

# Polyphonies and Affinities: Ștefan Niculescu and György Ligeti

Valentina SANDU-DEDIU<sup>1,2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National University of Music Bucharest, 33 Știrbei Voda Street, Bucharest, RO-010102, Romania

<sup>2</sup> New Europe College Bucharest, 21 Plantelor Street, Bucharest, RO-023971, Romania

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Received: August 12, 2022 • Accepted: November 20, 2022

© 2022 Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest



### ABSTRACT

I propose an overview of some of the defining aspects of Ștefan Niculescu's composition, some of which link him to his much better known contemporary on the world stage, György Ligeti. The musical affinities between the two have evolved into a steadfast friendship, reflected in a newly published correspondence that is becoming significant for slices of recent music history. I do not intend a comparison or an analytical parallel between the compositions of the two: the focus will fall on Niculescu's musical springs, with some signs of his and Ligeti's compatibility. Niculescu's heterophony versus Ligeti's micropolyphony, the impulses both received from mathematics, linguistics, the natural sciences, as well as the search (since the 1980s) for a new diatonicism that would configure an alternative system to serialism, all can be examined accordingly. It is also not uninteresting that both composers are convinced that they belong neither to the avant-garde nor to postmodernism, but consistently follow modernism.

### KEYWORDS

heterophony, micropolyphony, ison, new diatony, postmodernism, modernism

---

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: dediusandu@gmail.com

## 1. REMEMBRANCE

In 2007, the European music honored the composer Ștefan Niculescu at the age of 80. Portraits were dedicated to him in Bucharest and in some other European cultural centers (for instance, the *Culturescapes* festival in Basel and the IGNM Zurich organized in November concert debates with the composer). Since the 1990s, Niculescu has gradually become known on the European music scene, thanks to the efforts of an extraordinary friend, György Ligeti.

In 2008 we lost a person who was not only our favorite teacher, sometimes Socratic and ironic, sometimes kind, always uncompromising and at the same time generous, but also a model of moral standing among colleagues and students. With composure, with equanimity, with the spiritual attitude characteristic of his music and his human profile, Ștefan Niculescu withdrew from us discreetly and with dignity. He taught us (in communist and post-communist times) what and how to read, what and how to analyze, how to be Europeans. He gave us books, cassettes, records from his impressive library, in which he invested a lot on every trip. He showed us the intelligence of a teacher with crystalline clarity and mathematical order. He pointed out to us the path of a refined composer and intellectual who made no concessions to the Romanian avant-garde, who had original ideas and pursued them consistently.

His music speaks to us of George Enescu and Olivier Messiaen, of Anton Webern and Béla Bartók, of heterophony and archaic non-European cultures, but above all of the sacred, culminating in the massive *Recviem românească, Pomenire* [*Romanian Requiem, Remembrance*] (2000–2003). The complexity of Niculescu's scores – filled with ison techniques, synchronies, heterophonies, modal structures, mathematical procedures – is almost without exception subjected to religious expression.

In what follows I propose an overview of some crucial aspects of Niculescu's composition, some of which link him to his much better known contemporary on the world stage, György Ligeti. The musical affinities between the two have evolved into a steadfast friendship, reflected in a newly published correspondence that is becoming significant for slices of recent musical history. I do not intend a comparison or an analytical parallel between the compositions of the two: the focus will fall on Niculescu's musical springs, with some signs of his and Ligeti's compatibility.

## 2. MAIN THEME – THE SACRED – WITH VARIATIONS: NEW DIATONIC, “ISON,” A “PLANETARY GRAMMAR”

In a society that was atheist by definition, such as the communist one, it was not possible to show one's preference for religious themes openly. But music, because of its abstract nature, could often escape ideological censorship. There were many cases where the composer titled an instrumental work “For Peace” or something similar (with the approval of the communist regime) in order to deal freely with the musical substance, which borrowed from avant-garde techniques and had nothing to do with the announced title. (Sometimes, in the case of malicious colleagues, the composer in question could be reported to the authorities for not adhering to the rules of socialist realism, but usually there was a general complicity in such practices.)

Another aspect can also be observed: Communist propaganda placed great emphasis on national identity, on inspiration from local folklore. In this nationalist vein, the invocation of the



other ancient Romanian tradition was tolerated (especially after 1965), never called “religious,” but sometimes referred to as “Byzantine,” and most often vaguely called “sources.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in a Romania that would have been under different historical conditions, the valorization of psaltic music might have been better represented, at least quantitatively. It persisted, however, in surprisingly different forms and emerged from obscurity after 1990, when the other extreme was reached. That is to say, countless liturgies (or similar genres) appeared, not all of them written out of the inner necessity of a composer who might even adapt the same music once folded into socialist lyrics to a religious text. Ștefan Niculescu, on the other hand, was one of the few musicians who consistently (covertly or explicitly) pursued the expression of the sacred in new music before and after 1990:

The sacred is the ultimate target of music. It tends towards the sacred even when it is profane or when it forgets its destiny to serve it. Just a title or a spiritual text used in music does not automatically qualify it as sacred, for the sacred in music is a gift, a presence beyond man’s creative powers. There is religious music so dubious in substance that it profanes even the texts on which it was composed (an example is religious musical kitsch, common today). But spiritualizing music at any cost is also a danger. It is akin to the politicization and ideologization of music, as it was until 1989.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1960s, Orthodox religious tradition and Byzantine music have been the essential sources of Niculescu’s music, alongside peasant folklore, George Enescu and European models of modernism: Béla Bartók, Igor Stravinsky, Paul Hindemith, Olivier Messiaen, Anton Webern. His diverse techniques for incorporating the sacred into modern composition range from subtle encodings to sophisticated correlations between musical architecture and that of a religious temple. The composer transposes texts of invocation into music (in *Cantata III, Răscruce* [Crossroads], 1965) or probes the relationship between the *One and the Many* (*coincidentia oppositorum*, in *Aforisme de Heraclit* [Aphorisms of Heraclitus], 1969).<sup>3</sup> His second symphony, *Opus Dacicum* (1980), bears similarities to the layout of the ancient Dacian fortress of Sarmisegetusa. The relationship between music and architecture, explored by composers such as Guillaume Du Fay or Iannis Xenakis, is translated here through correspondences between the large circular space, the sanctuary of the fortress (about which the composer had read specialist studies), and the full circle of the tempered musical system.<sup>4</sup>

The technique of the *ison*, which originated in Byzantine music, had already been dealt with intensively in earlier works, *Ison I* (commissioned by the La Rochelle Festival, premiered under the direction of Michel Tabachnik, 1973) and *Ison II* (1975). The subtle appeal to the sonority of Orthodox music here does not mean a combination or re-evaluation of quotations, but the taking up of a characteristic aspect: the pedal (*ison*), the long note that runs through a melody

<sup>1</sup>Valentina SANDU-DEDIU, “Ideologii muzicale în România secolului XX” [Musical ideologies in twentieth-century Romania], in *Noi istorii ale muzicilor românești* [New Histories of Romanian Music], vol. 2, ed. by Valentina SANDU-DEDIU and Nicolae GHEORGHIȚĂ (Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, 2020), 61–62.

<sup>2</sup>Niculescu, in an interview by SANDU-DEDIU, “Dialog cu compozitorul Ștefan Niculescu,” *Muzica* 4 (1999), 55–59.

<sup>3</sup>It is worth noting that György Ligeti is also close to Heraclitean thought, to *Panta rhei*: For example, in his sketches for the Violin Concerto he mentions “Heraklit-Form”; see Constantin FLOROS, *György Ligeti. Jenseits von Avantgarde und Postmoderne* (Vienna: Lafite, 1996), 223.

<sup>4</sup>Liviu DĂNCEANU, “Symphony II by Ștefan Niculescu,” *Muzica* 4 (1982), 16–20.



and exists in monodic cultures such as the Greek Oriental. Another reference to ancient philosophical thinking about the One and the Many arises precisely from the consideration of ison and superimpositions of monody, since voices can coincide in unison or branch off into single lines. For the musical form, this results in an alternation of sparse unison moments and crowded sound surfaces. Moreover, the composer can transfer the concept of ison to the level of a musical layer and not just a single sound.

There are two versions of *Ison I*: the first for an orchestra with 14 soloists (1973), the second expands the instrumentation to the size of a large orchestra (1974). Both versions, which differ only in range, are notated in a single score. A year later Niculescu wrote *Ison II* – Concerto for Winds and Percussion (four flutes, four trumpets, four horns, four trombones and four or six percussionists). Three types of musical structures – flute melodies, wind harmonies, percussion rhythms – which are renewed at each performance, alternate with or overlap each other in the course of the work. These modes of writing, which separately articulate melodies, harmonies and rhythms, combine in a kind of ison of structures, which poetically speaking means the deepening of a single but complex state in ever-changing hypostases.<sup>5</sup>

Melody reigns supreme in *Cantos*, Third Symphony Concertante (1984), “a melody that draws from our ancient Byzantine culture as well as from other traditional cultures (folk art, Gregorian, non-European music, etc.), thus proposing a kind of ‘ecumenism’ or harmony between music from the East and the West.”<sup>6</sup> In a global perspective on post-war Romanian music, *Cantos* is not only a formula for the transposition of the melodic or rhythmic principles of Byzantine music into contemporary language, but also, as a direct consequence, an important point on the line of development from chromaticism to diatonicism. This led György Ligeti to admire and publicly embrace Niculescu’s music, coming into contact with it for the first time precisely through *Cantos* (thanks to the recording distributed by saxophonist Daniel Kientzy). The *Zeitgeist* of the 1980s and 1990s, after the chromatic saturation of the preceding decades, turned out not to be a return to tonal diatonicism, but the search – difficult indeed – for a new kind of diatonicism. Niculescu achieves such a goal via intermediate steps, the most significant being *Ison I* and *II*, parallel to other European composers’ efforts, for example those of György Ligeti (starting from the language developed in his Horn Trio, 1982).<sup>7</sup> And Ligeti, in a public lecture in Vienna, describes certain moments from *Ison II* in which he found a unique musical expressiveness:

This is the most beautiful thing: the unconscious anchor-dropping into the culture of Latin, archaic Balcanic, Byzantine influence. Thus, I discover your conception about sonorous blocks and the incredible originality. You are ... somebody who did an absolutely personal thing: despite your

<sup>5</sup>For more details, see Valentina SANDU-DEDIU, *Rumänische Musik nach 1944* (Saarbrücken: Pfau Verlag, 2006), 75–81.

<sup>6</sup>Niculescu, in Iosif SAVA, *Ștefan Niculescu și galaxiile muzicale ale secolului 20* [Ștefan Niculescu and the musical galaxies of the twentieth century] (Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, 1991), 246.

<sup>7</sup>“Meine Musik sollte sehr viel melodischer werden, in einer Art nicht-diatonischer Diatonik,” Ligeti quoted in FLOROS, *György Ligeti*, 162.



presence in Darmstadt or the theoretical correspondences you have with me, for instance, although we didn't know each other, you compose in an entirely personal way. And this music must be known everywhere.<sup>8</sup>

Since the late 1980s, in the last decade of the twentieth century, Ștefan Niculescu has devoted himself entirely to the various aspects of the idea of invocation, of supplication. *Invocatio* for 12 voices (1989),<sup>9</sup> *Axion* for women's choir and saxophone (1992), *Psalmus* for six voices (1993), Fourth Symphony, *Deisis* (1995), Fifth Symphony, *Litanii la plinirea vremii* [Litany at the Fullness of Time] (1997) are works that reveal, in a noble and by no means ostentatious manner, a spiritual height and a balanced luminosity that have become the defining attributes of the Niculescian style. The musical material reflects an attitude open to the stimuli of the sacred musical tradition, regardless of where it comes from. That is, one can discover a homogeneous fusion of principles from Machaut's *Messe de la Notre-Dame*, from a *Triplum* by Perotinus, from other music of the *Ars Antiqua* or *Ars Nova* with Byzantine axioms. All these elements do not come together in a collage, but are subtly inserted, with only their ethos discernible, in a composition whose modernity is underlined by the use of heterophonic writing, and by a system of modal scales outside the octave, derived by Niculescu from the spectrum of natural harmonics.

Another characteristic feature of these works, whether they are choral (with explicit use of sacred texts) or symphonic, is the purification of all external (e.g. timbral) effects towards a polishing of the content to its essence. In the Fifth Symphony, for example, the litanies addressed to the heavenly powers lead to a broad orchestral formula, but the percussion (which by definition is used for effects, for color) is absent. The emphasis falls on monody (in complex combinations), on pure, ascetic cantabile. Here too, as in most of the compositions written after 1989, we find this closeness to the sacred musical traditions of humanity, which led the composer to strive for

a new language, based on the past and present of as many cultures of the world as possible, in order to finally formulate a planetary grammar ... A new language that rejects both the return to the past, polystilism, the different meanings of postmodernism and the vestiges of the avant-garde, that are now obsolete.<sup>10</sup>

György Ligeti's statements show the same critical attitude towards the stylistic constraints associated with the terms avant-garde or postmodernism. Although he belongs to the Darmstadt group, he declares that he cannot join either side, avant-garde or postmodern, which were controversial in the 1990s, but stands outside them.<sup>11</sup> This is also the reason why Constantin Floros, in the monograph he dedicates to him, proclaims the composer's position in the title:

<sup>8</sup>Ligeti, in "Face to Face: György Ligeti and Ștefan Niculescu in a Dialogue Coordinated by Karsten Witt, Vienna 1992," translated from German into Romanian, adapted and annotated by Valentina SANDU-DEDIU, English version by Maria-Sabina DRAGA, *Muzica* 2 (1993), 80.

<sup>9</sup>The composer uses a distorted religious text that was not easy to understand under the political conditions of the time, a "heart prayer" that could be repeated every day of the week. The approach to the mystical theology of Orthodoxy is obvious.

<sup>10</sup>Niculescu, in the interview with SANDU-DEDIU, "Dialog," 57.

<sup>11</sup>Ligeti, quoted in FLOROS, *György Ligeti*, 229.



beyond avant-garde and postmodernism, but nevertheless consistently and convincingly modern, which can also be said of his Bucharest confrere.

### 3. A “CANTUS FIRMUS” IN NICULESCU’S CREATION: THE HETEROPHONIC TECHNIQUE VERSUS LIGETI’S MICROPOLYPHONY

In his famous book, *Penser la musique aujourd’hui*, Pierre Boulez had proposed a vision of heterophony, which Niculescu would develop in a different way, taking into account the framework of the musical tradition in which it is expressed.

I belong to a generation of composers across Europe who have set out to explore integral serialism – the last universal system for organizing sound material that has its origins in classical serialism (Schoenberg, Webern, Berg). My points of reference, my sources of inspiration: Enescu, Bartók, Webern, Messiaen, Stravinsky, archaic Romanian folklore, non-European musical phenomena (Japanese, Tibetan, African). I went through a period of organizing music according to the serial-modal system, which ended in 1962–65. Then, under the influence of heterophony, which became a particular concern of mine, I realized the limitations of the serial system. It was not able to organize the sound phenomenon of heterophony. So, I came to think of my own systems of order, systems in which mathematics plays an important role.<sup>12</sup>

As early as the third cantata (1964, on verses by the Romanian poet Tudor Arghezi), Niculescu integrated a section entitled *Contrapunct III – Heterophony*. Here, for the first time, we can sense the stylistic principles that were to characterize Niculescu’s later work and which we find with the consistency of a *cantus firmus* in all his scores. Still located in the serial realm, with modal sprinklings, the cantata contains that oscillation between mobile sound zones, dense with events per unit of time (textures) and static moments, extended ison layers. There is an expressive similarity here with Ligeti’s *Lux aeterna* (1966), written in the same period, surely a *Zeitgeist* situation that brings the two closer together. As a matter of fact, when Niculescu attended the Darmstadt Summer Courses in 1966, he was very impressed by *Lux aeterna* and the composer’s analysis of it, and later declared:

*Lux aeterna* begins like this: all the 16 voices sing a unique sound – a unison – then there comes a type of texture that leads to unison again; then there comes another texture that leads to another unison ... up to the end. Some time before I had written a work – Cantata no. 3 – based on the same principle: unison – texture – unison – texture (etc.). Therefore, I had a shock. Ligeti’s piece appealed to me a lot ... . What Ligeti did there is polyphony – he calls it micropolyphony – and what I do is heterophony.<sup>13</sup>

Then Niculescu – always striving for clarity, coherence and formal logic – will explore the new type of musical structure suitable for heterophonic writing, such as “synchrony.” If for Domenico Scarlatti the sonata was an initial formal scheme suitable for homophony, for Niculescu synchrony is a similar scheme but suitable for heterophony. The composer starts from “an understanding of heterophony in its most general sense: the oscillation between the monovocal

<sup>12</sup>Niculescu; see SAVA, *Ștefan Niculescu*, 42.

<sup>13</sup>Niculescu; see SANDU-DEDIU (transl.), “Face to face,” 72.



and plurivocal states, i.e. the alternation between unison and plurimelody.”<sup>14</sup> This can be compared to a “sinusoidal” shape, to the change from node to center produced by the vibration of air in tubes, in other words to an acoustic primordial phenomenon. The relationship between the One and the Many often invoked by Niculescu has both the religious significance and a technical musical solution. The generalization of heterophonic composition and its incorporation into appropriate forms can be found in *Eteromorfie* (for large orchestra, 1967), *Formants* (for a minimal ensemble of 17 solo strings, 1965), *Aforisme de Heraclit* (for 20 solo voices, 1969).

The architectural idea of the pieces entitled *Synchrony* as well as *Duplum* (1982 and 1984), *Triplum* (1971 and 1973), *Octuplum* (1985) and *Hétérophonies pour Montreux* (wind quintet, 1986) is based on the initially independent and asynchronous playing of the performers, who gradually synchronize themselves only to fall out of step again. The result is an interplay of synchrony and non-synchronous areas, a relationship of multiplicity and unity. The same happens in *Sincronie II, Homage to Enescu and Bartók* (for chamber orchestra, 1981, rev. 1986), where the musical discourse starts from three quotations from Enescu (Chamber Symphony) and Bartók (Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion), as stylistic emblems of the two, in terms of the rhythmic contrast between *rubato* and *giusto*. The slow and gradual process of musical synchronization will lead to a climax, the simultaneous voicing of the three quotations, a kind of “twinning” between Enescu and Bartók.

Somewhat later, in *Undecimum* (1998, dedicated to the Ensemble Klangforum Wien), a complex mixture of homophony, heterophony and ison layers, Niculescu takes up the same technique of synchronicity while returning to archaic, medieval sound worlds to draw impulses from the incipient forms of multivocality that underpinned occidental polyphony. Conceived in a modal idiom with Byzantine echoes, the piece moves in the register of the sacred and approaches the composer’s Fourth and Fifth Symphonies in its deep, hieratic atmosphere.

Heterophony remains a constant in Niculescu’s work, in forms of synchronicity, but also in other aspects linked to the technique of the ison (see *Ison I, II*) or in complex combinations with the other “syntactic categories” (what the composer calls the monody, the homophony, the polyphony). That is, the form is created by the temporal organization of the music, by the sequentiality (monody) or simultaneity (homophony, polyphony, heterophony) of the sound development, in multiple possible combinations: Polyphony between a heterophony and a homophony, polyphony of heterophonies, heterophony of heterophonies, etc. The composer’s name remains associated with the heterophonic concept, which he defined theoretically<sup>15</sup> and applied in his own work with a persuasiveness that influenced many Romanian composers of the following generations.

In the case of Ligeti, much has been written about his famous *micropolyphony*, which is indeed a network, a fabric woven like a net, a “Webtechnik”<sup>16</sup> that undergoes various modifications in the course of his creative work. With roots in the ancient counterpoint of the Renaissance (Machaut, Ockeghem), micropolyphonic structures are based on an original redefinition of canons, on a complex tapestry of many voices (e.g. the double fugue in 20 voices

<sup>14</sup>Niculescu, in SAVA, *Ștefan Niculescu*, 173.

<sup>15</sup>Ștefan NICULESCU, “Eterofonia,” in *Studii de muzicologie*, vol. 5 (Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, 1969), 63–77.

<sup>16</sup>FLOROS, *György Ligeti*, 43.





of the *Kyrie*, in *Requiem*, 1965). Moreover, whatever the techniques he uses, Ligeti always remains in search of curious impulses from linguistics, mathematics, the natural sciences, etc.; he is never a prisoner of templates or technical procedures, but knows how to interweave the rigor of generating musical structures with inspiration, imagination, irregularity, gesture and timbral expression.

#### 4. POLYPHONIES: MUSIC AND MATHEMATICS

Mathematical models have often been of interest to Romanian composers. Whether they studied extra-musical fields (mathematics, architecture, civil engineering) in their youth or were attracted to various procedures and algorithms they investigated in depth in the course of their musical development, the fascination that emanated from the fields of mathematics and logic produced original, modern sound systems. Wilhelm Georg Berger, Anatol Vieru, Aurel Stroe and Ștefan Niculescu consistently aimed at the abstract order of the musical material, without this becoming an end in itself. The interplay of music and mathematics was often combined with other suggestions from philosophy, fine arts, linguistics, etc.

His studies as a civil engineer, but also a certain characteristic of his temperament, have shaped Ștefan Niculescu's choice of radical modernism, of music that often draws on current mathematical procedures (theory of sets, graphs, groups). Examples of his elaboration can be found in the orchestral pieces *Heteromorphie* (1967, printed by Schott, Mainz, in the same year) and *Formants* (1965, published by Salabert, Paris, in 1969), which explore not only heterophonic expression but also a certain open dramaturgy of form. In the latter piece there is a strictly controlled aleatorism, similar to that practiced by Boulez in the Third Piano Sonata, based on the arrangement of the five parts, which the French composer calls "formants" after the linguistic model. In Niculescu's work, the form consists of 14 sections (*formants*) arranged according to specific rules; there are the composer's strict schemes noted in the score, random variables at the macro- and microstructural levels, but the various possible readings of the musical text are strictly controlled.<sup>17</sup>

Other techniques practiced in the new music of the 7th decade are creatively taken up here by Niculescu, such as novel notational elements (including graphics) or recording and altering sounds through microphones. Among the mechanisms of his work is the internal laboratory for "preparing" complicated, non-octave modes derived from the series of natural harmonics. (The composer favored this technique after passing through a serial period influenced by Boulez or Stockhausen, for example in the *Inventions for Clarinet and Piano*, 1965, printed by Salabert in 1968, or in the Cantatas II and III, 1960–1964.) Here is a possible connection with the spectral music movement.

Even though he always justified and substantiated his musical ideas with mathematical logic, Niculescu never forgot that the composer's discourse ultimately remains an ineffable one that cannot be formalized. As his lifelong friend Anatol Vieru remarked, Niculescu "did not regard

<sup>17</sup>On the same subject, the following studies can be consulted: Fred POPOVICI, "Ștefan Niculescu – Portrait," *Muzica* 12 (1979), 73–93 (in French); Anton DOGARU, "Formants de Șt. Niculescu," *Muzica* 2 (1973), 22–23; Corneliu Dan GEORGESCU, "Aforisme de Ștefan Niculescu și unele aspecte ale eterofoniei" [Aphorisms by Ștefan Niculescu and some aspects of heterophony], *Muzica* 4 (1971), 9–14.





science as the alpha and omega of art,” nor did he neglect the delicate relationship between *esprit de géométrie* and *esprit de finesse*.<sup>18</sup> His music therefore radiates clarity and balance, a solemn and noble expression, as if in keeping with the ideals of classicism, becoming an island without ostentation, isolated from the often agitated and turbulent context of contemporary music.

As is well known, in the 1980s Ligeti was interested in both fractal geometry – which attempts to describe the “amorphous,” irregular and fragmented forms found in nature – and computer-assisted music, with a reservation about algorithmic composition.<sup>19</sup> Fractal imagery, like many other ideas he was passionate about (Central African music or the rhythmic complexity of Conlon Nancarrow), is realized compositionally not through strict calculation but imaginatively. It is meant to ignite the spark of fantasy: In the fourth movement of the Piano Concerto (1985–1988), for example, Ligeti describes the performing of initially sparse music by multiplying figures by themselves according to the rule of fractals.<sup>20</sup>

## 5. UNPUBLISHED CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN TWO COMPOSERS

It is interesting to note where Ligeti places Niculescu, namely alongside other more marginal, original and, in his opinion, under-promoted composers – such as Claude Vivier and Conlon Nancarrow. For all these musicians, he makes generous efforts to make them known to the international concert scene. The relationship with his Romanian colleague can be traced, on the one hand, from the aforementioned conversation at *Wien Modern* in 1993 and, on the other hand, from the correspondence preserved in Stefan Niculescu’s personal archive and recently published.<sup>21</sup> It begins with a letter from Ligeti to Daniel Kientzy in April 1989, in which the composer expresses his admiration for *Cantos* and finally adds in handwriting after the typed text: “Si vous voyez M. Niculescu, s.v.p. de lui dire que j’aime sa musique!” Niculescu addresses Ligeti in Romanian for the first time on May 19, 1989 (knowing Ligeti’s knowledge of the language), thanks him warmly for his appreciation and tells him that the admiration is mutual, since Professor Niculescu has long been teaching his students analyses of *Continuum*, String Quartet no. 2, *Ramifications*, *Zehn Stücke für Bläserquintett*, *Lux aeterna*, *Aventures et Nouvelles Aventures*, *Kammerkonzert für 13 Instrumentalisten*.<sup>22</sup> The two send each other scores and recordings, with all the difficulty of communication in the last year of the Ceaușescu regime, and correspond in Romanian. There is, of course, no shortage of exchange of ideas. Ligeti asks Niculescu if he knows of any books on fractal geometry, and Niculescu replies:

I have so far read an article, *Reise in die fraktale Faszination*, published in *Das Magazin für Computer*, May 1987, as well as James Gleick’s book, *La théorie du chaos*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1989.

<sup>18</sup>Anatol VIERU, “Un profil luminos” [A luminous profile], in *Cuvinte despre sunete* [Words about sounds] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1994), 274.

<sup>19</sup>FLOROS, *György Ligeti*, 159–160.

<sup>20</sup>FLOROS, *György Ligeti*, 160.

<sup>21</sup>Dan DEDIU, “Ștefan Niculescu – György Ligeti. Unpublished correspondence,” in *Generația de aur a avangardei muzicale românești* [The golden generation of the Romanian musical avant-garde], ed. by Antígona RĂDULESCU (Bucharest: University of Music Publishing House, Bucharest, 2021), 93–122.

<sup>22</sup>Dan DEDIU, “Ștefan Niculescu,” 97.



I am very interested in Julia crowds: it seems to me that I could use them to model musical phenomena, for example heterophony. But I haven't read Mandelbrot's book *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, nor do I have it.<sup>23</sup>

The correspondence continues from 1990 onwards with some more extensive epistles, seemingly freed from the pressure of communist censorship, in which political ideas (about the recent revolutions in Eastern Europe and their impact on the two protagonists) and about composition are developed. After Niculescu became the founding director of the International New Music Week in Bucharest, he cordially invited Ligeti to the first edition; unfortunately, however, this invitation did not materialize. Instead, at Niculescu's suggestion, the Romanian Union of Composers and Musicologists offered Ligeti honorary membership (1990), and later (1997) the Romanian Academy extended a similar invitation, also at Niculescu's initiative. He asks his friend – which we also learn from these letters – for a copy of the speech he gave at the awarding of the Balzan Prize in 1991, entitled *Rhapsodische, unausgewogene Gedanken über Musik, besonders über meine eigene Kompositionen*, to be translated into Romanian and published.<sup>24</sup> Ligeti in turn successfully recommended Niculescu for a creative internship at Wiepersdorf Castle in 1993, and endeavored to recommend his scores at various festivals.

The other correspondence that has survived consists of copies of the letters Niculescu sent to Ligeti until 1993. After that, the two communicated only in long telephone conversations, so the written legacy disappears. I select a passage at the end in which Niculescu, after acknowledging Ligeti's generosity to his confreres, describes the impression left by the recordings he received of *Le Grand Macabre*, the Concertos for Piano, for Violin and the Piano Etudes nos. 1–9:

I am thrilled by these works, which I have begun to analyze and share with others. I find here a world that is absolutely new and paradoxically as if from eternity. A miracle of archetypes that you have discovered within yourself, but which are also found in completely different forms in the great traditional cultures of the world, eternal archetypes, therefore timeless, and yet so significant – I would say redemptive – for the definition and orientation of today's *Zeitgeist*. I sense here, among other things, the germs of a new universal grammar or, as you say, a new “tonality” which, I believe, bears planetary traits in you.<sup>25</sup>

Ștefan Niculescu passed on his admiration for György Ligeti to the students, and analyzing his scores became a tradition in the development of young composers. Some of them engage

<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Dan DEDIU, “Ștefan Niculescu,” 101.

<sup>24</sup>At the request of my professor Ștefan Niculescu, I was directly involved in this project. After translating the text, I sent the Romanian version to György Ligeti, who answered me at length, with an astonishing knowledge of the Romanian language, spiced with the archaic fragrance of the 1940s, with elegance and finesse. The result was a translation with the title “Gânduri rapsodice, neponderate despre muzică, în special despre propriile mele compoziții” [Rhapsodic, un-weighted thoughts on music, especially on my own compositions], *Muzica* 4 (1993), 88–97. On Ligeti's initiative and recommendation, Ștefan Niculescu commissioned me also to translate a study on Conlon Nancarrow, which represents the first contact of a Romanian reader with the original music of the American-Mexican composer; see Monika FÜRST-HEIDTMANN, “Tempo-ul ca factor componistic. *Studies for Player Piano* de Conlon Nancarrow” [Tempo as a compositional factor. *Studies for Player Piano* by Conlon Nancarrow], transl. from German by Valentina SANDU-DEDIU, *Muzica* 3 (1994), 53–61.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Dan DEDIU, “Ștefan Niculescu,” 114.



with Ligeti's world in depth, which also has an impact on their own compositions.<sup>26</sup> Romanian concert life lags far behind academic circles in terms of access to Ligeti's music, which is almost unknown to the public (with the exception of the picturesque *Romanian Concerto*). Few musicologists<sup>27</sup> strive to make the profile of the Romanian-born musician, who learned Romanian between the ages of 10 and 17 in a high school in Cluj ("I have a very, very deep knowledge, as well as love for the Romanian culture"),<sup>28</sup> known through research and publications. Among the many sources of a complex, effervescent musical thought that constantly embraces the new, the eccentric (in the sense of that marginality that does not conform to the general rules and is characterized by a genuine imprint) is traditional Romanian music. At least in the Piano Concerto, voicings from Southeast European folklore, the evocation of Constantin Brâncuși (*Columna infinita*, also present in the Piano Etude of the same name) merge with the multitude of sounds from medieval polyphony or Central African music, from Liszt, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Ravel, Nancarrow, Oscar Peterson and many other fascinating areas (such as the Caribbean), resulting in an "imaginary ethnic landscape."<sup>29</sup> And the Violin Concerto included a "Romanian polymodal" scherzo in the early sketches, with something of this intention reflected in the intonation of the first part, *Vivace luminoso*.<sup>30</sup> Finally, an explicit example is the first movement of the Viola Sonata, called *Hora lungă* (in Romanian in the original), a long song denoting a particular melodic type of Romanian folklore.

It is not so much the inventory of these Romanian sources that is important, but the way they fit into a unique universe of sound in the modern landscape, thanks to a curious and generous spirit, both in music and in everyday life. Ligeti's efforts to promote his colleagues whom he admired – including Ștefan Niculescu – distinguish an unusual artistic personality that always pays homage to originality and professionalism.

<sup>26</sup>A disciple of Ștefan Niculescu, Dan Dediú continued to explore Ligeti's music with his own students, as Mihai MURARIU's essay shows: "Disorder by György Ligeti: Analytical Remarks," *Musicology Today* 17 (January–March 2014), 12–35; see <https://musicologytoday.ro/back-issues/nr-17/studies/desordre-by-gyorgy-ligeti-analytical-remarks/> (last accessed: January 17, 2023).

<sup>27</sup>See Bianca ȚIPLEA-ȚEMEȘ, "Ligeti and Romanian Folk Music. An Insight from the Paul Sacher Foundation," in *György Ligeti's Cultural Identities*, ed. by Amy BAUER and Márton KERÉFKY (London, New York: Routledge, 2018), 120–138.

<sup>28</sup>Ligeti; see SANDU-DEDIU (transl.), "Face to face," 80.

<sup>29</sup>FLOROS, *György Ligeti*, 201.

<sup>30</sup>Ligeti, quoted in FLOROS, *György Ligeti*, 216–217.

