

The Reception of Ligeti, Post *2001: A Space Odyssey*

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In regards to the composer Ligeti, it is fair to assume that his compositional style may not be for everyone. Moreover, his twentieth century compositional roots also pose a problem for those who are not accustomed to the complex and challenging structural and harmonic innovations which emerged during this time. Hence, Ligeti's notions of musical composition may not have been well received, not necessarily because of distaste for his music or style, but rather in response to a lack of knowledge of these evolving musical notions and compositional styles which arose during the twentieth century. Assuming that the greater audience and public of the time period in which Ligeti was most active were not all accustomed to his style, or well educated in terms of twentieth century harmony practices, it is not surprising that his music was perhaps not well received. This therefore brings our attention to the question of reception, and how the reception of Ligeti's music has truly changed and evolved over the years, from Ligeti's earlier compositions to his later ones, more notably his piece "*Atmosphères*". Made famous in Kubrick's 1968 release of his film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Ligeti's *Atmosphères*, previously chosen as a simple temporary track, was ultimately chosen (among some of his other compositions) to be an integral part of the music of this film. Hence, the following paper will attempt to map out the reception of Ligeti's music, and analyse why his music that was once perceived as too different or complex became of interest, and ultimately determine how his music eventually emerged into the film industry scene, gaining him a much greater and broader range of audience.

Arguably, Ligeti's style is quite complex and, as a composer, has challenged many ideas and compositional notions from the twentieth century, most notably that of serialism. Ligeti must therefore be perceived as an innovator of innovations. Rather than following or

accepting the notions and innovations created during this time period, Ligeti preferred to challenge these compositional structures. As mentioned in Jonathan W. Bernard's article "Inaudible Structures, Audible Music: Ligeti's Problem, and His Solution" Ligeti argued that serialism, in which elements such as pitch, duration, timbre, dynamics, mode of attack, are organised in a specific manner or structure, could be exhaustive in terms of creating new and interesting contrasts and textures³³. Hence, Bernard stresses that "composers who had adopted serial methods discovered that it was becoming 'increasingly difficult to achieve contrast' - their music suffering an inevitable flattening"³⁴. In order to prevent such problems in his own compositions, Ligeti had sought to stray away from this serialist method, and followed a new method of composition: "Ligeti's experiments with electronic tape composition germinated 'micropolyphony' and the intuitive ordering of his material using 'quasi-serial' means were the major innovations for Ligeti in the late 1950s. At this time Ligeti's style was far from polished, but he had discovered the necessary clues to perfect his unique brand of modern music"³⁵. Accordingly, in relation to his interest in electronic music, this therefore led him to the use and creation of his micropolyphony, a calculated method of weaving simultaneous canons moving at different speeds, creating a thick orchestration or "cloud" of sound³⁶. This canonic method used by Ligeti is consequently found in his piece *Atmosphères*³⁷. By doing so, he also strays away from what could be considered as a popular method of composition, making his music even less relatable, seeing as serialism was one of the dominant compositional styles of the time. Again, this ties into the reception of his

³³ Jonathan W. Bernard, "Inaudible Structures, Audible Music: Ligeti's Problem, and His Solution." *Music Analysis* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Oct., 1987): 207-208.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 208.

³⁵ Sean Rourke, "Ligeti's Early Years in the West," *The Musical Times*, Vol. 130, No. 1759 (Sep., 1989):535.

³⁶ Paul Griffiths. "Ligeti, György." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed November 5, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/16642>.

³⁷ Bernard, 209.

music, and by taking a different path than that of serialism, Ligeti's musical reception would ultimately be challenged, given that his micropolyphony was not considered the norm in twentieth century compositional practice.

However, the reception of Ligeti's music had changed over the years. In order to understand this change, we must trace how Ligeti's music was discovered, especially in accordance to his piece *Atmosphères* and Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Why and how did Kubrick decide that Ligeti's *Atmosphères* was best suited for this film? Simply put, one must question how a composer such as Ligeti, one whose music was far too complex and harmonically challenging for the average listener, made its way to the forefront of film music of the time. Hence, Ligeti's public debut in *2001: A Space Odyssey* demonstrated how he ultimately became an undeniable force musically, but he also became a force in the film industry as well. As we will see, *2001: A Space Odyssey* was but a cornerstone in the usage of Ligeti's music as film music, and the beginnings of his popularity across the globe.

Originally chosen to be part of the temporary track for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, several of Ligeti's pieces, such as *Requiem*, *Lux Aeterna*, and *Atmosphères* would eventually become part of the official soundtrack for the film. Another of Ligeti's pieces, *Nouvelles Aventures*, had also made a small appearance as well, but was omitted from the credits of the general theatrical release³⁸. Although this is somewhat surprising, this suggests that Kubrick had acquired a taste for Ligeti's music, and truly favoured Ligeti's compositional style.

What is quite remarkable about the use of Ligeti's music in this film is that his pieces, along with pieces from other prominent composers such as Strauss, were chosen over the commissioned work of Alexander North, who had been hired to compose original music for *2001: A Space*

³⁸ Paul Merkley, "Stanley Hates This But I Like It!": North vs. Kubrick on the Music for *2001: A Space Odyssey*", *Journal of Film Studies*, Vol. 2, No.1 (Fall 2007): 2.

Odyssey³⁹. This consequently became a debated issue between Kubrick and North, and this decision to not use the music composed by North was the result of a very complex and even confusing series of events.

As mentioned in Paul Merkley's article, "Stanley Hates This But I Like It!": North vs. Kubrick on the Music for *2001: A Space Odyssey*", Merkley stresses that the rejection of North's original compositions may have reflected Kubrick's creative and innovative intentions of moving away from this traditional practice of original compositions, and moving towards the practice of compilation scores instead⁴⁰. Moreover, the article also suggests that the compositions created by North were not up to par, and did not meet Kubrick's standards and his overarching view of what would be an appropriate music for his film and the message he was striving to transmit to his audience. Although North had tried to compose very similar compositions to that of Ligeti and Strauss, his pieces never truly reflected or represented the scenes projected on screen. Strangely enough, Kubrick had been accustomed to working with North and had been very pleased with his work for his film *Spartacus*⁴¹. Given this already established relationship between Kubrick and North, why would Kubrick chose Ligeti over North?

As mentioned, Kubrick's decision upon choosing a compilation track rather than an original one was perhaps due to his desire to stray away from the tradition of creating an original composition for his score. However, what drove him to choose Ligeti over other composers? Although one could argue that his decision in choosing Ligeti had been merely coincidental, or out of just pure luck, one could also argue that Kubrick's artistic vision for *2001: A Space Odyssey* coincided well with Ligeti's own artistic visions and compositions. Perhaps, given Kubrick's desire to innovate and divert from film production norms and the traditional practice of original scoring, Ligeti's own desire to stray away from serialism and move towards micropolyphony demonstrated the

³⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 6.

⁴¹ Ibid, 8.

similarities between both artists. Both Kubrick and Ligeti desired to innovate and create something new and different, and this could perhaps justify why Kubrick had originally been so keen on keeping Ligeti's music as part of the soundtrack.

Given Ligeti's very distinct and unique style, it is therefore not surprising that Kubrick would have been attracted to the twentieth century composer, and favoured him over North. It is also important to take into consideration the ultimate purpose of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and its overall message and overarching storyline in regards to the chosen music. Ultimately, Kubrick wanted a music that perfectly represented the purpose and message of his film, using music as vehicle for dialogue in this film. Therefore, not only was this a breakthrough for Ligeti in terms of the greater discovery and transmission of his pieces, but the fact that his music was used instead of a spoken dialogue also means that his music was given more interest, and could arguably have been easily appreciated given this fact: "In all three cases the depiction of the transformational elements is carried out not by dialogue but by the images on the screen and the articulation of the works in the musical score"⁴². This suggests that Ligeti's music was well suited for this scene, and regardless of its complexity, Ligeti's compositions truly evoked philosophical and psychological journeys within each audience member, igniting a purpose or giving sense to the scene at hand. Therefore, people could have come to appreciate and credit Ligeti's work for having ignited these inner psychological journeys. Furthermore, the decision to use Ligeti's *Atmospheres* as the first piece presented and to be heard in the opening scene of the film also portrays how much Kubrick valued this piece from Ligeti, enough to make it the opening attraction for his film, once again shining an even brighter light on this once unknown composer.⁴³

Another important question one must ask in regards to the reception of Ligeti's music is that of the impact of Kubrick's influences

⁴²Ibid, 2

⁴³ Ibid.

and decisions had on Ligeti's career as a composer. Accordingly, it is possible that if Ligeti's compositions had not been chosen to be part of the music for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, his music would have been uncelebrated for the remainder of his life: "Although the score is compiled, audience members came to know striking music by Ligeti, a composer hidden for the most part from western ears, whose works they would not otherwise have heard, and who came to be regarded as a major composer partly or largely as a result of Kubrick's films"⁴⁴. Hence, Kubrick's ultimate decision to keep the pieces he had chosen as his temp track had truly impacted the reception and transmission of Ligeti's works such as his *Requiem*, *Lux Aeterna*, *Atmosphères* and *Nouvelles Aventures*.

However, it is also important to shift our attention to the legal problems that accompanied the use of Ligeti's pieces in Kubrick's film. Interestingly, and somewhat shocking is the fact that Kubrick never asked Ligeti's permission to use his pieces in *2001*. Ligeti never approved the use of his pieces, and when the film was released, he had never received his royalties. Furthermore, he was not definitely not pleased at the overall extensive use of 32 minutes of his pieces either⁴⁵. This culminated into yet another complicated and complex legal journey in which Ligeti finally settled for far less than he should have, a grand total of \$3,000⁴⁶. In her article "An effort to decide": More Research into Kubrick's Music Choices for *2001: A Space Odyssey*", Kate McQuiston writes:

"In the soundtrack for *2001*, Kubrick validated the practice of not just borrowing, but reinventing existing works in new contexts. Borrowing existing music is a commonplace in musical multimedia in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that, for the informed listener, inevitably makes for a

⁴⁴Ibid, 6.

⁴⁵ Julia Heimerdinger, "I have been compromised. I am now fighting against it": Ligeti vs. Kubrick and the music for *2001: A Space Odyssey*", *Journal of Film Music*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2011):134.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 129.

rich collision of cross-references and meanings that depend on shared cultural knowledge”⁴⁷.

This suggests that Kubrick had felt that by using Ligeti’s music in such a manner justified his position, and the fact that he did use Ligeti’s music without permission. This therefore leads us to ask ourselves, although wrong in practice, does this truly justify using Ligeti’s music without consent? One could argue that, even though Kubrick wrongfully “borrowed” Ligeti’s music, he did in fact give the composer something more valuable than money itself. This practice of “borrowing music” could also be linked to the use of Ligeti’s *Nouvelle Aventures*. As mentioned, although used in the film, this piece had not been properly credited in the general theatrical release. Perhaps Kubrick, by this time, realised that with this new “practice” of his, he was perhaps pushing his limits. Although Kubrick did credit the piece in the DVD release of *2001*, by not listing *Nouvelles Aventures* in the credits of the theatrical release, perhaps Kubrick felt that this would go unnoticed by the general public, and by Ligeti as well, seeing as the piece was seldom used⁴⁸. Regardless, by using Ligeti’s music, and choosing such a complex and different genre of music, as well as an unknown composer in North American eyes, Kubrick ultimately repaid Ligeti by gaining him his first real audience. That being said, Kubrick had put Ligeti’s music on the world map, and one could argue that the result of such an act is considerably more valuable in the long for Ligeti.

It is also important to discuss the fact that since *2001*, not only had Ligeti made his musical world debut, but he had also made his presence known in the cinematographic world as well, and arguably, with little effort. Since his “contribution” to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Ligeti’s music had been used in several other Kubrick films such as *Eyes Wide Shut* (1953) and *The Shining* (1980). Once again, in both films, the use of a compilation track was preferred over the traditional original

⁴⁷ Kate McQuiston, “An effort to decide”: More Research into Kubrick’s Music Choices for *2001: A Space Odyssey*”, *Journal of Film Music* Vol. 3, No.2 (2011), 153.

⁴⁸ Merkley, 3.

soundtrack. As Kubrick continued down this path of musical cinematographic innovation, it seems that Ligeti had somehow joined along for the ride.

In *Eyes Wide Shut*, Ligeti's *Musica Ricercarta* was yet another set of pieces of his that would be featured in Kubrick's film, and would also garner Ligeti a much greater audience after the film's release in 1953⁴⁹. *Musica Ricercarta* is a set of piano pieces composed by Ligeti in 1951-1953, which are nowadays considered as one of the most important works of this period according to pianists and analyst alike⁵⁰. Hence, one can assume that perhaps the gaining popularity of this Ligeti piece could be attributed to the fact that it was highlighted in Kubrick's film, once again suggesting that Kubrick was really the one who put Ligeti's fame and fortune into motion.

Unlike *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Kubrick's *The Shining* strays away from the science fiction genre. *The Shining* was Kubrick's first official horror film, and one could assume that his choice in music would reflect this change of genre as well. Hence, it goes without saying that the music used in *The Shining* was extremely important in terms of setting the perfect horror atmosphere, and once again, Ligeti's music seems to fit this bill. In *The Shining*, Ligeti's *Lontano* seemed to reflect the main characters (Jack) madness and the Isolation of the "Overlook Hotel", the hotel in which *The Shining* takes place.⁵¹ Consequently, seeing as this film diverts from Kubrick's science fictional roots towards the horror genre, we could argue that Ligeti's music is very accommodating and flexible in terms of suiting different film genres, making him and his composition multidisciplinary in terms of film music. More so, this also suggest that Ligeti would not only be known as

⁴⁹ Leonard Lionnet, "Music Unveiled: Mysteries of the Overlook: Unraveling Stanley Kubrick's Soundtrack for "the Shining," *Film Score Monthly* Vol. 9, No. 1 (Jan 2004): 44.

⁵⁰ Robin Halloway. "Ligeti's Half-Century," *Musical Times* Vol. 145, (Winter 2004): 54.

⁵¹Christine Lee Gengaro, *Listening to Stanley Kubrick* (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 179.

the composer of “that one piece used in *2001: A Space Odyssey*”, but as an actual force in the film industry, as well as multi dimensional composer who caught the attention of many since *2001, Eyes Wide Open*, and *The Shining*.

Moreover, we could also argue that Ligeti had also set the bar high for composers who wished , or were commissioned, to compose horror film music. More so, perhaps Ligeti’s compositions in *The Shinning* created a whole new wave and method of horror film compositions. As mentioned in Jeremy Barham’s article “Music as Context, Character and Construction in Kubricks *The Shining*”: The *Shining* exemplifies a level of both sophisticated interaction of music and moving image, and general reliance on music for contextual, characterization and narrative purposes, rarely equalled in his output”⁵². We can therefore assume that Ligeti’s contribution to *The Shining* could have forever changed how horror film music has been composed since. As also mentioned by Russel Plat in his article “Ears Wide Open,”: “In the midst of a dislocated life in a misbegotten century, Ligeti has created a body of music that, with a few exceptions, maintains an underlying serenity of purpose even while it indulges a taste for the ghoulish and the macabre”⁵³. Regardless the genre, it seems that Ligeti’s music suits many different types of films, and the overarching meaning of his pieces seem to morph as to accommodate the directors overall artistic view for the film in question.

Although *2001: A Space Odyssey* had been the breaking out point of Ligeti’s career, it would also be important to understand how the American public received, conceived and understood modernist music, and how this could have affected Ligeti’s reception prior to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. As mentioned in Bjorn Heile’s article “Darmstadt as

⁵² Jeremy Barham “Incorporating Monsters: Music as Context, Character and Construction in Kubrick’s *The Shining*” in *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema*, ed. Philip Hayward (London,UK: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2009), 137.

⁵³ Russell Platt, "Ears Wide Open," *The Nation* , Vol. 27, No. 19 (December 2003): 54.

Other: British and American Responses to Musical Modernism”, in view of modern music, they ultimately adopted an “outsider point of view⁵⁴”. In other words, Heile’s suggests that modern music was perhaps a continental phenomenon, rather than a global one. Although there are some modern composers in America, these composers are still stylistically different from their European counterparts. Consequently, as also mentioned in Heiles article, many of the composers of the Darmstadt school, including Ligeti, seem to have been overlooked as merely “marginal” composers, not worth discussing or listening to. Other composers deemed as marginal include John Cage as well, which is rather surprising seeing as he is an American composer⁵⁵. Consequently, by contrast, by using compositions written by Ligeti and Cage in films, these pieces had become “public friendly”. All of a sudden, these composers are deemed worthy of American attention. By using these pieces in film, one could argue that, regardless of the complexity, these pieces become more accessible and relatable seeing as it accompanies a narrative or storyline in which the greater society can understand. As mentioned earlier, Ligeti’s pieces in *2001: A Space Odyssey* had been used as medium of dialogue. Therefore, one could also argue that the scenes depicted on screen act as a script which accompanies the music, making it easier to understand the piece at hand through a cinematographic lens. Consequently, given this information, it is not truly surprising that Ligeti did receive such grandiose attention later on in his compositional career.

Although Ligeti’s compositional style may still not suit everyone’s musical tastes, one cannot deny his musical and compositional genius in the sphere of twentieth century period. Ligeti’s music may be an acquired taste, it is also apparent that his music, when presented in the right context, can be appreciated by a much wider and broader audience. Hence, given his rather unusual and dysfunctional relationship with Kubrick, Ligeti had not only become a world renown

⁵⁴ Bjorn Heile, "Darmstadt as Other: British and American Responses to Musical Modernism," *Twentieth Century Music* 1, no. 2 (2004): 169.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 166.

twentieth century musical composer, but he had ultimately emerged as a film music composer as well. Although this was perhaps not what Ligeti had envisioned for himself further along his musical career, through the unrequested help of Kubrick and his film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Ligeti's pieces such as *Atmosphères*, *Requiem*, *Lux Aeterna* and *Nouvelles Aventures* were ultimately given new life, and were repurposed for the better. Consequently, Ligeti had been transformed from an unknown composer into an international film music icon for years to come, and although he may have never predicted such a future for himself, his music ultimately changed film music in all cinematographic genres for generations to come.

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