

# Sándor Weöres's Poetry as a Catalyst for György Ligeti's Early Development

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### ABSTRACT

Sándor Weöres's poetry was a life-long passion and source of inspiration for György Ligeti. This article explores the role Weöres played in Ligeti's early development as a composer by providing insight into the genesis of all of his 13 early settings of Weöres, including the unpublished choral works *Hajnal* [Dawn] and *Tél* [Winter], the incomplete song "Nagypapa leszállt a tóba" [Grandpa descended in the pond], and the unfinished oratorio "Istar pokoljárása" [Ishtar's Journey to Hell], and by making some analytical observations on them. Ligeti's early settings of Weöres were composed in three periods. The first stage in 1946–1947 was his compositional discovery of Weöres's poetry, which seems to have acted as a fuel and a challenge for him, triggering something of a musical self-liberation. His Weöres settings in 1949–1950 may be seen as a sign of solidarity with the poet effectively silenced by Communist state authorities, while in 1952–1955, Weöres texts seem to have served specifically as material for Ligeti's experimentation with static music and serialism.

### KEYWORDS

György Ligeti, Sándor Weöres, experimentalism, surrealism, serialism

The poetry of Sándor Weöres (1913–1989) was a life-long passion and source of inspiration for György Ligeti. He was 23 when he wrote his first Weöres settings, and 77 when he composed his last ones; but perhaps even more telling is the fact that after leaving Hungary in 1956 he did not

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set texts anymore in his mother tongue other than those by Weöres. Ligeti was introduced to the poet ten years his senior in 1947 by Ferenc Farkas (1905–2000), his former professor in Cluj and then mentor in Budapest. The two men became friends,<sup>1</sup> belonging to the same liberal-minded intellectual circle around the Budapest literary journal *Válasz* [Response] before it was banned by state authorities in summer 1949.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his life, Ligeti made enthusiastic comments on his compatriot's poetry on many occasions (see Table 1 for a selection of relevant passages from his writings, interviews, and correspondence). According to these, what Ligeti admired most about Weöres's poetry was its linguistic virtuosity, its experimentalism and surrealism, as well as its imagery and magical charm.

Many similarities in Weöres's and Ligeti's artistic interests and physiognomy may occur, such as adventurousness; an affection for the exotic, the fantastic, and the surreal; a predilection for utopias and imaginary countries and languages;<sup>3</sup> an affinity for nonsense; playfulness; or associativity and visuality. But the focus of this article is not on these similarities, some of which have already been discussed by other scholars;<sup>4</sup> it is rather the role Weöres played in Ligeti's early development as a composer.

Ligeti composed 23 pieces or movements in total (including two unfinished settings) to poems by Weöres in five periods of his life: five settings from July 1946 to May 1947; four from December 1949 to November 1950; four from 1952 to 1955; three in 1983; and seven in 2000 (see Table 2). In each period, he apparently turned to Weöres for partly different reasons and objectives. The first stage was his compositional discovery of Weöres's poetry, which seems to have acted as a fuel and a challenge for the young composer, triggering something of a musical self-liberation. His Weöres settings in the second period may be seen as a sign of solidarity with the poet effectively silenced by Communist state authorities, while in the next stage, Weöres texts seem to have served specifically as material for Ligeti's experimentation with static music and serialism.<sup>5</sup> The distinctiveness of Ligeti's two later Weöres sets, *Magyar etüdök* [Hungarian Studies] and *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel* [With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles], does not simply lay in the fact that their words are in the composer's mother tongue. They also provided him with a unique opportunity to create musical structures in which the sound and content of the words and musical composition build a perfect unity.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>STEINITZ, György Ligeti, 40.

<sup>2</sup>"After the war I belonged to the circle of Mrs. Sárközi's journal *Válasz*, of course only loosely. This liberal intellectual group attracted me the most, and it was here that I met Weöres, among others." [Without author], "Beszélgetés Ligeti Györggyel" [Conversation with Ligeti], *Profil* 1979/7, 36, my translation.

<sup>3</sup>See, among others, Weöres's *Dalok Naconxypan-ból* [Songs from Naconxypan], a series of 20 short poems written in 1939–1940 about the imaginary country Naconxypan invented by the eccentric Hungarian painter and writer Lajos Gulácsy (1882–1932), and Ligeti's own imaginary country Kylwiria. For details, see Heidy Zimmermann's article in this issue.

<sup>4</sup>See BAUER, "Singing Wolves," 1–39; MÁNDI-FAZEKAS and FAZEKAS, "Magicians of Sound," 53–68; and LAKI, "Jenseits des Wortes."

<sup>5</sup>In March 1950 Ligeti embarked on a set of short studies for piano with the title *Rongyszőnyeg* [Rag Carpet]. Only three pieces of this set materialized, two written in March 1950 and the third one in February 1951, but only the first two survive. Nevertheless, the very fact that Ligeti borrowed the title from Weöres suggests that he might have considered him a model for artistic experimentation.

<sup>6</sup>See Ligeti's note on *Magyar etüdök*, according to which he has "tried to reproduce Weöres' playful-experimental attitude in the musical construction." See footnote 14.



Table 1. Ligeti statements on Weöres's poetry (selection), keywords in italics<sup>7</sup>

| Year | Ligeti's statement  |
|------|---|
| 1963 | Letter to Ove Nordwall:<br>Writing about T.S. Eliot and quoting “swing–spring–sing,” Weöres comes to Ligeti's mind, who “is now <i>perhaps the most significant poet in Hungary</i> ,” and he quotes “Kínai templom” [Chinese Temple] in full <sup>8</sup>  |
| 1966 | Letter to Ove Nordwall:<br>Writing about Ekkelöf, Ligeti recalls Weöres, whose latest volume of poems, <i>Tűzkút</i> [Well of Fire], he had just seen:<br>“... (published in Paris: although he lives in Hungary – not EVERYTHING can be printed there that seems ‘ <i>experimental</i> ’ yet.”<br>He quotes “Fabula” [Fable] by heart and adds:<br>“Even if you don't quite understand it, the ‘ <i>musical</i> ’ language composition is of <i>unique genius</i> .” <sup>9</sup>  |
| 1979 | Interview in <i>Profil</i> :<br>“I consider him <i>the greatest living Hungarian poet</i> .” <sup>10</sup>  |
| 1983 | Interview with Denys Bouliane:<br>“Weöres writes in a poetic language (which is true of all poetry, by the way) that is extraordinarily untranslatable. On the one hand, he is very ‘ <i>experimental</i> ’ and in certain aspects of his oeuvre he approaches letter poetry, German concrete poetry, Joyce, Cummings, and on the other hand his work retains a <i>universal</i> character. I am not aware of anything like it in other literatures. The starting point of his poetry is in fact the Hungarian language, which he does not really ‘work’ with, but tries to let it organize itself into metrical, rhythmic structures...”<br>Then Ligeti comments on the words of <i>Magyar etüdök</i> at great length. <sup>11</sup> |
| 1984 | Note to <i>Magány</i> [Solitude]:<br>“Sándor Weöres, arguably <i>the most important Hungarian poet of the 20th century</i> , is a <i>brilliant linguistic virtuoso</i> . His texts are partly <i>surrealistic</i> , partly <i>experimental</i> poetry, which proceeds from the rhythmic and associative potentials of the Hungarian language.” <sup>12</sup>  |

(continued)

<sup>7</sup> All translations of quotations are mine.<sup>8</sup> Ligeti to Nordwall, October 8, 1963, unpublished letter in the Paul Sacher Foundation, György Ligeti collection, Basel (henceforth CH-Bps GLC), 2.<sup>9</sup> Ligeti to Nordwall, September 21, 1966, unpublished letter in the CH-Bps GLC, 6.<sup>10</sup> [Without author], “Beszélgetés Ligeti Györggyel,” 36.<sup>11</sup> BOULIANE, “Entretien avec György Ligeti,” 11.<sup>12</sup> Written for a performance in Graz on October 4, 1984. LICHTENFELD (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 145.

Table 1. Continued

| Year | Ligeti's statement  |
|------|---|
| 1984 | Note to <i>Éjszaka, Reggel</i> [Night, Morning]:<br>"According to the textual content, they are 'snapshots' of moods, as it were. Sándor Weöres has written many hundreds of such very short, snapshot-like poems – poems in concise, concentrated images that are also <i>strongly condensed emotionally</i> . At the same time, he uses the onomatopoeic possibilities of the Hungarian language. In <i>Éjszaka</i> the night appears to us as an immense jungle, a wilderness full of <i>magical</i> silence. In <i>Reggel</i> , cockcrow and bellringing are combined into a garish, <i>surrealistic</i> painting of the early morning." <sup>13</sup>  |
| 1984 | Note to <i>Magyar etüdök</i> [Hungarian Studies]:<br>"Among several thousand short 'experimental' poems, Sándor Weöres has published more than a hundred with the title <i>Magyar etüdök</i> . They are, as it were, poetic <i>snapshots</i> of everyday events – the experimental gesture concerns the treatment of rhythm and meter and the field of association or connotation of the Hungarian language. In the setting of some of these short poems I have tried to reproduce Weöres' <i>playful-experimental</i> attitude in the musical construction." <sup>14</sup>   |
| 1985 | Interview with Edna Politi:<br>"Joyce also played a major role for me, as did a <i>great Hungarian poet</i> called Sándor Weöres." <sup>15</sup>  |
| 1987 | Interview with Denys Bouliane:<br>"There is an important literary figure who plays a great role for me personally, even if I find it difficult to explain in German. This is the <i>great Hungarian poet</i> Sándor Weöres, who invented several <i>imaginary mythologies</i> . He has written epics of myths, of peoples – some real, some freely invented. For example, he formed the Sumerian-Akkadian-Babylonian myth of Ishtar and Gilgamesh into an epic. He invented the imaginary land of Nakonxipan and described it in verse. His humorous prose epic <i>Bolond Istók</i> also comes to mind (the title is an allusion to another essential work of Hungarian literature), in which he invented a great mythological system with nine heavens that are constantly held by the gods like taut bedsheets and are eventually released and collapse. It is an <i>artificial mythology</i> about the creation and end of the world but thrown together from elements of real lore: a fantastic contamination of Mongol, Turkic-Tatar, Finno-Ugric, and Indo-European cultural fragments. It is set in an imaginary Central Asian region; it could be the Pamir plateau." <sup>16</sup> |
| 1992 | Interview with Bálint András Varga:<br>"‘Don't make yourself important,’ says the Angel of Disgust in Sándor Weöres." <sup>17</sup>   |

(continued)

<sup>13</sup>Written for a performance in Graz on October 4, 1984. Ibid., 165.

<sup>14</sup>Written for a performance in Graz on October 4, 1984. Ibid., 286–287.

<sup>15</sup>POLITI, "Entretien avec Ligeti."

<sup>16</sup>Interview on July 8, 1987. BOULIANE, "Stilisierte Emotion," 62.

<sup>17</sup>Interview on December 30, 1992. VARGA, "Repülőgépen, felhők fölött," 15.



Table 1. Continued

| Year | Ligeti's statement  |
|------|---|
| 2000 | Note for a performance of <i>Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel</i> [With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles]: “Sándor Weöres was one of the greatest poets of Hungary. A modern, universal and at the same time <i>experimental</i> poet, who used both the rhythmic-metrical and the semantic possibilities and impossibilities of the Hungarian language like no other. Profound and <i>playful</i> , elitist and vulgar – he was Hungary's Mozart.” <sup>18</sup>   |
| 2002 | Note for the recording of <i>Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel</i> : “Weöres was – like no one before him – a <i>virtuoso of the Hungarian language</i> . His poetic contents range from the trivial, even obscene, to sarcasm and humor, to tragedy and despair, and they also include <i>artificial myths and legends</i> . Some of his works are large-scale frescoes, indeed worlds unto themselves. In addition, he has written countless small poems, both serious and <i>playful</i> . I have always set such small poems to music.” <sup>19</sup> |

Already in 1996, Fred Sallis rightly observed that “Weöres’s work appears to have accompanied Ligeti’s search [for ways to renew his personal style] at a number of important junctures.” He even went on to assume that “[i]t may be that Weöres’s contribution to Ligeti’s oeuvre goes beyond that of simply providing texts.”<sup>20</sup> In the following I aim to confirm this hypothesis by providing insight into the genesis of all of Ligeti’s early Weöres settings, including unpublished and unfinished works, and by making some analytical observations on them.

## 1. 1946–1947: DISCOVERING WEÖRES

Ligeti’s first Weöres settings are three songs for voice and piano, all written in July 1946 in Cluj. From two of these, “Kalmár jött nagy madarakkal” [A merchant came with great birds] and “Táncol a Hold” [The Moon dances], Ligeti made a fair copy in a music notebook presented to his fiancée Brigitte Löw (1926–2023) under the title “Két dal (Weöres Sándor)” [Two songs].<sup>21</sup> The third song, “Nagypapa leszállt a tóba” [Grandpa descended in the pond], was left as an unfinished draft and had been considered lost until it was found and reconstructed by Sallis and authorized by Ligeti in the second half of the 1980s.<sup>22</sup>

All three songs take their words from *Rongyszőnyeg* [Rag Carpet], a collection of 120 short, untitled poems, first published in Weöres’s *Medúza* [Medusa] in 1943 with the subtitle “Dalok,

<sup>18</sup>Written on September 6, 2000, for the first performance in Germany on November 24, 2000. LICHTENFELD (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 313.

<sup>19</sup>Written for the CD *The Ligeti Project III*, Teldec Classics, 8573-87631-2. Ibid., 313.

<sup>20</sup>SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 66.

<sup>21</sup>CH-Bps GLC, Notenbuch 6 (“Bici füzete”), [34]–[40]. These two settings eventually became nos. 3 and 1, respectively, of the *Three Weöres Songs* published in 2004.

<sup>22</sup>SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 59–60. This song is presently being prepared for publication by Schott in a collection of Ligeti’s early unpublished songs.



Table 2. Ligeti settings of poems by Weöres

| Date of composition | Title of setting   | Scoring                      | Title of poem  |
|---------------------|--|------------------------------|--|
| July, 1946          | "Nagypapa leszállt a tóba" (unfinished)  | voice, piano                 | <i>Rongyszőnyeg</i> , no. 75   |
| July 22, 1946       | "Táncol a Hold" ( <i>Three Weöres Songs</i> , no. 1)   | voice, piano                 | <i>Rongyszőnyeg</i> , no. 93   |
| July 26, 1946       | "Kalmár jött nagy madarakkal" ( <i>Three Weöres Songs</i> , no. 3)   | voice, piano                 | <i>Rongyszőnyeg</i> , no. 106  |
| Nov. 10, 1946       | <i>Magány</i>  | SABar choir                  | lyric in <i>A holdbeli csónakos</i>  |
| May, 1947           | "Gyümölcs-fűrt" ( <i>Three Weöres Songs</i> , no. 2)   | voice, piano                 | <i>Forróövi motívumok</i> , no. 1  |
| Dec. 13, 1949       | <i>Hajnal</i> , no. 1  | SMA choir                    | <i>15 kis énekszöveg</i> , no. 1   |
| Feb. 19, 1950       | <i>Hajnal</i> , no. 2  | SMAT choir                   | <i>15 kis énekszöveg</i> , no. 2   |
| March, 1950         | <i>Hajnal</i> , no. 3  | SMATB choir                  | <i>Magyar etűdök</i> , no. 51  |
| Nov. 9, 1950        | <i>Tél</i>   | SATB choir                   | <i>Magyar etűdök</i> , nos. 25 & 36  |
| 1952                | "Pletykázó asszonyok" ( <i>Two Canons</i> , no. 2)   | 4-voice canon                | lyric in <i>A holdbeli csónakos</i>  |
| 1955                | <i>Éjszaka, Reggel. Két kép</i> , no. 1<br>"Éjszaka"   | SSAATTBB choir               | <i>Forróövi motívumok</i> , no. 7  |
| 1955                | <i>Éjszaka, Reggel. Két kép</i> , no. 2<br>"Reggel"  | SMATB choir                  | <i>Rongyszőnyeg</i> , no. 2  |
| Nov.-Dec., 1955     | "Istar pokoljárása" (unfinished)   | choir, orchestra             | <i>Istar pokoljárása</i>   |
| 1983                | <i>Magyar etűdök</i> , no. 1 "Spiegelkanon"  | 2 SSATTB choirs              | <i>Magyar etűdök</i> , no. 9   |
| 1983                | <i>Magyar etűdök</i> , no. 2   | 2 SSAATTBB choirs            | <i>Magyar etűdök</i> , nos. 49 & 40  |
| 1983                | <i>Magyar etűdök</i> , no. 3 "Vásár"   | SSAATB & SATB choir          | <i>Magyar etűdök</i> , no. 90  |
| 2000                | <i>Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel</i> ,<br>no. 1 "Fabula"<br>no. 2 "Táncdal"<br>no. 3 "Kínai templom"<br>no. 4 "Kuli"<br>no. 5 "Alma álma"<br>no. 6 "Keserédes"<br>no. 7 "Szajkó" | mezzo-soprano,<br>percussion | <i>Fabula</i><br><i>Táncdal</i><br><i>Kínai templom</i><br><i>Kuli</i><br><i>Tizenkettedik szimfónia</i><br><i>Magyar etűdök</i> , no. 67<br><i>Szajkó</i> |



epigrammák, ütem-próbák, vázlatok, töredékek” [Songs, epigrams, metric studies, sketches, fragments].<sup>23</sup> As to why Ligeti felt attracted particularly to these short poems, I think, at least two features inspired him: the experimental and the dreamlike or surreal. In fact, Weöres himself emphasizes both: the experimental by mentioning “metric studies, sketches, fragments” in the subtitle, and the dreamlike or surreal by quoting an excerpt on Queen Mab from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* as a motto to *Rongyszőnyeg*, as well as by thematizing dream in the opening poem.

The most surrealistic of the three poems Ligeti set to music is no. 75:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Leszállt a tóba<br>nagyapapa leszállt a tóba<br>giling-galang<br>nagyapapa leszállt a fekete tóba.  | Descended in the pond<br>grandpa descended in the pond<br>giling-galang<br>grandpa descended in the black pond.   |
| Nézi a zöld hal<br>nagyapapa bokáját nézi a zöld hal<br>nagyapapa lábujját nézi a zöld hal<br>giling-galang<br>nagyapapát nézi a zöld hal.                                  | The green fish looks<br>the green fish looks at grandpa’s ankle<br>the green fish looks at grandpa’s toe<br>giling-galang<br>the green fish looks at grandpa.   |
| Leszállt a tóba giling-galang<br>nagyapapa leszállt a tóba<br>nagyapapa változik vízi sóvá<br>nagyapapa változik fekete kővé<br>nagyapapa leszállt a tóba<br>giling-galang. | Descended in the pond giling-galang<br>grandpa descended in the pond<br>grandpa changes into the salt of the water<br>grandpa changes into a black stone<br>grandpa descended in the pond<br>giling-galang. <sup>24</sup> |

In this poem, there is a tension between the content (the drowning of a grandfather and the transformation of his remains in the watery environment) and the way it is described. The tone is childishly straightforward (see the onomatopoeic “giling-galang,” imitating tintinnabulation) and the structure is rigorous (recalling certain features of the *formes fixes* of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century French poetry). The poem consists of three stanzas, each being one line longer than the preceding one. The text is built from a limited number of motives, arranged almost geometrically (or, one could say, musically; see Table 3).

Growth is the governing structural principle of the poem:

- The number of lines per stanza increases.
- Each stanza starts with a pair of lines, in which the second line is an extension of the first.
- The number of repetitions of “nagyapapa” (motive *a*) per stanza increases, causing a growing intensity.

Ligeti’s setting breaks off after the penultimate line, and it does not include lines 6–10. The notation leaves open whether he just skipped these lines provisionally or he did not want to set them at the outset. At any rate, the music perfectly reflects the scene’s surreal atmosphere (see Example 1). The extremely low and soft piano part in measures 1–12 and 16–18 evokes the sound of bells as if heard from under the water. (One might associate it with “La Cathédrale

<sup>23</sup>Later Weöres revised and extended *Rongyszőnyeg* so that in his collected writings, it consists of 160 items. See the most recent edition of his writings, WEÖRES, *Egybegyűjtött költemények*, vol. 1, 269ff. All quotations from Weöres poems in this article are taken from that edition.

<sup>24</sup>Translation from SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 78.



Table 3. Motivic structure of *Rongyszőnyeg*, no. 75

| Strophe/Line | Correspondences |                |   |                |   |                |
|--------------|-----------------|----------------|---|----------------|---|----------------|
| I,1          |                 | b              |   |                |   |                |
| I,2          | a               | b              |   |                |   |                |
| I,3          |                 |                | C |                |   |                |
| I,4          | a               | b <sub>v</sub> |   |                |   |                |
| II,1         |                 |                |   |                | e |                |
| II,2         | a               |                |   | d              | e |                |
| II,3         | a               |                |   | d <sub>v</sub> | e |                |
| II,4         |                 |                | C |                |   |                |
| II,5         | a               |                |   |                | e |                |
| III,1        |                 | b              | C |                |   |                |
| III,2        | a               | b              |   |                |   |                |
| III,3        | a               |                |   |                |   | f              |
| III,4        | a               |                |   |                |   | f <sub>v</sub> |
| III,5        | a               | b              |   |                |   |                |
| III,6        |                 |                | C |                |   |                |

Key to letters: a = nagypapa; b = leszállt a tóba; C = giling-galang (refrain); d = bokáját; e = nézi a zöld hal; f = változik vízi sóvá; v = variation

engloutie” by Debussy.) At “giling-galang” in measures 13–15, the sound of bells is embodied through triads and seventh chords (colored by chromatic clusters in the right hand) resounding very loudly in the middle register. In contrast, the vocal line evokes the most elementary type of Hungarian children’s songs using only two pitches a minor third apart and the rhythmic values of a quarter and two eighths. An intensification in measures 20–23 is achieved by a gradual extension of this minor third up to a minor seventh. At the same time, both the rhythm and the tone of the vocal part, with an obstinate repetition of G# notes leaping up at the last syllable of each verse line, evoke how little children used to talk or sing.

György Kurtág wrote in 2006 that he considered Ligeti’s two completed Weöres songs from July 1946 “explosive, courageous, surrealistic madness, both self-discovery and promise for the future, incomparable in his oeuvre right up until the electronic *Artikulation* of 1958. I would almost say,” thus Kurtág, “that I count the ‘true’ Ligeti from this point on.”<sup>25</sup> “Kalmár jött nagy madarakkal” is similar to “Nagypapa leszállt a tóba” in that the piano has an individual part with pregnant musical material (even more dissonant than in “Nagypapa”), while the vocal line is declamatory with many repeated notes. The poem’s tone is eerie:

<sup>25</sup>György KURTÁG, “Kylwiria–Kálvária,” in VARGA (ed.), *György Kurtág*, 107.





**Sostenuto**

*pp una corda*

*8<sup>va</sup> con ped.*

5 Le-szállt a tó-ba nagy - pa - pa le-szállt a tó-ba

*8<sup>va</sup>*

8 **Poco a poco string. e cresc.**

*ppp*

*8<sup>va</sup> con ped.*

10

13 **ff** string. molto

gi-ling ga - lang

The image shows a musical score for Ligeti's "Nagypapa leszállt a tóba." It is an unfinished draft transcription. The score is written for voice and piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into five systems. The first system is marked "Sostenuto" and "pp una corda". The second system has the lyrics "Le-szállt a tó-ba nagy - pa - pa le-szállt a tó-ba". The third system is marked "Poco a poco string. e cresc." and "ppp". The fourth system has the lyrics "gi-ling ga - lang". The fifth system is marked "ff" and "string. molto". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

**Example 1.** Ligeti, "Nagypapa leszállt a tóba," unfinished draft, transcription.<sup>26</sup> Reproduced by kind permission of the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel

<sup>26</sup>CH-Bps GLC, Notenbuch 3, [51]–[54].



15 *tempo primo*

8<sup>va</sup> *una corda ppp subito*

17 *pp*

nagy - pa - pa le-szállt a fe - ke - te tó - ba.

18 *smorz.* [C]

Né - zi a zöld hal.

20

Nagy - pa - pa le-szállt a tó - ba nagy - pa - pa vál - to - zik ví - zi só - vá

22

nagy - pa - pa vál - to - zik fe - ke - te kő - vé nagy - pa - pa le-szállt a tó - ba

*fff*

Example 1. (continued)



Kalmár jött nagy madarakkal,  
a hercegisasszony meg ne lássa,  
őrizték a hercegisasszonyt!

Kalmár jött nagy madarakkal,  
a gyerekek kiabálnak,  
a hercegisasszony meg ne hallja!

A hercegisasszony sápadt, sose szól,  
szívében sok nagy madár rikácsol,  
őrizték a hercegisasszonyt!

A merchant came with great birds,  
the princess must not see,  
protect the princess!

A merchant came with great birds,  
the children are shouting,  
the princess must not hear!

The princess is pale and never speaks,  
in her heart many great birds shriek,  
protect the princess!<sup>27</sup>

As in “Nagypapa,” so in “Kalmár,” there is a tension between the text’s atmosphere and its rigorous structure. Each line of the first stanza is recapitulated: line 1 in line 4, line 2 (in a varied form) in line 6, and line 3 in line 9. Thus, the three motives that constitute the first stanza function like a frame for the whole poem (see Table 4). Ligeti’s setting is strophic, but the vocal part is varied in each stanza to correspond to the differing number of syllables per line and to emphasize keywords (“kiabálnak,” “sose,” “rikácsol”). The vocal line is declamatory, allowing the words to clearly come through, but it also reflects the text’s uncanny atmosphere in that most of the words are recited on one single pitch with even rhythm and with each syllable accentuated, which is in sheer contrast to the natural diction of the words. In addition, some of the words and grammatical structures that form a unity are broken up by rests (see “madarakkal,” “a hercegisasszony,” “a gyerekek,” “szívében”).

Table 4. Line structure of *Rongyszőnyeg*, no. 106

| Strophe/line | Correspondences |
|--------------|-----------------|
| I,1          | A               |
| I,2          | B               |
| I,3          | C               |
| II,1         | A               |
| II,2         | d               |
| II,3         | B <sub>v</sub>  |
| III,1        | e               |
| III,2        | f               |
| III,3        | C               |

“Táncol a Hold” is closer to the song genre than the two settings discussed so far. The vocal line is melodious rather than declamatory, and it shares its musical material with the piano, allowing the latter to accompany the singer rather than playing with individual material as in the

<sup>27</sup>Translation from SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 69, slightly amended.



two other songs. The more songlike nature of this setting is in line with the poem, which is more traditional in terms of both tone and structure than the two other poems set by Ligeti:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Táncol a Hold<br>fehér ingben.<br>Kékes fényben<br>fürdik <sup>28</sup> minden. | The Moon dances<br>in a white shirt.<br>In bluish light<br>everything bathes.      |
| Jár az óra,<br>tik-tak tik-tak.<br>Ne szólj, ablak,<br>hogya nyitlak.           | The clock goes,<br>tick-tock tick-tock.<br>Be still, window,<br>when I open you.   |
| Ne szólj, lány, ha<br>megcsókollak –<br>fehér inge<br>van a Holdnak.            | Be still, girl, if<br>I kiss you –<br>a white shirt<br>has the Moon. <sup>29</sup> |

Ligeti's fourth and last Weöres song, written in May 1947, is "Gyümölcs-fürt" [Bunch of fruit]. It was also left in draft and had been considered lost until Sallis found it. His reconstruction was authorized by Ligeti in 1987,<sup>30</sup> but it was not until 2004 that it was published as no. 2 of the *Three Weöres Songs*. The words are from *Forróövi motívumok* [Tropical Motives], a series of seven short, untitled poems first published in Weöres's *Elysium* in 1946. Each item of this series has a strongly rhythmic character, so that *Forróövi motívumok* may be considered as a series of metric studies. The first poem reads as follows:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Gyümölcs-fürt, ingatja a szél.<br>Ágon libeg, duzzadtan a fénytől.<br>Gyümölcs-fürt, kelő melegben.<br>Puha lomb közt ingatja a szél.<br>Gyümölcs-fürt, hozzuk le.<br>Add nekünk, boldog ág.<br>Gyümölcs-fürt, ingatja a szél. | Bunch of fruit, dangling in the wind.<br>Swaying on the branch, swollen by the light.<br>Bunch of fruit, in the arising warmth.<br>Among the soft boughs, dangling in the wind.<br>Bunch of fruit, let us fetch it.<br>Give it to us, happy branch.<br>Bunch of fruit, dangling in the wind. <sup>31</sup> |
|--|--|

More than just a metric study, what happens in this poem in fact is a systematic (and at the same time playful) variation of meters and motives in a symmetric layout (see Table 5). Each line is built up of two halves, the first consisting of three or four syllables, and the second of three, four, five, or six syllables. It is remarkable how meters are varied by frequent use of rhythmic inversion (see lines 1 and 4–7). Even the two recurring motives "gyümölcs-fürt" and "ingatja a szél" (marked in Table 5 *a* and *b*, respectively) are arranged symmetrically, *a* being repeated in every second line, and *b* in every third.

<sup>28</sup>In Weöres's collected writings, "úszik" [swims] instead of "fürdik" [bathes].

<sup>29</sup>Translation from SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 73, slightly amended.

<sup>30</sup>SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 59.

<sup>31</sup>Translation from SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 77, amended.



**Table 5.** Metric and motivic structure of *Forróövi motívumok*, no. 1

| Line | Rhythm                | Number of syllables | Motives |
|------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------|
| 1    | U - -   - - U U -     | 3 + 5               | a + b   |
| 2    | - - U -   - - U U - - | 4 + 6               | c + d   |
| 3    | U - -   U - U - U     | 3 + 5               | a + e   |
| 4    | U U - -   - - U U -   | 4 + 5               | f + b   |
| 5    | U - -   - - U         | 3 + 3               | a + g   |
| 6    | - U -   - U -         | 3 + 3               | h + i   |
| 7    | U - -   - - U U -     | 3 + 5               | a + b   |

The poem's structure is congenially recreated by Ligeti in the way that each text motive corresponds with a melodic formula, and all melodic formulae are variants, because they share the same pentatonic pitch collection (D $\flat$ , F, G, A $\flat$ , C). The melody's "swaying" between the neighboring pitches C/D $\flat$  and G/A $\flat$  represents the swaying and dangling of the bunch of fruit. This "fluctuation" multiplies through heterophony, that is, the three voices essentially have the same material with variances in ornamentation, rhythm, and octave position. The resulting music is to an extent static, which corresponds to the poem's character.

Ligeti's fifth Weöres setting of 1946–1947 is *Magány* [Solitude] for mixed choir. The words are from a lyric in the play *A holdbeli csónakos* [The Lunar Boatman] of 1941, and are accordingly songlike, having a regular rhyme scheme:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Sej, elaludtam,<br>sej, elaludtam<br>álló víz partján,<br>álló víz partján.                | Hey, I fell asleep,<br>hey, I fell asleep<br>on the shore of still water,<br>on the shore of still water. |
| Füvön fekvemben<br>ottan álomban<br>nőtt liliomszál,<br>nőtt liliomszál.                   | Lying on the grass<br>there in my dream<br>a lily grew,<br>a lily grew.                                   |
| Le kéne tépni,<br>mellemre tűzni,<br>az én rózsámat<br>kéne csókolni.                      | I should pluck it,<br>and pin it to my breast,<br>I should kiss<br>my sweetheart.                         |
| Sej, ellankadok,<br>lassan bágyadok,<br>lassan bágyadok,<br>holnap meghalok. <sup>32</sup> | Hey, I'm languishing,<br>I'm growing tired,<br>I'm growing tired,<br>tomorrow I'll die. <sup>33</sup>     |

<sup>32</sup>Quoted from WEÖRES, *Elhagyott versek*, 62–63.

<sup>33</sup>My translation.



Ligeti's setting is an ABA form, in which part A corresponds to stanzas 1 and 4 describing reality, and part B to stanzas 2 and 3 describing dream. These two different states of mind are expressed by contrasting musical parameters:

- Part A is slow and *rubato* in common time, with emphatic dissonances (see mm. 11–19 and 57ff.). Its tonal system is based on Bartók's polymodal chromaticism and 1:2 distance models, and the voice-leading is characterized by imitations and inversions.
- Part B is lively and *non rubato* in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time and is completely consonant. The harmonization is modal, and the texture is largely homophonic.

Though undeniably indebted to Bartók,<sup>34</sup> Ligeti's Weöres settings of 1946–1947 in fact constitute the most original and progressive part of his vocal output until 1955, which becomes quite clear when comparing them with his other works for voices. But there is another illuminating case for comparison: Farkas's *Gyümölcskosár* [Fruit Basket], a series of twelve songs on poems by Weöres, also composed 1946–1947. Both the choice of texts and the way they are set to music can be considered typical of the two composers' different approaches. While Ligeti chose experimental or dreamlike texts, Farkas preferred more traditional, songlike verses. Farkas even borrowed the title *Gyümölcskosár* from Weöres's illustrated anthology for children published in 1946.<sup>35</sup> Farkas's settings perfectly conform to the song genre, and they frequently evoke well-known musical topics such as march (no. 1), Hungarian folk song (no. 2), cradle song (no. 7), waltz in  $\frac{5}{4}$  (no. 10), and serenade (no. 11).

I will illustrate the difference of the two composer's approaches with two examples. Among the poems set by Farkas the one that stands closest in atmosphere to "Nagypapa" or "Kalmár" is *Rongyszőnyeg* no. 33 (no. 6 in Farkas):

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| A kő-béka lassan ment.    | The stone frog walked slowly.               |
| A kő-béka lassan ment.    | The stone frog walked slowly.               |
| Kitépték az éjféل szőréт, | They tore the midnight's fur off,           |
| lenyűzták a hajnal bőrét. | They stripped the skin of dawn.             |
| A kő-béka lassan ment.    | The stone frog walked slowly. <sup>36</sup> |

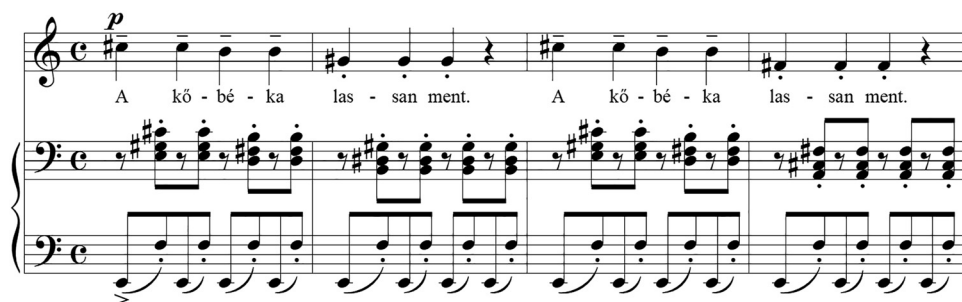
The scene's strangeness is expressed musically by the metric rigidity of the vocal part and the dissonances resulting from the clashing of the left hand's pedal point and ostinato with the right hand's chords. Otherwise, the music is straightforward, having a perfectly regular phrase structure, a clear tonality (the vocal line using only pitches of the C#-minor pentatonic scale), and uncomplicated rhythm (see [Example 2](#)).

<sup>34</sup>Sallis describes the compositional technique of Ligeti's Weöres songs as conventional and draws technical and stylistic parallels between them and Bartók's *Five Songs to Poems by Endre Ady*, op. 16. He even states that there is a certain contradiction between Ligeti's adoption of the conventionally expressive art song form and the innovative spirit of the poems. SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 62, 64, and 81.

<sup>35</sup>The book illustrated by Gyula Hincz was first published by Új Idők Irodalmi Intézet in Budapest. It includes poems from different earlier series, mostly from *Rongyszőnyeg*.

<sup>36</sup>My translation.





**Example 2.** Ferenc Farkas, “A kőbéka” (*Gyümölcskosár* no. 6), mm. 5–8. © by Universal Music Publishing Editio Musica Budapest. Reproduced by kind permission

No. 4 of *Gyümölcskosár* sets *Rongyszőnyeg* no. 2, whose first stanza Ligeti would use in “Reggel” in 1955. (For the poem see the next section in this article.) Farkas’s setting is based on the topic of tintinnabulation, but through syncopations and the occasional simultaneity of two metrically different layers (at the beginning, for instance, the left hand is in  $\frac{5}{4}$  and the right hand in  $\frac{4}{4}$ ) it also evokes the chaotic soundscape of a village morning, including bells, crows, and the donkey’s braying. In “Reggel,” Ligeti creates a similar soundscape through a four-part imitative structure and tone painting (the sound of bells in the bass and the crow in the tenor solo). Note that neither Farkas nor Ligeti could escape the rhythmic drive of the words, which is why the rhythm of the two settings is almost the same (see [Example 3](#)).

*Gyümölcskosár* became one of Farkas’s most popular works (with arrangements for various ensembles),<sup>37</sup> and it seems to have been a defining experience for Ligeti, too. He wrote an enthusiastic review of the first edition in spring 1948, and even in 1995 he recalled in a short article written for Farkas’s 90th birthday that “[i]t was a great experience when you played me your pieces in progress, the Weöres songs, and especially the Dsida cantata.”<sup>38</sup> In his review,



**Example 3.** Rhythm in Farkas’s and Ligeti’s settings of *Rongyszőnyeg* no. 2

<sup>37</sup>Arrangements by the composer exist for voice, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano; for voice, clarinet, viola, and piano; for voice and clarinet quartet; and for voice and wind quintet. See the work list in GOMBOS, *Farkas Ferenc*, 28.

<sup>38</sup>György LIGETI, “Kedves tanárom, Farkas Ferenc születésnapjára” [For the birthday of my dear teacher Ferenc Farkas], *Muzsika* 38/12 (1995), 6–7. The work Ligeti refers to as “Dsida cantata” is *Cantata lirica* (*Szent János kútja*) for mixed choir and orchestra (1945).



Ligeti states that it is difficult to write songs that are neither a mere declamation of the words nor a self-contained piece of music independent from them, and praises Farkas because he was able to compose real songs and had the audacity “to write clear and beautiful music” in the face of modernist demands for horrible acrobatics and dissonance.<sup>39</sup> As Sallis notes, Ligeti’s critique of “[t]he new Hungarian song literature [being] sunk up to its neck in declamation” seems to be “a repudiation of that which [he] had achieved in his own Weöres cycle.”<sup>40</sup> Approximately at the time Zhdanovshchina hit Hungary, Ligeti indeed seems to have turned away from his earlier aesthetic ideals and made tentative attempts at a simpler and more popular style, which culminated in his *Cantata for the Festival of Youth* in summer 1949.<sup>41</sup> According to Richard Steinitz, Ligeti was then instructed to compose a new cantata praising the Hungarian dictator, Mátyás Rákosi, but fortunately escaped the proposal thanks to a scholarship to study folk music in Romania.<sup>42</sup> Ligeti was there from the middle of October 1949 until the end of June 1950.<sup>43</sup> It was there that he returned to Weöres.

## 2. 1949–1950: SOLIDARIZING WITH WEÖRES

Between December 1949 and March 1950, Ligeti set three short lyrics by Weöres in Cluj for choir with the title *Hajnal* [Dawn], followed by two settings in November 1950 in Budapest, titled *Tél* [Winter].<sup>44</sup> All of these five poems appeared in the October 1949 issue of the Catholic literary journal *Vigilia* [Vigil] under the title “Tizenöt kis énekszöveg” [Fifteen Little Lyrics].<sup>45</sup> At that time Weöres had not been allowed to publish for about a year. The ban lasted until 1955,<sup>46</sup> when the anthology of his children’s verses titled *Bóbíta* eventually came out, followed by a book of poems tellingly titled *A hallgatás tornya* [The Tower of Silence] in late 1956.

The fifteen little lyrics in *Vigilia* probably resulted from a commission from Kodály. Notably, he had set Weöres’s poem *Öregék* [The Aged] for mixed choir as early as 1934, and four years later he asked the still young poet to write lyrics to his four-book educational series *Bicinia Hungarica* (first published 1941). Although Weöres immediately set to work, *Bicinia* includes

<sup>39</sup>György LIGETI, “Farkas Ferenc: 12 dal Weöres Sándor Gyümölcskosár című kötetéből,” *Zenei Szemle* 1/6 (1948), 337. English translation in SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 236. Ligeti iterated this opinion in his article “Neue Musik in Ungarn,” *Melos* 16/1 (1949), 5–8.

<sup>40</sup>SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 81.

<sup>41</sup>See KERÉKFI, “Functional Music.”

<sup>42</sup>STEINITZ, *György Ligeti*, 27.

<sup>43</sup>For more on Ligeti’s trip to Romania, see KERÉKFI, “Ligeti György 1949–50-es népzenei tanulmányútja.”

<sup>44</sup>Both pieces are being prepared for publication by Schott and have been recently recorded: György LIGETI, *Complete Works for a cappella Choir*, SWR Vokalensemble, dir. Yuval Weinberg (SWR Classic SWR19128CD, 2023).

<sup>45</sup>Sándor WEÖRES, “Tizenöt kis énekszöveg,” *Vigilia* 14/10 (1949), 652–655.

<sup>46</sup>During the years of silence, he nevertheless received a great many commissions for translations. See SCHEIN, *Weöres Sándor*, 79.





only seven pieces with his words (two original texts in book 2 and five translations in book 4), while 22 pieces in book 1 remain textless.<sup>47</sup> After Weöres had been banned and both he and his wife Amy Károlyi had lost their jobs in 1949, Kodály commissioned him to write lyrics to some educational material.<sup>48</sup> Weöres's collected writings include more than 70 posthumous lyrics under the title "Kodály *Bicinia* szövegtelen dalai" [Kodály *Bicinia* textless songs] dated to 1949–1950,<sup>49</sup> some of which Kodály did use, albeit not in *Bicinia* but much later in *Kis emberek dalai* [Songs for Small People], a collection of unaccompanied children's songs published in 1961. It was this repertory of lyrics which Weöres's *Magyar etüdök* [Hungarian Studies] grew out of.

Although I am not aware of any statement by Ligeti about *Hajnal* and *Tél*, the fact that he set five of these fifteen lyrics soon after they appeared suggests that he may have meant this as an act of solidarity with the poet. The very fact that these texts were published in *Vigilia* tells a great deal about Weöres's marginalized situation, because he had never published anything in that journal before nor would he do so again until 1966.<sup>50</sup> In the fall of 1949, following the arrest of Cardinal Mindszenty and in the midst of the Hungarian government's full-scale offensive against the Catholic church,<sup>51</sup> *Vigilia* was, to put it mildly, a marginal forum. At that time the journal was edited by Sándor Sík (1889–1963), a Catholic priest, monk, poet, and literary scholar, whose poem "Te Deum" Kodály set to music the same year. Thus it was very likely Kodály who proposed publishing Weöres's lyrics in *Vigilia*.

The texts Ligeti used in *Hajnal* and *Tél* are of a different kind from those set in 1946–47. Since they were written to existing melodies by Kodály, they are inevitably simpler in form and less original in content than Weöres's earlier poems, although all of them are of high quality and even have a special, sometimes folklike, atmosphere. They read as follows:

[*Hajnal*, no. 1]

Égi búza-szál:  
hajnal-csóva száll.  
Segíts engem, napsugár,  
dalra kelni már!

[*Hajnal*, no. 2]

Ugrál a csikó, nem is tudja mért, igazán!  
bizony! dúskál a veréb, nem is tudja mért, hej!<sup>52</sup>  
hintáz a virág, nem is tudja mért, igazán! bizony!  
nótáz a leány, nem is tudja mért, hej!

[*Dawn*, no. 1]

Heavenly wheat:  
dawn-tail flies.  
Help me, sunshine,  
to start singing now!

[*Dawn*, no. 2]

The foal is jumping, it knows not why, indeed!  
The sparrow is buzzing, it knows not why, hey!  
The flower is swaying, it knows not why, indeed!  
The girl sings a song, she knows not why, hey!

<sup>47</sup>See Weöres's lyrics for nos. 3, 4, 5, and 7 with Kodály's marginalia in WEÖRES, *Egybegyűjtött levelek*, 25–26. None of these lyrics was included.

<sup>48</sup>SCHEIN, *Weöres Sándor*, 79.

<sup>49</sup>WEÖRES, *Elhagyott versek*, 350–363.

<sup>50</sup>See <https://vigilia.hu/archivum/> (accessed: May 15, 2023).

<sup>51</sup>For details see BALOGH, *Mindszenty József*, 763–800.

<sup>52</sup>This line is missing in Ligeti's setting.



[*Hajnal*, no. 3]

Kék a hajnal, kék,  
harmat hinti még.  
Éledező tarka mező  
tavaszi csokra szép!  
Kék fönn az ég!  
Kék fönn az ég!  
Tavaszi szellő fújja hátunk,  
ragyog a kikelet,<sup>53</sup> örül a lég!

Nóta, meg ne állj,  
szállj te, szállj te, szállj!  
Fütyi kanyarúl, arc kipirúl,  
szapora móka vár!  
Zeng, zsong a táj!  
Zeng, zsong a táj!  
Viola-kedvünk, szöcske-lábunk,  
pityeg<sup>54</sup> a cinege, dalol a száj!

[*Tél*]

Áll a ladik Tiszarévnél,  
benne ül az öreg éjfél,  
odvasabb a magas égnél,  
áll a ladik Tiszarévnél.

Tekereg a szél,  
csavarog<sup>55</sup> a szél,  
didereg az eper ág:  
mit üzen a tél?

[*Dawn*, no. 3]

Blue is the dawn, blue,  
the dew is still on the ground.  
Fair is the spring bouquet  
of a blossoming meadow!  
Blue is the sky above!  
Blue is the sky above!  
Spring breezes are blowing on our backs,  
the spring is shining, the air is happy!

Song, don't stop,  
Fly, you, fly, you, fly!  
The whistle winds, the face blushes,  
a brisk fun awaits!  
The land resounds and jingles!  
The land resounds and jingles!  
Our spirit is violet, our legs are grasshopper,  
the tit chirps, the mouth sings!

[*Winter*]

The boat stands at Tiszarév,  
in it sits the old midnight,  
wiser than the high sky,  
the boat stands at Tiszarév.

The wind is blowing,  
The wind is whirling,  
The strawberry-branch is shaking:  
what is the message of winter?<sup>56</sup>

Ligeti's settings are miniature studies for choir, all of which heavily rely on the rhythm of the words. For the opening and closing piece of *Hajnal* Ligeti chose texts whose first two lines have the same rhythm, which allowed him to recapitulate the subject of the first piece in the third, thus creating an ABA<sub>v</sub> form. It is interesting that the number of voices increases with each piece: the first one is for three female voices, the tenor enters in the second, and the bass in the third piece. The systematic expansion of the sound space corresponds with the increasing duration of the pieces (no. 1 ca. 40'', no. 2 ca. 1'25'', no. 3 ca. 2'20'').

In terms of style, *Hajnal* is somewhat insecure; its modal harmonies echo in essence the consonant, triadic middle section of *Magány*. *Tél* is more interesting, especially its laconic, fast closing section (13 measures in  $\frac{2}{4}$  *Allegro molto*) that ends with a *fortissimo* diatonic cluster (see [Example 4](#)).

<sup>53</sup>In Ligeti, "szép kikelet" [beautiful spring] instead of "ragyog a kikelet."

<sup>54</sup>In Weöres's collected writings, "röpül" [flies] instead of "pityeg."

<sup>55</sup>In Weöres's collected writings, "kanyarog" (synonymous with "tekereg") instead of "csavarog."

<sup>56</sup>My translations.



**Allegro molto**  
*pp molto leggiero*

Csa - va - rog a      Di - de - reg az      e - per - ág,

Te - ke - reg a      szél, a szél, a      szél, a szél, a      szél, a szél, a      szél, a szél, a      szél, a szél, a

aj, *f* *mit?* *ff* *mit?* *mit?*

szél, a szél, a      szél, a szél, de      Mit ü - zen a      tél?      Mit?

Di - de - reg az      e - per - ág,      Mit ü - zen a      tél?      Mit?

**Example 4.** *Tél*, conclusion. © by Schott Music, Mainz. Reproduced by kind permission

### 3. 1952–1955: MUSICAL EXPERIMENTATION AFTER WEÖRES

That emphatic diatonic cluster written down on 9 November 1950 foreshadows a new path in Ligeti's development; the following year he started to develop a new musical style, so to speak, from scratch in *Musica ricercata* (1951–1953).<sup>57</sup> Of the new musical ideas he envisioned in the early 1950s, the most lasting was that of static music, which eventually led to *Apparitions* (1959–1960) and *Atmosphères* (1961). He repeatedly stated that the idea of static music had been haunting him since about 1950 but that he had no means to realize it until he was initiated into electronic music in 1957.<sup>58</sup> The ambition to create music that seems to stand still can nevertheless be observed in the harmonically and/or rhythmically neutral sections of some of his pre-1956 works. Diatonic or chromatic clusters in *Métamorphoses nocturnes* (1953–1954) and *Éjszaka, Reggel* are frequently employed to achieve harmonic neutrality.

The earliest example of Ligeti's use of diatonic clusters for harmonic neutralization is, however, another Weöres setting, the four-part canon "Pletykázó asszonyok" [Gossiping Women] (1952), which is entirely made up of diatonic clusters (see [Example 5](#)). This humorous miniature also foreshadows a typical feature of Ligeti's later vocal works, that is, the music itself evokes, even recreates, the soundscape of the events described by the words.<sup>59</sup> Here it is the sound of (probably older) women gossiping and gossiping, cutting each other off, that the music evokes. To sound more authentic Ligeti even adds typical gossipy phrases to the original text such as "ne mondja!" [you don't say!], "mit szól?" [what do you say?], "hallatlan!" [unheard of!], and "jaj!" [oh dear!].

<sup>57</sup>See KERÉKFI, "A 'New Music' from Nothing."

<sup>58</sup>See, for instance, Ligeti to Péter Várnai in [Without ed.], *György Ligeti in Conversation* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1983), 33.

<sup>59</sup>This is characteristic, for instance, of all the pieces in *Magyar etüdök*.





**Example 5.** *Pletykázó asszonyok*, harmony extract

Ligeti used the expression “snapshots’ of moods” to describe the words of *Éjszaka, Reggel*.<sup>60</sup> “Éjszaka” sets no. 7 of *Forróövi motívumok*, and “Reggel,” no. 2 of *Rongyszőnyeg*, but both use only a few selected lines. Remarkable here is Ligeti’s tendency to eliminate almost everything that suggests any kind of action in these texts, only retaining what can be considered a snapshot or a still. In the following quotations what has been retained by Ligeti is in italics:

[*Éjszaka*]

*Rengeteg tövis: éjszaka!*  
*rengeteg csönd: tücsök-cirpelés!*  
*én csöndem: szívem dobogása!*  
 Tejről, mézről szóljon az ének.  
 Virágról szóljon az ének.  
 Sok, nagyon sok virágról.  
 Anyáról szóljon az ének.  
*Rengeteg tövis: éjszaka!*  
*rengeteg csönd: tücsök-cirpelés!*  
*én csöndem: szívem dobogása!*

[*Reggel*]

*Már üti – üti már*  
*a torony a hajnalban!*  
*Az időt bemeszeli a korai kikeriki,*  
 lendül a vad dallam.  
 Kiscsacsi, kiabálj,  
 örülök a hangodnak!  
 Ha lefőz ez a kusza kikeleti kikeriki,  
 vége a rangodnak.

[*Night*]

*Masses of thorns: night!*  
*infinite silence: cricket-chirping!*  
*my silence: the beating of my heart!*  
 Of milk, of honey let the song sing.  
 Of flowers let the song sing.  
 Of many, very many flowers.  
 Of mother let the song sing.  
*Masses of thorns: night!*  
*infinite silence: cricket-chirping!*  
*my silence: the beating of my heart!*<sup>61</sup>

[*Morning*]

*[Already striking – striking already*  
*the tower at dawn!*  
*The time is being whitewashed by the early cock-a-doodle,*  
 the wild melody swings.  
 Little donkey, shout,  
 I’m glad to hear your voice!  
 If you’re outdone by this muddled springtime cock-a-doodle,  
 you’ll lose your rank.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup>See his note on *Éjszaka, Reggel* quoted in Table 1.

<sup>61</sup>Translation from SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 171, slightly amended.

<sup>62</sup>My translation.



The way in which the selected words are set to music here is similar to the procedure used in “Pletykázó asszonyok.” This is not only because canonic texture and static diatonic harmony prevail in both choral pieces, but also because the respective soundscapes described in the words are recreated in them by musical means: “infinite wilderness”<sup>63</sup> and “infinite silence” in “Éjszaka” by an intensifying, dense canonical structure, respectively sustained, then with soft pentatonic chords, and the sounds of a village morning with bells ringing and the cock crowing in “Reggel” by onomatopoeias. Despite the music’s direct connections to the text, the poems were probably not the starting point for the musical concept but rather catalysts. Ultimately the words serve here merely as the raw material for the realization of existing ideas of static music.

Ligeti’s last Weöres project before he left Hungary was a cantata for choir and orchestra on the epic poem *Istar pokoljárása* [Ishtar’s Journey to Hell], which he was apparently working on in November and December 1955 but never finished. In ancient Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian Empires, Ishtar was known as a goddess of love, war, and fertility, her primary title being “the Queen of Heaven.” Her most famous myth is the story of her descent into and return from the underworld. Based on this story, Weöres’s poem bears the subtitle “Babylon rege” [Babylonian myth] and was first published in *Medúza* in 1943, next to a (much longer) paraphrase of the Gilgamesh myth.

Weöres’s Istar, “the Moon’s daughter, mother of men, [and] the beautiful sister of the moving clouds,” descends into the underworld to bring out her beloved, but there she is deprived of her treasure, jewels, and clothes. Istar weeps for the dead, and they wake up. Allatu, the hell’s mistress, has Istar killed and curses her. Goddess Ea then creates a hero and sends him to Allatu. He breaks into her realm by force, destroys it, and resurrects Istar and clothes her. She rises, followed by the undead, who build four great bonfires. Istar throws her jewels and clothes into the fires, and “in born-naked light, she shines in fullness.”

It is thought-provoking that, in addition to the Istar oratorio, Ligeti planned to write a Requiem at the same time.<sup>64</sup> After all, *Istar*’s subject matter – the redemption of the dead through voluntary sacrifice – can in a sense be interpreted as an apocryphal, mythical Requiem. It is important to stress that it would have been practically inconceivable to have either the oratorio or the Requiem performed in Hungary at that time, which inevitably suggests that Ligeti embarked on these projects out of an inner, personal need. He wanted to write them for himself, even if he eventually had to realize that it was not reasonable to continue with these plans.

Nothing is known about the circumstances of the oratorio, but it is clear from the surviving manuscripts that Ligeti experimented in it with serialism.<sup>65</sup> Seven pages of sketches (including row charts) and ten pages of draft survive. The draft pages belong to three drafts, the first (without date) being one page long, the second (dated November 11, 1955) three pages, and the third (dated December 26) six pages long. All three drafts contain material for the instrumental prelude titled “Passacaglia (a pokol leírása)” [a description of hell],<sup>66</sup> renamed in the third draft to “Ostinato.” The

<sup>63</sup>Quoted from the English words by Ligeti in the printed edition.

<sup>64</sup>Steinitz mentions two plans for a Requiem, the first originating sometime after the completion of *Métamorphoses nocturnes* (i.e., most probably 1955) and the second from 1956. In the CH-Bps GLC, only manuscripts of the latter survive. See STEINITZ, *György Ligeti*, 65 and 67.

<sup>65</sup>Other works from 1955 to 1956 using serial technique include the *Chromatic Fantasy* for piano.

<sup>66</sup>In the second draft it is called “a pokol hiteles leírása” [an authentic description of hell].



music in the third draft is made up of six layers of ostinato entering in succession, each consisting of repetitions of a six-note pitch row (in four transpositions) and a four-note rhythm row, with each new layer having twice the tempo of the previous layer (see [Example 6](#)). After the sixth layer enters, a speaker starts reciting the poem's first stanza, followed by the chorus's rhythmical recitation of the second and third stanzas, while the orchestra continues to play the ostinato. With the fourth stanza, the second movement starts, which however breaks off after four measures.

What is remarkable about this "Ostinato" movement is not only the peculiar serial technique, but also the fact that Ligeti wanted to use this mechanically repetitive music to represent hell. In his memorable article on Bartók's chromatic technique published in September 1955, that is, just before he started to work on "Istar," Ligeti condemns serialism, saying that "atonality ... was converted ... into constraints never before imagined, in the inexorable mechanics of the twelve-tone row."<sup>67</sup> He goes on to state that in serial music, "form becomes static, [and] becomes almost timeless."<sup>68</sup> It seems then logical that he turned to the serial technique for the musical representation of the ruthlessness and timelessness of hell. Paradoxically, however, experimenting with serialism (as a "formalistic" technique condemned by the aesthetics of socialist realism) was in itself an act of self-liberation.

Had Ligeti completed "Istar" it might not only have become his largest-scale Weöres setting but also one quite different in genre and subject from any other work by him. Even if he did not finish it, it can hardly be a coincidence that he turned again to Weöres when experimenting with new compositional techniques.

The image displays musical notation for Example 6. At the top, four transpositions of a six-note pitch row are shown, labeled A, B, C, and D. Below these are six layers of rhythm, labeled 1A, 2C, 3B, 4D, 5A, and 6C. Each layer is written in 4/4 time and consists of a four-note rhythm row. The notation is arranged in a grid-like fashion, with the pitch rows at the top and the rhythm rows below them.

**Example 6.** The four transpositions of the six-note pitch row and the rhythm of each layer in the "Ostinato" of "Istar pokoljárása." Reproduced by kind permission of the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel

<sup>67</sup>György LIGETI, "Megjegyzések a bartóki kromatika kialakulásának egyes feltételeiről" [Remarks on Some of the Conditions for the Development of Bartók's Chromaticism], *Új Zenei Szemle* 6/9 (1955), 43. English translation in SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 259.

<sup>68</sup>LIGETI, "Megjegyzések," 43. English translation in SALLIS, *An Introduction*, 260, amended.



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