

UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS, FACULTY OF MUSIC AND
VISUAL ARTS
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Themata of the dissertation titled
György Ligeti: Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel

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The subject of my research

György Ligeti's song cycle *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel* is the piece of music I have worked the most with during my singing career so far. Part of the reason is that I have unwittingly contributed to the birth of the idea for the piece, I premiered it, and have been singing it around the world ever since. During the twenty-three years since the première, my preparations and the rehearsals for the more than fifty performances of the work have yielded a great deal of inspiration. Those experiences, along with my knowledge about the origins of the piece, its linguistic toolkit, dramaturgy and musical construction may assist those who wish to study it, or perform it in an authentic manner. The composition occupies a special place within Ligeti's oeuvre, as it is his last completed piece and also the only one he ever composed and dedicated specifically for Hungarian performers.

György Ligeti is one of the most original and seminal creative artists of the second half of the 20th century. His oeuvre is a source of inspiration for composers, performers and musicologists alike, and it also has a strong impact on other art forms. His vocal chamber music achieves a special place within the context of the oeuvre not by means of its bulk but its originality and virtuosity of composition. His last finished work, the seven-movement song cycle *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel* – which he composed using the musicality of poems and poem fragments by Sándor Weöres – is related to the piece entitled *Három Weöres-dal (Three Weöres Songs)*, composed over fifty years earlier, yet they also exhibit the taboo-free use of the human voice that he discovered and immediately exploited to the furthest extreme in *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*. In those pieces we as performers not only aim to acquaint ourselves with the extremely complex musical language, but also to understand the specific features of phonetic connections. These are pieces of music that test the limits of the human voice as a musical instrument, and which require an especially high level of musical, vocal and acting acumen, technical skill, a swift understanding and a great deal of stamina. Ligeti was fully aware of the characteristics of the singing voice (he had a great voice himself, between 1945 and 1956 he had regular sessions with György and Márta Kurtág, where they would sing

complete operas with Ligeti carrying all the male roles, Márta singing all the female roles, and Kurtág playing a piano adaptation of the orchestral score). He knew what the human voice is capable of, but traditional music tuition, in particular vocal training based on the world of tonal harmony and the classical repertoire offers no key to singers for unlocking such more complex pieces that diverge from the traditional forms in terms of music, rhythm a drama. The singer's task is to relearn the ability, both mentally and as regards vocal technique, the ability to play without fear, fully giving oneself, so as to be able to use her voice, in accordance with the given text or game of phonemes, to produce any tone freely, from lyrical *bel canto* to screaming, in the full dynamic range from *sotto voce ppppp* to *fffff*. These unique forms of musical communication require a new approach based, on the one hand, on thoroughness, and on the other hand on curiosity, the spirit of exploration and humour. Singing Ligeti's vocal pieces represents a manifold spiritual and physical challenge to the performer, and I believe that the time is right for presenting it, bringing it into awareness, and offering insights for its realisation.

Methods

The method of my inquiry concerns the practice, rather than the theory of art. Due to the nature of the subject matter, I use a qualitative research methodology.

My dissertation is structured as follows:

a) In the first chapter, entitled *The genesis of the cycle Sippal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel* I record, as the primary authentic source, Ligeti's own thoughts about the genesis of the piece (*The significance of the personal relationship*) and the process of cooperating with the composer (*From conception to première*). This chapter is primarily based on conversations with the composer.

b) In the second chapter, entitled *Similarities in the creative attitudes of György Ligeti and Sándor Weöres*, I provide helpful information to performers for understanding the composer's specific musical vocabulary in his works written using the poems of Sándor Weöres (*Ligeti – Weöres, or the unity of music and text*). For an understanding of the extraordinary unity of words and music in the cycle *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel*, I explore the sources of Ligeti's special use of text (*Giovani universali*) and the musicality of Weöres's poesis (*Weöres, the music-poet*), and the relationship of the two geniuses to folk music (*Weöres – Kodály, or the interplay of poem and music, Kodály – Ligeti, or the reasons for, and the effects of, the unavoidability of folk music in Ligeti's art*). The research in that chapter is based on correspondence between the artists and their individual statements.

c) In the third chapter, entitled *The cycle Síppal, dobbal nádihegedűvel*, I provide an analysis and a practical contextualisation of the musical, linguistic and performative content and instructions in the written music of the piece. My analysis is based on the manuscript and the printed sheet music, while the exploration of the practical aspects of performance is based on my own experiences.

Ligeti provided a lot of information both orally and in writing about the genesis of his works, his relationship to his pieces and his compositional technique, so the musicologist wishing to structure the oeuvre or the performer wishing to understand and perform them authentically can use material from that most authentic of sources. He added very exact and extremely detailed composer's instructions to the sheet music of his works.

My dissertation is accompanied by two interviews. The first conversation, recorded with Zoltán Rácz, the leader of the Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, concerns the problematic of authenticity as applicable to performers, touching on the question of the responsibility and the opportunities of performers who had played music for the first time and who had worked with the composer in transmitting their experiences of the works concerned to younger generations. The subject of the second interview is the British composer, concert pianist and conductor Thomas Adès, whom I interviewed about the influences of György Ligeti's *Síppal, dobbal,*

nádihegedűvel on his new song cycle *Növények*, written for the poems of Attila József, Miklós Radnóti, Sándor Weöres and Ottó Orbán, including the choice of instruments and the treatment of text.

Results and conclusions

The performer for whom a composer writes music is in a privileged position. The work leading up to the performance, the process of learning and practicing with a living composer is a genuine journey of discovery. In order to finally voice the piece it is indispensable that the performer should subject her entire attention, talent and technical skills to the musical intention of the composer. Understanding that intention can be rendered easier by the author's presence, as that makes it possible to ask questions about anything, to discuss narrative and musical connections, to experiment together in order to shape tonalities, tempos and dramaturgy. It is, however, also a challenge, as the performer wants to comply with the composer's musical ideas and author's instructions – which are communicated in multiple ways and are hence unambiguous – as accurately as possible, and at the same time it is also a responsibility, as her performances and any recordings produced in the composer's presence go beyond the written music and acquire a reference value, and as such, they become the key to the authenticity of performances created by other performers. This is very much the case with reference to György Ligeti's song cycle *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel*. Whenever I prepare for a new performance of the piece with ensembles other than the Amadinda Percussion Ensemble – despite the fact that I am fully aware of how my relationship to the piece has been growing since the première in 2000, I am more abandoned and extreme in realising the author's instructions (that is to say, I distort my voice more in a nasal or shrill direction, or in some cases I may bellow even louder), and I am also aware that every single percussive instrument has a unique tone (and this is particularly true of the noise instruments of the first percussion part) – during the preparatory period the primary

foundation of my work with the musicians is my experience of having rehearsed the piece with the composer – and this is indeed something that the musicians require of me, something they believe is indispensable.

Naturally, the piece speaks for itself. Nevertheless, I felt the need to explore the roots of the unity of text and music that the cycle exhibits. It was in that context, in its relationship to phonemes, words and text that I examined the composer's creative attitude, and I found that it had a strong similarity to the attitude of the poet Sándor Weöres to melody and rhythm. There are a great many parallels in the spiritual character and the interests of the two artists, and the essence of their mutual respect for each others' art, of their friendship, yields fruit in Ligeti's compositions written for Weöres's poems.

Reviewing the sheet music for Ligeti's *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel* it is conspicuous that the composer uses a minimal toolkit to achieve maximum effect, utilising an economy of composition that exceeds his earlier work in that respect. The musical expression amplifies the contrasts present in the texts. Similarly to Baroque composers, he uses musical means to present the essence of the ideas clearly, but while in the case of a Baroque aria, the entire aria is subjugated to that idea, Ligeti, while maintaining the original idea, grasps the independent semantic content and emotional effect of the words as well. The sound of the words, their content, and the musical composition form a perfect whole in the piece.

The barely fifteen-minute cycle of seven songs is like a miniature opera, whose movements are formed by completely different musical worlds, which amplify the musicality of the chosen words a great deal. The singer is acting a role, even when in the third person singular, because the music turns her into whatever she is singing about: a mountain, a wolf, a dance, a temple, Coolie, an apple, a bride and a jay bird. The alternation of roles that are very distinct in terms of character, and extremely different modes of making sound, was very much part of Ligeti's *modus operandi*, present in its most pronounced form in the movements of *Három Weöres-dal*, composed in 1946, and later in the 1962 and 1965 pieces *Aventures* and *Nouvelle Aventures*.

The key to the performance of this work is the relationship between the vocal part and the instrumental parts, which may not be interpreted in the traditional fashion, as in this piece it is the vocal part that generates the entire musical process, which is at odds with the traditional soloist and accompaniment model. As a result, the vocalist controls the process of the performance as a conductor of sorts. In the majority of the movements, the singing voice adds colour to the musical tapestry as an instrument.

The tempos indicated are integral parts of the characters of the individual movements, any major diversion from those will result in a loss of character. The *general pausa* at the end of each movement is similarly important. This is not marked specifically at the ends of the third and sixth movements, as it goes without saying there, due to the longer sustain of the metallophonic instruments.

The linguistic context – namely the fact that due to their musico-linguistic complexity, Sándor Weöres's poems are practically impossible to translate – does not influence the reception of the work, as the experience of understanding is evoked in the listener, whether a speaker of Hungarian or not, by the music. (That is also how Weöres's 'meaningless' poems, that is to say those without any semantic content, work – the musicality of the words makes the poems 'understandable'.) However, in order to allow that experience to be created in the listener, it is important that the performers – the vocalist and the percussionists equally – are fully cognizant of the rhythm, cadence and meaning (in the case of meaningful words⁹ of every single word, while in the case of a vocalist who is not a native speaker of Hungarian, it is also indispensable to learn to pronounce the vowels and consonants in a clear and exact manner.

In addition to the appropriate choice of instruments and the required technical skills, it is a fundamental precondition of performing the piece in an authentic way that all five performers should understand the musical, semantic and dramaturgical aspects of the composition fully. Once that is achieved, the piece acquires a sense of evidence in performance while retaining its highly complex symbolism.

Activities related to the subject matter of my dissertation

Since the première, I have sung György Ligeti's *Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel* song cycle at least fifty times, with various percussion ensembles or the percussionists of chamber and symphonic orchestras. I have also recorded the piece and gave a number of lectures about its composition.

10/11/2000	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Arsenal – Metz, première
22/11/2000	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Huddersfield Contemporary Music, Huddersfield
24/11/2000	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Stadthalle Gütersloh, Gütersloh
11/02/2001	London Sinfonietta, Queen Elisabeth Hall, London
22/03/2001	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Zeneakadémia, Budapest
20, 22/01/2001	Asko Ensemble, NDR / Hamburg, Rotterdam
19/08/2001	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Salzburger Festspiele, Salzburg
11/09/2001	4-MALITY Percussion Quartet, BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London
07/06/2002	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Bayerische Rundfunk – Munich
05/07/2002	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Blackheath Concert Hall, London
08/07/2002	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, International Bartók Symposium and Festival, Szombathely
24/04/2003	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Wiener Konzerthaus, Vienna
23, 24/05/2003	Asko Ensemble, Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, Antwerp
27/09/2003	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Fest der Kontinente, Berliner Philharmoniker, Berlin
26/10/2003	Asko Ensemble, Kölner Philharmoniker, Cologne
25/05/2004	Kruomata Percussion Ensemble, Polar Prize, Stockholm
26/09/2004	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Musikcentre Vredenburg, Utrecht
16/10/2004	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Budapest
23/10/2004	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Kunsthaus Muerz, Mürzzuschlag
15/05/2005	Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Festival Karthause Ittingen, Ittingen

19/11/2005 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, European Central Bank, Hochschule für Musik, Frankfurt

27/05/2006 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, MÜPA, Budapest
https://youtu.be/___7W7BhGhfI

22, 24/04/2007 Tambuco Percussion Ensemble, Mexico City, San Luis Potosí

23/08/2007 Asko Ensemble, NDR Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Hamburg

20/11/2007 Percussionist students of the LFZE, Zeneakadémia, Budapest

15/06/2008 BCMG, Aldeburgh Music, Aldeburgh

31/01/2009 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Carnegie Hall, New York City

27/08/2009 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Ostrava Days, Ostrava

05/11/2009 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Festival International Carmelo Bernaloa, Vitoria-Gasteiz

16/10/2010 Percussionists of the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra, Seoul

05/04/2011 SŌ Percussion, LA Philharmonic / Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles

15/05/2011 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Prague Spring Festival, Prague

05/06/2013 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Schwetzingen Festspiele, Schwetzingen

18/10/2013 Tambuco Percussion Ensemble, Cervantino Festival, Guanajuato

20/10/2013 Tambuco Percussion Ensemble, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City

13/03/2014 Ensemble 2E2M, Conservatoire National de Musique de Paris, Paris

07/05/2014 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, MÜPA, Budapest

26/11/2015 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Institut Balassi, Vienna

12/05/2016 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Zeneakadémia, Budapest

26/05/2017 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, International Percussion Convention, Taipei

05/04/2018 Slagwerk den Haag, Ligeti Festival in Musiekgebouw, Amsterdam

06/05/2018 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Hungarian Radio Studio 6, Atrium / Radio Bartók, Budapest

24/05/2018 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, Ligeti Festival, Cluj Napoca

27/05/2018 Tambuco Percussion Ensemble, 100 años del Teatro de la Ciudad Esperanza Iris, Mexico City

27/05/2021 Amadinda Percussion Ensemble, BMC, Budapest

28/03/2023 Zoltán Rácz and percussionists of the Budapest Festival
Orchestra, Zeneakadémia, Budapest

GYÖRGY LIGETI – THE LIGETI PROJECT III

Síppal, dobbal, nádihegedűvel (**first recording, with the author present**)

Amadinda Percussion Ensemble

TELDEC Classics 8573-87631-2

2023 – Ligeti Raum Interpretation – Symposium and Masterclasses

Musikinstrumenten, Museum Berlin

2021 – Masterclasse de chant de la musique contemporaine

Conservatoire à Rayonnement Départemental Paris-Saclay, Orsay, France

2017 – Kurtág – Ligeti International Masterclasses

Franz Liszt University of Music, Budapest

2017 – Composing for voice and interpretation

Centro de Experimentation y Producción de Música Contemporánea, Centro
National de las Artes, Mexico DF., Mexico

2015 – IV. Curso Grandes Maestros de Canto

Benemérita Universidad de Puebla, Colegio de Música de la Escuela de Artes BUAP,
Mexico

**2015 – The singing voice in the works of Boulez, Berio and Ligeti – Specialist
seminar on music history**

University of Miskolc, Béla Bartók Institute of Music
