

Sketches for the First Movement of Ligeti's Piano Concerto from 1980 to 1986

by Jason Yust

Ligeti's six years of work on the Piano Concerto's first movement is highly unusual, and produced an impressive number of notes and sketches, chronicled in the hundreds of documents relating to the Piano Concerto in the György Ligeti Collection. Table 1 lists 71 separate attempts to begin the piece, divided into four stages.

Stage 1: June 1980

The distinguishing feature of the first stage is a melodic idea that alternates between two notes a semitone apart in an irregular rhythm.

In a letter to the concerto's commissioner, Mario di Bonaventura, written a week after sketch 2, Ligeti first apologizes that the concerto is late, then describes at length his recent discovery of Conlon Nancarrow, saying "it's a pity that his music has not more influence on my piano concerto, which is in the basic ideas ready – maybe some indirect influence will appear during my work."¹ The influence begins to appear shortly thereafter. In a movement plan (124-58) written less than two weeks later, headed "Piano Concerto ABSOLUTELY FINAL" (Zongvers LEGESLEG VÉG-LEGES), Ligeti plans a 12-tone Nancarrow-style canon for the third movement, with the piano and orchestra in different tempos, and a fifth *presto* movement resembling Nancarrow's extravagant Study No. 40.

The page with sketch 7 of the first movement (Plate 1) reveals associations these rhythmic techniques had for Ligeti in 1980.² At

1 György Ligeti, letter to Mario di Bonaventura, June 28, 1980 (György Ligeti Collection; henceforth PSS-GLC).

2 Many thanks to Géza Kocsis, whose assistance in interpreting Ligeti's handwriting and translating his Hungarian notes was invaluable.

Stage	Version	File	Image	Date	Type	Length	
1	1	125	31	14/6/1980	Orch. score	1 m.	
	2	125	21	21/6/1980	Piano	1 m.	
	3				Piano, Fg, Vln	1 m.	
	4	125	20		Piano	3 mm.	
	5	125	19		Piano	2 mm.	
	6				Piano	2 mm.	
	7	125	67		Piano	1 m.	
2	8	125	32	16/7/1980	One line	2 mm.	
	9				Line + piano	4 mm.	
	10	128	3	16/7/1980	Orch. score	2 pp.	
	11	125	71	Summer 1980	Orch. score	5 mm.	
	12	128	4	Summer 1980	Orch. score	3 pp.	
	13	128	5	July–Sept 1980	Orch. score	2 pp.	
	14	128	6	1980	Orch. score	2 pp.	
	15	125	35		One line	16 blocks	
	16				One line	6 blocks	
	17				One line	13 blocks	
	18				One line	14 blocks	
	19	125	33		One line	5 mm.	
	20				One line	3 mm.	
	21	125	47		One line	8 blocks	
	22				3 lines	2 mm.	
	23				One line	14 blocks	
	24	125	69		3 lines	2 mm.	
	25					6 mm.	
	26	125	45		One line	9 blocks	
	27	125	36		One line	5 blocks	
	28	215	32		One line	16 blocks	
	29	125	73		One line	25 blocks	
	30	125	74		One line	11 mm.	
	31	125	72	26/11/1981	One line	3 pp.	
	32	125	79		3 lines	8 mm.	
	33					7 mm.	
	34	125	78		3 lines	7 mm.	
	35					8 mm.	
	3	36	125	37		4 lines	11 mm.
		37	128	8	1982–83	Orch. score	2 pp.
		38	128	7	1982–83	Orch. score	2 mm.
		39	126	15		3 lines	2 pp.
		40	128	9		3 lines + piano	2 pp.
		41	126	13		3 lines	13 mm.
		42	128	10	22/12/1983	Orch. score	3 pp. (p. 2 missing)
43		128	12		3 lines + piano	5 mm.	
44					4 lines + piano	4 mm.	
45					5 lines + piano	13 mm.	
46		126	30		3 lines + piano	9 mm.	
47		128	14	8/4/1984	Orch. score	2 pp.	
48		128	13		3 lines + piano	10 mm.	
49		126	34		3 lines + piano	6 mm.	
50					3 lines + piano	3 pp.	

	51	128	15	1984	Orch. score	5 mm.
	52	128	11		3 lines + piano	2 pp.
	53	126	78		3 lines + piano	2 mm.
	54	126	20		Orch. score	5 pp.
4	55	125	22		Piano	2 mm.
	56	128	21	1985–86	Piano, cel, fl	9 mm.
	57	128	20	1985–86	Orch. score	4 mm.
	58	126	57		Orch. score	2 pp.
	59	128	18	1985–86	Orch. score	First p. (others lost?)
	60	126	44		Orch. score	6 pp. (p. 1 missing)
	61	128	16	21/12/1985	Orch. score	4 pp.
	62	128	17		Piano	6 mm.
	63				Piano	6 mm.
	64	52	72		Piano	1 m.
	65				Piano, Vn	4 mm.
	66				Piano	5 mm.
	67	128	19		Piano	1 m.
	68				Piano	8 mm.
	69	126	50		Orch. score	6 pp.
	70	128	22		Orch. score	4 pp.
	71	128	23		Orch. score	43 pp.

Table 1: Chronology of Sketches for Ligeti's Piano Concerto, First Movement.

the top of the example is a rhythmic idea for the piano melody that Ligeti later (in red pen) labeled “Fontos I tétel ‘bolgár’” (Important: first movement, “Bulgarian”). He groups the quavers in three levels, first 3s and 2s, then 6 + 5, and finally one group of 11. The metrical notation is likely abstract: from more complete sketches (2–7 in Table 1) we can see that he would set this irregular pattern in a more common time signature like 12/8, allowing it to shift with respect to the barlines, as he does in other pieces. Notes next to this enthusiastically associate it with Olivier Messiaen, Charles Ives, and Nancarrow.

Toward the bottom of the page, Ligeti further develops the idea. The “Bulgarian” description occurs again – likely thinking of Bartók’s “Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm” – and a reference to Boris Blacher, who similarly used irregular aksak-type rhythms (e.g. in *Paganini Variations*). He describes a polyrhythmic plan: “Unis. átmege eltolódásba (polymtr)” (unison turns into polymetric shifting), and a detailed description of a plan for a polyrhythmic interaction between the piano and the orchestra: “Zong kissé gyorsabb, külön tempo! [...] KÉT-SÍK” (Piano a bit faster, in its own tempo! [...] TWO PLANES). As varied as Ligeti’s sketches of the first movement would be over the next six years, this idea of contrasting tempo layers would remain a through line.

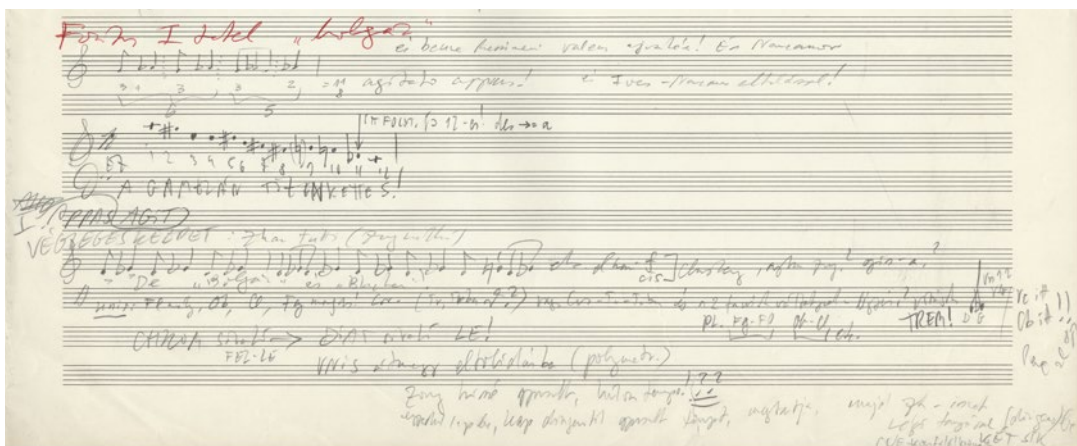


Plate 1: György Ligeti, Piano Concerto, sketch page 125-67, lower half (PSS-GLC).

Stage 2: July 1980–November 1981

The second stage versions begin from a sequence of rotated transpositions of a 12-tone row. The row never changes over the course of stages 2–3 and ultimately serves as the basis of the fourth movement of the completed concerto. Most of the versions in this stage are preparatory sketches of a melodic line, usually in a generalized rhythm, to be deployed in a large canon. Many are abstract preparatory sketches in which Ligeti groups sequences of notes from the series into overlapping melodic blocks. Most (15–18, 27–31) are in a simplified rhythmic notation, where quarter and half notes stand in for generalized short and long values, and bar lines are used to indicate melodic blocks to be separated by longer pauses. Ligeti planned to use this line as the lead part of a canon, with parts related by major-third transposition. Sketches 19–20 mark the moment where Ligeti decides to make this a mensural canon. A note in the margin says “CANONOK!” and next to sketch 20 below he writes “3 Tempó Réteg cis-f-a” (three tempo layers, C#–F–A).

Plate 2 diagrams a mensural canon like those in sketches 24–25 and 32–35. Above, he writes “shifting syncopations” (“szink. eltólni”) and below a polyrhythm with divisive proportion 3:4:5. The sketches halve these note values, but otherwise match it closely, with the 3-line the lowest in pitch (“MÉLY” = “low”). The assignment of the 5-line to the piano (“Zong[ora]”) and 4-line to the orchestra (“Z[ene]kar”) matches sketches 24 and 25. The barring in the diagram, with groups of 4 in all the parts, reflects the idea that they will share rhythmic figures, proportionally adjusted to the basic unit of each line.

Ligeti was to find this block-canon method handy for the first of the *Magyar Etüdok*, subtitled “Spiegelkanon.” His first attempt,

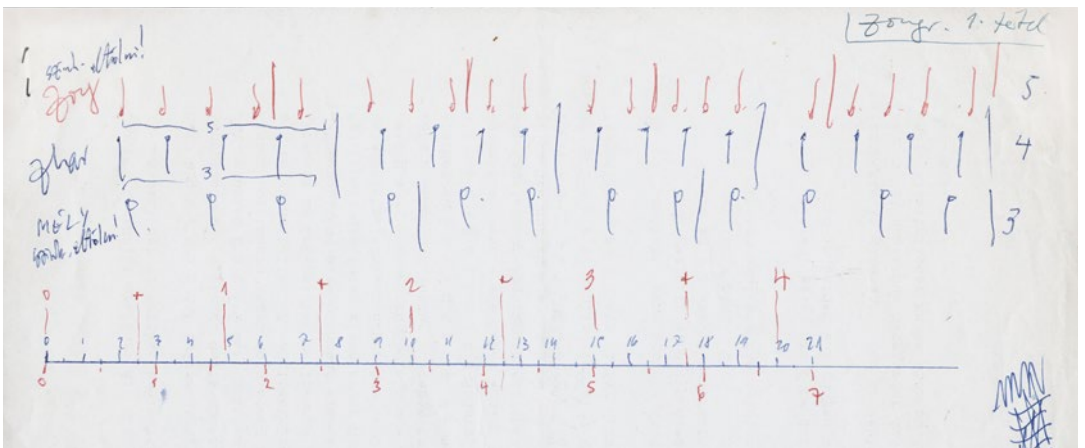


Plate 2: György Ligeti, Piano Concerto, sketch page 124-106, upper half (PSS-GLC).

preserved in an incomplete 38 measure sketch, is a simple eight-part canon. In the final version he instead divides the ensemble into two choirs and uses the notational method that he would eventually use in the final version of the Piano Concerto first movement. Choir 2 is in 2/2 with a half note equal to choir 1's dotted half note in 6/4. From choir 2 to choir 1 there is a 2:3 mensural canon, except that Ligeti prevents the choir 1 parts from overtaking the choir 2 parts by lengthening pauses between melodic blocks in choir 1.

Stage 3: 1982–1985

In stage 3 Ligeti hits upon a strategy diagrammed in Plate 3. At the top of the page he reproduces the basic durational units of the previous mensural canons, making a 3:4:5 polyrhythm. Below, he writes the 4-layer basic pulse out again, then rebars it and adds accent markings to make an irregular 3+3+2 pattern. He then applies the same pattern to the other two parts using their basic durational units. While the cycle of 8 pulses in the 4-layer lines up with the notated meter, the 3- and 5-layers do not, requiring 4 cycles to realign with a barline. When combined, the patterns will make a two-level polyrhythm, with the basic units in the proportion 3:4:5, and the repeated 3+3+2 cycles reproducing this proportion augmented by 8. This becomes the foundation for the next two years of sketches.

The sketch in Plate 3 indicates that the polyrhythmic scheme would be entirely entrusted to the orchestra, while the piano would be freely composed (“szabad fig.”). Ligeti would vacillate on this aspect of the plan.

In sketches 39–53 Ligeti first writes in the 3+3+2 rhythms as guides in between the staves, using beams and stems without noteheads, before writing the music. The rhythm of the parts is

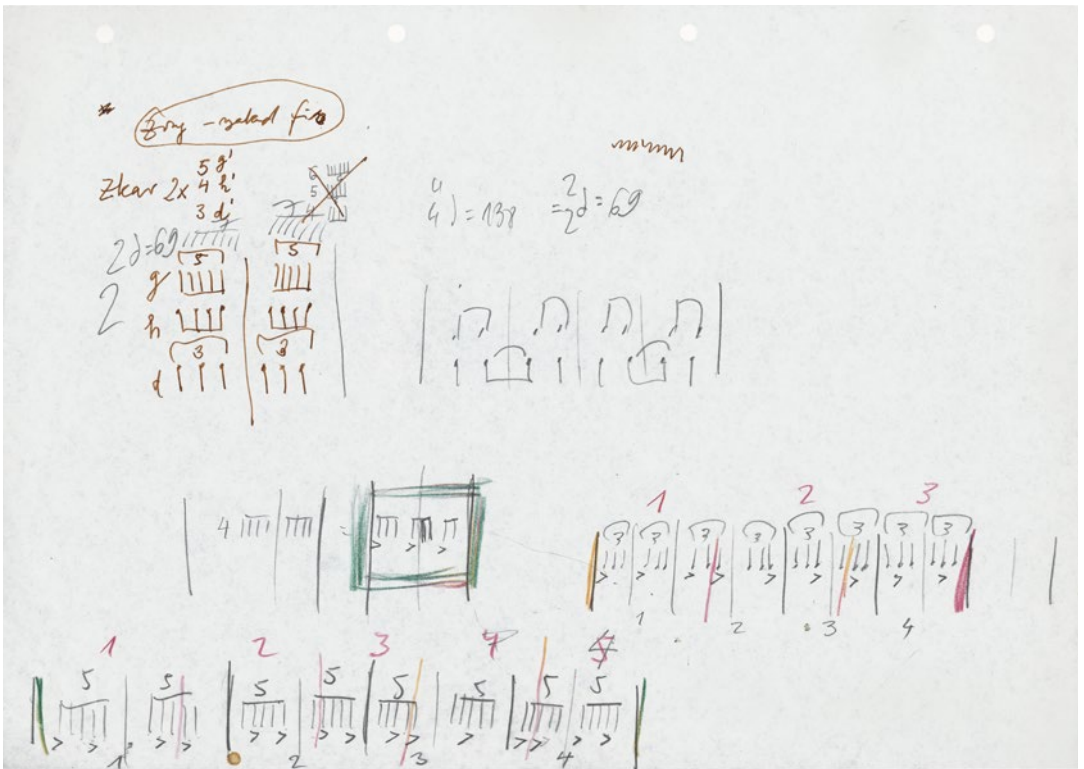


Plate 3: György Ligeti, Piano Concerto, sketch page 124-140 (PSS-GLC).

not fully determined by the 3+3+2 guides – rather, these serve as a framework that determine where to place melodic groups and accents. The parts generally increase in density, so that the rhythmic framework is inaudible at first and gradually comes into focus as the rhythms get more dense. Orchestration indications in sketches 39 and 40, with the 4-line marked “vonós” (strings), the 3-line “fafűvós” (woodwinds), and the 5-line “rész” or “rész + ütő” (brass and percussion), do not include the piano, which Ligeti may have intended to freely compose as the sketch in Plate 3 indicates. In sketches 41 and 42, the piano is based on the 5-line of the canon, but in sketches 43–51, he goes back to the idea of a freely composed piano part independent of the canon.

Stage 4: 1985–1986

The crucial development for stage 4 is Ligeti’s work on the first book of *Études* for piano. Initially planned as a set of three études for Pierre Boulez’s 60th birthday in March 1985, the project extended to six since some ideas were not ready in time for this performance. In particular, he replaced what would eventually become *Étude* 5, “Arc-en-ciel,” with a quickly composed “Touches Bloquées.”

The piano *Études* served as a new starting point for the Concerto's first movement, with a series of attempts based on "Automne à Varsovie" and "Arc-en-ciel" before finally completing the movement with ideas from the first *Étude*, "Désordre." The versions of the first movement from stage 4 are therefore diverse and difficult to put in chronological order.

The basic technique of "Automne à Varsovie," composed around June of 1985, is to layer "lamento" melodies over an ostinato of continuous semiquavers, and to create polyrhythms by measuring different melodies with different multiples (3, 4, 5, 6, 7) of the basic semiquaver unit. Version 56, the last with the "Agitato appassionato" tempo marking, begins with a lamento line in quavers across 4 octaves, leading to an ostinato in triplet quavers. The versions most clearly based on the "Varsovie" etude (58–61) introduce an important new notational technique. In addition to preparing pages with preruled barlines, he begins adding color-coded sub-barlines to measure out different polyrhythms. In version 58, blue, green, and yellow lines measure out distances of 3, 4, and 5 crotchets respectively. In versions 59–60, a more complex scheme measures distances of 4, 5, 6, 7, and 11 semiquavers (Plate 4).

Ultimately Ligeti would shift his plans for a movement based on the "Varsovie" etude from the first to the third movement. The first movement as we know it finally emerges from a phase shifting idea from the first etude, "Désordre." Ligeti achieves a similar effect in the Concerto using an isorhythmic design with two irregular rhythms on pulsation grids related by a 2:3 proportion.

The Piano Concerto sketches are central to the transformation of Ligeti's style in the 1980s, and they show him processing the influence first of Nancarrow, then, via the *Études*, of African music. However, what they reveal is not a straightforward case of influence. Rather, these encounters intensified his development of techniques that had already been present in some form in his compositions. His sketches for the Piano Concerto are an invaluable window into this process at a pivotal moment in Ligeti's career.