

LUKAS LIGETI

And now I'm here as his son:
**remembering György Ligeti as a person,
a composer, and a father**

INTRODUCTION

I guess I'm here because my name is Ligeti. But I'm that *other* Ligeti. People ask me all the time if we're *related*. And then there's the problem that in most places, people can't remember my father's first name, or are scared to say it because they're sure they're going to pronounce it wrong. So they ask me if I'm related to Ligeti. I say, "Well, if your name is Smith, are you related to Smith?" Then they ask if I'm related to *the* Ligeti. And I say, hold on, I'm also *the* Ligeti. I'm not any less Ligeti than any other Ligeti. I would even argue that maybe I'm even *more* Ligeti because my grandfather changed the name Auer to Ligeti. In German, "Auer" means something like "coming from a heath" or a "park". Ligeti means something similar in Hungarian; it's not exactly the same thing but quite close. So he Hungarianised the name. So one could say that I'm one more generation in of Ligeti and further away from the Auer, so maybe I'm even *more* Ligeti.

But here now, I'm supposed to talk about my father, and that is the most difficult thing. This is actually only the second time I'm doing anything like this, and I really want to keep it very rare to do this kind of thing, to talk at a musicological symposium about my father, because I'm not a musicologist. I'm very interested in and inspired by the work of musicologists. I would say that a lot of my own music is crucially influenced by ethnomusicological work by other people, and it's also led me to become interested in doing my own ethnomusicological research, which I haven't really started doing yet in a concrete way.

But as much as I am inspired and interested in musicology, I am myself a composer and a drummer. I write scores for other musicians to play, some of which are completely composed down to the last note, while others are also environments for

improvisations. As a player, I'm an improviser, and I'm actually indeed a drummer and not a classical percussionist. I come more from the practical side, even if it has a strong theoretical background. And I'm not a scholar of my father's work.

I really loved my father, and I love his music. Every time I hear his music, which I don't do as often as you might have thought, I think it's really fantastic music, and his writings are fantastic. But at the same time of course, it's difficult to be associated with him all the time. I've come somehow to accept that. At the beginning I really probably would have refused to do something like giving this talk, because at that time, he was still alive. So maybe the fact that I'm standing here has something to do with the fact that he isn't alive. It would have been even stranger to talk about him if he were still alive. At least now when I say weird things about him, he can't defend himself, right?

Certainly, my father's influence on me is very strong, although it's not necessarily strong in the way that most people would think. It's strong in other ways, so I want to talk a little bit about that, too, and a little bit about my own music because it's easier for me to do that, but I don't want to bore anybody.

So, what can I share with you? I'm not going to share analyses of his work, but maybe what I can share are some different perspectives and some interesting insights.

BEING ORIGINAL

A lot of my impressions of my father were not strictly anything in music, but more generally that he was always a very curious person. He wanted to know things, and then create his own thing. It's something that's also very important to me, as an artist: being original and trying to develop things that are not only new to me, but also conceptually new, and bringing something new into the musical discourse as such. I probably came to that interest through my father.

Somehow, my father had this impetus since childhood. Maybe it came from his father, my grandfather, who was an economist. He had a day job working at a bank. The family came from western Hungary, and they moved to Transylvania. My father was born in a small village, Diciosânmartin, which these days is not such a small village anymore. I went there once with my mother and we looked together for the house where my father was born. My mother had been there decades before, and it was strange because we couldn't find it. It then turned out that a big block of apartments had been built around this house, but the house was still there in the courtyard of that block, so it survived, at least until now, or at least until a few years ago. I don't know if it's still there. My father grew up there for his first six years and then went to Cluj, or Kolozsvár.

At night my grandfather was apparently always writing books on economics that he didn't have time to write during the day, as he was working at the bank. Appar-

ently, those were quite innovative books. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to read them because they were never translated. My Hungarian isn't good enough for that, but maybe one day it will be. If I had a chance to spend six months in Hungary, I would probably learn the language fairly well because it's there in my mind somewhere. I guess maybe there was something scientific, something about exploration that was in the family. My grandmother was an ophthalmologist, and she was even one of the first, or maybe the very first female ophthalmologist in Hungary.

From an early age on, my father liked exploring things. He was apparently a naughty child. One story I know was that his mother told him that he had a black soul because he was never doing as he was told. I don't quite know what a black soul is, but then my father somehow found a chicken in the kitchen, and he started opening up, cutting up this chicken, and he found the chicken's gall bladder. He was convinced that this gall bladder, because it was black, must be the chicken's soul and that the chicken also had a black soul. And not only was he very intelligent, he also had a good memory. Apparently, he had a recollection from an extremely early age, when he was just a couple of months old. The house already had electricity, but there was a power outage. As opposed to my house now in Johannesburg, where we have power outages probably about once every three or four days, apparently even back then in Romania, it was a very rare thing. So there was a power outage when he was just a few months old, and his parents lit candles. And then it happened again when he was maybe four or five years old. And they lit candles again, and my father said, "I've seen this light before. Where have I seen this light?" And it turned out that the only time that he would have been able to see that kind of light was during the previous power outage when he was only a few months old. That's quite remarkable.

He was always into learning and knowing and wanted to be a scientist. When he finished high school in 1941, he was not able to get into the university to study science. This was due to the "numerus clausus" for Jews in the World War II years; he was not the best student in his class. So he went to the conservatory instead. By that time, he had already started playing music and composing. He had always wanted to make music, so that's very different from me, but his parents weren't interested in letting him take music lessons. But he had a little brother, five years younger, who was obviously very talented for music. The parents somehow noticed that, and so Gábor got violin lessons. My father said, "Well, if my little brother gets violin lessons, let me play the piano to accompany him," and that's how he started playing.

During the war my father was in a forced labour unit. It's actually very interesting. When I was a kid, maybe five or six or seven years old, he would tell me bedtime stories about his experiences in the forced labour camp. He was somewhere in the area of Szeged, and a part of his forced labour division was segregated from his section, and they were all put on a train. They were transported to the copper mines of Bor, in Serbia, where they all died. Fortunately, my father was not among those that were taken there. And by all these incredible coincidences, he somehow survived in

the forced labour camp until he basically found himself at the eastern front with the Russians approaching and ran away. He walked home to Cluj and found an empty apartment, and eventually his mother returned.

His mother survived Auschwitz because, as a doctor, the Nazis wanted to kill her last, and then the Russians came and freed Auschwitz. She came back, but his father and his brother Gábor never returned from the concentration camp. His brother never coming back was probably the thing that emotionally nagged him most in his life. It was not something that he talked about a lot, but he did tell me stories about this and about what happened in the forced labour camp. It's strange that he was telling me these stories as I was falling asleep as a little kid. He was very objective about these kinds of things. He was telling me about how he would ride between Romania and Hungary on the train, and there was no space to ride inside the train, so he had to get on the roof of the train. So he was there, and you always tried to be at the back of the train because when there were cables crossing the train tracks, the people who were in the front would get beheaded by the cables, so when he saw the heads flying, he knew to duck. He told me these kinds of things in a very objective tone of voice. But at the same time, I think, inside, there were many feelings, especially about his brother. When he was at the end of his life and sick, he would talk more about this and he would often dream of it and have feelings of revenge against the people who killed his father. He was not a vengeful person at all otherwise, but that somehow came out.

The last years were very difficult. He was getting more and more sick, becoming increasingly paralysed due to a neurological issue that was never fully diagnosed. He ultimately lost his ability to hold a pencil and compose, and then also started communicating less and less. It was very strange to see how the disease that ultimately killed him was one that silenced him, first his composing and then his speaking.

When he was already almost unable to talk, during the very last stage, he sometimes would watch TV, and he would just sit there and not say a word, but it was clear that he was understanding what was going on around him. Since we are in Finland, I can tell you that one of the moments that proved this was when my mother, who took fantastic care of him, was sitting with him, and they were watching something on TV. There was a language being spoken, and my mother didn't immediately know what language it was. So she asked my father what it was, because she was used to my father recognising most languages. My father immediately said, "Finnish." Probably he didn't say anything else all day, but that was proof that while he was often unable to communicate, it wasn't that he was losing his mental awareness. He knew exactly what was going on, and I guess that must have made it even more difficult for him.

Luckily, I managed to be with my father when he died, which was obviously not a pleasant moment. I managed to be with him the last two weeks or so of his life, and it made it a little bit more bearable for me than being somewhere far away.

THE PERSON

My father was a very complex person. On the one hand, he was an extreme traditionalist, which is something that I want to speak about a little more. But then, on the other hand, he was a very free spirit, and I think you all know that. He wasn't really a family man in the traditional sense. He was always kind of locked away working on his music, but always really nice when he was around. He was often rather withdrawn and didn't think so much that a child needs rules. When it came to raising his son, he was a free spirit, and he didn't want to impose anything on me at all.

All those who knew my father will agree that he was an extremely communicative person who always liked to talk, and who was not into small talk. I remember that whenever there were guests at the house, my father would show up and immediately start asking difficult questions. What kinds of things are you interested in? Why are you doing this? Things like that. As reclusive as he was in his work, he was always very curious and enjoyed talking with people, both talking and listening.

I think that most people who knew him will confirm that he was not a self-promoter. He was actually somebody who would almost make fun of the hustlers, and he just wanted to make his music. I guess he was one of those rare cases of a person who deserves to be very successful and was very successful. I can name for you many people who would deserve to be very successful and aren't, and I can name many people who I think don't deserve to be very successful and are. But my father was one of those rare cases where that "went right".

FATHER AND SON

I had a very close relationship with my father when I was a little child, maybe until about the age of four or five. As I said, he wasn't such a family man, but at the same time we had kind of a normal relationship between a father and a little son. After that came a period where he was a gone a lot. He soon started teaching in Hamburg, and we became a lot less close during that time. When I was 18 and started making music, our relationship strengthened again. But then it was a very different relationship because at the time, I was already practically a grown-up, and it was kind of a relationship between friends, and he was like an older composer friend.

When people see that I'm my father's son and also a composer, they automatically think that I was brought up from age zero to be a musician or a composer. Or they think that my father forced me, standing behind me with a whip or something, forcing me to play the piano as a child. Nothing is further from the truth. At one point, when I was about nine or ten years old, I did attempt to take some piano lessons, but I quickly decided that reading music is an impossible task, and practising is just out of the question. So I stopped, very soon, and I didn't take any more music

lessons until after I graduated from high school. And I really didn't think much about playing music.

I did, however, sit down at the piano sometimes and improvise, and my father would tell me, "Well, you know, you really seem to be talented for music, so maybe if you want to take piano lessons or something, I'm sure you'd be very good. But if you don't want to do it, that's also fine. I'm not going to force you."

I grew up without rules. Maybe that's why I've become this kind of unruly person, but I didn't want to make music as a child. I don't quite know why that was, but maybe it was because my father was so good at it that I wanted to stay away. Or maybe I always knew in the back of my mind that I would be a musician at some point anyway. Now that I think about it, with my father being a musician and being a composer and being so good at it, I'm sure I thought that I could do that as well, and I could start even later than my father. Maybe that was the reason, because he didn't start with music until he was 14 and I didn't really start until after high school.

When I was about eleven years old, I was always inventing things and making up imaginary places and drawing maps of them. I don't quite know where this comes from, but this is among the many things that I have in common with my father. I'll talk about this a little later. I also made up a Hungarian man, called Hortobágyi István. He was a musician and a musicologist in Hungary but managed to get out of Hungary in the 1970s and ended up getting a job as a soccer player in Malawi in south-eastern Africa. It's a very strange story. I would sometimes record piano improvisations on a tape deck, so I recorded piano solo music by Hortobágyi. With that, I recorded an interview of him by an interviewer who spoke with a British accent, and Hortobágyi is speaking English with a Hungarian accent. Well, the composer György Kurtág happened to come for a visit. He's a close friend of my family. He heard the recording of this interview with Hortobágyi on the tape, and I've been told that for a moment, Kurtág actually thought it was real. He was really interested in the interview. I've been told that hearing this interview somehow opened him up. He was just starting to write *Játékok* at the time and was feeling hemmed in his composing. Somehow the whole thing freed him, and he started developing his own voice as a composer. Whether this is true or not, I don't know, but that's what I've been told.

A lot of people think that my father was a person who connected me with everyone and made sure that I had a career. But that wasn't his nature. In fact, he was somehow scared to be a door-opener for me in the modest way that he could have done it. I think this was because he had a very strange experience around the year 1989.

I had just started composing, and one of the first pieces I wrote was a percussion quartet called *Pattern Transformation*. It was the first piece where I started to develop my own voice as a composer. My father saw the piece, and he thought it was really good. Completely unrelated to my piece, he got an inquiry by Josef Häusler

– and I think probably most of you know who he was – saying that there was a commission for a percussion piece for Percussions de Strasbourg. They wanted to give the commission to a young composer, and Häusler asked if my father could recommend a young composer who could write a good piece for a percussion ensemble.

My father thought about this for a moment. He thought that none of his students were particularly specialised in writing for percussion ensembles, but I had just written a piece that he really liked. So he wrote back to Häusler, saying that I don't want this to sound like nepotism, but I could actually recommend my son to do the commission. Häusler answered, saying no. He said that it really would seem like nepotism. Let's not do that. My father became furious. He got extremely angry, and he never spoke to Josef Häusler again. From that time on he never recommended me for anything anymore, because he was convinced it would damage my chances.

I never studied with my father. I never wanted to study with him. It would have seemed very strange for me to do that. I did, however, go to his composition classes sometimes. I was starting to study composition around the time that he was writing the first book of the Piano Etudes. It was also the time that his teaching at the music academy in Hamburg was starting to draw to a close. He retired there maybe in 1988 or 1989. In the mid- to late '80s I would go to Hamburg maybe once a year and sit in on his class. That was a very interesting experience. He wasn't at that time what I would consider a very active teacher. He was just sitting in a circle with his students and talking, and that's what I try to do as well. I'm teaching composition myself now, which is a rather new thing for me to do. I'm in my second year. I'm getting older, so I've become a university professor. It's still a strange feeling for me, but maybe I draw upon seeing my father teach.

At that time, my father and I had a relationship where he was just somebody that I could talk to a lot about conceptual and aesthetic issues. But he was not my teacher by any means. There were certain things that he kept telling me. He was very obsessed with craft. I was not so obsessed with craft at the time. I've become more so. My father and I would talk very candidly about each other's pieces and criticise each other quite a lot. He would always be very open to my criticism, and I hope the other way around as well. Our relationship was like this from the mid- to late '80s on for almost fifteen years. Then, unfortunately, he started getting sick.

PARALLELS

There are certain parallels in our life. One thing that a lot of people know is that my father invented a country when he was a little kid, called *Kylwyria*. He had a nanny when he was little, like four years old or so, and she would take him to the movies all the time because she liked going to the movies. When my father's parents weren't around, she would take care of him and they'd go to the movies, and there was a movie apparently called the *Kalvaria of a Mother* (the Ordeals of a Mother). My father liked the word *Kalvaria*, and he took the a-s and replaced two of them with y-s and replaced the v with a w so that the name became *Kylwyria*. Maybe he made up this country as a kind of escape from the competition that his soon-to-be-born or just newly-born brother was giving him – I don't know.

The strange thing is that around the same age, I also made up a country. My mother would sometimes recite a Hungarian poem which was in Latin, and it was a student poem. It ended with *Vivam quoque ita*, which means "I live anyway." Out of this I picked up "quoque ita", and that became *Qwoqwita*, the name of the country that I made up. I also spent my childhood writing encyclopedias. I was very disciplined, writing in alphabetical order and drawing maps of this country. The odd thing is that to the best of my knowledge, and to the best of my parents' knowledge, I did not know about *Kylwyria* at that time. Apparently, I invented this country independently from my father. That was just one example of similar things that happened in our lives. Also, approximately at the age of 30, we both changed cultural areas and countries. Of course in my life, it was a much more peaceful migration, but nevertheless. And then by coincidence at about the same age, we found ourselves suddenly teaching at a university or academy. Strange, interesting and unplanned parallels.

IDENTITIES

My father's identity was complicated in that he was a Hungarian and a Jew but was actually born in Romania. In those days Transylvania kept going back and forth between Hungary and Romania. It was sitting in the same place, but it was constantly switching countries because it was occupied by one and then the other. Eventually my father came to Austria and became an Austrian citizen.

My case is maybe an even more severe case of uprootedness because I was born stateless. I was born in Austria, but Austria doesn't automatically confer citizenship upon you if you are born there, as opposed to some other countries. My parents hadn't received Austrian citizenship yet, so I became an Austrian citizen when I was a little kid. I was basically part of an expatriate family from Hungary that wasn't really Hungarian, and I wasn't Jewish either really because you have to go back, I

don't know how many generations in my family to find a practicing Jew. It was only Hitler who reminded my family that they're Jewish. It's a very typical situation in central Europe, with these assimilated Jews like my family was.

I started learning German from Hungarian speakers, and then I went to America and I came back and went to the American International School and grew up with kids from all over the world but kind of as an American. But then I came to live in America, and I noticed that because I never watched the same TV shows as American kids my age, I was really not American, either. When I'm in Europe, I feel American, and in America, I feel very European. Then I also started spending a lot of time in Africa, and that also had a very very strong effect on me.

Because I've become so Africanised, I like using terminology from Africa, in this case, a term from the Mandé people in the interior of West Africa who have something called *griots*. The griot is a traditional musician and storyteller. They usually are part of families and clans, and I like to say that I am a griot because there's my father and there are also a number of other musicians and other artists in my family. But we're a very special griot clan because instead of retelling the old stories, the specialty of our griot clan is to do something new. So we are the innovation griots, and I really feel that by trying to do something innovative, I'm actually at the same time carrying forth a tradition that comes from my father.

INFLUENCES

In the early '80s, as is quite well documented, my father was given a recording of salsa music by his student Roberto Sierra. That set him off on a path of being interested in Afro-Caribbean and African music. He had already been interested in jazz for a long time. My own interest in African music came in part, but not entirely, through my father. I became interested in African music through swapping cassette tapes with my father, but also through going to lectures by the musicologist Gerhard Kubik. He was teaching in Vienna at the university and was also an influence on my father.

When I started to make music in the mid-1980s, a certain trend was already well under way of becoming more of what it is now, namely that you get exposed to a lot of different types of music. For example, very soon after I started making music, I started listening to African music. So am I based in western art music? Is that my musical home-base? In a certain way it is, because growing up, I heard more of that music than other types of music. But then, when it came to being an active musician, I would say it's not necessarily true. I started with western art music and jazz and rock. But in my case, studying the western art music tradition was not such an obvious thing since I was interested in various types of traditional musics at the same time. Of course I studied harmony and counterpoint and all those very thoroughly in Vienna, but I was questioning it already at that time be-

cause I was hearing a lot of other musics that were based on completely different concepts and principles.

Although my father and I shared many interests, one of them being African music, there were also many differences. For example, he was not very interested in improvisation. That's something that we discussed a lot, and my father felt that improvisation was somehow not as sophisticated a form of music creation. I strongly disagree with this idea. I think it really depends on what your ambitions are. I both compose and improvise. When I compose, I want to create a situation where something, let's say the form, is in a certain way settled to the point where it would be hard to imagine the piece going any other way – at least for me. When I improvise, I'm not interested in that at all. I'm exploring completely different questions. Basically composing is slowly-made decisions, and improvising is quickly-made decisions. But improvising is not *randomly*-made decisions. I'm building upon a huge foundation of experiences and practicing and personal vocabulary that I've developed on my instrument as an improviser. I think both ways can lead to artistically very interesting results.

When I started composing, I wanted to be as far away from the music of my father as possible. As I've gotten a little older, I'm no longer as fearful of making the connection audible. The searching for something original has always been there, and the influence of his music has been there as well. I could show you moments from early pieces of mine that are almost like quotes, not literal quotes but atmospheric quotes from my father's pieces – at least the way I hear it. But I would say that in the last ten years, maybe since my father died, I've also allowed a more audible influence of his music into my own music.

I don't know if the things that I really got from my father were learned during the times that we were talking more often, or whether I learned by osmosis during my childhood, just from hearing him talk to my mother and other people, just hanging around with them.

One thing that I learned from him very strongly was to try to always do the absolute best that I can and to always search to be original. Nowadays, with a lot of younger generation composers, I find that the interest in being original in a deliberate way is not so strong. There are certainly original voices out there. I'm not saying that there aren't, but I'm saying that it is not something that's so much talked about, and for me it's remained a very crucial aspect of what I do.

TRADITION

My father was a person full of contradictions, as we all are, I guess. In a musical conversation, let's say, the contradiction I sensed most strongly was the one between being almost compulsive about being original and being almost compulsive about

being traditional. And of course, in his case, “tradition” meant the western art music tradition. His interests were always evolving, and he was incredibly open-minded. But at the end of his life, the compulsion to tradition became in a certain way overwhelming. But his real interest was still in finding things. He sometimes quoted Mahler as saying that tradition is not worshipping the ashes but passing on the flames. Actually, Mahler didn’t invent this quote, but was already quoting someone, I think it was Thomas More, but I’m not exactly sure, and there were also John Denham and Benjamin Franklin and Confucius, as well as others who this quote has been attributed to.

In the beginning of my own career, I was less interested in tradition. But especially since I work with African traditional musicians a lot, I developed a real closeness with the idea of being in a certain tradition. In my case, it’s the cosmopolitan tradition, so I have the difficulty of having to learn something about all these different traditions.

As for my father, in his later stages, the conflict between originality and tradition gave him a very hard time composing. I remember very well how he gave himself an awfully hard time with his Piano Concerto, and then even more with his Violin Concerto, and also with the Hamburg Concerto, which I personally find to be the piece where he came to the greatest perfection in the harmonic ideas he was working on, even though it’s the least talked about of those three pieces. I wish he could have gone on from there, but it was hard for him to do that because he tried to satisfy these contradictory demands of being so polished as a craftsman yet at the same time doing something new.

LEGACY

My father’s work from the 1960s was a final consequence of the language of tonality being disassembled with dodecaphonic and serial music and their consequences. In his music, there was no longer a perceptible rhythm and no longer a perceptible melody, and through the density of events, everything became a tapestry, a very complex tapestry.

I think that the challenge we have today is a little bit different: do we want to come up with new languages in the first place? As composers, we’ve enjoyed a certain freedom, let’s say by *not* being part of a set language. Or, *not* having to deal with a certain question, namely: are we fulfilling the things that convention or tradition demands? In new music, there are so many cliques. We all know that if you write a triad, you’re a persona non grata in mainstream European modernism. If you don’t have a fixed meter, you’re a persona non grata in pop music.

I’ve managed to become a persona non grata in everything. I’ve become an outsider, but I like doing my own thing, and I think that’s also important about my

father. I think this is an aspect that is neglected when thinking about my father. When he first came to the west, he became very much part of the Darmstadt circle, but it didn't take very long until he started questioning these kinds of stylistic and grammatical rules. Then he became his own clique just in himself. And now I'm here as his son, and I'm often in the position of having to think about, how is my father's music being understood and how is it contextualised today? I'm a little worried, and there's a couple of things that I want to say to the musicologists in this room today because I think that you are people who can help with this since you write about it. There are so many things that are being said about my father, and some of them are "alternative truths".

In general, I feel that my father is being contextualised as standing closer than he actually was to the whole European modernist Darmstadt aesthetic, or that he was working with a Darmstadt aesthetic. There was a composition competition in Berlin some years ago, after my father's death. It was a sort of memorial prize for him, and the panel consisted of people who were firmly ensconced in the post-Darmstadt complexity style. And of course they also chose winners who were firmly ensconced in the post-Darmstadt complexity style. And as a memorial prize, that seemed to me like a misrepresentation, because my father was *not* part of this.

I'm not a professional son. I don't really feel that it's my job to chaperone my father's music. I make my own music, but it's important to me that my father's music is contextualised in the right way. What is important for people to realise is that my father was a maverick outsider, which is an element that I think is often overlooked.