

Sketching between the Chorale and the Sound Mass in Ligeti's *Hamburg Concerto*

by James Donaldson

Amy Bauer's description of Ligeti's late compositions as a manifestation of "cosmopolitan absurdity" captures the central role of referential material in the music.¹ In contrast to his music written in the preceding decades, works such as the Horn Trio and the Violin Concerto directly engage with intertextual references. This article explores a specific instance of such referential material traceable in the sketches of the *Hamburg Concerto* (1998–99, rev. 2003): chorales and sound masses. The framework of topic theory is helpful here, as, despite their diverging historical associations, both these references are familiar musical styles or genres with conventionalized characteristics imported into another context.² Using this topic-theoretical lens emphasizes the expressive conventions with which Ligeti's music engages. And since these two topics share several characteristics – both are characterized by multiple pitches in a homogeneous texture with smooth voice leading, but crucially the sound mass *subsumes* the voices into a perceptual whole, such that voice-leading and meter are imperceptible³ –, they provide an interesting case study of the interaction of referential material in his sketches.

Before turning to the *Hamburg Concerto* itself, let us look at a small scrap of paper in the sketches for Ligeti's Piano Concerto (1988), which contains a potentially revealing sentence (*Plate 1*).⁴

-
- 1 Amy Bauer, "The Cosmopolitan Absurdity of Ligeti's Late Works," *Contemporary Music Review* 31, no. 2–3 (2012), pp. 163–76. See also Denys Bouliane, "Ligeti's Six Études Pour Piano: The Fine Art of Composing Using Cultural Referents," *Theory and Practice* 31 (2006), pp. 159–61.
 - 2 Danuta Mirka, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1–57, esp. p. 2.
 - 3 On the perceptual and semantic associations of the sound mass, see Chelsea Douglas, Jason Noble, and Stephen McAdams, "Auditory Scene Analysis and the Perception of Sound Mass in Ligeti's *Continuum*," *Music Perception* 33, no. 3 (2016), pp. 287–305; and Jason Noble, "Perceptual and Semantic Dimensions of Sound Mass" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2018).
 - 4 Transcription: "PONTOS, LASSÛ: Felhős: ágaz 'diatonikus' harmoniavilág de CLU-STEREZEVE" (Precise, slow: cloudy: branch out "diatonic" harmoniously but clustered).

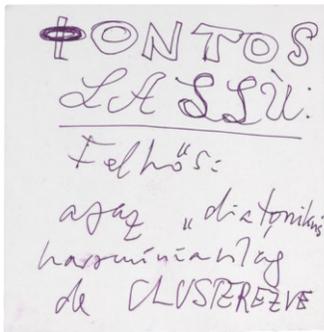


Plate 1: György Ligeti, Piano Concerto, sketch (György Ligeti Collection, PSS).

This note describes a harmonic process from diatonicism to a clustered sonority. Common in Ligeti's earlier works, clustering is characterized by a rejection of distinct pitches, while the traditionally oriented "diatonic" – in quotation marks perhaps (even in a sketch) to distance from such a familiar term – is associated with characteristics such as tonality and modality and a general pitch clarity far removed from a cluster's cloudiness.

Such "jottings," as Jonathan Bernard terms Ligeti's prose notes,⁵ constitute a significant percentage of the materials housed in the György Ligeti Collection. Although we must tread carefully when interpreting such potentially hastily written notes, taken together their role in the creative process appears significant. And as Ligeti moves towards his later style a shift is traceable from more abstract concepts (such as rhythmic patterns and dynamics) to often detailed lists of extra-musical references as diverse as Gesualdo, Supertramp, and Tuvan folk music.

Although the prose note above dates from the relatively late Piano Concerto, the concepts remain abstract. But the distinction between diatonicism and clustering could constitute the foundational differentiation between the characteristics of the chorale and the sound mass. Since chorales and sound masses appear throughout the *Concerto* (both explicit and more fuzzy)⁶ – combined with the word "korál" appearing throughout the jottings –, these characteristics appear to become the basis for kaleidoscopic semantic associations. The sketches seem to explore this threshold of signification between these two topics with closely related characteristics, effectively omitting one or two defining characteristics to flip between the two or effectively sit on the boundary.

This sentence likely refers to the opening of the *Concerto's* third movement, which moves from a near-cluster to a rolling diatonic pattern.

- 5 Jonathan W. Bernard, "Rules and Regulation: Lessons from Ligeti's Compositional Sketches," in *György Ligeti: Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds*, ed. Louise Duchesneau and Wolfgang Marx (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2011), pp. 149–67, esp. pp. 151–53.
- 6 See James Donaldson, "Topics, Form, and Expression in the Music of György Ligeti and Thomas Adès" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2021), pp. 111–19.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the Hamburg Concerto by György Ligeti. The score is written on ten staves, with the following parts labeled on the left:

- Cor Solo Fa
- Cor 1 Fa
- Cor 2 Mi
- Cor 3 Fa
- Cor 4 Mi
- Cor Solo Pa
- Cor 1 Pa
- Cor 2 Mi
- Cor 3 Fa
- Cor 4 Mi

 The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *p* and *mf*. There are also circled numbers (5, 4, 14, 15) and arrows indicating specific performance techniques or fingerings. The bottom of the page shows several empty staves.

Plate 2: György Ligeti, *Hamburg Concerto*, sketch (György Ligeti Collection, PSS).

Although the chorale is a familiar topic across centuries of music, the sound mass is more recent and less standardized. Cited as a topic by Yayoi Uno Everett and Robert Hatten,⁷ it fulfils the traditional theoretical understanding of a topic as a genre imported out of its original context (just as a chorale), a treatment distinct from the sound mass as a fundamental structural device for a whole work. Indeed, this shift from genre to topic occurs within Ligeti's own output: whereas his stand-alone sound mass works of the 1960s and 70s such as *Atmosphères* (1961), *Ramifications* (1968–69), and the *Requiem* (1963–65) are rooted in electronic experiments, his later use as a conventionalized imported object fundamentally changes the sound mass's role in Ligeti's compositional aesthetic to a musical topic.

Plate 2 shows likely an early sketch for the *Hamburg Concerto*. There are two clear parts, with the first two crossed-out bars followed by *f-p* interjections in 5/4. It is unclear whether Ligeti intended for these sections to be part of the same passage, or – due to the rewriting of the clefs – whether the second part is conceived as a heavily revised version of the first, or perhaps as completely fresh material. Nevertheless, the two excerpts demonstrate a curious mix of chorale and sound mass characteristics. The first two bars are essentially a simple stepwise melody in the solo horn, accompanied by the lower horns variously transposed from a tone to a fourth below. This creates a chain of near-chromatic clusters paralleling the melody, with the solo horn's shift to E \flat shifting the final sonority to a complete five-note chromatic cluster. Yet the straightforward, near-diatonic melody, at a steady tempo in a singable range and articulation – complete with a homophonic accompaniment in a homogeneous timbre –, points to a chorale. (Indeed, in shape this melody is similar to both the stepwise melodies of the chorale in the final version's second movement and the seventh movement "Hymnus.") Although this group of characteristics unambiguously mirrors those of a chorale, the dense cluster harmony is clearly antithetical to the chorale's clear pitches. But this passage is not quite a sound mass either – this would require a degree of stasis – yet the dense chromatic is not far away.

The second part (following the double barline) contains two pairs of chords. In each, the first is a cluster, almost the same as the final chord of the crossed-out bars (although Ligeti notates the tuning deviations for this passage). The second, though, is significantly more chorale-like in harmony: first, an altered quartal chord (F–B–E) and second, a D⁹ chord in third inversion. No longer is the sound mass's clustered harmony supporting a chorale tune, but instead a temporal sequence of a cluster followed by a familiar diatonic chorale-like chord.

7 See Yayoi Uno Everett, "Signification of Parody and the Grotesque in György Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*," *Music Theory Spectrum* 31, no. 1 (2009), pp. 26–56, esp. p. 29, and Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), p. 280.

Adagio

K. 12. v.

Cor Solo Fa

Cor Sol

Cor Mi

Cor Mo

Cor Re

I Sol

II Sol

III Re

IV Re

Cor 1 Fa

Cor 2 Mi

Cor 3 Mi

Cor 4 Mo

EUVENGES

Plate 3: György Ligeti, *Hamburg Concerto*, sketch (György Ligeti Collection, PSS).

Plate 3 shows another sketch from the *Hamburg Concerto*. Written on a larger page, suggesting a slightly later stage than the previous example's A4, this sketch similarly contains two distinct sections. At the top Ligeti is experimenting with the gradual shifting clusters with different horn keys, strongly invoking the sound mass. At the bottom, a passage labeled "érvényes" (effective) strikingly contrasts, closely resembling a chorale through its spacing and metrical regularity. The fourth obbligato horn's pitches even suggest progressions resembling a half cadence in the fourth bar and an authentic cadence in the eighth, further supported by the descending line in the solo horn. Unlike the previous sketch, this example fulfills many key chorale characteristics: a clear phrase at a medium tempo, singable range and articulation, four parts, regular rhythm, homogenous timbre, and at least three distinct homophonic parts. The harmony is perhaps a little dense and sustained notes appear in the middle voices, suggestive of a slightly clustered chorale. Nevertheless, the topical contrast between the two parts of this page is striking, examples of both the sound mass and chorale, with the latter far from archetypal.

In sum, from the evidence of these two sketches Ligeti appears to elevate an abstract relationship familiar from his previous works to the role of two topics' foundational characteristics. The context of both the *Concerto's* accompanying jottings and appearances of chorales and sound masses in the final version suggest that evoking these genres played an appreciable role in the work's composition. This isolated pairing may not quite reach the heady heights of Bauer's examples of "cosmopolitan absurdity," but the close interaction of their characteristics suggests that Ligeti was exploring the potentials of larger relationship between semantically significant objects throughout the creative process.