

A Key to Structure in the Kyrie of György Ligeti's Requiem

by Jonathan W. Bernard

From his fast appearance on the Western musical scene, shortly after emigrating from Hungary in 1956, György Ligeti lost little time in fashioning a distinctively new compositional style for himself. The fast aspect of this new style, indeed, had already begun to coalesce, if in secret, during his final months in Budapest: a rejection of the conservative, quasi-Bartókian style to which he had been confined by the dictates of socialist realism. Although this change could not have been surprising to many observers even at the time, a second aspect, manifested not much later, was no doubt much more so: a skepticism about the reigning wisdom of “advanced” musical composition – that is, post-Weberian serialism as it had arisen and developed in Darmstadt and other hubs of contemporary musical activity. While Ligeti’s well-known essay, “Wandlungen der musikalischen Form” (first published in 1960, but written two years earlier), is usually regarded as his formal and explicit declaration of independence from serialism, in fact the path to this independence had been prepared some time even before that, as is evident from an early, unpublished Version of *Apparitions* (1958–59), the first concert work Ligeti finished in the West.¹

There can be little doubt that the tenets of serialism as practiced in the 1950s, once he was in a position actually to become acquainted with them, left Ligeti disillusioned. Yet it would be inaccurate to assert that, from that point on, he turned his back on dodecaphony and serialism completely. For one thing, like many of his Darmstadt colleagues, Ligeti became deeply absorbed in the music of Webern – especially, it would appear, the twelve-tone works. Articles about Webern dominated his bibliography until the mid-1960s; beyond these publications, Ligeti found Webern important enough to make his music the subject of a ten-part series of lectures that he delivered over Southwest German Radio in 1963–64.

Another indication that dodecaphony and its offshoots remained of some importance to Ligeti appears in his self-interview, “Fragen und Antworten von mir selbst” (1971).² Here he rehearsed once again his criticisms of 1950s serialism – but then, asking himself whether he had excluded serialism completely from his own compositions, he answered: “I have been talking about modifications, not total abandonment. [...]”

There are aspects of serial thinking that I have felt to be promising for the development of my own working methods, above all, the principle of selection and systemization of elements and procedures, as well as the principle of consistency: postulates, once decided on, should be carried through logically, but only in those areas in which they are musically relevant.”³ Where might such areas lie? The potential range of application for such criteria is vast, but one specific piece of evidence that serialism continued to exert some influence on Ligeti’s compositional imagination surfaces in the Kyrie, the second movement of his Requiem (1963–65).

Ligeti’s Kyrie is unusual, possibly unique among settings of this text from the Ordinary of the Mass in its reiterated and overlapping entries of the two components of the text in simultaneous, contrapuntal presentation. To keep them aurally distinct from each other, the Kyrie eleison and Christe eleison are assigned radically contrasting melodic material. The Kyrie is always set to the same melody (which may also be transposed or inverted strictly in pitch), which moves solely by melodic adjacencies of whole tones and semitones, and in durational values that gradually increase and decrease through a range extending from somewhat longer than a beat to as short as nonuplets. The Christe settings, on the other hand, are much more diversely and more angularly constructed: they vary considerably in length and make use of a larger range of possible melodic adjacencies, all generally conforming to expanding and contracting wedge designs;⁴ they exhibit a more angular pattern of durations too, selected from a range extending from shorter than a beat to much longer. However, a basic similarity is established between Kyrie and Christe material by the fact that each entry consists of a “voice bundle,” as Ligeti has described it:⁵ the five divisi parts of the soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor, or bass section of the choir entering in unison and then fanning out into a stretto canon, merging back into a unison as the canon concludes and the entry ends. *Example 1*, the first page of the Kyrie, displays the initial settings of both Kyrie eleison and Christe eleison material.

It is the wedge design of the Christe melodies that lends them their general tendency to exhaust the set of twelve pitch classes in fairly short order – quite unlike the Kyrie melodies – although instances of a series, in the strictest sense, are relatively rare. One such instance is the pitch sequence for the soprano Christe strand beginning at measure 40 (see *Example 2a*). The only other strand conforming to these same strict requirements of a series is the pitch sequence for the soprano entry at measure 102 (*Example 2b*), which stands in the relationship of retrograde inversion to the entry at measure 40. Notice also that a transposition has been selected for the measure 102 entry that allows it to begin with the same two pitch classes, B^{\sharp} and B_b^{\flat} , that end the measure 40 entry: that is, if the entry at measure 40 were designated P_0 , then the entry at measure 102 would be RI_1 .



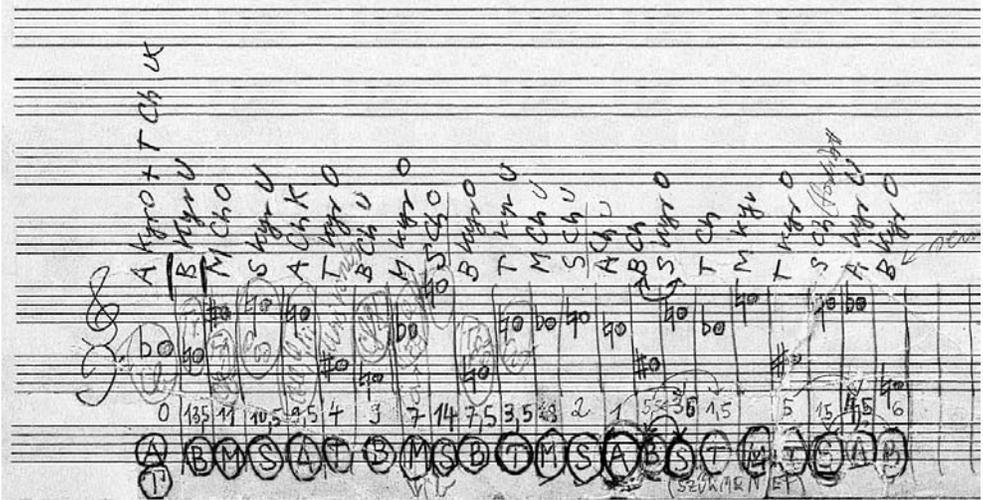
Example 2a



Example 2b

The characteristics of these two series, as it turns out, provide crucial information as to the way in which Ligeti controls the order of entries of both Kyrie and Christe melodies in a single scheme extending throughout the movement. The first hint of this control comes in the appearance in one of Ligeti's sketches, of the pitch series of *Example 2a*, transposed down a perfect fifth and labeled "Grundtypus." This "Grundtypus," paired with its corresponding retrograde inversion (that is, the pitch series of *Example 2b*, also transposed down a perfect fifth), are the basis for a further sketch, reproduced as *Example 3*. Here the two series are dovetailed to form a 22-pitch-class sequence. Above each note appears an indication of correspondence to the order of entries of Kyrie and Christe material: for the first note, B_b , the legend "A Kyr O + T Ch UK" signifies that the Kyrie eleison melody is given to the altos, in its original (uninverted) form, while simultaneously the tenors sing the Christe eleison melody in its inverted retrograde form; at the second note, A , the basses project Kyrie material in inversion; and so on. Ligeti has revised the order of pitch classes in the basic scheme in two places, as shown by arrows drawn on the chart in *Example 3*: first, the F_\sharp and G at order positions 15 and 16 respectively are switched; second, the sequence $B-B_b-A$ at positions 20, 21, and 22 respectively is circularly permuted to B_b-A-B .

Even more interesting than the Webernian allusions, embedded in the way this series is constructed and deployed in overlapping forms, is the idea



Example 3: György Ligeti, Requiem (1963–65), sketch for no. 2, Kyrie (György Ligeti Collection).

of using such a series as a kind of master control mechanism to govern a composition that is decidedly neither twelve-tone nor serial in its note-to-note organization. Such a scheme is at the heart of one of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s great works of the 1950s, his *Gruppen* for three orchestras (1955–57). In this work, the intervals between adjacent notes of a series are used both to define precise ratios between the tempi of brief sections and to define vertical (pitch) spaces, or “fields,” within which these brief sections operate.⁶ It is perhaps not a coincidence, then, that one of Ligeti’s first up-close glimpses of musical composition as it was being practiced in the West was at Stockhausen’s house in Cologne, where he stayed for a time as a guest in early 1957.⁷ Clearly, this exposure induced no particular desire on Ligeti’s part to write like Stockhausen; his own music from that time on could hardly have been more different. Yet there is a similarity of philosophy, in the kind of relationship that musical materials are meant to have with the resulting composition: in the use, in short, of serial principles to enforce a certain order – but only up to a point. And after that point, other principles more specifically of the composer’s own invention must take over. What is not controlled by serial principles in Ligeti’s Kyrie – such as, for example, the voice leading for the Kyrie eleison melodies, discussion of the rules for which would require an article by itself – is of course at least as interesting as the features that are so controlled.

¹ See György Ligeti, "Wandlungen der musikalischen Form," *Die Reihe*, no. 7: *Form – Raum* (1960): 5–17; translated by Cornelius Cardew for the English edition, *Die Reihe*, no. 7: *Form – Space* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser, 1965): 5–19. The manuscript of the earlier version of *Apparitions*, dated 1957, resides among the materials in the György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation. Only the first movement bears any resemblance to the eventual, final version. The second movement, an "open work" with limited aleatoric features, is published along with its directions for performance in György Ligeti, "Spielanweisungen zur Erstfassung des zweiten Satzes der 'Apparitions,'" *Musica*, 22 (1968), no. 3: 177–79.

² György Ligeti, "Fragen und Antworten von mir selbst," *Melos*, 38 (1971), no. 7: 509–16; English translation by Geoffrey Skelton, in *Ligeti in Conversation* (London: Eulenburg, 1983), 124–37.

³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴ Each *Christe* melody is ultimately a recognizable transformation of a single, fundamental form, the "Grundtypus" (see below); but the various transpositions, retrogradations, inversions, and retrograde inversions are more "freely" composed than the strict transpositions and inversions of the *Kyrie* melody. In the *Christe* settings, repetitions of tones and segments are frequent, as are palindromic reversals and re-reversals. Sometimes, in fact, the identity of a transformation is detectable only from its incipit.

⁵ Ligeti uses the term "Stimmbündel" in his essay, "Auf dem Weg zu *Lux aeterna*," *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift*, 24 (1969): 80–88.

⁶ For a detailed, authoritative analysis of *Gruppen*, see Jonathan Harvey, *The Music of Stockhausen: An Introduction* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, and London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 55–76.

⁷ According to Harvey, at this time Stockhausen was just beginning the task of writing out the score of *Gruppen*, realizing it from plans drawn up earlier (*ibid.*, 55). In "Meine Kölner Zeit," Ligeti has recalled the keen interest with which he observed Stockhausen's work on *Gruppen* while staying at his home. Written in 1993, this essay was published as part of *Erinnerungen: Neue Musik in Köln 1945–1971*, an exhibition at the "MusikTriennale, Cologne 1994"; see Otto Tomek, "Neue Musik in Köln 1945–1976," *Die Befreiung der Musik: Eine Einführung in die Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Franz Xaver Ohnesorg (Bergisch Gladbach: Lübbe, 1994), 253–73; a typescript of the text is in the György Ligeti Collection.