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## *Lux aeternas* by Two Composers: Sacred and Profane in the Context of Genre Individualisation

*Lux aeterna* dveh skladateljev: sakralno in profano v luči zvrstne individualizacije

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### IZVLEČEK

Prispevek se dvema skladbama z naslovom *Lux aeterna*, deloma György Ligetija in sodobne slovenske skladateljice Tadeje Vulc, posveča skozi prizmo glasbene zvrsti. Takšen pristop se zdi primeren že zaradi Ligetijeve posebne obravnave sakralnega besedila, predvsem pa zaradi skladbe Tadeje Vulc, napisane za simfonični orkester, ki vsebuje šepetanje začetka besedila *Lux aeterna*. Vse to sproža več problemskih vozlišč, predvsem pa vprašanje, kaj je omogočilo, da lahko skladbi iz posvetnega zvrstnega okvirja prevzemata naslov in besedilo stavka rekviema.

### ABSTRACT

Two pieces, both titled *Lux aeterna*, are works by György Ligeti and contemporary Slovenian composer Tadeja Vulc. The paper offers some thoughts on two pieces through the notion of genre. This point of view seems appropriate on account of Ligeti's distinctive treatment of the sacred text, but even more on account of Tadeja Vulc's work, a symphonic piece, which includes whispering the first words of *Lux aeterna*. This raises several questions, yet the main dilemma is how it came to be possible that pieces which originate from the genre realm of profane can easily embrace both title and text that used to mark a *communio* of a requiem mass.

The fundamental characteristic of genre phenomenon appears to be its heterogeneity. Genre is defined as a connection of several different factors or criterions. In different historical periods, we find different criterions, on which genre norms were based on, but generally these four groups of factors were and are of most importance: (1) structure and form, (2) presence of text and its origin, (3) instrumentation and (4) performance context or social status.

The notion of genre, as we understand it today, is historically confined. Its first traces can be found in Johannes de Grocheo's *Ars musicae* from the beginning of 14<sup>th</sup> century, genre later became an important concept in the time of music-print expansion, as it functioned – and still does – as a device of marketing and distributing music, while it was theoretically exposed and presented for the first time in 1739 with Mattheson's work *Der vollkommene Capelmeister*. But Hermann Danuser warns us, that this was a time when genre history reached its zenith and that soon after the notion of genre was replaced with idea of musical work as individual entity.<sup>1</sup> This individuality was not manifested very clearly until 20<sup>th</sup> century modernistic project, which is commonly mentioned as a time of complete genre disintegration. Carl Dahlhaus explained how this supposed disintegration of genre is not a result of one single process, but rather a result of different changes in different genre factors – function, instrumentation, text and form.<sup>2</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a Requiem mass was already a reasonably well established genre within the concert environment, therefore performance context is not as relevant for the two *Lux aeternas* in question as other three genre factors. The individualisation of instrumentation is closely connected to the growing awareness of sound-colour, timbral element in music. The orchestra's growth enabled not only stronger sound but through different instrumental combination provided also more precise differentiation of sound-colour configuration.<sup>3</sup> As composers began to understand sound-colour as an independent compositional element, equal of harmony, melody, dynamics or articulation, they most likely started to choose instrumentation, which suited their conception best, and not instrumentation, which has previously been a part of inherited genre-norm. The position of text, its origin, meanings and symbolism, seems even more important for our problem. Listening habits changed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a way that vocal music – which used to be listened to exclusively in functional relationship to the text – became an object of structural or instrumental mode of listening. This led to disintegration of semantic dimension of texts, that were put to music within the context of a post-war New music.<sup>4</sup> In several works, composers made use of text exclusively as a substratum of sound-nuances. After such step towards understanding of a text's role, the genre of chosen text ceased to define genre of music, based on this text. It becomes very obvious why, for example, genre identity of Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* has no connection to biblical source of the text it includes.

This role of text seems to represent a sharp change in genre history, but even more radical changes happened in individualisation of musical forms. This is a process, which took place during the greater part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is a result of changed relationship between music syntax, tonal system and motivic-thematic work. Structural transparency, as observed in the music of classicistic-romantic tradition, is a direct result of functional tonal harmony with regular appearing of harmonic cadences. Rapid evolving of tonal harmony, its more and more remote and unpredictable harmonic

1 Hermann Danuser, "Gattung", in *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 3 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1995), 1049.

2 Carl Dahlhaus, "New Music and the problem of musical genre", in *Schoenberg and the New*, transl. Alfred Clayton, Derrick Puffett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 38.

3 Dahlhaus, "New Music and the problem of musical genre", 41.

4 Dahlhaus, "New Music and the problem of musical genre", 36; Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, transl. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 5-6.

relations and intense working with motifs – all this also redefined musical forms, which, in general, became ever more individual. Such formal individuality reached its radical point in 1950s with total serialism, other structuralistic methods and chance music. One of the sceptics of this development was also György Ligeti, who explained how such methods of musical material organisation abolish all types of established formal norm and cause changes in formal parts, which lose their vector-like functions.<sup>5</sup> Ligeti argued that this changed attitude towards form counteract something, which is inherent to the phenomenon of music and musical form, namely, they counteract formal frame of reference. As he analysed a phenomenon of musical form, he drew a distinction between musical form and music as such. For him music itself is a pure time course, while musical form exists as an abstraction. This abstraction comes into being, as we look at musical time course in a retrospective manner. This retrospective characteristic of musical form includes two levels, *real* musical time and *historical* musical time, both of which help to define formal frame of reference. Individual vector-like function of each formal section establishes through both of these temporal levels. We can grasp these functions from inner-connections of certain composition, which occur in a *real* musical time, as well as from connectedness with (or deviations from) other works of a certain stylistic context or tradition line, which exist in a *historical* musical time frame.<sup>6</sup>

We can trace these Ligeti's ideas also in his piece *Lux aeterna* for 16 solo voices, composed in 1966. Form of this piece is defined with textural contrast between micropolyphony and homophony. Within dominantly polyphonic piece Ligeti inserted two homophonic chord blocks, which define a formal idea on the level of the *real* musical time, and also trigger references on the traditional choral writing, thus establishing the *historical* temporal connections. Another strong historical reference seems to be Ligeti's microcanon, a special derivation from a polyphonic technique of imitation. Prefix micro refers to a specific difference from the traditional canon: time distances between voice appearances are much smaller and also the intervallic relations between parts appear to be similarly small. Even though micropolyphony is an important compositional technique, its result could just as well be understood from the aural perspective – here the audible recognisable and comprehensible technique is not polyphony of 16 voices, it is rather a sense of different sound facture. In Ligeti's *Lux aeterna* we do not hear a traditional polyphonic texture, but more likely a kind of surface of various densities and sound-colour nuances. This is reflected even in vocabulary by which Ligeti operates as he describes new musical syntax from the late 1950s. Rather than through parameters, he explains his ideas with expressions like sound surfaces, sound objects and sound interweaving.<sup>7</sup>

This aspect is even more important as we examine the role of text in this piece, which was already closely examined in analysis Paul Op de Coul carried out in his article *Sprachkomposition bei Ligeti: "Lux aeterna"*.<sup>8</sup> Ligeti's *Lux aeterna* is an extremely

5 György Ligeti, ["Über Form in der Neuen Musik"], *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik* 10 (1966): 28-29.

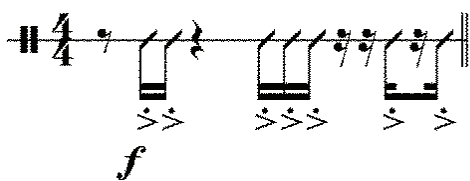
6 *Ibid.*, 25.

7 Ligeti, ["Über Form in der Neuen Musik"], 29.

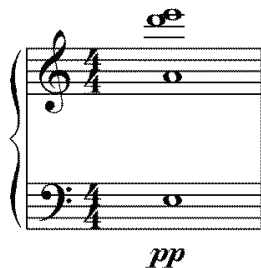
8 Paul Op de Coul, "Sprachkomposition bei Ligeti: "Lux aeterna". Neben einigen Randbemerkungen zu den Begriffen Sprach- und Lautkomposition", in *Über Musik und Sprache: Sieben Versuche zum neueren Vokalmusk*, ed. Rudolph Stephan (Mainz: Schott, 1974): 59-69.

syllabic piece. To each tone height composer assigned its own syllable. In direct repeating of particular tone height the syllable remains the same, while almost all of the tones – and also all of the syllables – are separated with pauses. Consequently each syllable is separated from its textual context. Ligeti also asks for as soft entries as possible and also asks singers to omit pronunciation of “s” in the word “eis” and of “t” in the word “luceat”. It seems very clear that Ligeti is mostly interested in articulation of vowels – in Latin [u], [ū], [ē], [e], [ā], [a], [ī], [i], [ō], [o] and [y]. As Paul Op de Coul already suggested, this heavily influences sound-colour.<sup>9</sup> Vowels shaping is in general an important part of singing technique, as each vowel occupies certain area within frequency spectrum – formant area. Ligeti’s attitude towards text, especially towards syllable and vowels, is a sign of his understanding of vowels as parameters for very exact and acoustically accurate defining of sound-colour or *timbre* for each tone height.

*Lux aeterna*, 10-minute piece composed by Tadeja Vulc, can be easily classified within a genre of shorter introductory piece in symphonic concert. But we can take a risk and try to find some deeper layers of this piece’s genre identity. As we are facing genre problem, we should deal with it through genre-criteria, beginning with form. This is a one-movement piece, which contains two minor divisions, and its ongoing musical flow is almost constantly sustained with tone centre – tone e. Tone e – in function of a pedal point – is regularly present, and this harmonic homogeneity is also achieved with reappearances of starting chord (example 1), which seems to be designed in quartal relationship, again gravitating to tone e. The most obvious caesura appears in bar 65. Until then music is defined by harmony and a kind of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, yet after this caesura the defining elements are rhythmical structures (see example 2).



Example 1: Reappearing Harmonic Structure.



Example 2: Distinctive Rhythmic Structures (Bar 89).

The third section of Vulc’s *Lux aeterna* begins after bar 112; after harmony-oriented first section and rhythmical second, a synthesis of the two appear in the last formal section. Here the harmonic structures from beginning and rhythmic element of the middle part reappear, but in this last part of a composition there is also a strong melodic

9 Ibid., 64.

element – it begins with separate melodic fragments, which unfold into a recitative-like flute solo melody, designed with additive technique, centred around central tone d (example 3). Apart from the same title, there is another connection between Ligeti's and Vulc's pieces. In this last section of *Lux aeterna* by Tadeja Vulc tone-centred harmony is occasionally replaced with very obvious micro-canon, György Ligeti's invention.



Example 3: Additively Built Melodic Line (Bars 171–173).

This is also a moment within the piece, when use of text and performance space – important genre factors – start to define character and effect of the piece. Lights in the concert hall are turned off and the only light comes from lights on musicians' stands. Musicians gradually stop playing, one by one turning their lights off and start whispering »Lux aeterna, luceat eis, Domine« in an aleatoric manner. At the end, as they all stop playing, there is a complete darkness and at this moment – as composer instructs – a small light is lit somewhere in the hall, symbolizing the eternal light. In this conclusion the composer changes the anticipated instrumentation, as she reduces symphonic orchestra to a soft tremolo of violins and a melodic line of flute, along with unexpected whispering. Using light and darkness she also individually redefines the performance location. We can understand the little light from the very end of her piece as a symbolic entrance of the sacred in the concert hall, i.e. in domain of musically profane. Light, an association to candle, could act as an allusion to some of religious ceremonies or rites of Jewish-Christian tradition, on lighting a candle on Jewish Shabbat, candles in Catholic liturgy or Orthodox prayers. That said, we can interpret this somehow differently. The composer obviously intervened in the performance space – she reduced it to contrasting relationship between light and darkness. Complete darkness at the end of the piece results in a situation, in which most of that, by which we recognise concert hall as a characteristic public space, is removed from visual field. Darkness and light are arguably the most basic and all-present dimension of every space and in this way concert hall becomes a *universal* environment of distributing music.

Composer's approach to text offers further interpretations in a similar direction. Orchestra musicians whisper only first five words of the *Lux aeterna* comunio and there are at least two possible reasons for this decision. The first is utterly pragmatic – musicians whisper these words in darkness, and have to memorise the text in advance, which is more convenient with only smaller portion of the text. Second explanation is more of a compositional nature. Tadeja Vulc – much like Ligeti – obviously avoided presenting the text with its complete semantic value. Ligeti used the whole text as a substratum for different timbral combinations, arising from vowels' formant areas, but Tadeja Vulc exploited a different side of human's voice. Whispering produces sonic

phenomena, acoustically defined as noise. This noise is even better defined when consonants are being whispered. At the end of Vulc's *Lux aeterna* we as listeners therefore perceive noise; this may be the reason why the composer emphasized consonants – first five words of *Lux aeterna* offer enough of these.

Discussing music in Slovenian language, we often hear explicit claims that music phenomenon is defined by three universal foundations without which music cannot exist as such: melody, rhythm and harmony.<sup>10</sup> Structuring of Tadeja Vulc's *Lux aeterna* actually underpins such notion of these three basic musical-theoretical strata, yet the particularly interesting use of the text reveals another possibility of interpreting musical universality. If we imagine understanding, what is ever-existing, universal in a phenomenon of music, this would more likely be *sound* – in a sense of its timbral quality, sound composed of periodic vibration – and *noise* – sound composed of nonperiodic vibrations. This universality connects both *Lux aeternas* by two composers. Ligeti's work reveals sacred text being understood as a substratum of sound – i.e. timbral – nuances, while Vulc's piece presents the same text through subtly articulated noise. They both incorporate a sacred text in a profane context, yet this does not trigger polarisation between the two principles; in case of Tadeja Vulc's work a profane performance context and a ritualistic, sacred elements converge into universality of the performance space. While examining pieces by György Ligeti and Tadeja Vulc, we also observed the latest steps of process which musicology describes as a disintegration of genre system and an individualisation of musical work. The analyses of two pieces suggest a notion, that total individualisation of musical work from genre boundaries – paradoxically, but still – often leads the composer into creating within a field of musical universal.

#### POVZETEK

Dve skladbi z naslovom *Lux aeterna*, deli Györgya Ligetija in Tadeje Vulc, nas postavljata pred vprašanja o zblíževanju sakralnega in profanega v času individualizacije glasbenega dela ter rahljanja zvrstnih norm. Ko sledimo Ligetijevim zamislim o pomenu vektorskih lastnosti posameznih delov skladbe za delo kot celoto ter o idejah o pomenu zgodovinskega referenčnega polja, se pojavljajo tudi jasne povezave s kompozicijskimi idejami in tehnikami v njegovi skladbi *Lux aeterna* za šestnajst glasov. Oblika te skladbe določajo teksturni kontrasti med mikropolifonijo in homofonijo. Skladba je večinoma polifona z izjemo dveh homofonih blokov, te teksturne spremene pa ustvarjajo asociacije znotraj skladbe same in hkrati sprožajo povezave s tradicionalnim zborovskim skladanjem. Za naše dileme o zblíževanju sakralnega in profanega pa je pomembnejši Ligetijev pristop k besedilu – na različne načine je skladatelj

v izgovorjavi besedila močno poudaril vokale in s tem njihova značilna formantna območja, torej območja v frekvenčnem spektru. Skladatelj je besedilo torej uporabil kot substrat natančno definiranih zvenov, zvočnih barv. *Lux aeterna* Tadeje Vulc je delo za simfonični orkester, torej delo iz profanega zvrstnega območja, ki pa nosi naslov komunija rekviema. Vpetost sakralnega v profano gre še nekoliko dlje, saj glasbeniki tudi šepetajo začetne besede komunija. Šepetanje – drugače kot petje, kjer zvok nastaja predvsem iz periodičnih nihanj – najbolj poudarja konsonante, ko pa te šepetamo, nastane zvočni rezultat, ki ga akustično najbolj definiramo kot šum, torej zvok, ki nastaja predvsem iz neperiodičnih nihanj. Kljub temu, da sta oba skladatelja v profan zvrstni kontekst vpeljala sakralno besedilo, to ni sprožilo bistvenih polarizacij. S svojo glasbeno obravnavo besedila sta skladatelja bolj kot k profanemu ali sakralnemu težila k dvema univerzalnima glasbenima fenomenoma – zvenu in šumu.

10 e.g. Črt Sojar Voglar, [without a title,] in *Skladateljske sledi po letu 1900*, ed. Črt Sojar Voglar (Ljubljana: DSS, 2005), 224–225.