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978-0-521-82733-1 - Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War

Rachel Beckles Willson

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Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War

Drawing on key elements from musical thought in inter-war Hungary, this book provides a new perspective on the nation's musical heritage both inside and outside Hungary's borders during the Cold War. Although Ligeti became part of the Western avant-garde after he left Hungary in 1956, archival sources illuminate his ongoing contact with Hungarian musicians, and their shifting perspective on his work. Kurtág's music was more obviously involved with Hungarian traditions, was entangled with the Soviet occupation, and was a contributing part of the city's diverse musical culture. However, from the mid-1960s onwards, critics identified his music as an artistic and moral 'truth' distinct from the broader musical life of Budapest: it was an idealised symbol of life beyond the everyday in Hungary. Grounding her interpretations of works in these complex political circumstances, Beckles Willson is nonetheless sympathetic to arguments by Ligeti, Kurtág, and Budapest music critics that their music might have a life beyond nationalist and Cold War ideology.

RACHEL BECKLES WILLSON is Reader in the Music Department at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is the author of *György Kurtág's 'The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza' op. 7* (2004) and she has many articles published in journals including *Contemporary Music Review*, *Slavonica*, *Music and Letters*, and *Central Europe*.

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*For Tony, Robina, Mark and Rob.
And with warm memories of Naomi, who even
learned some Hungarian.*

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I am even jealous of their language, which contains nothing human, whose sound calls forth another world – forceful and harsh as a prayer, comparable to a roar, to a plea, its enunciation perpetuating the very accents of hell. Even if I know only its swear words, it gives me endless pleasure; I cannot listen to enough of it – it enchants me and petrifies me – I am astounded by all the beauty and the horror its words contain, words as sweet as nectar and as bitter as cyanide, so perfectly appropriate for the expression of death throes. It is in Hungarian one must expire, or refuse death altogether.

Émile Cioran: *History and Utopia* (1960)

Imagine a garden maze, a maze in which mirrors conceal the hedges, giving the illusion of open space and free movement but also distorting wildly, as in a fairground hall of mirrors. At one corner you look impossibly tall, thin, and pale, like the poet Petőfi; at the next, absurdly squat. First you confidently step forward – and hit a mirror. Then you nervously edge around an open space. But sometimes you can walk straight through a mirror (or hedge), only to find yourself in another alley. Here you meet the administrator of the maze, himself lost in it.

This is Hungary . . .

The maze has its own language. I call it the Hungarian Periphrastic. It is a language of diabolical circumlocution, of convoluted allegory and serpentine metaphor, all guarded by a crack regiment of sub-Germanic abstract compound-nouns. Nothing is said directly. Everyone is taken from behind. A spade is never a spade. A crime is never a crime . . . It is the intellectual version of an attitude that prevails in the whole society: that of getting around the system rather than confronting it, of finding loopholes and niches rather than making demands of the state; and the premise of this attitude is . . . the essential permanence and immutability of the system . . .

The hedges move daily.

Timothy Garton Ash
(‘A Hungarian Lesson’, 1985)

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Note on the text

The text refers to a large number of critics and composers whose names will be unfamiliar to most readers. On their first appearance I have attempted to make their significance clear, but I have also provided a ‘Personalialia’ at the back of the book that fills out additional biographical data, including professional genealogies and affiliations.

Archives are abbreviated in footnotes as follows:

MOL Magyar Országos Levéltár (Hungarian National Archive)
 MZT Magyar Zenei Tanács (Hungarian Music Council)
 PSF Paul Sacher Foundation

Documents housed at the MOL and MZT are listed individually and numbered in the ‘Archives’ section of the Bibliography, and are referenced in the footnotes as ‘MOL document 1’, ‘MOL document 2’, and so forth.

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 GLC György Ligeti Collection
 SVC Sándor Veress Collection

I have presented the titles of Hungarian musical works initially in Hungarian (with an English translation), and thereafter in English only. I have provided translations of journal titles appearing only once in the text itself; but more significant and/or regularly appearing journals and newspapers remain in Hungarian. These are the following:

<i>A Zene</i>	Music
<i>Élet és Irodalom</i>	Life and Literature
<i>Filharmónia műsorfüzet</i>	Programme Booklet of the Philharmonia Concert Agency
<i>Magyar Kórus</i>	Hungarian Chorus
<i>Magyar Nemzet</i>	Hungarian Nation
<i>Magyar Zene</i>	Hungarian Music
<i>Magyar Zenei Szemle</i>	Hungarian Musical Review
<i>Népszabadság</i>	People’s Freedom
<i>Nyugat</i>	West
<i>Pesti Napló</i>	[Buda]Pest Diary

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