

FEDERICO COLLI

piano

GYÖRGY LIGETI (1923–2006)

Musica Ricercata

- I. Sostenuto - Misurato - Prestissimo
- II. Mesto, rigido e cerimoniale
- III. Allegro con spirito
- IV. Tempo di valse (poco vivace - "à l'orgue de Barbarie")
- V. Rubato. Lamentoso
- VI. Allegro molto capriccioso
- VII. Cantabile, molto legato
- VIII. Vivace. Energico
- IX. (Béla Bartók in Memoriam) Adagio. Mesto - Allegro maestoso
- X. Vivace. Capriccioso
- XI. (Omaggio a Girolamo Frescobaldi) Andante misurato e tranquillo
(approx. 27 minutes)

FRANÇOIS COUPERIN (1668–1733)

Le Carillon de Cythere

Les Barricades Mysterieuses

Les Follies Francaises, ou Les Dominos

La Virginité: sous le Domino couleur d'invisible

La Pudeur: sous le Domino couleur de rose

L'Ardeur: sous le Domino incarnat

L'Espérance: sous le Domino vert

La Fidélité: sous le Domino bleu

La Persévérance: sous le Domino gris lin

La Langueur: sous le Domino violet

La Coquetterie (sic): sous différents Dominos

Les Vieux Galants et les Trésorières Surannées: sous des Dominos Pourpres et feuilles mortes

Les Coucous bénévoles: sous les Dominos jaunes

La Jalousie Taciturne: sous le Domino gris de maure

La Frénésie ou le Désespoir: sous le Domino noir

(approx. 14 minutes)

SERGEI PROKOFIEFF (1891-1953)

Visions Fugitives Op. 22

1. Lentamente
 2. Andante
 3. Allegretto
 4. Animato
 5. Molto giocoso
 6. Con eleganza
 7. Pittoresco (Arpa)
 8. Comodo
 9. Allegro tranquillo
 10. Ridicolosamente
 11. Con vivacità
 12. Assai moderato
 13. Allegretto
 14. Feroce
 15. Inquieto
 16. Dolente
 17. Poetico
 18. Con una dolce lentezza
 19. Presto agitatissimo e molto accentuato
 20. Lento irrealmente
- (approx. 25 minutes)

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

from Le Tombeau de Couperin

- Prélude
Forlane
Rigaudon
Menuet
Toccata
- (approx. 20 minutes)

György Ligeti

Musica Ricercata

György Ligeti (pronounced “LI’-geh-tee”) was a leading figure of the avant-garde in the latter half of the 20th century. His music first became widely known when the dense tone clusters and searing bright sonorities of his *Atmosphères* and *Lux Aeterna* were heard in the soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

But before Ligeti emigrated from Hungary in 1956, his early career was beset with the difficulties inherent in working under a communist regime suspicious of artistic innovation and other “bourgeois” tendencies. Consequently, many of his experimental works from this period had to be shelved. One of these was his piano suite entitled *Musica Ricercata* (1951–1953), which wasn’t performed until 1969 — after, that is, the release of Kubrick’s popular film, which made him a household name.

The title, *Musica Ricercata*, has a double meaning. It pays tribute to the compositional style of the *ricercare*, the early 17th-century forerunner of what would later become the Baroque fugue. But *ricercata* also means “searched for” or “sought after,” a reference to the Hungarian composer’s desire to construct his own personal compositional style from scratch — “out of nothing,” as he put it.

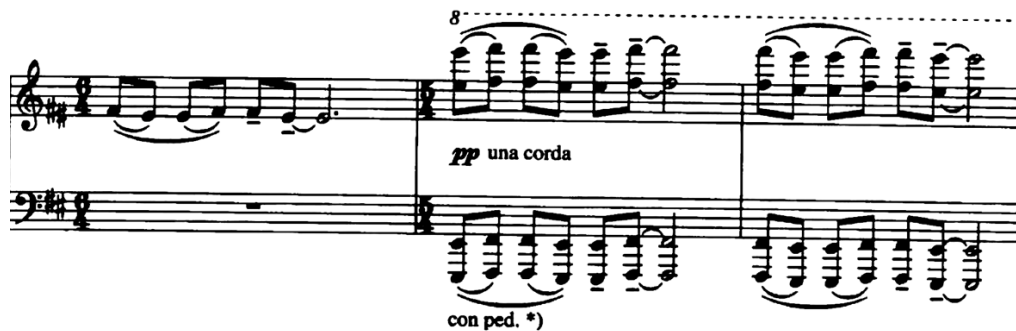
Perhaps influenced by other “rule-based” compositional methods such as Schoenberg’s 12-tone system or Boulez’s total serialism, the method Ligeti arrived at was based on limiting the pitches available for use. In the 11 pieces that comprise the suite, he began composing with just two different pitches (and their octave equivalents), adding one pitch in each successive piece until, in the 11th piece, he was using all 12 chromatic pitches of the octave.

Musica ricercata I is based on the pitches A and D, although the pitch D only occurs once, in the last bar, so this is as close as the suite gets to a “Johnny One-Note” piece. Without melody or harmony as a guide, the listener’s ear hears the sounds coming out of the piano as drumming pulses. They can be (1) high or low in pitch, (2) grouped rhythmically in twos or threes, and (3) either in-sync with the steady left-hand ostinato or out of phase with it.



Ligeti toys with all three of these perceptual parameters to dazzle the ear and in the process tells a surprisingly engaging musical story that builds to an exciting final climax.

Musica ricercata II is constructed from the pitches E#, F# and G, with two-note ruminations on E# and F# forming the major motive of the piece. They first appear as a single line in the mid-range but then get expanded sonically into octaves at opposite ends of the keyboard. This parallels in sound the visual effect in cinema of going from a “close-up” shot to a “long” shot.



This suddenly makes the mood turn creepy and ghoulish. Are we witnessing a procession of the dead? The performance indication *rigido e ceremoniale* might suggest as much. The drama is heightened midway through when the interloper pitch G loudly intrudes on the proceedings to challenge the “rigidity” of the “two-noters” with unmeasured tremolos and exhilarating *accelerandi* on one note.

Stanley Kubrick appreciated the raw emotional volatility of this piece enough to include it in the soundtrack to his erotic mystery drama *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999).

With the pitches C, G, E \flat and E \sharp available to him in *Musica ricercata III*, Ligeti can create both major and minor triads to play around with. And play around with them he certainly does in a continuing series of harmonically salty cross-relations between E \flat and E \sharp .

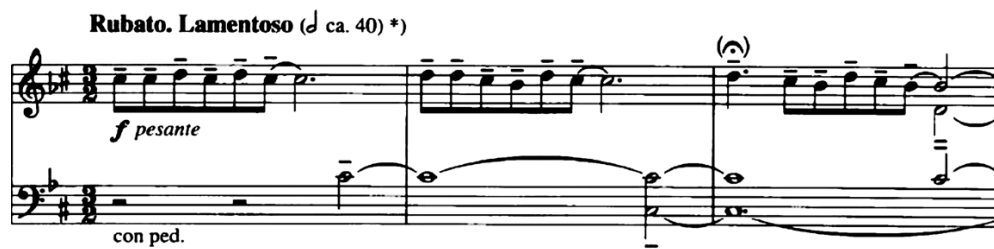


Given the jaunty, hop-scotchy quality with which Ligeti imbues this piece, I would not put it above him to be parodying Beethoven’s “Waldstein” Sonata in C major with the left-hand ostinato in the above passage.

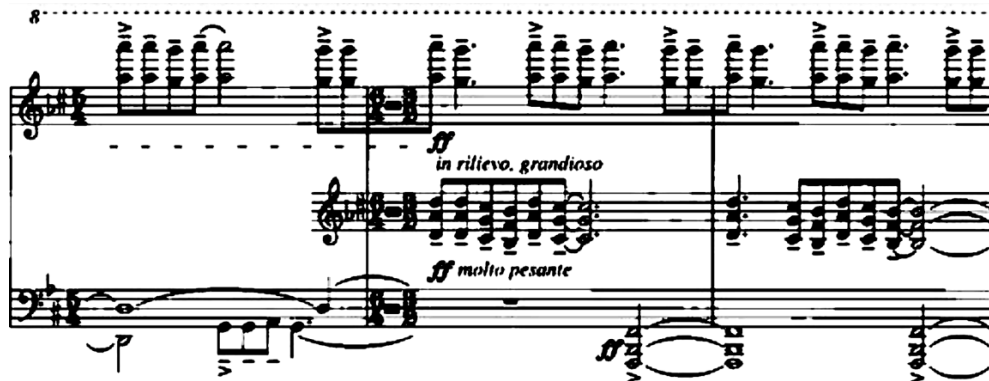
Musica ricercata IV, working with the pitches A, B \flat , F \sharp , G and G \sharp , is an eccentric waltz, one channelling Chopin's "Minute" Waltz in D \flat major. But it seems undecided, though, as to whether it prefers to be in 3/4 or 2/4 time.



Musica ricercata V, like the second piece in this suite, is obsessed with alternations of neighbouring notes, at first as simple noodling.



But given the additional sonic resources Ligeti allows himself through the use of pitches A \flat , B, C \sharp , D, F and G, he has this simple beginning explode into a major sonic-theatrical event.



Musica ricercata VI draws on the pitch classes A, B, C \sharp , D, E, F \sharp and G but focuses its attention on repeated four-note figures that, in the end, begin to sound like a Hanon exercise.



Register changes, speed-ups and slow-downs plus rapid changes in dynamics all make sure that the ear is entertained in every bar.

Musica ricercata VII, using pitches A \flat , A, B \flat , C, D, E \flat , F and G, features a clearly layered texture of left-hand ostinato and right-hand melody.

The left-hand ostinato repeats, murmuring in the background, for the entire length of the piece while single- and then double-line melodies hum their tuneful musings above.

Musica ricercata VIII, based on the pitches A, B, C, C \sharp , D, E, F \sharp , G and G \sharp , sounds like one continuous fanfare, so prominent is the pitch E at the top of each chord.

Melodic interest is confined to inner voices in this swaggering sea shanty of a piece.

Musica ricercata IX uses the pitches A, A \sharp , B, C, C \sharp , D, D \sharp , F, F \sharp and G \sharp and is subtitled *Béla Bartók in Memoriam*. It opens with a tolling bell, against which a series of 3rds wails a lament.

These 3rds, thickened in texture and boosted in dynamics, dominate this sorrowful commemoration of the great Hungarian composer, which ends with the slow fade of its opening bell-toll.

Musica ricercata X, labelled *Vivace, capriccioso*, is an antic romp through tonal space featuring scampering scales of minor 2nds alternating with bitonal arpeggios.

The spirit of Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* hovers brightly over the chippy rhythms and salty dissonances of this piece.

Vivace. Capriccioso ♩ = 200

tre corde, secco

Towards the end, big tone clusters make an appearance – to be performed “spitefully” and “like a madman” – but they stop suddenly to let a silkily smooth arpeggio slide softly and nonchalantly down to the nether regions to end the piece, as if to say, “Just kidding!”

Musica ricercata XI is conceived of as an homage to the 16th-century keyboard composer Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643), who long held the position of organist at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Frescobaldi was not only a master of the austere *ricercare* style but also a bold innovator in his use of chromatic melody.

Andante misurato e tranquillo ♩ = 76

sempre *p.*, sempre legato (sehr gleichmäßig / very evenly)

Ligeti pays tribute to this important musician in a slow-moving *ricercare* of his own with a subject that uses every note of the chromatic scale, laid out in various intervals, almost entirely in quarter notes. The countersubject which follows is an equally paced descending chromatic scale.

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In this piano suite based on the most mathematic of compositional processes, Ligeti shows what kinds of emotional states may be created by the simplest of musical procedures.

François Couperin

Le Carillon de Cythere

Les Barricades Mysterieuses

Les Follies Françaises, ou Les Dominos

François Couperin enjoyed a long and profitable career at the French court from the 1690s to the late 1720s, during which time he established himself as the leading composer of harpsichord music in France.

His four *Livres* of keyboard music published in 1713, 1717, 1722 and 1730 are organized into *ordres*, each *ordre* being a suite of short tuneful pieces in the style and rhythm of courtly dances or structured as *rondeaux* with a recurring refrain interrupted by a series of contrasting *couplets*.

A goodly number of these pieces have fanciful, descriptive titles that cater to the French nation's love of theatre and their desire to "see" what they are listening to. Unfortunately, the references in many of these enigmatic titles are such "inside baseball," so "wink-and-nod" specific to the French courtly circles of the time, that their meaning and intention has been entirely lost to modern scholars — and to modern audiences as well.

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Not so, however, for *Le Carillon de Cythère* that vividly depicts the leisurely pleasures of life on the Greek isle of Cythera, birthplace of Venus and site of her most famous amorous adventures.

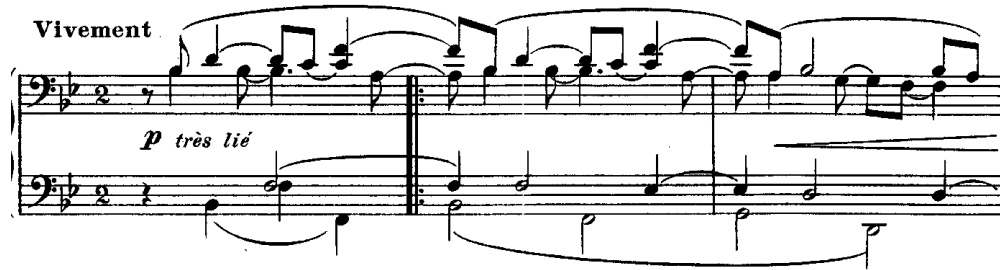


The recurring pedal note on the tonic D represents the call of the carillon bells chiming out a signal for lovers everywhere to do what they do best (and to do it in pairs if the recurring parallel 3rds and 6ths in the melody line have anything to say about it).

This piece is thickly encrusted with frilly ornamentation, which is entirely typical of French keyboard style but suggestive nonetheless of the pleasures taking place on this island of love.

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By contrast, the intended meaning of *Les Barricades mystérieuses*, one of Couperin's most famous pieces, can only be speculated on. But no matter, as the appeal of its *style luthé* texture, rippling with arpeggiated chords and rhythmically displaced harmonic tones, is very much evident to the ear.



Composed as variations on a repeating bass line, it grants the listener a kind of deep satisfaction comparable to that of Pachelbel's Canon.

And, being written in the mid to low register to generate the maximum resonance from the sound board, this is one piece that just begs to be played on a modern pedalled concert grand.

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Les follies Françaises, ou Les Dominos is a mini-suite of 12 pieces, all based on the same underlying harmony, that takes us deep into the gossipy cliques and whispering side-chatter of a French masked ball. The *dominos* of the title refer to the different masks worn by the ball's attendees. Each mask is described in a title referring to a specific character trait of its wearer – the joke being that the mask actually reveals the character of the person whose face it is meant to hide.

It opens with *La Virginité*, portrayed in the trilling flutter of a fan.



Next comes *La Pudeur* (modesty or prudishness), conveyed in an unexciting succession of quarter notes without rhythmic vitality and with zero seductive charm.

L'Ardeur could probably be best colloquially translated as “randiness,” and with its jagged wide-ranging dotted rhythms it must surely be describing the roving eye of any number of male suitors out to make a conquest.



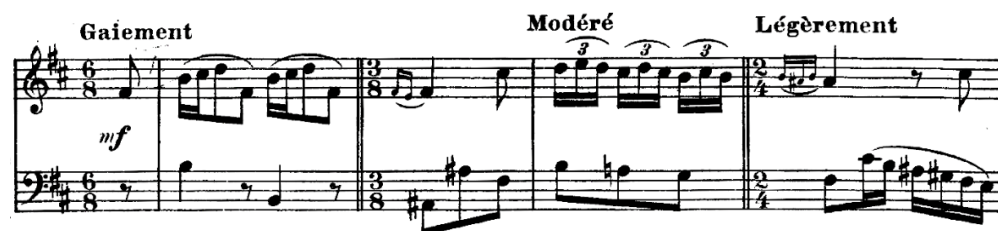
Then *L'Espérance* (hope, expectation) in an exchange of rolling triplets paints a flirtatious conversation that seems to be going well for both parties.

La Fidélité, with its performance indication *Affectueusement* (affectionately) depicts in tonal language the comforts of coming home to the same bed every night, while *La Persevérance*, chirping away in the high register, promises amorous rewards for hanging in there despite all obstacles.

La Languueur (boredom) is eloquently dull, comprised of nothing but a staid succession of half notes,



while *La Coquetterie* simply jumps around with vivaciousness, changing time signature with each new thought that comes into her ditzzy head.



Les Vieux Galants et les Trésoriers surannées could well be translated as “the old charmers and their over-the-hill [female] paymasters.” What is obvious in this piece is that there is a conversation going on between the low and high registers of the keyboard, with an exchange of funds being perhaps the topic under discussion.

No such worries for *Les Coucous bénévoles* in bird attire, who seem eager and willing to call out their intervallic cry to all and sundry in every bar.



Not everyone, however, is quite as chipper at the ball. *La Jalousie taciturne* grumbles its jealous complaint into its champagne flute in the low register of the keyboard, eating away at its enjoyment with dark green thoughts.

La Frénésie ou le Désespoir (frenzy or despair) depicts the scurrying of those who realize that the ball is over, and if there ever was a time to act on their impulses, now is that time.



Sergei Prokofieff

Visions Fugitives Op. 22

Prokofieff's *Visions fugitives* is a collection of 20 piano miniatures composed between 1915 and 1917, each lasting from 30 seconds to two minutes. The Russian title Мимолётности (literally "things flying past," i.e., transient experiences) suggests an attempt to express momentary psychological states, to catch fleeting glimpses of an interior emotional life briefly but concisely expressed in music.

For an *enfant terrible* such as Prokofieff, best known hitherto for such brutalist scores as his percussive Toccata, Op. 11 and the savagely sardonic Sarcasms, Op. 17, this represents a new, less combative approach to musical expression. Notably missing in this new approach are the abrupt "jump-scare" changes in dynamics that made his previous works so nerve-jangling to listen to.

While Prokofieff may have taken off his brass knuckles when sitting down to compose, not all of his earlier compositional crankiness, however, was cast aside. Each piece, whether slow or fast, has a clearly defined rhythmic pulse, and many feature ostinato figures in the left hand.

The melodies in this piece are instrumental in conception and wide-ranging. Their pitch range is only remotely related to the range of the human voice, thus giving us the impression that they might well be coming from outer space. Several of them use the octatonic scale with eight scale degrees (alternating whole tones and semitones) instead of the usual seven.

The scoring is exceptionally transparent, and despite the amount of dissonance, it is never “muddy” because of the wide spacing used in creating the sonorities. And there is a clear “layering” of the texture into contrapuntal lines, with alto, tenor and bass registers carrying the lead melodic line as often as the soprano.

The collection opens in a mood of peaceful, contemplative lyricism, softly projecting in its first piece a naively innocent melody wandering somewhat aimlessly over a Debussy-esque stream of parallel chords in the left hand.



Prokofieff an impressionist? Who knew? And yet “colour” harmonies abound in this collection of pieces.

As the work proceeds, Prokofieff’s sometimes quirky Italian performance indications reveal the range of moods and emotional states explored, from the *pittoresco* imitation of the harp in No. 7



to the clownish *ridicolosamente* No. 10



and from the *feroce* (ferocious) No. 14



to the *dolente* (sorrowful) No. 16



and *poetico* No. 17,



ending somewhere off in the distant ether with the finale, marked *Lento irrealmente* (slowly unreal).



Note how in these pieces a left-hand ostinato typically creates the overall mood while the right-hand melody scampers, whimpers, or heads off for the celestial ether.

Maurice Ravel

Selections from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is based on the Baroque dance suite and was written near the end of the Great War as a tribute not only to a golden age in French music — the age of the great keyboard composer François Couperin — but also as a memorial to the war dead, many of whom Ravel saw up close while working as an ambulance driver at the front.

The term *tombeau* refers to commemorative music written in mourning for a great figure, but Ravel chooses instead to commemorate the greatness of French musical culture through a re-creation of the sensibility of the Baroque dance suite, echoed in the use of modal harmonies and 18th-century ornamentation but seen through the colourful chromatic lens of early 20th-century neoclassicism.

The *Prélude* that opens the suite, with its constant pattern of rippling triplet 16ths, owes much to the “pattern” preludes of the Baroque period.



An abundance of Baroque-style mordent figures decorate the melodic line as the music flows along in a world of bright modal harmonies ambiguously situated somewhere between G major and E minor.

The *Forlane* (originally *forlana*) was a Northern Italian courtship dance that was popular in French aristocratic circles in the first half of the 18th century. Ravel uses its characteristic dotted rhythm, combined with a kaleidoscopic range of harmonic colours, to suggest the lascivious connotations it had acquired when danced at the French court. Particularly coy is the accented major 7th in the first bar and other sly gestures of chromatic hanky-panky in the wildly wandering melodic line.



Constructed in a basic ternary (three-part) form, its tone is intimate throughout, with dynamic levels that rarely exceed *mezzo piano*. A middle section chimes like a music box in the high treble register, adding a degree of childlike innocence to the dance's reputation for seductive charm.

The *Rigaudon* is a boisterous, high-stepping folk dance, similar to the bourrée, which originated in Provence and became popular at the court of Louis XIV.



Ravel's rigaudon is true to form in its punchy rhythms and bright sonorities, but features a contrasting middle section in which a gently plaintive pastoral melody is accompanied by guitar-like plucked chord patterns.

The *Menuet* that follows opens with all the graceful elegance expected of a French courtly dance, but tinged with an eerie wistfulness.

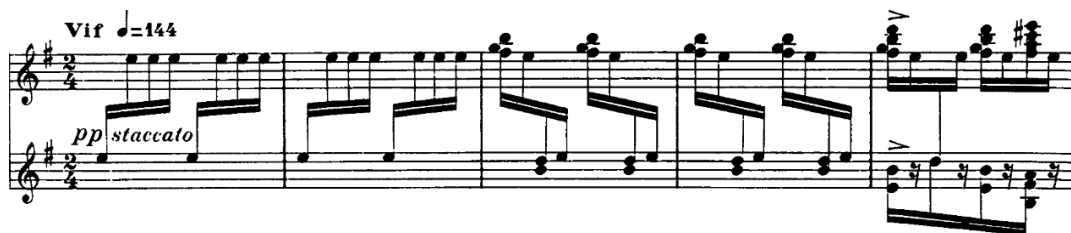


The large number of minor chords in the harmony make this a slightly worried little minuet. Its concerns only grow larger in the rising dynamics and thicker textures of its middle section *Musette*



which begins in a whisper but swells to an impressive climax before the nostalgic return of the opening's dainty dance steps.

To conclude, Ravel gives us a *Toccata* in moto perpetuo 16ths in place of the lively gigue that normally ends a Baroque suite.



Configured as a repeating pattern of notes punctuated with punchy chords, it still finds time for the occasional lyrical episode amid all the "old typewriter" clatter of staccato chatter.

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Each work in the piano suite is dedicated to individuals who died during the war. When asked how he could include so much joyous music in his *Tombeau*, Ravel replied wistfully, “The dead are sad enough, in their eternal silence.”

Donald G. Gíslason 2024