

A Folkloric Collage Jettisoned The Original Version of the First Movement of György Ligeti's Violin Concerto (1990)

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The genesis of the Violin Concerto (1990–92) was, as with all of Ligeti's large-scale works after 1985, no easy story. Like the Piano Concerto's première in 1986, the first performance of the Violin Concerto on 3 November 1990 in Cologne was incomplete, since only three of the planned five movements had been written by that time.¹ But while in the case of the Piano Concerto Ligeti simply added two more movements to the already existing three without significantly altering them, he substantially revised the Violin Concerto by rearranging the sequence of the movements and recomposing them.² In fact, he composed three new movements: the opening, the second, and the finale. While the original first movement was jettisoned and the second revised and placed after the third, only the third movement was left in place, albeit in slightly revised form.

Ligeti revealed little about his reasons for undertaking this thorough revision. In a conversation with Louise Duchesneau in October 1992, on the occasion of the première of the definitive version, he only mentioned that while working on the new version he had followed Haydn's model in the "principle of avoiding unnecessary complexity," which had brought him closer to his ideal.³ However, in an interview given to Marina Lobanova in December 1991, when he was already working on the new version, he admitted that over-complexity was not the sole reason for rewriting the piece:

What has not been successful is that in the complex polyphony of the concerto I used too many layers and metrical complexities – which resulted in a finished product which was too chaotic. That is one reason for re-writing the piece. The second reason is its rather folkloric atmosphere: perhaps through nostalgia, I came too close to Hungarian folk music, and I believe that this approach is no longer relevant today.⁴

From a comparison of the two versions of the Violin Concerto, it becomes clear that both of Ligeti's verdicts – the "too many layers and metrical complexities" and the "rather folkloric atmosphere" – apply primarily to the

first movement. Metrical complexities and folkloric atmosphere are both salient features of the opening movement that are immediately perceivable to the listener.⁵ Curiously enough, however, Ligeti hardly touched the subject of ethnic influences in his otherwise detailed program notes to the concerto's first version. After discussing the harmonic structure, he proclaimed that by using unusual tunings he did not aim at strangeness but complexity, and that exoticisms, if there were any at all in the concerto, appeared only as allusions. Then he added in parenthesis: "(The first movement certainly has a folkloric flavor, in homage to the music of my Hungarian, particularly Transylvanian, home.)"⁶

In fact, the "folkloric atmosphere" is no accidental or secondary feature of the original version of the first movement, but the result of a compositional idea to which the elaborate employment of, and allusion to, various ethnic melodies is absolutely central. The movement includes six musical materials, or themes, related to Hungarian and Romanian folk music that are used as components of an increasingly complex four-and-a-half-minute collage (see *Example 1* for the materials used). Some of the underlying popular tunes are altered only slightly and so are easy to recognize, but others are transformed, even distorted, to such an extent that they are hardly identifiable. Yet even they can be identified on the basis of Ligeti's jottings for the concerto, in which a great many ethnic sources are referred to.⁷ In the following I will also name these source melodies using Ligeti's terminology (see *Example 2* for the source melodies).

Tune (b), first played by the piccolo in measures 8–13, is perhaps the most noticeable and the easiest to identify. It is a slightly varied version of an old Hungarian folk melody that is widely known with the text *Dunaparton van egy malom*. In the sketches, Ligeti occasionally calls it *Dunántúli* (Transdanubian), a name referring both to the text and to the "Transdanubian third," a neutral third characteristic of folk melodies of that region in general, and of this tune in particular. (Curiously, however, Ligeti did not take advantage of the microtonal potential of this melody, although microtonal deviations play a key role in the concerto's harmonic structure, resulting in an intentionally "dirty" sound.)⁸ In the concerto, almost nothing is changed in the folk song, except that the cadence of line 2 is eliminated and thus lines 2–3 elided. The melody usually appears in a very high register, which suggests, together with the typical ornaments, the sound of a peasant flute.

Tune (f), called "cantus firmus" in the score, is also easily recognizable. It is based on a so-called new-style Hungarian folk song (*Kisangyalom rácsos-rezes kapuja*) that Ligeti arranged for two-part children's choir in 1955 as no. 2 of *Mátraszentimrei dalok* (Songs from Mátraszentimre). In the jottings, it is occasionally called *Mátraszentimrei* ("behívó") (conscription), which refers to the text, the farewell of a young man to his sweetheart after being called up for military duty. The tune is not quoted in its original form. Ligeti

changed its intervallic structure by replacing a few minor second steps with major seconds and vice versa, thus alienating the melody.

More difficult to recognize is the source of tune (e), because it is not quoted in its entirety but only as a few characteristic melodic turns in a slowed-down, free rhythm. The source melody is an old-style Hungarian folk song of the *parlando*–*rubato* type (*Az hol én elmegyek*). In one of the jottings, exceptionally, Ligeti jotted down not only the first words of the text but also notated the first line of the folk melody, albeit with a characteristic difference, the closing note being written a minor second higher. This little deviation is not accidental, for it turns the originally pentatonic melody into a whole-tone one, which is exactly what Ligeti needed. The harmonic concept of the entire movement is based on two complementary whole-tone collections on the one hand and a pentatonic collection on the other. From the motifs of the folk song, Ligeti creates “infinite” expressive melodic lines. Whereas at its first appearance (mm. 21–33, played by the trumpet and the trombone in parallel fifths) the melody remains rather in the background, at the second occurrence (mm. 33–43) it is taken over passionately in a very high register by the solo violin.

Tune (c), first played by horn 1, consists exclusively of natural overtones and is obviously a reminiscence of Romanian alphorn signals that Ligeti encountered during his two months of folk music research at the Institutul de Folclor in Bucharest (1949) and employed in the third and fourth movements of his *Concert românesc* (Romanian Concerto) in 1951. Among the jottings for the Violin Concerto are several notes demonstrating that he sought to invoke the sound of the *bucium* by using the horn’s natural overtones.⁹

In some of the sketches, Ligeti refers in Hungarian to both tunes (a) and (d) as *Párnás tánc* (pillow dance), meaning a certain type of folk dance and melody that belong to the folklore of wedding ceremonies both in Hungary and Romania.¹⁰ Tune (d), first played by the solo violin in m. 15, has indeed the character of a lively folk dance. It is based on a stereotyped motif from a Romanian dance tune that Ligeti arranged in 1950 under the title *Párnás tánc* as no. 6 of *Román népdalok és táncok* (Romanian folk songs and dances), an unpublished series of ten arrangements for a female and a male singer and gypsy ensemble.¹¹ In the Violin Concerto, the motif is transformed to fit into a whole-tone collection. Tune (a), another *párnás tánc*, is a variant of (d): they share the same even rhythm and whole-tone collection; moreover, their first five notes are in exact inversion. The ethnic source of (a) is a widely known Hungarian folk song (*Elvesztettem zsebkendőmet*) that exists in several variants and was also arranged by Bartók as no. 14 of the *Forty-four Duos* (1931–32) under the title *Párnás tánc / Pillow Dance*.¹² The borrowed motif is again transformed into a whole-tone melody that is also doubled at a major sixth, so that the two resulting voices use two complementary whole-tone collections.

(a) mm. 5–6, vn solo, cl/cl b

pppp

(b) mm. 8–13, pic

grazioso
pp p mf

(c) mm. 14–15, hn 1

pp cresc. p mp p dim. pp morendo

(d) mm. 15–20, vn solo

capriccioso
mf p mp mf sub p

(e) mm. 21–33, tpt, trb

con sord. (straight, metal) Flatterzunge
ppp

(f) mm. 39–48, trb/tpt

senza sord.
leggero espressivo, con eleganza
f („cantus firmus”) *più f* mf f
più f
p („cantus firmus”) [17.]

Example 1: Musical materials of the first movement of György Ligeti's Violin Concerto.

(a-1) Hungarian folk song, *Corpus Musicae Popularis Hungaricae* [henceforth *CMPH*] III/B, ed. Lajos Kiss (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1956), no. 202, p. 208

Tempo giusto

El-vesz-tet-tem zseb-ken-dő-met, meg-ver a-nyám ér-te. Meg-ka-p-ták a szép le-gé-nyek, csó-kot kér-nek ér-te.

Hej, a-nyám, hej, a-nyám, csó-kot kér-nek ér-te. Hej, a-pám, hej, a-pám, ki-vált-ha-tom ér-te.

(a-2) Ligeti, *Magyar etűdök*, no. 3, choir II, mm. 1–5

♩ = 190 Vivacissimo

Ér-ke-zik a ván-dor-cir-kusz, hoz-nak e-le-fán-tot, ta-eka bohóc ve-ze-ti, Fű-si Pi-si kö-ve-ti, í-lyet so-se lát-t.

(b) Hungarian folk song, *CMPH* VII, ed. Imre Olsvai (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1987), no. 32, p. 102

Poco rubato

Du-na - par - ton van egy ma-lom, Bu-bá - na - tot öl - nek a - zón, c - jo-ha.

Ne - kém is van hu - bá - na - tom, O-da vi - szém, lé - já - ra - tom, c - jo-ha.

(c) Ligeti, *Concert românesc*, movt III, mm. 192–195, hn 1, 3

[Adagio ma non troppo]
1. solo naturale

p *mp*

eco, 3. solo naturale, da lontano

(d) Ligeti, *Román népdalok és táncok*, no. 6, mm. 1–8

Párnás tánc. Gyors

(e) Hungarian folk song, *CMPH* X, ed. Katalin Paksa (Budapest: Balassi, 1997), no. 568, p. 537

Poco rubato

Az - hol én el - mē-gyek, — Még az fák és sír-nak, —

Gyēn - ge já - gi - i - ről Le - ve - lek le - hull - nak.

(f) Ligeti, *Mátraszertimrei dalok*, no. 2, mm. 1–8

Andante

Kis-an-gya-lom rá-csós-re-zes ka-pu - ja, Jaj, de so-kat ki-nyí-lott a szá-mom - ra.

Is-ten vő-léd, re-zes ki-lin - cses aj - tó, Te meg ba-bám, ol-vasd el a be-hí - vőt.

Example 2: Source melodies of the Violin Concerto.

This latter whole-tone *párnás tánc* melody is, by the way, a self-quotation from no. 3 of Ligeti's *Magyar etűdök* (Hungarian Studies, 1983). The overt reference to that earlier choral piece is by no means accidental, for it is in many respects a precursor of the Violin Concerto's opening movement. Being an entertaining naturalistic rendition of the multitude of sounds heard in a market, "Vásár" is a collage of five quasi-folk songs that enter one after another, each in its own tempo, meter, and key, resulting in ever-increasing chaos. All the melodies are "fake quotations" of non-existing Hungarian folk songs alienated in a manner similar to the quotations in the Violin Concerto.¹³ Despite the similarities in compositional technique and in the overall process of increasing density, however, the two movements are essentially different in their effect. Compared to the almost mechanical process of increasing chaos in "Vásár," with the individual layers entering one by one and the piece coming to a sudden stop, as if "switched off," the form of the concerto's first movement is far more complex. In its straightforward manner, "Vásár" is rather playful and comic, even if there is undoubtedly some nostalgia behind the playful attitude.¹⁴ In contrast, the Violin Concerto's first movement is more bewildering and, eventually, tragic: the melodies of Ligeti's "Hungarian, particularly Transylvanian, home" that initially sounded so nice and clear gradually blur and become confused, the music turns into chaos and disintegrates.

Although Ligeti replaced the folkloric collage with a new opening movement that is much more well-ordered and introductory in character (hence its title *Praeludium*), he did not succeed in eliminating the "folkloric atmosphere" from the Violin Concerto (obviously, he did not want to do so either).¹⁵ On the contrary, four of the six melodies discussed above found their way into the fifth movement, where they resound partly in the middle section and partly in the soloist's cadenza, albeit embedded in a totally new context.

¹ See Ligeti's program notes to the first performance: "Violinkonzert (Urfassung)," in György Ligeti, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Publications of the Paul Sacher Foundation, vol. 10, ed. Monika Lichtenfeld (Mainz: Schott, 2007), vol. 2, pp. 302–04, here p. 304.

² Cf. Jonathan W. Bernard, "Rules and Regulation: Lessons from Ligeti's Compositional Sketches," *György Ligeti: Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds*, ed. Louise Duchesneau and Wolfgang Marx (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011), pp. 149–67, here p. 157. The genesis of the Piano Concerto is discussed in depth in the same volume by Richard Steinitz, "À qui un hommage? Genesis of the Piano Concerto and the Horn Trio," pp. 169–212.

³ Louise Duchesneau, "György Ligeti on his Violin Concerto," *Ligeti Letter*, 2 [1995], pp. 1–7, here pp. 3–4. An edited version of the interview was published in German as "Violinkonzert (definitive Fassung)," in Ligeti, *Gesammelte Schriften* (see note 1), vol. 2, pp. 304–06.

⁴ Marina Lobanova, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics*, trans. Mark Shuttleworth (Berlin: Ernst Kuhn, 2002), p. 359. The interview was conducted in German.

⁵ The autograph full score of the original version of the Violin Concerto and recordings of various early performances are in the György Ligeti Collection of the Paul Sacher Stiftung (PSS).

⁶ “Nun ist aber nicht Fremdartigkeit an sich, sondern Komplexität mein Ziel, und Exotismen gibt es in diesem Konzert, wenn überhaupt, nur als Allusion. (Folkloristisches ist wohl im ersten Satz präsent – eine Huldigung an die Musik meiner ungarischen, im besonderen siebenbürgischen Heimat.)” Ligeti, “Violinkonzert (Urfassung)” (see note 1), p. 303.

⁷ By jottings I mean, applying Jonathan W. Bernard’s typology of Ligeti’s sketches, verbal sketches that basically do not involve musical notation (Bernard, “Rules and regulation,” see note 2, pp. 151–53). Over 200 pages of such miscellaneous jottings are to be found in the first of the five folders containing manuscript material for the original version of the Violin Concerto in the György Ligeti Collection, PSS.

⁸ Ligeti, “Violinkonzert (Urfassung)” (see note 1), p. 303, and “Violinkonzert (definitive Fassung)” (see note 3), p. 305.

⁹ See e.g. *2 kürt natur, nagy bucium dallamhoz vezet* (2 natural horns, leading to a great bucium melody), or *2 kürt natur – yodel, bucium* (2 natural horns – yodel, bucium).

¹⁰ In Romanian it is called *Hora cu perina*. See Béla Bartók, *Rumanian Folk Music*, vol. 1: *Instrumental Melodies*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), p. 31.

¹¹ The György Ligeti Collection preserves two manuscript fair copies of this work: a vocal score written by the composer and a full score in an unknown hand. According to the cover text of the latter, the orchestration was not made by Ligeti but by József Rácz.

¹² See Vera Lampert, *Folk Music in Bartók’s Compositions: A Source Catalog* (Budapest: Helikon etc., 2008), p. 188 (no. 276).

¹³ See Zoltán Farkas, “Magyar népzenei hatások Ligeti György és Kurtág György zenéjében” (The Influence of Folk Music in the Œuvres of György Ligeti and György Kurtág), *Magyar zene*, 44 (2006), no. 4, pp. 361–86.

¹⁴ As Rachel Beckles Willson points out, the way the piece is “switched off” at the end aptly illustrates how Ligeti puts an end to nostalgic fantasy. See Rachel Beckles Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 178.

¹⁵ The most overt reference to Eastern European folk music and to Ligeti’s Hungarian past is certainly the “Aria” of the second movement, which cannot be discussed here.