BLENDING THE SUBLIME AND THE RIDICULOUS: A STUDY OF PARODY IN
GYÖRGY LIGETI’S LE GRAND MACABRE

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ABSTRACT

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Most musical depictions of the apocalypse do not begin with a car-horn prelude. However, György Ligeti’s only opera, Le Grand Macabre, written in 1978 and revised in 1996, is not most music. Dark, humorous, sometimes off-color, and always thought-provoking, Le Grand Macabre is filled with examples of musical and musical-historical parody. This thesis analyzes five parodic episodes from Le Grand Macabre, evaluating them in light of the theories of literary scholar Linda Hutcheon, musicologist David Metzer, and others.

Metzer, especially, proposes a twofold perspective for works comprised of quotation: either the dramatic action collapses internally, resulting in insanity, or it collapses externally, yielding destruction. A comet strikes in the penultimate scene of Le Grand Macabre, and the final scene involves the characters trying to discover whether or not they are dead. Ultimately, the only person to die is Nekrotzar, the self-proclaimed Death. However, Ligeti insists that the ending of the opera be left to individual viewers to interpret: he does not want the production to end as either a farce or an apocalypse. Thus, I analyze Le Grand Macabre based not on Metzer’s twofold concept, but rather on a continuum in which the two extremes are insanity and destruction.

Critical to this analysis is a discussion of Peter Sellars’s production of Le Grand Macabre at the 1997 Salzburg Festival. Ligeti attacked the production, and most reviewers agreed that Sellars interpreted the story as an apocalypse, not as the ambiguous adventure Ligeti had envisioned. Accordingly, I explore this ambiguity in light of Umberto Eco’s The Open Work to determine whether an inconclusive ending automatically denotes an “open work.”
Cette thèse est consacrée à STK, qui sera toujours une influence positive dans ma vie.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Most musical depictions of the apocalypse do not begin with a car-horn prelude. However, György Ligeti’s only opera, Le Grand Macabre, written in 1978 and revised in 1996, is not most music. Dark, humorous, sometimes off-color, and always thought-provoking, Le Grand Macabre is filled with examples of musical and musical-historical parody. Although Ligeti’s music has been a source of many scholarly studies and articles, little attention has been paid to Le Grand Macabre’s parodic episodes.¹ For example, Ligeti’s biographers Richard Toop, Richard Steinitz, and Paul Griffiths have discussed specific moments of parody but have not questioned their purpose.² Rachel Beckles Willson has also observed these gestures, but she mentions them as musical moments of the opera rather than as stylistic phenomena unto themselves.³ Others, such as Jonathan D. Kramer, although not specifically referring to Ligeti, have addressed ways in which postmodern music pays homage to the past and what role this tribute plays.⁴ Despite the scholarly attention paid to Ligeti’s music, no studies have addressed the implications and consequences of his use of parody in Le Grand Macabre.

In this thesis, I seek to illuminate instances of parody in Le Grand Macabre and their inherent meaning for the listener. I argue that meaning manifests itself through Ligeti’s use of parody. I have selected five specific moments on which to focus my analysis, although the opera contains many other references to the past. For example, the structure of the opera itself is based

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on the traditional “Meistergesang”: Stollen-Stollen-Abgesang, consisting of three acts with climactic endings and a final epilogue. In addition, Ligeti draws characters from historical precedents: Piet the Pot is a buffoon sidekick servant borrowed from the commedia dell’arte stock characters, and the histrionic duets of Amanda and Amando indicate that they are descendants of opera seria. In addition, the plangent chorus who worships their impotent leader, Prince Go-Go, evokes choruses of grand opera, and, according to Toop, the palindromic car-horn and doorbell preludes appear to be playful adaptations of Monteverdi’s brass overtures. All of these gestures indicate Ligeti’s awareness of the past and his use of it as a guiding structural principle in Le Grand Macabre.

Ligeti acknowledges the past through a variety of parodic gestures. These take one of two forms: either they quote a specific piece or they emulate general stylistic elements of a genre or composer. For instance, in scene 2, Mescalina and Astradamors dance to a thinly disguised version of Offenbach’s Galop Infernal, and the basis of Nekrotzar’s processional in scene 3 is a mutated version of the final movement of Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony. In terms of general stylistic adaptation, Griffiths has observed that Ligeti uses Monteverdian embellishments in the arias shared by the lovers Amanda and Amando. Through these and other uses of parody, Ligeti pays his own brand of homage to composers from Mozart to Verdi to Joplin. I will analyze how these references evoke the past while they encourage listeners to consider the present and the future.

7 Toop, György Ligeti, 164.
8 Griffiths, György Ligeti, 99.
The primary point of departure for my analysis of parody is Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Parody*, and I also include insights on irony from Wayne C. Booth’s *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Critical to my analysis is the discussion of quotation as a vehicle of parody, drawn from arguments established by David Metzer in his recent study, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning in Twentieth-Century Music*. Metzer argues that compositions built on quotation, references to the past, and nostalgia eventually collapse into either insanity or destruction. The arrival of a comet in scene 3 of *Le Grand Macabre* is Ligeti’s realization of such a collapse. However, Ligeti insists that productions of the opera remain ambiguous, allowing the audience to determine whether it has just witnessed an apocalypse or a farce. Thus, instead of adopting Metzer’s twofold solution for my analysis, I propose a continuum in which one extreme is insanity and the other is destruction. Compositions comprised of quotation and parody, such as *Le Grand Macabre*, may fall between Metzer’s two extremes, and such a continuum allows the flexibility of multiple interpretations.

Chapter II will introduce the plot and inception of *Le Grand Macabre*, and I will also define parody and place it in historical context, employing the theories of Metzer and Hutcheon. Chapter III includes a detailed analysis of five parodic episodes and their associations and meanings for the listener. I will also discuss the opera’s inconclusive ending in light of Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work*. Chapter IV will describe several productions of *Le Grand Macabre* and

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11 For example, after Peter Sellars’ production at the 1997 Salzburg Festival, Ligeti was outraged, claiming, “All of *Le Grand Macabre* is ambiguous, and [Sellars] has taken this ambiguous piece and made it into a completely unambiguous story, a propaganda story with an obvious moral.” Quoted in Toop, György Ligeti, 216–217. In addition, Ligeti has said of the character Nekrotzar that “one never knows whether he really represents death of whether he is simply a charlatan.” György Ligeti, et. al., *Ligeti in Conversation* (London: Ernst Eulenberg, 1983), 115.

their subsequent reviews, focusing on the controversial 1997 Peter Sellars production and its incongruity with the opera and its meaning. This chapter will emphasize whether an ambiguous ending automatically denotes an open work. Finally, chapter V will summarize and reflect on the above points.
CHAPTER II. _LE GRAND MACABRE AND PARODY_

History of _Le Grand Macabre_

The creation of _Le Grand Macabre_ was lengthy and gnarled. In 1965, Göran Gentele, then director of the Stockholm opera, commissioned an opera from Ligeti. For several years, Ligeti brainstormed various ideas, especially those conspicuously lacking unifying dramatic content, such as those used in his _Aventures_ (1962) and _Nouvelles Aventures_ (1962–65). These two works are composed for a chamber ensemble, soprano, alto, and baritone. The voices never sing specific texts, only consonant or vowel sounds, which has led Bryan Simms to call _Aventures_ and _Nouvelles Aventures_ “wordless dramas.”\(^{13}\) Toop has noted that the two pieces blend five different emotions: “humorous, ghostly-horrific, sentimental, mystical-funereal, and erotic.” He writes

> [T]he musical invention is too striking for the piece not to be taken seriously; but it is also because the two works constantly tread the tightrope between the sublime and the ridiculous. … All five areas or processes are present all through the music, and they switch from one to the other so abruptly and quickly that there is a virtual simultaneity. Each of the three singers plays five roles at the same time. So in addition to there being no actual words … there are also no fixed characters; even though one assumes a classic sexual triangle as the basis for the various solos, duos, and trios, at another level each character is all of the characters.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) Toop, _György Ligeti_, 96.
However striking *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures* are, Ligeti realized that transforming their spirit into an opera would compromise dramatic integrity. Ultimately, Ligeti decided that he could not write an opera that lacked a narrative; it needed what he called a “dramatic thread.” As he explained, “Let’s say that music-theater was an abstract genre and that I wanted to return to a certain narrative style.”

While contemplating non-narrative operas, he also considered stylistic influences such as the Theater of the Absurd and the Theater of Cruelty. Although the Theater of the Absurd refers to plays written in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s by such authors as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, Ligeti also looked to its precursors, especially Alfred Jarry. Jarry’s works often revealed the tragedy of life through biting humor, and his plays, most notably *Ubu Roi*, reflect the cruel reality of human existence, with all its gluttony, narcissism, and rage. Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty, on the other hand, sought to eliminate the false reality surrounding the physical perception of theatrical performance. In his manifesto, *Theatre and its Double*, Artaud wrote that theater would not find itself “except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior.” The Theater of Cruelty tried to evoke the unconscious obsessions and dreams of the audience through nonverbal gestures like grunts and screams. The ideology behind the Theater of Cruelty is strikingly similar to that of the *Aventures* pieces in that both deliver ugliness through actions instead of text. Thus, through the works of the Theater of

15 Ligeti, et. al., *In Conversation*, 114.
16 Ibid., 112
the Absurd and the performance philosophy of the Theater of Cruelty, audiences receive a graphic depiction of human existence.

Ligeti began his quest to integrate the grotesque of the Theater of Cruelty and the Theater of the Absurd into a narrative structure. Initially, he investigated Greek myths, remarking, “I became tempted by the Greek myths which offered the advantage of being at once totally familiar and sending me back to other musical works [by] Monteverdi, Gluck, [and] Stravinsky.” He eventually selected the Oedipus myth and wrote an entire libretto between 1968 and 1971, parodying Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* and shifting the role of Oedipus among several speakers.

In 1972, only two weeks after being appointed the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, Gentele died in a car accident. His death devastated Ligeti, who had looked to him as both a friend and the artistic director who had commissioned an opera. During this period, Ligeti stopped his work on *Oedipus*; he realized that although he wanted to write an opera with a text and a narrative, he also wanted to avoid characteristics of traditional opera; even a Greek myth was too familiar. He and his Stockholm production team, including Michael Meschke, Aliute Meczies, and Elgar Howarth, sought texts to illuminate simultaneous humor and cruelty. When Meczies discovered Michel de Ghelderode’s play *La balade du grand macabre* (1934) in a book of German absurd theater, Ligeti knew they had found their inspiration. He said, “At last I had found a play about the end of the world, a bizarre, demoniacal, cruel and also very comic piece, to which I wanted to give an additional dimension, that of ambiguity.”

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20 Ligeti, et. al., *In Conversation*, 114.
24 Ligeti, et. al., *In Conversation*, 115.
Although Ghelderode never knew Artaud’s work, these two playwrights are similar in that they both drew inspiration from Bosch and Breughel in what theater scholar Helen Hellman calls “their rendering of secret and cruel world[s] of hallucination.” According to theater scholar Aureliu Weiss, Ghelderode’s plays are characterized by “fetishism, living dead men, leaps through time, devils, sorcerers, ghosts, grinning buffoons, legendary heroes stubbornly destroying their legend, historical characters denying the facts of their history, philosophical drunkards, and death as a character in farce,” and Ghelderode “cherished the revels of apocalyptic visions [and] the terrors of fanaticism.” His characters are demonic, misguided, and grotesque, and his stage directions frequently refer to a specific artist, such as Breughel, Bosch, or Goya. Thus, in several ways, Ghelderode complemented Ligeti’s aspirations for a non-traditional opera.

Ligeti has identified additional influences for Le Grand Macabre, however. Art, literature, and other forms of theater are critical components of Ligeti’s vision for the opera, although not in the Wagnerian sense of the Gesamtkunstwerk. In fact, Ligeti detests this label and its associated pretension. Perhaps to emphasize the comedic and sublime aspect of the opera, Ligeti draws on the Tin-tin comics of Hergé, pop art, the Marx Brothers, cinema cartoons, and Charlie Chaplin. For example, the alphabetic tirade of insults in scene 3 (“Muckraker! “Mealy-mouth!” “Nancy-boy!” “Nincompoop!”) is inspired by the outrageous insults of Tin-tin’s Captain Haddock, which include such monstrousities as “Troglodyte!”, “Ophicleide!”, and “Visigoth!”

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27 Ibid., 58-9.
29 Ligeti, et. al., In Conversation, 118.
30 See, for example, Hergé [Georges Remi], The Adventures of Tintin (Boston: Little Brown, 1993?).
Ligeti has pointed out that the opera’s dramatic continuity is akin to comic books than to Mozart in that it consists of series of small scenes.\(^{31}\) Pop art, particularly the works of Roy Lichtenstein, demonstrates sensitivity to melodrama and violence. Many of Lichtenstein’s images, such as *The Engagement Ring* (1961), isolate one frame of a comic strip, directing the viewer’s attention to that particular moment (see Figure I). As art scholar Bradford Collins has noted, Lichtenstein’s changes do not eliminate the dramatic content but rather “strengthen the story.”\(^{32}\) In fact, he argues that Lichtenstein creates “a compelling image with greater emotional intensity” than that of the original comic book source.\(^{33}\) Similarly, Ligeti presents characters in isolated scenes, as if we are only witnessing snapshots of the story and we must construct our own context for them.

In combination with the comic book aesthetic, however, Ligeti drew on an ambience that had already inspired the *Dies Irae* of his *Requiem*: a large-scale sense of catastrophe.\(^{34}\) For visual inspiration, he turned to the artwork of Breughel and Bosch, retaining Ghelderode’s setting in the fictional country of Breughelland. Ligeti has said that Breughel’s *The Land of Cockaigne* and *The Triumph of Death* are particularly inspiring.\(^{35}\) Even though it is not a literary opera, *Le Grand Macabre* channels the dramatic spirit of the terse, direct speech of Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, the babbling repetition of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and the absurd, horrifying imagery of Franz Kafka.\(^{36}\) In short, like the *Dies Irae*, *Le Grand Macabre* emerges as a darkly humorous depiction of the Last Judgment, truly a juxtaposition of the sublime and the ridiculous.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 21.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 70.
\(^{34}\) Griffiths, *György Ligeti*, 106.
\(^{35}\) Ligeti, et. al., *In Conversation*, 118.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 115.
In terms of the libretto itself, Ligeti and Meschke wrote equal parts of the original. Ligeti has admitted that the rhythms of his native Hungarian prevent convenient translation, and despite his claim that Italian and English are the two ideal languages in which to write opera, the libretto for the original version is in German. Ligeti has subsequently decided that the opera is best performed in the language of the area in which it is presented. Therefore, the 1978 Stockholm premiere was in Swedish, and since then, *Le Grand Macabre* has been performed in German, Italian, Danish, French, English, and, despite Ligeti’s qualms, Hungarian.

The opera enjoyed nine European performances between 1978 and 1984, but it did not see the stage again until the Ulm production in 1991 (see Figure II for a complete list of performances). Ligeti revised *Le Grand Macabre* in 1996, replacing most of Meschke’s spoken dialogue of the original with dynamic recitative. For example, the roles of the Black and White Ministers were originally entirely spoken, but Ligeti transformed them into singing roles. He shortened the second act, a decision which has resonated positively with reviewers familiar with both versions. Ligeti also considerably expanded the final “Passacaglia” section (see chapter III for an analysis). He condensed the original two acts with intermission to four scenes with no intermission. The new version was premiered at the 1997 Salzburg Festival under the direction of Peter Sellars. Despite the musical revisions, the overall dramatic effect remained unchanged.

As noted, a palindromic car-horn prelude opens the opera. Piet the Pot, wine taster by profession and drawn from the goofy sidekicks of the *commedia dell’arte*, such as Harlequin, bemoans his existence. He forgets his troubles, however, when two young lovers named Amanda and Amando appear and croon about their desire to find a secluded place in which to

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37 Ibid., 115.
38 György Ligeti, liner notes to *Le Grand Macabre* (Sony Classical S2K 62312, 1999), 10.
39 Steinitz remarks, “Without doubt, the 1996 score is stronger both theatrically and musically.” *Music of the Imagination*, 239.
consummate their love. Then, Nekrotzar, the self-proclaimed Grand Macabre, emerges from a tomb and announces his plan to summon a comet and end the world at midnight. He calls for his horse, scythe, and cape, and rides away on Piet’s back. Amanda and Amando seize the opportunity to use the vacated tomb to make love, and they remain there until the final scene.

The next scene opens as Mescalina, a leather-clad virago, chases her lover Astradamors around the stage, whipping and verbally belittling him. Astradamors is dressed in women’s lingerie, and eventually we learn that he has protected the vulnerable parts of his anatomy with a frying pan. After the sadomasochistic behavior winds down, Astradamors observes the stars while a drunken Mescalina offers a plea to Venus: send her a man, “bowlegged, a hunchback if you like, but please, well-hung!” Venus, a coloratura soprano, responds in kind, for Piet then charges in with Nekrotzar on his back, who then attacks Mescalina, rapes her, and bites her throat, killing her. The three men dump the body in the cellar, Astradamors celebrates his freedom, and they set off for the royal palace.

Scene 3 begins with an alphabetic barrage of insults (“arse-licker, arse-kisser,” “blackmailer, bloodsucker”) between the Black Minister and White Minister. They represent the conflicting political parties of Breughelland, but their personalities and political objectives are identical. The Ministers goad the countertenor, young Prince Go-Go, to practice his posture and riding exercises, which are executed on an enormous toy rocking horse. But the boy prince wants nothing more than to gorge himself on delicacies. The chief of the Gepopo secret police, played by the same coloratura as Venus, arrives and delivers an indecipherable stream of warnings regarding an apocalypse, the macabre, and an asteroid. The terrified Black and White Ministers flee, and Prince Go-Go, delighted, can now eat without interruption. Piet and Astradamors enter, and Go-Go and Astradamors exalt their freedom from the Ministers and Mescalina. Nekrotzar
enters from the back of the hall with a processional of musicians, ranting about the impending end of the world. All four characters indulge in too much wine, and suddenly the intoxicated Nekrotzar realizes that it is two minutes to midnight and his promised apocalypse. He demands his scythe and trumpet, and, mounting Go-Go’s rocking horse, announces that the comet approaches. All the lights onstage are extinguished.

The final scene opens in the comet’s aftermath. Piet and Astradamors, floating above the stage, cannot decide if they are alive or dead. Nekrotzar emerges from beneath a pile of rubble, and asks rhetorically, “Have I not just laid to waste the entire goddamned world?” When a resurrected Mescalina evacuates the cellar and attacks Nekrotzar, the Ministers reappear and blame her for all wrongdoing, including higher taxes, the Inquisition, and assassination attempts on the Prince. In the midst of the chaos, Go-Go, Piet, and Astradamors realize that if they are thirsty for more wine, then they must be alive. This news is too much for Nekrotzar, who begins to shrivel as the sun rises, and he disappears. Suddenly, Amanda and Amando vacate the tomb they had occupied, noting that while they were hidden, nothing in the world existed except the two of them. All the characters join in a final chorus, singing that nothing exists but the “here and now.”

As for interpreting this twisted plot, we might begin by noting some major changes from Ghelderode’s play to Ligeti’s opera. One of these is the ending. In La balade du grand macabre, Nekrotzar is revealed to be nothing but a charlatan, whereas Ligeti allows the audience to decide whether Nekrotzar is Death or a fraud. As Ligeti has said, “If Nekrotzar really is Death, then Death is dead, we have passed into a state of eternal life, we are in Paradise and we have lived through the Last Judgment without realizing it. But if Nekrotzar is a charlatan, nothing has
changed; he is dead and we have won a reprieve.”

The consequences of this ambiguity will be evaluated in greater detail in chapters III and IV.

Ligeti also changed most of the characters’ names. Nekrozotar became Nekrotzar. Videbolle became Astradamors, a combination of the occult astrologer “Nostradamus” and “amor.” Salivaine became Mescalina, a combination of the psychedelic drug “Mescalin” and “Messalina,” the female corruptor of male power. Porprenaz (“purple-nose”) became Piet the Pot, a name adapted from another Ghelderode character named Piet Bouteille, or “bottle,” conveying his fondness for drink. Adrian and Jusemina were originally renamed Clitoria and Spermando, but Ligeti settled for the less raunchy Amanda and Amando. Ghelderode’s unnamed bird messenger was transformed into the chief of the Gepopo, a combination of “Gestapo” and “popo,” which is German slang for “rear end.” Prince Goulave became Prince Go-Go, probably adapted from Vladimir’s nickname for Estragon in Waiting for Godot.

Definitions, History, and Scope of Parody

To explore parody in Le Grand Macabre, it is first necessary to define parody and set it apart from similar devices, such as pastiche and satire. According to Hutcheon, parody always targets another work or another form of discourse. It showcases a text squarely in the light of its predecessor, illuminating the correspondence between the past and the present without necessarily mocking the past. Whereas Hutcheon’s definitions generally apply to literary texts, in my summation and definition, I mean “text” broadly enough to include musical scores.

40 Ligeti, et. al., In Conversation, 118.
42 Sabbi, “Illusions et allusions,” 19.
Parody is a form of imitation characterized by what Hutcheon terms “ironic inversion,” that is, implicating a meaning other than or in addition to what appears on the surface.\textsuperscript{43} This ironic inversion often causes the term “parody” to be used interchangeably with “pastiche” and “satire.” However, although all three terms employ irony, pastiche requires similarity of juxtaposed texts, while parody emphasizes their differences; satire requires the same ironic distance as parody, but satire almost always connotes negativity and ridicule.\textsuperscript{44} As such, parody illuminates the differences between old and new, pastiche amalgamates old and new through their similarity, and satire mocks them whether they are similar or different.\textsuperscript{45}

Irony is the main mechanism of parody. Wayne Booth has identified four principal characteristics of irony:

[Ironic gestures] are all intended, deliberately created by human beings to be heard or read and understood with some precision by other human beings. … They are all covert, intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface. … They are nevertheless stable or fixed, in the sense that once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions. … They are all finite in application …. The reconstructed meanings are in some sense local, limited. Though some of them are about very broad subjects … the field of discourse … is narrowly circumscribed.\textsuperscript{46}

By extension, irony can alert the listener to the differences in musical texts, and, according to Hutcheon, the listener distills pleasure from that irony due to the “intertextual bouncing between

\textsuperscript{43} Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 6.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 38. She also notes: “[E]ven the best works on parody tend to confuse it with satire, which, unlike parody, is both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention. This is not to say … that parody does not have ideological or even social implications. Parody can, of course, be used to satirize the reception or even the creation of certain kinds of art.” (16)
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 38 and 42.
\textsuperscript{46} Booth, Rhetoric of Irony, 5-6 (italics original).
complicity and distance.”⁴⁷ This critical distance is crucial to absorb the full meaning of parody; otherwise, as Hutcheon has noted, the listener will “naturalize” the parodied material as a part of the new, rather than associating it with the past.⁴⁸ Measured against the old work, the new work takes on multiple meanings as opposed to standing without the support of the past.⁴⁹ It is necessary for a listener to know first that a work is being parodied, and second, the work parodied. Otherwise, much of the meaning is lost.

One especially effective subset of parody is quotation. Although Hutcheon notes that the term “quotation” is not as strong as “parody,” Metzer has argued that because quotation may involve “fragmentation, expansion, rhythmic skewing, [and] stylistic metamorphosis,” it, too, can emphasize the difference between old and new.⁵⁰ In music, quotation thus serves as a structural component of musical parody, either by referring to generic stylistic principles or evoking specific melodies. Quotation in music refers to the incorporation of familiar melodies and stock dramatic construction to develop useful references to the past. In Le Grand Macabre, quotation is the backbone of parody, integrating the familiar into the unfamiliar to create multiple meanings.

As listeners recognize both the previous material and its new manipulation, they glean the meaning from these parodic gestures. As mentioned earlier, the composer intentionally plants ironic gestures for the audience to discover. This places a burden on the public, as Hutcheon notes that “[as] readers or viewers or listeners who decode parodic structures, we also act as decoders of encoded intent.”⁵¹ Booth, in turn, proposes four steps of reconstruction in which the listener engages to decode ironic intent: the listener rejects the literal or surface meaning; the

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⁴⁷ Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 32.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 34.
⁴⁹ Ibid., 31.
⁵⁰ Ibid., 15. Metzer, Quotation and Cultural Meaning, 6.
⁵¹ Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 23.
listener samples alternate meanings; the listener determines that his rejection is also rejected by
the composer; and the listener chooses a new meaning for what has been said. The final step is
the most important because it is through this new meaning that parodic works communicate. An
analysis of parody therefore must not only catalogue the works parodied, but relate them to the
appropriate historical, social, and musical contexts.

Much postmodern music confronts the juxtaposition of past and present; this is true not
just of parodic works. In Jonathan D. Kramer’s checklist of the characteristics of postmodern
music, he notes that it “is, on some level and in some way, ironic; … [it] does not respect
boundaries between sonorities and procedures of the past and of the present; … [it] embraces
contradictions … [it] presents multiple meanings and multiple temporalities.” Although he uses
these terms to define postmodern music in general, all of these concepts apply to the study of
parody, because irony, the past and present, and multiple meanings all engender parody. Andrew
Dell’Antonio observes that postmodern listeners explore open-ended meanings through a variety
of cultural relationships. Of course, as Christopher Reynolds maintains, this phenomenon is
nothing new in postmodern music; in the nineteenth century, composers used allusion in much
the same way as irony, concealing information to play “hide and seek” with their listeners.

Many post-World War II composers found quotation an ideal mechanism with which to
update their musical language, as it could integrate musical gestures of both the distant past, such
as Mozart’s melodic structures, and the recent past, such as Darmstadt and integral serialism.

Quotation and parody also provide a compositional middle ground between what Glenn Watkins

54 Andrew Dell’Antonio, editor, *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (Berkeley and Los
55 Christopher Alan Reynolds, *Motives for Allusion: Context and Content in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge,
56 Metzer, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning*, 110.
has called the “paralyzing polemics” of aleatory and integral serialism. Ligeti, too, has acknowledged this conflict:

When I arrived in the west, people were obsessed by Schoenberg, Webern, and what followed, thinking “12-tone or not 12-tone?” The question on everyone’s lips was “Wie geht es weiter?” – what path could music possibly take after Boulez and Stockhausen? …

I cannot understand this idea that you have avant-garde and you have this postmodern, neo-tonal stuff, as if these were the only two possibilities, there could be no third way.

There are always a hundred ways. You have to find them.

If integral serialism sought to forget the past and start anew, works of parody attempted to reconcile past and present. The result, however, is often irony rather than homage.

In her study, Hutcheon observes, “historians of parody agree that parody prospers in times of cultural sophistication.” As mentioned, the reader or listener must fully comprehend the original work in order to decode the author’s intent. Yet, the meaning encompasses more than just a flash of recognition. It is critical that the reader and author have a covert understanding of what the other already knows or assumes. As Booth argues:

What determines the relevant context out of the infinite number of surrounding details are the author’s choices and the reader’s inferences about those choices: the relevant context becomes the picture of a coherent whole, with every detail referring reciprocally to every other in the work. But at the same time, it is impossible to say that only what is “in the work” is relevant context, because at every point the author depends on inferences about

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60 Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre*, 416.
what his reader will likely assume or know – about both his factual knowledge and his experience of literature. And the reader depends on inferences about what the author could assume.\(^{61}\)

To glean a thorough understanding of a work then, the listener must comprehend not only the parodic gesture, but also the cultural context shared with the composer.

Metzer introduces several critical approaches for the study of musical quotation and its cultural aspects. He proposes two ultimate endings for works comprised of quotation and parody: denoting either madness or destruction. Compositions built on the possibilities of the past pursue a utopian ideal of reconciliation, but this pursuit will often collapse under its own weight. This collapse is either internal, resulting in insanity, or external, yielding destruction. Either the character becomes insane by dwelling on the past, or the world around that character crumbles due to overwhelming nostalgia, complete with corresponding musical motives. In either case, the crushing presence of the past leads to either internal or external annihilation.\(^{62}\)

Metzer introduces several postmodern compositions which illustrate his points, including Stockhausen’s *Hymnen*, Berio’s *Recital I (for Cathy)*, Berio’s *Sinfonia*, Maxwell Davies’s *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, several works of Rochberg, and, as a precursor, Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*. He argues that *Hymnen* aurally shatters under the burden of an unattainable utopia, while the third movement of *Sinfonia* admits the distinct possibility of such a collapse. On the other hand, characters in *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, *Erwartung* and *Recital I (for Cathy)* entrap themselves in the past to such an extent that any realistic perception of the present implodes. Thus, although the past offers vast possibilities for the present, to rely on it excessively is to tread on thin ice.\(^{63}\)

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\(^{63}\) Ibid., 113.
In his analysis of madness, Metzer cites Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* and Berio’s *Recital I (for Cathy)* as prime examples of quotation and parody evoking the obsession with the past and its subsequent decline into insanity. These works offer a dark underside to nostalgia, implying eventual demise if old and new become too intimate.\(^6^4\) The Woman in *Erwartung* and the singer in *Recital I* achieve neither death nor transcendence at the end of their pieces. Schoenberg’s Woman trails off chromatically with the unfinished sentence, “I was looking …” while Berio’s singer seeks liberation in either applause or death, mewling out a prayer in the last moments of her desperation.\(^6^5\) Although these inconclusive endings create a limitless expanse into which the characters’ past freely mingles with the present, both these characters are trapped in the past and can never look forward. Thus, the past ultimately consumes the present.

Metzer also presents other pieces that end in destruction. For instance, Stockhausen’s *Hymnen* also has a conclusive ending; the piece blends several national anthems, and it winds down into the single sound of Stockhausen’s breathing.\(^6^6\) Metzer refers to this conclusion as an “empty frame.”\(^6^7\) In addition, the third movement his *Sinfonia*, Berio accretes quotations from Mahler, Stravinsky, Bach, Strauss, and Berlioz, as well as texts of Beckett. The movement has a definitive ending, in which the first tenor acknowledges his fellow performers and the conductor, announcing, “It’s done, it’s over.” The end of the third movement of *Sinfonia* is less bleak, but it promises that time could potentially topple and crush all those in its wake.\(^6^8\) These pieces contain shards of the past that collapse into themselves, dragging with them the new elements into which

\(^{6^4}\) Ibid., 75.  
\(^{6^5}\) Ibid., 105.  
\(^{6^6}\) For a detailed analysis, see Robin Maconie, *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen* (Landham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005).  
\(^{6^7}\) Metzer, *Quotation and Cultural Meaning*, 149.  
\(^{6^8}\) Ibid., 139.
they were integrated. These endings leave no doubt that the music, and perhaps all existence, is destroyed.

Thus, Metzer describes two harrowing outcomes for compositions deeply mired in the past. The past has much to offer for postmodern music, but an excessive reliance on it may lead to cultural quicksand. The next challenge, then, is to narrow the field to theoretical concepts of parody into which *Le Grand Macabre* finds its meaning. I will argue that *Le Grand Macabre*, while comprised of parody, may not necessary occupy one of Metzter’s two extremes, but that Ligeti allows the possibility of either. As I will argue in chapter III, the meaning of *Le Grand Macabre* manifests itself through Ligeti’s use of parody.
CHAPTER III. ANALYSIS OF PARODIC EPISODES

This section analyzes five separate instances of musical parody within Le Grand Macabre: the love duets between Amanda and Amando; Mescalina and Astradamors’s dance; Nekrotzar’s processional; the mirror canon accompanying Nekrotzar’s collapse; and the final passacaglia and chorus. Each represents Ligeti’s homage to the past and to traditions of opera, but musical parody in each scene develops the characters, commenting on their personalities and motivations. These parodic gestures link the music of Le Grand Macabre to its musical predecessors, providing historical points of reference for the listener. Further, each episode is part of a continuum whose two extremes are insanity and destruction, as detailed by Metzer. Le Grand Macabre blurs the distinction between them because the final state of the world is ultimately left unclear at the end. It integrates elements of the absurd and the classic into what one reviewer, Shirley Apthorp, has called “an allegory for every age.”

Amanda and Amando’s Love Duets

The most stable relationship portrayed in Le Grand Macabre is that between Amanda and Amando. When they arrive on the scene, they croon about their undying desire for one another. The stage directions indicate that they are constantly intertwined, both physically and vocally. Ligeti has said, “They are very beautiful and their lyricism is excessive, somehow overblown; they remind me of the two entwined figures who represent the wind in Botticelli’s Birth of Venus” (see Figure III). That work, commissioned by the Medici family in the 1480s, features

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70 Ligeti et al., In Conversation, 120. See also Ronald Lightbrown, Sandro Botticelli: Life and Works (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989).
the Roman goddess of love and beauty emerging from the sea, flanked by two angelic characters on the left.\textsuperscript{71} The female clutches the male, and they appear to float toward Venus. If Amanda and Amando evoke these characters, then they are, in a sense, the archetype of lovers from traditional opera, those whose love endures despite any disturbances in their midst. They sing only in isolated episodes, when the action around them seems to freeze.

As atonality does not allow the harmonic sense of tension and release often associated with musical eroticism, Ligeti employs other techniques to depict the sexual excitement between the lovers. Amanda and Amando’s lines frequently begin in unison and then move chromatically in opposite directions. Each entrance is higher than that of the previous one: at rehearsal 9, for example, they begin on a unison A; at rehearsal 23, on a unison B-flat; and at rehearsal 34, on a unison C-sharp, the ascending pitch heightening their growing ecstasy. Their melodic lines are rarely separated by more than an octave and they frequently sustain melismas or syllabic phrases on enharmonic thirds, as in the measures between rehearsal 17 and 19. These unbroken parallel phrases also indicate the characters’ sexual and emotional unity. The overblown lyricism and breathless sixteenth-notes emulate orgasmic climaxes, such as that between rehearsals 17 and 20.

There are several historical precedents for these duets. The cozy melodic embellishments and harmonic relationships strongly resemble those of Monteverdi, a likeness Ligeti has acknowledged.\textsuperscript{72} Other stylistic references, such as the phrases in which the lovers breathlessly complete each other’s sentences while searching for a private place in which to make love, echo of the duet between Nanetta and Fenton in Verdi’s \textit{Falstaff} (act 1, scene 2), as Peter von Seherr-Thoss notes. He has also suggested similarities to Bach’s motet \textit{Singet dem Herrn}, the flagrant

\textsuperscript{71} Laura Payne, \textit{Essential History of Art} (Bath, UK: Paragon, 2002), 55.
\textsuperscript{72} Ligeti et al., \textit{In Conversation}, 120. Toop, Steinitz, Griffiths, and Willson have also mentioned these similarities.
chromaticism and erotic obsession of Gesualdo’s madrigals, and the light virtuosic elegance of Johannes Ciconia’s *O Rosa Bella*.\textsuperscript{73}

The strongest parallel to Amanda and Amando’s love duets, however, is to those of Nero and Poppea in Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea*.\textsuperscript{74} As Susan McClary has noted, sexuality and gender became central concerns in the seventeenth century, leading to their expression, explicitly or not, in all of the arts, particularly madrigals and opera.\textsuperscript{75} Ligeti has mentioned the similarity of his embellishments to those of Monteverdi, but he has not specified which opera. However, he considers *Poppea* one of the four “essential” operas (in addition to *Don Giovanni*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and *Falstaff*).\textsuperscript{76} Tellingly, *Poppea* is Monteverdi’s only opera in which both of the lovers are played by treble voices. In the duets between Nero and Poppea, “Ne più, ne più s’interporrà noia o dimora” (act 2, scene 5) and “Pur ti miro, pur ti godo” (act 2, scene 8), there are several similarities to Amanda and Amando’s duets. These include syllabic sequences built on enharmonic thirds and contrary chromatic motion leading to or away from a unison or an octave.

\textsuperscript{73} Peter von Seherr-Thoss, *Gyorgy Ligetis Oper Le Grand Macabre: Entstehung und Deutung* (Eisenach: Varlag der Musikalienhandlung, 1998), 240. Translated from German by Christopher Williams.


\textsuperscript{76} Ligeti, et. al., *In Conversation*, 112. He adds, “I might add a fifth: Otello; and perhaps a sixth: Carmen.”
Example 3.1: C. Monteverdi, *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, “Ne più, ne più s’interporrà noia o dimora”

Example 3.2: G. Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, rehearsal 17

By evoking Monteverdi’s Nero and Poppea with two females, Ligeti also parodies modern performances of early Baroque opera. In modern productions of *Poppea*, directors must choose an adequate modern substitute for a castrato, be it a countertenor, a female soprano, or a tenor with some transposition and modification. Two of the most popular recorded versions of *Poppea* include a female soprano as Nero.\(^77\) Thus, those who witness and listen to modern renditions of *Poppea* will likely observe two women portraying the romantic leads. Try as one may to imagine that the character of Nero is a man, the hint of a lesbian affair cannot help but permeate one’s listening experience. Ligeti, by contrast, confronts the past by recasting the sounds into their expected physical appearances. Unlike Baroque performances in which the lovers were portrayed by a beautiful woman and a castrato, or modern performances in which the

\(^{77}\) The 1996 recording (Archiv Produktion, 47088, conducted by John Eliot Gardner) features Dana Hanchard as Nero. The 1993 recording (Teldec 42547, conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt) features Elisabeth Soderstrom as Nero. Amazon.com lists these two recordings of *L’incoronazione di Poppea* as its best-sellers.
audience must pretend that the soprano in drag is actually a man, the treble-voiced love duets of *Le Grand Macabre* are unapologetically performed by two females.

Yet the character of Amando is male. And thus Ligeti also parodies another operatic gesture: the “trousers role,” or what Sam Abel has called the “drag boy.” By indicating that Amando is a “trousers role,” Ligeti evokes characters such as Handel’s Xerxes, Mozart’s Cherubino, and Strauss’s Octavian. In those gender-bending roles, sopranos dress as men and portray male roles. These roles lead to gender confusion for the audience, however, such as when the male Cherubino, played by a woman, dresses in women’s clothing and flirts with the countess. As Abel has noted, the character of Cherubino established the “drag boy” character on the opera stage, paving the way for other hormonal teenage male characters portrayed by adult women.78

Thus, through parody, the character of Amando is either the modern realization of the castrato leading man, or a woman in man’s clothing. Further, he demonstrates stereotypically masculine traits, such carrying a dagger and threatening Piet when he interrupts the lovers’ interlude. Additionally, the audience knows that male characters portrayed by sopranos, such as Nero and Cherubino, are ruled by their sexual obsession. By encoding these characteristics, Ligeti charges the lovers’ passages with erotic energy.

Another allusion to *Poppea* concerns the mise-en-scène. Amanda and Amando confiscate the tomb for their love-making, and they do not return to the stage until the end of the opera. When they emerge, they are blissfully ignorant of the previous evening’s events. Like Nero and Poppea, Amanda and Amando narrowly escaped death, but danger does not register with them. Their final love duet, which confirms this attitude, is again reminiscent of *Poppea*. Nero and

Poppea survived deception, attempted murder, and the banishment of their friends and mentors. Like them, Amanda and Amando avoid confronting trauma due to a series of unrealistic events. Whereas Amanda and Amando avoided a comet by canoodling in a tomb, Poppea, protected by Amore, escaped attempted murder by Otto. In the final scene, the erotic energy is significantly cooled between Amanda and Amando, however, perhaps reflecting some level of complacency. In their final duet, they sing syllabically on quarter notes, whereas their earlier duets were comprised of either lengthy melismas or frantic sixteenth-notes. Similarly, the rampant sexuality between Nero and Poppea is ancillary in the final scene; they are still in love and obsessed with one another, but there are other issues to address before they can return to their love-making.

As for Ligeti’s parody of Falstaff’s Nanetta and Fenton, the breathless manner of Amanda and Amando’s phrases and the way in which they finish each other’s sentences evokes Verdi’s brief duets. Julian Budden has noted that Nanetta and Fenton are Verdi’s “most poetic pair of young lovers.” They complete each other’s thoughts and, like Amanda and Amando, try to escape the fools around them. In addition, the other characters bless them during the final chorus; it took the others the entire duration of the opera to learn the lesson by which the lovers have been living all along. Ligeti nods to tradition not only in the lovers’ isolated vocal style, but in the process of their consummation and the way in which it affects the final scene and the characters’ outlook. Like Fenton and Nanetta, Amanda and Amando are joyful and compassionate, reminding us of a cycle of love and renewal each generation.

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79 Carter, Monteverdi’s Musical Theatre, 274.
81 Ibid., 465.
thus embody the pursuit of the sublime, characterized by references to the past. This final chorus and its meaning will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Mescalina and Astradamors’s Dance

Another example of parody in *Le Grand Macabre* is the dance between Mescalina and Astradamors. The first scene has just concluded with Nekrotzar’s proclamation of impending doom and his riding away on Piet’s back. Scene 2 opens with Mescalina and Astradamors engaging in various S&M activities: Mescalina, clad in leather, physically abuses her husband while he, dressed in women’s lingerie, fantasizes about how to kill her. After knocking him unconscious, Mescalina revives Astradamors by depositing a spider on his nose. She threatens to make him eat it, but he claims that “spiders always give me nausea.” Mescalina bemoans his ineffectual lovemaking while Astradamors recites a catalogue of every day in his miserable week:

Mescalina: “Hopla, eunuch!”
Astradamors: “Morbid Monday!”
Mescalina: “Hopla, hangjohn!”
Astradamors: “Tiresome Tuesday!”
Mescalina: “Hopla, shithole!”
Astradamors: “Weary Wednesday!”
Mescalina: “Hopla, fiddlebow!”
Astradamors: “Thankless Thursday!”
Mescalina: “Hopla, pisspot!”

After these declamations, the two launch into a grotesque dance, which features three quotations, all of which Ligeti has identified. The most obvious is a chromatically altered version of *Galop*
Infernal (better known as the can-can) from Offenbach’s *Orpheus in the Underworld*; blended into the orchestral texture are mutated excerpts of Schumann’s “The Happy Farmer” from the *Album for the Young* and Liszt’s *Grand Galop Chromatique*, both for solo piano. 83 None of these quotations are literal, but they are close enough to the originals that the listener can easily discern them.

As noted, quotation as a vehicle of parody occurs in one of two ways, either by evoking a specific musical reference or a general stylistic tendency. Unlike the duets between Amanda and Amando, in which Ligeti avoided specific quotations, the music accompanying this scene retains the shell of the original melodic lines. Ligeti terms these “pseudo-quotations” and declares that they are “always meant for the comic moments.” 84 By incorporating melodies as familiar as the can-can, the composer eases the process of decoding; the well-known tune pops out of the texture and, with all its connotations, signals irony to the listener, who then can generate alternate meanings. In this case, and by Ligeti’s own decree, these alternate meanings are intended to be humorous.

Paradoxically, this parodic episode is only four measures long, yet it is particularly striking because the can-can is so familiar. The can-can melody is placed in the clarinets and trumpets (example 3.7), while the bassoons and tuba present the first two measures of “The Happy Farmer” (example 3.5 and 3.6) and the flutes, piccolo, and oboe play measures 14-16 of the *Grand Galop Chromatique* (example 3.3 and 3.4). The strings, horns, and trombones maintain accompaniment figures.

83 Ligeti, et. al., *In Conversation*, 119.
84 Ibid., 119.
Example 3.3: G. Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, flute, rehearsal 172

Example 3.4: F. Liszt, *Grand Galop Chromatique*, S. 219, measures 14-16

Example 3.5: G. Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, clarinet, rehearsal 172
Example 3.6: G. Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, bassoon, rehearsal 172

Example 3.7: R. Schumann, “The Happy Farmer,” from *Album for the Young*, op. 68, measures 1-3

All instruments are marked *fortissimo*, but the clarinet and trumpet line emerges from the texture most clearly, because of the nature of the instrument and the familiarity of the can-can melody. Thus, most associations decoded in this scene will arise from the can-can, not the other two parodied works.

Those unfamiliar with the plot of *Orpheus in the Underworld* will still recognize the can-can and its associations with the burlesque and Moulin Rouge-style shows, neither of which is particularly wholesome. Those familiar with Offenbach’s operetta will recall that it inverts the Orpheus myth, creating a sort of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* version of the legend.\(^85\) Much the same way Stoppard recounts the tragedy of *Hamlet* from the viewpoint of the troubled protagonist’s two stooges, Offenbach portrays the gods as quarreling gossips and Orpheus and Eurydice as cheating, unhappy spouses. The framework of the story is the same, but ignobility dominates the plot. Orpheus is delighted when Eurydice is abducted, but Public

\(^{85}\) Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1997).
Opinion forces him to “rescue” her from the Underworld and Jupiter’s clutches. The *Galop Infernal*, or can-can, is the culmination of indulgence and sinful behavior in which Eurydice, transformed into a Bacchante, leads the entire Underworld in a rendition of the chorus.

The two piano pieces quoted may lead the nostalgic listener to recall childhood piano lessons. More significant, however, is the fact that Liszt and Schumann are considered part of the “cartoon canon,” that is, composers whose music frequently appears in cartoon films and shows. Thus, listeners who detect “The Happy Farmer” may be reminded of a *Looney Tunes* episode. “The Happy Farmer” appeared in a 1954 *Looney Tunes* episode entitled “Muzzle Tough,” while several of Liszt’s piano works, including the Hungarian rhapsodies, pop up frequently in such episodes as “Rhapsody Rabbit” (1946). The music parodied in this scene is much like that chosen for cartoons, which, as Daniel Goldmark notes, tends to be “short, easily digestible melodies to match the rapid-paced action that dominates their story lines.” The correlation to cartoon music also coincides with Ligeti’s desire to link the visual action and pacing to that of comic strips.

Thus, by parodying the can-can simultaneously with works of the cartoon canon, Ligeti encodes a light-heartedness in which nothing is to be taken too seriously. The dance is another step in the pursuit of utopia, marked by references to the past, and it is followed by Mescalina’s drunken prayer to Venus, in which she begs for a more effective lover. Then, she meets her untimely death at Nekrotzar’s hand. The music prior to this violence leaves no doubt that the situation is ludicrous, not horrifying. Despite the humiliation of Astradamors, the audience is too
busy laughing to believe that he is in any mortal peril. Astradamors’s subsequent freedom, then, is much like that of the Roadrunner when Wile E. Coyote ingests his own dynamite.

Nekrotzar’s Procession: “Collage”

After Prince Go-Go’s Ministers flee in scene 3, the prince settles in for a snack. He is interrupted by Nekrotzar’s procession, a scene Ligeti describes in the score as follows:

Nekrotzar’s grandiose entrance with scythe and trumpet, riding on Piet’s back
together with his fiendish retinue: bizarre giants, skeletons, fabulous animals, devils and demons, amongst them four musicians—violin, bassoon, E-flat clarinet and piccolo. The procession should take place through the auditorium. Nekrotzar and his retinue come through a door in the center or at the side and reach the stage—over a bridge.

Labeled “Collage” in the score, Nekrotzar’s entrance is the most complex instance of parody in the entire opera. It comprises over a hundred measures and contains no fewer than seven different historical and cultural references, which Ligeti has termed “synthetic folklore.”

The structural basis of this scene is a quotation, a transmuted version of the final movement of Beethoven’s *Eroica* (ex. 3.8). The rhythm, contour, and instrumentation are untouched, but the pitches are transformed into pairs of tritones.

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89 Ligeti et al., *In Conversation*, 119.
Example 3.8: G. Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, cello and bass, rehearsal 451

While the cellos, basses, and timpani repeat this thirteen-pitch pattern, Nekrotzar enters from the rear of the hall, accompanied by a band of four “masked devils.” Each of these soloists performs a mutation or variation of a specific Western or world music style, joining the texture one at a time. For example, the scordatura violin begins with a ragtime two-step, whose sixteenth-eighth-sixteenth-note rhythmic patterns and jaunty syncopation recall Scott Joplin (ex. 3.9).\(^9\)

Example 3.9: G. Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, violin, rehearsal 452

The bassoon then joins, playing what Ligeti calls a distorted Greek Orthodox hymn, one he recalls singing as a child (ex. 3.10). In 6/8 time, the bassoon’s melody retains the eighth-quarter rhythmic pattern of the medieval rhythmic mode II.

\(^9\) Richard Toop asserts that this violin melody is also “a reference to the Devil in Stravinsky’s *Soldier’s Tale*, who likewise plays a ragtime.” (164) Ligeti has not acknowledged this connection.
Example 3.10: G. Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, bassoon, rehearsal 453

An E-flat clarinet enters with a Brazilian and Spanish half-samba and half-flamenco inspired melody (ex. 3.11), followed by the piccolo with its pentatonic Hungarian-Scottish march intended to sound like bagpipe music (ex. 3.12).\(^ {92} \)

Example 3.11: G. Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre*, E-flat clarinet, rehearsal 455


Once Nekrotzar’s entire retinue is playing, the remainder of the orchestra launches into rhythmic variations on the cha-cha rhythm. The uncanny resemblance to Ivesian layering is no accident: Ligeti admits this scene, although entirely his own music, is a partial homage to Charles Ives.\(^ {93} \)

Still, even after multiple hearings, it is nearly impossible to discern the discrete aural elements of this scene. Once Nekrotzar’s procession begins, the character of each melodic line melts into the chaos. Because the madcap aural quality is comprised of many musical styles, it

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\(^{92}\) Ligeti et al., *In Conversation*, 119; Ibid., 59.

\(^{93}\) Ligeti et al., *In Conversation*, 120.
can be said to symbolize the entire world. Flamenco, samba, ragtime, cha-cha, and bagpipes detract from the Western formality of the *Eroica* quotation. As Nekrotzar has promised to destroy the entire world, it is fitting that his processional is a hodgepodge of Eastern and Western European, British Isles, Latin American, and African-American styles.

The dense, indecipherable web of quotations foreshadows Nekrotzar’s demise. It is a rapid accumulation of external allusions, which accrue until the weight of the past and the pursuit of utopia become unbearable. The cacophony pushes the listener into Nekrotzar’s position, either driving him mad from the aural overload, or destroying him. This perfectly prepares the apocalypse. It is also at this point in the action where the audience begins questioning Nekrotzar’s intentions and sanity. Is he really capable of demolishing the entire world, or is he just a nut job accompanied by his own band? The music is no longer just in front of the audience; it swarms around them and marches to the stage, as if invading the customary boundaries between audience and performer. Forced to confront the sounds and their implications, the audience can no longer separate itself from the music. Ligeti prepares his public for the possible destruction of the world.

Nekrotzar’s Demise: “Mirror Canon”

Once the drunken Nekrotzar summons the comet, he examines his handiwork. But he cannot figure out if he has succeeded. The other characters wander about, also unsure they are still alive. The resurrected Mescalina evacuates the cellar, much to the dismay of those around her. Go-Go, Piet, and Astradamors decide: “We have a thirst, so we are living.” To this solipsism Nekrotzar replies, “So, you are living,” instigating his evanescence. Appropriately, at rehearsal 666 the orchestra begins the Mirror Canon, the sun rises, and Nekrotzar disappears.
The music of this scene does not quote a specific melody, but it does evoke stylistic characteristics of Bartók and Lutoslawski. Both Toop and Steinitz have noted that the Mirror Canon resembles Lutoslawski’s *Funeral Music*. On further examination, the Mirror Canon, like the Prologue of *Funeral Music*, gradually adds instruments to the texture and seems to elude any discernable rhythmic pulse. To be sure, it is unclear how familiar Ligeti was with *Funeral Music*, if at all, when he wrote *Le Grand Macabre*. The only notable contact between Ligeti and Lutoslawski was the latter’s choice of the former for the 1986 Grawemeyer award. Lutoslawski won the first Grawemeyer Award in 1985, and he was asked to assist in choosing his successor. The 1986 winner was Ligeti’s *Piano Etudes*, Book I.

At this point in the opera, the audience must decide whether Nekrotzar has died or gone insane. If Nekrotzar is insane, then Ligeti has parodied another aspect from previous generations of opera. There are many examples of heroes or anti-heroes experiencing temporary or lasting insanity, a fate that affects the title characters in *Boris Godunov*, *Nabucco*, *Wozzeck*, *Otello*, *Orlando*, and *Tristan*, as well as *Fidelio*’s Florestan and *Pique Dame*’s Herman. In a few of these cases, the men are insane for a brief period, such as when lightning strikes Nabucco after he claims to be God, when a delusional Florestan imagines his rescue from prison, or when Orlando discovers that Angelica loves another man. The other characters’ insanity leads to their deaths, and Wozzeck, Otello, Tristan, and Herman claim other victims in the process, killing them either directly, with a weapon, or indirectly, by breaking their hearts. Thus, the insanity of male characters typically results in one of three outcomes: temporary; injurious only to the insane character; or injurious both to the insane character and others he affects in the process, typically his lover. As Nekrotzar did not kill anyone during the apocalypse, he is not a candidate for the

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third category. In fact, Mescalina, whom Nekrotzar raped and murdered in the second scene, returns to life as if nothing had happened. If Nekrotzar’s insanity is only temporary and his shriveling represents not death but a temper tantrum, then he may return later to proclaim another apocalypse. If his insanity is the cause of his death, then Nekrotzar has minimally affected the other characters. Ligeti advocates an open ending, so the audience is free to draw its own conclusion regarding Nekrotzar’s state of mind.

In one of the earliest discussions of openness in a musical work, Umberto Eco has written

A work of art … is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself.  

Thus, each performance of Le Grand Macabre allows multiple readings of Nekrotzar’s fate. The open ending allows each person to place Nekrotzar somewhere on the continuum of destruction and insanity, based on his or her personal interpretation. This point will be discussed with regard to performances and directorial interpretation in chapter IV.

The mirror canon could be an elegy for Nekrotzar, but we are unsure whether we should celebrate his demise or mourn it. However, immediately after Nekrotzar disappears from sight, Amanda and Amando emerge into the sunlight. They resume their duet from the first act, which gradually expands into the passacaglia and chorus that draw the opera to a close.

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96 Eco, The Open Work, 4 (italics original).
Passacaglia and Final Chorus

When Amanda and Amando emerge from the tomb, the score directs that they “advance with elegant dancing steps, as if half dreaming.” The remaining characters join the graceful dance, while the orchestra accompanies them with the Passacaglia. The Passacaglia’s texture is reminiscent of the mutated *Eroica* pattern from Nekrotzar’s processional. Steinitz has observed that the texture of this section is most closely related to Webern’s orchestration of the Ricercare from Bach’s *Musical Offering* in its “timbral distribution.”97 The sparse instrumentation and close attention to texture evoke the general stylistic principles of the shifting tone colors of pointillism.

These Baroque-inspired gestures segue seamlessly into Amanda and Amando’s final duet, the topic of which is their love, although the erotic tension from their initial duets is absent here. Amando points out, “For us too the world ceased to be, and yet how ecstatic were we!” Amanda joins him, and they sing, “What do we care for storm and flood, when fire is coursing through our blood! Let others fear the Judgment Day. We have no fears, let come what may. ‘Neath terrors dire let others bow, for us, there’s only here and now.” Go-Go and Mescalina join them, singing, “For life grants most to those who give, and who gives love shall loving live.” The remaining characters, including the Black and White Ministers, Piet, and Astradamors, complete the texture, and they sing the following homophonic chorus:

   Fear not to die, good people all!
   No one knows when his hour will fall!
   And when it comes, then let it be
   Farewell!

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A moralizing chorus at the end of an opera descends from the tradition of Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, as well as Verdi’s *Falstaff* and Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*. Joseph Kerman has written that the final choruses of operas emphasize the essential articulation of the plot. The denouement of *Le Grand Macabre* involves the characters showing their gratitude and realizing that they must live in the present, rather than fear what is to come. As Mozart did in *Don Giovanni*, Ligeti ends the opera not with the demise of the anti-hero, but instead, he winds down the action with a lesson.

This final gesture highlights the ways in which Ligeti has parodied the practices of the past. The moral of this story explicates the message of the last two hours: death will come at any time, but we ought to enjoy ourselves in the meantime. Kerman has observed of the finale of *Figaro*,

> The [finale] uncovers a core of decency under all the shabbiness which the comedy has exposed and tried to rationalize in laughter. All this is possible because *musically* it is a climax, because the music at this section has a seriousness and a new clarity of feeling. Unimpressive in itself, the section depends for its effect on the rest of the finale, with its striving hilarity, and grows out of it, and yet transcends it completely.

Thus does Ligeti at the end of *Le Grand Macabre*. The message is especially vivid and relevant for post-1945 audiences who are all too aware of the possibility of an apocalypse. *Le Grand Macabre*’s ambiguous ending allows the audience to decide whether this is a message about love or about a potential apocalypse.

The moral of this chorus is unlike the morals of their predecessors, however. The characters are not laughing about silly mistakes, as in *Figaro*; they are not rhapsodizing about

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99 Ibid., 88. (Italics original)
sinners earning their penance, as in _Don Giovanni_; they are not brushing off the entire world as a joke, as in _Falstaff_; and they are certainly not mourning the loss of a loved one, as in _Dido and Aeneas_. Although the characters are thankful to be alive, we still do not know the ultimate outcome. Has Death just died, permitting them eternal life? Or, has Nekrotzar has just disappeared temporarily? Perhaps once he sleeps off his hangover, he will return to threaten the fate of the world once again. Ligeti permits the audience to decide.

As with _Recital I (for Cathy)_, _Erwartung_, and _Waiting for Godot_, we cannot help but wonder if this spectacle occurs every night. _Recital I_ ends with the singer’s desperate plea for applause and absolution, neither of which comes; she is left breathless and unsure of what will happen next. The Woman of _Erwartung_ will likely continue her desperate search forever. _Waiting for Godot_’s Estragon and Vladimir remain trapped in their endless cycle of waiting, anticipating an arrival that may never come. In all of these cases, the audience witnesses a snapshot of tragic lives, lives in which the characters constantly seek, but never attain, resolution. We happened to share one brief moment of a pointless existence.

To return to Metzer’s conception of an internal or external collapse, it is unclear in _Le Grand Macabre_ whether the quotation and parody of past styles will result in one or the other. Of the musical construction of the opera, Ligeti has said, “You take a piece of foie gras, you drop it on the carpet and you trample it in until it disappears – that is how I utilize the history of music and especially the history of opera.”

Although this image of grinding a delicacy under one’s foot seems to imply destruction, in fact, it describes how Ligeti views the past as a part of the present: dismembering it allows the opportunity to create something new. He thus views these fragments of the past as material for its manipulation and rebirth. Here, a comparison with Dadaism is relevant. As Dickran Tashjian has written of the Dadaists, these artists “disrupted

100 Ligeti, et. al., _In Conversation_, 119.
Ligeti’s reference to operatic and musical traditions does not collapse on itself, but it creates this sense of open-endedness and infinite possibility.

Unlike the works of Stockhausen, Berio, Rochberg, and their contemporaries, Le Grand Macabre’s inclusion of the past in the present does not promote one view or another. Rather, its inconclusive ending demonstrates that, despite the frequent episodes of parody, Nekrotzar and the residents of Breughelland may or may not have imploded, and may or may not have plummeted into madness. It can be a farcical romp in which love emerges triumphant, or it can be a darker projection of how the promise of the past and the quest for the sublime may very well cave in on itself. We may never know for sure.

The dramatic situation builds to the comet’s impact on a parallel track with the parody and references to the past. The Monteverdian duets between Amanda and Amando, the smorgasbord of lighthearted music accompanying Mescalina and Astradamors, and the Ivesian extravaganza of Nekrotzar’s entrance are all anticipatory, establishing a reliance on the past. When this nostalgia becomes too much to bear, the comet lays to waste the entire world. When Nekrotzar discovers that he did not accomplish what he set out to do and there will indeed be a future, however, the music accompanying his demise, the mirror canon, is the fall of the accumulated past; it is an elegy for the mad or the damned. The final duet and chorus represent the characters reassembling musical and personal fragments while searching for meaning in either real or imagined worlds.

CHAPTER IV. “FAIRY-TALE REQUIEM” OR “EXCRETORY APOCALYPSE?” PETER SELLARS AND LE GRAND MACABRE

Performance Reception

Le Grand Macabre’s music has consistently received positive reviews, whether produced in Stockholm, Bologna, Copenhagen, or San Francisco. The score of Le Grand Macabre convinced many reviewers of Ligeti’s rightful place among the best of twentieth-century composers. Rodney Milnes wrote that it is one of the “wittiest” and “most frightening” examples of twentieth-century opera, and Andrew Clements remarked, “The music is full of the anarchic devices and the astonishingly acute textural effects that had established [Ligeti] as one of the leading figures in his generation.”102 Anthony Tommasini praised the “zany surface energy” as well as the “sophistication and richness of the music.”103 Others have claimed that Le Grand Macabre “must be seen” or is “a blast.”104 With rare exception, such as John Rockwell’s complaint that Ligeti’s music did not “fill up a large stage over a full evening in a coherent and convincing way,”105 reviewers offered nothing but praise.

However, audiences expressed varying degrees of appreciation for the music of Le Grand Macabre. Rockwell noted in 1981 that the opera is “in a contemporary idiom that avoids lyrical vocal lines and fat-toned instrumental support” and predicted that it “is not likely to enjoy a

United States performance any time soon.” He was absolutely right: the opera’s United States premiere occurred in San Francisco in 2004, just over a quarter of a century after its first production. It is also the only United States performance of *Le Grand Macabre* to this date. As KCRW deejay James Taylor explained: “Ligeti’s smelting of difficult, academic music with vulgar, cartoonish dramaturgy is probably what kept U.S. opera companies from presenting it,” but those characteristics were necessary to lift American opera-goers out of the nineteenth century. Tommasini praised San Francisco Opera general manager Pamela Rosenberg for delivering the American premiere of a “bracing contemporary opera that has been neglected in the United States.” In his review of the San Francisco production, Joshua Kosman credited the patrons for keeping open minds, even “the strong-lunged gentleman in the rear of the orchestra section whose indignant ‘Boo!’ filled the house as soon as the first scene had drawn to a close.” Some San Francisco patrons even arrived for the Halloween weekend premiere clad in exotic costumes, a gesture Ligeti would undoubtedly have appreciated.

Reception of the production elements is a different story. Not only does *Le Grand Macabre* lend itself to various interpretations, but contemporary events color the work. For instance, Kasper Holten almost cancelled the Royal Danish Opera’s September 2001 production because the sets consisted of smoking rubble of a fallen skyscraper. Planned long before 9/11, the sets seemed to hit too close to home. After much evaluation and debate, the production went on to rave reviews, perhaps, as Eco might argue, due to its resonance with the audience’s

106 Ibid.
108 Tommasini, “Buffoons in the Bureaucracy.”
110 Tommasini, “Buffoons in the Bureaucracy.”
111 Apthorp, “The shows go on.”
“particular and individual perspective.” On Holten’s decision to proceed with the production, Apthorp wrote, “And thank goodness. There’s nothing better than a bit of eschatological levity at a time like this.”

Perhaps the most discriminating critic is Ligeti himself, who has vehemently opposed several stagings of the work. In a 1981 production at the Paris Opera, he stormed out during the second act, complaining of distorted amplification. In the early 1980s, Ligeti remarked that only one production had come close to what he had envisioned, namely, the 1979 Bologna production. For Ligeti, it captured the true spirit of the work, and he proclaimed it “a demoniacal romp, a great extravaganza.” His most memorable critique, however, is his public denouncement of Peter Sellars’ production for the 1997 Salzburg Festival.

Ligeti vs. Sellars

Set in Chernobyl, Sellars’ production featured body bags and other debris strewn about the stage. Dangling fuses, a defunct space capsule, and blinking light bulbs evoked a post-nuclear wasteland. The chorus was clad in yellow hazardous material suits, and blindfolded hostages were held at opposite ends of the stage. Halfway through the production, the audience witnessed “the unexplained arrival of a monster insect-machine which [served] no dramatic purpose.” Although a nude Venus in the second scene “shocked the once-stuffy Salzburg Festival,” as Denis Staunton pointed out, “the public [was] turning up in droves.”

112 Eco, The Open Work, 3.
113 Apthorp, “The shows go on.”
114 Rockwell, “Ligeti and Stockhausen have premieres of operas.”
115 Ligeti, et. al., In Conversation, 113.
Ligeti had little say about the staging. Andrew Clark commented, “by handing the staging to Peter Sellars, [festival director Gérard] Mortier gave Le Grand Macabre the kiss of death.”

118 Bernard Holland pointed out that “the composer, by all reports, is not happy with Mr. Sellars’s directorial vision, but has been ultimately powerless to dissuade him from it.”

119 Nearly every review mentioned that Ligeti was extremely disappointed with Sellars’s production, although Holland observed that “Mr. Ligeti did appear onstage for curtain calls and made nice with his apparent tormentor.”

120 To the press, Ligeti said

I have to defend myself against this, because it’s not just a matter of staging, it’s a transformation of the piece’s content. … All of my piece is ambiguous, and [Sellars] has taken this ambiguous piece and made it into a completely unambiguous story, a propaganda story with an obvious moral.

121 He also raged that his work was “dénatûrée et lui-même dupe.”

122 Perhaps his disapproval, in addition to the naked Venus, piqued the public’s interest in the production.

123 All reviewers of Sellars’s production of Le Grand Macabre read the ending as apocalyptic. They see this, moreover, as an egregious directorial move on Sellars’s part. Holland remarked, “Brilliantly realized as this ionized Götterdämmerung may be, I think it misses the point the real Grand Macabre wishes to make. Mr. Sellars would give us total annihilation and tentative rebirth, a CNN bulletin with sermon and weather forecast attached.”

118 Clark, “A po-faced post-nuclear pantomime.”
120 Ibid.
121 Quoted in Toop, György Ligeti, 216-17.
123 Holland, “On Death’s Demise.”
on themselves, or if the end result lies somewhere in between. According to Eco’s analysis of an open work, “every performance offers us a complete and satisfying version of the work, but at the same time makes it incomplete for us, because it cannot simultaneously give all the other artistic solutions which the work may admit.”\textsuperscript{124} Sellars’s production did not leave the opera “incomplete,” however. Instead, the apocalyptic setting closed the ending, slanting perception of the production to a single viewpoint.

In addition, Sellars’s production hardly offered a “complete and satisfying version of the work,” at least as far as Ligeti was concerned. One critical aspect of an open work is its ability to withstand varying interpretations. Eco argues

\begin{quote}
[T]he author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work \textit{to be completed.} He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and, at the end of the interpretative dialogue, a form which is \textit{his} form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen. The author is the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development.\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

As an open work, \textit{Le Grand Macabre} should remain recognizable to Ligeti. Instead, he disowned the Salzburg production because Sellars had, in Clark’s opinion, “neutered” the opera of meaning.\textsuperscript{126}

Sellars, of course, is no stranger to controversy. Of his directorial intent, he has declared, “I’m interested in awakening spaces in people, but spaces where [people] themselves will be able

\textsuperscript{124} Eco, \textit{The Open Work}, 15.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 19. (Italics original)
\textsuperscript{126} Clark, “A po-faced post-nuclear pantomime.”
to find and take something.” In order to awaken these spaces, he frequently updates centuries-old operas, recasting them in light of current political or economical concerns. For example, in 1981, he set Handel’s *Orlando* in the Kennedy Space Center, while his 1988 production of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* cast the title character as a televangelist embroiled in a sex scandal involving the prostitute Venus. These anachronistic settings, he says, are “a part of the multi-layering that I do, which is, I hope, about producing something that’s here and now, and moves forward and backward in time, and sort of touches eternity.” In a sense, then, Sellars’s view is not unlike Hutcheon’s definition of parody in that it places the new alongside the old to create multiple meanings for both. This multi-layering involves more than simply dressing traditional opera characters in modern-day garb. Sellars meticulously studies the characters and their motivations, attempting to illuminate their inner turmoil. In addition, he assumes his audience is well-versed in literature, history, current events, and popular culture. Theater scholar Don Shewey likens a Sellars production to a graduate seminar in which active intelligence is demanded and rewarded. Sellars’s production style relies on what Hutcheon calls the audience’s “cultural sophistication.” The production cannot resonate with contemporary perspective if the contemporary audience is unaware of it.

Sellars’s most famous work is probably his production in the late 1980s of the Mozart/Da Ponte trilogy. He updated the setting and scenery to the late twentieth century: *Le Nozze di Figaro* is set on Floor 52 of Manhattan’s Trump Tower, *Don Giovanni* is transplanted to Spanish Harlem, and *Così fan tutte* is located in “Despina’s Diner.” Accordingly, Susanna sports a

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128 Ibid., 52.
French maid uniform, Don Giovanni injects heroin in between phrases, and Ferrando and Guglielmo toast Don Alfonso with Miller Lite. Sellars asserts that his production philosophy engenders paradox and simultaneity:

We live in a world that is about simultaneity and contradiction, and that even while one gesture is being made somewhere else, or maybe at the same place, a completely opposite gestures is made…. There are no single gestures anymore, every gesture is multifaceted or surrounded by enough other gestures that it no longer means the same thing, and has to be considered in an interdependent mode.\(^\text{131}\)

Postmodern theater is comprised of disjuncture and juxtaposition. Successful postmodern directors are able to make audiences aware of the history, context, and reverberations of a familiar image in the contemporary world.\(^\text{132}\) However, some of Sellars’s gestures seem downright incongruous with the music: in act 2, the diegetic music of Don Giovanni’s feast, traditionally performed by an onstage orchestra, now blares through Leporello’s boom box. However, Sellars’s stagings do illuminate certain crucial conflicts, such as Susanna and Figaro struggling to fit their bed into her laundry-room-cum-flat, while the countess sleeps in an extravagant penthouse suite.

Sellars, of course, does not consider his productions incongruous with the operas’ content. According to Del Ray Cross, Sellars does not try “to replace the classic with an updated version,” but to let the original stand on equal footing with the updated version.\(^\text{133}\) Frequently challenging a traditional opera audience’s expectations, Sellars enjoys exploring “a secret world


\(^{133}\) Del Ray Cross, “Peter Sellars’s Stagings of *Don Giovanni*: Directorial Intent and Critical Response” (Master’s thesis, Bowling Green State University, 1992), 18.
… [those] moments between the actions.”\textsuperscript{134} He argues that music always speaks of an interior life, and it is his obligation as a director to illuminate that inner life.\textsuperscript{135} Shewey argues that Sellars will “utilize whatever scenic devices are necessary to set up the spiritual or philosophical or intellectual journey the work [offers],”\textsuperscript{136} such as alerting modern audiences to class difference by resetting \textit{Figaro} in Trump Tower.

Others, including Sellars himself, argue that his updated productions reveal layers of class consciousness and political battles that traditional productions bury. Andrew Porter wrote that, despite the unrelenting intensity of the Italian trilogy, Sellars’s productions were still among the “most exciting Mozart productions of our day. … His stagings seem to … embody the most passionately vivid responses to the operas that I have ever encountered.”\textsuperscript{137} These “vivid responses” are due to what Richard Trousdell calls Sellars’s “approximations,” in that Sellars resets the opera in modern terms to illuminate the timeless points.\textsuperscript{138}

Despite this criticism, Sellars remains one of the most popular stage directors of the last twenty years. For example, his operatic collaborations with John Adams, including \textit{Nixon in China} (1987), \textit{The Death of Klinghoffer} (1991), and \textit{Doctor Atomic} (2005), drew national attention. He encourages audiences to consider the means in addition to the message. Moreover, the opera is no longer just the product of the composer and performers, but the director. As Sellars has argued,

The only reason that we put any of this stuff out there is to get people to discuss these issues. Therefore you create something where you … have the potential for a wide range

\textsuperscript{134} Trousdell, “Peter Sellars Rehearses ‘Figaro,’” 67.
\textsuperscript{135} “Peter Sellars: L’art n’est pas sucré,” (includes an interview with Peter Sellars) \textit{Le Temps} (Paris), August 15, 1998.
\textsuperscript{136} Shewey, “Not Either/Or But And,” 272.
\textsuperscript{138} Trousdell, “Peter Sellars Rehearses ‘Figaro,’” 87.
of reaction. You create images, and music, and words that put the viewer on edge to get
the picture after their own fashion. No two people will have the same reaction – that’s
what’s exciting about the piece. It fails to dupe the answers for you: you have to fill out
your own questionnaire.139

Thus, Sellars seeks multiplicity in his productions, urging audience to glean numerous readings
from a single gesture.

So why would Sellars’s production of Le Grand Macabre fail? We can discern at least
two reasons, both of which relate to Sellars’s small- and large-scale contextual readings of a
work. First, his interpretative strategy relies primarily on character studies and illuminating the
“moments between the actions.” This is completely incongruous with Ligeti’s comic-book
characters and setting. Ligeti’s characters are much like Lichtenstein’s pop art images in that
they are removed from a particular context, which, in turn, allows an even greater possibility for
narrative content. For example, in Lichtenstein’s The Engagement Ring (1961), we construct our
own background story for the isolated image (see Figure I). It originally appeared as a frame in
the comic strip The Adventures of Winnie Winkle, where it was one step in a larger dramatic
continuum and left no opportunity for alternate interpretation.140 For those familiar with the
comic strip, they know that the male character has just purchased jewelry for an exotic dancer,
much to the dismay of his sister, who asks, “It’s not an engagement ring, is it?” However,
isolated from its context, readers develop multiple readings of the same image.

Sellars, of course, might argue that Ligeti’s score provides an opportunity to explore the
“moments between the action.” Along these same lines, art scholar Albert Boime has written that
speech balloons in comic strips create a window into the previously hidden level of the

140 Collins, “Modern Romance,” 70.
characters’ consciousness. Yet, the ending of *Le Grand Macabre*, like Lichtenstein’s pop art works, is open for the viewer to interpret. It allows individuals to construct a dramatic scenario surrounding an isolated incident. For example, we do not know if Amanda and Amando have just met, or if they are still infatuated with each other after years. Sellars, on the other hand, with his engineering of a nuclear wasteland, assumed too great a role in determining the audience’s perception of the characters’ histories and hidden motivations.

Second, an open work complements other performances and readings. According to Eco, “the author is the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development.” Ligeti had a specific end in mind for *Le Grand Macabre*, albeit an inconclusive end. Yet his insistence on the ambiguity means, paradoxically, that the opera is less than “open.” Eco argues that open works still belong to and are recognizable to the composer, despite any number of interpretative strategies. However, Ligeti disowned the Sellars production: he charged Sellars with misreading and mutilating *Le Grand Macabre*, turning it into a morality play with an inescapable message. In effect, Sellars rewrote the ending, framing it as an apocalypse. Had he interpreted the opera as a total farce, however, Ligeti would have been equally infuriated. As Eco argues, an open work, or a “work in movement,” is open to many different interpretations, but it will always “[remain] the world intended by the author.” Thus, Sellars’s reading of *Le Grand Macabre* overlooked Ligeti’s intended world of ambiguity in favor of a one-sided nuclear holocaust.

In sum, *Le Grand Macabre* is subject to a certain degree of nuance, but it is flexible only to a certain extent. Sellars’s interpretation focused on the dark aspects, when much of the work’s

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142 Eco, *The Open Work*, 15.
143 Ibid., 19.
144 Ibid., 19.
pleasure is derived from the ridiculous and ironic. As Sidney Corbett remarked, “The deadly serious, heavy-handed staging lacked the absurdist humor so essential to the work, resulting in the strange sensation that stage and music were concerned with fundamentally different things.” George Loomis wrote, “Sellars’s morose approach lent a feeling of redundancy to the proceedings, to say the least, while the opera’s bizarre humor vanished without a trace after the … second scene.” The morbid staging suffocated the lighter moments of dramatic irony.

Andrew Clark observed, “The most successful performances of Le Grand Macabre are those which make you laugh loudest. Well, there wasn’t much to laugh about in Salzburg.” Sellars’s own comments seem to contradict the observations of reviewers: before the premiere, he called Le Grand Macabre “irreverent,” “outrageous,” and a “giant mess,” but also said he was delighted to direct it. He has also referred to it as an “excretory apocalypse,” yet he emphasized the apocalyptic elements rather than the humorous.

Ultimately, Sellars’s vision was too macabre for Ligeti’s Macabre. Sellars’s pursuit of character development and the search for implicit motivation is incongruous with Ligeti’s music and characters. The characters in Le Grand Macabre are not intrinsically motivated, nor are they battling social controversies. Whereas Sellars’s productions recast the issues of Wagner and Mozart’s characters in light of current social trends, Le Grand Macabre does not need any assistance in communicating its message. In fact, as Apthorp observed of the 2001 Oldenburg production in which director Mascha Porzgen drew imagery from Bosch and Breughel, “when

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147 Clark, “A po-faced post-nuclear pantomime.”
you follow Ligeti’s stage directions the piece works.” Despite Sellars’s best intentions for this opera, he ultimately proved that *Le Grand Macabre* is best left ambiguous.

149 Apthorp, “The Shows Go On.”
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS

“Some years ago, [Pierre] Boulez declared that opera-houses should be blown up, that opera was dead. I agreed with him, and I still do,” Ligeti said in 1983. Ligeti, like Boulez, also complained that opera is senescent, that it has become a museum for the public to see Wagner and Verdi on display. Despite his misgivings about traditional opera, Ligeti was too deeply indebted to the past to defenestrate it. Instead, the parodic episodes in Le Grand Macabre exemplify Ligeti’s reconciliation of the past and present, weaving together operatic techniques of the past three hundred years with the post-tonal and non-narrative techniques of his Aventures and Nouvelles Aventures. Even though he avoided elements of traditional opera and did not build an entire opera based on a non-narrative structure, vestiges of both genres are critical to the structure of Le Grand Macabre.

In accordance with Ligeti’s allegiance to the Theater of the Absurd and Boulez’s decree about opera houses, Le Grand Macabre is Ligeti’s attempt to merge the vivid reality of existence with the traditional operatic genre. In a sense, the ambiguous ending of Le Grand Macabre leaves unanswered not only what will happen to the characters, but also what will happen to the future of opera. Le Grand Macabre, perhaps more so than any other opera in the twentieth century, amalgamates tradition and the avant-garde in a way that defies classification. Due to the inherent instability of relying on the past, any composition constructed from quotation, parody, or allusion risks self-destruction. Even though the fine line between insanity and destruction is left for the audience to discover, the ultimate question of the future of opera remains: if opera is

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150 Ligeti, et. al., In Conversation, 113. In 1968, Boulez remarked in an interview, “Only with the greatest difficulty can one present modern operas in a theatre in which, predominantly, repertory pieces are played. It is really unthinkable. The most expensive solution would be to blow the opera houses up. But don’t you think that would also be the most elegant?” See Pierre Boulez, “Opera Houses? – Blow them up!” Opera 51, part 2, supp. 1 (2000): 32-42 for a reprint of this article in English.

151 Ligeti, et. al., In Conversation, 113.
dead, as Ligeti and Boulez think, then what are composers supposed to do? Perhaps, like the ending of *Le Grand Macabre*, composers can now present opera itself as a scenario in which the audience may draw its own conclusions. 

Of course, there are multiple readings for the future of opera. The past is inescapable. “Museum” productions of Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini will always exist. Even Sellars’s productions rely on a contemporary reading of these “museum” pieces. In addition, contemporary composers continue to derive material from the past by quoting previous works or alluding to stylistic tendencies. However, as Metzer has argued, nostalgia alone cannot support the present. If music relies too heavily on the past, then it risks collapse. Despite the volatile relationship between past and present, Ligeti successfully reconciled the two: he retained the traditional framework while incorporating postmodern gestures. *Le Grand Macabre*, then, draws upon the past for inspiration and guidance, but its relationship with the past is not its sole structural support. Ligeti’s incorporation of theater, pop art, comic strips, and his own compositional style strengthen *Le Grand Macabre* such that it will not buckle under the weight of its reliance on the past. The parodic elements are not just stylistic toys with which Ligeti plays, but they are carefully calculated devices for integrating the past into the present and therefore reinforcing both. Ligeti’s *Le Grand Macabre* treads the fine line between madness and destruction, past and present, and sublime and ridiculous.
FIGURE I. Roy Lichtenstein: *The Engagement Ring* (1961)

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**FIGURE II. Table of *Le Grand Macabre* performances**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Designer</th>
<th>Conductor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swedish Royal Opera, Stockholm</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Michael Meschke</td>
<td>Aliute Meczies</td>
<td>Elgar Howarth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamburg State Opera</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Gilbert Deflo</td>
<td>Ekkehard Grübler</td>
<td>Elgar Howarth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saarbrücken State Theatre</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Christof Bitter</td>
<td>Walther Jahrreis</td>
<td>Matthias Kuntzsch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teatro Comunale di Bologna</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Giorgio Pressburger</td>
<td>Roland Topor</td>
<td>Zoltán Peskó</td>
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<tr>
<td>Musiktheater Nürnberg</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Götz Fischer</td>
<td>Marco Arturo Marelli</td>
<td>Wolfgang Gayler</td>
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<tr>
<td>Théâtre National Opéra de Paris</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Daniel Mesguich</td>
<td>Bernard Daydé</td>
<td>Elgar Howarth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graz Schauspielhaus</td>
<td>1981</td>
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<td>1984</td>
<td>David Freeman</td>
<td>David Roger</td>
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<td>Ulm Theatre</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Ulrich Heising</td>
<td>Guido Fiorato</td>
<td>Alicia Mounk</td>
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<td>Leipzig Opera</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Joachim Herz</td>
<td>Peter Sykora</td>
<td>Volker Rohde</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zürich Opera</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Marco Arturo Marelli</td>
<td>Esa-Pekka Salonen</td>
<td>Andreas Delfs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Berne State Theatre</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Eike Gramss</td>
<td>Eberhard Matthies</td>
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<td>Vienna Jugendlustheater</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Gidon Saks</td>
<td>Gidon Saks</td>
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<td>Münster State Theatre</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Dietrich Hilsdorf</td>
<td>Dieter Richter</td>
<td>Will Humburg</td>
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<td>Teatro Comunale di Ferrara</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<td>Dieter Richter</td>
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<td>Salzburg Festival*</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<td>Châtelet Theatre, Paris</td>
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<td>Esa-Pekka Salonen</td>
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<td>Hanover Opera House</td>
<td>1998</td>
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<td>Hartmut Schörg höfer</td>
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<td>Netherlands National Reisopera</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Stanislas Nordey</td>
<td>Emanuel Clolus</td>
<td>Reinbert de Leeuw</td>
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<td>Tirol Landestheaters, Innsbruck</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Michael Sturminger</td>
<td>Renate Martin</td>
<td>Arend Wehrkamp</td>
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<td>Budapest Opera</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Balázs Kovalik</td>
<td>Péter Horgas</td>
<td>Jonathan Nott</td>
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<td>Teatro Nacional de Sao Carlos, Lisbon</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Ernst Theo Richter</td>
<td>Hartmut Schörg höfer</td>
<td>Andreas Delfs</td>
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<td>Theater Krefeld-Mönchengladbach</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Thomas Krupa</td>
<td>Andrea Jander</td>
<td>Kenneth Duryea</td>
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<td>Flanders Opera, Antwerp</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Ernst Theo Richter</td>
<td>Hartmut Schörg höfer</td>
<td>Andreas Delfs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heidelberg Theatre</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Wolf Widder</td>
<td>Sibylle Schmalbrock</td>
<td>Thomas Kalb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oldenburg State Theatre</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Mascha Pörzgen</td>
<td>Cordelia Matthes</td>
<td>Alexander Rumpf</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kongelige Teater, Copenhagen</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Kasper Holten</td>
<td>Steffen Aarling</td>
<td>Michael Schönwandt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Komischen Oper, Berlin</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Barrie Kosky</td>
<td>Peter Corrigan</td>
<td>Matthias Foremny</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Kasper Holten</td>
<td>Steffen Aarling</td>
<td>Michael Boder</td>
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<td>Komischen Oper, Berlin</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Barrie Kosky</td>
<td>Peter Corrigan</td>
<td>Johannes Stert</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Denotes the premiere of the revised version.

FIGURE III. Sandro Botticelli: *Birth of Venus* (c. 1485-1486)
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