

# A Pianist's Approach to Complex Musical Material in Ligeti's Études

Kristi Kapten

## Abstract

This article deals with performer's experiences in handling the pianistic challenges in the demanding études of György Ligeti (1923–2006). The article analyses possible approaches to the complicated musical material and describes how to master the études as effectively as possible through specific practice methods.

Ligeti's études are among the most complex pieces of piano music, demanding exceptional virtuosity and concentration from the pianist. An important structural component of the études is complicated polyrhythm, which makes learning and performing them particularly intense mentally. There are many polymetric passages where the pianist must choose which metre to proceed from in cognitive terms in order to achieve both technical confidence and the desired musical effect. The author gives examples of experiments with different metrical feelings in the work process and describes different technical and mental practice methods which prove useful for learning Ligeti's études.

The research is based on the author's experiences while practising and performing Ligeti's études, analysing notes taken during the preparatory phase. The main method is self reflection. In addition, other pianists' thoughts have been gathered from conversations, master classes and literature.

The études of György Ligeti (1923–2006) are among the greatest achievements in the solo piano repertoire of the second half of the 20th century. Performing them demands exceptional virtuosity and concentration from the pianist. The main characteristic feature throughout these works is Ligeti's use of polyrhythms and polymetricism, and this places considerable demands on the pianist. In addition to the rhythms, the études are also polyphonic in other aspects: the lines are intertwined and there is an abundance of polydynamics. Often there appears an illusion of many independent layers moving at different speeds. At the same time the études are extremely demanding technically, and learning and memorising them requires great patience from the pianist.

In my doctoral thesis *A Pianist's Approach to Learning Ligeti's Études*<sup>1</sup> I dealt with pianists' experiences while practising and performing Ligeti's études. The aim was to analyse a pianist's approach to complex musical material and highlight methods which have proven to be fruitful through experience. I relied mainly on my experi-

ence using the self reflection method. Reflection is often defined as a cognitive process through which one learns from experience, either individually or in association with others (Benammar 2004). The method is often claimed to be conducive to deeper learning as it allows one to create and systematize conscious knowledge of one's self-perception (Moon 2004). In the process of practising a musical instrument, reflection helps one to gain an awareness of one's weaknesses and find solutions for making improvements (Parncutt 2007). Reflections on my own experiences are derived from notes and score markings taken during practice sessions and master classes. In many cases I was able to draw parallels between my own thoughts and the experiences of other pianists. Interesting discussions about playing Ligeti's études occurred during conversations in which other pianists explained the notes they had added to their own musical texts and recalled useful practice techniques. Numerous examples of the notes made during the practice process may be found in my research.

<sup>1</sup> The doctoral thesis (in Estonian) was defended at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in 2017 (supervisor Professor Kerri Kotta), [http://www.ema.edu.ee/vaitekirjad/doktor/Kristi\\_Kapten.pdf](http://www.ema.edu.ee/vaitekirjad/doktor/Kristi_Kapten.pdf).