Mysteries of the Macabre, for Trumpet and Orchestra

György Ligeti

Many New York Philharmonic audience members first encountered György Ligeti’s opera Le Grand Macabre through the Orchestra’s staged performance of the work in the spring of 2010, conducted by Music Director Alan Gilbert. The work, based on a play by the Belgian author Michel de Ghelderode, unrolls in a madcap realm called Breughell and, inspired partly by the vibrant genre paintings of the 16th-century painter Pieter Breughel “the Elder” and the perverse phantasmagoria of his forebear, Hieronymus Bosch. The work’s theatrical approach has much in common with the Absurdist school of Alfred Jarry and Eugène Ionesco; King Ubu or the Smiths and Martins (of The Bald Soprano fame) could stroll through this opera and fit right in. On at least one occasion, Ligeti compared the piece to a work of pop art, its ironic effect arising from the collision of disparate aesthetic styles:

Ghelderode’s play was already close to Jarry’s Ubu Roi. I endeavored to realize in my music the immediately gripping quality of Jarry’s panache.

If the end of the world was imminent, if a comet was about to crash into our little globe and obliterate it, how would one choose to spend those final hours? That is the question posed by Le Grand Macabre, and having raised the issue, Ligeti also offers an answer that may seem oddly consoling: people will spend their final moments doing pretty much whatever they have done before; they’ll jockey for power, revel in stupidity, pursue love, engage in posturing, get drunk. In his essentially absurdist treatment, the composer manages to make the unthinkable approachable, by rendering it comical. He told the journalist Claude Samuel in a broadcast interview:

The threat of collective death is always present, but we try to eliminate it from our consciousness and to enjoy to the maximum the days that are left to us.

Le Grand Macabre is complex to realize onstage, but the Royal Swedish Opera apparently succeeded when it presented the initial production, in the spring of 1978. Further productions were quickly mounted in other cities, beginning with Hamburg (1978), Saarbrücken (1979), Bologna (1979), Nuremberg (1980), Paris (1981), London (1982), and Freiburg (1984). During that period, the composer arranged two movements from the opera into a 50-minute collage for four singers and orchestra, titled Scenes and Interludes from Le Grand Macabre. It was unveiled in Berlin in 1978 and reached New York as part of the New York Philharmonic’s Horizons festival in 1986.
The following year a concert performance of the complete opera was being prepared in Vienna, conducted by the British conductor Elgar Howarth, who had led the World Premiere. A crisis arrived. The coloratura soprano who was to sing Gepopo, the chief of police, fell ill and would not be able to perform her extremely intricate part. No understudy was in place and no substitute could be found at the spur of the moment. Howarth came up with an unorthodox solution. He was not only a conductor but also a trumpet player, and he imagined that the soprano’s part could be managed on that instrument. In a spectacular demonstration of the maxim “the show must go on,” he turned to the Swedish trumpet virtuoso Håkan Hardenberger, who somehow mastered the music, sans text, in very short order.

It was a make-do solution, but Ligeti was so pleased with the result that he consented for Howarth to arrange the soprano’s three principal arias into a single-movement piece for trumpet and piano, which was titled Mysteris of the Macabre. The composer then authorized that the Mysteris of the Macabre retrenchment be turned into a setting with full orchestra, featuring either solo trumpet or reverting to the original vocal part.

In Scene Three of the opera, the three arias follow each other in the order Howarth retained: “Psssst! ... Shhht! ... Cocomo!”; “Aah! ... Secret cipher!-” and “Kukuriku1 ... He’s coming!”

**Instrumentation:** flute and piccolo, three oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, contrabass trombone, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, suspended crotale, xylophone, triangle, police whistle, slide whistle, signal pipe, castanets, maraca, guero, cymbals, suspended cymbal, woodblock, temple blocks, snare drum, rattle, tambourine, bongos, low conga, low tom-tom, tamtam, military drum, sandpaper, tissue-paper, (which can be crumpled loudly), bass drum, celesta (doubling harpsichord), piano, harp, mandolin, and strings.

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**In the Composer’s Words**

György Ligeti said of *Le Grand Macabre*:

[I sought] a very colorful, comic-strip-like musical and dramatic action. The cartoons of Saul Steinberg were my ideal: characters and situations should be direct, terse, non-psychological and startling — the very opposite of “literary” opera; ... the dramatic action and the music should be riskily bizarre, totally exaggerated, totally crazy. The novelty of this style of music theatre should be manifest not in the external properties of the production, but in the inner quality of the music.
Film Fame

György Ligeti grew up in a Jewish family in a Hungary that was dominated, in turn, by Hitler and Stalin. Unlike his father and his brother, he managed to avoid internment in a labor camp. He spent the years immediately following World War II studying at the Academy of Music in Budapest, producing a stream of the folk-based choral music that was de rigueur in Hungary at the time. But he also worked at blatantly experimental pieces, building on the models of Bartók and a few other avant-garde composers.

After the great Hungarian exodus of 1956, Ligeti settled in Germany, where he avidly soaked up the thriving culture of contemporary music. The new-music community was watching Ligeti closely long before he was thrust to a sort of popular fame in 1968. That’s when, without the composer’s knowledge or permission, and to his utter horror, director Stanley Kubrick incorporated three of his compositions — Atmosphères, Lux Aeterna, and Requiem — into the sound track of the film 2001: A Space Odyssey. Kubrick would make further use of Ligeti’s music (with his approval) in 1980, using his Lontano to help create the creepy atmosphere of The Shining, and in 1999 employing his Musica Ricercata II in the film Eyes Wide Shut.