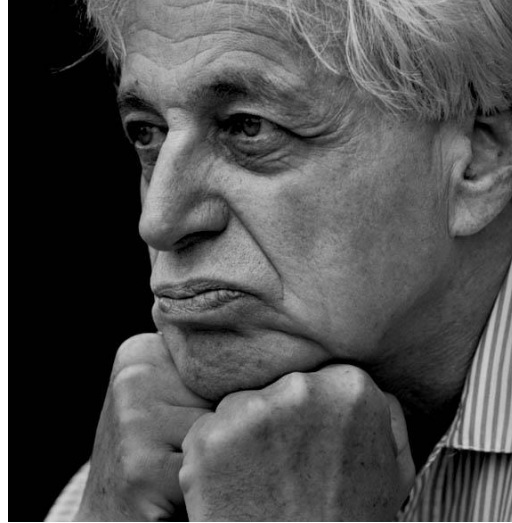


Ligeti Etudes

Comparative Survey: 11 performers evaluated, March 2013



A Modern Classic

Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording

A Candid Appraisal of the Etudes and Recordings

Table of Recordings Surveyed

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A Modern Classic

György Ligeti's Etudes for Piano have emerged as the most significant contribution to the piano repertoire since Messiaen's *Vingt Regards*. The eighteen etudes were written over a period of sixteen years and originally appeared as three separate books: Book One (1985) contained six etudes, Book Two (1994) contained eight etudes, and Book Three (2001) contained the last three completed works (though more were envisioned).

I believe the reason for their success has very much to do with a concept I first discussed in the Liszt Sonata survey, concerning *empathetic connection* and *emotional directivity*. This same concept also explains why the bleeps and twitterings of Boulez and Stockhausen have never taken hold among mainstream listeners (and probably never will) while the music of Messiaen or Ligeti seems to really engage and resonate with listeners. And it has nothing to do with dissonance or atonality. Daniel Levitin also talks about some related aspects of this topic in his book, *This is Your Brain on Music*, but here's how I describe it: Whether in conversation or listening to music, we require subliminal clues (road signs) that help direct our aural/emotional synapses to a functional level of processing that allows us to understand the musical or conversational stimuli. If these signals are not forthcoming, our brains will relegate the stimuli to the category of "noise" and we begin to "shut out" or ignore these stimuli. If the pervasive nature of the music is too repetitive, droning on without a sense of direction, we become bored (the music of Philip Glass or LaMonte Young). If the composer purposely seeks to circumvent the possibility of tuning out the music ("you'll not nod off on my watch!"), creating music that has long lulls of very soft music followed by savage outburst at full volume, then such music can no longer be tuned out and ignored and then crosses over into the category of active annoyance (the music of Boulez, or George Crumb's *Black Angels*, for example).

In conversation we have the body language of the person to help guide us toward an appropriate response. Remember, it's not just the words, but the underlying emotional intention that counts. Even with body language and facial expressions to help us, there must still be a sense of a connective arch, or a progression of thoughts that give us a sense of *emotional directivity*. If we meet a person on the street who starts a conversation with a mild observation about the weather, but then segues into a rant about commercial exploitation, then suddenly draws inward and begins to recall how his recently deceased mother used to rock him to sleep with tender lullabies—and all of this within the span of a minute—well, we quickly assess that in all likelihood this person is not mentally stable and is probably suffering from an emotional breakdown.

With music the composer must rely on his ability to take us from point A to point B in a manner that we can follow. Whether Bach, Rachmaninoff or Ligeti, all good music (as in successfully communicative) gives the listener plenty of road signs to ride out the expressive arch. This is how composers and performers establish an *empathetic connection* with the listener. If the progressive arch (our "road sign") seems to have a lot of pot holes in the road, or to take us in seemingly random and inexplicable directions, then our sense of empathetic connection is lost. Levitin calls this the "listener's sense of safety."

“To a certain extent, we surrender to music when we listen to it – we allow ourselves to trust the composers and musicians with a part of our hearts and our spirits; we let the music take somewhere outside of ourselves. Many of us feel that great music connects us to something larger than our own existence, to other people, or to God. Even when music doesn’t transport us to an emotional place that is transcendent, music can change our mood. We might be understandably reluctant, then, to let down our guard, to drop our emotional defenses, for just anyone. We want to know that our vulnerability is not going to be exploited.”

To that idea of “exploited” I would also add “abused.” Here’s another simple analogy: Let’s say the emotional arch of a phrase takes on a gentle upward sweep and back, 1-2-3-2-1, perhaps conveying a sense of uplifting euphoria. Or, let’s say the arch is increasing in intensity, 1-2-3-4-5, followed by a fermata to allow the emphatic gesture to resonate (I’m thinking of Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 8), or let’s even allow for the occasional extreme dynamic contrast for startling effect, 1-5, or contrasting phrases such as found in the Liszt Sonata (the declamatory *Recitativo* section) where one phrase is aggressively *fortissimo* with *staccatissimo* articulation, while the other phrase is more flowing and with inward reflection. All of these variables define the expressive range of music in a manner that has an ability to maintain an empathetic connection with the listener and give us enough emotional directivity that we feel “safe” going down the road with this particular music. What is not communicative, is to have sudden and inexplicable contrasts without this connective expressive arch, to play a Bach prelude with 1-5-1-4-1 dynamic emphasis (all over the road, and even off the road) or within a singular context to have sudden swings of emotion or levels of intensity that jar and confuse the processing synopsis of our brains. With such music we either tune it out, or become very annoyed.

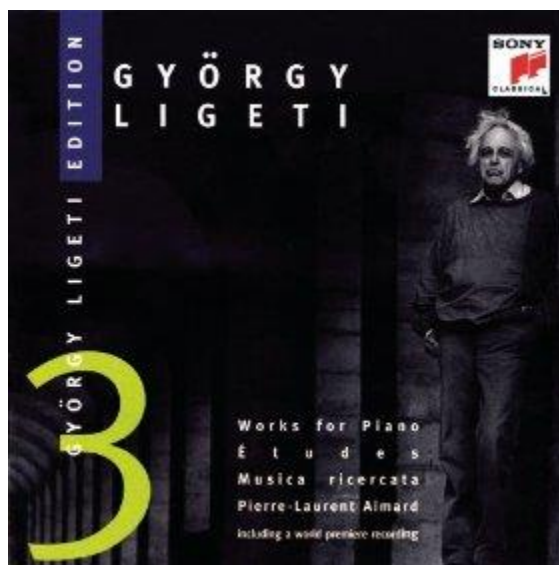
All that to say that Ligeti’s Etudes are among a very small handful of serious concert works in the last fifty years which follow these guidelines for successful communication yet are also innovative and captivating enough in their moods to stand out with a distinctive voice. With Ligeti’s Etudes, we can say to ourselves: “Here is a composer whom I can spend an hour with, and enjoy the scenery along the way.” Mind you, not all of Ligeti’s works fall into that category. I find some of the juvenilia such as the *Chromatische Phantasie* extremely contrived and banal, and works such as the *musica ricercata*, musically facetious and silly, and without edification. Such works are not worthy of my time when there are so many greater riches to explore. But the Etudes are, by all reckoning, modern masterpieces.

There have been relatively few composers since Messiaen who have been able to tap into this universal expressive language and yet find a distinctive voice. When I was a student at music school I accompanied a fellow student in a recital of American vocal music including works by Samuel Barber and Ned Rorem. Once acquainted with these composers I began to explore other of their works and as it turns out on my next visit to the music store, Ned Rorem’s Eight Etudes were in the new releases box and looking for a happy home. So I bought them, learned the first three and ended up playing No.3 at my junior jury test. Just the other night I found that somebody had posted a MIDI performance of the works, and how inhumane and monstrous the music sounded to me. By comparison to such a strict and literal rendering, my playing must have been laden with far more expressive indulgence! But I recount this story only to sweep the cobwebs of my memory and try to determine if there have been any other contributions to the pianist’s repertoire that can compare with the Ligeti Etudes. I’ve dabbled with some of the works by Corigliano,

Rautavaara, Helps, and Muczynski, and while not without interest, they don't appear to have tapped into this sense of universal appeal that Ligeti's Etudes have. Sofia Gubaidulina's Chaconne is a serious concert work that seems poised to become part of the standard modern repertoire, but that is just one work. The Ligeti Etudes offer the pianist the choice to pick and choose from among them to program the works that appeal most to the performer. It is because of their range of moods and textures that I feel that no other works hit it out of the park like Ligeti's Etudes do.

My suggestion is this: if you like the piano music of Bartok and Messiaen, but haven't yet discovered these works, go to YouTube and check out the videos by Yuja Wang or Nicolas Namoradze. If those don't win you over, then nothing will. If, as I suspect, you find something compelling and even addictive about this music, you will want to explore the entire oeuvre and invest in a good recording for your library.

Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording



Pierre-Laurent Aimard. Sony (1997)

I deliberated right until the very end about which recording would be the Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording. Neither of my two overall favorites, Aimard or Denk, offer the complete 18 etudes (Denk plays 13 of them, Aimard 15). The complete 18 are available on a recording by Fredrik Ullen, which does have its engaging moments. But I believe both Denk and Aimard more consistently offer up the highest standards of interpretive vision. I finally decided on the Aimard because he really provided some of the standout performances of this survey. The other factors working against Denk's fine efforts were twofold: sound and musical coupling. The recorded sound was often quite brittle in the upper treble and didn't allow for sufficient atmosphere in some of the etudes. As for the odd choice of the Beethoven Opus 111 Sonata as a companion work, a concept that might work in a recital with the space of an intermission to divide the two worlds, but on a CD for home listening this is not a programmatic concept that I would want to revisit time and again.

As for the Aimard, there is no "dead wood" here, each of the etudes registers with the fullest conviction on the performer's part. Sound is good, with sufficient textural clarity, but also allowing enough resonance and breathing room for Aimard to paint some incredibly evocative and atmospheric renderings. His spine-tingling performance of the ever popular *Warsaw in Autumn* is alone worth the modest cost of this CD (or MP3 download). This recording is now offered at a budget price, ranging from \$8.99 to \$11.99 at the time of this writing. Given the quality of the performance and recording, and the more than fair price, there's no reason why this shouldn't be in the personal collection of every lover of modern piano music.

Overview of Available Recordings

(And Candid and Subjective Appraisal of the Etudes)

As is often the case with recordings of cycles, there is not one single version that is clearly superior in each individual piece. Until we get more than just a teaser of two selections from Wang, I go back and forth between Denk and Aimard, and even then, there are a few etudes where neither is completely satisfying. In conducting this survey I listened to many postings on YouTube by students and competition contestants, and really, the only standout for me was the young Nicolas Namoradze. Somebody please put him in a studio on a good piano; he has the potential to stand alongside of, or ever surpass the achievements of Aimard and Denk.

As for the titles given each etude, Ligeti came up with a list of suggested possibilities and more or less left it to friends and his publisher to decide on the matter. Many of the works did not have a finalized title until long after their composition.

Étude No.1. Désordre (disorder). This is a study in non-convergent metric stresses. There is an overall strong and willful metric projection that is basically in 8/8 time, but Ligeti occasionally short-shrifts one hand a beat to give the effect of 7/8 in one hand and 8/8 in the other, with the two hands coming in and out of phase. Overall timings are similar between the pianists (Biret the slowest at 2:51 and Ullen and Smith the fastest at 2:12) but the musical characterizations can be radically different depending on use of pedal, sharp or rounded metric pulse, and level of contrast between loud and soft. At its best the work can exhibit an exhilarating energy and frisson, and I'd say that Denk is probably the most successful. Smith also demonstrates tremendous drive and energy—like an ecclesiastically beserk Messiaen—which must have been something to behold at his live concert. On the other hand this can sound like the mechanical contrivances of Nancarrow, or even worse, like those machines used at piano factories to break-in actions, an effect sadly demonstrated by Toros Can's rendering.

Étude No.2. Cordes à vide (open strings). A study in open fifths and shifting sonorities. This is a wonderfully evocative piece which all of the pianists did pretty well with. However, there is more of a range of timings between the pianists, with Ullen coming closest to the composer's estimated timing (2:45) at 3:03, and Biret really too slow to the finish line at 4:36. Then there is the question of the piano's innate resonance, sonority and sustain, and here I find Chung and Can's pianos to be rather thin compared to the others. Pedaling also plays a role, and I find Aimard is perhaps too quick to let sustained tones drop. Therefore, my top votes go for Ullen (with a nice ringing harmonic sheen) and Denk (less harmonic sheen but wonderful dynamic gradations).

Étude No.3. Touches bloquées (stuck keys). I have to confess that this is not one of my favorites. In most performances it sounds like silly, spastic noise. Therefore, it takes a really compelling rendering for me to derive any enjoyment. The only one that did that was Denk, who created an effective mood that "hooked me" from beginning to end.

Étude No.4. Fanfares. This is probably the most popular of the etudes (at least judging by the number of YouTube postings of student recitals and competition rounds). None is

more compelling than Yuja Wang (either the live concert version on YouTube or the even better studio version on her CD for Deutsche Grammophon). The main points of differentiation concern touch and rhythmic alacrity. As for touch, a crystalline pearl-like tone is ideal for the left hand ostinato figurations, given shape and frisson by micro dynamic pulses. Wang does that best, followed by Denk, and least successful was Biret who sounds like her left hand is playing on marshmallows. As for rhythmic alacrity, the right hand syncopated chords are often too rounded and blunt (Ullen), or conversely, too dry and sterile (Can). It takes just the right amount of rhythmic definition and color to make the line buoyant (Wang and Aimard are best, though Smith is also very effective for a live performance). Overall, Wang's rendering makes this etude one of the joys of the modern repertoire; if her performance doesn't win converts, nothing will.

Étude No. 5. Arc-en-ciel (rainbow). This is a study in delicate sonorities and reminds me a bit of Rautavaara. I don't think I heard a bad version from anyone. The music doesn't really convey a sense of colors of the light spectrum (I'm not sure how I would imagine that) but the specific imagery and titles don't really matter. Each listener is free to conjure his/her own images. I see a flat watershed at dusk, dried water reeds standing upright and unmoving against the last filaments of radiant light. Bet nobody else had that specific image! Anyway, as I said, all versions were good, but I'd give the nod to Ullen for this one.

Étude No. 6. Automne à Varsovie (Autumn in Warsaw). This is one of my favorites, and also, apparently, fairly popular with students. I can appreciate a variety of approaches here, and that may be one reason why it is so popular: details don't have to be within incredible tolerances for the expressive message of the music to come forth. Ullen is etched and almost pointillistic in conception (and Smith similarly so), while Aimard is much more atmospheric and *misterioso*, conjuring up the sounds of Bartok's *Nachtmusik*. Some focus on textures, others dig into the more passionate emotional moments, some paint in greys and blocks of mono-dynamic stasis, others are more vibrant. Probably the least effective was Can, not because the performance was lacking, but just owing to the limited range of colors of his piano. My favorite, and standout performance of the survey, is Aimard, for the simple reason that the evocative and eerie imagery he creates sent a shiver down my spine!

Étude No. 7. Galamb borong (~ gamelan gongs). This is one of the etudes which didn't immediately appeal to me, but which over time, and with the right performances has become one of the etudes I eagerly anticipate. The reason why it didn't catch me on the first round of exploration is that it doesn't have any extrovert textural details that draw attention to themselves, but of course, the gamelan sonorities (mimicking the unique sounds of Javanese kendang, hanging bells and kempul gongs) can really create an exotic sound world that will transport you straight to the Indonesian Islands. Obviously, color and sonority are crucial here, and none are better than Aimard in this etude. I like Denk, too, but the more aggressive section in the upper treble really sounds like shattering shards of glass the way his piano has been recorded, and I find that a bit unpleasant and disruptive of the otherwise evocative atmosphere he creates.

Étude No. 8. Fém (metal). This is a study in sharp, angular rhythms with Bartokian harmonies. The trick is to find the right balance of excitement and crisp rhythmic delineation without sounding like a metal knife chipping away at brittle obsidian. Toros

Can crosses that uncomfortable boundary and renders the music with a dry and brittle tone. Denk and Ullen find the best overall balance. Aimard, usually one to fault in the direction of diffusing textural detail, is here very dry and secco and without atmosphere, yet in the concluding section uses more than usual amount of pedal for an interesting and effective conclusion. To pick just one I'd go with Ullen, who at 2:26 has the fastest timing without sacrificing any accuracy or color.

Étude No. 9. Vertige (vertigo). This is technically quite challenging, though the average listener might think it is actually less demanding than some of the other etudes. This is where we separate the wheat from the chaff. Can seems to struggle with rhythmic continuity, and Biret makes this sound like Philip Glass on crack. Aimard is blurry and irregular and not especially convincing. Chung is merely proficient. Denk gets overwrought and too extreme for my comfort level (vertigo doesn't mean manic screaming... well, maybe if one falls off the precipice!). That leaves Ullen as the last man standing, so a well-deserved compliment for the job well done!

Étude No. 10. Der Zauberlehrling (Sorcerer's Apprentice). This is another tricky etude which challenges the pianist with its irregular repetitions. Wang does a great job in bringing forth the musical characterization of the piece, but in terms of technical aplomb, I was most impressed with Torros Can. While I found many of his renderings lacking, this one seemed to fit both his technical style and the type of sound captured on this recording. Denk is also impressive, Aimard and Ullen less so. Smith's version is too much like chicken pecking.

Étude No. 11. En suspens (in suspense). This is an intriguing etude, but most performances have one or another feature which detract from my complete enjoyment. For example, the way Denk is recorded the sound is too present, and as sensitively as he plays it just doesn't evoke a sense of timelessness or a suspension of the here and now. Smith doesn't bring out the layers of sonority, the bass register in general lacking penetrating depth, and the glissandi are too dry and literal. Although I don't care for most of Chung's renderings, I found her most effective in this number. The sense of wistful nostalgia she conveys, tinged with a bit of remote and abstract pondering of sorrow put in my mind an image of an abandoned old playground at the edge of a modern ghost town, perhaps post-apocalyptic, with a rusty old swing set, and the murmuring glissandi in the music representing tumbleweeds blowing by. Well, that's my take, but at least she tells a story and fully engages my imagination.

Étude No. 12. Entrelacs (interlacing). This is a study in textures and shifting perspectives. While not among my most favorite numbers, I did enjoy Denk's rendering. He does the best at keeping all the different layers on their own plane (one line appears in fragmentary bits every nineteen beats!). Ich denke über Denk: All that "brain-aching" paid off!

Étude No. 13. L'escalier du diable (devil's staircase). This is like the musical equivalent of Max Escher's perpetual roundabout illusion, always ascending and never descending, round and round and never arriving anywhere. I like to think of it as the "Escalator from Hell," where you are trying to go up toward escape, but the treads are moving to take you back down. One thing's for certain, this is no Stairway to Heaven! Any way you look at it

it's a hellacious ride and a bit of clever compositional craft. For me, a key element of effective realization centers on how seamless the circling patterns are. Torros Can was the least effective here simply because his avoidance of the pedal and the dry acoustic of his recording allow no forgiveness of any bumpiness in his dynamic continuity. Biret seems to have been caught in the loop longer than most, and takes 6:51! to emerge. Denk is too dry and Ullen at 5:04 is entirely too frantic and lacking in metric definition. Amazingly, Nicolas Namoradze clocks in faster than anyone (at 4:49) yet maintains perfect cohesion of both the micro and macro arch of the work. Of the commercial recordings, I'd opt for Aimard, though the final thuddy low note is not an ideal conclusion. It's at moments such as those I long to hear the incisive bass power of a Bösendorfer. Why hasn't anyone played some of these etudes on a Bösendorfer? Certainly the colors and sonorities would make for an effective rendering.

Étude No. 14. Coloana infinita (infinite column). Most performances sound like so much irritating noise (which is thankfully over in a brief span of its minute-long duration). Aimard seems to suggest layers of "something" lurking under all the noise, enough that I'm at least making an attempt to connect the dots. The only other version that somewhat engaged me was Simon Smith's live performance which had a slapping noise at the end which made for quite an effective conclusion! (maybe it was just a broken string!). Hopefully other listeners will get more out of this etude than I do. By the way, there are two versions of this work, the first version was deemed impossible to play, though a few pianists have actually played it, so the second version has less dense overlapping of textures. The effect of either version is very similar (neither version wins me over, to be honest), so I'd recommend pianists focus on the final version, the other one isn't worth all the extra effort.

Étude No. 15. White on White. This is another one I wasn't so fond of upon first acquaintance, with its rather plain vanilla diatonic harmonies and uneventful progression in the beginning, and then the manic shift of moods with the *doppio movimento*. This etude might as well be subtitled Slow and Fast, or Calm and Crazy, or perhaps Dr. Jeckel and Mr. Hyde. Therefore, I prefer a pianist who will give some shape to the chordal structures in the beginning, but not just bringing out the top line at a steady dynamic level without expressive nuance (like Ullen) but giving a more natural rise and fall to the phrases (like Aimard). Then, as regards the crazy spurt of activity in the last section I look for some sense of underlying metric continuity, rather than the impression Ullen gives of Thelonious Monk gone Mad. Chung has better metric clarity than Aimard but her tone (as recorded) sounds terrible. Although I'm not completely satisfied with any of the versions I've heard, Smith managed to evoke an interesting state of stasis in the slow section, which brought to my mind images of elapsed photography capturing the slow passage of time over a barren landscape, and the fast section was reasonably contoured. By default (until I hear one that completely satisfies) my two picks are for Smith and Aimard.

Étude No. 16. Pour Irina (for Irene). This is another one that can seem uneventful and even uninspired, until you hear the performance that brings it alive for you. For me that was Nicolas Namoradze, who plays with a limpid tone and singing projection, and who conveys an underlying sense of swaying motion, like the wind rocking a person who rests in a hammock. There is a sense of tenderness and of melancholy which is quite touching.

Many of the other performances seem like they play the piece just because it's part of the cycle, and they haven't really fathomed how to get anything more expressive out of it. Ullen paints a bleak and desolate picture, which may be a valid perspective, and may appeal to other listeners more than it does to me. The Namoradze performance is completely satisfying to me; I just wish he'd get around to making a commercial recording of better quality than what I get from the YouTube posting.

Étude No. 17. A bout de soufflé (out of breath). This *moto ritmico* study bristles with energy that seems to almost fray at the edges from its sheer centrifugal force. The out of breath notion may stem from the idea of the frenetic whisking of an egg-beater in preparation to making a soufflé. In any case, it's a fun, compact, etude that can be effective if the pianist doesn't bludgeon the listener to death. I found Ullen most effective here, and Smith is also quite good (especially for a live concert performance).

Étude No. 18. Canon. Well, this little etude seems a rather ignominious way to complete such masterful set of pieces. But then we know that Ligeti did not intend to stop at this point - his poor health put an end to this creative endeavor. Choices are limited. I suppose I'd opt for Chung, but I wish she would lift her hands a bit more to impart more micro-dynamic energy and lift between phrases. Ullen was not especially engaging, and Smith also seemed a bit perfunctory.

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Table of Recordings Surveyed

	Performer	Name	Etudes	Date	Label	Source
1	Aimard	Pierre-Laurent	1 – 15	2001	Sony	CD
2	Banfield	Volker	1 – 6	1987	Wergo	CD
3	Biret	Idil	1 – 14	2001	Naxos	MP3
4	Can	Toros	1 – 17	2000	L'empeinte	MP3
5	Cascioli	Gianluca	2, 4		DG	CD
6	Chung	Lucille	1 – 18	2003	Dynamic	MP3
7	Denk	Jeremy	1 – 13	2011	Nonesuch	CD
8	Namoradze	Nicolas	13, 16		(live)	YouTube
9	Smith	Simon	1 – 18	2005	(live)	YouTube
10	Ullén	Fredrik	1 – 18	2004	BIS	MP3
11	Wang	Yuja	4, 10	2008	DG	CD