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Collaborative Essay

Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre*

Arrangements for György Ligeti's first full-blown opera, initially to be an "Oedipus" opera directed by Göran Gentele, the director of the Stockholm opera, were made in 1965 as a follow-up to and development of Ligeti's *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*. However, it wasn't until 1978 that Ligeti's final project, *Le Grand Macabre*, graced the stage of Stockholm's Royal Opera after having undergone alterations, developments, changes, new conceptions, and delays, not the least of which was the death of Gentele in a car crash in the summer of 1972, shortly after he had been named director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. It was this unfortunate event that marked an almost complete reworking of the entire opera, and a switch from a relatively plot-less opera with nonsense syllables as text (like *Aventures*) to a less abstract and completely new musical-dramatic conception (Steinitz, 219-220).

Still contracted to compose for the Royal Swedish Opera, Ligeti met with Michael Meschke, director of the Stockholm Puppet Theater (with whom he wrote the libretto of *Le Grand Macabre*), the German stage designer Aliute Meczies, and the musicologist Ove Nordwall to essentially start from scratch. Having just seen Mauricio Kagel's *Staatstheater*, which impressed Ligeti with its revolutionary approach to gesture and instrumentation, he wanted to go in a new direction. Michel de Ghelderode's *La Ballade du Grand Macabre* stood out in his mind as a possible source for a libretto, and

inspiration also stemmed from literary giants like Kafka, Jarry, and Boris Vian, as well as the visual artists Breughel and Bosch. So was Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* born.

He described his concept as an anti-anti-opera. In an interview with Péter Várnai in *György Ligeti in Conversation*, he explained that the time of the anti-opera was over, and having already explored this idea in *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*, he wanted to write something that went beyond the contradiction of all traditional features of the genre and create a unique opera that squeezed "all the scraps of music history" into it. He likened the style and form of the work to a flea market where "there is everything there; a traditional closing passacaglia, symphonic intermezzi, overture, fanfare, but everything is strangely transformed. It is half real, half unreal, a disintegrating, disorderly world where everything is falling in, breaking up" (GLIC, p. 69). And indeed he not only squeezes the scraps of music history into *Le Grand Macabre* but manages to quote the cancan from Offenbach's *Orpheus*, Schumann's *Merry Peasant* (simultaneously as a matter of fact), Beethoven's *Eroica*, a distorted Greek Orthodox hymn, and genuine folk tunes, as well as nods to Bach, Mozart, Berlioz, Rameau, Verdi, Stravinsky, and even himself.

Dramatically speaking, the opera has a plot: the end of the world, but it is constructed of so much Dadaist absurdity, grotesque caricature, and frivolity that the music itself is really the glue that holds the work together in terms of structure and form. Ulrich Dibelius who wrote the program note for the ORF-Symphonie-Orchester's recording of *Le Grand Macabre* under the baton of Elgar Howarth (Ligeti's favorite interpreter) suggests that the piece could even possibly be heard as "a purely musical succession of a 1st movement (exposition), a scherzo and an extended finale with a recapitulation epilog." (*Le Grand Macabre* program note, p. 10) The return of the

opening fanfare of car horns in various intermezzi, and recurring musical ideas related with characters and situations create relationships that lend musical coherence to the work.

Perhaps the overarching moral to this opera Ligeti wanted to communicate is two-fold. First, humankind is simultaneously fearful of and consequently intentionally oblivious to an end-of-the-world scenario. Second, we are consistently numbing ourselves with the likes of booze, sex, and anything else that can distract us from our own personal mortality. Ligeti is poking fun at the same death that stared him square in the face as a young man in a Jewish labor camp during the Second World War. Having lost everyone in his immediate family to the Holocaust except for his mother, a doctor, Ligeti chose to respond with humor and sarcasm rather than horror and seriousness.

In the beginning of the opera, after an “overture” of 12 car-horns played by three players with a horn for each hand and foot, *Le Grand Macabre* opens with a corpulent and consistently drunk Piet the Pot (a professional wine-taster) staggering around the countryside of Breughelland which consists of a decaying and overgrown graveyard and a burial chamber. The first words that come out of Piet’s mouth are “Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in...” and he takes a swig of wine. Ligeti’s extremely strange start followed by a drunkard singing the dies irae interspersed with hiccups are the first of many moments in the opera which create an uneasiness in the listener. Should we laugh, or not?

Shortly thereafter two insatiable lovers, Amando and Amanda, sung by a mezzo and a soprano, enter in a rapturous and ecstatic duet, voices sensuously entwined as if they were limbs. Everything about their singing is suggestive; notes climbing

successively higher, breathlessly exchanged, panting, and with unmistakable metaphors such as “like a long bow, tightly spanned, trembling, trembling, trembling, (multiple times on ascending staccato sextuplets). Oh! Here in my hand I languish blissful.” If this kind of shameless display of eroticism makes us a little uncomfortable, Ligeti provides comic relief with Piet’s peeping-Tom curiosity.

The lovers and Piet the Pot, who is understandably mesmerized, are blissfully unaware of the fact that Death himself has just appeared from the burial chamber. Practically joining in the love-duet Nekrotzar (Death) sings “Perish!” a high G in falsetto through a megaphone as the two are reaching a climax, vocally speaking. Piet’s relative oblivion and captivation infuriates Nekrotzar who screams “lecherous worm!” which stops everyone dead in their tracks. Amando strikes Piet with his dagger having thought him the perpetrator, Piet begs forgiveness and explains the voice was not his but rather “came from above”, the lovers decide they’d better find a more private place for their coupling, Piet cowers in a drunken stupor before the unrecognized Nekrotzar who is finally able to announce the apocalypse. The end of time is pronounced during 16 measures of a repeated C as an off-stage choir of spirits sings of the impending destruction in a completely different tempo. The irony and uncountable double- or multi-entendres of the first twenty minutes of the opera certainly make us laugh at the idea of death, much like we do in Monty Python’s *The Meaning of Life*, or at least make us raise our eyebrows.

Upon describing Nekrotzar’s entrance Ligeti writes, “Nekrotzar appears suddenly from the tomb. He is very tall and thin and should give the impression of being larger than life; is he Death or just a charlatan?” This is the question that remains essentially

unanswered at the end of the opera, and quite possibly is Ligeti's main point. Whether he is either is not important. Does it make any difference to us here and now?

The basic premise of *Le Grand Macabre* is exactly this: that a grim-reaper-like character arrives and announces the end of the world and the end of humanity. Subsequently, more and more apocalyptic signs appear, including a comet headed for the planet, and in the end it doesn't happen, or if it did, nothing substantially noticeable changed. Rather, Breughelland remains the same; even the thought-deceased oversexed dominatrix wife of Astramadors, Mescalina is resurrected. Before the *ora mortuorum* the still-drunk Piet, Astramadors, and Prince Go-Go carry the completely inebriated grand macabre, Nekrotzar, to his steed (Go-Go's rocking horse) and hand him his scythe and trumpet, Nekrotzar pronounces that at the stroke of midnight all shall come to an end, and subsequently falls off the rocking horse, too drunk to stay on it. This is followed by an intermezzo which Ligeti calls "the terrible, imaginary Last Judgment" and suddenly the curtain rises to the same setting of Breughelland as the first scene. Drunken Piet and Astramadors exchange condolences on their mutual recent passing, as they float above the stage in a dream-like state. Nekrotzar awakens disheveled with a hangover, spots Prince Go-Go and says, "Shit! Your Highness still alive? Have I not just laid to waste to the entire god-damned world? My scythe! My trumpet! Horse! Comet!" Three stooge-like characters enter the stage and try to pry Mescalina (who earlier in the opera was excessively sexually ravaged by the Macabre himself) from the overwhelmed Nekrotzar. One slap-stick event after another occurs, they all realize that because they are thirsty they must be alive, Nekrotzar disappears into thin air, and Piet posits, "Was he death incarnate? Or just sheer... Yes? What is asked remains unanswered. Let's start up

boozing all over...” Finally, like all good operas, there is an ensemble finale in which the sextet of soloists proclaims the following; “Fear not to die, good people all! No one knows when his hour will fall. And when it comes, then let it be. . . Farewell, till then – Live merrily.” And this, somehow strangely fitting into the contorted passacaglia subject inspired by and borrowed from Beethoven’s *Eroica*.

Perhaps the desire to lighten up a scary topic stemmed from Ligeti’s youth. As a child, he was often afraid and so, to calm his fears he created imaginary worlds where he found relief from terror. Later as an adult Ligeti tells Vernai “one dimension of my music bears the imprint of a long time spent in the shadow of death both as an individual and as a member of a group. Not that it lends a tragic quality to my music, quite the opposite. Anyone who has been through horrifying experiences is not likely to create terrifying works of art in all seriousness. He is more likely to alienate (others)” (Whittall, 382). Poking fun at death, and in such a ridiculous way, the adult Ligeti created another imaginary world, Breughelland, where he could thumb his nose at the character-types and institutions that caused him such terror, and expose the idea of death in a lighter atmosphere, and thus relegate the fear and trembling to a comical landscape.

Directly related with his own personal experiences growing up in Europe during the first half of the 20th century, Ligeti named the Chief of the Secret Police in *Le Grand Macabre* the Gepopo, after a combination of the Gestapo, the Soviet GPU (later the KGB), and the East German Geheimer Politische Polizei (Steinitz 226). Once again he turns something terrifying and tragic into something comic. This character, sung by a coloratura soprano, enters on roller-skates dressed as a bird and exchanges “pssts!” with

the off-stage chorus and later comes back as a spider on stilts. His/her code-like language is incomprehensible to anyone but her and comes across as absurd and pointless.

When speaking of another work of his that deals with death, his *Requiem*, Ligeti says, “There is all my own fear in it, my real life experiences, a lot of terrifying childhood fantasies, and yet the music resolves all that as well. As if to say, we do not have to live in fear; or you could put it like this, we are certainly going to die, but so long as we are alive we believe that we shall live for ever.” This is essentially the message of *Le Grand Macabre* which is apparent on many levels and stated quite unabashedly, as seen above, by Piet the Pot.

Yet, with all the scatological and sexual humor, the debauchery, drunkenness, and nonsense that takes place on stage, Ligeti’s intentions were not to have the whole opera one big farce. The balance between unreal and real, between things that really make us shudder for fear and things that make us guffaw and toss a dismissing hand, the balance between the sublime and the ridiculous and the tragic and comic was a balance that Ligeti truly desired to calibrate carefully. He disassociated himself with those performances that erred on the side of being too comic as easily as he did with performances like Peter Sellars’ in Salzburg which turned the whole plot into something way more serious than it ought to have been, setting Breughelland in a post-nuclear, sci-fi lunar landscape with little resemblance to Ligeti’s artistic and intentions. Granted, the opera is perhaps not the easiest to stage, as Steinitz aptly describes *Le Grand Macabre* as “a hyperactive mix veering between luminous sensuality and avant-garde mannerism” (Steinitz, 243).

Le Grand Macabre’s success was demonstrated by the fact that it received more than twenty different productions across Europe within the first twenty years after its

premiere. Perhaps this is testimony to the appeal of an opera that fearlessly looks death in the face and that also doesn't neatly tie everything up in the end. Ligeti wanted "the dramatic action and the music [to] be riskily bizarre, totally exaggerated, totally crazy." (Steinitz, 222) and that's exactly what we got: horror and comedy sharing a peaceful coexistence, and music to match. Thus we are left to exit the opera house shrugging, giggling, and maybe just a little more aware of our own mortality and impending death than we were when we entered. Perhaps Ligeti had a message for us that we should not take our selves too seriously, or too lightly.

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