capacity as a composer.⁴ Attesting to this, it appears that his former professor was Ligeti's initial point of contact upon arriving in Vienna.⁵ Veress's reply dating 19 December survives, though Ligeti's initial letter is lost. Ligeti subsequently dispatched a seven-page response already by Christmas, to which Veress relayed further advice on 10 January. Ligeti's reply from Vienna has not survived. Ensuing letters from Cologne date from 20 February and 1 March, the latter of which requested a letter of recommendation with hopes of securing funding from an American foundation. Veress duly prepared an endorsement, dated 7 March, although the grant eventually came to naught. A hiatus of four months follows Ligeti's note of thanks on 1 April; his subsequent surviving letters date between August and October. None of Veress's replies nor

4. See Ligeti's 1948 review of Veress's *Fingerlaks*, as well as his two articles concerning Hungarian musical life published during 1949 in the German journal *Melos*: "Veress Sándor: *Billetgető muzsika* (Cserépfalvi kiad.)," *Zene-pedagógia* 2/3 (March 1948), 43; "Neue Musik in Ungarn," *Melos* 16/1 (January 1949), 5–8; "Von Bartók bis Veress: Neues aus Budapest," *Melos* 16/2 (February 1949), 60–61.

5. On the connection between Veress and Ligeti during 1956–1958, see Melinda BERLÁSZ, "'Tanítványom, barátom – Ligeti György:' Veress Sándor és Ligeti György megújuló kapcsolata Ligeti emigrációjának első éveiben (1956–1958)" ["My pupil and friend György Ligeti:" The renewal of Sándor Veress's and György Ligeti's relationship in the first years of Ligeti's emigration (1956–1958)], in *Pontosan, szépen: Almási István 80. születésnapjára*, ed. by Erzsébet SALAT-ZAKARIÁS (Cluj Napoca: Mega, 2014), 66–78.

any further correspondence over the ensuing ten-month period survive, save for a card of New Year's greetings in late 1957. 1958 is similarly sparsely represented. Three letters survive from the fall: two letters further to his customary respects for the new year on Ligeti's part, and a single reply from Veress. It is nevertheless unlikely that communication had ceased.

Despite the missing documents it is clear that the correspondence continued throughout these two years, although the intensity of their exchange appears to have gradually abated. Their letters are characterized by Ligeti's efforts to secure subsistence; they provide regular accounts of his activities and seek assistance in the form of letters of recommendation for grants and professional positions, benefitting from Veress's European connections. Veress readily offered his former student guidance and undertook sincere efforts to obtain opportunities on Ligeti's behalf. Naturally, they also discussed the state of Hungarian musical life and politics. The tone of their communication encapsulates a pupil's reverence on Ligeti's part, and fatherly benevolence on Veress's; their letters consistently open with "Kedves Tanár Úr" (Dear Professor) and "Kedves Barátom" (My Dear Friend), and they refer to one another formally (in the linguistic sense). Ligeti addresses his senior colleague in a manner suggesting an attempt to gain favor and trust.⁶ In December of 1956, Veress could only have acquired a scant impression of his former pupil's professional and political activities during the previous eight years. When Veress emigrated, leaving Hungary on 6 February of 1949, Ligeti was a professed leftist and folksong arranger, who would shortly commence upon composing *Cantata to a Youth Festival*: a piece set to a propaganda text. Upon leaving Hungary Veress was a member of the Communist Party,⁷ and a candidate for the highest artistic decoration of Hungary's communist government: the Kosuth Prize. Nevertheless Veress's departure established that he no longer desired to function in any official capacity in the communist regime.⁸ It is clear from

6. This is suggested by Ligeti's echo of Veress's withering criticism of the state of Hungarian musical and intellectual life, and especially his use of the metaphor "oxigénhiány" [lack of oxygen], by Ligeti's frequent use of German words, as well as his statement that he would have liked to go to Switzerland because Veress was there. Furthermore, Ligeti appeals to Veress's goodwill when he writes he was "the main target" [fő céltábla] of Ferenc Szabó (a powerful communist composer, whom Veress despised), and probably also when he qualifies the entire body of new Hungarian music and its "principals" using the Bible's words: "[they] have been weighed on the scales and found wanting." See Ligeti to Veress, dated Christmas 1956, PSS SSV. For the Hungarian original of the quotations in the present article, see my article, Márton KERÉKFI, "'Nullapont': 1956 szerepe Ligeti György életében és pályáján," in *1956 és a zenei élet* [1956 and musical life], ed. by György GYARMATI and Lóránt PÉTERI (Budapest: Liszt Ferenc Zeneművészeti Egyetem / Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára / Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2019), 259–272.

7. Ligeti attained one of the two necessary recommendations for applying for Communist Party membership in the autumn of 1945 from Veress. Eventually, however, he decided not to enter the Party. See "'Ja, ich war ein utopischer Sozialist:' György Ligeti im Gespräch mit Reinhard Oehlschlägel," *MusikTexte* 28–29 (1989), 93.

8. On Veress's role in postwar Hungarian cultural policy and his initial years of emigration, see Claudio VERESS, "Komponieren im Zeichen skeptischer Parteilichkeit: Der Film 'Talpalatnyi föld' im Kontext der letzten ungarischen Jahre von Sándor Veress," in *Sándor Veress: Komponist–Lehrer–Forscher*, ed. by Doris LANZ and Anselm GERHARD (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2008), 36–76 (= *Schweizer Beiträge zur Musik-*

their correspondence, as well as his later recollections, that Ligeti interpreted his mentor's departure in this light.⁹ In this context, Ligeti's remarks portraying contemporary Hungarian musical and political climates are especially scathing, venturing beyond even Veress's derisive diagnosis of the conditions in Hungary:

As to Professor's opinion regarding Hungary's political and musical state of affairs, I share your view entirely. Unfortunately, I didn't always see [the case] so clearly; in [19]48 I still believed in communism as the most humane of ideas. When the first blows came (Zhdanov, Mindszenty's case), I still perceived these as mere "faults." But then followed the [19]49 Rajk's case, and subsequently: Hungary's total captivity. By then, "faults" had become so numerous that there appeared to be nothing aside from faults. ... This turn of events is reminiscent of a particular short story by Poe, in which mental patients confine the nurses and doctors in cells and impersonate the doctors:¹⁰ everything became perverted, [and] the darkest inhumanity was employed in the name of the most beautiful idea. [The years] [19]48–[19]49 were a piece of cake by comparison with that which followed. Professor was surely kept informed, but one could only actually feel [how] life [was] at home – the little horrors of daily life, the intricate mechanisms of the regime, the manner in which one is not simply a victim, but at once a part and practitioner of the tyranny, the whole *Zauberlehrling*-like, unstoppable inhuman automatization – from the inside, from within the inner recesses of the engine.¹¹

Though the initial letter is undated, it is likely that Ligeti established communication with Mátyás Seiber in December 1956, having met at the Bartók Festival taking place in Budapest between 26 September and 22 October. Unfortunately, Seiber's replies prior to the fall of 1958 are lost. Nevertheless, it is clear from the surviving correspondence that Seiber readily fulfilled a role similar to Veress: offering Ligeti counsel throughout their regular contact. Ligeti's uncle who resided in England offered to accommodate György and Vera, however, their prospective host was seriously ill, and therefore this would only have been plausible if they could secure their financial independence. Ligeti sought guidance from

forschung, vol. 11); as well as Rachel BECKLES WILLSON, "Veress and the Steam Locomotive in 1948," in *ibid.*, 20–35. See also ead., "Letters to America," in *Centre and Periphery, Roots and Exile: Interpreting the Music of István Anhalt, György Kurtág, and Sándor Veress*, ed. by Friedemann SALLIS, Robin ELLIOTT and Kenneth DELONG (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011), 129–173.

9. In his recollections Ligeti often contrasted Veress with his other master, Ferenc Farkas. He said, for instance, that in contrast to the "opportunistic" Farkas, "Veress was a hundred-percent straight person, unbelievably moral. A brave person. This is why he left Hungary," "Träumen Sie in Farbe?," *György Ligeti im Gespräch mit Eckhard Roelcke* (Wien: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2003), 65. See also György LIGETI, "Between Science, Music and Politics," in *Kyoto Prizes & Inamori Grants* (Kyoto: Inamori Foundation, 2002), 230–265.

10. This is a reference to *The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Feather* by Edgar Allan Poe.

11. Ligeti to Veress, dated Christmas 1956.

TABLE 2 Ligeti–Seiber correspondence, December 1956 to December 1958

Date	Correspondent	Location of Dispatch	Additional Notes
[Dec 1956?]	Ligeti	[Vienna]	
[before 12 Jan 1957]	Seiber		missing
12 Jan 1957	Ligeti	Vienna	
16 Feb 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
3 March 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
31 March 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
15 May 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
18 May 1957	Seiber		letter of recommendation
2 Aug 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
22 Dec 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
[end of 1957?]	Ligeti		New Year's greeting

the 51-year-old Seiber, then a professor at Morely College in London and a successful composer with works published by Schott, as well as with several film scores under his belt. Ligeti aspired to teach composition and theory, or secure a similarly appropriate role which would allow for pursuing composition. Though Seiber's efforts came to naught, on Ligeti's behalf his senior compatriot petitioned to the British Council, penning a letter of recommendation for a grant from the Anglo-Austrian society, and would probably even have accepted Ligeti as a pupil.¹²

Whereas Ligeti's correspondence with Veress seems to have become increasingly sporadic after 1958, he maintained regular exchanges with Seiber until the latter's premature death in 1960.¹³ It is possible that irreconcilable stylistic ideals between Veress and his former student contributed to their waning communication.¹⁴

12. "I would be very glad if Professor considered me worthy of his tuition for a while." Ligeti to Seiber, 12 January 1957, photocopy in PSS SGL.

13. Between the fall of 1958 and 1960 photocopies of seven letters penned by Ligeti and six by Seiber are found in PSS SGL.

14. It seems that Veress could not identify himself even with the style of Ligeti's First String Quartet of 1953–1954. In early 1958 the two composers met in Vienna, where Veress performed a concert featuring his *Klee Fantasies*, and attended a rehearsal of Ligeti's quartet (its first performance took place on 8 May). Veress wrote a letter on 17 June 1958 to Endre Gaál, who published an edited version of his statement on Ligeti in the émigré Hungarian journal *Irodalmi Újság* [Literary Journal] on 1 September. Veress's words bespeak, besides the unconditional recognition of his former pupil's talent, of a subtle restraint towards Ligeti's stylistic orientation, which he relates to post-Schoenbergian and post-dodecaphonic trends: "He was very much interested in Schoenberg and dodecaphonic music already when studying with me, and he even made attempts in that direction. But at home he was certainly still bound to the healthy traditions, thanks to which neither Bartók, nor I, nor the following generation (all with ca. 30 years difference) lost a natural and healthy musical foothold." On Ligeti's string quartet Veress writes that it "is a very interesting, excellent work, even if combinational and constructional elements predominate in it. But it is unquestionably a work of a European horizon, in contrast to the awful provincialism that the entire Hungarian repertoire since 1948 emanates." Quoted by BERLÁSZ, "Tanítványom, barátom – Ligeti György," 73. Veress's emphasis of the word "healthy" in connection with tradition may suggest that he found that Kodályian and Bartókian traditions had become subjects of an "unhealthy" deformation from 1948 on. At the same time, his contrasting of Schoenberg and dodecaphony with "healthy traditions" suggests as if he held dodecaphony to be unnatural and thus unhealthy, and, consequently, that he thought Ligeti's quartet was not natural and healthy enough.

In 1957, Ligeti established himself as a significant member amongst the composers engaged with the electronic studio of *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* (WDR) in Cologne; embarked upon electronic composition (in the form of *Glissandi*); wrote an exhaustive analysis of Pierre Boulez's proto-serial *Structures*;¹⁵ and participated in the Darmstadt summer course. Already in the following year Ligeti's electronic composition *Artikulation* premiered in Darmstadt, where, in 1960, he was also invited

TABLE 3 Ligeti–Weissmann correspondence, December 1956 to December 1958

Date	Correspondent	Location of Dispatch	Additional Notes
25 Jan 1957	Ligeti	Vienna	two letters
23 Feb 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
24 Apr 1957	Ligeti	Vienna	
15 May 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
30 May 1957	Weissmann	London	
7 July 1957	Ligeti	Cologne	
9 July 1957	Weissmann		
12 July 1957	Ligeti		
26 Jan 1958	Ligeti	Cologne	
2 Feb 1958	Weissmann		
9 Feb 1958	Ligeti	Cologne	
9 July 1958	Ligeti	Vienna	
22 July 1958	Weissmann		
10 Aug 1958	Weissmann	London	
2 Oct 1958	Ligeti		
25 Oct 1958	Ligeti	Vienna	
27 Nov 1958	Weissmann		
21 Dec 1958	Ligeti	Vienna	

in the capacity of a lecturer. Veress, on the other hand, avoided serial and electronic music and the circles and institutions of the avant-garde generally. Although Seiber was not a central figure in the continent's contemporary music scene, he was nevertheless engaged with avant-garde circles.¹⁶ On account of Seiber's Swedish connections, Ligeti received an invitation to deliver two lectures in Stockholm in the spring

15. György LIGETI, "Entscheidung und Automatik in der *Structure Ia* von Pierre Boulez," *Die Reihe* 4 (1958), 38–63.

16. Seiber was a regular guest of the Darmstadt summer courses, where his works were programmed in 1951, 1953, and 1955. In 1954, his *Elegy for Viola and Small Orchestra* was premiered at the Donaueschingen Music Festival. See *Im Zenit der Moderne: Die Internationalen Ferienkurse für Neue Musik Darmstadt 1946–1966*, ed. by Gianmario BORIO and Hermann DANUSER (Freiburg: Rombach, 1997), vol. 3, 513ff.; as well as the online archive of the Donaueschingen Music Festival: <www.swr.de/swr-classic/donaueschinger-musiktage/programme/donaueschinger-musiktage-archiv/-/id=2136962/did=14231624/nid=2136962/csruw2/index.html> (accessed 5 August 2018).

of 1959.¹⁷ In 1961, Ligeti secured a visiting professorship in the Swedish capital,¹⁸ and subsequently a commission which resulted in the *Requiem* (completed in 1965).

At the Budapest Bartók Festival in the fall of 1956, Ligeti also met John S. Weissmann. A writer and critic occupied largely with Hungarian music, Weissmann authored *inter alia* several entries relating to Hungarian musical traditions in the 1954 edition of the *Grove Dictionary of Music*. His review of the Bartók Festival was published in *The Music Review* in February 1957, followed by a more comprehensive four-installment article concerned with contemporary Hungarian composers in *Tempo*, a journal focused on modern music.¹⁹ Ligeti's friend and fellow composer Kálmán Halász, who also fled Hungary in the wake of the revolution, informed Ligeti of this upcoming article. Thereby, through establishing a professional relationship with Weissmann, Ligeti anticipated public exposure as opposed to direct support. Outlining his past and current circumstances, Ligeti sent two messages on 25 January of 1957, providing Weissmann with a curriculum vitae alongside a detailed list chronicling his compositions.²⁰ Weissmann appears to have replied promptly, requesting scores. Ligeti duly dispatched String Quartet No. 1, the choral pieces *Éjszaka* [Night] and *Reggel* [Morning] (seemingly the only manuscripts he had transported from Budapest), as well as a string quartet and some piano pieces by Halász.²¹ Already in the review published in February 1957, Weissmann judged Ligeti as "perhaps the most adventurous" among young Hungarian composers, although at that moment he was familiar only with the *Six Bagatelles for Wind Quintet* and some newer piano pieces. The latter compositions, according to Weissmann, "speak of the unexpected influence of Webern."²² The outbreak of the revolution thwarted their appointment scheduled for 24 October. Ligeti was thereby denied an opportunity to present further works, likely foremost amongst which would have been the String Quartet, a piece Weissmann discusses in detail – even citing a score excerpt – in his article for *Tempo*.

17. See also Ligeti to Seiber, 4 February and 24 May 1959, photocopies, PSS SGL.

18. Ligeti was invited in 1961 by Ingvar Lidholm, a former pupil of Seiber, and Karl-Birger Blomdahl, head of the department for composition. See STEINITZ, *György Ligeti*, 112.

19. J[ohn] S. W[EISSMANN], "The Budapest Bartók Festival and after," *The Music Review* 18/1 (February 1957), 52–56; and id., "Guide to Contemporary Hungarian Composers," *Tempo* 44 (Summer 1957), 24–30; 45 (Autumn 1957), 27–31; 46 (Winter 1957), 21–24 and 27; 47 (Spring 1958), 25–31.

20. PSS SGL, MF 109.0-1167–1170. We are informed from this letter that Ligeti had his curriculum vitae sent to Weissmann through Halász already in Budapest, but upon learning that it had gone astray, dispatched a new copy.

21. Ligeti to Weissmann, 23 February 1957, PSS SGL, MF 109.1-1171–1172.

22. WEISSMANN, "The Budapest Bartók Festival and after," 55. In Budapest, Ligeti must have shown manuscripts to Weissmann. Later he remembered that the Jeney Quintet premiered five of the *Six Bagatelles for Wind Quintet* at the Academy of Music in "late September 1956." In fact, as Ferenc László revealed, the concert in question took place on 13 April 1956, in the framework of the Third Week of Hungarian Music; therefore Weissmann could not attend the work. See Ferenc LÁSZLÓ, "Ligeti a hídon: A *Musica ricercata* és a *Hat bagatell*: Az exodus zenéi" [Ligeti on the bridge: *Musica ricercata* and *Six Bagatelles*: Music of the exodus], *Magyar Zene* 41/4 (December 2003), 362. One of the piano pieces attended by Weissmann was most probably the *Chromatic Fantasy* (1956), which relies on a certain kind of dodecaphony; for a facsimile page from the manuscript of this work which remains unpublished, see STEINITZ, *György Ligeti*, 68.

The Ligeti–Weissmann correspondence embodied a more informal tone, addressing Weissmann as “Kedves Weissmann Úr” [Dear Mr. Weissmann], rather than “professor.” Their exchange encompassed a decidedly genial nature by contrast with Ligeti’s approach to his other senior colleagues: they exchanged news and gossip, engaged in spirited debate, and Ligeti felt comfortable to request favors. Significantly, their correspondence demonstrates instances where Ligeti delved into his compositional processes in detail, presumably because Weissmann embodied the capacity to convey his younger colleague’s stature as a composer to a broader public.

On Veress’s recommendation, Alfred Schlee, director of Universal Edition in Vienna, commissioned Ligeti for proof-reading tasks. Ligeti also became acquainted with Hanns Jelinek, who had just a few months earlier sent his textbook on twelve-tone music to Ligeti in Budapest (in response to an earlier message from Ligeti).²³ Whilst still residing in Budapest, Ligeti initiated contact with Karlheinz Stockhausen and Herbert Eimert, who sent Ligeti the first volume of *Die Reihe* on electronic music.²⁴ In 1993, Ligeti recalled how Schlee, Ernst Hartmann (also a director at Universal Edition), and Otto Tomek (responsible for contemporary music at the publishing house) had attempted to attain a professorship of music theory for the young émigré, seeking positions across Austria and West Germany. Eventually, owing to their intervention, Eimert, the head of the department for new music, secured Ligeti a four-month scholarship at WDR.²⁵ Thus, Ligeti received a salaried position at WDR’s electronic music studio, largely as a result of chance.

As refugees, the Ligetis gained temporary resident status in Austria, and Vera even enrolled at the University of Vienna to continue her psychological studies. With respect to long-term settlement, however, they deemed neither Vienna – nor Austria generally – appropriate. As Ligeti wrote to Veress, Vienna was oversubscribed with refugees seeking employment.²⁶ They desired to travel further afoot, however, by this time many Western countries had reached the stipulated refugee quota, diminishing their options. Switzerland appears to have been their first choice. Although Vera had relatives residing in Zürich, this option was nevertheless only viable if they could secure means through which to support themselves financially. The Ligetis received refugee status and were permitted to travel to Zürich in October 1957 upon the intervention of Vera’s extended family, even

23. Hanns JELINEK, *Anleitung zur Zwölftonkomposition* (Wien: Universal Edition, 1952). The source of this information is Paul GRIFFITHS, *György Ligeti* (London: Robson Books, 2/1997 [1/1983]), 58. Griffiths’s statement is confirmed by the fact that a worn-out copy of this book with penciled markings and broken into two parts survives in Ligeti’s estate.

24. *Die Reihe* 1 (1955) (*Elektronische Musik*). The source of this information is Wolfgang BURDE, *György Ligeti: Eine Monographie* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1993), 52.

25. “Mein Kölner Jahr 1957,” in György LIGETI, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Monika LICHTENFELD (Mainz: Schott / Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung, 2007), vol. 2, 29.

26. Ligeti to Veress, dated Christmas 1956.

though the Swiss refugee quota was already filled. This did not, however, guarantee any prospects. Ligeti used this opportunity to visit Veress in Bern. He, and likely also Seiber, cautioned against England. Veress did not recommend France either, but rather advised settling in Germany as the viable option instead, on account of its numerous colleges and academies. However, according to his letters from Cologne, Ligeti felt uneasy in Germany, where he did not wish to reside for an extended period.²⁷

Ligeti also seriously considered Veress's suggestion of emigrating to the United States.²⁸ Though financially less promising, Ligeti ultimately desired to remain in Europe, primarily because of the accessibility to avant-garde musical circles:

... we would be very reluctant to depart from Europe, and we had greatly desired a cultured atmosphere for years. America would only mean another *Provinz* [for us]. Moreover, I don't know if in America there is space for the type of music I'd like to make.²⁹

Although Ligeti took steps to establish contacts in the United States upon the newly reopened refugee quota in the early spring of 1957 (through utilizing the American addresses which Seiber had provided), he wrote on the 31 March that he deemed remaining in Germany the sensible course of action. He established in a letter to Seiber that this was not only related to his scholarship (which continued until mid-June), but because "here I have very good opportunities to become acquainted with modern music and to have my future compositions performed."³⁰

Arriving in Cologne in mid-February, Ligeti initially resided with the Stockhausens. Ligeti's letters from this period reflect the shock with which he received avant-garde music, both positive and negative. Capturing some of this conflict, he wrote to Veress on 1 April:

I've fallen head over ears into the work of the electronic studio here. It is extremely interesting; I'm learning things of which I previously had no concep-

27. "There are, however, many arguments against [staying in] Germany, firstly, its atmosphere, which is not very friendly. I don't know why I feel that, because the people I know are all very kind. It may be a phantasm – though there is no Nazi mood, I nevertheless feel a sort of 'Deutschland über alles' tone in the air, a kind of arrogance. But this may be just because of [my] foreignness (I also felt the atmosphere in Vienna unfriendly), and it may be owing to my homesickness for [Buda]Pest that manifests itself in this way. But it is also possible that this [feeling of mine] has a real root. I could perhaps describe best what I feel as that the people here 'are not decent enough'." Ligeti to Veress, 1 April 1957, PSS SSV. Even on 12 July Ligeti erupts in a letter to Weissmann: "I wish I did not hate this Germany so much! I could not live here for a long time." PSS SGL, MF 109.1-1184–1188.

28. In the early 1950s even Veress made attempts to emigrate to the USA, but he did not secure a visa. See BECKLES WILLSON, "Letters to America." Kálmán Halász had to wait in Vienna for his visa until October 1958.

29. Ligeti to Veress, dated Christmas 1956.

30. Ligeti to Seiber, 31 March 1957, photocopy, PSS SGL. In addition to the countries mentioned above, Ligeti also considered immigrating to Sweden a viable option.

tion. I wouldn't dare make a judgment about this kind of making music yet. Despite all my interest [in this] I have a certain feeling of distance toward electronic music. Incidentally, music is regarded here rather one-sidedly, and almost nothing is appreciated but Webern and his followers. During my initial two weeks, I had the opportunity to familiarize myself with practically the complete works of the younger generation – Nono, Boulez, Stockhausen, etc. (they have everything on magnetic tape) – as well as many works by Webern. The latter had already left a deep impression on me previously. Of the newer generation, I feel Nono is the most talented. Stockhausen has a sensational intellectual capacity, and he is a very nice boy; though I cannot yet grasp a clear picture of his music. I am learning a striking amount of new ideas here. That all this has, and will continue to, leave a profound impression on me is certain. I am nevertheless secure in my aspirations: I will create an entirely different manner of music from what they compose here. In the past month I did not have the opportunity to listen to music because I was commissioned to analyze works by Boulez, and I even wrote a longer article on one of his works. This wasn't a musical task but rather like deciphering cryptography. I am extremely curious what Professor thinks about this trend. I think that the "serial" technique offers a great many potentialities, but only if one can overcome [its] automatisms, and master how to handle serially constructed material freely, as a sonic raw material. The real articulation of form begins where the automated construction ends. As it stands, I feel that electronic music is most useful in that it reveals, through its wonderful and previously unheard sounds, completely new sonic possibilities regarding instrumental music also.

The speed with which Ligeti was able to assimilate the technique and aesthetics of serial and electronic music, whilst simultaneously distancing himself from these developments, is striking. Arguably he separated himself from, before fully digesting, these new approaches. Ligeti's letter to Veress dating from the Christmas of 1956 exemplifies this:

I don't want to do something similar to what Boulez and Stockhausen do; that sort of mathematics is still somewhat alien to me – although I'm interested in it very much. But if they are like Mondrian then I'd prefer to be like Klee.³¹

31. That Ligeti distances himself from Boulez and Stockhausen and writes that his idol is Paul Klee (an artist whom Veress highly appreciated) can be interpreted as an attempt to gain his former tutor's goodwill (Veress composed *Hommage à Paul Klee* for two pianos and strings in 1951). The fact, however, that Ligeti equated Bartók's music with Klee's art in a lecture in the late 1950s suggests that Klee's oeuvre might indeed have been an important point of reference for him. In the same lecture he compares the "magical" qualities of both oeuvres as well as their stance towards tonality and the physical world: "Like Klee stands halfway between figurative and abstract painting, so is Bartók halfway along the route to radical denial of tonality, that is, of hierarchic forms." György LIGETI, "Über Bartóks Mikrokosmos," in id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 319.

Ligeti's letters suggest that he left Hungary already in the possession of almost fully-developed musical plans and established compositional ideas. This possibly explains why his encounter with the novelty of the Western European avant-garde did not stunt his creativity, rather, these experiences fueled his approach to technical musical construction and to articulate his concepts and approaches in a way that appeared current – and thus acceptable – in the context of the Cologne–Darmstadt avant-garde. On 12 July 1957 he wrote to Weissmann about his work in progress, *Apparitions*:

I consider [it] my first composition; I feel that I now start from zero point, and what I've written so far is worth nothing. I will state that there is no Stockhausenism in it, it is not "serial" music, it only loosely contains dodecaphonic elements, and even those are insignificant. I strive for a liberated music, putting dreamlike or visionary sound-fantasies to paper.

Ligeti's correspondence with these three fellow expatriates displays not only his ability to swiftly adapt to new environments, but to conceptualize contemporary aesthetics. He was opportunely suited to his new circumstances. In 1957 West Germany was a hub for new music, and WDR was perhaps the most important workshop of avant-garde composers in Europe. Ligeti became engaged with this musical nucleus as an established composer who was nevertheless still young enough to desire a break with his past: to embark upon a new creative path. By contrast, Veress's post-emigration career perhaps exemplifies an opposing case study, in which a lack of comparable fortuitous constellation of locale, historical context and personal circumstances becomes evident through posterity.

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