

Tracking Down Ligeti's Unfinished Third and Fourth String Quartets

by Bianca Țiplea Temeș

György Ligeti's two published string quartets convey a very accurate image of his compositional concept over the years, mirroring the stages of his mastery spanning two decades (the 1950s and the 1960s). They microscopically retrace the broad stylistic transformation of his oeuvre and provoke new questions regarding the fact that such a prolific composer could write only two pieces for string quartet during his long career.

The manuscripts preserved at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel have proved to be a revelation in terms of Ligeti's earlier attempts and his continuing interest in writing string quartet music after the 1970s. From an early age, when he was still living in Cluj, Romania, Ligeti learned to master classical and romantic techniques and to follow the ground rules of syntax, morphology, harmony, and counterpoint. His string quartet exercises range from the classics to the late romantics, and his notes demonstrate that he was intensively studying masterpieces of the world repertoire. His sketch notebooks¹ of the early 1940s reveal that he was already studying masterpieces of the genre, such as Beethoven's F minor Quartet (op. 95), Haydn's and Schubert's E-flat major Quartets, and Tchaikovsky's Quartet in D major (op. 11). These years could be labeled as "the fast assimilation process," in which he tried to make a condensed sweep through all the stages of music history, from the classical period in the style of Haydn or early Mozart up to a more dissonant language infused with a few chromatic elements.² During this period of study with Ferenc Farkas in Cluj, the young musician wrote short stylistic exercises that clearly displayed a high level of inspiration and ingenuity in melody or harmony. In a letter to Adam Horst in which he intended to sketch his artistic *Curriculum Vitae*, Ligeti specified that in his early years he had written "dilettantische Kompositionen: Klavierstücke, mit 15 ein Streichquartett, mit 16 und 17 zwei Sätze einer Symphonie."³

For his graduation exam at the Franz Liszt Music Academy in Budapest, Ligeti completed *Andante and Allegretto* (1948–50), a piece that anticipated and, within a few years, led to the outstanding String Quartet No. 1, which

III - VONÓSNÉGYES: → Ardi: Str. Q

IV - VONÓSNÉGYES: → Kronos

mindkettőben elhangolás is így:

↓ picit ~ 14 cent 30% ~ 31 cent ↓ nyugodtan
10-20% (5. felhang) ~ 45 cent

13., 14., 15. felhang → való G-ly 5. felhang + h (a-bis) (M. felhang.)
C hang 7. felhang + h (a-bis)
való megfogás helyi feszültség
Való G-ly 5. felhang + h (a-bis) C hang 7. felhang + h (a-bis)
való megfogás helyi feszültség

III - Str. Q.

IV - Str. Q

egy hangú tetelben
sík epizód: ataca
igen csapongó, megle-
pett széri: talán ez a
hat típus

ket tetelben

LASSÚ TÍPUSOK:

- ① felt korál
- ② sluktrató afrik labirintus
rácsokkal, Otája
- ③ hangzás (spherulic)
experimentumok lebegésűk

- 2. GYORS
Burma, Cameroon,
Nonsuco, Trüffel

GYORS TÍPUSOK:

- ① Áron János, John Zorn (Av. G-ly)
- ② Áron János, John Zorn (Av. G-ly)
- ③ Áron János, John Zorn (Av. G-ly)

Plate 1: György Ligeti, Notes on String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4, sketch book (ca. 1995), p. [45] (György Ligeti Collection).

musicologists have called Bartókian. Among those musicologists was Ligeti's close friend and esteemed colleague György Kurtág:

Le premier quatuor à cordes, *Métamorphoses nocturnes*, vibre en moi comme s'il était le septième que Bartók n'a jamais écrit. Après les six quatuors de Bartók, cette œuvre reste du moins pour longtemps la plus importante du genre qui ait été écrite en Hongrie.⁴

Ligeti's contact with string quartet music did not end with his well-known "No. 2," a piece that already displays a fine grasp of instrumental timbre and technique and a much more advanced micropolyphonical layout. The composer himself, writing from Vienna to Dr. Y. Spira, Chairman of the Music Section at the National Council of Culture and Art in Tel Aviv, described his piece to his credit as one of the most striking achievements in his œuvre up to that time: "As chamber music the most representative work is the 2nd String Quartet (24', Schott), this piece is played by LaSalle Quartet (Cincinnati)."⁵ The manuscripts held at the Paul Sacher Foundation contain extended material with relevant verbal references⁶ to the virtual emergence of a Third and a Fourth String Quartet (see *Plate 1*), the former of which to be composed for the Arditti Quartet, the latter for the Kronos Quartet.

As Ligeti's rich notebooks reveal, the project evolved in the composer's mind from the 1980s to the year 2000, a period during which he planned several other works destined to remain unfinished (*Labyrinth*, *The Tempest* for the BBC, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) and published notable pieces (*Piano Études*, *Hamburgisches Konzert*, *Violin Concerto*). The two new chamber pieces, unfortunately left unfinished, were probably triggered by the interest that musicians and audiences had expressed in having more string quartets from him. This hypothesis receives support from a letter sent by Dr. Vanek from Geneva to Irvine Arditti in the early 1980s and forwarded by Arditti to Ligeti: "Un concert Ligeti I + II + (un 3^e quatuor de Ligeti n'est-il pas en chantier pour vous? Que diriez-vous alors d'une création mondiale?)."⁷ Arditti himself, acknowledging the value of Ligeti's special collaboration with his ensemble, declares:

He is one of the few composers of our time who have been able to sustain and develop his style through many decades. [...] I am still awaiting a long ago promise of his third string quartet, as well as every new piece that flows from his pen.⁸

Even in words, the new unwritten string quartets display the same features as the aforementioned titles, namely a wide stylistic fusion between different cultures and historical times. Just as Ligeti's String Quartet No. 1 echoes pieces like *Musica ricercata* and *Sechs Bagatellen für Bläserquintett*, or just as String Quartet No. 2 stylistically matches works of the same period, such as *Kammerkonzert* (in the fast movements) or *Lux aeterna* (in the slow movement), the verbal sketches of String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4 exhibit the new stylistic concept he had developed from the 1980s to the year 2000. In his

1. László: Gesualdo,
Ben Johnston

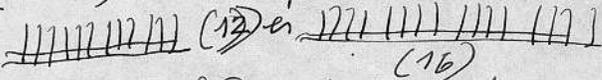
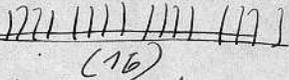
3. Vozsueggy
(Arkhiv)

2. György: Belkora MATA PATA

⊗ László kuz: László Borostin 1. d. (Alice-
Tippel, Adler - hangy.)

GD METAZDAS:

EGY ketal, fogytans, Perotik-nagym
Afyng. (shona s.b.) tekis oruamabhevel

egyszetely  (12) ei  (16)

elkei emya angumebhu jaglo d:
 $15 = 3 \times 5 = 8 + 7$, $14 = 7 + 7 = 8 + 6 = 9 + 5$

$13 = 7 + 6$, $12 = 3 \times 4 = 7 + 5$, $11 = 6 + 5$

$10 = 2 \times 5 = 6 + 4$, $9 = 3 \times 3 = 5 + 4$

$8 = 2 \times 4 = 5 + 3$, $7 = 4 + 3$, $6 = 2 \times 3 = 4 + 2$

$5 = 3 + 2$, $4 = 2 \times 2$, $3 = 3$ (legbismert modell)

keszlet egy hang:  h, kap hirtsejtely gunt,

elhangyidik" ↑ h, h, ↓ h = levegisek
Ritmikus METAZDAS - a 4 hangy MATA DRYM

uonyi j = 12, azaz nyitok usson vama,
de fny elvuk (f vago) em dush. Akcentu-

elogyi metazdas! METAZDASOK (heterofon), amely-
nyben egy szolan gonal vgy laonit. Vissz-

TOVA BB: c kakhuz c jra, allo barva, crolli fley.
HETEROFONIA HOB, megadot megaryy - heretka
crolli TR 7. hang  FOLKYS

Plate 2: György Ligeti, Notes on String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4, sketch book (ca. 1995), p. [66] (György Ligeti Collection).

most recent notes, preserved at the Paul Sacher Foundation⁹ (Ligeti was still using the Hungarian language after so many years spent in Austria and Germany!), the researcher can glean the following musical ingredients (see *Plate 2*): the composer collected ideas from Beethoven's *Große Fuge* (op. 130), Borodin's String Quartet No. 1, Janáček's String Quartet No. 2, the African polyrhythms that he intensively used in his *Piano Études*, musical elements from Burma, Cameroon, Romania (*Hora lungă*, a folk song brilliantly used in his *Viola Sonata*), and Hungary, and references to acoustic effects ("Pizzicato movement = Madagascar Cythères," "Romanian folk string instruments," "Uneven tremolo, at a different vibrato speed"¹⁰) and musical language ("ultra chromatic," "spectral," "complex polyrhythm"¹¹) – an amazing amalgam of musical crossovers. His numerous references to the music of the past range from Perotin and Gesualdo to Schubert's G major String Quintet. But browsing the past during his mature years was not meant to restore outdated compositional devices; instead, it was supposed to provide an underlying grid for the new musical substance and techniques he had in mind. Ideas imported from the composers of previous times would have provided Ligeti with a conceptual framework over which he could have added the novelty of a musical content imbued with extra-European elements and charged with new meanings. Much richer in references than the String Quartet No. 4, String Quartet No. 3 opens up new perspectives on Ligeti's way of reinventing himself as a composer. Commissioned by the prestigious Festival d'Automne in Paris, the piece passed through various stages of design. At first, String Quartet No. 3 was meant to be written in a single section ("One long movement with many episodes"¹²), recalling the form of *Métamorphoses nocturnes*. It then underwent various shapes as a piece in six or three movements, with the duration of each movement precisely specified (12' + 3' + 6' = 21'). The musical language was also very well outlined in words: "Entirely microtonal," "Microtonal harmonics," "It disintegrates through the hyperchromaticism typical of Gesualdo,"¹³ augmented with detailed information on which string the instrumentalist was meant to play. Descriptions combining visual and acoustic elements of different musical fragments are very relevant: "Gradually it evolves higher and higher (maybe the cello stays in a low register, on the C string, as a BORDUN), the others disappear irritated in the high register through high harmonics, as a lost plane."¹⁴ For each of these characteristics, Ligeti sums up a rich array of extra-European musical influences of a wide geographical spread, stringing together rhythmic and melodic ideas from Burma, Uganda, Great Zimbabwe, Java-Bali, Cameroon, etc. Moreover, he crosses the frontier of art music by integrating references from the fine arts into his verbal sketches: "In Escher's footsteps," "Pinturas negras," "Alhambra ornaments,"¹⁵ all articulating the image of a complex personality of twentieth-century culture and poignantly leaving unanswered for posterity the question of what String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4 might have sounded like.

Ligeti's verbal plans for his new string quartets, which would have been completely innovative, both in musical substance and structure,¹⁶ are completely in keeping with the words of the Romanian composer Ștefan Niculescu. He wrote Ligeti the following lines, accurately describing his late compositional style, after having received a recent CD of the Transylvanian-born composer, released in the early 1990s, the period during which Ligeti was also sketching his String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4:

I find here a completely new and paradoxical world, as if from eternity. A miracle of certain archetypes which you discovered inside yourself, but which can also be found, in totally different shapes, in the great traditional cultures of the world. Eternal, therefore timeless archetypes, and yet so significant – I would say “redeeming” – for specifying and guiding today's *Zeitgeist*. I sense here, among other things, the seed of a new universal grammar or, as you put it, of a new “tonality” which, I believe, has in your case planetary features.¹⁷

¹ Sketch book 3 (1940), György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.

² Sketch books 9 and 10 (1943–44), György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.

³ György Ligeti, letter to Adam Horst, January 1973, György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.

⁴ *György Kurtág: Entretiens, texts, dessins* (Geneva: Contrechamps, 2009), p. 171.

⁵ György Ligeti, letter to Dr. Y. Spira, August 17, 1969, György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.

⁶ Sketch book (ca. 1995) and sketch book “Alice in Wonderland,” György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.

⁷ Irvine Arditti, letter to Ligeti, March 15, 1981, György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.

⁸ Irvine Arditti, program note, ca. 2000, György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.

⁹ Sketch book (ca. 1995), György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.

¹⁰ “pizz tétel,” “Román népi vanosok,” “lebegések visznek hangmagaság-fluktuációkhoz.”

¹¹ “ultrakromatikus,” “spectral,” “komplex poliritm.”

¹² “egy hosszú tételben sok epizód.”

¹³ “egész mikrotonális,” “üveghang mikrotonális,” “Gesualdo szerűen hiperkromatikusan széthúzódik.”

¹⁴ “Fakozatosan elmozdul mind magassabra (esetleg Vc lent marad C-húron, mint BORDUN), a többiek üveghangokban magas szövetekben, iritálva eltűnnek a magasban, mint egy elveszett reülógép.”

¹⁵ “metamorfózisok Escher nyomán,” a reference to Goya's series of paintings, “Alhambra ornamentika.”

¹⁶ In one of the pages devoted to the string quartets (sketch book, ca. 1995, György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation), Ligeti writes at the top the Hungarian title “Radikális új” (“radically new”).

¹⁷ Letter from the Romanian composer Ștefan Niculescu, March 24, 1993 (György Ligeti Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation): “Găsesc aici o lume absolut nouă și, paradoxal, venită parcă din eternitate. Un miracol al unor arhetipuri, pe care le-ați descoperit în Dvs., dar care pot fi întâlnite, sub cu totul alte forme, și în marile culturi tradiționale ale lumii, arhetipuri eterne, deci fără timp, și totuși atât de semnificative – aș spune de *salvatoare* – pentru precizarea și orientarea *Zeitgeist*-ului de astăzi. Eu simt aici, printre altele, germeii unei noi gramatici universale sau, cum spuneți Dvs., ai unei noi ‘tonalități,’ care, cred, are la Dvs. caracteristici planetare.”