

Ligeti and the Requiem

By Babak Golestani

Different historical and compositional aspects of Ligeti's Requiem will be discussed in this essay with some brief look at his personal motivations and his musical ideas resulting the creation of the Requiem being one of his most prominent works which Ligeti himself marked as „the best work he composed to date“ in a letter to Ove Nordwall. The second and the third movements which would be the most interesting between the four will be discussed with a slightly more careful regard to details.

Ligeti was for some years willing to compose a Requiem for political reasons and the idea of creating such a work was actually born in his home country, Hungary. After several tries in various styles, Ligeti began to compose his Requiem - the last try resulting the creation of the large-scale Requiem with four movements, which we know today - after his immigration to Austria.

After becoming a member of a group of militant Catholics, as a “not practicing”, “not baptized Jew”,¹ Ligeti decided to write a work, which was related to “Jews, Catholics”, and “all people who vanished in Hungary”². Ligeti's Requiem is not “related to a person or event” and is “a funeral mass for the whole the humanity”.³

Ligeti used the requiem mass as an already existing text. He composed the Introit, the Kyrie and the Dies irae sequence from this text. The listener, however, cannot follow the text because of the dense polyphonic nature of the work, which would not be absolutely necessary, as the listener already knows the emotional content of the text:

- The Introit (the first movement) represents the “pain of death”
- The Kyrie (the second movement) represents the “cry for help”
- The Dies irae sequence (the third movement) represents the “Last Judgement”
- The Lacrimosa (the last movement) is considered as a part of Dies irae. But it is a separate movement in Ligeti's Requiem. The Lacrimosa is a kind of epilogue and “its dominant emotional content is lux perpetua”⁴ or eternal light: hope.

As Eric Drott⁵ expressed his opinion, Ligeti used simple versus complex, static versus dynamic, audible versus inaudible, and individual versus mass as contrasts in the Requiem. I would add comprehensible versus incomprehensible: Ligeti has treated individual words of the liturgical text in such a way that they are understable.

¹ Nah und fern zugleich: jude-sein in musik: Ein Gespräch zwischen Juan Allende-Blin, Mauricio Kagel und György Ligeti, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, 3 Nov 1990

² ref. 1

³ Erkki Salmenhaara, Das musikalische material und seine Behandlungen in den Werken Apparitions,' Atmosphères, Adventures und Requiem von György Ligeti (Regensburg, 1969)

⁴ ref. 3

⁵ Eric Drott, Line, Masses, Micropolyphony: Ligeti's Kyrie and the "Crisis of the figure")

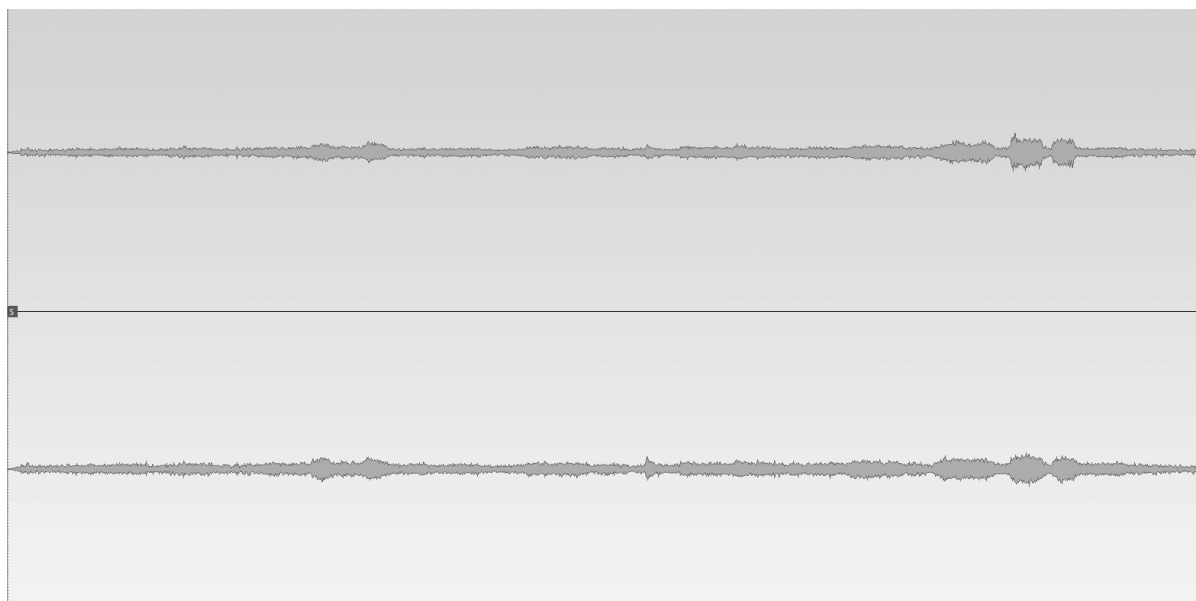
Ligeti adopted some styles of his preceding compositions in Requiem such as „experimental vocal style of his adventures in which three vocalists try to convey their emotional state without words by singing in an imaginary nonsense language.”⁶

Ligeti wrote the following in a letter to Ove Nordwall:

“You will see that the four movements of the Requiem are a kind of summary of my previous way of composing: the “Typus” of Volumina and Atmospheres is in the first and second movement, and the “Typus” of Avenues on the other hand is in the third movement.”

It is noteworthy that the Atmospheres and the Aventures represent “two opposing tendencies”⁷ in Ligeti’s works. Atmosphere is a static work and Aventures is very dynamic. The Requiem could be considered as combination of these two tendencies with some new features added.

The Requiem appears with the Introit, from the darkness of lower register and disappears with Lacrimosa in the shining light of high register. The Introit, by the way, also begins in low register and ends in high register. The darker timbre of the start - consisting of four splitted bass parts - brightens gradually. This could be considered as a short presentation of the form process in the Requiem as a whole.



The dynamic development in the Introit. (London Voices, Berliner Philharmoniker - Jonathan Nott)

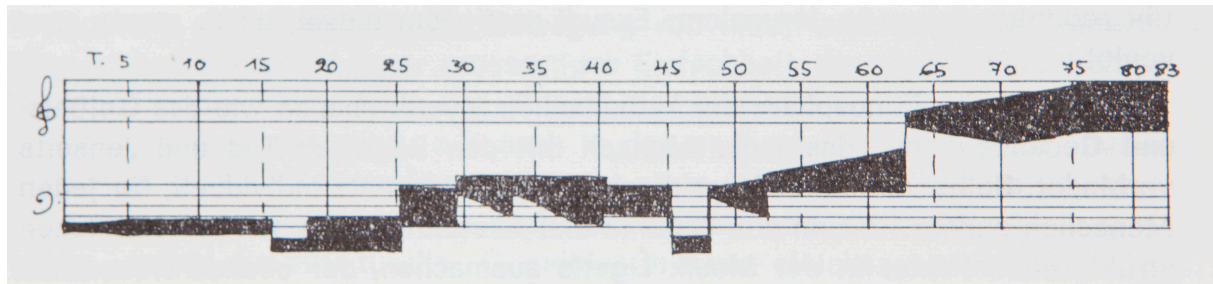
The Introit contains the traditional text of the first part of the funeral mass. But the musical content of the Introit is not only a medium which merely demonstrates the text musically. It also includes the “hundreds of years old associative material” which is “linked to famous lines”⁸ of the Introit : *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis. Te*

⁶ Wolfgang Marx, Make room for the Grand Macabre!

⁷ Erkki Salmenhaara, Das musikalische material und seine Behandlungen in den Werken Apparitions, Atmosphères, Aventures und Requiem von György Ligeti (Regensburg, 1969)

⁸ ref. 7

deceat hymn, Deus in Sion, et tibi reddetur votum in Jerusalem: Exaudi orationem meam ad te omnis caro veniet.'



The pitch development in the Introit.⁹

The long sounds of orchestra which accompany and support the vocals parts, the choral part which is created by 4, 8 or 12 voice polyphonic textures, with slow gradual movements, which would be reminiscent of the vocal polyphony of the past: Palestrina, the [comprehensible] words (M. 14-16 and 45-46) 'Domine' and 'exaudi orationem meam' (note from Ligeti on the score: "Articulate the text as clearly as possible in this position"), and the 2 voice texture of soloists, soprano and mezzo-soprano, are marked by Salmenhaara¹⁰ as essential musical elements by which the Introit is composed.

The dynamics in the Introit is very limited: *pppp-p*, imparting, both formally and emotionally, a long lasting continuity, a strange kind of uniformity to the part with a starting somewhere in distance, stillness, depth... From the darkness. Such atmosphere will be back in the last part, the *Lacrimosa*, in which the "the thinnig of the texture is pushed further"¹¹.

Counterpoints occur in both micro-polyphonic and macro-polyphonic levels. The four voices, which move independently creating a cluster with a range of a diminished forth, can be simultaneously combined with a polyphonic 'whole'. And no rhythmic pulse can be heard which helps the continuity and uniformity of the part.

The *Kyrie*, which is a five-part double fugue - each part is consisted of 4 rhythmically independent voices which build a cluster (Ligeti called it "bundles of voice"¹² treated polyphonically; "each bundle a group of four parts subdividing the soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor and bass sections of the choir"¹³) – with "two subjects": "one accompanying the words *Kyrie eleison* the other the words *Christe eleison*"¹⁴. The four alto voices, however, "bring all the same tones in exactly the same order".¹⁵

⁹ ref. 7

¹⁰ ref. 7

¹¹ Eric Drott, *Line, Masses, Micropolyphony: Ligeti's Kyrie and the "Crisis of the figure"*)

¹² György Ligeti, "Auf dem Weg zu *Lux aeterna*", *Österreichische Zeitschrift*, 24 (1969): 80-88

¹³ Jonathan W. Bernard, *Rules and regulations: lessons from Ligeti's compositional sketches*

¹⁴ ref. 10

¹⁵ Erkki Salmenhaara, *Das musikalische Material und seine Behandlungen in den Werken Apparitions, 'Atmosphères, Adventures und Requiem von György Ligeti* (Regensburg, 1969)

The text, in the Kyrie, remains generally incomprehensible by “rush speaking... excessive elongation of individual words and syllables... simultaneous presentation of different voices and splitting words and distributing them to different voices.”¹⁶

8

2. KYRIE

[CORO I]
Cl 3 muta in CEG

$\frac{2}{2}$ (4) $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 40$ **MOLTO ESPRESSIVO**
 $\frac{2}{2}$ (4) ($\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 80$)

pp espressivo

A 1
2
3
4

T 1
2
3
4

Cb
Tutti unis.

(con sord.) tenuto
p

diminuendo

György Ligeti, Requiem (1963–65), no. 2, Kyrie, p. 8 (study score, no. 4841, Frankfurt am Main etc.: Litolf/Peters 1966) - 1/2

¹⁶ Constantin Floros, György Ligeti, Jenseits von Avantgarde und Postmoderne

György Ligeti, Requiem (1963–65), no. 2, Kyrie, p. 8 (study score, no. 4841, Frankfurt am Main etc.: Litolf/Peters 1966) - 2/2

The Kyrie is a contrast to the Introit: It is dynamic and active – a factor that “distinguish the Kyrie from Ligeti’s later forays in micropolyphonic writing”¹⁷ - with a polyphonic texture developed simultaneously in two levels: micro and macro polyphony.

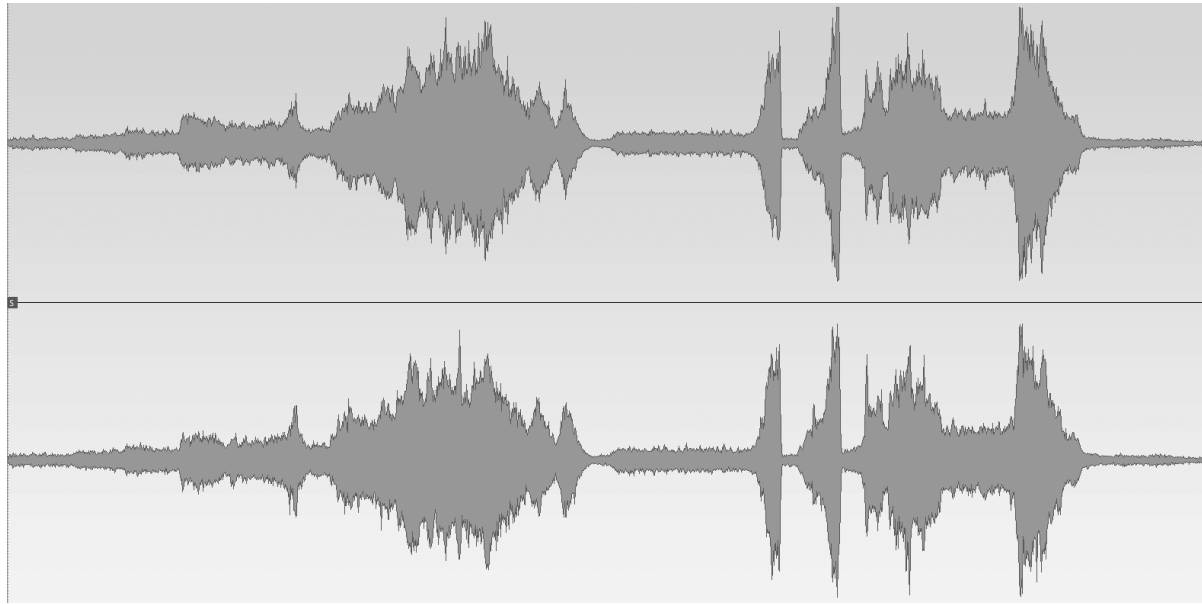
There is a basic similarity between Kyrie and Christe material: “each entry consists of voice bundles”: “the five divisi parts of the soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor, or bass section of the choir entering in unison and then fanning out into a stretto canon, merging back into a unison as the canon concludes and the entry ends.”¹⁸

Ligeti testified that the contrapuntal form model of this part, with a basic idea of “continuous polyphonic stream”¹⁹, was Bach’s motet ‘Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied’.

¹⁷ Eric Drott, Line, Masses, Micropolyphony: Ligeti’s Kyrie and the “Crisis of the figure”)

¹⁸ Jonathan W. Bernard, A Key to Structure in the Kyrie of György Ligeti’s Requiem

¹⁹ ref. 12



The dynamic development in the Kyrie. (London Voices, Berliner Philharmoniker - Jonathan Nott)

Kyrie is a big double fugue without themes in the traditional sense, containing the two melodically contrasting ‘Kyrie eleison’ and ‘Christe eleison’, which are structurally created themes, each of which has its own differing construction principle. The two Canon’s interval development is different. One, the Kyrie Canon, consists second intervals, while the Christe settings constructed more variously, consists of narrow and widening interval combinations: wider than a major second.

The tone B \flat which appears twice in the Kyrie row, at the first and the last pitch, is particularly important. The composer mentioned in this regards the „use of central pitch in Webern’s Piano Variations Op. 27“²⁰. The Kyrie part begins with this pitch in unisono and the climax of the second big Crescendo ist also the high B \flat .

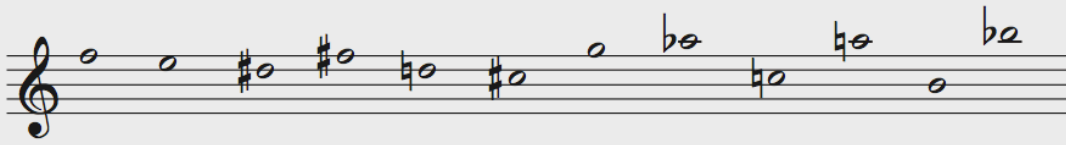
The wedge-like design of the Christe melodies “lends them their general tendency to run through all 12 of the pitch classes in fairly short order”²¹. The Kyrie melody does not share this feature.

By the way, beginning the Kyrie theme in pianissimo espressivo, and the Christe theme, in contrast, in *pppp non espressivo* “arises spatial effects”²².

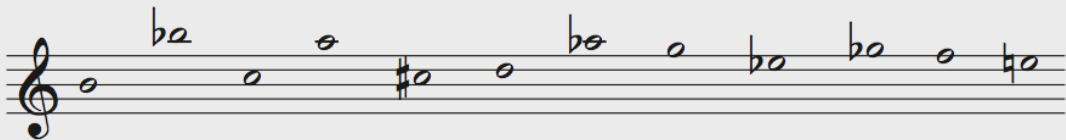
²⁰ ref. 12

²¹ Jonathan W. Bernard, Rules and regulations: lessons from Ligeti’s compositional sketches

²² Constantin Floros , György Ligeti, Jenseits von Avantgarde und Postmoderne



Soprano Christe strand beginning at measure 40.²³



Soprano entry at measure 102, which stands in the relationship of retrograde inversion to the entry at measure 40.²⁴

The soprano melodies at bars 40 and 102 – which is a “retrograde inversion of the entry at m. 40”²⁵ - could be considered as series, as “they consist of exactly 12 pitches”²⁶.

As Eric Drott²⁷ mentioned, the large number of voices in the Kyrie has been seen as following:

- “Instead of ordered community moving with mutual respect along the lines of a canon, we are presented with a **mob**.”²⁸

- “...This kind of musical life is very much a metaphor of certain aspects of urban society. The **person-as-atom** can enter the urban society anonymously and therefore easily, but can just as easily be replaced. This knowledge tends to generate an atmosphere of mutual indifference, accompanied by a certain amount of tension”.²⁹

²³ Jonathan W. Bernard, *A Key to Structure in the Kyrie of György Ligeti's Requiem*

²⁴ ref. 22

²⁵ Jonathan W. Bernard, *A Key to Structure in the Kyrie of György Ligeti's Requiem*

²⁶ ref. 18

²⁷ Eric Drott, *Line, Masses, Micropolyphony: Ligeti's Kyrie and the "Crisis of the figure"*

²⁸ Paul Griffiths, *György Ligeti*, New York: Robson Books, 1997) 50.

²⁹ Thomas Clifton, *Music as Heard: A Study of Applied Phenomenology*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 169-71.

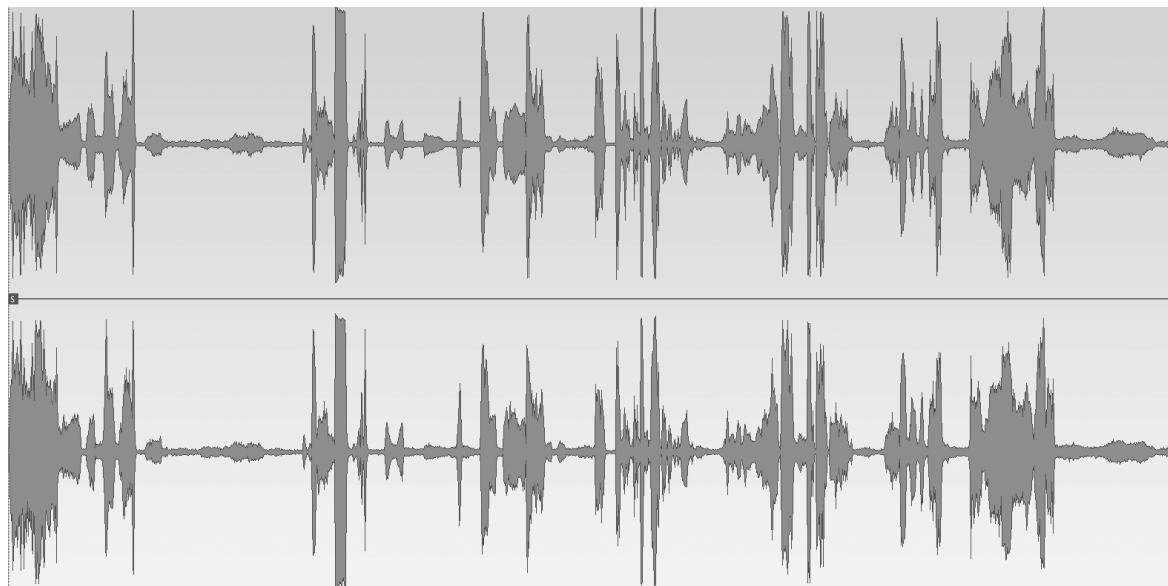
- "...By refusing to celebrate the independent quality of inner and outer voices, Mr. Ligeti's polyphony acts like a socialist state in which the **individual effort anonymously** serves the whole."³⁰

- The "**immeasurable tide of imploring humanity**"³¹

The process of absorption of a voice, as form of individual, into a dense polyphony, which disallows the individual – here the voice – to be heard, can logically be likened to "deindividuation"³².

Ligeti expressed his opinion about Dies irae in a letter to Ove Nordwall in the following way: "I think – but of course I may be wrong – that the Requiem and especially the Dies irae is my best composition to date. That might not seem at the first hearing. Rather, it may be that many people are disappointed and may say, I was not "avant-garde" anymore, because Dies irae may appear more conservative than my other pieces, because of the type of dramatics and expression and because of use of very strict polyphonic compositional technique. I would say: I don't care... I only care to compose the music that I have in mind ... Like Stravinsky, I'm unconcerned about the category of "modernity". I don't care about the fashion."

The Dies irae, which also has an incomprehensible text, in contrast to the Kyrie which is based on uninterrupted continuity, shows an interrupted form: "in a five-part counterpoint, each of the five musical events is broken into individual pieces."³³



The dynamic development in the Des irae. (London Voices, Berliner Philharmoniker - Jonathan Nott)

³⁰ Bernard Holland, "Unnerving Master of Terror and the Absurd", New York Times (April 21, 1998), E7.

³¹ Richard Steinitz, György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 146.

³² Eric Drott, Line, Masses, Micropolyphony: Ligeti's Kyrie and the "Crisis of the figure")

³³ Erkki Salmenhaara, Das musikalische Material und seine Behandlungen in den Werken Apparitions, Atmosphères, Adventures und Requiem von György Ligeti (Regensburg, 1969)

Ligeti provided some details about voice leading in a letter to Erkki Salmenhaara³⁴, in which he wrote about harmony, use of pitches, rules of leaps for soloists and chorus and “proportional distribution of intervals in each voice”.³⁵

Ligeti wrote also about the ‘twelve-tone economy’ in this part: no tone must be heard more frequently than other tones, so that an even distribution of the 12 tones can be possible.

The composer used more leaps in *Dies irae*. All intervals are allowed from minor third up to major ninth. Octave leaps are not allowed. For each voice, the composer prefers minor and major sevenths and ninth. Leaps with alternating directions are permitted, but leaps in the same direction are not allowed. In the solos are also two leaps in the same direction allowed, except the third and the sixth. Two steps in the same direction are not allowed. Two steps with alternating directions are possible, but only when, the steps are made of two different seconds. A succession of more than two steps is not allowed: with change of direction they are allowed without restriction.

‘Dead’ intervals (intervals separated by pauses or phrasing turning points) are all allowed (also prime), with the exception of the octave, which is not allowed as dead interval (but allowed after a long break).

Sequence: A succession of the same interval (in the same direction or change of direction) is not allowed. The recurrence of the same interval (transposed) of any other intervening interval, while not unlawful, however, should be avoided. Sequences from two times two intervals are not outlawed, but should be avoided.

Harmony: The vertical presence of minimal a small or large second is prescribed. Exception: in certain highlights of the sentence a pure unison is possible. For locations where the voicing is very moving and a chord feeling does not exist, all vertical complexes are possible, with the observance of the principle that minimally one seconds must be vertically exist.

Open (as such audible) vertical octaves are not allowed. Octaves are allowed if they are hidden in the voice texture and are not audible.

The “main elements of the form structure of *Dies irae*”³⁶ are:

- The orchestra that supports the big and the small choir - singing ‘*Dies irae, dies illa*’ with fast and rhythmically complicated interval leaps - with strong accents.
- The mezzo-soprano solo (m. 12) singing ‘*Tuba mirum*’: its basic element is the one voice melody of soloists which consists large intervals and proceeds either in very long notes or contains extremely fast and large interval leaps.

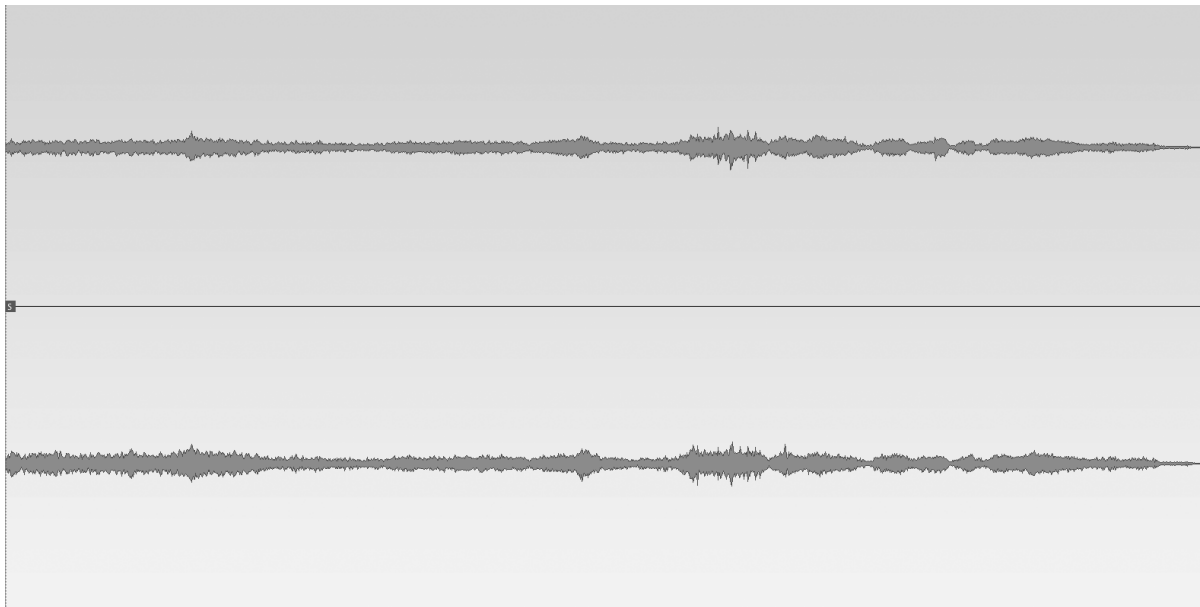
³⁴ ref. 28

³⁵ Jonathan W. Bernard, *Rules and regulations: lessons from Ligeti’s compositional sketches*

³⁶ ref. 28

- The declamation-like texture of the combined choirs, which appears for the first time in measure 35.
- The uninterrupted flowing continuity: a reminiscent of the micropolyphony in the Kyrie part: 12 women's voices subdivided in four parts, which appear for the time in measure 94 with 'Salva me fon pietatis'.
- The solo voices that sing the word 'Ingemisco' in measure 111 with a dense melodic and rhythmic texture. The continuity of the texture is sometimes interrupted by long sustained notes (for example in the choir in measure 117-118).

Peace has been realized in the *Lacrimosa*, which Ligeti called an "Epilogue"³⁷, in a unique way. A way to 'eternal light'. "The absolute emptiness of Beckett, the leftover "Nothing", has found its audible form"³⁸, wrote Kaufmann about the *Lacrimosa*.



The dynamic development in the *Lacrimosa*. (London Voices, Berliner Philharmoniker - Jonathan Nott)

Lacrimosa, compared to the other parts has a simple structure with a 2-voice texture, but with a similarly complicated rules of voice leading of the other parts. The choir is muted. The accompanying orchestra is small. There are not many notes and only three or four pitches sound simultaneously and the "interval relations between the voices are clearly visible."³⁹

The individual intervals, the second, the tritone, the fifths and octaves are the main elements of expressions without being tonal or atonal. "Their voices are selected by laws that only seemingly have connections to the principles of traditional music... The seconds or tritones in *Lacrimosa* are not dissonances, and the prime, fifth and octaves

³⁷ Ligeti, Auf dem Weg zu "Lux aeterna", in: ÖMZ 24 (1969), S. 80-88, hier S. 82f.

³⁸ Kaufmann: Död och förnyelse

³⁹ Erkki Salmenhaara, Das musikalische Material und seine Behandlungen in den Werken Apparitions,' Atmosphères, Adventures und Requiem von György Ligeti (Regensburg, 1969)

are not consonances. They act as intervals that have a certain character of expression in their environment, in their specific musical context... In the *Lacrimosa*, the material itself is the expression. The melodic line of the both voice solos is musical material and at the same time conveys the expressive content. Form and material are merged.”⁴⁰

After the first release of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s ‘*Gesang der Jünglinge*’ in 1956 in Cologne, composing ‘language music’ was the fashion. Several composers, like Luciano Berio, Mauricio Kagel and Dieter Schnebel, began their ‘language compositions’ by destroying the “syntactic structure of the language and treating it as phonetic material”⁴¹, which made the language incomprehensible. But Ligeti presented new ways of use of language in the music. The listener cannot still understand the words, however this is not because the words are phonetically or semantically dismantled, but mainly because of extremely dense musical structure he created in this work.

⁴⁰ ref. 33

⁴¹ Constantin Floros , György Ligeti, *Jenseits von Avantgarde und Postmoderne*