



Metronomes are quiet before the Musiqa preview performance of Ligeti's work last month.

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Music by metronome or ... time after time Ligeti symphonic work features 100 devices that keep on ticking

By CHARLES WARD Copyright 2006 Houston Chronicle

A year after György Ligeti wrote *Atmospheres* — the eerie sounds made famous later in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* — the Transylvanian composer created a work at the other end of the spectrum. *Poème symphonique* is played on 100 metronomes.

"It's one of those landmark pieces," says Anthony Brandt, president of Musiqa, the contemporary music ensemble run by composers at Rice University and the University of Houston. "It created a riot when it was performed."

"We've all heard about it, but we've never heard it live. So when we decided to present a tribute to Ligeti, Karim Al-Zand (of Rice) said we had to do *Poème symphonique*." Ligeti (LEE-geh-ti) died in June.

But where to find 100 mechanical metronomes, the kind that operate like old wind-up clocks or watches? Today, musicians use electronic versions.

After deciding that an appeal for donated metronomes would be too cumbersome, Brandt turned to eBay. He found a dealer offering a mechanical one for \$20.

"I wrote and asked, 'Do you have 100?' He replied that he had 300."

Brandt took one to see if it would work. "It was exactly what we needed." He then ordered the rest, and negotiated the price down. Total bill: approximately \$1,400.

Ligeti's instructions for *Poème symphonique* are simple but precise. Each metronome must be wound exactly four half-turns (it's physically difficult to turn the wind-up lever a full turn). The metronomes should be set to strike from fast to slow speeds in roughly equal numbers. Visually, the slowest ones should be closest to the audience. Finally, the presenter is to start the metronomes before the audience enters the space where the piece is operating.

So, Saturday, Musiqa will set up the metronomes in the lobby of the Hobby Center's Zilkha Hall during the group's one-hour concert. The program inside the program will comprise works for piano four-hands, voice and solo instruments.

Out in the lobby, the ticking will start during the final round of applause.

Aurally, the effect of *Poème symphonique* is initially random clicks. "People have likened it to popcorn," Brandt says.

But as the faster metronomes run down, patterns emerge, many like the phase rhythms underlying some of Steve Reich's earliest music.

As more and more instruments go silent, simpler patterns become audible, "and it changes the nature of what you see," Brandt says.

Visually, he adds, *Poème symphonique* is "like the wind blowing through a field, moving individual blades of grass at different speeds. That's my favorite part."

Then there's the "metaphorical" aspect of the event. Ligeti's father and uncle died in concentration camps. "Here is a Holocaust survivor writing a piece for 100 metronomes winding down until there is nothing left," says Brandt.

Born in 1923, Ligeti grew up under repressive, censorial governments in Hungary. In 1956, he moved to Vienna where, Brandt notes, he expected unfettered freedom.

But when *Poème symphonique* was presented in Holland soon after its 1962 composition, the audience rioted. "In the West, he found there are other forms of censorship," Brandt says.

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