

An Analysis of Gyorgy Ligeti's
Aventures and *Nouvelles Aventures*
by David Mitchell

Gyorgy Ligeti (1923-2006) was born in Transylvania, Romania and began studying music in 1941 at Cluj city conservatory with Ferenc Farkas. He studied with Pál Kadosa from 1942-1943 in Budapest, but was sent to a forced labor camp by the Nazis. The Nazis destroyed Ligeti's entire family. After the war, Ligeti resumed studies at the Liszt conservatory in Budapest. In 1956, he fled Hungary after the revolution and was then exposed to the avant-garde European movement of the 1950s. Ligeti was invited by Herbert Eimert to join the Electronic Music Studio of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (West German Radio) in Cologne, where he remained from 1957-1959. At this studio he became familiar with the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Gottfried Michael Koenig, and judging by the aleatoric nature of *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*, John Cage. I believe his electronic music experience at this studio influenced *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*.

The titles, *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures* that Ligeti choose for these compositions, mean "Adventures" and "New Adventures" in English. There is a definition in the [American Heritage Dictionary of The English Language](#) that defines aventurine (a closely related word) as an opaque or semi-translucent brown glass flecked with small metallic particles, often of copper or chromic oxide. It is derived from the French word "aventure" or accident, so called because of its accidental discovery, or the randomness of inclusions in it. It's not clear that Ligeti had this last origin in mind when

composing these pieces, but both definitions are very appropriate descriptions of *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*.

Ligeti is using word sounds to create a textless composition for soprano, alto, and bass with instrumental accompaniment. He specifies these sounds in his extensive performance notes using the International Phonetic Alphabet to specify the consonant and vowel sounds that the singers use in both pieces. It is clear from Ligeti's performance notes that he is trying to exploit the full range of sounds that the human voice has to offer. Since Ligeti is not using a specific language or any recognizable words, the voices have a very primitive quality like the guttural grunts of primitive man. Perhaps this is why Stanley Kubrick used excerpts from Ligeti's music in his film 2001: A Space Odyssey. One of Ligeti's pieces that is very similar to *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures* can be heard at the beginning of the film in the scene entitled "The Dawn of Man".

There is very little middle ground in these two pieces. The dynamics, pitches, timbre, notation and rhythm are all extreme: the dynamics are either pp, ppp, pppp, or ff, fff, ffff. Sometimes the dynamics occur next to one another or even at the same time. The range of pitches is from the top range of the voice to as low as possible. There is also a degree of indeterminacy in the pitches. For example, the performance notes read, "murmuring, at various pitches, murmuring, as low as possible, speaking voice, as high as possible". But Ligeti contrasts these indeterminate sections with specific pitches in traditional notation and a polyphonic texture to create a sound mass. There is no specific tone row, but there is a free use of all twelve tones in Ligeti's polyphonic sections and a chordal structure that liberally uses minor second chord clusters. The timbre of the vocal

parts is used to create percussive and ambient effects. The singers sometimes sing through paper tubes, exhale and inhale, or shout and laugh. The rhythm has indeterminate sections that alternate with specifically notated sections. The overall effect is a very irregular and arrhythmic structure.

Aventures and *Nouvelle Aventures* by Ligeti have a very surreal ambient quality. Both pieces seem to be an extension of Ligeti's work with electronic music. He is using the ensemble like a synthesizer. It is a very effective piece and one that would be very difficult to perform.

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