

Continuum

after György Ligeti



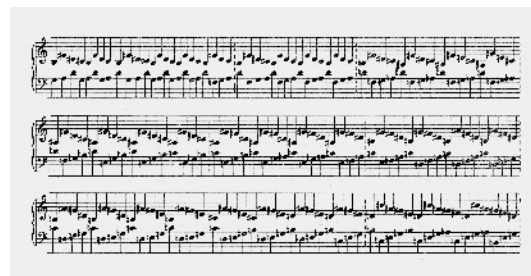
Continuum für Cembalo by György Ligeti, 1968; cover of score, published Edition Schott, Mainz, (ED6111).

"It had never occurred to me before to write for harpsichord, but as soon as I had read Antoinette Vischer's letter it suddenly came to me that a harpsichord is really like some strange machine... I also remembered that a harpsichord was most typically an instrument with a non-continuous sound, the twang of the string is of short duration, followed by silence. I thought to myself, what about composing a piece of music that would be a paradoxically continuous sound... but that would have to consist of innumerable thin slices of salami? A harpsichord has an easy touch; it can be played very fast, almost fast enough to reach the level of continuum, but not quite (it takes about eighteen separate sounds per second to reach the threshold where you can no longer make out individual notes and the limit set by the mechanism of the harpsichord is about fifteen to sixteen notes a second). As the string is plucked by the plectrum, apart from the tone you also hear quite a loud noise. The entire process is a series of sound impulses in rapid succession which create the impression of continuous sound."

Interview with Péter Várnai, 1978, translated from the Hungarian by Gabor J. Schabert; *Ligeti in conversation*, London, 1983.

György Ligeti's *Continuum*, for harpsichord, specifies that the notes be played *prestissimo* "extremely fast, so that the individual tones can hardly be perceived, but rather merge into a continuum". The sound from start to finish is a dense mass, the score instructing that it should be played "very evenly, without articulation of any sort". Despite this, it has distinct momentum, moving ahead at full speed: "The correct tempo has been reached when the piece lasts less than 4 minutes," and should "stop suddenly, as though torn off."

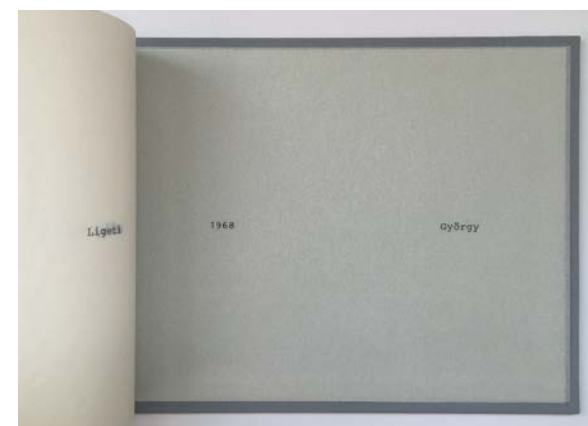
The paradox Ligeti explores is to make continuous sound from individual notes, and his likening of this to "innumerable thin slices of salami" suggested that it was possible to make an equivalent with the pages of a book—the book's thickness made up of separate words rather than notes—an extent of pages rather than of time.



Start, centre, and end of the score.

The text in the score—title, instructions, etc—is typewritten as individual words, one per page, ranged to the left and reading forwards: György / Ligeti / Continuum / für / Cembalo / Frau / Antoinette / M. / Vischer / gewidmet / Prestissimo* / *Prestissimo = / extremely / fast, / so / that / the / individual / tones / can / hardly / be / perceived, / but / rather / merge / into / a / continuum. / Play / very / evenly, / without / articulation / of / any / sort. / The / correct / tempo / has / been / reached / when / the / piece / lasts / less / than / 4 / minutes / (not / counting / the / long / fermata / at / the / end). / The / vertical / broken / lines / are / not / bar / lines— / there / is / neither / beat / nor / metre / in / this / piece— / but / serve / merely / as / a / means / of / orientation / plötzlich / aufhören, / wie / abgerissen** / **stop / suddenly, / as / though / torn / off. / lunga / Duration: / 4 / minutes / or / less / Wien, / Januar / 1968; with an equivalent opposite, ranged to the right and reading in reverse: 1968 / Januar / ,Wien / less / or / minutes / 4 / :Duration / lunga / .off / torn / though / as / ,suddenly / stop** / **abgerissen / wie / ,aufhören / plötzlich / .orientation / of / means / a / as / merely / serve / but / —piece / this / in / metre / nor / beat / neither / is / there / —lines / bar / not / are / lines / broken / vertical / The / .(end / the / at / fermata / long / the / counting / not) / minutes / 4 / than / less / lasts / piece / the / when / reached / been / has / tempo / correct / The / .sort / any / of / articulation / without / ,evenly / very / Play / .continuum / a / into / merge / rather / but / ,perceived / be / hardly / can / tones / individual / the / that / so / ,fast / extremely / =Prestissimo* / *Prestissimo / gewidmet / Vischer / .M / Antoinette / Frau / Cembalo / für / Continuum / Ligeti / György

The text is typed with an electronic typewriter using a carbon film ribbon on 53gsm translucent typo/detail paper. In addition, a cassette has a recording of the piece superimposed with a digitally reversed version, momentarily symmetrical at its centre.



Front, middle, and back of the book.

103 leaves, 151 x 217, typewriter on typo/detail paper, loose-leaf with screw-posts in cloth-covered casebinding; C8 cassette; 10 copies, London, 1994.