



Example 1: György Ligeti, 'Désordre', from *Études*, book 1, bars 1-8
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Not-quite-minimalist madness: Ligeti's 'Désordre', from *Études*, book 1

Like the runners leaving the blocks in a dads' three-legged race at sports day, the music bursts into life in a mêlée of desperate, hectic, semi-coordinated activity. In the surge of propulsive clattering, energy is expended at a massive rate, with little sense of getting anywhere. The entertainment is in the journey, not the destination.

Within four bars the hands cease to

co-operate, although they never become opposed. They merely slip out of sync and never get back in. Are the pianist's hands racing each other to the finish? Is each trying to drown the other out? The two hands play similar material, with uneven, lurching melody in octaves filled in with filigree scales, the right hand on only white notes, the left on only black, a simple – even simplistic – conceit.

The *Études* (1985) belong to the beginning of what emerged as Ligeti's 'late period', heralded by the *Horn Trio* in 1982. While the *Horn Trio* is a rapprochement with the music of the 19th century, in particular Brahms, the *Études* spring from an engagement with two sources closer to home.

First is Conlon Nancarrow, the American maverick who spent years in Mexico City punching holes in paper sheets for his *Studies* for player piano. The coincidence of titles is no coincidence. Both composers use unremitting fast tempos and *forte* dynamic, familiar, even banal, material, propelled with manic energy. Ligeti simply adds genius to the mix.

The second inspiration is Ligeti's engagement with minimalism. He had already used repetition and stasis more than the great post-war avant-garde composers. But the *Études* wholeheartedly engage with both diatonic musical material – 'Désordre' has no accidentals at all – and with systematic

patterning. Of course, being Ligeti, he ensures the music follows no strict, Glass-like process, where groups of 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 would inevitably have been followed by 7. But the grammar of minimalism is referenced even as it is denied.

The right hand groupings are: 3 5 3 5 5 3 6 3 5 3 5 5 3 7 3 5 3 5 5 3 3 9 3 5 3 3 5 3 4. Patterns are suggested but always disrupted, never properly realised. There is a wit in this music largely absent from American minimalism, where obsessively stating the obvious at inordinate length is both the point and the disappointment. Ligeti's restless imagination turns it into music of the greatest excitement, energy and simple craziness.

Ligeti's *Études* Book 1 is one of the masterpieces of the 1980s. Minimalism – the most influential new 'ism' of the 20th century – forced the modernists to re-consider consonance and repetition, both previously anathematized. Ligeti's response is typically impish, delighting in not-quite repetition, not-quite consonance, not-quite-minimalism. Despite sounding like a silent comedy score played at the wrong speed, 'Désordre' is a completely modern classic, from the starter's gun to the final glorious, exhausted stumble over the finishing line.

Bernard Hughes