

Lukas Ligeti | Biography



Transcending the boundaries of genre, composer-percussionist Lukas Ligeti has developed a musical style of his own that draws upon downtown New York experimentalism, contemporary classical music, jazz, electronica, as well as world music, particularly from Africa. Known for his non-conformity and diverse interests, Lukas creates music ranging from the through-composed to the free-improvised, often exploring polyrhythmic/polytempo structures, non-tempered tunings, and non-western elements. Other major sources of inspiration include experimental mathematics, computer technology, architecture and visual art, sociology and politics, and travel. He has also been participating in cultural exchange projects in Africa for the past 15 years.

Born in Vienna, Austria into a Hungarian-Jewish family from which several important artists have come including his father, composer György Ligeti, Lukas started his musical adventures after finishing high school. He studied composition and percussion at the University for Music and Performing Arts in Vienna and then moved to the U.S. and spent two years at the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics at Stanford University before settling in New York City in 1998.

His commissions include Bang on a Can, the Vienna Festwochen, Ensemble Modern, Kronos Quartet, Colin Currie and Håkan Hardenberger, the American Composers Forum, New York University, ORF Austrian Broadcasting Company, Radio France, and more; he also regularly collaborates with choreographer Karole Armitage.

As a drummer, he co-leads several bands and has performed and/or recorded with John Zorn, Henry Kaiser, Raoul Björkenheim, Gary Lucas, Michael Manring, Marilyn Crispell, Benoit Delbecq, Jim O'Rourke, Daniel Carter, John Tchicai, Eugene Chadbourne, and many others. He performs frequently on electronic percussion often using the marimba lumina, a rare instrument invented by California engineer Don Buchla.

His first trip to Africa, a commission in 1994 by the Goethe Institute to work with musicians in Côte d'Ivoire, embarked him on an exploration of cross-cultural collaboration that continues to this day. In Abidjan he co-founded the experimental, intercultural group Beta Foly which led to the release of his first CD Lukas Ligeti & Beta Foly in 1997. He has worked with Batonka musicians in Zimbabwe; collaborated with Nubian musicians in Egypt which culminated in a concert at the Cairo Opera; and composed a piece for musicians for various Caribbean cultures which premiered in Miami Beach.

In 2005, Lukas was featured at the Unyazi festival in Johannesburg, the first electronic experimental music festival in Africa, and in 2006, he was composer-in-residence at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Lukas also traveled to Uganda in 2007 to collaborate with the music/dance/theater group, the Ndere Troupe. In 2008, he taught composition at the University of Ghana at Legon (Accra). Lukas' band Burkina Electric, based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, combines African traditions with electronic dance music and has been touring internationally.

Recent highlights include a month-long curatorial project for March 2009 at The Stone in NYC; a solo concert as part of the Whitney Museum's Composer Portrait Series; a nationwide tour of Lukas' electronic percussion solo CD Afrikan Machinery (Tzadik Records); and an American Composers Orchestra commission and world premiere of Labyrinth of Clouds with Lukas on solo marimba lumina.

Lukas Ligeti | Short Bio

Transcending the boundaries of genre, composer-percussionist Lukas Ligeti has developed a musical style of his own that draws upon downtown New York experimentalism, contemporary classical music, jazz, electronica, as well as world music, particularly from Africa. Known for his non-conformity and diverse interests, Lukas creates music ranging from the through-composed to the free-improvised, often exploring polyrhythmic/polytempo structures, non-tempered tunings, and non-western elements. He has also been participating in cultural exchange projects in Africa for the past 15 years. Lukas' concert music has been commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra, Bang on a Can, Vienna Festwochen, and the Kronos Quartet, to name a few. He frequently performs solo on electronic percussion, and as a drummer co-leads several bands including Burkina Electric, the first electronica band from Burkina Faso in West Africa. Lukas has also performed/recorded with John Zorn, Henry Kaiser, Raoul Björkenheim, Marilyn Crispell, Jim O'Rourke, Gary Lucas, John Tchicai, and many others.

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Lukas Ligeti | Press Quotes

As a composer:

“Modest and affable onstage, Ligeti represents, under a Clark Kent exterior, a new generation of musical Superman - a globally minded, technologically adept, technically sophisticated composer who also happens to be a virtuoso performer and accomplished improviser.” - **Los Angeles Times (USA)**

“One of the world’s top classical composers.” - **Wall Street Journal (USA)**

“...an extraordinary ability to absorb the world’s music.” - **La Folia (USA)**

“...a distinctive and energetic voice...that walks a skillful line between the comprehensible and the unpredictable...” - **San Francisco Chronicle (USA)**

“Sophisticated music that has communicative directness yet retains a sense of mystery...Ligeti really knows sound and how it lives in the mind.” - **The Wire (U.K.)**

“...as a composer, he enhances his prodigious technique with cyclonic techniques...he manipulates both the beauty and chaos that occurs when lots of different musics come together...” - **Village Voice (USA)**

“...elegant, concise music...imbued with a subtle and ingratiating wittiness.” - **Fanfare Magazine (USA)**

“...his ‘Pattern Transformation’, for four players and two marimbas, is renowned as a cult piece in which constantly shifting rhythmic patterns combine to form structures of subtle, meta-melodic power.”
- **Der Standard (Austria)**

“...a revelation...a composition that inspires enthusiasm through its disciplined freedom and homogeneity.”
- **Nordbayerischer Kurier (Germany)**

“... ‘Labyrinth of Clouds’ ...is rich with atmosphere, piled-up harmonies and Minimalistic patterns...riveting.”
- **New York Times (USA)**

As a percussionist/improviser:

“He plays his drums as if he were dancing.” - **Village Voice (USA)**

“...Ligeti is an original and his playing combines jazz sensibility with a wide array of influences.”
- **The Squid’s Ear (USA)**

“Lukas Ligeti is defter than most in dealing with the same influences both on manuscript paper and behind the drum kit in his work as an improviser.” - **The Wire (U.K.)**

“...a subtlety and attention to sonic detail which sees every hit, brush and tap contribute to the dialogue.”
- **Jazzwise Magazine (U.K.)**

Lukas Ligeti | Press Quotes

Afrikan Machinery (2008) Album reviews:

“2008 50 Records of the Year” - **The Wire (U.K.)**

“Lukas Ligeti is splendidly fulfilling expectations, as this album - which bridges the classical modernist/world music divide- demonstrates. - **The Independent (U.K.)**

“[Ligeti’s] combination of interests, energized by his own sensitivity to specific properties and qualities of sound, is brilliantly displayed on *Afrikan Machinery*” - **The Wire (U.K.)**

“[Ligeti’s] frenzied thicket of sound [in *Afrikan Machinery*] contain a multitude of elements, with long polyrhythmic percussion cycles put through the sampler and brought out again transformed; ...sometimes the effect is of a gigantic sound sculpture. But you listen with close attention, because you don’t want to miss a single note.” - **Songlines Magazine (U.K.)**

“[*Afrikan Machinery*] is dragging me into the newest worlds of today’s music, at first disorientating, but soon captivating.” - **Musical Pointers (U.K.)**

“Brilliant CD - which neatly bridges the classical-modernist-world-music divide... If his art represents a melange of Europe, America, and Africa, it does so with unique finesse... The whole thing keeps you on the edge of your seat, waiting to see what comes next.” - **The Scotsman (U.K.)**

“For this album [*Afrikan Machinery*], he has taken snapshots of various African sounds and filtered them through his unique musical mind. The resulting polyrhythmic music is captivating and often times hypnotizing... it never bores. This is not music to turn on before cleaning the house. This is music to drink up and fully absorb.” - **Atlanta Music Guide (USA)**

As bandleader of Burkina Electric and other collaborative African projects:

“Lukas Ligeti has found an extraordinary interpreter for his work in Mai Lingani, with whom, in his project ‘Burkina Electric’, he frees African music from the folkloristics and traditionalism of Western observers.” - **Salzburger Nachrichten (Austria)**

“...there’s nothing predictable about composer, percussionist, and electronica maven Lukas Ligeti and his West African compadres in Burkina Electric...” - **Boston Herald (USA)**

“[Beta Foly brings]...a new dimension in the dialogue between Africa and the Western world.” - **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Germany)**

“[In Beta Foly]...Lukas Ligeti...discovered, much like Béla Bartok,...the popular basic ingredient for a completely new music.” - **Stereo (USA)**

“[Beta Foly is]...perhaps one of the most successful African/Western...fusion projects ever to come down the pike.” - **Signal to Noise (USA)**

“[With reference to Beta Foly...]...Who, prior to Lukas Ligeti, had the idea to improvise freely in a collective with traditional African musicians, referencing music from Uganda as well as Korea, coordinated solely by a metronomic 'click track' relayed via headphones?...Who had a balafon player enter into a dialogue with an interactive music computer sounding like a piano?...” - **Jazz-Podium (Germany)**

MAVERICK COMPOSER-PERCUSSIONIST LUKAS LIGETI IS ESTABLISHING HIMSELF AS A MUSICAL INNOVATOR. MARK LANGSHAW CAUGHT UP WITH HIM IN LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND

Out of Africa

Try as they might, nobody defies categorization like Lukas Ligeti. His music is an original fusion of acoustic, avant-garde, jazz, electronic and traditional African melodies, as unique as it is daring. Born in Austria into an artistic family, his musical journey began after he graduated from high school and decided to follow in the footsteps of his father, György Ligeti, the Hungarian composer best known for his scores for Stanley Kubrick classics *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Shining*.

'If it hadn't been for my father, I don't think I would have even had the idea it was possible to become a composer. But it's very hard to say because I've never been anybody else; I've never had another father,' says Ligeti.

Although he does not downplay his father's creative influence, his area of artistic interest soon extended further: 'My father was not a collaborator; he

liked to compose alone. I also like to compose alone, but my passion is collaboration. My father was about structure; he was interested in jazz, but mainly structured jazz, whereas my interest lies in improvisation.'

It was his penchant for improvised music that drove Ligeti to pursue jazz drumming at the age of 21 at the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna, defecting from classical percussion. 'I soon realized classical percussion was not for me,' he says. 'I just wasn't that interested in being an interpreter and had no desire to learn other people's music.'

'I LOVE THE IDEA OF MUSIC AS A LANGUAGE AND HAVING A CONCRETE MEANING WITHIN A CERTAIN CONTEXT'

'The Austrian music scene was, and still is dominated by aesthetic tendencies that are not really mine, so I always felt more at home playing the US and England.' And it was from England that he received his first commission, which was premiered by the London Symphony Orchestra. Following this, his passion for jazz led him to downtown New York, home to many of his inspirations including Charles Ives, John Cage and Henry Cowell.

'Jazz is an incredible influence on me because I find it to be the strongest example of a living musical language that has developed over the past hundred years or so. I love the idea of music as a language and having a concrete meaning within a certain context. That's not to say I'm against the abstract, but a piece can be more poignant in context.'

Ligeti quickly developed his own voice, inspired by a diverse array of musical and non-musical inspirations. Western classical concert music and world music – especially African – were a great influence from the start, but non-musical passions such as experimental mathematics, visual art, politics and traveling have also played their part.

'My emphasis has been on Africa for some time. After my first trip there it became my single greatest inspiration,' he says. 'The way I structure my music is very much influenced by African traditions. I went to Uganda last year, which was very inspiring because I've been basing my music on their principles for a long time. It was so encouraging to see that Ugandan musicians understood what I was doing.'

Combining his love of African culture with his affinity for collaboration, Ligeti

co-founded Burkina Electric in 2004 with vocalist Mai Lingani, guitarist Wende K Blass and German pop music pioneer Pyrolator. 'Burkina Faso is very much off the music map,' he explains. 'It's great to base music on their traditions because you can present the European and American audiences with something they have never heard before.'

Burkina Electric creates and performs an original blend of Burkina Faso traditions and electronica. The ensemble released its debut CD, *Paspanga*, in 2006 and there is more to come from the group in the near future. 'We are currently working on a project called Summer of Love with American dance choreographer Karole Armitage,' says Ligeti. 'This will premier in Taormina in Sicily.'

Although Ligeti favors the low-tech approach for much of his African-influenced work, new technology is prominent in many of his other projects. 'For me technology means potential,' he explains. 'A computer is a clean slate on which you can do anything. I like to use commercial software and hardware in strange new ways. For my solo work I use a lot of samples, then manipulate them via computer. I often experiment, looping samples or superimposing them in such a way that it sounds like effects are there.'

With myriad new projects on the horizon, the future looks bright for Ligeti. 'My new CD, *African Machinery*, is released this June,' he reveals. 'I am also working on a project with Karole Armitage called The Elegant Universe and revising some existing compositions, including a piece I wrote for British percussionist Colin Currie. Then there's a piece for American trio Real Quiet, my composition for Bang on a Can and a project I am working on for the American Composers Orchestra.'

Over the last year Ligeti has clearly been among the busiest artists in the industry, but he wouldn't have it any other way. 'It's been completely great,' he admits. ■

MUSIC

Sons Composing Their Own Paths . . .

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

At a recent concert at the West Village club Le Poisson Rouge, Lukas Ligeti was an energetic one-man band, his multicolored mallets blurring over an unusual electronic percussion instrument called the marimba lumina. Mr. Ligeti, the son of the Hungarian-born composer Gyorgy Ligeti, was performing his own unorthodox works, which meshed West African melodies and lively rhythms in a jubilantly organized frenzy.

Mr. Ligeti, who's reluctant to give his age but describes himself as "pretty close" to 40, is striving to cement his own reputation as a composer while defending his father's legacy, which he believes is often misunderstood. He said that his father, who died in 2006, "inadvertently put a lot of pressure on me just because he's not an easy act to follow."

"I would be completely dishonest if I said his music wasn't a huge influence on my music," Mr. Ligeti added, "but I consciously try to do something different."

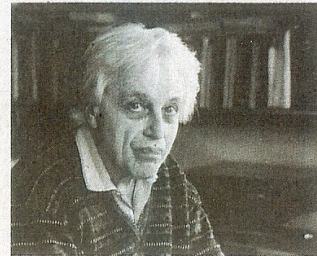
The aesthetic of Gyorgy Ligeti, whose music Stanley Kubrick used in "2001: A Space Odyssey," was mostly rooted in the European classical tradition. His son draws from an unusually broad musical palette that includes jazz, electronica, improvisation and traditional and popular African music. On Friday evening Lukas Ligeti is to perform the premiere of his "Labyrinths of Clouds" for marimba lumina (a MIDI percussion instrument invented by the synthesizer pioneer Donald Buchla) and orchestra, with the American Composers Orchestra conducted by Dennis Russell Davies at Zankel Hall.

Mr. Ligeti has been influenced by African music to an even greater degree than his father, whose piano études were inspired partly by the complex polyphony of sub-Saharan African music. A familial fascination with polyphony is evident in Lukas Ligeti works like "Pattern Transformation," brilliantly performed by the Amadinda Percussion Group on "Mystery System," a CD on the Tzadik label.

That disc is a snapshot of Mr. Ligeti's eclectic output. Kaleidoscopic layers of rhythmic patterns underpin "Independence," also performed by the Amadinda ensemble. "Moving Houses," performed by the string quartet Ethel, starts with a moody, simple violin and cello theme before evolving into a complex melee with



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BETTY FREEMAN

references to Gypsy fiddling, the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby," sabar drumming from Senegal and the melodic styles of West African griots.

David Harrington, the first violinist of the Kronos Quartet, which commissioned "Moving Houses," said that when he first encountered Mr. Ligeti's music, he felt "a powerful sense of this young composer collecting experiences from all over the place, almost being surprised by what would become part of his collection."

"It just seemed to me," Mr. Harrington added, "that Lukas could write something very interesting."

Also on the disc is the riotous "Delta Space." The pianist Kathleen Supové plays a Yamaha Disklavier, her part blending with sampled lines of the balafon (a West African xylophone) and ngoni (a plucked string instrument) in a Messiaen-like riot of color. In "Entering: Perceiving Masks; Exiting: Perceiving Faces" on "Afrikan Machinery," another Tzadik CD, you hear polyrhythmic lines and sunny xylophone melodies emerging from a cacophony of interlocking patterns.

In 2004 Mr. Ligeti helped found the group Burkina Electric, which blends traditional music of the West African country Burkina Faso with dance-oriented electronica. Another night at Le Poisson Rouge with the group, Mr. Ligeti moved between his marimba lumina drum set and laptop as the sultry-voiced singer Mai Lingani charmed and dancers riveted the crowd.

While growing up in Vienna, where he was born and attended an international school, Mr. Ligeti was fascinated with maps of Africa. Apart from a few piano lessons at 9 (he had three teachers in three

Lukas Ligeti, far left, and his father, the Hungarian-born composer Gyorgy Ligeti, in 1993.

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months, he said, because he refused to practice), he had limited musical training until he was 18.

"In the back of my mind I knew that I was going to be a musician one day, but I was mainly interested in math and physics," he said. "Maybe I was a little bit of a nerd, but not too much. I was too weird, I think, to be even a nerd. I continue to be too weird to fit into any category."

After high school he entered the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna as a classical percussion student. "Their attitude was that they would rather take an older beginner who hasn't been taught the wrong way," Mr. Ligeti said, "and for them the wrong way was any way but theirs."

He soon rebelled against his percussion teachers, members of the Vienna Philharmonic. He instead focused on jazz and rock drumming while practicing piano and training his ear to gain entry to the composition program. But he found what he called the university's "neo-complexity movement" of little interest.

In 1994, after a commission from the Goethe Institute, he led a workshop in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and helped found the ensemble Beta Foly. He worked at the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics at Stanford University for two years, then, in 1998, moved to New York, where he found his niche in the multicultural, experimental downtown scene.

Mr. Ligeti lives in a loft in Bushwick, Brooklyn. People often assume that his surname has opened doors, he said, adding that his father "didn't have a lot of connections" and "had some very bad experiences" when he tried to promote his son. Gyorgy Ligeti once recommended him for a percussion commission but was told that it would seem like nepotism. The experience, Lukas Ligeti said, "traumatized him in that he became very circumspect about trying to push me in any way, as he thought that maybe it would hurt me more than it would help me."

Vera Ligeti, Gyorgy's widow and Lukas's mother, said that Gyorgy "criticized Lukas terribly severely."

"My husband said Lukas is really gifted and talented and should learn the craft," she added. "He was very strict." He sometimes frustrated Lukas, Ms. Ligeti said, by insisting that he study the classical canon. Even as a child, she said, Lukas preferred to improvise rather than play other people's music.

Lukas Ligeti said that he and his father "were always very frank, critical of each other's music but very supportive." He once called his father's Violin Concerto, a mélange of folk Hungarian melodies, avant-garde sounds and lyricism, "a bit old-fashioned and self-referential," he said, and his father responded, "I think you're right."

"He was always kidding me, 'You should look at Haydn more,'" Mr. Ligeti added. "And I would say: 'It's 1990. You should listen to this heavy metal.'"

Mr. Ligeti said he hopes to keep his father's legacy "on the right track." Gyorgy Ligeti wanted to distance himself from the "modernist aesthetic," Lukas added, but because he taught at the Darmstadt summer school in Germany, which promoted



WERNER PUNTCAM

Lukas Ligeti on percussion. Born in Europe, inspired by Africa, he now lives and composes in Brooklyn.

serialist composition, he is sometimes wrongly viewed as part of that continuum.

It also irks Mr. Ligeti that his father's music "is getting appropriated for a lot of people's agendas," he said, noting that a modernist composer had been chosen to judge a recent composition contest in Berlin held in memory of his father.

Lukas Ligeti challenges himself to meet the standards represented by his lineage.

"I don't know if I would have had even the idea to be a composer, such an unusual profession, had my father not been a composer," he said. "It makes me maybe try harder, and it's made me very self-critical."

Mr. Ligeti refers to West African storytellers to explain his relationship to his own ancestry. "I'm like a griot," he said, "and the tradition of my griot clan is to do something new."

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Los Angeles Times

It's an African excursion as the composer-performer builds layer upon layer of sophisticated sound.

By MARK SWED, Music Critic
Published November 22, 2008

On my way to the Steve Allen Theater in Hollywood Thursday night for a rare local appearance by Lukas Ligeti, I stopped by Amoeba Music to pick up his new solo CD, "Afrikan Machinery." It was temporarily out of stock. A good sign, I thought. This is remarkable music, and its popularity must mean a brilliant young composer is catching on.



Ligeti is a delirious percussionist as well. He plays something called a Marimba Lumina. It was invented by Donald Buchla, a brilliant synthesizer builder who lost out (to the regret of many major composers) to Robert Moog in the popular market. The marimba is hooked up to a computer, which Ligeti supplies with African sound sources. When his mallets fly, complex rhythms intertwine into post-Minimalist hyper-complexity. Africa is revealed as a continent of fabulous, if musically mad, intoxication. Unfortunately, the good sign at Amoeba was a less good sign down the road at the Steve Allen Theater, where ResBox, an ambitious series of improvised music, is held the third Thursday of every month. Big-box new music (the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Green Umbrella, the Monday Evening Concerts, Jacaranda, presentations at REDCAT) attracts, these days, impressive crowds from many walks of life. But the improvised music scene in town flies so low under the radar, we should be thankful it hasn't crashed.

Only a handful were on hand at the mildly funky, well-equipped, wonderfully accessible (free and easy parking!) Steve Allen, part of the Center for Inquiry, across the street from Barnsdall Park. I suspect I was the only one in the theater who didn't know everyone else. Tickets were but \$10 (barely more than the price of parking downtown). Hard-to-find CDs (including "Afrikan Machinery") were on sale at refreshingly low prices. Bring your own booze. And spread the word.

Ligeti's set was preceded by a local violin and saxophone duo (Jeff Gauthier and Becca Mhalek) and electro-acoustic improvisers from Baltimore and Berlin (Bonnie Jones and Andrea Neumann, respectively). VJ Fader sat at a laptop and projected decorative designs on the stage.

Los Angeles Times

All had something of interest to offer. But the real news was Ligeti.

That he is a stranger to Los Angeles is, itself, strange. He is the son of the late composer György Ligeti, who has long been a draw downtown (Gustavo Dudamel will conduct "Atmospheres" with the Los Angeles Philharmonic next week) to say nothing for Hollywood (bits of "Atmospheres" found their way into "2001: A Space Odyssey"). Lukas spent part of his youth in Palo Alto when his father taught at Stanford, and he later studied at Stanford as well as in Vienna. He now lives in New York but spends much of his time in West Africa. He's formed a rock band in Burkina Faso, called Burkina Electric. He is also the composer of transfixing ensemble pieces for the Kronos Quartet, the Bang on a Can All-Stars and others.

Forget his famous dad. Modest and affable onstage, Ligeti represents, under a Clark Kent exterior, a new generation of musical Superman -- a globally minded, technologically adept, technically sophisticated composer who also happens to be a virtuoso performer and accomplished improviser with a populist bent.

On Thursday, Ligeti began by casually tapping his electronic marimba with a mallet and set off a rhythmic figure with the timbre of a finger-piano. Another tap generated a catchy little whistled tune. But before long, his mallets were a blur, creating layers of rhythms that produced a wall of mesmerizing sound, while the whistling went the route of merry dementia.

Each succeeding piece had its own soundscape, and in each a different route of thickening and thinning textures was taken. African sound sources came in and out of prominence. Regular Minimalist grooves collided with irregular ones. Ligeti's Africa is an ever-changing mosaic of impressions. There wasn't a dull second.

The evening's other performers were from different traditions. Mhalek, the saxophonist, had her nocturnally noir jazzy side, but she also punched out notes and shrieked, while Gauthier, an excellent if understated violinist, connected to electronic sources and kept his cool in the background.

Jones and Neumann turned knobs and knocked around inside a piano. Sine waves and electronic whirring met various noises, while VJ Fader illuminated the stage with swirls. The machines spoke in their language, and we eavesdropped.