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## Analyzing Ligeti's Étude No. 11: En Suspens

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## Analyzing Ligeti's Étude No. 11: En Suspens

### Abstract

Using the tools of post-tonal music theory, we analyze Gyorgy Ligeti's Etude No. 11, one of a series of etudes written to present piano students with technical and compositional challenges. As listeners, we clearly experience a feeling of suspense and constant uneasiness. To find out why, we must dig deep into the structure of the piece. Considering pitch class content, the role of meter, rhythm, and phrase-shaping, and development, this analysis reveals a complicated mathematical arrangement behind the auditory experience.

### Keywords

Form, Analysis, Post-Tonal Theory, Ligeti

### Disciplines

Music | Music Theory

### Comments

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## Analyzing Ligeti's *Étude No. 11: En Suspens*

### Introduction

The principal goal of this paper is to comprehensively analyze and interpret the first eighteen measures of György Ligeti's eleventh piano etude using concepts from post-tonal theory. According to Straus, "each of Ligeti's Etudes explores a different compositional and technical problem."<sup>1</sup> Natasha Marin, a Doctorate of Music candidate at the University of Southern California concurs with Straus, stating that proper performance of the *Étude* "requires complete independence of hands to simultaneously weave intricate, delicate, and elegant polyphonic lines."<sup>2</sup> With these assessments in mind, let us begin our own analysis.

One of the most immediately striking features of this piece is the combination of key and meter signatures. Both hands are initially notated in treble clef, however, the right hand has a key signature of five flats, while the left hand has an empty key signature.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Ligeti indicates a six-four versus twelve-eight meter contrast. The implication here suggests that the listener will experience not only tension in harmonic relationships, but also rhythmic elements. We will focus first on the former.

### Pitch Class Content

Before the left hand starts playing scales in the sixteenth bar, the right and left hands contain only six distinct pitch classes each.<sup>4</sup> In the right hand (recall the five-flat key signature), we have D $\flat$ , E $\flat$ , A $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , F, and G $\flat$ . In normal order and numerical notation, these pitches [1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10] taken together constitute  $\mathbf{T}_1$  of the diatonic, all-combinatorial hex-

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Straus. *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, pp. 155.

<sup>2</sup>Natasha Marin. "György Ligeti. Etude No. 11 'En Suspens' Analysis." pp. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Despite the notation, a tonal center is nebulous at best for most, if not all, of the excerpt.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Straus recommends this as a jumping-off point for analysis.

achord  $\mathbf{sc}(024579)$ . In the left hand, we have E, B, A, D, G, and C. In normal order and numerical notation, these pitches [7, 9, 11, 0, 2, 4] taken together constitute  $\mathbf{T}_7$  of the diatonic, all-combinatorial hexachord  $\mathbf{sc}(024579)$ .

We know that these hexachords are six semitones apart, but perhaps we can gain a better appreciation for the relationship between these sets using a visual approach. Consider Figure 1 where we illustrate the geometric relationship between these sets.<sup>5</sup>

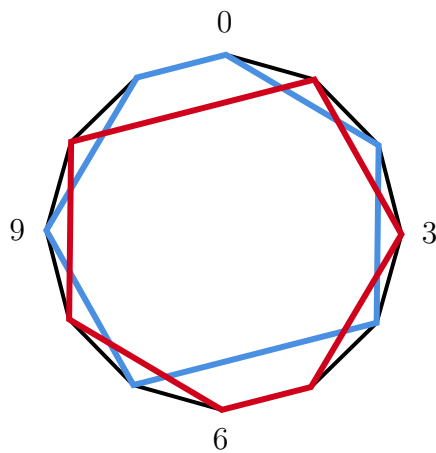


Figure 1: Left Hand versus Right Hand Pitch Class Content

If it was not obvious beforehand, it should be now that the union of our two sets yields the complete chromatic scale. Since they are presented in opposite hands using completely different motivic material, we perceive a great deal of tension, “*l’essence du suspense*,” in the melodic and harmonic material.

The resulting effect gives the music a constant forward motion tinged with constant unease. We might liken it to the sensation of walking as a series of coordinated falls in quick succession: never once does the piece completely fall apart, but rather its vector results directly from aesthetic tension.

<sup>5</sup>We might also characterize this as a rotation of 180° in more plainly mathematical terms.

## The Role of Meter, Rhythm, and Phrase-shaping

As noted in the introduction, Ligeti takes advantage of meter to enhance the theme of suspense or suspension. The six against four birhythm puts the performer's hands at odds with each other and enhances the motivic power of suspended parallel thirds.<sup>6</sup> It is also worth noting that the right hand, though notated in six, plays phrases longer than six beats. Similarly, the left hand, though notated in a compound four, plays phrases that are mostly shorter than full measures.

Taken together, the birhythm and irregular phrase lengths lead to almost constant patterns of suspension. Consider the quality of the first four measures and the first suspension of the piece. Initially, we have  $[4, 11] \cup [1, 8] \in \mathbf{sc}(0358)$  but as the right hand changes, we get  $[4, 11] \cup [1, 3] \in \mathbf{sc}(0135)$ .<sup>7</sup> The metric component enhances the dynamic nature of the piece.

Returning to the idea of phrase length, we can also consider the unique way in which Ligeti extends and even defies the notated meter. Straus notes that Ligeti uses phrasing of  $9 + 10 + 5$  beats in a regular sequence throughout the first eighteen bars.<sup>8</sup> This yields three superstructure phrases that play out over the course of four bars each in the right hand. Rather than following the simple convention of notated meter, Straus further enhances the piece's feeling of motion by introducing these larger motivic units.

Marin notes that the rhythmic grouping of quarter notes and half notes in the right hand remains consistent across the three superstructure phrases.<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that the second incidence of the phrase is offset by one beat. This occurs in bar 5. In this second iteration of the pattern, the range between notes played by each hand substantially as the

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<sup>6</sup>Natasha Marin. "György Ligeti. Etude No. 11 'En Suspens' Analysis." pp. 3.

<sup>7</sup>These are only two choice examples of sonorities occurring in the first two bars and by no means characterize all of Ligeti's complex harmonic relationships.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph Straus. *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, pp. 155.

<sup>9</sup>Natasha Marin. "György Ligeti. Etude No. 11 'En Suspens' Analysis." pp. 3.

left hand moves into bass clef for the first time. The offset in this pattern foreshadows greater shifts to come.

## Development

After the second statement of the  $9 + 10 + 5$  schema, we noted some changes in range. This was not a one-off occurrence. Bars eleven and twelve feature a large jump from the bottom of the piano's range to the top so that the hands actually cross over. We also see and hear our first beat value shorter than a dotted quarter in the left hand. In measures twelve, thirteen, and fourteen, Ligeti leads up to the scale section with a rocking pattern in dotted eighths.

As soon as the rocking pattern was there, it is quickly replaced by large triplet runs up and down the diatonic collection, covering a massive range of the piano. The resulting effect is reminiscent of wind chimes in a cinematic dream sequence.

## Conclusion: The Listener's Experience

We identified several distinct characteristics in Ligeti's eleventh piano etude. In particular, our analysis focused on rhythm, meter, and the dynamic relationship between feelings of stability and instability throughout the piece. For all this may say about the mechanics, what matters in the end is the listener's experience.

Ligeti achieves a palpable sense of suspense throughout this piece. If we were to personify these lines together, they might reflect two sides of discussion surrounding some difficult topic. The words keep flowing, but the conversation never reaches stasis. The listener is constantly on the edge of her seat as she tries to find some sense of resolution between the two rambling speakers. While their voices seldom get above a whisper, the energy in their

conversation never quite goes away.

On the whole, Ligeti's piece is a compelling example of how tonal and metric devices can be used as both technical exercises and artistic features to post-tonal composition.

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