

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Ligeti 100: Pierre-Laurent Aimard in Recital

Saturday 14 October 2023, 1pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music is an incredible, centuries-long story. As we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – share that story with the world today, we're creating as many ways for as many different people as possible to experience this wonderful art form.

Whether this is your first encounter with classical music or one of many, I'm absolutely thrilled that you're joining us for more powerful human experiences. Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2023/24.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

Chromatische phantasie	6'
Musica ricercata	25'
I. Sostenuto – Misurato – Prestissimo	
II. Mesto, rigido e cerimoniale	
III. Allegro con spirito	
IV. Tempo di valse (poco vivace – 'à l'orgue de Barbarie')	
V. Rubato. Lamentoso	
VI. Allegro molto capriccioso	
VII. Cantabile, molto legato	
VIII. Vivace. Energico	
IX. (Béla Bartók in memoriam) Adagio. Mesto – Allegro maestoso	
X. Vivace. Capriccioso	
XI. (Omaggio a Girolamo Frescobaldi) Andante misurato e tranquillo	
Etude No.7 (Galamb borong)	3'
Etude No.8 (Fém)	3'
Etude No.2 (Cordes à vide)	3'
Etude No.6 (Automne à Varsovie)	5'
Etude No.11 (En suspens)	2'
Etude No.13 (L'escalier du diable)	5'

Performer

Pierre-Laurent Aimard *piano*

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour.
There is no interval.*

This event is part of *Ligeti 100*, a day of events celebrating the life, work and legacy of one of the 20th century's most influential composers.

Though Ligeti, by his own admission, started at the piano too late to develop a virtuoso technique, he certainly developed into a virtuoso composer for the instrument in the Etudes of his 60s and 70s. *Chromatische phantasie* comes from much earlier, from 1956, when a modest cultural liberation in Hungary allowed him to compose his first piece using the serial technique pioneered by Schoenberg – also his last, for he came to dislike the technique and disparage the piece (but that doesn't mean that we need to). Though the composition, which lasts just a few minutes, simply takes the chromatic scale as its series, the resulting clusters and jutting motifs parade themselves with mystery, drama and humour, characteristics typical of Ligeti.

Musica ricercata (1951-53) dates from more restrictive times. Ligeti, however, turns restriction on its head. The rule is rigid: beginning with two notes, each piece adds a note until in the last there are 12. What results, though, has all those Ligetian characteristics just mentioned, together with unflagging brilliance.

The first piece is almost all on A in various registers, a one-note csárdás (Hungarian folk dance). Then a new note, D, leads on.

In what follows, a single interval – a minor second – provides all the material necessary for a slip of chant, dark and threatening. Here, too, a note is held back, to arrive and change the locus of the threat. Stanley Kubrick made telling use of the piece in *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Next a full assembly of four notes runs all through to make a piece that wobbles and skips around a triad of C with major and minor thirds. Not for the last time, an abstract construct ends up sounding like folk music.

Four notes from a G minor scale are enough for a tipsy waltz in the fourth piece, coming as if from a barrel organ (*orgue de Barbarie*). Almost lost, the tune recovers itself thanks to a scare from the movement's fifth note, G sharp.

The chant of the second number is revisited in the fifth, but of course in denser harmony.

Seven notes then make possible a complete diatonic scale, but one equivocating between modal varieties of A major and E, bright and folksy.

The seventh piece is again clearly but ambiguously diatonic. Against an ostinato cloud in the left hand, the right picks out a tune that, four decades later, was to reappear in the composer's Violin Concerto. Change, again, is brought in by the delayed entry of the last (eighth) note.

In the eighth piece, a Bartókian rampage is delicately invaded by the tune from the preceding piece, but persists.

Regular tolling at the bottom of the piano then soon gives way to bells of a different colour, flights of panic and a long coda. Bartók was the composer with whom Ligeti had hoped to study.

With eleven notes to hand in the tenth piece, simple tunes can be heavily chromatic or dissonated, in another compact Ligetian comedy.

At four minutes much the longest piece, the finale puts forward a 12-note theme and takes it rising while also melting it into chromatic scales. Maintaining itself against breakdown, the movement says something about Ligeti's whole musical project.

More than three decades later, Ligeti produced his first six Etudes, published in 1985. This was the ideal genre for some of his new enthusiasms: the cross-rhythms of Conlon Nancarrow's pieces for player piano, the complex metres of music from Sub-Saharan Africa, and whirling fractal geometries. The mad-machine character of his earlier piano music took on another dimension, and having started, he found it hard to stop. Twelve more Etudes followed, of which the last was his final work. Pierre-Laurent Aimard plays two pieces from the first set, bookended by later pairs.

For the opening piece of his second set, Ligeti teasingly chose two Hungarian words that have an Indonesian sound, appropriate for music summoning echoes of Javanese or Balinese gamelan music. Irrelevant is the title's meaning: 'Melancholy Dove'.

Next comes a piece with another Hungarian title, *Fém* (Metal). Ricocheting in even, rhythmic values, the sound is harsh, clangorous, indeed metallic. In a quiet coda, some of the territory is gone over again at one-third speed.

The studies in the first book share certain basic features: generative construction from simple elements; imprints from folk music; harmony and metre in states of bewilderment or veiling. *Cordes à vide* (Open strings) is a study in fifths, hence the title's reference to the tuning of string instruments.

Automne à Varsovie (Warsaw Autumn) conveys other allusions, to the annual contemporary music festival in Warsaw, the hazardous political and economic condition of Poland in the early 1980s, and the presence of Chopin. Against an even stream the music moves mostly in descending chromatic scales, which are superposed in up to four layers going at different speeds. The slowly descending chromatic scale was used by Baroque composers as a bass for laments; part of the ominousness of Ligeti's version comes from there being nothing above the bass, which supports only smaller or larger versions of itself.

En suspens (Suspended) sounds like an attempt to recall Debussy's 'Clair de lune'. The hands have non-overlapping sets of keys: five black plus one white, and the six white remaining. Hence the modal colourings.

Fit for a finale, *L'escalier du diable* (The devil's staircase) is the most imposing and alarming piece in the whole enterprise. Its stairs are chromatic steps, in rising scales braided together, but hobbled, as each scalar note is divided from the next by one or two foreign notes. After a page of this furious, driven but irregular music, the right hand terrifyingly breaks free, but is still bound into chromatic-scale figures. The inexorable upward stairways seem to be able to continue forever, because when one of them reaches the top of the keyboard another two or more will still have room ahead. Eventually, however, both hands are crammed into the far treble and the uneven steppings stop. Chords now appear alone, as if peering around in an emptied musical space, but the rule of upward chromatic motion soon reasserts itself and, despite the wild ringing of bells, the music returns towards its former condition, compelled to go on rising.

Programme notes © Paul Griffiths, 2023

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- ▶ Pierre-Laurent Aimard
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