

"intercultural synthesis in the First Book of the Ligeti's Etudes for Piano"

ABSTRACT

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The discovery of the musical language must be related to the entire experiential and cultural universe reverberated by the sound. Even though rudimentary, the shaping of sound objects recreates and reinterprets at once the complexity of such many-sided suggestions, renewing them in original ways.

The artistic route of György Ligeti follows this direction.

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His multi-faceted inspiration is able to blend musical imagination, interculturalism, scientific curiosity and the most varied aesthetic thoughts, giving rise to a sound world that is both strictly bound to the tradition and projected into a future with utopian and visionary traits.

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The First Book of the Piano Etudes, crucial work published in 1985, is an emblem of the stratified style of the Hungarian composer, come at this point to his full artistic maturity.

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The cycle includes six pieces, parts of an unitary organism, sprung up from the singular convergence of multiple stimulating inputs. Here the composer merges with astonishing ability the aesthetic models inherited from the learned musical tradition (especially Chopin, but also Liszt, Schumann, Brahms, Debussy, Ravel, Bartók), the hints of the Hungarian, Rumanian, Balcanic, Puerto-Rican and African folklore, the knowledge of the works for mechanical piano by Conlon Nancarrow, the jazz language and the reflections suggested by the scientific theories of that period.

The Nancarrow's Etudes for *Player Piano* represent a charming challenge to realize, within the limits of the human interpretation, the superimpositions and the progressive gradations of speed, obtained by the American composer by using a particular innovative card punch of the mechanical pianos. However an influence even greater was exerted on Ligeti by the ethnomusicological writings of Simha Arom about the sub-saharian polyrhythm: the systematic use of the hemiola brings him to build complex overlapped musical periods, to which a continuous isochronous beating guarantees a ground unitariness.

Besides these uncommon inspiring sources, the composer is attracted by some basic mathematical and physical intuitions of the 80s: the computer's generative process (that suggests to create "vegetable" musical forms), the Chaos' theory, whose hermeneutics of the chaotic phenomena is based on the alternance of order and disorder, and the fractal geometry, considered as a sort of fascinating abstract art, able to recall with visual images the sensation of an enchanted, almost frozen time.

Although Ligeti declared to have conceived these first 6 Etudes as eminently virtuoso pieces, unrelated to fixed stylistic categories, we can anyway outline some aesthetic and compositional principles that feature them.

Firstly, we can notice a creatural conception of the sound as significant vibratory entity: it appeals to the sense seduction, and to the cognitive and mnesic faculties. The attention to the globality of the perceptive sphere reveals a subtle affinity with the Schiller's theory of the Play's impulse, that harmonizes sensitive and intellectual faculties thanks to the Beauty. Ligeti achieves this effect through the elaboration of a

complex sound object, arisen from the impurity of the synthesis of heterogeneous parameters (timbre, pitch, rhythm), organically connected in a reticular structure.

Therefore the sound appears as a form-in-movement, subject to continuous transformations, suspended in multiple space-time weaves, without centre nor hierarchies, like infinite or open systems. Their ramification, expanding towards architectures more and more complex, can be considered as a process of crystallization, during which the shading off of a section into another appears always extremely soft, in observance of the principle of the maximum gradualness described by the Chaos' theory.

The sound illusionism generated by the continuous variation of the musical germinal cells reverberates in the most subliminal regions of the conscience, like a precious track of an inner time, split from the chronological time, and immersed in a fluid mixture of *Erlebnis* and imaginative projections.

In this sort of virtual world, where nothing is neither created nor destroyed, a restless stream of presences and absences now emerges, now is reabsorbed in the silence, and the time seems to have been swallowed up and made static, in a motionless Becoming populated by figures with a latent dramaturgic significance. So the theatricalization of the time, with its different masks, has to be considered as the hidden theme of the whole book, animated by the polar conflict between order and chaos.

In effect all the beginnings of the six Etudes consist of elementary musical formulae, which gradually become very complex, until they come to a chaotic dimension.

The outward *kosmos* of the first bars of the first Etude (*Désordre*) gives way to an increasing disorder: the means chosen by the composer to achieve this aim are the wise use of the *décalage* (progressive subtraction or addition of the beats that support the rhythmic *continuum* in eighths), the severance of the registers of the two melodic sequences of the right hand (white keys) and of the left hand (black keys), and the irresistible crescendo of the final section. The disorder, considered as unforeseeable deviation of an infinitely repeated route becomes a necessary discontinuity, that generates new energy and new possibilities of life, projected into an imaginary world, in which Being and Becoming live together in harmony, and from which springs a spiral sound effect, that combines the spatial dimension – as a resultant of the interaction among an horizontal Becoming, the circularity of the eternal return of the Equalness and the ascensional thrust – and the temporal dimension, articulated in several overlapped speed levels.

In *Cordes à vide* the research into the phenomena of the disorderliness focuses on the exploration of the inmost depth of the unconscious, in a quasi bergsonian investigation of the stream of consciousness and of the memory. Here the rhythmic complexity voices the mysterious overlappings of the inner time, crowded with wishes, dreams, memories, anxieties, silences, waits. Present, past and future intersect in a psychic amalgam, smooth and everchanging, cohering thanks to the thine threads of the mnemonic runs.

Listen's sphere, whose care shines through the extension of the sonorous field until to levels not so far from the audibility threshold, is the object of an even more deep research in the third Etude (*Touches bloquées*), built on the genial inlay of sound and silence – an effect obtained by percussing with one hand some of the keys held down by the other. Starting from the resultant bunches of rhythmic-melodic cells, the thematic material is expanded through turn-notes and voices in free counterpoint. The fifth section (bars 72-91, the only section without blocked keys), reveals through its vertiginous silences the ulterior meaning both of the piece and of the whole cycle: the transformations of the material evoke by analogy the metamorphosis of the life processes which, not aiming at a teleological destination, tragically plummet into the

abyss of Nothing and Emptiness. So the silence is the final outcome of the self-suppressing process of the sound, and at the same time the precious shadow that allows the entire compositive body to grow. The mute notes already present in the first bars seem to portray annihilating spectres, that on the one hand consume the sound, on the other make possible its evolution, representing the negative principle necessary to the polar dialectics on which the *Bildung* of the material is based.

In *Fanfares* the self-destroying time, mingled with the silence, changes to a space thick with presences. Goethe's intuition of the instant that hosts in itself the whole Being is developed in this context through mirroring effects, that multiply the thematic identities. Resting on the turnover of the "ostinato" rhythmic successions of 3 + 2 + 3 eighths, the thematic sequence of the two Fanfares appears to be theatricalized and polyspatialized, so that the sound is sprinkled with its bright lightness, as though it had to herald the meditative rarefactions of *Arc-en-ciel*, contemplative apex of the whole book.

The rhythmic and harmonic elements inspired by the jazz generate in this piece a sound tissue in which the chords are like rays of changing coloured light. Their refraction, as in pure crystals, creates an enchanting atmosphere, absolutely free of any conceptual bond, suspended in an immaterial beatitude, out of time and space.

This beam of iridescent light caressing the crystallized time is followed by the lament of *Automne à Varsovie*, the last component of the polyptych. It emerges from the background of a ceaseless rain, symbol of an infinite cry, which consumes countenances, identities, wishes. The progressive saturation of the speeds is reached through an inextricable tangle of rhythms, that the composer interlaces using the hemiola very intensively.

The implosion of the acoustic space comes inexorably to the final fall: the cycle, that was opened by the ascensional thrusts of *Désordre* ends now surrendering to a dark power, which magnetizes the energy of the sound, and plunges it into the darkness of Nothing.

The last mask worn by the time, extreme synthesis of a compositive thought that stands out on the background of a limitless human and cultural horizon, paradoxically brings to the collapse in the indifference and to the tragic self-negation of the sound identity: perhaps a dramatic mirroring of a contemporary civilization that sometimes does not respect the diversities, and regarded the destruction as one of the main principle of the development of life.

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