PROGRAM NOTES

Poème symphonique for 100 Metronomes
GYÖRGY LIGETI
b. May 23, 1923, Dicsőzentmáron, Hungary
d. June 12, 2006, Vienna

György Ligeti began his career as a composer in Hungary in the years after World War II, when musical life in that country was rigidly controlled by a repressive communist bureaucracy intent on enforcing the doctrine of “Socialist Realism”: music (and all art) must be acceptable to the masses and must serve the ends of the state. Under these restrictions, Ligeti found himself limited to composing patriotic choruses and music for school musicians. Desperate for wider horizons, Ligeti found them when he escaped from Hungary in December 1956, just after the revolution there had been crushed.

Suddenly in Western Europe — Ligeti found the musical possibilities almost limitless, and he began to explore them. He studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen in Cologne and for a time became interested in electronic music and music constructed out of non-instrumental sounds. In 1961 Ligeti produced what might be called his first classic score, Atmosphères, an orchestral work that does without themes, rhythm, or harmony and instead offers slowly-shifting textures (listeners may know that work best not from the concert hall but from the movie theater: Stanley Kubrick used it — without permission — in his movie 2001).

But Ligeti was also aware in these years of the many competing “ideologies” in the world of music, and in 1962 he composed a score that he hoped would be understood — at least partially — as criticism of those ideologies. This was his Poème symphonique, composed for one hundred metronomes. This piece called into question not only all the competing ideologies, with their various manifestos, but the very nature of music itself. The Poème symphonique requires one hundred metronomes, each set at a different tempo. These metronomes are wound tight, and — at a signal from the “conductor” — they are all set in motion (these metronomes must be the old-fashioned wind-up type, not the more recent electric version). At first, the sound produced is simply a inchoate mass of ticking sounds, but as the springs in the metronomes wind down, it becomes possible for listeners to pick out the strands of individual rhythms until finally only one metronome is left in motion, and gradually it ticks its way into exhaustion and silence.

It has been pointed out that Ligeti’s Poème symphonique is not a “poem,” nor is it “symphonic,” and that is part of his ironic take on the artistic battles of the day. This piece created something of a scandal in that day, for it called into question the whole meaning of music (one radio station in Europe refused to broadcast a performance of it, much to Ligeti’s delight). Today, half a century after its creation, the Poème symphonique reminds us of the artistic battles in the years after World War II, and more specifically it reminds us of Ligeti’s probing questions about what constitutes music in a world where complete artistic freedom seemed to open the door to anything.

— Eric Bromberger

Continuum
GYÖRGY LIGETI

Performance Time
approximately 4 minutes

Premiere
1968

Continuum, which Ligeti completed in Vienna in January 1968, is conceived specifically for two-manual harpsichord, an instrument with a very distinctive sound but one that is unable to make dynamic gradations. Ligeti wrote music that plays to and incorporates these characteristics: Continuum is a Prestissimo throughout, and the music is essentially a study in extreme speed and the texture that arises from it. In a note in the score, Ligeti instructs the performer to play “extremely fast, so that the individual tones can hardly be perceived, but rather merge into a continuum. Play very evenly, without articulation of any sort. The correct tempo has been reached when the piece lasts less than 4 minutes . . . “

There are no true chords in Continuum — the music is entirely linear — but the effect of playing arpeggiated patterns very fast is that chords seem to emerge from the rush of the sound of the harpsichord. One might almost say from the “noise” of the harpsichord, for the quite audible sound of the instrument’s action is an essential part of what Ligeti has called the “ghostly rustle and buzz” of Continuum. Audiences might best follow this music by listening for this distinctive sonority and also for the changing patterns of sound across its brief span as the (apparent) chords gradually evolve. The blistering pace does not slacken at any point, and Continuum concludes on the piercing sound of repeated high F-flats, which Ligeti instructs the performer to “stop suddenly, as though torn off.”

— Eric Bromberger
Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedüvel
(With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles)
GYÖRGY LIGETI

Performance Time
approximately 14 minutes

Premiere
November 10, 2000

Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedüvel (With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles) is one of Ligeti’s final works, completed in 2000. It is a cycle of seven songs for mezzo-soprano and percussion quartet, dedicated to the Hungarian percussion ensemble Amadinda. The texts are taken from short poems in Hungarian by Sándor Weöres, and the title of this cycle comes from a Hungarian children’s rhyme, dating from the Turkish occupation of Hungary.

The seven songs deal with a variety of subjects; from notes by the composer:

Fabula (Fable) — A pack of wolves shudder with fear as two mountains approach each other, crushing them without pity in their wake.

Táncdal (Dance Song) — The text may sound meaningful, but actually the words are imaginary, having only rhythm and no meaning.

Kínai templom (Chinese Temple) — conveys the contentment of the Buddhist view of life by using only monosyllabic Hungarian words.

Kuli (Coolie) — a poetic portrayal of an Asian pariah’s monotonous hopelessness and pent-up aggressiveness.

Alma álma (Dream) — embedded into the sound of four harmonicas, the voice describes how the branches of an apple tree gently sway in the wind and an apple dreams of journeys in distant, enchanted lands.

Keserédes (Bitter-sweet) — Ligeti calls this a “fake” Hungarian folk song, combining artificial folk music with a pop-like melody and an artificially sweetened accompaniment.

Szajkó (Parakeet) — the poem is in effect a nonsensical play on words, but one which produces a rhythmic swing. The percussion instrumentation is also bordering on absurd, with one of the musicians playing a different instrument for every note.

— Robert Dillon
Sippal, dobbal, nadihegedűvel
Text by Sándor Weöres (1913-1989)

I. Fabula
Egy
hegy
megy.
Szembjon a masik hegy.
Orditanak ordasok:
Ossze ne morzsoljatok!
En is hegy,
et is negy,
nekunk ugyan egyremegy.

II. Tancdal

III. Kinai Templom

IV. Kuli

Kuli bot vag
Kuli meggy
megy
csak guri-guri
Riksa
Auto
Sarkanyszeker
Kuli huz riksa.
Kuli huz auto.
Kuli huz sarkanyszeker.
Csak guri-guri
Kuli gyalog megy
Kuli szakall feher.
Kuli almos.
Kuli ehes.
Kuli oreg.
Kuli babszem makszem kis gyerek
ver kis Kuli nagy rossz emberek.
Csak guri-guri
Riksa

With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles
Translation by Sharon Krebs

I. Fable
A
mountain
walks.
The others mountain comes toward it.
The wolves howl:
Do not crush us!
I, am mountain,
you, too, a mountain,
we are indifferent to that.

II. Dance Song
[This text cannot be translated]

III. Chinese Temple

IV. Coolie

Coolie stick cut.
Coolie walk
walk
just rolling and rolling
Rickshaw
Car
Dragon-coach
Coolie pull rickshaw.
Coolie pull car.
Coolie pull dragon-coach.
just rolling and rolling
Coolie go on foot
Coolie beard white.
Coolie sleepy.
Coolie hungry.
Coolie old.
Coolie bean-sized poppy-seed-crumb-sized little child
Little coolie beat big bad people, and rolling and rolling
Rickshaw
Car
Dragon-coach
Who pull rickshaw?
Who pull car?
Who pull dragon-coach?
If coolie die?
Kuli meghal.
Kuli neem tud meghal!
Kuli orok
csk guri-guri

V. Alma Alma (Tizenkettedik Szimfonia)
alma agon
alma ring az agon
alma ring a
lombos agon
ring a ring a
barna agon
ringva
ringa-ringatozva
inga
hinta
palinta
alma alma
elme alma alma
almodj alszol?
mozdulatlan lengedezve
hűs szelben arnyban
alom agon
agak alma
ringva
ringa-ringatozva
ingadozva
imbolyogva
it egyhelyben elhajozik
indiaba afrikaba holdvilagba
almodj
alma alszol?

VI. Keseredes (67. Magyar Etude)
Szantottam, szantottam het tuzes sarkannyal,
hej, vegig bevetettem csupa gyongviraggal.
Szantottam, szantottam szep gyemant ekevel,
hej, vegig bevetettem hullo konnyeimmel.
Szaz nyilo rozsorol az erdon almodtam,
hej, tobbet nem aludtam, felig ebren voltam.
Hajnalban folkeltem, kakukszot szamoltam,
hej, visznek eskuvőre kedves galombommal.

VII. Szajko

Coolie die.
Coolie can nooooot die!
Coolie forever
just rolling and rolling

V. Dream (Twelfth Symphony)
An apple on the branch
an apple swings on the branch
an apple swings
on the leafy branch
swings-swings
on the brown branch
swinging
rocking
pendulum
swing (hinta)
palinta
a dream of an apple
the mind’s dream an apple
dream dream?
motionlessly swinging
in the cool wind in the shadows
dream
on the branch
dream of the branches
swinging
rocking
swaying
staying in this spot it casts off
to India to Africa to the moonlight
dream
–apple, are you sleeping?

VI. Bitter-Sweet (67th Hungarian Etude)
I plowed, I plowed with seven fiery dragons,
Heigh-ho, I sowed nothing but lilies of the valley.
I plowed, I plowed with a beautiful diamond plow,
Heigh-ho, everywhere I sowed my tears.
In the forest, I dreamed of a hundred blossoming roses,
Heigh-ho, I slept no longer, was half awake,
In the early morning I got up, counted the cuckoo calls,
Heigh-ho, they are taking me to be wed to my sweetheart.

VII. Parakeet
[This text cannot be translated.]
Goldbeater’s Skin
CHRISTOPHER CERRONE
b. 1984, Huntington, New York

Performance Time
approximately 25 minutes

Premiere
February 4, 2017, University of Notre Dame

Winner of a 2015 Rome Prize and a finalist for the 2014
Pulitzer Prize, the Brooklyn-based composer Christopher
Cerrone is internationally acclaimed for compositions
characterized by a subtle handling of timbre and resonance, a
deep literary fluency, and a flair for multimedia collaborations.

This season Cerrone has world premieres with the Los Angeles
Chamber Orchestra (for Jeffrey Kahane’s final concert as
LACO Music Director), the Calder Quartet at the Broad Stage;
Third Coast Percussion and Rachel Calloway for the DeBartolo
Performing Arts Center; and an electroacoustic work for Tim
Munro at Miller Theatre.

He curates an evening for New York Festival of Song and
enjoys featured performances by Tito Muñoz and the Phoenix
Symphony, Eighth Blackbird, Jennifer Koh, and Vicky Chow.
Cerrone’s works are also performed at Caramoor, the Festival
Nuova Consonanza in Rome, the Balliet im Revier in Germany,
and at the Kennedy Center, and featured on new releases from
New Amsterdam Records, VIA Records, and an album from
Christopher Rountree and wild Up.

A co-founder of Red Light New Music, and one-sixth of the
Sleeping Giant composer collective, Christopher Cerrone holds
degrees from the Yale School of Music and the Manhattan
School of Music, and is published by Schott NY and Project
Schott New York.

Goldbeater’s Skin
texts by G. C. Waldrep (b. 1968)

“I met the poet G. C. Waldrep at the MacDowell Colony in 2015
and was immediately drawn to him as both a poet and person
— friendly, unique, and for a poet, deeply musical. In addition
to his study of poetry, he was trained as a countertenor and
professed his love for composers like Meredith Monk and
David Lang. In turn, we bonded over our shared love for the
books of Italo Calvino and the poetry of James Wright. So
naturally I was curious about his work.

“I tore through his many published volumes, and was drawn
in particular to his first collection of poems, Goldbeater’s Skin,
written 20 years ago, when he was about my age. I found it
to be particularly pregnant with musical possibilities (actual
musical allusions abound). So I decided to craft a new work for
voice and percussion quartet around these poems. They are
often deeply imagistic; the source of each reference would be
impossible to trace; yet each poem leads inexorably to a potent
and dramatic conclusion. I constructed music that functioned
similarly — music that is billowing yet always headed towards
some kind of denouement. As I sifted through the whole
collection, I chose poems whose references overlapped to
create connective tissue; some references are more specific
than others, but almost all of them are concerned with
companionship — whether deep friendship, or love.

“The challenge of writing a work for voice and percussion
quartet is obvious: four drummers are much louder than one
voice, and I wanted the musicians in the quartet to have
moments to shine as well. So in turn I constructed a series
of interludes (two proper, and one faux interlude), each
focused on a single kind of idiophone — wood; metal; then,
appropriately enough, skin.”

— Christopher Cerrone

Goldbeater’s Skin was commissioned by Elizabeth and Justus
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Performing Arts Center