

philharmonia orchestra

LIGETI *Atmosphères*

Nine years later than Xenakis, Ligeti also arrived in Western Europe as a refugee, crossing the border by night in December 1956 as the uprising in his native Hungary was crushed by Soviet tanks. Like other left-wing idealists he had been slow to recognise communism as another totalitarian oppression. But as censorship increasingly impeded creativity, he wrote his serious compositions 'for the bottom drawer' so that he could experiment, although with little knowledge of what was happening in the West. To shake off the Bartókian heritage he composed a set of piano pieces, *Musica ricercata*, the first of which is built on a single pitch (and its octaves), gradually adding more pitches in each successive piece.

For this purpose he chose to regard all the music he knew and loved as 'irrelevant and even invalid. I set myself such problems as: what can I do with a single note? with its octave? with an interval? with two intervals?...' More radically, he conceived 'the idea of a static, self-contained music without either development or traditional rhythmic configurations'. The 'supposed self-liberation was doomed to partial frustration' due to Ligeti's isolation and retarded technical ability. The Bartókian idiom still came through and, after arriving in the West, he laughingly dismissed the (actually very effective) products of this secretive workshop as 'inadequate and half-baked'.

Amongst the few manuscripts Ligeti was able to take across the border was an orchestral piece called *Viziók (Visions)*. Although subsequently lost, it evidently came closer to his ideals. He reworked it, and the final version, renamed *Apparitions*, was performed at the World Music Days in 1960, where it created a sensation. The music retains rhythmic and melodic elements and explosive gestures – the ephemeral phenomena of the title. But in his next orchestral score, *Atmosphères* premiered in 1961, Ligeti focuses entirely on texture. Now there is virtually no figurative foreground – only background.

But what a background! Brilliantly coloured, and of blinding intensity, this too suggests clouds and gases amassing and dispersing, a strange and exotic void before matter is created. The effect is less abrasive and far more mysterious than in Xenakis. One is reminded of the transient opening bars of Beethoven's ninth and Bruckner's symphonies, when hushed tremuli define the space into which themes will be projected. Not to project them at all was unprecedented. But despite the absence of discourse, the piece is far from uneventful. It opens with a soft 59-note cluster covering five and a half octaves; and, as this slowly fades, harmonic subgroups are successively highlighted. The cluster begins to tremble and float upwards, ending in a piercing screech from four piccolos. Suddenly cut off, the music reappears at the deep other extreme in the double basses. The full strings re-enter in 56 parts, each following one of two twelve-note melodies but in its own unique rhythm so that, submerged in the mass, no individual can be identified. Their direction is clear however: gradually compressed into a central core of three adjacent pitches. A series of textural blocks follow – variously coloured, increasingly furtive – and the piece ends in a dying haze of disembodied harmonics.

Ligeti was unaware, so he said, that his use of clusters and polymetric (moiré) rhythms had been pioneered by Xenakis. *Atmosphères* and *Pithoprakta* have similar durations and intent, but the buzz already surrounding Ligeti made his premiere the more momentous. This was the 'Ligeti sound' with which the composer became identified in the '60s and '70s. Such was its impact that I remember hearing Ligeti's music on John Peel's 'Night Ride' on Radio 1; and Stanley Kubrick was so haunted that he used *Atmosphères* and other pieces by Ligeti extensively on the soundtrack of *2001 – A Space Odyssey*, famously without asking permission.