



Driver played two of Ligeti's Études at Wigmore Hall in London in October 2020 as part of BBC Radio 3's live lunchtime concert series with socially distanced audiences

later he wrote his first étude. The Nancarrow pieces pose important aesthetic questions, for example about the relationship between a machine (the player piano) and a human (the pianist) – about hearing music that is not really playable by a human, only by a machine. Equally important are the incredible energy and buzz that come from such complicated polymetric, polyrhythmic, polyphonic pieces. What's amazing about Ligeti's Études is the way he creates such an original and new sound world and attitude to the instrument within entirely traditional means – so I'm still just using two hands on the keyboard, I'm not preparing the piano, and yet the results are dazzlingly new.'

Is that newness intensified when they're performed with other repertoire? 'Well, I haven't done them as a complete cycle all that often, but for that Perth recital I added Bach's Partita No 1, and in earlier concerts I'd play books one and two interspersed with Debussy's *Images*. One of the interesting things about that process is that you can't always tell which composer is which – Debussy's "Mouvement", for instance, which ends so enigmatically at the extremes of the keyboard, is almost Ligeti-like, while the latter's jazz-infused "Arc-en-ciel" is Debussian. I think that kind of combination also helps an audience into Ligeti's world, especially if it's an unfamiliar one. I find listening to a single composer's music for an hour or more *can* be a wonderful experience, but even in the case of a composer such as Beethoven, of whom one never tires, it can also be daunting. That said, it's easier to play more Ligeti études than it is to play fewer – if you're just programming one or two you have less time to warm into their musical and aesthetic challenge. They need such intense concentration apart from the obvious technical demands.'

Of course, merely hearing the Études is only part of the thrill. To appreciate them more fully you really need to *see* them being

performed and also to understand at least a little behind their titles. And the Études would surely have been far less colourful affairs had Ligeti not had such an enquiring mind, referencing as they do a variety of African musics, Balinese gamelan, jazz, Bill Evans, Cuban music and salsa, not to mention the writings of Lewis Carroll and Jorge Luis Borges, the chaos theory of Edward Norton Lorenz and Benoit Mandelbrot's fractal geometry. He was also a formidable linguist, and frequently the work's titles have multiple meanings. To take just one: 'Fém', the title of the eighth étude, means 'metal' in Hungarian but also, as Driver points out, 'five' in Swedish (Ligeti had learnt the language while teaching in Stockholm), and so it's a perfect fit for this fifth-imbued étude.

As for the visual aspect, examples are many: the very first étude, 'Désordre', has the right hand playing only white keys and the left only black ones. In the third étude, 'Touches bloquées', keys are literally 'blocked' in order to create a stuttering effect, while the passage in which octaves go horribly wrong is described by Ligeti as being like clowns in a circus who are constantly messing up tricks that in fact they can do brilliantly. Driver adds: 'I think there are many kinds of piano music where being there and seeing it happen add to the experience. Not just because you're in a concert hall with other people gathered together to share an experience but also because of the visual aspect. The feeling of acoustic space is important too – I think recordings operate in a rather different way. But having said that, there's a danger of these études becoming mere spectacle: if they're presented as too much of a Herculean tour de force then there's a risk that we miss something that's unique to this composer as opposed to other heroic pianist-composers; what's important is conveying their emotional and aesthetic quality.'

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Recording the Études at St Silas the Martyr, north London, in October 2019

And that emotional gamut is a broad one. "Automne à Varsovie" (Autumn in Warsaw), which ends book one, is such a tragic piece, with its descending chromatic lines and references to a Romanian funeral lament combined with the prolation technique you find in Ockeghem's Masses. But there's also this sense of nostalgia within it and in the way it ends, with everything piling up until Ligeti literally breaks the music apart, so it collapses and destroys itself.'

One piece I find particularly enigmatic, I tell Driver, is the 18th, the Canon. 'Yes, that's an interesting one – it's the only example in the whole set where there's an exact repetition. So you have two pages of music, you play it once in a stuttering manner, then you repeat it, but this time playing it as fast as you can; and then there's the final slow section, but somehow it manages to feel open-ended and unresolved even though Ligeti finishes it with an A minor chord – one of the few traditional "tonal" moments in the entire set.'

This couldn't be in greater contrast with the dizzying technical demands of pieces such as 'Désordre' (Disorder) or the infamous 'L'escalier du diable' (The Devil's Staircase). Is there a risk of such music becoming merely superficially virtuosic? 'Well, in "Désordre" I think the thrill of the *accelerando* comes not from sheer speed itself but from the impression of the material, which spirals into chaotic fragmentation and ultimate disintegration. In the case of "L'escalier", it mustn't be taken too fast because one inspiration behind the étude was the experience of cycling up a hill in a storm, so there needs to be a feeling that you're working really hard but not really getting very far. And that kind of tension is, I think, ultimately more thrilling and more satisfying.'

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That sense of effort is foremost also in the 14th étude, 'Coloana infinită' (Infinite Column), whose original version even Ligeti decided was unplayable, and so he created a simpler – though that term is relative! – alternative. To my ears, the revised version seems more successful than the first one, published separately as Étude No 14a, precisely because it allows the pianist to make more sense of the light and shade of the immense textures (it was inspired by the gigantic column in Târgu Jiu, Romania, created by the sculptor Constantin Brâncuși to commemorate the Romanians lost in the First World War).