

“Ishtar’s Journey to Hell”

György Ligeti’s Unrealized Oratorio (1955)

by Márton Kerékfy

Istar pokoljárása (Ishtar’s Journey to Hell) is one of Ligeti’s unfinished works from his final year in Budapest (fall 1955 to December 1956), during which he sought to move away from a thematic-motivic approach toward texture-oriented music by using new compositional techniques such as dodecaphony, row technique, tone clusters, and static sound masses.¹ As he recalled in 2002, “I conceived a kind of synesthetic music, with visual associations of color and light, and tactile associations of matter, density, volume, and space replacing motifs, melodies, harmonies, and rhythm.”² Ligeti drew inspiration for his new musical ideas from books that were considered “forbidden” in Hungary at the time, such as *Doktor Faustus* by Thomas Mann, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* by Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction à la musique de douze sons* by René Leibowitz, and *Anleitung zur Zwölftonkomposition* by Hanns Jelinek.³ As he later recalled, his knowledge of

- 1 These unfinished works include a Requiem for two choirs and orchestra, *Sötét és világos* (Dark and Light) for orchestra, and *Variations concertantes* for chamber orchestra (all 1956). The only work completed in this period is the *Chromatic Fantasy* for piano (1956, unpublished). Manuscripts of all four works are in the György Ligeti Collection, PSS (henceforth PSS-GLC). The draft of Ligeti’s last work composed in Budapest, *Víziók* (Visions) for orchestra, repeatedly referred to by him as the original version of the first movement of *Apparitions* (1958–59), appears to be lost.
- 2 “Meine Vorstellungen gingen in die Richtung einer synästhetischen Musik: Visuelle Assoziationen von Farbe, Licht sowie taktile Assoziationen von Materie, Dichte, Volumen, Raum traten an die Stelle von Motiven, Melodien, Harmonien, Rhythmus.” Ligeti, liner notes to *The Ligeti Project II* (CD, Hamburg: Teldec Classics 2002, 8573-88261-2).
- 3 Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer, 1947); Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1949); René Leibowitz, *Introduction à la musique de douze sons* (Paris: L’Arche, 1949); Hanns Jelinek,

contemporary Western music, including the works of the Second Viennese School, was very limited due to Hungary's cultural isolation during the Stalinist era, and, most importantly, he lacked the opportunity to listen to this music. Beginning in 1955, with the gradual loosening of party control, it became possible to obtain records and scores from the West. In the spring of 1956, Ligeti was able to listen to string quartets by Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern for the first time.⁴ He mentioned that he had collected "snippets of information" on contemporary Western music through night programs on the Bayerischer Rundfunk and other West German radio stations: "In 1952/53, I heard that electronic music existed, serial music, that there was a Cage in America, and what he was doing. These were just snippets of information."⁵

As the compositional sources in the György Ligeti Collection at the Paul Sacher Stiftung show, *Istar pokoljárása* was to be an oratorio for solo voices, choir, and orchestra, based on the epic poem of the same name by Sándor Weöres. Ligeti worked on it during November and December 1955.⁶ 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). It was first published in 1943 in a collection of Weöres poems that also included a paraphrase of the Gilgamesh myth.⁷

Anleitung zur Zwölftonkomposition (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1952). See Richard Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 58, 62, and 66, who states that Ligeti obtained *Doktor Faustus* in 1952 and *Anleitung* in the winter of 1955. See also Friedemann Sallis, *An Introduction to the Early Work of György Ligeti* (Cologne: Studio, 1996), p. 205. Note, however, that *Doktor Faustus* was published in Hungarian already in 1948 (translated by Endre Gáspár, Budapest: Athaeneum).

4 György Ligeti with Reinhard Oehlschlägel, "Ja, ich war ein utopischer Sozialist," *MusikTexte* 28–29 (1989), pp. 85–102, esp. p. 96. See also Ursula Stürzbecher, *Werkstattgespräche mit Komponisten* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1973), p. 43 in the Ligeti chapter (pp. 37–52).

5 "Ich hörte [...] 1952/53, daß elektronische Musik existiert, serielle Musik, daß es in Amerika einen Cage gibt, und was er macht. Das waren so [...] Floskeln von Nachrichten." Josef Häusler, "Interview mit György Ligeti," *Melos* 37, no. 12 (1970), pp. 496–507, esp. pp. 498–99. See also Péter Várnai's interview in *György Ligeti in Conversation* (London: Eulenburg, 1983), pp. 13–82, esp. p. 35.

6 The following description draws on my article, "Sándor Weöres's Poetry as a Catalyst for György Ligeti's Early Development," *Studia Musicologica* 64, nos. 1–2 (2023), pp. 51–73.

7 Sándor Weöres, *Medúza: Versek* (Budapest: Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1943). For the most recent edition in Weöres' collected poems, see his *Egybegyűjtött költemények* (Collected Poems), vol. 1, ed. Ágota Steinert (Budapest: Helikon, 2013), pp. 205–09. The following quotations are my translations.

Folio	Contents	File 234 image no.
1r	“Istar – jegyzetek” (Sketches)	16
1v	“Jegyz. Ist.” (Sketches)	15
2r	First draft, p.1: “Istar pokoljárása. 1. Passacaglia (a pokol leírása)” (a description of hell), the whole page crossed out	10
2v	Row chart and sketches	09
3r	“Istar jegyz SOROK” (Sketches, rows) (see Plate 1)	04
3v	Discarded p.9 of the autograph fair copy of String Quartet no. 1 written in blue ink, crossed out in pencil, and a 12-tone row on the bottom stave	05
4r	Second draft, p.1: “Istar pokoljárása 55. nov. 11. 1. Passacaglia (a pokol hiteles leírása)” (an authentic description of hell)	14
4v	Empty	–
5r	Second draft, p.2, written upside down	12
5v	Discarded p.17 of the autograph fair copy of String Quartet no. 1 (bar lines only) written in blue ink, crossed out in pencil	13
6r	Second draft, p.3	11
6v	Empty	–
7r	Third draft, p.[4]	17
7v	Third draft, p.[1]: “ISTAR POKOLJÁRÁSA 55. Dec. 26. 1. Ostinato”	18
8r	Third draft, p.[2], no. 1 written in upper right corner	19
8v	Third draft, p.[3]	20
9r	Empty	–
9v	Third draft, p.[5]	22
10r	Empty	–
10v	Third draft, p.[6], no. 3 in upper right corner	21
11r	A page from the autograph fair copy of music examples for <i>Klasszikus összhangzattan</i> ⁸ written in blue ink	06
11v	12-tone row chart	07
12r	Row chart based on the 12-tone row on previous page	08
12v	Empty	–

Table 1: Contents of the folder *Istar pokoljárása* (PSS–GLC). Writing is in pencil, unless specified otherwise. All music papers are without trademark. Folios 1–6 have 24 staves, and folios 7–12 have 22 staves. Folios 5–6 originally formed a bifolio, and folios 7 and 8 still form a bifolio.

Weöres’s Ishtar, “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. She weeps for the dead, and they wake up. Allatu, the hell’s mistress, has Ishtar 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 Ishtar and clothes her. She rises, followed by the undead, who build four great bonfires. Ishtar throws her jewels and clothes into the fires, and “in born-naked light, she shines in fullness.”

8 György Ligeti, *Klasszikus összhangzattan: Segédkönyv* (Classical Harmony: Textbook) (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1954).

Example 1: The four transpositions of the six-note pitch row (labeled A to D) and the rhythm of each layer (numbered 1 to 6) in the “Ostinato” of *Istar pokoljárása*.

It is thought-provoking that, in addition to *Istar pokoljárása*, Ligeti also planned to write a Requiem at the same time. 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 emphasize 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 *Istar*, but it is clear from the surviving manuscripts that Ligeti experimented with the row technique in this work.⁹ Seven pages of sketches (including row charts) and ten pages of draft survive (see Table 1). The draft pages belong to three distinct drafts, the first (without date) being one page long (fol. 2r), the second (dated November 11, 1955) three pages (fols. 4r, 5r, and 6r), and the third (dated December 26) six pages long (fols. 7v, 8r, 8v, 7r, 9v, and 10v). All three contain material for the instrumental prelude titled “Passacaglia

9 The row technique used in *Istar* has been closely analyzed by Sallis, *An Introduction* (see note 3), pp. 208–11. This book also includes a facsimile of two pages of *Istar*. Other works from this period using row technique are the *Chromatic Fantasy*, the unfinished *Variations concertantes*, and an unfinished piece for piano, *Fehér és fekete* (White and Black). See *ibid.*, p. 207, and Steinitz, *Ligeti* (see note 3), p. 67.

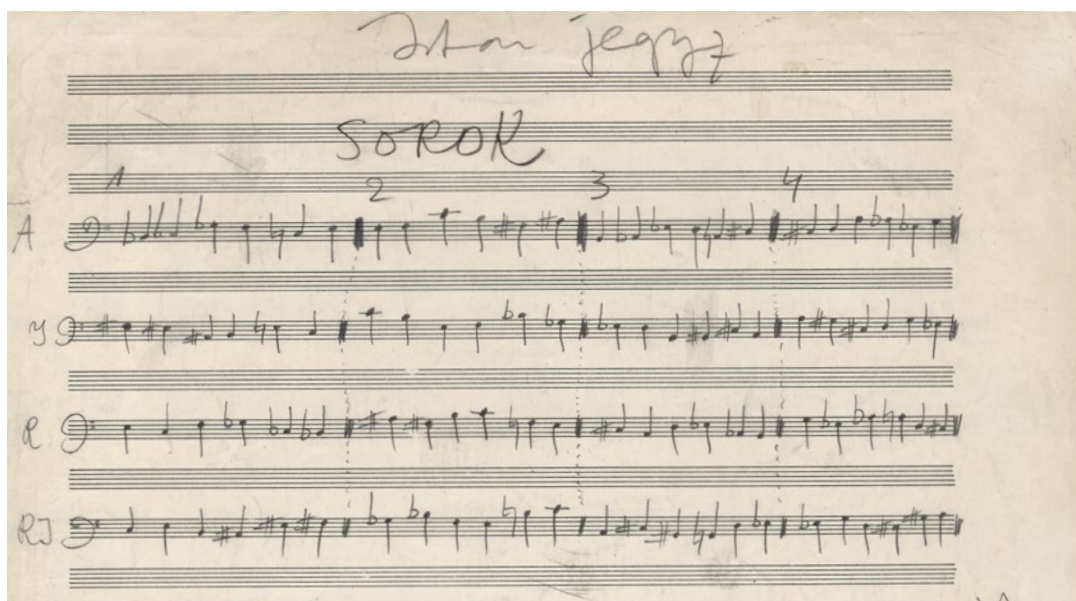


Plate 1: György Ligeti, *Istar pokoljárása*, row chart on fol. 3r (PSS-GLC).

(a description of hell),”¹⁰ renamed in the third draft to “Ostinato.” The 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 1). The pitch class set of the six-note row is made up of three adjacent tritones (B \flat -E, C \flat -F, and C-G \flat), and the sequence of notes forms a narrowing funnel pattern. This same row appears on the sketch page labeled “Istar jegyz | SOROK” (*Istar sketches | rows*) (fol. 3r, see Plate 1). There, Ligeti wrote down the row in four transpositions (numbered 1 to 4) next to each other and their inversions, retrogrades, and retrograde inversions beneath them. Transpositions 1 and 2 are a tritone apart and thus share the same pitch class set. The same applies to transpositions 3 and 4. The pitch class sets of the first two transpositions and the last two transpositions are complementary; thus, they add to the chromatic total. Ligeti originally intended to use a different transformation in each layer of ostinato, but ultimately decided to avoid inversions, and used only the four transpositions of the prime series. He arranged the ostinato layers so that each new layer would complement the previous layer’s pitch class set.

Once the sixth layer has been entered, a speaker begins to recite the first stanza of the poem. This is followed by the choir’s rhythmic recitation of the second and third stanzas while the

10 In the second draft it is called “an authentic description of hell.”

orchestra continues playing the ostinato. At the end of the third stanza, the orchestra suddenly stops, and movement 2 follows without interruption. It begins with a staccato *tutti* chord and a sustained high F/F# dyad on two piccolos. This is followed by the speaker's recitation and Ishtar's words to the gatekeeper of hell. However, the music breaks off after four measures. The last page of the draft contains nine measures of movement 3, featuring a bass tuba solo accompanied by a jagged ostinato played by flute and high bassoon.

What is remarkable about the "Ostinato" movement is not only the row technique, but also the fact that Ligeti wanted to use this mechanically repetitive music to represent hell.¹¹ In a noteworthy article on Bartók's chromatic technique published in September 1955, shortly before he began 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."¹² He goes on to state that in serial music, "form becomes static, [and] becomes almost timeless."¹³ It seems then logical that he turned to the row 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.

11 This calls to mind the "collage" section of *Le Grand Macabre* (rehearsal no. 451ff.), where Nekrotzar enters with his hellish retinue accompanied by a bizarre passacaglia.

12 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, no. 9 (1955), pp. 41–44, esp. p. 43. English translation in Sallis, *An Introduction* (see note 3), pp. 256–61, esp. p. 259.

13 Ligeti, "Megjegyzések" (see note 12), p. 43. English translation in Sallis, *An Introduction* (see note 3), p. 260, amended.