

LE GRAND MACABRE AT THE CROSSROADS OF TWO EXILES

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Abstract. *The meeting between Hungarian composer Györgi Ligeti and Lithuanian scenographer Aliute Mecys was a unique encounter between two artists, each marked by childhood traumas and identity problems. These sublimated traumas are reflected in Le Grand Macabre, an opera based on a text by Michel de Ghelderode that was proposed to Ligeti by Aliute Mecys. This “anti-anti-opera”, in the words of Ligeti, is a eulogy for two passionate beings, devoted mainly to carnal love. Could it be considered as an autobiographical score, as the essence of their shared intimate life that lasted longer than the ten years during which the opera was composed? Built to oppose two forms of aesthetics – the noble opera and the puppet show – it embodies both the tragicomic of the Last Judgment, an end of the world that does not really take place, and absolute Love, the triumph of Eros. Ligeti abandons here the sonoric approach to musical material that was so important in his most innovative works and adopts the style of Aliute Mecys (who was a kind of modern Hieronymus Bosch) by letting his musical language burst into a multitude of references and subversions. This paper will try to answer the question of how a joint work may reflect the fusion and sublimation of personal trauma within a passionate relationship.*

INTRODUCTION

The more I advanced in my research on György Ligeti’s opera *Le Grand Macabre* (1978), the more it reminded me of a puppet whose invisible strings disappear into a hidden part. This hidden part is the genesis of the opera. Ligeti twisted the work of the Flemish dramatist Michel de Ghelderode, *La Balade du Grand Macabre* (1935), to make, in a way, an autobiographical story of his secret life with Aliute Mecys (Metschies, Meczies), the German stage designer and painter of Lithuanian origin. They met in Darmstadt and lived together in Hamburg.¹ According to Aliute Mecys, their romance lasted for twenty-two years, and according to his

1 Letter from Ligeti to Aliute Macys, 18 May 1972 (Kaunas Archives, Lithuania).



Ex. 1. Aliute Mecys. *Self-portrait with my love* (1982)

close friend, Raminta Lampsatyte, this opera was for the couple like a child they wanted but never had.²

The opera bears at the same time the stylistic imprint of both creators, of their love story and also of their respective exiles, whether physical or psychological, namely their state of being and their relationship to the world. It is precisely this aspect that I will explore in this study, using documents from the archives of Kaunas, Lithuania, and from the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel.

SOME POINTS ON THE GENESIS OF THE OPERA

The official version of the creation of the opera is recounted in the autobiographical writings of György Ligeti. In 1965, when Göran Gentele, the director of the Opera of Stockholm, suggested to Ligeti to write an opera, Ligeti first thought about Kylviria, “an imaginary country of his childhood, a place of his day-dreams”, his “private mythology”.³ According to the composer, “The first ideas about Kylviria were similar to those of *Aventures*: no action followed distinctly and no meaningful text, pure emotions”.⁴ Ligeti realized that “the universe of *Aventures* was closed”; then he planned with Göran Gentele in 1969 another project, also mythological, a kind of Oedipus variant. The libretto was completed in 1971, but in 1972 Göran Gentele died in a car accident. “In search of a new style, the project team for a representation in Stockholm met towards the end of 1972 in Berlin-Wilmersdorf: it was composed of Michael Meschke, the stage director and director of the Stockholm Puppet Theatre, Aliute Mecys, the stage designer and the musicologist Owe Nordwall. [...] Aliute Mecys suddenly remembered that there was indeed such a play, and she brought us *La Balade du Grand Macabre* of Ghelderode.”⁵ Ligeti omitted to mention that, together with Mecys, he had been seeking a subject for the opera already since the beginning of 1972. Summaries of her research are mentioned in their correspondence of that year: “so far I have read a lot of texts, still hoping to find the ‘ideal’ material for an opera for you without success”.⁶ In return, Ligeti thanked her: “Thanks for Macbeth Information”⁷ and “Thank you for reading and looking around so much”.⁸

2 Elke Herms-Bohnhoff: *Den Traum erfüll' ich mir. Frauen wagen ein neues Leben* (Zürich: Kreuz Verlag, 1995), 172; Aliutė Mečys: “Irealizmas ir fantazijų Lietuva”, *Kultūros barai* 11 (1998), 64.

3 György Ligeti, *L'Atelier du compositeur. Ecrits autobiographiques. Commentaires sur ses œuvres* (Genève: Contrechamps, 2013), 267.

4 Idem.

5 Ibid., 268–69.

6 Letter from Mecys to Ligeti, 8 February 1972 (Kaunas Archives).

7 Letter from Ligeti to Mecys, 1 April 1972 (Kaunas Archives).

8 Ligeti's undated answer to Macy's letter from 8 February 1972 (Kaunas Archives).

The opera was from the beginning a joint project, as Aliute Mecys confirmed in an interview conducted in 1998 for a Lithuanian magazine: “We set up the project of the opera *Le Grand Macabre* together with Ligeti. [...] I chose the subject and persuaded Ligeti to use it. I created the costumes and set design”.⁹

PHYSICAL EXILE

Ligeti and Mecys had certain points in common before they met: they both felt uprooted, foreigners in the countries where they lived, and they were strongly marked by the war. In the biography of his Jewishness, Ligeti wrote:

I was born in 1923 in Transylvania and became a Romanian national. However, I did not speak Romanian during my childhood and my parents were not Transylvanians. They left Budapest for the small Transylvanian town of Dicsöszentmarton at the time when this province still belonged to Hungary. My mother tongue is Hungarian, but I am not a real Hungarian, because I am Jewish. Not being a member of a Jewish religious community, I am an assimilated Jew. I am however not quite assimilated either, because I am not baptized. Today, as an adult, I live in Austria and Germany, and have for long time been an Austrian citizen. I am not a real Austrian, but only a newcomer, and my German is always tinged with a Hungarian accent.¹⁰

For professional reasons, I lived in Austria and Germany; I stayed there, always aware that the tension and resentment that all of us, Jews and non-Jews alike, have carried with us since the Hitler era, are incurable – these are psychic facts with which we must live.¹¹

Aliute Mecys was of Lithuanian origin by her father, who was a member of the SS during World War II. She was marked by his Nazi past; and she too felt a foreigner in the country even though she was born there. In an interview she said: “I am different from the majority of Germans, despite the fact that I am a hybrid and have a half German blood,”¹² or: “We were always the Others, the Foreigners, during the war and the postwar period. I always felt an outsider”.¹³

9 Mečys, “Irealizmas ir fantazijų Lietuva”, 65.

10 Ligeti, *L'Atelier du compositeur*, 21.

11 Ibid., 30–31.

12 Mečys, “Irealizmas ir fantazijų Lietuva”, 65.

13 Herms-Bohnhoff, *Den Traum erfüll' ich mir*, 169.

MOVING TO A PSYCHOLOGICAL EXILE:
THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF FEELINGS

Beside the war and physical exile, the childhoods of Ligeti and Mecys were marked by parental conflict. The parents of Aliute Mecys were opposed to her desire to draw, to the point that she became seriously ill. Acceptance came just after the intervention of a doctor.¹⁴ Ligeti, meanwhile, had a similar experience: “My desire to learn to play an instrument first met with my father’s refusal. [...] He was worried about my lack of self-discipline, my refuge into the imaginary, and the vast plans of the cities – of non-existent metropolises – which I drew, or my grammar of the Kylwirian language seemed strange to him.”¹⁵ Her interest in tales and witches and his passion for myths and imaginary countries probably was not “accidental” and drew deeply from the same roots.

It is often claimed that twentieth-century expressionism is based on “the expression of repressed feelings”. The artistic quest to liberate such feelings inform all the pictorial stylistics of Aliute Mecys, a closed and glaucous world in the tradition of Hieronymus Bosch or Pieter Breugel, and are part of the musical style of Ligeti, which began with *Articulations* (1958), continued with *Aventures* (1962), *Nouvelles Aventures* (1965), and culminated with his opera *Le grand macabre* (1978). Both artists shared a common attraction to psychological processes and emotional states. As Mecys pointed out:

I am interested in processes [...], in interior development. I do not belong either to the surrealists or the hyperrealists. I have created the word that suits me: *unrealism*. What does not exist in reality, but is real. I paint in a very realistic way, but it is impossible to see these things in the real world. The content is not real, and at the same time it is real, since these states, these processes, these directions exist – I find them when I am painting and thinking. Why are the characters of my paintings crippled, blind, decadent, broken, aged? Because there is no normal man on this earth, at least, I’ve never met him. That is why there is a reality that is an unreality.¹⁶

Ligeti, for his part, described the two mini-operas that he composed before *Le grand macabre*, as an

adventure of form and expression, imaginary actions, labyrinthine intricacies of emotions and denatured impulses, derision, mockery, idyll, nostalgia, mourning,

14 Ibid., 170.

15 Ligeti, *L’Atelier du compositeur*, 17.

16 Mečys, “Irealizmas ir fantazijų Lietuva”, 65.

fear, love, humor, excitement, passion, dream and wakefulness, logic and absurdity. [...] There is no question here of a real action, [...] but rather of a drama inherent in the music. [...] Thanks to the phonetic-musical structure, semantically incomprehensible, but clearly understandable on an emotional level, what is alluded to is a dramatic action, mysterious, admittedly, as to its real meaning, but quite understandable as regards the appearance of the expressive characters and patterns of human behavior.¹⁷

Le grand macabre represents the symbiosis of two stylistic approaches, both based on a common interest in the expression of human affects and the same appeal to masks and puppets. Speaking about Aliute, the gallerist Gerd Wolfgang Essen said: “In her paintings she herself plays different roles behind different masks [...]. Aliute has only one outcome – capture the evil spirits, lock them in the space of the painting and thus continue to live with them.”¹⁸

The opera’s characters are made as masks or puppets: they do not undergo changes, have no temporal direction. Hence their archetypal appearance. These symbol-objects represent emotional and psychological states of a wide range of affects, from the lowest (for example, the alcoholic Piet, the shrew Mescalina) to the highest (for example, the goddess Venus or the couple in love). Each character is defined by its emotional color. Its expression constitutes both form and content. All the characters represent a dual world, a world of opposites in which various configurations or various “emotional territories” of affective states, form the eschatological entity of Breughelland. Istvan Balazs goes further and considers that “Ligeti uses the genre of the opera itself as a mask” since “these creatures with exaggerated features are subjected to the commonplaces of the opera, which then end up functioning as masks. [...] Therefore, the subversive aspect occurs especially in the musical-dramatic structure.”¹⁹

If the general theme of the opera is that “love stronger than death,” the sub-theme, undoubtedly, is a feeling of fear. This is the archetypal fear of the Last Judgment and death itself. The theme of death is a common subject of thought for Ligeti and Mecys. Ligeti said: “The idea of the Last Judgement was for me a constant concern for many years, but without any reference to religion. Its main characteristics are fear of death, the representation of terrifying events, and a way to lessen them by freezing them through alienation, which is the result of excessive expressivity.”²⁰ Or: “In the paintings of Aliute Death appears in person – in her

17 Ligeti, *L'Atelier du compositeur*, 192–94.

18 Mečys, “Irealizmas ir fantazijų Lietuva”, 66.

19 Cf. Istvan Balazs, “La fin du monde vue d’en bas”, *L'Avant-Scène Opéra* 180 (1997), 87.

20 Idem.

pictures hands and eyes disappear, she even removes Death's eye itself. Death rages and only the act of painting can fight against it."²¹

Thus, the aim of Ligeti and Mecys aim was to "lock up" death while ridiculing it. Ligeti said, "The Last Judgment started with the big hubbub, but it is a total failure. The tragicomic part of the play lies in the failure of this great act of extermination."²²

Speaking of the perfect symbiosis between Breughel and Ghelderode as a "gradual shift from one spatiality to another, from the pictorial to the stage, from a built image to the obscure human territory under the mask"²³ Michèle Friche was unwittingly describing the symbiosis that occurs between Ligeti's music and Mecys's scenery.

Much more than just an artistic description of a decadent society or a modern tale in the style of the theatre of the absurd, *Le grand macabre* embodies this "anthropology of human feelings" in general and the revised, exorcised life experiences of Ligeti and Mecys in particular.

THE OPERA LIBRETTO

Ligeti was not satisfied with the original text of Ghelderode, and he transformed it for his own purposes, not only changing details such as the names of the characters, but also the general idea. For Ghelderode, the outcome of love is the birth of a child; For Ligeti love is concentrated on Eros.

Amanda and Amando:

*What do we care for storm and flood, when fire is coursing through our blood?
Let others fear the Judgment Day: we have no fears, let come what may!
'Near terrors dire let others bow: for us there's only here and now. [...]
For life grants most to those who give, and who gives love shall loving live.
When one does this, then time and tide stand still: now and for evermore.*²⁴

In Ghelderode's version, the two lovers are Adrian and Jusemina, while in Ligeti's version they are called Clitoria and Spermando (in later versions, after 1982, the lovers are renamed Amanda and Amando). Ligeti's opera turned into an apology

21 Dietrich Diederichs-Gottschalk, cited in Mečys, "Irealizmas ir fantazijų Lietuva", 66.

22 Pierre Michel, "Mon opéra est une sorte de farce noire", interview with György Ligeti, *L'Avant-Scène Opéra*, 180 (1997), 96.

23 Michèle Friche, "La Balade du Grand Macabre de Michel de Ghelderode", *L'Avant-Scène Opéra* 180 (1997), 93.

24 Michel, "Mon opéra est une sorte de farce noire", 83, 85.

for Eros, which was actually the main focus of their common life and their relationships. This is reflected not only in their long letters filled with erotic descriptions but also in the many drawings that the composer enclosed in his letters.

For Richard Steinitz, it is precisely this “pornographic” aspect which delayed the premiere of the opera in Stockholm: “The premiere had already been announced for April 1977, then postponed for a year – not only because of the time needed to learn so difficult a work, but also, it was rumoured, because of objections to its pornographic libretto, whose supposed sexual excess had been eagerly seized upon by the more prurient members of the press.”²⁵

For Ligeti, however, this “sexual excess” was a “subtle eroticism.” In his letter to Michael Meschke he described his vision like this:

The erotic power of the texts from Clitoria and Spermando is only apparently weakened. I have written a super sweet, crazily enraptured music, and needed more text neutrality [...] Do not think that it won't be erotic. On the contrary: I think today we have attained a stage of sexual freedom (Thank God!), where we do not necessarily need a lot of sex manifestation, but can go on to a more subtle eroticism. The extensive text simplification in the duets of Spermando-Clitoria was also necessary because all will be sung in a highly ornamental way, with a reduced understanding of the text, many words drowned out, hence the stimuli to strengthen comprehensibility [...] Then, Clitoria-Spermando should not be vulgar, but seemingly transfigured in Botticelli style – the stronger than the erotic obsession.²⁶

The two characters that Ligeti added to the original text of Ghelderode are the ones that most reflect their past and present: the goddess Venus, the goddess of love who symbolizes perfect love, and Gepopo, the chief of the secret police, who is a direct reference to the Gestapo. Richard Steinitz even includes a triple allusion:

Clearly, Ligeti wrote her part with the evident relish of poking fun at the three secret police organisations he had most cause to despise: the Gestapo, the Soviet GPU (later renamed KGB), and the East German Geheime Politische Polizei, the three first syllables of which make up the acronym ‘Gepopo’. Of dazzling virtuosity, the Chief of the Gepopo is one of the great coloratura roles in opera and a hilarious portrayal of sleuthiness. She is no Scarpia, but a canary-voiced high soprano, who enters on roller-skates disguised as a fantastic bird of prey, exchanging scarcely concealed ‘pssts’ with the offstage chorus. The libretto here

25 Richard Steinitz, *György Ligeti. Music of Imagination* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 217.

26 Letter from Ligeti to Michael Meschke, 1 March 1976 (Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel).

is a tirade of spy-book clichés, encoded warnings of imprecise substance but sufficient to work her into paroxysms of excitement and panic.²⁷

The idea of Gepopo as a bird on roller skates belongs to Aliute: in her interview she said: “I proposed that the chief of the police would be a bird on roller skates, and the king, on stilts.”²⁸

HIDDEN LOVE

For Ghelderode and Ligeti, the loving couple is hidden. They descend into the empty tomb at the beginning of the opera, to rise at the end, after their act of love. This reflects perfectly their secret, hidden relationship, since Ligeti never divorced his wife Vera.

The world of Eros, by definition, has no connection with the outside world. Ligeti gives this intimate relationship an unexpected aspect, the lesbian aspect, using the equal voices: the pair of lovers is sung by a soprano and a mezzo-soprano. One of the goals of Ligeti was to make this relationship more “ethereal”. In a letter to Meschke, Ligeti confides: “The characters of Clitoria-Spermando are simultaneously ethereal and ironic – far from any simplicity and stupid comedy. Yes, a lesbian layer is also determined there but very subliminally, iridescent. Please, look again through the erotic drawings of Bayros *The purple snail*. There is a subtle refinement of eroticism [...], I have tried to achieve this atmosphere in music.”²⁹ This “ethereal” love is presented as an ideal, as a love without faults. While real and clearly erotic, because of the Monteverdi lyricism of high and equal voices, it is reduced to the same emotional color as the voice of the goddess Venus, to the same depersonalized, metaphoric, unreal, aerial level, detached from the general context of Breugheland life. For Michèle Friche, “The reality of their love preserved them from the Judgment, they simply ignored fear.”³⁰ Saying that, she describes perfectly, albeit metaphorically, the relationship between Mecys and Ligeti.

THE HYBRID WORLD

The opera is constructed as a double world in which each character reflects half of a unit or entity. For example, there are “two sovereigns, Tsar Necro and Tsar

27 Steinitz, *György Ligeti*, 226.

28 Mečys, “Irealizmas ir fantazijų Lietuva”, 65.

29 Letter from Ligeti to Michael Meschke, 1 March 1976 (Paul Sacher Foundation).

30 Friche, “*La Balade du Grand Macabre* de Michel de Ghelderode,” 92.

Gogo”;³¹ two corrupt ministers, leaders of the two hostile parties, the White and the Black, “whose opinions don’t differ in any way”;³² love is also double: that of the couple of idealized love, and that of “the evil woman, Mescalina, a combination of the words mescaline, poison, and Messalina, the shrew”,³³ for her husband Astradamors, whom she holds “under her yoke”,³⁴

This hybrid world is that of Aliute Mecys: “Now I am interested in hybrid beings [...]. I am drawn to these creatures. Mongrels, mixed creatures, masks next to some faces, hybrids, painted one beside the other, all that is the two spiritual aspects of one single man. Angels and demons painted side by side in parallel, or as an object and its shadow”³⁵

It is also the world of Ligeti: “My music is not literary or illustrative but is full of sensations and associations. I love allusions, double meanings, the polyvalences of signification, false bottoms, ulterior motives.”³⁶ Through oppositions and by accentuating ambiguities, Ligeti uses all the palette of styles, instruments, expressions and articulations from the operas of Monteverdi, Verdi, or Mozart, to the Avant-garde musical theatre of the twentieth century. As Steinitz observed, “The *Klangfarbenmelodie* timbral distribution applied by both Webern and Ligeti conjoins modernism and the Baroque in a manner that is neither old nor new; more an enigmatic hybrid.”³⁷ For Pierre Michel, “Ligeti retained to the end the ambiguity of the opera, of its meaning and all its possible interpretations. The work ends in a consonant but atonal language, as if to open some perspective to the imagination without providing reassurance.”³⁸

We find in the opera that particular junction between the crippled characters of Mecys and the musical background which is a blending of styles and sonorous articulations of affects, in other words, “drama inherent in music”. The exile from the archetypal imagination, marked by individual experiences, gives to this opera those imperceptible fluctuations between a modern fairy tale and a true story. It is at times tragic, and it evokes the tribulations of war, but it is told with the lightness of irony, the precision of the grotesque, and the naivety of the comic.

31 Ligeti, *L'Atelier du compositeur*, 275.

32 Ibid., 274.

33 Pierre Michel, “Commentaire musical et littéraire”, in *Le Grand Macabre* by Ligeti, *L'Avant-Scène Opéra* 180 (1997), 83.

34 Ligeti, *L'Atelier du compositeur*, 268.

35 Mečys, “Irealizmas ir fantazijų Lietuva”, 66.

36 Claude Samuel, Ligeti, le clin d’œil au happening, *L'Avant-Scène Opéra* 180 (1997), 94.

37 Steinitz, *György Ligeti*, 233.

38 Michel, “Commentaire musical et littéraire”, 84.

Ligeti wrote in a letter to Bertil Bokstedt, “I want to do ‘the work of my life.’”³⁹ This statement is very significant. Moreover, after *Le Grand Macabre* Ligeti decided to abandon this style, while Aliute Mecys, on the contrary, devoted herself exclusively to painting, as if for Ligeti the opera was the end of an experience, and for Mecys the beginning.

They met like two exiles, not only in a physical space, but also in an archetypal one, made of real places and metaphorical territories, of emotional anchors and artistic encounters. They shared the same love and identity experience, lived both as a condition and as consciousness.

39 Letter from Ligeti to Bertil Bokstedt (Direc of the Oper Kungliga Teatern, Stockholm,) 10 November 1971 (Paul Sacher Foundation).