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In *Lux Aeterna* by György Ligeti, in what ways did extra-musical forces influence the music's relationship to the unfolding of the text?

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Abstract

The *Lux Aeterna* is an iconic piece of late 20th century music. It is the setting of the final part of the requiem mass where God is entreated to cast his protective eternal light on the souls of the dead. Yet Ligeti was a lifelong atheist, who also composed a separate *Requiem*. Though much has been written about the technical aspects of the *Lux Aeterna*, there is little study of why he would undertake the setting of such a sacred text, or of whether this was an act of artistic subversion; taking the established text and undermining its original meaning, in order to express a different narrative. This paper discusses the extra-music ideas that perhaps helped to shape this work.

Listening to the music and studying the score provided the opportunity to discuss the primary sources. Reading works by Bernard (1994), Clendinning (1995), Iverson (2009), Jarvlepp (2016), Levy (2013), Searby (1997), Selvey (2011) and Steinitz (2003), as well as interviews with him (Duchesneau & Marx 2011; Várnai, Häusler, Samuel, 1983), allowed me to study his personal and socio-political background, as well as technical and other aspects of his compositional oeuvre and specifically the *Lux Aeterna*. To further contextualise this piece I studied works by Penderecki, Brecht, Berio, Victoria, Palestrina, Ockeghem. I have included research into the Catholic church's rules and dictates on sacred music (Musicae Sarae 1955), orders of the requiem mass and interpretations of the various sections of the mass.

I argue that Ligeti's life, particularly his survival under the Nazis and Soviets, as well as memories from his childhood, the socio-political background, his philosophies, rejection of ideologies and relationship with religions, contributed significantly to his overall artistic output and in particular to his *Lux Aeterna*. This paper examines how these ideas were translated into musical constructs and suggests that Ligeti did indeed 'subvert' the theological text and asks therefore, what was the new 'message' or meaning he was attempting to express?

My conclusions are based on certain assumptions; for example, that as he composed his *Requiem* just a year before he composed *Lux Aeterna*, there could well be certain extra-musical influences that could pertain to both pieces.

My findings were that the issues are more complex than first imagined. The work may well have come from within a well of many tortured memories and experiences and Ligeti had preoccupations with notions of death and judgement. But *Lux Aeterna* was also a musical exploration, a development of his extraordinary ideas in composition. He was refining his understanding of micropolyphony, this time using only voices. He also played with the text, deconstructing it to become a series of sounds, the meanings of which were less important than the feelings the listeners got from the dissonances and irregular pulses of this sonic poem. Ligeti arrived at his work through painstaking attention to detail; vocal timbre the structure of the whole piece was determined by mathematics and concerns of proportionality.

As a work written in the mid-1960s, it reflected the concerns of its time; the Cold War was at one of its many peaks, whilst memories of the tragedies of World War Two were still fresh in adult minds and the threat of nuclear annihilation hung in the air. At the same time, people were beginning to turn away from the established church for answers to moral issues, social revolution was in the air. It was perhaps entirely appropriate that in the midst of all this, a composer with Ligeti's experiences would take such a text and use it, subvert it, to express his death, eternity and light.

“What is this sound so strong and so sweet that fills my ears?” “This”, he replied, “is the melody which, at intervals unequal, yet differing in exact proportions, is made by the impulse and motion of the spheres themselves, which, softening shriller by deeper tones, produce a diversity of regular harmonies. Nor can such vast movements be urged on in silence; and by the order of nature the shriller tones sound from one extreme of the universe, the deeper from the other:

- Cicero, Scipio’s Dream

Introduction.

Despite being less than 10 minutes long, György Ligeti's *Lux Aeterna* has made a significant contribution to late twentieth-century music. Written in 1966, for a mixed *a cappella* choir of 16 singers, it subsequently gained notoriety when Stanley Kubrick included it (without permission) amongst other Ligeti pieces in his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

For students of contemporary music, this piece has been the subject of much analysis and many theses (eg Clendinning, 1995; Iverson 2009; Bernard 2013). These mainly concern themselves with the work's canonic style, use of micropolyphony and clusters, its timbral and structural aspects; referencing its relationship to his other works or to those of his contemporaries - typically within a purely musical, indeed often mathematical framework.

A number of commentators (eg Steinitz 2003; Várnai, Häusler, Samuel, 1983; Duchesneau & Marx 2011) have addressed the extraordinary circumstances of the first half of his life (which I will be discussing later) and their possible influences on his other 'religious' work, *Requiem* (1965), and his general compositional output. However, little or nothing has been published that really explores those territories specifically with the *Lux Aeterna*.

For example, Richard Steinitz unpacks and illuminates many episodes of his life, his works and the possible connections between the two, but on the *Lux* he spends little or no time looking at any extra-musical routes to it beyond suggesting that it was 'psychedelic music composed in a drug-induced trance' (p150), a reference to Ligeti's morphine addiction at the time.

Even Robin Holloway's ample review of Steinitz's book refers to Ligeti's earlier *Requiem* as, "the coruscating apocalyptic masterpiece that (incidentally) proves there can be non-banal music after Auschwitz" (p59);

then, when glancing at the *Lux Aeterna*, can only offer, “After such ‘darkness visible’ (p59), radiance and serenity are the residue”, before moving straight on to Ligeti’s next piece, *Lontano*.

Likewise, Jennifer Joy Iverson, again on the *Requiem*, spends many illuminating pages considering Ligeti’s experiences as a Jew in Nazi occupied territory, eventually asking two crucial questions, “who is this work for?” and, “what are the implications of composing a Requiem in post-war Germany?” (p258). However, in her thorough and far-reaching 301-page thesis, the *Lux Aeterna* is only mentioned once in the main text.’

To illustrate Ligeti’s significance in the second half of the 20th century, Bossin, in assessing Ligeti’s legacy for the Berlin Festival’s retrospective of his work, says

“though one of the foremost contemporary composers, Ligeti represents something of a maverick whose keynote is a continuous search for an individual style” (p233)

This paper will discuss the extra-music ideas that perhaps helped to shape this extraordinary work. His personal life – particularly his survival under the Nazis and Soviets, as well as memories from his childhood, the socio-political background, his philosophies, rejection of ideologies and relationship with religions, I argue, contributed significantly to his overall artistic output and in particular to his *Lux Aeterna*. I will look at how these ideas were translated into musical constructs. However, Ligeti himself in conversation with Várnai, issues a warning to anyone straying into this particular territory:

“If you try to understand a work from the actual circumstances of the artist, you will get nowhere. It is a rather childish idea that a composer will write music in a minor key when he is sad, it is rather too simplistic.” (p21)

Although he immediately adds a major, albeit self-evident qualifier:

“There is no doubt however, that the stance of the artist, his whole approach to his art, his means of expression are all of them greatly influenced by experiences he has accumulated in the course of day-to-day living.” (p21)

The Man

György Sándor Ligeti was born in Transylvania, Romania on 28 May 1923 into a Hungarian Jewish family. With the rise of Nazism in the 1930s he found his initial ambitions thwarted. Steinitz says: “he originally wanted to be a natural scientist but was denied the possibility because he was a Jew” (pxvi)

However, in 1941 he managed to get a place to study composition at the Kolozsvár Conservatory and was also able to regularly travel to Budapest for private composition studies with Pál Kadosa.

His time in the war was a mixture of both personal tragedy and good fortune. In March 1944 the Germans occupied Hungary and annexed it to Transylvania, Ligeti’s home. They then began the campaign there to eliminate Jews. Though he escaped, the rest of his family was sent to Auschwitz and from there to various other camps. As Steinitz baldly points out, “Only his mother survived the Holocaust, because she had been useful as a doctor” (p20)

As a Hungarian-Transylvanian he was then captured by the Russians – for a potential fate almost as bad as under the Nazis – he again escaped and was recaptured a number of times in the general confusion of 1944. But when Romania, having left the Nazi Axis and joined the Allies, regained Transylvania from Hungary, Ligeti was drafted into the Romanian army to fight Hungary and Germany, alongside the Russians. He managed to avoid battle as he succumbed to a tubercular infection and spent the rest of the war in hospital.

However, life after the war under Stalin's brutal Soviet system was little better. 'Steinitz: "Living under a dictatorship sapped one's energy, sowed distrust, stifled discussion and killed originality" (p35). He found himself cut off from the west and living in fear that his more radical secret compositions would be discovered.

Just after the Communist takeover of Hungary, Ligeti was made President of the Students' Union at the Music Academy in Budapest. An honour one might think, but as he points out in conversation with Duchesneau, it was a poisoned chalice and he was called for by the secret police:

"and I was asked how many students there were at the Music Academy. I said about 900." Then please give us 9 names next week" – it had to be 1 per cent; the communist system always operated on a quota system - nine names of openly catholic students....so Catholicism is now the enemy (not so much Protestants, Jews etc) and suddenly I am expected to denounce people. I am supposed to name nine church musicians." (Duchesneau 73)

Ligeti endeavored to warn his Catholic colleagues of this purge and in doing so fell in with a circle of devout Catholics, led by the musicologist and conductor János Bartos. He wasn't attracted by their faith but as he added, "you have to stand by those who are discriminated against, who are declared enemies. So I became part of that group, without becoming a Catholic" (Duchesneau 73). The seeds of the reason for a secular Jew composing his *Requiem* were certainly sown in post-war Budapest. When it was finally composed (after two failed attempts) Ligeti dedicated his longest and most ambitious work to date to, "Jews, Catholics", and "all people who vanish in Hungary" (Duchesneau 73)

And Wolfgang Marx adds:

"Ligeti is not the only 20th-century composer to have written a requiem with this kind of 'dedication'. Like him, many had not set out to write a piece of Catholic liturgy at all, but rather wanted to make use of the well-known traditional text for their personal statement about death." (Marx. p74)

Marx notes however, that what sets Ligeti apart from all the others are that while the others were nobly protesting their causes, Ligeti was composing from the reality of his own horrific experiences under the Nazis and the Soviets.(p 75)

In conversation with Várnai, Ligeti touches on the inevitable path he has walked that straddles his atheism and certain religious notions.

*“The idea of the Last Judgement was a constant preoccupation with me for many years, without any reference to religion. Its main features are the fear of death, the imagery of dreadful events and a way of cooling them, freezing them through alienation, which is the result of excessive expressiveness.
(p46)*

It took numerous attempts before Ligeti finally managed to escape to Vienna in the West in 1956. A decade later, *Lux Aeterna* was commissioned by Cyltus Gottwald, the conductor of *Schola Cantorum* the German vocal ensemble, in Stuttgart. It subsequently received its premiere in November of that year. However, at the time of the commission, Ligeti was dangerously ill with a perforated intestine, from which he eventually recovered after an emergency operation in Vienna. Unfortunately, a by-product of his recovery was a three-year addiction to morphine. And it was in this addicted state that he composed *Lux Aeterna*.

The Text

Lux Aeterna is a theological text, traditionally one of the final sections of the requiem mass – the Catholic mass for the dead - with the *Agnus Dei*, coming after the point of communion.

Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine
(Let everlasting light shine upon them, Lord)
cum sanctis tuis in aeternum, quia pius es.
(with thy saints forever, for thou art merciful)
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine

(Grant them eternal rest, Lord)

et lux perpetual puce at eis, quiz pius es.

(and let perpetual light shine upon them, for thou art merciful)

There are hardly any instances of composers writing a stand-alone *Lux Aeterna* – certainly at the time Ligeti wrote his the only examples were those of: Pietro Generali in 1860 (which was clearly part of a larger Requiem that was to take over three years to compose); Mabellini in 1869 (at the suggestion of Verdi to commemorate the death of Rossini, 12 composers were invited to each write a section of the Requiem – and for various reasons, this was only finally performed in 1988); Edward Elgar in 1899 (this in fact was his Nimrod, re-arranged by John Cameron); Stano Kmotorka in 1964.

Just the previous year Ligeti had composed his *Requiem* mass and although it was his longest and most substantial work to date, it omitted a number of traditional sections, including the *Lux Aeterna*. Although Steinitz suggests that there was always an intention to set the full text to music (p150), it is clear he didn't intend this new piece to be slipped into the already-existing *Requiem*. The *Requiem* was written for solo soprano, mezzo, choir and orchestra; the *Lux Aeterna* is for a *cappella* voices of a completely different configuration. Whilst musically there is certainly a sense of Ligeti developing his ideas from the *Requiem*, thus creating a sense of artistic continuity, the fact that he never sought to include it in any performance of the *Requiem* confirms that it was and remains a stand-alone work.

There is a history of composers using sacred texts and subverting the theological context in order to address a different subject. Janacek's *Glagolitic Mass* (premiered 1927), whilst conforming strictly to the order of the mass, was clearly intended to be a celebration of Slavic-culture and a beacon for pan-Slavism, and was even 'paganic' (McKinnon 1999). And although Benjamin Britten wavered between agnosticism and Christianity, his *War Requiem* (1962) was a resoundingly secular cry of pacifism in response to the

poems of Wilfred Owen. By the 20th century the church had long ceased to be a major commissioner of new music and perhaps composers felt less obliged to follow slavishly the doctrines of their former paymasters.

In this particular interpretation, rather than asking God to shine eternal light on the souls of the dead, granting them peace; Ligeti's work, with its tensions, clusters, its lack of consonants, translates this into more of a sonic poem, evoking the awesomeness of the notion of eternal light in an infinite universe in a way that might be termed 'spiritual' but not necessarily 'religious'.

Bayan Northcott writes of the conflict that reached a peak in the 1960s, whether, given the potentially catastrophic ideological conflicts of the time, artists could divorce themselves from the realities of the day to produce 'pure' art, "or whether the times had become so urgent that all artists ought now to subject their skills to articulating the ideological issues" (Independent 7 March 1997). He looked to the increasing use of religious texts to serve purposes other than theological, and noted Stravinsky's reaction:

"Yet, where the setting of sacred texts was concerned, Stravinsky was prepared to concede nothing: it was the duty of the believing composer strictly to match the canonic forms of the Church, never to transmute such texts into what he called "secular religious music... inspired by humanity in general, by art, by barmensch, by goodness and by goodness knows what." (Independent 7 March 1997).

As to the words themselves in performance, I will discuss below the micro-polyphonic style and rhythmic rules he places on the piece. For now, it is enough to say that Ligeti clears most of the words of their consonants; we only hear the open, flowing vowels to become part of his micro-polyphonic fog.

He is only partly interested in the words for their meanings; if he was concerned solely for their sound, he might have called the piece anything. However, he has titled it *Lux Aeterna* and in deconstructing and reconstituting

the words as a sonic poem, rather than the original sacred text, he is inviting the audience to participate in the piece by building a bridge between themselves and its possible meanings and interpretations.

The Music

To explore how extra-music influences manifested themselves in Ligeti's compositional techniques used in the *Lux Aeterna*, it is necessary to understand its structure. *Lux Aeterna* is an *a cappella* composition for 16 voice parts (4Sop, 4Alt, 4Ten, 4Bs); it lasts for 126 bars and, with a tempo of 56 bpm, it runs for approximately 9.50 minutes.

Jarvlepp shows how structurally it contains three main polyphonic sections:

- 1 Lux Aeterna luceat eis (bars 1-37; Sop, Alt; 24-37 Ten)
- 2 Cum sanctis tuis in aeternum, quia pius es (39-88 Ten, Bs)
Requiem aeternam dona eis (61-79 Sop, Alt)
- 3 Et lux perpetua luceat eis (90-119 Alt; 94-102 Sop; 110-114 Sop, Bs)

These three main sections are connected by two shorter interlocking homophonic passages each with the single word, 'Domine' (37-41 Bs; 87-92 Bs).

Finally, there are seven bars of complete silence at the end. There are two possible reasons for their addition: 1) to add a contemplative period before the audience applauds, 2) to make the third section 37 bars long and thus create a symmetrical pattern with the three sections: 1=37 bars; 2=50 bars; 3=37 bars.

The three main polyphonic sections are written in strict canon, with different pitch sequences for each section. However, as Levy clearly shows diagrammatically (Ex1), there are rhythmic adjustments made to each voice throughout – a mix of different rhythmic modules and rests that combined,

often place the entries of each new note at delicate points, producing an irregular pulse. (p219) Ligeti carefully planned an even distribution of these rhythmic modules throughout, thus as Levy says, “The strict regulation of rhythmic strands ensures that there will be a constant conflict between divisions into fours, fives and sixes and that no pulse will come to the fore” (p226)

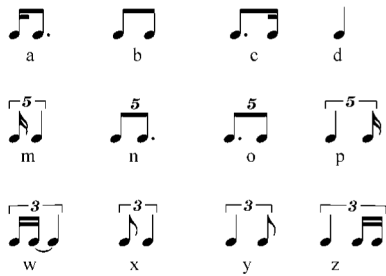
In order to create this sensation of continuous, eternal sound; Ligeti tries to keep the piece as devoid of accents as possible and his instructions in the score to, “sing totally without accents: barlines have no rhythmic significance and should not be emphasized”, as well as the repeated note, “all entries very gentle”, add to the feeling of fluidity.

The results are irregular pulses and the feeling of a never-ending, arrhythmic wash of sound. This is further enhanced by the way each voice obeys a 3, 4 or 5 fractional subdivision of the beat. The 1st soprano progresses in triplet units, 2nd soprano in quintuplets and the 3rd in in quarter (semiquaver) units. This pattern is repeated down through all the other parts until 4th bass¹.

The overall effect is to liberate the music from any sense of accent or beat by avoiding any point where more than one voice attacks at the same time. As with the text, Ligeti has deconstructed traditional elements (a cappella choir, strict canonic composition) and reconstituted them to create a sense of floating, timelessness, of a discordant world and universe instead of the traditional understanding of the *Lux* as entreating God to bestow His eternal

¹ There are moments when these strict rules are broken: in bar 24, where, on the last crotchet, tenor 1 enters for the first time, alto 1 departs its quintuplet subdivision for the triplet, soprano 1 leaps dramatically to A5; bars 37-41 with the bass trio singing *Domine* all within a triplet subdivision; bar 59 with the entry of the eight sopranos and alto parts all obeying the triplet subdivision for that single bar; bar 90 where the four altos enter to join the three basses, again on a triplet subdivision and again, solely for that single bar; bar 94-102 where soprano 1234 join the tenor 1234 for “*luceat*”; finally, the basses abandon any differentiation of subdivisions from bar 101 to their dying notes on bar 114.

light upon dead souls.



Ex 1: Rhythmic modules used in Lux Aeterna Modules a,b,c,d are for the voices obeying semi-quaver (quarter) subdivisions; m,n,o,p for those in quintuplets and w,x,y,z for those in triplets. (Levy 2013: p219)

Dynamics are created less by individual volume changes (the whole of the 1st section is entirely in *pp*) and more by the accumulation or subtraction of parts. For the rest of the piece, nothing is marked louder than '*p*'. And, as Bernard says:

“any drama that might arise from a series of clearly identifiable entrances is mitigated, if not entirely effaced, by the composer's explicit direction that the performers make their entrances as imperceptibly as possible.” (p229)

But the “drama” in this *Lux* is of a more abstract, non-linear kind, where there is an impression of a journey over a longer period, rather than a tightly plotted narrative. If older canonic compositions were constructed like a Da Vinci painting, then Ligeti's *Lux Aeterna* is a Rothko. Steinitz describes the resulting effect:

“The melody breeds so many delayed reflections that different segments are present simultaneously. Successive pitches in the melody are aggregated into clusters and chords, but these remain elusive and are surrounded by a soft halo of more alien resonances.” (p159)

MICROPOLYPHONY

Micropolyphony is Ligeti's trademark and has been the subject of much analysis as I illustrate below. Bernard quotes Ligeti describing his

micropolyphonic technique:

“Technically speaking I have always approached musical texture through part-writing. Both Atmosphères and Lontano have a dense canonic structure. But you cannot actually hear the polyphony, the canon. You hear a kind of impenetrable texture, something like a very densely woven cobweb. I have retained melodic lines in the process of composition, they are governed by rules as strict as Palestrina's or those of the Flemish school, but the rules of this polyphony are worked out by me. The polyphonic structure does not come through, you cannot hear it; it remains hidden in a microscopic, underwater world, to us inaudible. I call it micropolyphony (such a beautiful word!).” (p 227).

Bernard then adds:

“Ligeti's description of the workings of his 'micropolyphony' suggests that the music characterized by it has two, essentially antithetical aspects: 1) the outer, audible one, which results from 2) the internal one, inaudible because it is really no more than a rule, working secretly, 'behind the scenes', as it were.” (p227)

Steinitz calls it “microscopic counterpoint’ (p103) and the sixteen voices, each following the same pitch sequence, create a highly structured, yet entangled cloud-like texture making the clarity of any single voice or tonal centre impossible to hear.

Mike Searby describes Ligeti’s move away from melody, harmony and rhythm as perceptible elements in his music in the early 1960s and towards timbre and texture and use of:

“arhythmic canons. The aural result consists of a slowly shifting cluster, starting from a unison note and gradually expanding, rather in the way a fertilized egg develops, by splitting each cell into two, and then each new cell splits again, ad infinitum.” (p10).

Clendinning in an extremely clear and non-interpretive analysis calls it a ‘microcanon’:

“Although the original ordering of the pitches is strictly maintained in all canonic voices, the duration of pitches in each canonic strand are adjusted by the composer to control the flow and registral shape of the piece more precisely and to create the desired vertical alignments. (p230)

Within his micropolyphony, Ligeti's sixteen voices largely move in chromatic steps; even though they are all singing the same pitch sequence. The denseness of the resulting texture, enhanced by the rhythmic rules he has placed on each voice part, means that even though many of the note durations are long, the overall impression is that of a constantly changing harmonic field. And by not moving along a diatonically-based harmonic progression these canonic lines produce dense tone clusters, which of course in turn produce varying levels of dissonance. As Clendinning points out, quoting Ligeti himself: "*Polyphony is what is written, harmony is what is heard*" (p232).

TIMBRE

The timbral qualities in *Lux Aeterna* also offer opportunities for interpretations. Although Iverson pouts out, referencing Amy Bauer, that "timbre is a difficult phenomenon to analyze—in lieu of concrete, quantifiable parameters, timbre is defined only as a difference in sound quality when pitch is the same" (p4)

But Ligeti is very specific when it comes to timbral elements, using qualities of voices to determine and alter timbre in *Lux Aeterna*. For example, the introduction of basses in high falsetto (bars 37-41), singing what could easily be tenor or alto parts, radically alters the quality of the sound picture painted up till that point. It is the first major change in the music (at this point we also get the first non-canonic parts; the first of the two homophonic sections; the first dynamic change - to '*ppp*' - the first appearance of the basses, singing in falsetto and alone. It is also the first suggestion of diatonic harmonies - F#, A and B suggesting a B7 chord - as well as the first appearance of the note B - B & D being the only notes not used in this first section). and places the sung word, "Domine" in a spotlight.

Both Darvlepp and Selvey suggest something theological, elevating the Divine.

“In addition, by shuffling the text so that the word Domine appears out of order and serves as a structural and dividing line between the three larger sections, it would appear that the source of the textual meaning is ‘Domine,’ that the origin of eternal light literally and metaphorically is the Lord.” (Selvey P15)

“The three bass sections can be considered a representation of the Holy Trinity. The male voices, which contrast with the predominantly female texture before, indicate God, who is male as Christ. The static harmony can be considered to portray God's never changing presence while the lower dynamic level indicates the peacefulness associated with God. Falsetto voices indicate that God is high (in Heaven)” (Jarvlepp para 17)

The high falsettos have an unearthly quality, but this is no exalted and worshipped deity; rather something calling from afar, disturbing, alien., Jarvlepp and Selvey both take the exacting work of Clendinning and add to it interpretations that are a) theological – with Selvey going so far as to suggest that elements in the work that can be analyzed through the prism of the number 3, somehow conform to a Trinitarian viewpoint (p15&16) - and b) very literal. They both conveniently ignore the fact that, as Alex Ross confirms (p509), Ligeti was a confirmed atheist all his life, who rejected religion. This was the man who said, in conversation with Várnai, “I detest Dogmas” (p36) - and, as an artist, such literalism was an anathema to Ligeti. An interpretation this literal could equally suggest that this displacement of *Domine* was akin to ‘parking’ God to one side - away from the body of the argument. Indeed it could also highlight the fact that the whole piece begins with several repeats of the word, ‘Lux’ - almost like a plea, placing the emphasis on ‘light’ rather than ‘God’ or any sense of redemption.

Also, the nature of voice entries and exits contributes significantly to the timbral and textural changes in the piece. From the first bars, the voices emerge so gradually, we are tempted to ask ourselves, “How long have they been singing before we actually heard them?” This, together with the final fading alto voices on bars 119 followed by the last seven empty bars of the composition, seems to a world where beginnings and endings are undefined and thus entirely appropriate in a piece called ‘Eternal Light’.

Despite Jarvlepp's and Selvey's assertions, it is clear that, like the *Requiem*, this *Lux Aeterna* was written for the concert hall, not the church. There are no obvious nods to the traditions of plainchant, no hymnal melodies; although Ligeti has noted in his conversation with Peter Várnai that his compositions, "are governed by rules as strict as Palestrina's"(p14).

Just a decade before, in 1955, Pope Pius XII had issued his '*Musicae Sacrae Discipline*', placing 'Gregorian Melodies' at the heart of what is considered 'sacred music':

"Everyone certainly knows that many polyphonic compositions, especially those that date from the 16th century, have an artistic purity and richness of melody which render them completely worthy of accompanying and beautifying the Church's sacred rites." (para 53)

It is unlikely that Pope Pius anticipates Ligeti's dissonant micropolyphony and tone clusters when he then goes on to use the term, 'Religious Harmonies' (para 80)

Indeed, the Pontiff continues:

"As regards music, let the clear and guiding norms of the Apostolic See be scrupulously observed. Gregorian chant, which the Roman Church considers her own as handed down from antiquity and kept under her close tutelage, is proposed to the faithful as belonging to them also. In certain parts of the liturgy the Church definitely prescribes it;[171] it makes the celebration of the sacred mysteries not only more dignified and solemn but helps very much to increase the faith and devotion of the congregation." (para 191)

CONCLUSION

Ivan Szigeti asks Ligeti in a radio interview whether his bitter experiences found outlets in his later work; Ligeti replied:

GL: Of course, they did. We were living in terror, the few who managed to come out of that alive knew that it was only by pure chance. Then came the liberation and we thought that everything was wonderful, and it indeed was wonderful for two years.....Then we found that we had got from the frying pan into the fire; we found ourselves under the Stalin dictatorship. Dictatorships left a very bitter feeling, I think it must be the

same for everyone who lived through these times.” Broadcast on Budapest Radio on July 29th, 1983.

It has been a tricky process trying to discern from the many documents written about Ligeti, his works in general and the *Lux Aeterna* in particular, exactly why he chose that text and what his composition is really about. In order to really explore the notion of subversion in taking something that so profoundly belongs in the theological realm and using it for an entirely different purpose: to express ‘Eternal Light’ as an awesome rather than sacred phenomenon, I have had to draw calculated conclusions from the many interpretations of his *Requiem*, written barely a year before, also from the musical decisions he made in setting the text.

A more prosaic view might be that he was simply commissioned to compose a new piece, vital for the livelihood of a professional composer; the *Lux Aeterna* seemed appropriate, having been omitted from his immediately previous piece, *Requiem*. However, as a serious artist he still had to interpret those words and perhaps he felt, like so many secular people do, that the sentiments of certain sacred texts are a meaningful, appropriate enough vehicle without the need to absorb any of the associated religious doctrine.

As an atheist, Ligeti was unable to evoke God honestly in his work, so he drew on his own life experiences to create his notion of ‘eternal light’. He used the strict compositional techniques and rules he had been developing in order to shape that notion into music.

Lux Aeterna was written at the high-tension point of the cold war, when the threat of nuclear obliteration was uppermost in many minds and the Doomsday clock was set at the famous 11 minutes to midnight. The Warsaw Pact had recently agreed to support North Vietnam, thus raising the stakes further. For a man who had survived the Holocaust and the Soviet purges and who was subsequently, like many of us, living in the shadow of this new

apocalyptic madness, the notion and meaning behind the term, “Eternal Light” is not a serene plea to God to shine a spiritual light on the souls of the dead. The 1960s, for many in the West, ushered in a new era of secularism, science, the ‘white heat’² of technology, the ‘dawning of the age of Aquarius’ (even Time magazine had got in on the act; their April edition of 1966 carried the cover headline, “Is God Dead?”); The pre-war hierarchical certainties were giving way to post-war revolutionary thought; and both the institution of the church and Christian belief were standing in the way of that philosophical juggernaut. Ligeti’s haunting and harrowing visions from his dreams and experiences, may have made this composition momentous, but it was portentous too; for he wasn’t to know that just forty years on, religious doctrine, coupled with scientific and technological advances, would bring us once more to the brink. And this is perhaps why his particular understanding of *Lux Aeterna* - eternal light, resonates so strongly with us in the twenty-first century.

Lux Aeterna, with its micropolyphony, clusters and dense canonic textures, was an intrepid musical exploration as the analyses of Clendinning and co. prove. In many ways it was a refining of his work in the Requiem and a stepping-stone towards his future works (musically *Lontano*, his next composition; subject-wise *Le Grand Macabre*, an opera composed in 1977). However, Ligeti doesn’t fall under the spotlight of Stravinsky’s 1960s accusation of art for art sake. His extraordinary life experiences and philosophical stances regarding religious or any other forms of dogmas, are crucial to understanding his work. In choosing a text such as this, he is subverting the original meaning to create, exactly as Stravinsky says, a ‘secular religious piece’; but one that looks at the spirituality of the human condition in all its flaws and wonderment.

² From a speech by British Prime Minister Harold Wilson at the Labour Party Conference debate on science in 1963;

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