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## Conversations with Gyorgy Ligeti

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### ABSTRACT

2023 is the 100th anniversary of the birth of Gyorgy Ligeti, widely considered among the most original composers of the latter part of the twentieth century. This essay is an account of his life and thoughts (including economics) at the Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin, 2000-01, by his next-apartment neighbor.

*Gyorgy Ligeti is widely considered to have been, in the words of Robert Cummings, “one of the most important avant-garde composers in the latter half of the twentieth century,” and “one of the most innovative and influential among progressive figures of his time” (Cummings, n.d.). The critic Alex Ross went further in a profile of Ligeti in 2001, while he was still alive: “Blessed with awesome powers of invention and assimilation, Ligeti may be the one living composer for whom ‘genius’ is not too strong a word” (2001).*

*Ligeti (the accent falls on the first syllable) was a fellow of Wiko (short for Wissenschaftskolleg, Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin) in 2000–2001. I, also a fellow, was his next-apartment neighbor. My field of research is global political economy, and I have a long, amateur interest in classical music and play the classical guitar. Reclusive though he was, we had many conversations, including on economics. “Who is right, Robert? Keynes or von Hayek?” he asked multiple times.*

*First, some biographical background. Ligeti was born in 1923 to Hungarian Jewish parents in Northern Transylvania, Romania, a territory which in 1940 passed to Hungary. During the Second World War he was sent to a forced labor camp. His 16 year old brother and his parents were sent to concentration camps. His brother and father died; only he and his mother survived. After the Second World War he became a professional composer and teacher of music in Budapest. In 1956 he fled the Soviet invasion for Vienna. Soon after he moved to Cologne, and linked up with Cologne avant-garde figures like Stockhausen and Koenig. After three years he left, having fallen out with the Cologne School for its dogmatism and infighting. His Wikipedia entry quotes him as saying, “there were [sic] a lot of political fighting because different people, like Stockhausen, like Kagel, wanted to be first. And I, personally, have no ambition to be first or to be important.” In later life he lived, composed, and taught in Hamburg, Stockholm, Palo Alto (Stanford University), and Vienna. Vienna*

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\*I sent an earlier version of this essay to the Arts editor of *The Economist*, who drew on it liberally: “Modern composers: fighting shy. We caught up recently with Gyorgy Ligeti, a modern master, in Berlin,” *The Economist*, 2001, 28 July, pp. 69–70.

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*was always a magnet, for his wife and son continued to live there most of the time. He died in 2006 after a long illness, including several years in a wheel chair, looked after by his devoted wife.*

Gyorgy Ligeti was presented with the prestigious Kyoto Prize in philosophy and arts in July 2001, a prize worth more than \$350,000, tax free. A few weeks earlier he had been interviewed by Japanese sponsors of the prize (“businessmen” he called them), who came to see him in person and seemed chiefly concerned to determine—having heard that he had difficulty climbing stairs—whether he would be able to ascend the podium at prize-giving ceremonies in Kyoto and San Diego and give several public lectures at both events; for the ceremonies were to be bathed in media attention. They were almost explicit: if you are unable to manage the stairs we will award the prize to someone else.

His first reaction was to tell them to please give the prize to someone whose qualifications included legs in better shape than his; he would not be party to yet more prostitution of art for commerce. Then he reflected that his personal economy was in the same state as the economy of the government of Berlin. He remarked, “If you are a composer of abstract music you make very little money. As a conductor I could make more money in one evening than I make in three months as a composer.” The prize would enable him to repay debts and help some dear friends who needed help. So he kept his mouth shut and let them continue.

On the day that he learnt (by fax) that he had won, I and some others at the Institute joined him for a celebratory drink. He looked glum. “In these past weeks I had convinced myself that by not winning it I would at least remain clean. Now I have to deal with all kinds of unpleasant things, humiliating things. Now many people will approach me for money. Now I have to go through ceremony, and I hate ceremony. I am uncomfortable in the hands of businessmen.” Then he lightened up as we poured glasses for a toast. “Still, I am happy to see that it has made you happy,” he said with a twinkle.

But again he grew serious, and said that he did not think he deserved the prize. He had earlier been asked to nominate a person for the prize, and had chosen the person whom he considered the best living composer, the Russian Galina Ustwolskaya, now in her 80s. “But she did not get it. I did.” He looked downcast.

And he was troubled by something else. His leg had kept him in serious pain, but the only effective pain killers also killed his musical imagination and most of the time he did not take the medication. He had just received an accurate diagnosis at last, which called for an operation to remove a tumor. He wanted to have the operation straight away, but it carried the risk that he would not be able to ascend the podium and take part in the prize ceremonies. So he concluded that the operation would have to be delayed until after the second ceremony in San Diego in February 2002, “because I gave them my word.”

I asked him if he could recommend a CD of Ustwolskaya’s music. There is a marvelous recent recording conducted by Reinbert de Leeuw, he said, lighting up, “who is the best conductor of her music, and also of my music.” Teldec had just released a CD recording of his music conducted by de Leeuw, featuring the Schonberg Ensemble, the Asko Ensemble, and Ligeti’s favorite pianist for his music, Pierre-Laurent Aimard. Ligeti, nothing if not a perfectionist, was really happy with this CD. He was dismayed and disappointed that, just when he had found a home for his legacy, Teldec had been brought by Time Warner and disbanded except for the name.

Those wanting an introduction to his music might start with the hauntingly beautiful “Melodien,” the first track of the Teldec recording. He thought his much more frequently heard piece, “Lontano,” was second-rate; he wished he could pull it from circulation, and presumed that orchestras like to play it because they and their audiences find it easy. I once went with him to the Berlin Philharmonic, for a concert which featured one of his pieces. I assumed he would be very happy. On the contrary, as the piece began he slumped down in his chair, folded his arms, and looked into his lap. The piece was Lontano. The next day a fellow remarked to him how much he had enjoyed hearing Lontano at the Berlin Philharmonic the previous evening. Ligeti admonished him, “Ignore it. It is not important. Marginal. When you have heard other of my pieces you will know it is not important.”

He was not at all happy with the recordings of his orchestral music played by the Philharmonia of London, intended to be issued by Sony as the eighth and ninth CDs in a series of his music. The orchestra had almost no rehearsal time, the conductor tried to sandwich the recordings into gaps in his airline schedule. So Ligeti went to a lawyer to prevent the recordings being issued, and, stubborn as a mule, won at great expense to himself. He remained concerned that Sony would break the agreement and he would find inferior recordings of four of his orchestral pieces on the market. But he was happy with some of the earlier ones in the Sony series, and particularly recommended #3 (solo piano, played by Aimard) and #7 (chamber music).

Conductors, performers and composers who become famous through a gift for self-publicity—or employing a good agent—were the bane of Ligeti’s life. Most musicians who are famous fit that description, he thought, especially conductors, who face less objective tests of their ability than performers and more easily degenerate into pure showmen/businessmen. “Ligeti’s Law,” he proposed with a smile, is that “Artists who become famous are no good because they have no time to be good [so busy at self-promotion].”

He thought Conlin Nancarrow was the most original of composers since Stravinsky and Bartok; the sixteenth century composer Carlo Gesualdo was among the greatest composers who ever lived; and Reinbert de Leeuw was among the very best of contemporary conductors. None of them household names. He was also happy to say that two very well-known names—John Lennon and Paul McCartney—were “brilliant” when they worked together.

I mentioned Heitor Villa Lobos. Did he know the hauntingly beautiful Bachianas Brasileiras? Yes, he knew it, but it is of no worth, he said disdainfully, it is just Bach with ornamentation, it is derivative. He dismissed one of the world’s most celebrated pianists and conductors as “a manager,” not a musician. As for the conductor of the Berlin Phil performing one of his pieces that very evening, he advised us not to attend because the conductor is a “nobody, an unknown.”

Who does he listen to get motivated? I once asked him. “I would have to give the answer that every composer gives—Mozart, Chopin, everyone: the Well-Tempered Clavier. These two books.” He listened to them and played them—or used to play them but by 2001 was no longer able.

He lived his own life in a frugal and disciplined manner. His clothes looked like they were bought in jumble sales, or not even bought. His trade-mark Missoni jerseys, their subtly colored repeating patterns echoing his music, were gifts from well-wishers. Apart

from the daily lunches at the Wissenschaftskolleg, he protected his solitude fiercely. Most of the time he was in his room, which could not be more bare. No television, no paintings, few books, no computer, “just my music.” To compose he needed long stretches of totally uninterrupted time with a piano nearby (he regretted that the Wiko piano was 10 min walk down the street for him). He tried composing with a keyboard; but found that pushing down the key and having the note appear instantly on the screen was too quick and too mechanical. Though much slower, he preferred pencil and erasure, because as he drew each note he heard and saw it better, and as he erased he had time to search for a new one.

He had lived for the previous 16 years in Hamburg, a city he did not particularly like, a city with a commercial soul. He much preferred Berlin. But he stayed in Hamburg because his secretary—“my policeman, or police dog”—was there, and she kept order in his dealings with the rest of the world; and also because he was almost entirely isolated there, seeing only a journalist couple once a week as his only regular break from composing and correcting of some 35 scores.

Nevertheless, at our daily lunches at the Wissenschaftskolleg he was a star. He engaged voraciously in conversation with almost anyone in any of six and a half languages (Rumanian, Hungarian, German, French, English, Swedish, and half Italian). He engaged with people on their subject, for he generally shied away from talking about music, his own music particularly. As I helped him walk down the street to the lunch room he wanted to talk about political economy. “Who is right, Robert? Keynes or von Hayek?” he asked multiple times. Barely waiting for an answer he plowed on with reminiscences of Hayek, whom he met and who he thought was probably right. Swedish social democracy was inspired by Keynes, he said, and it was a disaster. Early on, one of the fellows, knowing only that he was a composer, asked him whether he had written piano music. He replied with a preemptory “yes.” She exclaimed excitedly that she played classical music on the piano and asked him to recommend one of his pieces for her to learn. “Can you play with different tempi on both hands?” he asked her in a put-down kind of way, which ended the conversation.

He considered himself a mathematician manqué, fascinated by and knowledgeable about science and mathematics, and was heard to declaim that science had rendered religion and philosophy obsolete. He dismissed many of the most celebrated philosophers—Heidegger and Nietzsche, for two—as “nonsense, complete nonsense.” He was a good friend of Benoit Mandelbrot, a founder of fractal geometry. They met after Ligeti sought him out after reading an account of Mandelbrot’s work in fractals and recognizing that he had been using fractal patterns in his music for years.

Once we were discussing whom artists create for. One person said that her husband, a poet, wrote for a known circle of 30 people, and was satisfied if he felt he could communicate to them. Someone else said an artist she knew created only for herself. Ligeti said, “I create neither for an audience nor for myself. I create for *solutions*.”

On another occasion he avowed, “I am not a musician, I am a scientist.” He said this in the context of lamenting that he could not play the piano well because parental opposition prevented him from starting to play until the age of 14, post-puberty, much too late for the necessary changes in brain development to occur. By his late teens he realized he was not going to be good enough to make a career as a concert pianist, and agreed with

his parents' wishes that at university (in Hungary) he follow his second love—mathematics and physics. But the university informed him that the “Jewish” quota for math and physics was already full, and recommended that he approach the music conservatory—whose director turned out to be ignoring the quota, and welcomed him in.

I gave him copies of two newspaper articles, one about the recent experiment in which the speed of light was (said to be) slowed to zero, the other by a professor of physics and humanities at MIT reflecting poetically about the significance of transforming the one constant in the universe into a variable, the significance for our understanding of who we are. He was fascinated by the first, the account of the experiment. “What about the other article?” I asked. With a dismissive wave of the hand he said, “That is just opinions. The other one is science.”

He was also fascinated by an article about synesthesia. He told me that he was extremely synesthetic; he associated musical notes and numbers strongly with colors (five with lime green, for example), and was amazed to learn in his late teens that other people did not.

On the infrequent occasions when he talked about composing, he talked about it much as a scientist talks of research, with questions yielding answers and answers yielding more questions; the difference being, as he explained, that he is disciplined not by “evidence” but by esthetics. Yet in the realm of esthetics his driving esteem of science fell away, and he dismissed out of hand attempts to find a relationship between arts and brain activity (as in Semir Zeki's *Inner Vision, An Exploration of Art and the Brain*). Esthetics is somehow too precious—too German romantic, perhaps—to be bracketed with science. He once remarked that Bach, Mozart and the other greats of that period had it easy, because they were working within a fairly well-defined syntax. He worked much more slowly because he had to invent syntax as he goes. He saw himself as attempting to create a new language of music, and at age 78, felt acutely the closing in of time to accomplish it.

Conversation once came to the photo of him on the cover of the Sony CDs. Where was it taken? At Odeon Theater, Paris, 6th arrondissement, he said. One of the fellows, who knew his music well, remarked that Ligeti in the photo looked “grim.” I said, not grim, rather, contemplative, pensive. Another fellow said, “Rebellious,” and Ligeti declared with a small smile, “That is the right word. Yes, I am a rebel.”

The *New Yorker* magazine of May 28, 2001 carried a profile of Ligeti by Alex Ross, where Ross made the remark quoted at the beginning, “Ligeti may be the one living composer for whom ‘genius’ is not too strong a word.” I showed the article to him as we descended the stairs for lunch. He had already seen a photocopy. “I was astonished. I do not know this gentleman. But he really knows my music.” As we went into lunch I showed the magazine to some friends. “No, no, no,” Ligeti admonished, “Put it away. I do not like name-dropping.” He was as emphatic about his modesty as he was critical of others' self-promotion. Later I put the magazine to the side of the lunch table where we were sitting, and he asked me to remove it from sight so that we could talk freely about other things, like globalization, Hayek, Keynes, the hell of the prison that was pre-1956 Hungary, and the serious problems of Swedish social democracy where, as he knew from personal experience in the 1960s and 1970s, people work so little that even ambulances operate with a waiting list and dentists spend half the year by the Mediterranean.

The Ross article closes with a sentence that captures one of Ligeti's most striking qualities, "Where the Romantics used to smile through tears, Ligeti cries through smiles." END

### **Further Reading**

Cummings, R. n.d. "Gyorgy Ligeti: Artist, biography." Accessed October 22, 2013. Allmusic website.  
Ross, A. 2001. "Ligeti Split." *New Yorker*, May 28.