

Review

# The technical reviews of Ligeti Piano Etude No.4 *Fanfares*

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**Ligeti's etude *Fanfares* extends the technical skills demanded of the modern pianist and many incorporate completely new techniques. This etude, which was composed around 1985 consists of some of the most technically demanding issues composed for the piano in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the study of this work the pianist is pushed in new directions as Ligeti extends the limits of the pianistic borders.**

**Key words:** Ligeti, Piano Etudes, Piano Performance Techniques, *Fanfares*, Polyrhythm.

## INTRODUCTION

The title *Fanfares* relates to the short melodic and rhythmic motive that recurs in a cyclic manner and is projected against a background of moving quavers. The fanfare motive functions a little like an isorhythmic cell in the sense that every now and again the motive will align with the commencement of a bar. These little melodic ideas are fanfare-like in appearance, particularly in the first few pages of the music, where they appear as crotchets and dotted crotchets and are accommodated in a logical way against the moving quavers of the accompaniment. However, as the music progresses, the fanfare motives become more and more integrated into the fabric of the music, the quaver passages asserting greater dominance as the music unfolds, while the crotchets and dotted crotchets are progressively dropped in favour of quaver movement in both hands. This description might appear to be a recipe for progressively greater simplicity. However, because the rhythmic complexity grows as the music progresses, the opposite

is the case. The reason for this is that the running quaver passages that are heard at the beginning are always grouped as 3+2+3, and this predictable element is heard against a second part which, as it proceeds, is always changing its rhythmic orientation. *Fanfares* is a piece of great rhythmic complexity and becomes progressively more so as the polyrhythmic elements become more dominant from the middle until the end. The 3+2+3 rhythmic grouping is also found in Bartók's *Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm*, No. 4 (Figure 1) (Bartók, 1987), however, Ligeti's etude unfolds in a far more complex way.

Figure 2 shows the predictable *ostinato* passage in *Fanfares*, played here by the left hand. Against this, the fanfare elements are heard in two parts played by the right hand. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the progressive transformation of the "fanfares" idea through the gradual increase of polyrhythmic elements.

In his instructions to the performer, Ligeti has been

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Figure 1. Bartók's Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm, No. 4.

*dédiée à Volker Banfield*  
**Étude 4: Fanfares**  
 Kompositionsauftrag der Bayerischen Vereinsbank für die 8 ½- Konzerte in Hamburg



Figure 2. First eight bars of *Fanfares*.



Figure 3. *Fanfares*, bars 105-108.

careful to emphasize the dual nature of his polyrhythms. By drawing to the attention of the performer the need not

to over-accent the first beat of each bar, he conveys his understanding that for the polyrhythms to work, there

Figure 4. *Fanfares*, bars 157-160.

need to be a careful balance between the predictable (*ostinato*) and the non-predictable or moveable (polyrhythmic) elements. The essential point is that such polyrhythms work best of all when both elements are in balance:

*The ostinato Figure should be clearly accentuated as 3+2+3/8 throughout (even in pp). Do not accentuate the first beat of the bar any more than the subdivisions: there should be no feeling of entire bars (Ligeti, 1986; 2003).*

It is important to note that the *ostinato* part is always a scale pattern, with subtle and predictable accents on the first, fourth and sixth notes. Contrasting with this is the fact that the fanfare elements played by the other hand are not made up of scale notes. Usually these fanfare ideas contain both double notes or chords as well as leaps, which, as often as not, move in oblique or contrary motion to the *ostinato* scales. This actually makes the polyrhythmic accents easier to achieve than would be the case if the polyrhythmic elements were more similar to the *ostinato*. It is the different direction and character of each of these two parts that makes execution of the polyrhythmic elements more feasible.

This etude also uncovers another problem area for the pianist, that of fingering the notes so as to serve the required accents in the best possible way. A logical fingering for the left hand *ostinato* is 4-3-2-1-4-3-2-1. The accented notes fall to the fourth finger and the thumb but the third accent in the bar will have to be made by the third finger which, in this context, is a little weaker than the other two. Such an idea is also mentioned by Yung-jen Chen in his doctoral thesis:

*Regarding the three accented notes, the first note c is accented easily with the shifting hand; and the second note f does not raise a problem as it is executed by the thumb. The third note g# is perhaps the most problematic one, as one can easily neglect the accents on this note. This task therefore requires careful concern on the third accented note (Chen, 2007).*

In practice, the thumb can be more problematic particularly when the dynamic level is very soft. In such

cases, the thumb, which can be less subtle than the other fingers, will often produce an additional amount of accent simply because of the way in plays on its key. As was implied by Ligeti in his instructions to the performer, the issue is one of not over-playing the *ostinato* pattern and it is the thumb in the middle of the passage that can inject an unwanted accent. But it is not simply the fact that the thumb will play differently when compared to the other fingers. For example, when the right hand has to play the pattern, the accents on the right hand's *ostinato* are comparatively easier than with the left hand. The logical fingerings for the right hand's *ostinato* will be 1-2-3-1-2-3-4-5, so the accents are on the fingers 1-1-3. Two of these accents are played by thumb, and it is comparatively easier to produce the required accents. The problem seems mainly to do with hand position, it being easier to shift from one thumb position to the next (for example, when the right hand is ascending or the left hand descending), than it is to pivot on the thumb and pass the third or fourth finger over the it (for example, when the right hand is descending or the left hand ascending).

Generally speaking, the *ostinato* part throughout this piece is played at the dynamic of *piano* (*p*) or softer. The dynamics that Ligeti has placed on the score are extremely interesting in themselves. The overall dynamic of the piece is soft, but there are many instances where Ligeti has marked the score with *ppppp* and even *pppppppp*. As discussed earlier, such markings must be notional rather than actual given the difficulty of playing at such an extreme level of softness. Such dynamic markings are very uncommon, even in contemporary piano music. There are also *forte* dynamics marked in the score, including one or two instances of *fffff*. An extreme challenge for the pianist is the immediate change from one extreme dynamic to the opposite, such as occurs in bars 201-202 (Figure 5) and the simultaneous playing of *pp* in one hand and *fff* in the other (Figure 6). An extreme example of difficult contrasting dynamic markings coupled with awkward polyrhythms is in bars 149-152 shown in Figure 7.

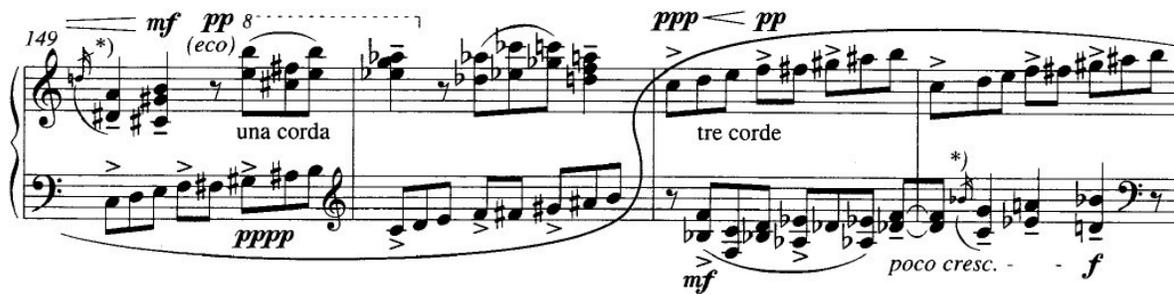
A word might also be said about the use of the *una corda* pedal which Ligeti frequently calls for in the score of *Fanfares*. The *una corda* pedal is, of course, mainly a coloration device rather than a means of achieving softer sounds, although it does allow a certain amount of



Figure 5. *Fanfares*, bars 201-202.



Figure 6. *Fanfares*, bars 181-184.



\*) Play the grace note together with the lower note of the chord.

\*) Den Vorschlag zusammen mit dem unteren Ton des Akkordes spielen.

Figure 7. *Fanfares*, bars 149-152.

additional softness. But given the extremely soft dynamics which Ligeti calls for, there can be a temptation on the part of the pianist to use the *una corda* pedal for this purpose as well. In connection with this, it is also interesting to note that Ligeti expressly calls for a very clean sound with great care taken over pedalling (*quasi senza pedale*). Consequently, because the fingers alone have to do most of the *legato* work, there is no build-up of sound resulting from the use of the sustaining pedal and also no blurring of the repeated scales that form the *ostinato* part. For many pianists, the frequent/constant use of the sustaining pedal can be a means of achieving a higher level of confidence in their playing. This is perhaps because the sustaining pedal makes the piano a

much more resonant instrument with the result that positive feedback is received by the player and he/she feels less exposed. In *Fanfares*, Ligeti has written a technical study which forces the pianist to acquire confidence in execution without the use of the sustaining pedal so that he/she must rely upon the fingers alone. An example of an etude which is similar, though not polyrhythmic nor requiring such extremes in dynamics, is Debussy's (1989) etude, *Pour les huit doigts*.

A significant difficulty in *Fanfares* is that the soft playing must be sustained over a long period, with whole sections being dominated by extremely soft playing. In this context, the loud passages provide some relief and underline the fact that, from a pianistic point of view, it is

in soft playing that the real struggle occurs because it is harder to achieve an absence of sound than it is to make more sound. To achieve really soft dynamic effects, the pianist has to play on the surface of the keys rather than at the bottom of the key-bed and there is a corresponding loss of the sense of security that comes from playing into the keys as is required in loud playing. Such playing involves a strict and severe limitation upon the amount of downward energy that can be employed.

In summary, as with the other Ligeti etudes, *Fanfares* breaks new ground and requires the pianist to develop skills that are beyond the scope of other piano etudes. *Fanfares* might be viewed, at least superficially, as an extension of the techniques developed by Debussy and Bartók in their compositions. Ligeti is certainly a kindred spirit with each of the great composers of the past, particularly in the sense that he has created a group of works which guide and direct the pianist in developing new skills in piano performance and musicianship that the composer views as being important. Accordingly, *Fanfares* can be seen partly as a continuation of a tradition that had been established by these earlier masters. However, Ligeti has also invented and developed new piano performance requirements that were not covered in the etudes of earlier pianist/composers. Because of this, Ligeti's similarity with the pianist/composers of the past is also his point of difference; through these works he has laid out quite new requirements for pianists to develop. Secondly, the development of such specific new pianistic skills is housed within works of great artistic integrity, conviction and musical interest. The new requirements relate particularly to new approaches to complex rhythmic problems, and they also embody new approaches to tonality. This virtuoso work represents a revolutionary challenge, both physical and mental, for the pianist.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declared that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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