

Sensationally Macabre

CUBE Circuits (Winter/Spring 2006)

by Janice Misurell-Mitchell

On Friday, January 13, 2006 I attended the first of a series of three concerts of music of Hungarian composer György Ligeti, presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York City. The first program had the most sonic variety; the following two concerts featured works for woodwind quintet, string quartet, and piano.

Most of the program was organized around a chronological sequence of works, opening with the tonal *Old Hungarian Ballroom Dances*, for flute, clarinet and strings. Ligeti wrote the piece in 1949 to appease Soviet authorities, who asked him to write something for public radio that reflected the country's cultural heritage; the work was a great success. He says, "I became famous for writing a piece that was not my own composition".

Nonetheless, there are hints of irony in this work, which apparently were not noticed by those in power. The *Chamber Concerto for Thirteen Instrumentalists*, completed in 1970 reflected a vastly different musical vocabulary, one the composer developed after fleeing Hungary in 1956, moving to Vienna, then working extensively with other modernist composers in Cologne at West German Radio. This piece, in several movements, contained virtuosic writing for all the instruments, creating a delicate balance between soloistic and textured ensemble writing; the use of sonorites of minor seconds and melodies of perpetual motion made for an exciting performance. Conducting the group was Reinbert de Leeuw, director of the Schoenberg Ensemble in Amsterdam and a familiar conductor and pianist in the US.

The showstopper was "Mysteries of the Macabre," the wild coloratura aria from Ligeti's opera, *Le Grand Macabre* (1978), arranged for chamber ensemble and performed brilliantly by soprano Barbara Hannigan. The opera is set in a surrealistic world with themes of mortality and depravity: the end is coming, or perhaps it's not. The soprano portrayed Gepopo, a male character who is chief of police. Wearing a shiny black wig, a short, tight black leather dress, high boots and a long black leather coat, Hannigan sputtered and sang a series of disconnected sentence fragments, words and sounds, accompanied by a similarly disjointed instrumental texture that was punctuated by occasional verbal outbursts from the ensemble.

Providing a calm antidote to the previous piece's excesses was the *Hamburg Concerto* for solo horn and chamber orchestra, completed in 2002. Here Ligeti writes for an ensemble that includes two basset horns and four obbligato natural horns. The contrast between the solo horn, played for the most part on a contemporary instrument, and the four obbligato horns was striking: the natural horns (without valves), all in different keys, created an intonation that defied any known tuning. The result was a sense of unusual color, termed "weird" even by the composer. William Purvis, the soloist, led the group through a series of seven movements, many with contrasting dance rhythms and musical styles. Completing the program was Ligeti's classic work, *Aventures and Nouvelles Aventures I and II*, for three singers and seven instrumentalists (1965). As the composer explains, the piece uses an artificial language that conveys "ritualized human emotions... such as understanding and dissension, dominion and subjection, honesty and deceit," etc. There is no setting of a text, only particular groupings of

sounds. Barbara Hannigan, soprano, Katalin Károlyi, mezzo, and Omar Ebrahim, baritone, performed the vocal parts with drama, humor, and irony. The audience at Alice Tully Hall responded with tremendous enthusiasm to the entire concert.