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FINDING LIGETI

His earliest attempts led to defeat, but a decade ago Danny Driver learnt to embrace fully Ligeti's fiendish *Études* – first in concert and now on a new recording for Hyperion, he tells Harriet Smith

One of the highlights of my concert-going in those heady pre-lockdown days was a journey via the Caledonian Sleeper to Perth (Scotland) to hear Danny Driver play the complete Ligeti *Études*. That was in December 2019, a few weeks after he'd recorded them for Hyperion.

For Driver, the serious work on the pieces started around a decade ago when he was asked to participate in two concerts as part of a Ligeti series presented by soprano Claire Booth and director Netia Jones in the early days of Kings Place in London. 'One was dedicated to the early piano music (ie *Musica ricercata*) and one to the late (ie the *Études*). The concerts themselves involved video projections and an actor on stage and I found it a very stimulating way to start addressing this music seriously.'

Not that this was the first time Driver had approached the *Études*. 'I had tried to learn a couple of them a few years beforehand but my early attempts were a combination of wonderment, disbelief and frankly, defeat.' Driver adds, modestly: 'I was at the time more of a traditional classical pianist, and these pieces do call into question a lot of things about that kind of playing – not in the sense of revolutionising it, but in the sense of expanding one's approach and the way one deals with the piano in all directions.'

Although the *Études* are still relatively new (created 1985–2001), it's remarkable how fast they've entered the canon. The set consists of 18 pieces arranged into three books (the last incomplete), and if the 1995 recording by Pierre-Laurent Aimard of the 15 then extant pieces still stands out for its combination of fast fingers and even faster brain, it has now been joined by a couple of dozen others. And it's noticeable that the pieces have moved from the province of the contemporary specialist to that of pianists performing a broader range of repertoire.

Perhaps part of the appeal for pianists and pianophiles alike is that while following in the footsteps of great *étude* writers of the past (Chopin, Liszt, Debussy, Scriabin, Rachmaninov), what Ligeti frequently does is send up the inherent vacuousness of the genre. Anyone with any kind of musical pretensions will likely have experienced the mind-numbing tedium of technical studies, designed to improve technique but at the cost of all flights of imaginative fancy. Hanon and Czerny take a bow!

What makes Ligeti's *Études* even more startling is the fact that he wasn't predominantly a pianist. He began his studies late, and only renewed interest in the instrument after his 1973 appointment as composition teacher at the Hamburg Musikhochschule, where he had access to a piano. So it's little surprise that there's a hiatus between *Musica ricercata* (completed in 1953, the year he turned 30) and the later music.

So, I wonder, did this non-pianist composer (in the great scheme of things) actually compose at the keyboard? Driver is unequivocal: 'Yes. As Ligeti explains, "I lay my ten fingers on the keyboard and imagine music." He'd then go on to create a "feedback loop" between the idea in his head and the physical realisation of it. As he sat and tried these things out, obviously the original image changed and then changed again and this evolution was indeed dependent on him putting hands on keys. I think an important thing is the fact that much of his rediscovery of the piano was connected to playing chamber music with his students – a collective pleasurable activity. And that links with his notion that playing the piano should be physically enjoyable. That might seem rather incredible to anyone opening the scores of the *Études* for the first time, but in fact they are extraordinarily well written for the instrument, despite their great difficulties.'

Another important moment for Ligeti was when he discovered Nancarrow's player piano studies for the first time. 'It's surely no coincidence that five years