

Remarks on a Sketch of György Ligeti A Case of African Pianism

by Martin Scherzinger

There is a sketch by the Hungarian-born composer György Ligeti housed at the Paul Sacher Foundation that does not comport with the standard historical narrative on the composer's engagement with African culture. To the extent that African music is mentioned at all, musicological commentaries on Ligeti's late period tend to emphasize the composer's personal contact with Israeli ethnomusicologist Simha Arom and, to a lesser extent, Ligeti's engagement with the work of the Austrian born Gerhard Kubik. Arom's research, exemplified in his *magnum opus*, *Polyphonies et polyrythmies instrumentales d'Afrique Centrale*,¹ principally examines the musical practices of the Central African Republic (notably those of the Aka and the Banda-Linda); Kubik's research casts a wider net, ranging from the *tusona* ideographs found in Angola to the *amadinda* and *akadinda* xylophone music of Uganda. Yet the sketch clearly indicates an involvement with the music of the *Shona* people of Zimbabwe, a creative tradition not studied by either ethnomusicologist.

Dated August 1990 in red pencil, the sketch, originally conceived as *Étude* no. 10, bears three titles: "Zimbabwe" and "Mbira" (crossed out), and "Konvex-Konkav" (*Example 1*). On the right-hand side, we find two three-pronged square brackets vertically aligned to imply a hocket between upper and lower parts. Below this, Ligeti writes the word "interlocking," followed by a reference to the Shona *mbira*. The Hungarian words "Hüvelykujj eltolódás dallam" ("Thumb offsets/shifts tune"), offer a shorthand description of the way *mbira dza vadzimu* tunes are often constructed around interlocking lines between left and right thumbs; the words also suggest the way two *mbira* parts (known as *kushaura* ["to lead"] and *kutsinhira* ["to follow"] in Zimbabwe) are separated by one pulse to facilitate the interlocking of notes. On the left-hand side of the first staff Ligeti indicates two distinct temporal groupings for the two hands: 2+2+2 for the right hand and 3+3 for the left, a typical rhythmic grouping of the two parts in the music of the *mbira dza vadzimu*. From the notation itself, it is clear that Ligeti is experimenting with a peculiar kind of pianism derived from the *mbira*. The pulse notation recalls the *mbira* and *matepe* transcriptions of the South

African ethnomusicologist Andrew Tracey, and the musical passages, grouped into four quarters of twelve pulses each (before cycling back to their starting point), reproduce the basic structure of a typical *mbira* tune. Even the descending character of these lines emulates the signature down-

The image shows a handwritten musical score on aged paper, titled "Example 1" in the caption. The score consists of approximately 12 staves of music. The notation is primarily rhythmic, with many notes beamed together in groups, suggesting a complex, repetitive pattern. There are several annotations in German and Hungarian, including "KONVEX - KONKAV" and "Aug 50". The score is written in a style that is both technical and expressive, with some parts of the music appearing to be sketches or studies. The paper has some staining and wear, particularly a large diagonal line across the middle staves.

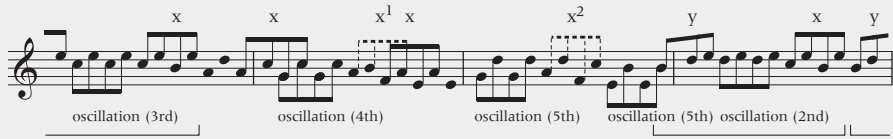
Example 1: György Ligeti, *Étude* no. 12 ("Entrelacs"), sketch (György Ligeti Collection).



Example 2: A typical Mbira tune (“Nyamaropa,” performed by Samuel Mujuru in August 1996; transcribed by the author).

ward cascading of a typical *mbira* song (Example 2). As in the music of Ligeti’s sketch, *mbira* music tends to issue forty-eight-pulse interlocking lines, staggered in time, that inhabit the same approximate register – a mechanism that maximizes the emergence of inherent melodic rhythms (about which more below). Ligeti explains: “On the piano there is no possibility of the two hands playing the same pitches as they can on the *mbira*, because the piano was constructed having the bass on the left and the treble on the right. I have no symmetrical possibility, but I want to combine two patterns [...].”²

Ligeti’s attempt in the sketch to impersonate the instrumental behavior of the *mbira* issues the rhythmic illusionism that he found so compelling in African music. Commenting on its “paradoxical nature,” Ligeti writes, “the patterns performed by the individual musicians are quite different from those which result from their combination. In fact, the ensemble’s super-pattern is in itself not played and exists only as an illusory outline.”³ In Ligeti’s homespun impressions of *mbira* music, we find similarly illusory rhythmic results. For example, the passage notated on the tenth staff of the sketch – an interlocking canon separated by eleven pulses – produces inherent melodic rhythms that sound out a unique motivic interplay, at once self-referential and elusive (Example 3). Notice how the two “Y” motives (each followed by an “oscillation” and an identical “X” motive) are offset by one pulse, as if the second appearance of “Y” comes a moment too soon. The “X” motive itself never appears in the equivalent rhythmic position in this short fragmentary passage, occurring instead on pulses 5, 6, 7, 8, and 12 at different points in the cycle. Motivic activity is thus constantly displaced against the meter. Similarly, the “oscillation” motives, which elaborate four-note fluctuations on the intervals of a second, third, fourth, and fifth (in that order), occur on pulses 1, 2, 3, and 9 at different points in the cycle. And yet, these asymmetrically distributed motives result from a simple interplay between two identical descending melodies, a musical characteristic Ligeti identifies as distinctly African. In African *mbira* music, for instance, the irregular acoustic experience is out of sync with the regu-



Example 3: Motivic analysis of Ligeti's sketch (staves 10 and 13).

lar physical structure of the music. Ligeti emphasizes this puzzle-like aspect in connection with African music: “the absolute symmetry of the formal architecture on the one hand [is in strong tension with] the asymmetrical internal divisions of the patterns on the other.”⁴

Interestingly, Ligeti also references two European romantic composers in this sketch. On the right hand side of the notation he writes: “Des Abends’ Hemiolak 3:2,” which probably refers to the first of Schumann’s *Fantasiestücke für Klavier*, op. 12, as well as “Chopin f moll ballade,” which refers to Chopin’s *Ballade*, op. 52. Schumann’s piece shares several traits with *mbira* music. First, while notated in 2/8, the music actually flows in a pulse-based ternary time throughout (notated in triplets), with an undulating 2+2+2 grouping in the right hand and an implied 3+3 in the left. As in Ligeti’s sketch of *mbira* music, Schumann’s motives and melodies undergo subtle, almost illusionist, temporal shifts. In m. 3, for example, the bass pedal-figure is briefly offset by one pulse, while in the parallel place four measures later (m. 7), the stepwise ascent in the upper voice has shifted by two pulses. As in Ligeti’s “*mbira*” sketch, these shifts take place in the context of an otherwise unwavering meter. Akin to the melodies of the *mbira*, the oscillating right hand figuration in Schumann’s piece also occasionally shifts its emphasis to the offbeat. In mm. 11–16, for example, both inner and outer voices elaborate melodic movement, while in mm. 21–24, the melody has shifted entirely to the offbeating inner voice. Finally, as a result of the crossing of parts between left and right hands, Schumann elicits from the, otherwise fairly straightforward, tonal play some striking harmonic constellations (initially mainly thirds, but then also tritones and an especially spiky minor second in m. 12). These momentary sonorities resonate with the peculiar sounds that drive the music. Note, for example, how the opening G^b (sounded as upper neighbor – or is it a passing tone?) in the context of D^b -major yields a sonority that re-sounds in m. 24 as C^b , E^b , G^b , and A^b , a flattening of a dominant seventh that illusionistically becomes B-major with an upper neighbor (or is it a passing tone?) in m. 25.

Chopin's ballade too shares several traits with *mbira* music. For example, in mm. 175–76, ternary groupings in the right hand run agilely alongside binary groupings in the left (notated in triplets against duple sixteenths). Moreover, the right hand ternary movement is further grouped into a four-beated melodic flow (notated with upward stems) while the left hand binary movement is grouped into a three-beated flow (three ascending arpeggio tones followed by three descending ones). Thus here too we find a resonance between Chopin's rhythmic practice and that of African music. One striking difference between the two rhythmic approaches is that in much African music, and especially in the music of the *mbira*, this kind of polyrhythmic activity often plays out within the same registral span – a technique that augments the appearance of illusory rhythms. This is where Ligeti's music frequently becomes more African than European. In the sketch, for example, Ligeti further explores the results of coinciding registers on the fifteenth and sixteenth staves. Here the composer enriches the descending lines with dyads (intervals of a seventh) in each hand. To circumvent the problem of colliding hand movements, left and right hands occupy black and white key collections respectively. Once again, with reference to the music of the *mbira*, Ligeti explains: "[...] I came to see how I can play with two hands at the same place, doing with one hand the white keys and with the other the black."⁵ Ligeti's piano music after 1985 – from the first *Étude* ("Désordre") to the *Klavierkonzert* – substantially bears the marks of this topographical revision of the piano on the model of the *mbira*.

How do we allow this kind of sketch to weigh upon the interpretation of Ligeti's late piano music? Like the American composer Steve Reich, with whose stance on "structural" borrowing from non-Western traditions he has more than a little in common, Ligeti looks to Africa as one of the musical cultures with whom some kind of communion across time and space is possible. "Having never before heard anything quite like it, I listened to ['Banda Polyphonies'] repeatedly and was then, as I still am, deeply impressed by this marvellous polyphonic, polyrhythmic music with its astonishing complexity. [...] For composition, it opens the door leading to a new way of thinking about polyphony, one which is completely different from the European metric structures, but equally rich, or maybe [...] even richer than the European tradition," he writes movingly in the preface to the 1991 English translation of Arom's *Polyphonies et polyrythmies*.⁶ At stake here is more than a simple confrontation between distinct musical traditions. Ligeti's passionate fascination with African musical procedures led to a significant shift in his compositional thinking. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, in style and method, Ligeti's creative output after 1985 grew primarily out of a methodical study of African musical structures. At their best, the piano music, for example, rises above the scrupulous application of compositional processes found in Africa to a creative amalgam that wavers precariously, and finally transcends, the

dichotomy between structural syntax and rhetorical allusion. This, to draw on an idea proffered by the African composer/musicologist Akin Euba, is Ligeti's peculiar *African pianism*.⁷

¹ Simha Arom, *Polyphonies et polyrythmies instrumentales d'Afrique Centrale: Structure et Méthodologie*, Ethnomusicologie 1, 2 vols. (Paris: Selafl, 1985); english edition: *African Polyphony and Polyrythm: Musical Structure and Methodology* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, and Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1991).

² György Ligeti, in *Settling the Score: A Journey through the Music of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael Oliver (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 178.

³ György Ligeti, "Foreword," in Simha Arom, *African Polyphony and Polyrythm* (note 1), p. xvii.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ligeti, in *Settling the Score* (note 2), p. 178.

⁶ Ligeti, "Foreword" (note 3), pp. xvii and xviii.

⁷ Cf. *Towards an African Pianism: Keyboard Music of Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. Akin Euba and Cynthia Tse Kimberlin (Richmond, CA: MRI Press, 2005). For a detailed study of Ligeti's *Études* and their connections to African music, see Martin Scherzinger, "György Ligeti and the Aka Pygmies Project," *Contemporary Music Review* 25, no. 3 (2006): 227–62.