

Nonsense Madrigals by György Ligeti: The Musical Sense of Nonsense between Chaos and Order

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NONSENSE MADRIGALS AND LIGETI'S “PREMODERNISM”

One of the main musical trends of the second half of the 20th century was the regaining of ancient forms and genres and putting them in the new context of musical composition. The use of the madrigal can seem related to a desire for rebirth, which manifests itself in moments of linguistic, formal and perhaps even content crisis. According to Michela Garda,¹ for many composers “the madrigal in a certain sense represents the origin of the tradition of Western music, ending up to assume an almost symbolic value, in some way analogous to the Greek myth in the 18th century music, an ideal incipit for the art of sounds.”² The revival of the madrigal involves two fundamental consequences related to the dynamic conception of tradition, determined by the activity of reception and by the idea of tradition as a partial process of selection. In the first case, the process of restoring takes place within a dialogic structure of question and

answer that characterizes every relationship with a text of the past. The tradition presumes a reception with an “effect” of the past in the present: “[...] if tradition means a historical process of artistic practice, it must be considered as a movement which begins when one recognizes and adopts the past, approaches it and places it near what has been translated and preserved in the new light of a present meaning.”³ In the second case, when tradition is interpreted as a selection process, it can be accepted in an unintentional way or as an act of voluntary reflection. What emerges in both cases is an evident partiality of reception. Garda notes the difficulty that lies in the partial selection, which leaves the reference to the past to a subjective arbitrariness, opening up a space for disorientation and criticism.

When, in the second half of the 1980s, Ligeti decides to approach the texts of the English nonsense literature, the cultural and political situation in Europe is free from the post-war reminiscences. He himself comes from a difficult experience, lived in a country subject to the Stalinist regime, where composing new music was forbidden for a long time because of populist focusing on easy and understandable compositions for everyone. Only in the 1950s Ligeti is finally able

¹ M. Garda, *Alcuni esempi di ricezione compositiva del madrigale del Novecento* [in:] *Il madrigale oltre il madrigale. Dal Barocco al Novecento: destino di una forma e problemi di analisi*, Atti del IV Convegno internazionale sulla musica italiana nel secolo XVIII, Lenno-Como, 28–30 giugno 1991, a cura di Alberto Colzani, Andrea Luppi, Maurizio Padoan, A.M.I.S. (Antique Musicae Italicae Studiosi) Como 1994.

² *Ibidem*, p. 307.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 309.

to access the news from abroad. Thus, he begins to use the serial technique and to attend the Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt. At the same time, he does not deny his interest in the utilisation of ancient forms and elements, even suggesting the term “pre-modernism” instead of “postmodernism” to define his own approach to the trend.⁴ The case of the *Nonsense Madrigals*, however, is rather a fruit of a great passion for the literary sources he used and towards nonsense in general. Lewis Carroll’s Alice Books fascinated Ligeti from his early childhood, when he read them in Hungarian translation by Frigyes Karinthy.⁵ Through Carroll’s books, Ligeti became acquainted with the works of other Victorian authors, such as Edward Lear or William Brighty Rands, also used in the *Madrigals*. The *Nonsense Madrigals* are not the first example of the use of nonsense by Ligeti: in 1983 he had composed *Magyar Etüdök [Hungarian Studies]* for choir, based on nonsense texts by Sándor Weöres, and the *Aventures/Nouvelle Aventures* in 1962 and 1966 which are a kind of ironic and absurd “mimodrama”. The idea of *Nonsense Madrigals* could be Ligeti’s response to postmodernism and, in this case, the expression of a new desire for change caused by the warning of a linguistic, formal and content crisis, or it could, rather, be a smug expression of post-modernism itself.

THE “STYLISTIC REVOLUTION” ACROSS LIGETI’S WRITINGS

The *Nonsense Madrigals* are six short pieces for six male voices based on English nonsense literature and composed between 1988 and 1993 on the commission of the British male sextet the King’s Singers.⁶ The madrigals were composed in the same period

as the second book of *Études* for piano. As we read in Ligeti’s writings the inspiration for the *Nonsense Madrigals* came from two distant sources, the mensural notation of the 14th century and the Sub-Saharan polyrhythm Ligeti discovered in those years thanks to Simha Arom’s research in Africa.⁷ In a comment to the composition, written in English on the 16th September 1988, Ligeti declared rhythmic complexity as the principal characteristic of his new style.

“Thanks to these two techniques” – Ligeti writes – “it is possible to match more melodic lines in different times. While the mensural notation allows the partition of the note value in two or three units, I introduced a partition in five or seven units. Similarly, in the African rhythms only strictly periodical groups are possible, while I use different and irregular proportions of tempo.”⁸

As reported by Ligeti in the introduction to the English version of *Polyphonies et polyrythmies instrumentales d’Afrique Centrale* by Simha Arom, the first approach to African polyrhythms and polyphonies dates back to 1982, when the composer received Arom’s recordings of vocal and instrumental music of the Banda-Linda African tribe.

“Having never before heard anything quite like it, I listened to it repeatedly and was then, as I still am, deeply impressed by this marvellous polyphonic, polyrhythmic music with its astonishing complexity. [...] The formal simplicity of sub-Saharan African music with its unchanging repetition of periods of equal length, like the uniform pearls of a necklace, is in sharp contrast to the inner structure of these periods which, because of simultaneous superimpositioning of different rhythmic patterns, possesses an extraordinary degree of complexity. [...] What we can witness in this music is a wonderful combination

⁴ G. Ligeti, *Ma Position comme compositeur d’aujourd’hui*, “Contrechamps” 1990, vol. 12/13, pp. 8–9, [in:] Taylor S.A., *The Lamento Motif: Metamorphosis in Ligeti’s Late Style*, D.M.A. Dissertation, Cornell University 1994, p. 146.

⁵ G. Ligeti, *Nonsense Madrigals*, [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, Basel–Mainz 2007, p. 301; transcription of an English original dated Sept 16, 1988, published as introduction to the first German performance of entire cycle of *Nonsense Madrigals* on April 21, 1994 at Gütersloh ’94: Musikfest für György Ligeti, 16–24 April 1994, p. 6.

⁶ For a larger monograph about *Nonsense Madrigals* see D. Malfatti, *An Analysis of György Ligeti’s Nonsense Madrigals*, PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University 2004.

⁷ S. Arom, *African polyphony and polyrhythm*, Cambridge–New York–Paris 1991, p. xvii. For further studies see eadem, *Le ragioni della musica. Scritture di musicologia africanista*, a cura di M. Agamennone e S. Facci, Lucca 2013; eadem, *Polyphonies et polyrythmies instrumentales d’Afrique central. Structure et méthodologie*, 2 volumes, *Ethnomusicologie* 1, Paris 1985; L. Aubert, *Simha Arom. Polyphonies et polyrythmies instrumentales d’Afrique central. Structure et méthodologie*, “Cahiers de l’ethnomusicologie” [En ligne], 1/1988, mis en ligne le 15 août 2011. URL: <http://ethnomusicologie.revues.org/2314>; S.A. Taylor, *Ligeti, Africa and Polyrythm*, “The World of Music” 2003, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 83–94.

⁸ G. Ligeti, *Nonsense Madrigals*..., op. cit., pp. 301–302.

of order and disorder which in turn merges together producing a sense of order on a higher level.”⁹

The “marvellous polyphonic, polyrhythmic music with its astonishing complexity” that results from the superimposition of different patterns has also another meaning, says Ligeti, because the melody, the harmony, the rhythm and the simultaneity of melodic lines become vehicles to express sentiments. The attention in the *Nonsense Madrigals* is concentrated more on poetic setting than on expression of the meaning.

Ligeti then lists the sub-Saharan music scholars whose recordings he had the opportunity to approach, including Hugo Zemp, Gerhard Kubik and Alfons Dauer. In the same introduction, the composer mentions his passion for the music of Philippe de Vitry, Guillaume de Machaut and Johannes Ciconia, as well as for the compositions of Conlon Nancarrow. In 1982 Ligeti begins a new phase of composition that arrives after a long period of compositions “lacking in movement, with vague transitions and high level of fusion of voices and timbres,”¹⁰ characteristic of his micropolyphonic period of the ‘60s. However, the use of micropolyphony does not disappear entirely. As Mike Searby states: “[...] this ambiguous approach to quasi-tonal harmony allows Ligeti to ‘play’ with the listener’s expectations. The listener never feels completely on firm tonal land because the harmonic background of the music is continually twisting and turning.”¹¹

The first hints of the new conception manifest themselves in Ligeti’s *Trio for violin, horn and piano* (1982) where the three instruments move on distinct melodic-rhythmic levels. The second movement of this composition Ligeti describes as “a fast polymetric dance inspired by a popular music of a ‘non-existent community’, located between Hungary, Romania and the Balkans, somewhere between Africa and the Caribbean.”¹² The complex hemiolic construction of this work is based on Chopin’s and Schumann’s

music and uses the rhythm of eight beats split into different schemes like 3+2+3, 3+3+2 and so, similar to the rhythm called Aksak which is characteristic of Bulgarian folk music.¹³ These schemes create a polyrhythmic structure of great richness. The multitude of inputs underlying the new compositional idea is quite nonsensical: the “non-existent community”, full of different inputs apparently impossible to encounter, could be a metaphor of changes in Ligeti’s style and of his new, unexplored, almost “non-existent” style.

Ligeti’s research on rhythm continues with the *Three Fantasies by Friedrich Hölderlin* for mixed choir of 16 voices a cappella (1982) in which he seeks an affective strengthening for a greater complexity from the counterpoint and metric point of view, with the use of “not tonal but not even atonal” melodic and harmonic figures.¹⁴ In 1983, the already mentioned *Magyar Etüdök* (Hungarian Studies) were composed, and in 1985 Ligeti completed the draftings of the first book of *Studies for piano* for which he drew

¹³ “Aksak”. The term was taken from S. Arom writings: *A Kinship Foreseen: Ligeti and African Music*. Simha Arom in *Conversation* (19 Nov 2008), [in:] György Ligeti. *Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds*, ed. by L. Duchesneau and W. Marx, Woodbridge 2011, pp. 107–124.

“Bulgarian Rhythm”: frequently used rhythms in Bulgarian folk music

5/8 2+3 or 3+2
7/8 2+2+3 or 3+2+2
8/8 3+2+3 or 2+3+3
9/8: 2+2+2+3 or 2+3+2+2
10/8 3+2+2+3 or 2+2+3+3
[...]

Bulgaria’s asymmetrical rhythms may be thought of as combination of duple and triple metres strung together to create heterometric patterns [...]. Each pattern serves as the basis for one or more dance types, which may be differentiated by region and choreography.

[...]

Although these heterometres, of which there are many more than mentioned here, were termed ‘Bulgarian’ by

Béla Bartók (1938); they are linked to similar pattern found in Greece, the Former Yugoslav Republic of

Macedonia, Turkey and Caucasus.”, *Voce “Bulgaria”*, [in:] *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. by Stanley Sadie, London 2001, p. 578; J. Cler, *Pour une théorie de l’aksak*, “Revue de Musicologie” 1994, vol. 80, no. 2, pp. 181–210; B. Brăiloiu, *Le rythme aksak*, “Revue de Musicologie” 1951, vol. 33, pp. 71–108; S. Arom, *L’Aksak*, “Cahiers de l’ethnomusicologie” [En ligne], 17/2004, mis en ligne le 13 janvier 2012. URL: <http://ethnomusicologie.revues.org/413>.

¹⁴ G. Ligeti, *Magyar etüdök*, [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 286; originally an introduction to the performance at the Steirischen Herbst Festival in Graz 1984.

⁹ S. Arom, op. cit., p. xvii.

¹⁰ G. Ligeti, *Zum Klavierkonzert*, [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 300.

¹¹ M. Searby, *Ligeti the Postmodernist?*, “Tempo, New Series” 1997, no. 199, pp. 10–12; see also M. Searby, *Ligeti Stylistic Crisis: Transformations in His Musical Style 1974–1985*, Maryland–Toronto–Plymouth 2010.

¹² G. Ligeti, *Trio für Violine, Horn und Klavier*, [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 283.

inspiration from the great masters of the past, Scarlatti, Chopin, Schumann and Debussy.

Ligeti's research focuses on two main aspects: rhythmic patterns and the possibility to obtain the illusory melodic-rhythmic configurations of one or more voices, "something analogous to the 'impossible' perspectives by Maurits Escher."¹⁵ The "rhythmic illusion" (*Illusionsrhythmik*) is obtained through the execution of a fast and homogeneous succession of sounds perceived as a slower and more irregular rhythmic form due to the particular distribution of the frequencies of some recurring sounds. The ear of the listener tends to organize the sounds to create one or more auditory streams. For example, two different acoustic stimuli played alternatively in a fast tempo are perceived as two reorganised streams because of similar characteristics. Due to this particular overlapping of the voices the listener can perceive structures not present in the score. The *Illusionsrhythmik* can be regarded as a reconsideration of the rhythmic conception used already by Ligeti in the *Symphonic poem for one hundred metronomes* (1962) and in the *Continuum for harpsichord* (1968). More influences of the new compositional approach come from geometry and fractal geometry with reference to the scholars Benoît Mandelbrot and Heinz-Otto Peitgen, from whom Ligeti borrows the deformation of the pattern and the self-similar shapes. Another source of rhythmic ideas is Conlon Nancarrow (*Studies for Player Piano*) from whom Ligeti learns the rhythmic and metric complexity with "rhythmic-melodic subtleties that lie outside the boundaries experienced so far in modern music", and jazz pianism by Thelonious Monk and Bill Evans.

"However my studies", writes Ligeti, "are neither jazz nor Chopin or Debussy, and not even African music, Nancarrow or mathematical constructions. [...] what I compose is difficult to classify. It is neither 'avant-garde' nor 'traditional', it is neither tonal nor atonal – in no postmodern way,¹⁶ where for me

there is nothing else than an ironic theatricalization of the past."¹⁷ Another example of experimentation in the rhythmic field prior to the 1982 is the *Monument* (1976) for two pianos in which both pianists perform similar musical itineraries at different times, one binary and one ternary, creating an extremely complex structure through the superimposition. It is evident that Ligeti was experimenting with rhythm long time before his discovery of sub-Saharan music. In his writings the composer reveals his great interest in puzzles, paradoxes of perception and imagination, the Gestalt psychology and morphogenesis, growth and transformation, and in the discrimination of different levels of abstraction of language and thought. Among the authors and artists most studied in that period Ligeti lists Lewis Carroll, Maurits Escher, Saul Steinberg, Franz Kafka, Boris Vian, Sandor Weöres, Jorge Luis Borges, Douglas R. Hofstadter, Manfred Eigens, Hansjocherm Autrums, Jacques Monods and Ernst Gombrich. Among Ligeti's main interests there is the concept of ambiguity present in the mensural writing of the late Middle Ages as well as in romantic and African music. Also, in the second book of *Studies for piano*, composed in the years 1988–1994, Ligeti experiments with the rhythms of extra-European cultures: the seventh study entitled *Galamb borong* (it. A looming pigeon), for example, takes up the tradition of Javanese gamelan.

The rhythmic research reaches its culmination in Ligeti's *Piano Concerto* (1985–1988), whose first poly-metric movement superimposes two rhythmic indications, 12/8 and 4/4. The rhythms develop through asymmetrical groups constructed in the manner of different length *talea*, played at different speed levels. The repeated patterns of both rhythms never coincide, but as in a kaleidoscope, they always create new combinations. In the third movement of the *Concerto*, over the constant basic pulsation different types of hemiolias and "inherent melodic patterns"¹⁸

the past" but rather intends to discover new ways to employ the universal music elements. (Conversation with György Ligeti cfr. in M. Searby, *Ligeti the Postmodernist?...*, op. cit., p. 11).

¹⁷ G. Ligeti, *Études pour piano*, [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 289.

¹⁸ The term "inherent patterns" was borrowed by Ligeti from Gerhard Kubik. G. Ligeti, *Zum Klavierkonzert...*, op. cit., p. 301; originally as introduction to the booklet of the CD-Edition by Teldec Classics (*The Ligeti Project I*, 8573-83953-2), Hamburg 2001.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 287.

¹⁶ In a comment to his *Piano Concerto* Ligeti defines the postmodern as a fashion: "Mit dem Klavierkonzert lege ich nun mein ästhetisches Credo vor – meine Unabhängigkeit von Kriterien sowohl der tradierten Avantgarde als auch der modische Postmoderne" (G. Ligeti, *Zum Klavierkonzert...*, op. cit., p. 300). According to Mike Searby, even if Ligeti approaches the past it is not possible to "label" him as a postmodern composer, because he is not searching to "rediscover

appear, which played with the “right” speed and clear accents, create illusory rhythmic-melodic structures not present in the score but perceived by the listener due to a particular overlapping of the voices.¹⁹ According to Ligeti the *Concerto* is a “result of a stylistic revolution” that marks the total abandonment of the chromatics and micropolyphonic structures to turn towards a “granular” rhythmic structure: “A succession of uniform and fast impulses and their groupings (‘grains’). The ‘grains’; are like pixels of the screen that turn on and off in fast successions without moving. However, the alternation of image switching on and off generates the illusion of movement, as if the surface of the image were ‘alive’.”²⁰

After the composition of the *Nonsense Madrigals* (1988–1993), the “stylistic revolution” will concern also the *Violin Concerto* (1990, rev 1992) and the *Sonata for solo viola* (1991–1994) which, due to adding new solutions to those already elaborated, will carry Ligeti’s style increasingly towards the postmodern. In fact, the composer lists the sonatas of Bach and Ysaÿe, and the violin compositions of Paganini, Wieniawski and Szymanowski as models for his concerto. The most relevant inspiration of the *Sonata* is taken from Bach, but Ligeti mentions also the elegance of the viola in Schubert’s last quartet, in Schumann’s piano quintets or in the orchestral compositions by Berlioz.²¹ Ligeti claims that to understand the musical sense of the *Sonata* one should approach the *Violin Concerto* and the *Nonsense Madrigals* as well. The key to the interpretation of the *Sonata* lies precisely in the art of humour of the *Nonsense Madrigals*, in their universality and nonsense which “would be understandable in the United Kingdom and in the literary cafes of Budapest in the 1930s as well.”²²

COMPLEXITY AS A FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE OF THE NONSENSE MADRIGALS

The inspirations of Ligeti become clearer if one examines the archives of the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, where all jottings, drawings, charts, tables and musical notation sketches of the *Nonsense Madrigals* are collected.²³ The most interesting ones, initial jottings (almost entirely in Hungarian), present large numbers of single words, like brainstorming, regarding rhythmic and melodic aspects of the composition. The Ligeti Collection in Basel contains more than seventy pages of sketches and musical notation for the *Nonsense Madrigals* that are available for research purposes. Some other annotations referring to the composition may be found in the sketches of the *Piano Etudes* (Book 2, 1988–1994) and *Magyar etüdök* (1983). A large number of jottings have been written on A4 paper sheets, but smaller formats are also present. From the colour intensity of the writing, it is possible to conclude that Ligeti used different pens, probably at different moments of the creative process. The brainstorming that results from the variety of references doesn’t seem instant. It seems to be a result of a long and repeatedly revised reflection. Unfortunately, only some of the jottings contain a precise date. That’s why it is quite difficult to determine the exact time of writing. All the references create a kind of apparent chaos, which appears more and more organized as one goes through it from the beginning to the end. Once I examined all the pages of the manuscript, I organized the single words into thematic groups transcribed as they appear in the jottings. We can see the ancient inspirations from Medieval music to Renaissance and Baroque, Sub-Saharan Polyrhythm, Balkanic and Oriental Influences, Popular Music, Ligeti himself, Jazz and other less frequent inspirations (Fig. 1).

¹⁹ G. Ligeti, *Zu meinem Klavierkonzert*, [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 297; written on February 20, 1988 as an introduction to the first performance in Vienna.

²⁰ Idem, *Zum Klavierkonzert...*, op. cit., p. 301.

²¹ Idem, *Sonate für Viola solo*, [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 308.

²² Idem, *Zur Sonate für Viola solo*, [in:] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 311.

²³ According to Jonathan W. Bernard the autograph sources of the creative process of Ligeti are divided into five categories: jottings, drawings, charts, tables and musical notation. J.W. Bernard, *Rules and Regulation: Lessons from Ligeti’s Compositional Sketches*, [in:] *György Ligeti. Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds...*, op. cit. For further studies about the sketches see: W. Marx, ‘How I wonder what you’re at!’ – *Sketch Studies of Ligeti’s Nonsense Madrigals*, “Contemporary Music Review” 2012, vol. 31, issue 2–3, pp. 135–148.

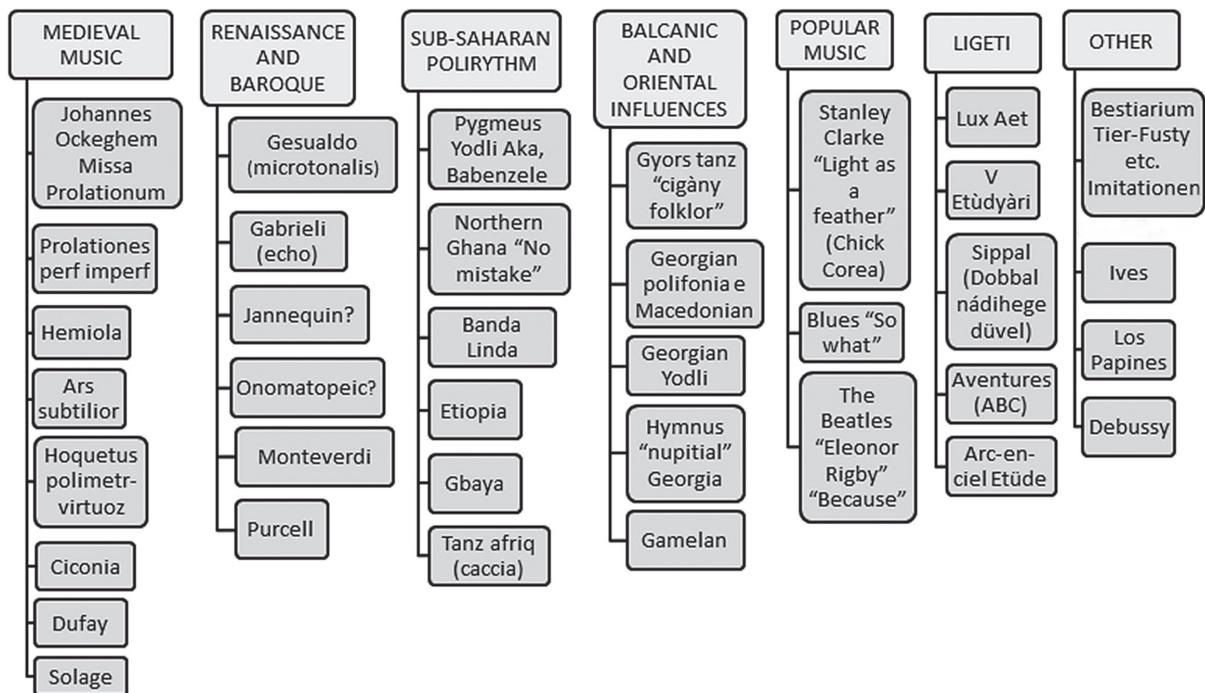


Fig. 1. Table of Ligeti's inspirations as they appear in the jottings

At least a few inspirations from every group listed appear in the *Nonsense Madrigals*. I will show the most evident ones in the musical analysis in the following sub-chapters.

THE SENSE OF NONSENSE: FROM LITERATURE TO MUSIC

Even if the origins of nonsense literature could be considered in a wider historic context,²⁴ it becomes a proper literary genre in the 19th century because of the nonsense writings by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. According to Jean Jacques Lecercle's study on 19th-century Nonsense,²⁵ some of the nonsense texts are impossible to comprehend due to their semantic incoherence and the presence of neologisms. There are four levels of construction of nonsense: phonology,

morphology, syntax and semantics, which compensate for each other in case one of them is missing. Nonsense is a pragmatic and visionary genre and deals with the eccentricity of language rather than the psychology of characters.²⁶ Nonsense texts are like patchworks, created by pieces of different origin and colours. As Lecercle states, nonsense has a kind of ideological function even though it has no proper ideology: it's a sort of transmitter of discourse which concerns language, fiction and logic, natural sciences and madness. The fiction of nonsense has an intuitive and reflective nature and that's why we can consider it a metanarrative genre.²⁷

According to Susan Stewart's analysis of the aspects of intertextuality in literature,²⁸ "nonsense stands in contrast to the reasonable, positive, contextualized, and 'natural' world of sense as the arbitrary, the random, the inconsequential, the merely cultural." The author describes sense as "sensory", "tangible" and

²⁴ For the origins of literary nonsense see: N. Malcolm, *The Origins of English Nonsense*, London 1997; *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*, ed. by W. Tigges, Amsterdam 1987.

²⁵ J.J. Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature*, London–New York 1994, p. 29.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 199.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ S. Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, Baltimore–London 1979.

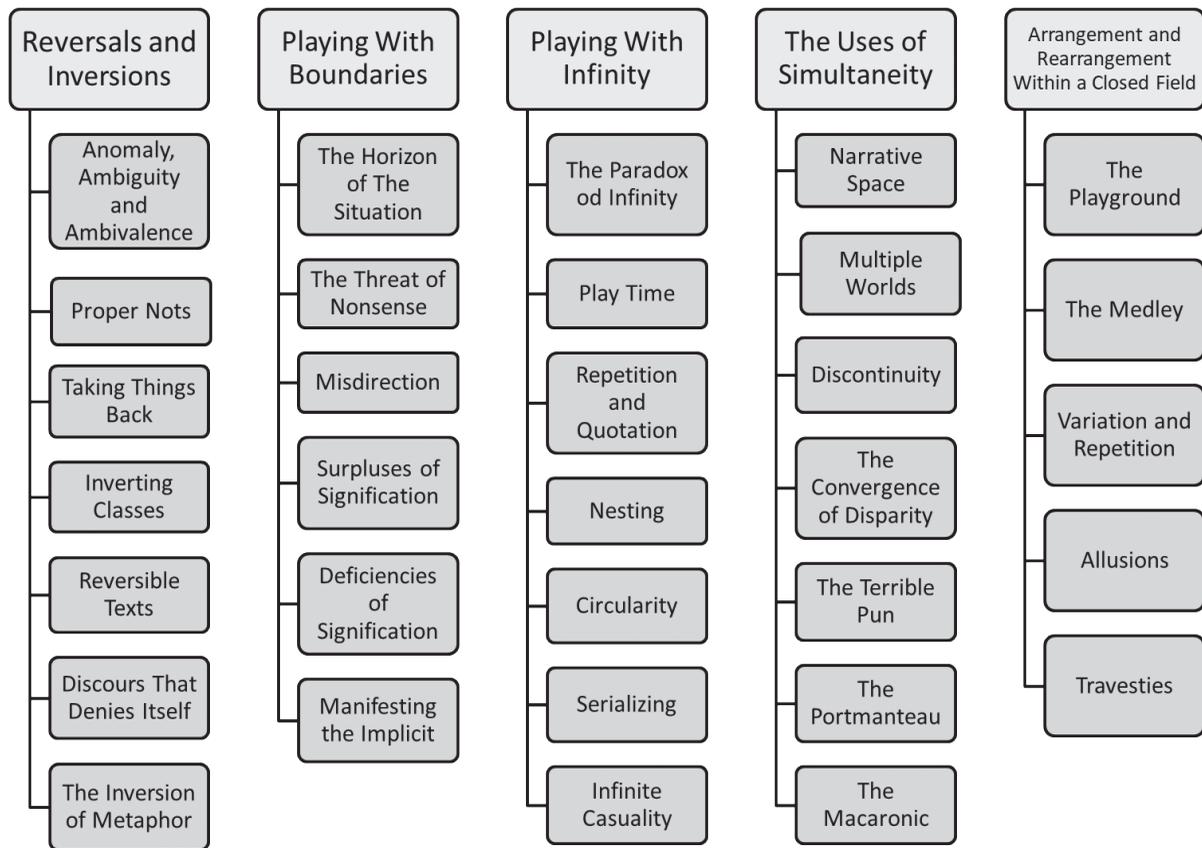


Fig. 2. The areas and tools of literary nonsense defined by Susan Stewart

“real”, while nonsense is “a game of vapours”, “unrealizable” and a “temporary illusion”. While sense is “common” and “down to earth,” nonsense appears as “perfect”, “pure”, like “an untouched surface of meaning whose every gesture is reflexive.”²⁹ The language of nonsense is out of context. It could be a negative language, an impediment, an illness, that is always around and makes us waste time. However, without nonsense, the sense couldn’t be “measured” and could be exposed to infinity and regression. Stewart sets nonsense against sense: the “really happened” of sense against the “never happened” or “could be never happened” of nonsense. Stewart divides nonsense aspects into a number of wider areas which in turn divide into different tools and operations.³⁰

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 4.

³⁰ See Fig. 2 in which I present all the areas and tools of literary Nonsense defined by Susan Stewart.

One of the main aspects of literary nonsense are the “multiple worlds” which emphasises the basic and mystic chaos of the world and coexists with the “discontinuity” of the literary text. More extreme is the discontinuity and simultaneous confusion, and more nonsense is the discourse. Another frequent nonsense feature is a “play with boundaries of discourse” with its “surpluses of signification” which is supported by a game of words and appears as an enigma or a puzzle. The discourse is extended for purely artistic purposes: it uses redundant details to strengthen its artistic elements. Another kind of literary nonsense is a “play with infinity” which occurs by manipulation of limits of time and space. Events which are characterised by a beginning and a distinctive ending are being transformed and therefore they break the regular course of human events characterised by temporal limits. Examples of playing with

infinity are the “play time” which may be limited to any specific “amount” but at the same time implicate the infinity of the abstract time system, or “nesting” which functions like “Chinese boxes” of discourse: a discourse of minimal dimension extends little by little up to infinity. The discourse is transformed also by the “arrangement and rearrangement within a closed field” which regards an event with given boundaries while the space it surrounds is a place of infinite substitution of permutable and incongruous content. The content might be also misdirected and twisted by different conclusions giving space to parody or caricature or misdirected by distraction of the reader through a trick or joke that changes the boundaries of the discourse.

The richness of Ligeti’s *Nonsense Madrigals* as the result of superimposition of different musical elements causes the major presence of nonsense aspects. We can observe as the literary analysis by Susan Stewart matches perfectly the musical analysis, enriching and putting it in a new and enthralling light. The variety of patterns used contemporaneously, simultaneously or separately, indicates the presence of multiple worlds which contribute to the sensation of an illusory chaos. Thanks to the multiplicity of musical tools, such as madrigalisms or micropolyphony, which contribute to the complexity of architecture of the *Nonsense Madrigals*, we are faced with surplus of significance. These characteristics coexist with the serialization of patterns repeated a number of times, counterpoising the discontinuity of the musical discourse.

THE ANALYSIS

I have chosen two of the *Nonsense Madrigals*, no. 1 *Two Dreams and Little Bat* and no. 6 *A Long, Sad Tale*, written respectively in 1988 and 1993, to focus on the most interesting technical and stylistic tools that make the sound of the pieces ancient and modern at the same time and contribute to obtaining the balance of superimposition of different patterns and literary texts. I introduce a new analysis of musical nonsense as well, based on Susan Stewart’s literary analysis presented above. First of all, I have chosen some concepts from Fig. 1, such as mensural notation, madrigalisms, Debussy, Sub-Saharan

Polyrhythm – with its ambiguity as a base of the foundation principle –, and a Bulgarian rhythm, aksak. Aksak is a rhythm with a particular outline that we can describe as an alternation of groups of 3 and 2 notes. After Béla Bartók and other scholars’ theorizations, Simha Arom proposes three types of aksak: the 3+2+2 real aksak, the 3+2+2+2 quasi-aksak and a 3+2+3 pseudo-aksak. Arom notes also the link between the use of Bulgarian rhythm in Ligeti and the African principle of the “rhythmic oddity” that have the same expression in numbers.

In the score of the first madrigal, *Two Dreams and Little Bat*, composed in 1988 in “gently swinging” character, Ligeti welcomes us with a vertical hemiola signed just at the key signature three half notes equal four dotted quarters. He distributes the parts of hemiola between Countertenors and Baritones of two poetic texts by William Brighty Rands concerning children’s dreams (Example 1). To this rhythm that is already quite complex, Ligeti adds the “cantus firmus” of the famous English nursery lullaby, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* in the version from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (*Twinkle Twinkle Little Bat*). The rhythmic values of the melody are artificially enlarged, creating a contrasting counterpoint with the previous rhythm. What is interesting is that the large note values of the cantus firmus don’t allow it to emerge. On the contrary, this contributes to creating a sensation of illusionary chaos, as

Example 1. *Two Dreams and Little Bat*, bars 1–3 (Countertenors and Baritones hemiola)

the different rhythmical patterns are superimposed one above another (Example 2). There is a kind of mash-up of all the rhythms and melodic lines. And this is the most evident link of Ligeti with the medieval technique *ars subtilior* and its characteristic of mixing different rhythms and texts in the way that all the voices fuse together. There is also a short 7+5 pattern added to the other rhythms which gives some new air to the composition (Example 3), but the most interesting tool Ligeti uses in this piece is the madrigalism. At the moment the madrigalism occurs, the

Example 2. *Two Dreams and Little Bat*, bars 4–6 (Tenor cantus firmus)

Example 3. *Two Dreams and Little Bat*, bars 22–23 (Counter-tenors 7+5 pattern)

superimposition of rhythmical patterns stops. From one side this operation helps to distract the listener, from another it creates a new breath, different, yet still complex. There are several moments of tone or word painting in this madrigal, such as the single word “white” painted with the whole note or the onomatopoeic madrigalism like drummers beating on their drums (Example 4). The largest one is a sound description of two words extracted from William Brighty Rands’ text “I dreamt running”, which lead to the climax of the entire piece and describes not only the onomatopoeic meaning of the words but also the atmosphere of a dream.

Example 4. *Two Dreams and Little Bat*, bars 16–17 (word painting and madrigalism)

From the simple motif “I dreamt running” Ligeti develops new motifs more and more dense and intense which carry the entire piece to its culmination. The composer uses different tetrachords, especially the whole tone tetrachords which make us think about Debussy’s impressionism, here used actually to introduce the dreamy atmosphere. Ligeti begins with only three low voices altering tetrachords with the interval of a fifth, and limiting them between the two extremes of the interval (Example 5). When the madrigalism comes to culmination – especially on the word “dreamt” – all the voices are involved to form the clusters or minor seventh chords that respectively enforce or release the tension of the music. The

Example 5. *Two Dreams and Little Bat*, bars 27–29 (“I dreamt running” tetrachords)

Example 7. *Two Dreams and Little Bat*, bars 48–52 (final word painting)

direction of tetrachords is always ascending, up to the culmination in the *fortissimo* that conducts to the *ppp* on the word “plain” described with the whole notes that last up to the end of the Madrigal (Example 6). During that long “plain” fragment many events occur, but the most interesting is a kind of distant memory of Ligeti’s micropolyphony (Example 7). Considering the theory of chaos, which was one of the main topics Ligeti studied in those years, the single

tetrachord could be considered a particle that wanders in an erratic way being still pent in a determined ratio of space, the interval of fifth in this case. The new order arrives once the tetrachords have built entire scales and the rhythm becomes more regular, and so the culmination is possible.

Following Susan Stewart’s idea, in the case of *Two Dreams and Little Bat* Ligeti uses the misdirection to pass from one tool to another, and elaborates to perfection the passage to new material when the old one is still playing. In his madrigalism Ligeti uses the rearrangement through variation and repetition of the material, within defined boundaries. The “I dreamt running” madrigalism uses the effect of “Chinese boxes”: a motif is repeated more times always slightly different and wider through the enlargement of its melodic and dynamic extension. All the piece is defined by a superimposition of multiple worlds: different patterns taken from different genres and historical periods collaborate to obtain a new and original order of the composition.

The sixth madrigal, *A Long, Sad Tale*, composed in 1993, incorporates the Bulgarian rhythm aksak, the African principle of “rhythmic oddity” scheme 9+7 and the medieval *talea* with *color*: isorhythmic tenor that returns over and over again with the same interval and rhythm proportions. The piece is based on some quotations from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Example 6. *Two Dreams and Little Bat*, bars 39–40 (culmination and release)

by Lewis Carroll and one of his Original Games and Puzzles, the game called Doublets.³¹ In this game two words of the same length are given and the player has to link them together by interposing other words each of which shall differ from the next in one letter only. By using that game, Ligeti introduces an African pattern in two Baritone parts beginning it always on the unstressed or weak beat. The piece begins with a short introduction in the Tenor, with the famous phrase of the Queen of Hearts “Off with her head!” in the exact aksak rhythm 3+2+2. The same rhythm is a base of the *talea* beginning in the Bass (Example 8). In bar 20 aksak returns, but this time it is a combination of the real aksak and the quasi-aksak (Example 9). Finally, in bar 28 Ligeti surprisingly changes the tempo into 8/8 and puts two bars of pseudo-aksak adjusting rhythmically the other voices as well. From 8/8 it comes to 4/4, a simple regular tempo that sounds actually strange in the context (Example 10). Then the rhythm becomes a regular 6/8 (Example 11) and then it returns to the “rhythmic oddity” pattern (9+7) and continues in this way up to the end (Example 12). The aksak rhythm, the African pattern and the ancient techniques match perfectly together and, instead of creating chaos, they find a kind of new order.

Vivacissimo leggiero e molto ritmico (Like Jazz!)

Example 8. *A Long, Sad Tale*, bars 1–4 (aksak “Off with her head”)

³¹ Doublets example: furies – buries – buried – burked – barked – barred – barrel – barred – barked – burked... etc.

We could even say that they are like fractals, considering the continuous repetition of singular particles or patterns. It is evident for example in the *talea/color* line and rhythm. Here the particle stabilises itself in the periodic cycle and Ligeti reserves for us only some rhythmic surprises as an ironic aspect of the madrigal. This piece has a more modern sound, “Like Jazz!”, as Ligeti wrote at the beginning of the score. The cause lies in the music material used for

Example 9. *A Long, Sad Tale*, bars 20–22 (real aksak and quasi-aksak combination)

Example 10. *A Long, Sad Tale*, bars 28–31 (8/8 and 4/4 pseudo-aksak and regular tempo)

40

A I Fu-ries, bu-ries, bur-ied, bur-ked, bar-ked, bar-red,

A II Fu-ries, bu-ries, bur-ied, bur-ked, bar-ked, bar-red,

T Fu-ries, bu-ries, bur-ied, bur-ked, bar-ked, bar-red,

Bar I mine is a long

Bar II long

B Sir...

Example 11. *A Long, Sad Tale*, bars 40–42 (6/8 regular tempo)

59

A I glide, guide, guile, GUILT, guile, guide, glide, slide, "To...

A II (you) you to...

T you to...

Bar I (you) to death."

Bar II glide, guide, guile, GUILT, guile, guide, glide, slide, "To death."

B you, you to death."

Example 12. *A Long, Sad Tale*, bars 59–62 (9+7 “rhythmic oddity” pattern)

the composition and its link with popular and ethnic music. What we perceive is not actually a chaos, but a great order as the result of the superimposition of different but converging patterns.

Following Susan Stewart's analysis, the sixth Madrigal, *A Long, Sad Tale*, is an explosion of multiple worlds, with African and Bulgarian patterns which create, together with ancient music inserts, an original and well-judged collage of musical content. In this piece the chaos of different rhythms is a clear base to

a new order: the result seems to be a jazz improvisation with the Bass solo performing rigorous and proportional *talea* and *color*, perceived anyway as a simple solo part. Also, in that case Ligeti uses a misdirection every time he presents a new material. The alternation of the Bulgarian aksak with its more regular variant, pseudo-aksak, causes a sensation of discontinuity: the regular rhythms of 8/8, 4/4 and 6/8 seems to be intrusive in the complex polyrhythmic texture. The nonsense effect stands in the inversion of meanings: the irregularity constitutes the sense of the composition, while the regularity represents its nonsense part.

CONCLUSION

As the analysis of *Nonsense Madrigals* indicates, the illusory chaos presented by Ligeti strives through tools and techniques which belong to different genres, historical periods and musical styles, both classical and popular ones, for the organisation of the new sound order. It could be Ligeti's answer to postmodernism, which was characterised by high confusion of musical and artistic expressions, where there was no space for ideological and linguistic crisis dissolved in the multiplicity of phenomena. It seems to have been the same for the avant-garde composition, which theoretically has no more reason to exist in such a disoriented and chaotic world. On the one hand, the *Nonsense Madrigals* express some kind of nostalgia for the past as we can first observe in the title of the cycle. On the other, the *Nonsense Madrigals* manifest a powerful desire for newness which is expressed through a superimposition of diversities: Ligeti seems to search for a new way in a world where there is no more space for originality, because everything has already been told, written and composed.

Ligeti is clear and determined in the adaptation of the traditional to the contemporary. His *Madrigals* are full of contemporary contents which are possible to contextualize in present times. Together with literary and musical aspects, Ligeti links the compositions with mathematics and sciences, so the music becomes an acute act of intellect, an intellectual process at the highest level, and its operations converge in a common target: the creation of a new authentic order by superimposing a historical context on the

contemporary world. Ligeti uses the musical chaos to give an answer to the general chaos of the world. The *Madrigals* play with literary text by including it in the general superimposition of the patterns. As a new order springs from the chaos, the nonsense could give birth to a new sense. It is evident that chaos and nonsense of the *Madrigals* are just illusory, or designed to create a new order or sense at a higher level.

If we consider the way in which Ligeti employs ancient, modern, popular and ethnic contents, superimposing masterfully different styles and genres, we can adopt his own elegant term to describe it as “premodern”, because of its originality and great respect for the sources. At the same time, we can’t deny the affinity of Ligeti’s music with a refined kind of postmodernism in its positive meaning: if we consider postmodernism not only as a rejection of modernism but as a new and open-minded current in art. What we can say is that Ligeti’s fine approach combines perfectly literary and musical textual contents both ancient and modern, without mashing it up, and presents a high level of musical intuition. Furthermore, the *Nonsense Madrigals* are a great example of nonsense in music, which matches perfectly with the literary nonsense that stays at the base of the entire composition.

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Przykłady nutowe wykorzystane w artykule:

György Ligeti

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SUMMARY

Monika Prusak

Nonsense Madrigals by György Ligeti: The Musical Sense of Nonsense between Chaos and Order

The study examines Ligeti's "stylistic revolution" as well as the non-sense aspects of the composition and introduces an original analysis of Ligeti's musical nonsense inspired by the literary analysis of nonsense by Susan Stewart.

The *Nonsense Madrigals* by György Ligeti take part in a kind of "stylistic revolution" in Ligeti's style and are the result of his passionate research on African polyrhythms and its contribution to his music. What Ligeti intended to create in those periods was a superimposition of different rhythmic and melodic patterns in such a way that they could fuse together in an illusory chaos. However, there is also an ancient order that governs this new approach: the old masters such as Philippe de Vitry, Johannes Okeghem or Johannes Ciconia and their compositional techniques became the base of mixing the old western styles with the traditional music of Central Africa, so that the new and authentic compositional idea could blossom. The copious sketches of the *Nonsense Madrigals*, stored at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, reveal that the preparatory brainstorming involved also many other inspirations such as Balkan and oriental music, jazz, and some of Ligeti's own compositions. The combination of the old and the new without using concrete models but just drawing inspiration marks a new approach among Ligeti's contemporaries.

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Keywords

György Ligeti, nonsense, madrigal, 20th century, postmodern