

‘The Highest Dynamic Level Attainable Unvoiced’: György Ligeti, Language, and the Theatre of the Absurd.

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Introduction

György Ligeti’s music is often understood in terms of the composer’s own inventions of genre. Categories such as the micropolyphonic works (for example, *Requiem*, *Lux Aeterna*, and *Atmosphères*), or the mechanical works (*Continuum*, *Poème Symphonique*, and some of the piano études), naturally form into sets. This article proposes a category to designate those works that reflect his lifelong interest in language.

Not only was he a polyglot, but, as a youth, the Hungarian-born composer invented his own language. This creation was the national language for a fictional land, ‘Kylwiria’, which he had also invented. He recalls writing ‘descriptions of the geological constitution of the mountains, deserts and rivers, also studies about the social systems, and [inventing] a thoroughly “logical” language, even working out the grammar’.¹ This project may have been a response to his childhood realization that other languages existed beyond his native Hungarian (Magyar).² As with many other childhood experiences, such as his influential dream of being caught in a cobweb, this interest in language was to shape Ligeti’s attitude towards musical composition and manifest itself in many contexts throughout his career.³ There exists a deep relationship in Ligeti’s music between lingual experimentation and the theatrical movement known as the Theatre of the Absurd, a relationship sustained throughout the composer’s lifetime. I shall use the term ‘lingual’ to denote any relation or reference to the phenomenon of human vernacular language. I intend to trace the composer’s expressions of this from his early *Artikulation* (1958), to its peak in

¹ Quoted in Richard Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 10.

² He came to this realization when he first heard Romanian policemen in the mainly Hungarian-speaking city Dicsőszentmárton. Steinitz, *György Ligeti*, 6.

³ See Wolfgang Marx, ‘Ligeti’s Musical Style as Expression of Trauma’, in Amy Bauer & Márton Kerékfy (eds), *György Ligeti’s Cultural Identities* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2018), 80–1.

Aventures (1962) and *Nouvelles aventures* (1962–5). I argue that the Theatre of the Absurd influences the latter two works. For the purposes of this discussion, it is useful to separate relevant works into three groups: (1) instrumental works that use articulation similar to that of language; (2) vocal pieces that incorporate a playful use of words in the text; and (3) the so-called ‘speech pieces’, both vocal and instrumental, that contain more direct metaphorical references to language. The criteria of these categorizations are based on the composer’s treatment of language, both real and imaginary. Although the first group must be a subgroup of the third, both mimicking rhetorical articulation in a similar way, it is also conceivably a group by itself, by virtue of precise articulation requirements.

An example of the first group is String Quartet no. 2. The second movement, not unlike the better-known micropolyphonic works, places much emphasis on textural qualities and is lacking in themes or motives. Detail is paid to articulated intricacies, directed to a high level of organization. For example, bars 31–2 of the second movement incorporate many different types of pizzicato in a very short space. The players must strive to achieve speed and precision here, demands which subtly mimic speech by using such intense articulation. The micropolyphonic movement is reminiscent of other works such as *Atmosphères*, or *Requiem*, but here devoid of their weighty density. Instead attention is focused on expressive detail. String Quartet no. 2 is precluded from the third group by virtue of it not being a ‘speech piece’: that is to say, these techniques are not a dominant force informing the work.

The Concerto for Cello and Orchestra (1966), in particular the second movement, is again composed without main melodic themes. The ‘whisper cadenza’, which concludes the work, is comprised of lingual gesticulations of expressionistic focus, which other micropolyphonic pieces tend not to exemplify.⁴ In this way, the ending echoes the vernacular style of *Artikulation*. Ligeti himself has described the concerto as ‘a type of *Aventures* without words—or with words that are “pronounced” by the cello’.⁵ A hocket passage in bar 63 of the second movement also relates to a similar passage in *Nouvelles aventures* (first movement, bars 28–9. See Example 1) and the overall form of the concerto is similar to the episodic construction of *Aventures*.

⁴ György Ligeti, *Konzert für Violoncello und Orchester* (Frankfurt am Mein: Litolf/Peters, 1966), 48.

⁵ Quoted in Marina Lobanova, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics* (Berlin: Ernst Kuhn Verlag, 2002), 140.

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Example 1. György Ligeti: *Nouvelles Aventures* © 1967 by Henry Litolff's Verlag. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission of Peters Edition Limited, London.

3
4

27 **28** ("Hoquetus")

Subito:
Senza tempo:
Prestissimo possibile

* pp, staccatissimo, leggiero

ohne Zäsur
sofort weiter

* pp, staccatissimo, leggiero

* pp, staccatissimo, leggiero

GLOCKENSPIEL

ohne Zäsur
sofort weiter

* Sopr., Alt, Bar.: steif, wie Automaten. Die einzelnen Einsätze der verschiedenen Soli folgen einander so schnell wie möglich: als wäre eine Maschine aus den Fugen geraten. Die Stelle hat hektischen Charakter: eine periodische Sukzession ist nicht erwünscht; aperiodische Stockungen dürfen entstehen.

Sempre:
29
prestissimo possibile, con tutta la forza

ohne Zäsur
sofort weiter

** Sämtliche Instrumente: Die einzelnen Einsätze folgen einander so schnell wie möglich — als wäre eine Maschine aus den Fugen geraten. Die Stelle hat einen hektischen Charakter: eine periodische Sukzession ist nicht erwünscht; aperiodische Stockungen dürfen entstehen.

*** Vc, Cb: Nebengeräusche sind erwünscht!

**** Glockenspiel: falls das hohe d fehlt, eine Oktave tiefer spielen.

The second group of Ligeti's lingual works consists of those that make use of word games, and thus have a more linguistic discourse. The two other groups operate on a metaphorical plane, gesticulating in a conversational manner. However, the second group differs in that it is with language itself that the composer experiments. This group includes Ligeti's song settings of poems by Sándor Weöres (1913–89) and his Hungarian folk settings *Mátraszentimrei Dalok* (1955), in which the text generates a strongly accented rhythmic pulse.

The Weöres settings were a life-spanning corpus, dating from 1946 until 2000. The second of the 'Two Canons' (*Két Kánon*), *Pletykázó Asszonyok* (composed in 1952, later coupled with the earlier canon by his publisher), gives us perhaps the first instance of Ligeti's intense focus on language, and may even be considered a stylistic precursor to the micropolyphonic works. The setting of *Éjszaka-Reggel* (1955) ('Night-Morning'), uses ample semantically informed plays on words in its second movement, from ticking alarm bells to a cock's crowing.⁶ After a 30-year hiatus the composer returned to setting his countryman's work once again with the three *Magyar Etüdök* (1985) ('Hungarian Studies').

These poems of Weöres are used more as a raw material for a set of rigorous choral studies, the composer himself regarding them as 'extremely constructivist works'.⁷ A further long hiatus separates the choral études from the last setting, *Síppal, Dobbal, Nádihegedüvel* (2000) ('With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles'), a more complex work that uses nonsense words that seamlessly blend in and out of real semantic Magyar. Ligeti here reflects what he himself described as Weöres' exploitation of the 'semantic possibilities and impossibilities of the Hungarian language'.⁸

Perhaps the best-known example is to be found in the *Nonsense Madrigals* (1988–93). This cycle of six songs employs texts by William Brighty Rands in the first and second song and Heinrich Hoffmann in the fourth, while others are taken from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (nos. 1, 5, & 6). The text of the third song is simply formed from the English alphabet.

⁶ For more on the context of how Ligeti set this Magyar poem see Amy Bauer, 'Singing Wolves and Dreaming Apples: Cosmopolitan Imagination in Ligeti's Weöres Songs', *Ars Lyrica*, 21 (2012), 1–39: 18.

⁷ György Ligeti, *Ligeti: A Cappella Vocal Works*, performed by London Sinfonietta Voices, Sony (1997), (CD) SK 62305, 01-062305-10.

⁸ Quoted in Ildikó Mándi-Fazekas & Tiborc Fazekas, 'Magicians of Sound—Seeking Ligeti's Inspiration in the Poetry of Sándor Weöres', in Louise Duchesneau & Wolfgang Marx (eds), *György Ligeti: Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), 53–68: 62.

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Text is not the paramount focus of the *Nonsense Madrigals*; what is more important is how phonemes act as building blocks of sound. This work thus demotes the status of referents of its language. The final piece provides an example. Added in 1993, 'A Long Sad Tale' borrows from Carroll's *Doublets* (1879),⁹ incorporating its word games, some of which were subsequently utilized by visual artist Maurits Cornelis Escher, another inspiration for Ligeti.¹⁰ This short song cycle exemplifies not only Ligeti's virtuosity of linguistic playfulness, but also the virtuosity necessary to write nonsense verse as is illustrated further in works like *Aventures* and *Nouvelles aventures*. As Martin Esslin—the critic who coined the term 'the Theatre of the Absurd'—observes, 'There is an immense difference between artistically and dramatically valid nonsense and just nonsense this is an important difference regarding philosophical ramifications in interpreting some of the relevant works'.¹¹

The third and final group are the so-called 'speech pieces', upon which the rest of this paper will focus. These works aim to mimic language itself and share the property of non-semantic texts, the chief works of which are *Artikulation*, *Aventures*, and *Nouvelles aventures*.

The development of imaginary speech: *Artikulation*

Artikulation was composed in early 1958 in Cologne, Germany, and premiered on 25 March of that year. It is one of many electronic pieces comprised of a synthesis of speech, which originated at the WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk) radio station's studio for electronic music, built in 1951. *Artikulation* is contextually related to Mauricio Kagel's *Angrama* (1957–8), Luciano Berio's *Thema: Omaggio a Joyce* (1958), and Stockhausen's *Kontakte* (1958–60), all of which have associations with the Cologne studio.

The compositional process of *Artikulation* consisted of an organizational treatment of three elemental ingredients, the first being sine tones. These are pitched ranging from 16 Hz to 16,000 Hz, roughly corresponding to the audible extremes of the human ear. Rarely appearing unaltered, they are generally layered to form 'tone mixtures'. The second ingredient is the 'impulse'. These are sudden bursts of noise, with a sharp

⁹ Lewis Carroll, *Doublets: A Word-Puzzle* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1879).

¹⁰ For example, by changing one letter of each word in series, one arrives at the antonym of the first word. Thus, 'head, heal, teal, tell, tall, tail' and, 'witch, winch, wench, tench, tenth, tents, tints, tilts, tills, fills, falls, fails, fairs, fairy!' This technique is borrowed by Escher in his *Metamorphose* (1939–40, 1967–8) where fish turn into birds and back again, through many tiny mutations and repetitions. See also Constantin Floros, *György Ligeti: Beyond Avant-Garde and Postmodernism* (Frankfurt am Main: Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2014), 22.

¹¹ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1962), 307.

attack, followed by a gradual fade-out. The third ingredient is white noise. Ligeti presented this as a stagnant sound, which he generally fashioned with a blunt attack and slow fade-out. Both impulses and noise are sometimes filtered in the piece. After these sounds were transferred onto tape, their pitches were transposed by changing the tape speed, which in the Cologne studio was standardized at 30 inches per second (76.2 cm/sec). Ligeti's approach to his process was from the outset one based upon a grammatical understanding of a supposed language, chiefly by the method of ontological organization.

The composer left himself a set of 42 sound materials stored on tape cuttings. He then devised a type of mail-box sorting system to organize them. The categories of the various boxes of tape cuttings were differentiated according to pitch distribution, duration relations, intensity relations, or a combination of these. After sticking them together, Ligeti had ten pieces of tape which he referred to as 'texts'. Each had several defining characteristics: for example, a 'dry' tape consisted of non-reverberating sounds; a corresponding 'wet' one consisted of its opposite. Many sounds on each tape had already been associated by the composer with sonorities such as barking, coughing, and sneezing, among others. The 'texts' were spliced into 'words' and reorganized by means of the same ontological system, a collection of boxes modelled on a mail-sorting office. These were understood to be four constructed 'languages', each of whose tape was one kilometre long. These each underwent the same organizational treatment once again, being broken into 'sentences' (some of which were retrograded or inverted). The resulting pieces of tape make up the four tracks to the less than four-minute long *Artikulation*. Thus, the composer had created not one, but four distinct 'languages', all devoid of referents.¹²

Two further rules which Ligeti insisted upon were not to discard sounds and a uniformity of distribution. The latter was executed so that the lengths of tape were inverse to the amount of them. For example, for each single piece of tape of 150 cm in length, there were to be a corresponding 150 pieces of 1 cm each. His method was therefore both aleatoric, due to its inclusion of chance-determined methods of composition, and quasi-serialist due to its highly ordered organization. It typifies the composer's characteristic rejection of dogmatic serialism alongside his simultaneous acceptance of its methodology regarding the ordering of musical raw material.

The resulting work contains monologues, dialogues, and triologues, in addition to question/answer style forms, and conversational breaks—in short, it is a 'pseudo-

¹² Rainer Wehinger, *Ligeti Artikulation, Electronic Music, An Aural Score by Rainer Wehinger* (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1970), 7–8.

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language, an imaginary language, which means nothing', to quote the composer.¹³ These slightly larger vernacular structures, like the primary sounds, are without a semantic meaning, and are used as basic building blocks to construct a discourse to which there are no referents. Nevertheless, it is superficially convincing in a vernacular manner, closely representing the natural agitation, interruption, and pitch intonation that we hear in ordinary conversation. Ligeti himself states that 'one of the considerations in [*Artikulation*] was that, formally speaking, music could be articulated in an analogous way to normal spoken prose',¹⁴ perhaps not unlike a West-African 'talking drum'.¹⁵ Together with *Aventures* and *Nouvelles aventures*, *Artikulation* is humorous and 'non-purist', incorporating many non-linguistic sounds, but employing them to express his created vernacular discourse. Ligeti explains that 'non-purist' includes:

Damp, viscous, spongy, fibrous, dry, brittle, granulous and compact materials ... imaginary buildings, labyrinths, inscriptions, texts, dialogues, insects - states, events, processes, blendings, transformations, catastrophes, disintegrations, disappearances, all these are elements of this non-purist music.¹⁶

In creating this brief piece, he managed to spawn several new languages. In the later pieces, however, Ligeti's playful approach to the subject deepened philosophically. Indeed, the composer himself described *Artikulation* as 'the first version of *Aventures*'.¹⁷ Before turning to *Aventures*, it is first necessary to provide some context.

Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd

The development of a lingual style can be seen as reaching its culmination in the later pieces, *Aventures* (1962) and *Nouvelles aventures* (1962–5). Despite conforming to the aforementioned characteristics of the lingual works, these two differ by virtue of their relationship to the theatrical movement known as the Theatre of the Absurd. This term relates to Albert Camus' vision of the human condition as absurd and links the artistic

¹³ György Ligeti interview with Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt: 'Music in the Technological Era: György Ligeti with Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, translated and annotated by Louise Duchesneau', in Bauer & Kerékfy (eds), *György Ligeti's Cultural Identities* (London: Routledge, 2008), 21–38: 133.

¹⁴ György Ligeti, Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel, *György Ligeti in Conversation with Péter Várnai, Josef Häusler, Claude Samuel and Himself* (London: Eulenburg, 1983), 37.

¹⁵ This is a hugely popular instrument found throughout Western Africa. Formed in an hourglass shape, each end has a skin, tied together with a series of chords, which are 'squeezed' by the upper arm, thus causing an inflection of tone. It is known variously as Dondo, Tamanin, Lunna, and Mbaggu, among other names.

¹⁶ Quoted in Wehinger, *Ligeti Artikulation*, 7–8.

¹⁷ Ligeti et al., *Ligeti in Conversation*, 45.

movement to post-war existential philosophy. As theatre, it brought together some literary tendencies for the first time. Existentialism was never solely confined to a single category of philosophy or literature, having adherents as disparate as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Heidegger, Sartre, and of course Camus.

Camus saw the individual as an isolated being, without reason for action, purpose for living, or any ties to an objective truth, whose every act was ultimately futile. In short, he viewed the human condition as absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* he defines it thus:

[I]n a universe divested of illusion and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.¹⁸

Ligeti, similarly, mentions taking refuge in his invented land of Kylwiria and its associated language as an escape from the terror of war during his childhood. He describes having 'lived in an imaginary world'.¹⁹ This sensibility of disconnectedness comes to the fore in the dramatic lingual pieces *Aventures* and *Nouvelle Aventures*.

The Theatre of the Absurd echoes this philosophy in a manner different to both the philosophical and fictional writings of Sartre and Camus. Where the two French philosophers describe the condition of absurdity and angst within the parameters of a world of absolutes, the most prominent absurdist dramatists Eugène Ionesco (1909–94) and Samuel Beckett (1906–89) compromised conventional theatrical form itself to communicate the same message: that of meaninglessness. We shall see that Ligeti employs similar strategies to communicate the same message. The human being is seen as one conditioned by language itself. The Theatre of the Absurd is post-dramatic; that is to say, it lacks plot, truth, absolute language, or strong characters. Its centre is a situation in flux rather than a linear drama. All the elements of existential absurdity are manifest in the actions and dialogue of its players. They take over form, rather than comprise the content of it, as in the case of Sartre's and Camus' exposition. It is situational, non-progressive, and non-teleological. As Martin Esslin explains:

[T]he Theatre of the Absurd is not concerned with conveying information or presenting the problems or destinies of characters that exist outside the author's inner world, as it does not expound a thesis or debate ideological propositions, it is not concerned with the representation of events, the narration of the fate or the adventures of characters, but instead with the presentation of one individual's basic situation.²⁰

¹⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays* (Hammersworth: Penguin, 1975), 13.

¹⁹ Ligeti et al., *Ligeti in Conversation*, 47.

²⁰ Esslin, *Theatre*, 293.

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This article does not serve to claim a direct intention on the part of the composer. Such polemics contradict the paradigm of the intentional fallacy.²¹ Yet, the relationship between how Ligeti utilizes language and the methods of the absurdist dramatists is so close (as we shall see) that there is a temptation to leap to a conclusion of intentionality. Unfortunately, despite the existence of much background, commentary, and interviews, we do not find such intentionality explicitly stated by the composer. Nevertheless, it is undeniably a useful context and relationship in which to view these works.

Manifestations

The idea behind the composition of *Aventures* was to create an imaginary theatre or opera, stemming from the fictional Kylwiria.²² It comprises a balance between the two extremes of a complete dismantling of, and subordination to the traditional operatic form. The baritone solo in *Aventures* is an obvious assault on the operatic aria as a discourse of emotional expression (Example 2). We also see a mock-dramatic two-bar passage entitled 'La Serenata' (*Aventures*, bars 56–7). This is not to say that these pieces are opera. Rather, they are closer to being post-operatic theatre, comprised of fragmented residues of musical drama. The phonemes in the singers' parts are both the text and the raw material for musical composition. The text is written using the International Phonetic Alphabet, so sounds from any language may be presented but without specific semantic association. In terms of semantics, emotion, and drama, all that happens on Ligeti's stage is imaginary. The three roles—performed by soprano, alto, and baritone—are presented without personal characteristics, but their distinctive roles are discernible through the interrelationships and communications between them. Thus, the philosophical model stems from certain manifestations which relate to these pieces in four ways: circular and episodic form; interchangeability; the theme of isolation; and the devaluation of language.

²¹ See W. K. Wimsatt & M. C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *The Sewanee Review*, 54/3 (Autumn 1946), 468–88.

²² Ligeti et al., *Ligeti in Conversation*, 114.

Example 2. György Ligeti: *Aventures* © 1967 by Henry Litolf's Verlag. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission of Peters Edition Limited, London.

48

ca. 35"

B (plötzlich erstarrt...)

Cemb (subito) *pp* klingen lassen

Pf (Ped)

ZUM PUBLIKUM:

mf (mit der Hand vor dem Mund) *ff* *subite* *km. 22* (Hand weg)

delicissimo, tenuto *fff* *subit.* *ff* (stet. a. r. a.)... (kl. artikulierend, kri. glissando!)

ppp (grosse theatrale geste... einriten!) *fff* (sinnlose*)

B *poco cel.* *accel.* *ppp* *ff* *ff* *ff tenuto* *schleun. allargando...* **Grandioso*

ti... pe... la... ta be! *ti... pe... a... a...*

Cor *senza sord.* *estrem.* *ff*

Pf (Ped)

* so laut, wie es mit Kopfstimme nur möglich ist.

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47 Senza tempo, 30-35"

Solo, molto energico: die vorherige „Conversation“ plötzlich abbrechend, wie von zussen kommend und eine wichtige Botschaft bringend. Sehr erregt, mit Elan, hastend, ausser Atem.

ZUM PUBLIKUM: eroico fff

?ha! the! my? no da!

Prestissimo capriccioso, staccatissimo

ff ppp sff ppp sff ppp sff ppp

aggressivo ff

?e! Compadre robotato del papa Ci! damala? thaj?

(übertrieben klar artikulieren, doch nicht auf Kosten der Geschwindigkeit)

Cemb *ff (subito) klingen lassen*

(Vc, Cb: via sord.)

Pf *sehr hart und kurz sfff (subito)*

Ped (tenos), bleibt bis zum Takt 49 niedergedrückt

senza Ped.

dolcissimo, tenuto

pp (Kopfstimme) mit verklärtem Ausdruck

na hi

molto energico, aggressivo subito sfff

dha!!

(die gewählte Tonhöhe halten, kein gliss.)

ppp

so schnell wie möglich

mit verstopfter Nase poco allargando

pp

megegene megegene (Silbenzahl ad lib.)

staccato

baeae die ege

(misstrauisch, zutiefst angeekelt)

ZUM CEMBALISTEN: *drohend sfff*

kkk!!

(Cembalo folgt sofort!)

Pf (Ped)

1) Circular and episodic form

Both *Aventures* and *Nouvelles aventures* are episodic in construction, each section beginning and ending arbitrarily, in a manner analogous to the realities of natural conversation. The instrumental parts play mainly cluster forms in the earlier piece and are given more demanding roles in the latter. More importantly, both lack an overall coherency of structure, a rarity for Ligeti. From a literary perspective, we are shown a world without progress, change or development. There only exists situationality, with the individual human experience involuntarily centred within that. The emotional situation takes precedence over development of character in *Aventures* and *Nouvelles aventures*, making the interrelationships between the characters paramount.

The absurdist dramas are often structured in episodic form, within a circular context. Plays such as Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna* (first performed 1950) and *The Lesson* (1951) end the very same way as they begin: the former with Mrs. Smith reciting the opening passage about their pedestrian lifestyle; and the latter with the maid not only opening the door to another student to be murdered, but using the text verbatim. Beckett's *Act without Words II* (late 1950s) presents two identical revolutions of the movements of two men, one in turn carrying the other while he sleeps in a large sack. As soon as the procedure is about to be repeated yet again, the play suddenly ends. His better-known *Play* (1963) contains a complete repeat of the text after which it concludes with the opening three texts recited by the three characters at once. None of the aforementioned plays (with the partial exception of *Play*) employs a traditional plot, characterizations, conclusion, or exposition. Ligeti's 'anti-anti-opera' (à la Kagel) does not precisely employ such circular structure, but nevertheless closes leaving its audience equally unsatisfied.²³ Without any balance between tension and resolution, *Aventures* ends suddenly in the most unsuspected of moments—during an alto solo. From the outset of this passage, the other singers, instrumentalists, and conductor are instructed not to move for the remainder of the performance. The alto subsequently follows the same instruction for a lengthy 15 to 20 seconds of silence to conclude the piece.

²³ Ligeti's works discussed here anticipate Mauricio Kagel's *Staatstheater* (1970), a similarly absurd work, which puts opera itself as its own subject matter. The absurdist style later became known as 'anti-opera', and many operas have been retrogressively viewed so, such as Shostakovich's *The Nose* (1929), for example. Marina Frolova-Walker, 'Russian opera: between modernism and romanticism', in Mervyn Cooke (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 181–96: 195–6, & Robert Adlington, 'Music theatre since the 1960s', in Mervyn Cooke (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 225–43: 241.

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Ligeti intuited that 11 to 12 minutes would come close to exhausting the capacity of an audience's concentration, and so the piece concludes arbitrarily at this point. Similarly to many of his other works, a period of silence is directed in the score.²⁴ Like *The Bald Prima Donna*, in which the ending exposes the height of hostility among those concerned, *Nouvelles aventures* finishes with a demand of the 'highest dynamic level attainable unvoiced', before cutting off the performance 'as though torn off'.²⁵ This last direction is one used already in the earlier piece (*Aventures*, bar 18), and again later in *Ramifications* (1968–9). The lack of resolution echoes that of Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), a novel which ends without any resolution of the struggles and frustrations endured by Kafka's hero, K. Similarly, *Waiting for Godot* ends with the characters expressing sentiments of futility in the face of their eternally frozen situation:

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?
Estragon: Yes, let's go
[They do not move]²⁶

Beckett's *Endgame* uses an equivalent immobility in the character of Hamm (an elderly man in poor health, confined to a wheelchair), transferred to Clov (his able-bodied counterpart), who throughout the play has talked about and planned for leaving.²⁷ He is directed to remain motionless, frozen in the frustrating situation, as he metaphorically has been throughout the play.²⁸ Ligeti's seven instrumentalists, in addition to the baritone, soprano, and conductor, are to remain 'regungslos' (unmoving/motionless) during the alto solo that concludes *Aventures*.²⁹

2) Interchangeability

The Theatre of the Absurd is built upon a situational drama, rather than a teleological one, its form being disassembled, with remaining elements left to interact. Independent of an outside context (because in existential terms, any meta-context is merely void), the structure must be something closer to a self-regulating tessellation. Esslin uses Beckett's drama as an example:

²⁴ See Ligeti et al., *Ligeti in Conversation*, 44.

²⁵ György Ligeti, *Nouvelles Aventures für drei Sänger und sieben Instrumentalisten: for three singers and seven instrumentalists* (Frankfurt am Mein: Henry Litolff's Verlag, 1966), 29.

²⁶ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 87.

²⁷ Beckett, *Complete Works*, 109–10.

²⁸ Beckett, *Complete Works*, 133: '...he halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, until the end...'

²⁹ György Ligeti, *Aventures für drei Sänger und sieben Instrumentalisten* (Frankfurt: Henry Litolff's Verlag, 1962), 29.

Beckett's plays ... confront their audience with an organised structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality, rather like the different themes in a symphony, which gain meaning from simultaneous interaction.³⁰

There is in Beckett's drama as well as Ionesco's a consistent and fluid series of new perspectives on a static situation. Frictions between the situational elements constitute a micro-structure within the play. Although *Aventures* may stylistically be the furthest from Ligeti's static forms, this is exactly how he constructed the emotional domain of the music:

I put together a kind of 'scenario' by joining by areas of emotions; humour, ghostly-horror, sentimental, mystical-funeral, and erotic. All five areas or processes are present, all through the music, and they switch from one to the other so abruptly that there is a virtual simultaneity. Each of the three singers plays five roles at the same time.³¹

Formally, the emotional content appears in these five threads, constantly in flux, weaving in and out of each other, causing a different interaction at each moment in a contrapuntal style. Marina Lobanova has identified fifteen roles within the five areas of emotion,³² whereas Stefan Beyst has identified only two groups of emotion: irony and aggression.³³ Furthermore, Amy Bauer has dealt with the phonemes in great detail, regarding these five strophes.³⁴ The liveliest sections in *Aventures* are the 'conversation' and the final scene. The former episode begins with the direction that 'all the expressive characters should be constantly changed...gestures that result naturally should be slightly exaggerated...'.³⁵ The following bars are directed thus:

- 39: Soprano: stammering, resigned.
Alto: rather astonished, quasi on the defensive.
Baritone: overbearing-disparaging, rather ingratiating, stammering.
- 40: Soprano: rather astonished, ironic, disapprovingly.
Alto: elegant to mannered.
Baritone: rather astonished.
- 41: Soprano: overbearing-disparaging, melancholy, sobbing.
Alto: overbearing-censorious, pompously crushing.

³⁰ Esslin, *Theatre*, 33.

³¹ Ligeti et al., *Ligeti in Conversation*, 45.

³² Lobanova, *György Ligeti: Style, Ideas, Poetics*, 102–3.

³³ Stefan Beyst, 'György Ligeti's *Aventures*: Ode to the Discrepancy Between Word and Deed' (January, 2003). <http://d-sites.net/english/ligeti.htm>

³⁴ Amy Bauer, *Ligeti's Laments: Nostalgia, Exoticism, and the Absolute* (New York: Ashgate, 2011), 46–52.

³⁵ Ligeti, *Aventures*, 9.

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Baritone: with disgust, melancholy-sobbing, very slightly, overbearing-censorious.

- 42: Soprano: ironic sobbing, slightly.
Alto: ironic, chattering, stammering.
Baritone: just a breath, elegant to mannered.
- 43: Soprano: quasi on the defensive, chattering, elegant to mannered.
Alto: overbearing-disparaging, ironic sobbing.
Baritone: ironic sobbing.³⁶

The rapid assorted form echoes Beckett's fondness for exhausting combinations. Through relativism arises meaninglessness, a rejection of epistemological absolutes and hard fact. Beckett knits together these themes with a minimalist technique in his novel *Watt* (1953):

And the poor lousy old earth, my earth and my fathers' and my mothers' and my fathers' fathers' and my mothers' mothers' and my fathers' mothers' and my mothers' fathers' and my fathers' mothers' fathers' and my mothers' fathers' mothers' ...³⁷

He not only employs this technique in an immediate scale, but also in overall form. *Quad*, a play whose only sounds are that of a percussionist, is formed entirely around the idea of exhausting combinations: four actors are directed to walk the perimeters and the diagonals of two concentric squares, until all admixtures have been exhausted. Bars 12–14 of *Aventures* also employ this type of minimalist, theatrical technique. Both the soprano and alto are directed to clear the throat, laugh, weep, moan, groan and rattle the throat, in differing orders, as two incongruous forms of the same repertoire of emotion expressed through non-purist sound. (Fig. 3).

³⁶ Ligeti, *Aventures*, 9–13.

³⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Pan Books, 1976), 45. For a further example see Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable* (London: Pan Books, 1994), 69–74.

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* In der angegebenen Zeitdauer werden die folgenden Laute, deren Länge dem Abstand zwischen den einzelnen Ziffern entspricht, untergebracht: 1: Räuspern, 2: Lachen, 3: Weinen, 4: Ächzen, 5: Stöhnen, 6: Röcheln. Dieser Lautkomplex wird in einem Atemzug vorgetragen, und zwar so, dass die einzelnen Laute nur flüchtig intoniert und etwas stillisiert, und die Gemütszustände angedeutet werden. Alles sehr diskret, kaum hörbar, aber mit Ausdruck ausführen.

** Wie *, doch mit dem Unterschied, dass die Reihenfolge der Laute geändert ist, und zwar: I: Weinen, II: Röcheln, III: Räuspern, IV: Ächzen, V: Lachen, VI: Stöhnen.

*** 7 und VIII bedeuten: sehr rasches, wiederholtes, keuchendes Ein- und Ausatmen während der angegebenen Zeitdauer (von 7 bzw. VIII bis zum Ende des Notenwertes) - usw. Dieses Atmen gleicht dem zu Beginn des Stückes, doch ist es rascher auszuführen.

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The absurdist dramatists interchange the actual characters themselves. Vladimir and Estragon, the heroes of *Waiting for Godot*, and Clov and Hamm in *Endgame*, each repeatedly exchange lines. Beckett's pairs are also interdependent: Clov repeatedly expresses a desire to leave—yet although having Hamm's permission, he does not. He is aware that the only action after leaving is suicide (a reference to Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*). Ionesco depicts the Smiths and the Martins as interchangeable also, due to the empty, shell-like nature of these characters, and their incapacity to feel and think.³⁸ His *The Lesson* employs a procedure of a gradual exchange in personality, status and power between a professor and his pupil.³⁹

Similarly, Ligeti's singers and instrumentalists exchange roles. The five strophes of emotion weaving together to create a 'virtual simultaneity' is not only confined to the singers.⁴⁰ At times, the instruments imitate the voices, and in doing so dissolve the barrier that exists between them in traditional operatic form. This leaks across into the discourse of the instrumentalists, through the use of 'non-purist' sounds and imaginary language. The horn player is directed to sing a separate line to what he/she plays (*Aventures*, bar 10 and *Nouvelle aventures*, movement I, bars 7–13) and strike the mouthpiece with 'a short, sharp blow with the hand', interconnecting with the singers' expletives (*Aventures*, bar 25). The flute must mimic the singers (*Aventures*, bar 29). Later we find a brief spell of communicable understanding between the baritone's 'profound understanding' and the frenzied activity of the percussionist (*Aventures*, bar 98). The virtuosity of the singers in *Aventures* is transferred to the instrumentalists in its companion piece.

These works must be considered the most vocally demanding works in Ligeti's output (far more than the *Nonsense Madrigals*, for example). The inverse of instrumental imitation can be found in the strongly rhythmical passage in *Aventures* (bars 49–88), the fourth episodic part of the nine that comprise the piece's structure, and in the 'hoquetus' section of *Nouvelles aventures* (Example 1). The singers here assume the role of instruments, being given very little in the way of theatrical or emotional directions. This interchangeability reflects the existential position of the human being as essentially isolated, dehumanized, and alienated. The being is merely an empty vessel into which any authority can insert meaning. In this particular philosophical context, lacking that authority, the constant exchanging within the functionary parts is arbitrary, but necessary to provide a structure within their resounding meaninglessness.

³⁸ Eugène Ionesco, 'The Tragedy of Language: How an English Primer became my first Play', *Tulane Drama Review* IV/3 (March 1960), 10–13: 13.

³⁹ Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinoceros, The Chairs, The Lesson* (London, Penguin, 2000), 182–3.

⁴⁰ Ligeti et al., *Ligeti in Conversation*, 45.

3) The theme of isolation

What all these characters have in common is a yearning for a world outside of their own one of frustration. Clov searches pathetically for distant life with his telescope, the pair who wait for Godot repeat the mantra of 'shall we go?' and Ligeti's vocalists desperately cry out to be understood by their audience. They all suffer the existential condition of alienation.

That the human individual is alone, lost, and bereft of the possibility of recovery or communication is directly related to the philosophy of Camus and Sartre, especially in their novels *The Outsider* (1942), and *The Age of Reason* (1945) respectively. What is perhaps Ionesco's best-known play, *Rhinoceros*, illustrates its protagonist Béranger attempting to change into a rhinoceros at the close of the play after he realizes that he is the last remaining human on earth. At first it is the rhinoceros who is the isolated beast, but as people increasingly incur rhinocerotitis (an epidemic disease which causes its victim to transform irreversibly into a rhinoceros), Béranger, in his alienated individuality, becomes the beast due to the change in conditions about him. At first he refuses to conform, but soon capitulates:

My skin is so slack. I can't stand this white hairy body. Oh I'd love to have a hard skin in that wonderful dull green colour ... now it's too late! Now I'm a monster, just a monster ... People who hang on to their individuality always come to a bad end!⁴¹

Ionesco's use of the rhinoceros to symbolize simplicity and strength, stems from witnessing his friends join the fascist Iron Guard in Romania during the 1930s.⁴² But individualism is not the only end of the paradigm that is ridiculed. Ionesco is illustrating the futility of both conformism and individuality. *Rhinoceros* is inversely parallel to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), in which Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a giant beetle without explanation. His parents socially ostracize him, not willing to accept him as their son. Like Béranger in a world of rhinoceros, Gregor Samsa is the only beetle in a world of people. Ionesco develops this theme in a description of *The Chairs*:

The subject of the play is not the message, nor the failures of life, nor the moral disaster of the two old people, but the chairs themselves; that is to say, the absence of people, the absence of the emperor, the absence of God ...⁴³

During the 'conversation' episode (A, 38–48), the three singers turn to each other, to the audience, and to themselves 'kontaktlos' (out of touch). Each returns from their

⁴¹ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 123–4.

⁴² Esslin, *Theatre*, 326.

⁴³ Quoted in Esslin, *Theatre*, 113–14.

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momentary isolation, and there then follows a murmur, stammer or chatter before they each re-engage with exaggerated confidence to address either another singer or the audience. In *Nouvelles aventures*, the singers are firstly directed to act 'as though turned to stone,' before 'bursting into the restrained silence', repeatedly being interrupted by the 'restrained silence' (2nd movement, bars 40 and 42). The silence here operates as the ultimate meaninglessness and void, frightening the singers, leaving them to stew in horror and hopelessness. The alto solo, which concludes the earlier piece, is directed thus:

From here [bar 114] to the end the alto expresses a gradually increasing anxiety and desperation; her questions go unanswered, she is completely alone. Her action creates the impression that it is getting gradually darker and colder.⁴⁴

The emotional level of the alto solo is one commencing 'espressivo, questioning, seductive, slightly hysterical; *pp* yet very intense', and gradually becoming more hysterical, more questioning, and 'with intensified anxiety', until the final emotional direction: 'with a great deal of suffering'.⁴⁵ This icy finish negates the momentum of wild humour that precedes it, leaving the audience in a cold and pessimistic atmosphere. The opposition of humour and the macabre is one which also can be seen in much of the absurdist dramatists' work. It is the ability to laugh bravely in the face of the absurdity and futility of the human condition, to celebrate its meaninglessness, which restores human dignity.

4) The devaluation of language

The lack of semantic texts in *Aventures* and *Nouvelles aventures* points to perhaps their closest link with the Theatre of the Absurd. Much of the language is formed simply from patterns, word games, nonsense, and cliché. There is no argumentative or discursive speech, therefore making language redundant.

One of the greatest revolutions in the history of linguistics was Ferdinand de Saussure's realization that there is absolutely no causal or semantic relationship between a signifier (a word) and its signified (its meaning).⁴⁶ In the context of absurd theatre and of Ligeti's relevant works, this relates to the vastness of difference between illocution (intended meaning) and perlocution (perceived meaning). Hence, both composer and the playwrights see the raw material of words as devoid of any

⁴⁴ Ligeti, *Aventures*, 33.

⁴⁵ Ligeti, *Aventures*, 33.

⁴⁶ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York, Columbia University Press, 2011), 67–70.

meaning. As Ionesco said, 'language must be made almost to explode, or to destroy itself in its inability to contain its meaning'.⁴⁷

Two identical conversations in *Rhinoceros* illustrate the universalism of language to have multiple and relative meanings.⁴⁸ The actions of Ionesco's fire chief in *The Bald Prima Donna* contradict his speech. After stating that he has no time to sit, but has time to remove his helmet, he immediately does the inverse. The narrative of *The Chairs* is one of inability to communicate. The old man, who feels himself incapable of making a speech, hires an orator who fails to speak at the end of the play. The conversion of the stage into a theatre reflects Ionesco's own frustration as a playwright for the same reason. Following Wittgenstein's conviction that the grammar of language has been confused with that of logic, Ionesco presents us with a well-respected 'logician' in the opening act of *Rhinoceros*. In a lesson in logic he gives the following as an example of a syllogism: 'All cats die. Socrates is dead. Therefore Socrates is a cat'.⁴⁹ The reversal of logic apparently by its very own rules, aside from lampooning the well-known syllogism 'All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore Socrates is mortal', exemplifies the criticism of the subjective nature of meaning in language and logic.

The associated frustration becomes prominent in the finale of *The Bald Prima Donna*, in which the Smiths and Martins move gradually closer together while shouting increasingly louder in a mixed variation of cliché. This episode is constructed from overused speech and assembled in a nonsensical manner, not unlike Ligeti's compositional method of *Artikulation*.

A hysteria of nonsense also surfaces in Ligeti's *Grosse Hysterische Szene des Soprans* (*Nouvelles aventures*, 2nd movement, bars 8–17). The soprano acts as though insane, briefly awakes from her madness only to return to it, and then suddenly calms herself, the same way Ionesco's subjects do during the closing lines of *The Bald Prima Donna*. Semantic subjectivity features too in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, novels that were favourites of Ligeti's throughout his life (and which, as mentioned, provided text for the last two *Nonsense Madrigals*). The following example betrays the dialectic of meaning and nonsense, objectivity and subjectivity:

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

⁴⁷ Quoted in Esslin, *Theatre*, 114.

⁴⁸ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 28–9.

⁴⁹ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 26.

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'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'⁵⁰

The condition of Alice's world as one of absolutes and objectivity is challenged here when she has been taken out of context, into a world of nonsense and absurdity. She finds herself within a dialectic of meaning and meaninglessness, a predicament where nonsense appears to be contagious and could dispel any order and rules that appear to exist. It is the Beckettian world where the characters are often on the threshold of realizing the truth of their conditioning, Vladimir realizes that there is somebody looking at him saying 'he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on'.⁵¹ As soon as he is about to emerge and face the truth of his absurd existence, Godot's messenger arrives and suddenly plunges him back into his situation of eternal waiting. Equally, when Ligeti's music begins to breathe, it is suddenly cut off, sometimes to resume but often not. The many pauses with which *Aventures* begins, leaving too few bars for the musical material to establish itself, and the interspersing of conflicting material (*Aventures*, bars 50 and 56–7) altogether display a similar construction of conflicting truths perennially in flux.

Ionesco, while learning English—a task that ultimately resulted in the creation of *The Bald Prima Donna*—reveals that he discovered an automatic language, spat out without any initial thought process.⁵² Words according to him, are 'empty, noisy shells without meaning'.⁵³ Thus, the play shows language to be disintegrating into a shower of clichés, with nonsense getting in the way. Many of Beckett's characters have the same problem with the incompetent nature of language. Clov claims that the words he uses are those that Hamm taught him, and that he wants to leave Hamm. Hamm responds by reminding him that the one thing which keeps Clov there is the dialogue—a self-referential reminder of the character's *raison d'être*.⁵⁴ The mysterious speaker in *The Unnameable* tells us that he shall never be silent, but nevertheless the words he uses are 'no words but the words of others'.⁵⁵ He has no capacity for original thought nor expression due to his consciousness being conditioned by the empty shells of language. The three characters in *Play* open the first act speaking simultaneously trapped within huge urns, and continue at a rapidly paced drone throughout, breaking down pitch inflections and the natural metre of language itself.

⁵⁰ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass* (New York: Gilberton Co., 1968), 222.

⁵¹ Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 83.

⁵² Ionesco, 'The Tragedy of Language', 10.

⁵³ Ionesco, 'The Tragedy of Language', 12.

⁵⁴ Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 120–1.

⁵⁵ Beckett, Molloy, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable*, 316.

The task of communicating the absurdity of existence through language itself is redundant, and so the absurdist dramatists instead choose to present only the results of absurdity—that is, through the devaluation of language. Ionesco’s example in *The Lesson* has the professor giving a lesson in which he shows how the Romantic language group have common stems of words, but all are pronounced slightly differently. But as he gives examples, he makes no differentiation.

In a world without absolutes, people themselves have no identity. Ligeti’s subjects are trapped in an equivalent world. Their unpredictable hysteria, gesticulations, and exorbitant emotions show them to be sentient, but desperately trying to communicate with their audience who only laugh back. But as wit falls prey to the law of diminishing return, each successive hearing of *Aventures* becomes less amusing and increasingly dark. The sense of ensnarement extends to the instruments too, in that the tonal coherence of the piece is virtually nil. The actions of the musicians are presented as futile.

Conclusion

This collection of pieces cannot be demarcated too precisely. In fact, some elude strict ‘lingual’ categorization. For example, String Quartet no. 2 uses a lingual form only in part. Notwithstanding this, the three pieces discussed in this paper stand to be grouped—and hence understood—as lingual works, for their primary material and drive is inextricably linked to this theme, and that of the Theatre of the Absurd. In what Richard Toop has called a ‘balancing act between the sublime and the ridiculous’, Ligeti has, like Ionesco and Beckett, taken meaninglessness as a basis for constructing an art without meaning, nor need for meaning.⁵⁶ With the humour removed (with successive hearings, for example), *Aventures* and *Nouvelles aventures* become darkly macabre works, thus plunging their audience back into isolation, making humour merely another form of blindfold to the ultimate existential issues.

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⁵⁶ Toop, *Ligeti*, 97.