

Lukas Ligeti's *Notebook* is several things: an album and an ensemble, but also a creative practice and an ongoing series of pieces, all situated in the liminal space "somewhere between composition and improvisation." As a creative practice, *Notebook* is Ligeti's evolving methodology for creating conditions in which structure and spontaneity blur and overlap, manifesting his musical voice while also giving players a great deal of expressive agency, as musicians who are willing and able to "think aloud."

The members of *Notebook*—the band—are all musicians who thrive in the spaces in between, that is, who are fluent enough to move seamlessly between notated complexity and focused improvisation, and, as the occasions call for, to draw on and morph between several idioms, often within the span of a single piece. As Ligeti puts it:

I founded the ensemble **Notebook** as an outlet for musical ideas combining composition and improvisation in unusual ways—ideas and approaches that require too much rehearsal time, and playing techniques too individualized, for the usual "new music chamber ensemble," and too detailed and minutely coordinated for the usual "improvisers' ensemble." The musicians in the group are fantastic at playing both scored and improvised music . . . I compose the pieces we play, but each musician has "something to say," and says it. It's much more a collaborative effort than one from the ivory tower, but I, as the composer, still retain considerable control of the result.<sup>1</sup>

All four pieces on *Notebook* (the album) emerged from a multi-faceted

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<sup>1</sup> Lukas Ligeti, conversation with the author, December 24, 2025.

process that, as the case may be, *might* begin with a handwritten score, which *might* include a combination of precisely notated pitches and rhythms, melodies without rhythms, rhythms without melodies, descriptions of processes, delineations of parameters, cues, things to do, and things *not* to do. But it *might* instead begin with verbal instructions, and/or a sonic object to be responded to. Over time Ligeti might mix-and-match these methods of transmission, or reshape the material altogether, the aim always being to best situate players to make conscious musical decisions while still realizing an extremely clear artistic vision. The result is music that feels both rigorously shaped and disarmingly spontaneous. The music of *Notebook* fully inhabits the composition/improvisation continuum: While some moments are clearly composed and others clearly improvised, there are many gradations—"an infinite amount of right"—in between.

### From Vienna to Bushwick, via Ouagadougou

Ligeti has himself made remarkable music at both ends of this continuum. Born in Vienna and now based in Brussels, he spent extended periods living and working in Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, South Africa, as well as thirty-one years—more than half his life—in the United States; in each of these locales he cultivated unique, unprecedented collaborations. He holds a PhD in composition and artistic research from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, where his thesis, *Hand in Hand Into the Unknown*, explored the potential of experimental intercultural collaboration in African contexts, drawing particularly on his work with his own bands, Beta Foly & Burkina Electric. He currently teaches composition at the Royal Conservatory in Brussels, and has held positions at the University of California, Irvine, the University of Pretoria, and as a visiting professor at institutions in Accra and Johannesburg. As a composer he's been commissioned by groups such as Aris

Quartett and Eighth Blackbird, performed by the Gürzenich Orchester and the Basel Sinfonietta, and featured in international festivals such as Aldeburgh, Ars Musica, Moers, and Vienna Festwochen. As a drummer and percussionist he has worked extensively with equally stellar improvisers: Raoul Björkenheim, Marilyn Crispell, Henry Kaiser, Gary Lucas, Elliott Sharp, John Tchicai, John Zorn, and many others. Even before *Notebook*, he was continually “combining composition and improvisation in unusual ways.”

Across these contexts, certain through lines recur: a fascination with poly-rhythm and polymeter; an insistence on collaboration as a compositional condition rather than as an afterthought; and an ear for how multiple cultural and musical perspectives can occupy the same space without collapsing into uniformity. His long engagement with African popular music deeply informs *Notebook*, though it is only made fully explicit on the last track, *Kaleidoscope Point*. But the sensibility that produced Beta Foly and Burkina Electric—shared agency, attention to how different local traditions actually work, and a comfort with multiple rhythmic and cultural perspectives coexisting without homogenization—is very much evident in *Notebook*: a living set of situations in which form is something musicians do together, under never entirely fixed conditions, each time the music is brought to life.

Ligeti moved to New York in 1997, living in Brooklyn from 2007–2015. He lived, composed, and rehearsed in a Bushwick loft with a startlingly full view of Manhattan—the Verrazzano, George Washington, Queensboro, and Williamsburg bridges all visible in a single sweep. Josette Urso’s cover drawing depicts this view: It does visually what *Notebook* does in sound, looking out over a city in the process of reinvention, where old musical borders—the savage “Uptown/Downtown” divide that dominated the late 20th century—were rapidly withering away.

Possibly it was never actually geographic, but by the 21st century what

remained of it had nothing to do with one’s street address and seemed increasingly irrelevant. As *Notebook* took shape, Bushwick and other Brooklyn neighborhoods were filling up with a new breed of musician, people who could read intricate scores but also improvise with authority and abandon, and who did not feel in any way compelled to choose sides. The musicians of *Notebook* embody that hybridity. As Ligeti describes it:

Twenty-five years ago, it wouldn’t have been easy to find such musicians, even in New York City. But in the meantime, the scene has opened up and barriers have broken down, making a group like *Notebook* possible. Stylistically, it is located in a hopefully original and innovative place extrapolating and linking elements of new classical/post-minimalist music, indie rock, and free jazz.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Notebook* as practice**

*Notebook* functions as a laboratory in which Ligeti does his fair share of delineating pitches, rhythms, and forms, but also the conditions under which musicians listen, decide, and act together. His scores and verbal instructions often specify materials and procedures rather than single ideal outcomes. Within a single piece, a player might at various points have ‘conventional’ material, be asked to locate themselves in relation to overlapping cycles, to find their way in and out of a tempo, to follow a visual cue, or to improvise within certain unconventional parameters. These complexities are thrown into high relief—both in terms of contrast and in the sense of sculptural depth—by juxtaposition with disarmingly simple, catchy tunes and

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2 Ibid.

rhythms. Ligeti has often emphasized that, for all his fascination with the complex, his musical thinking begins with simple tunes—“my own voice singing”—and with an acute awareness of how rhythmic structures manifest in the body. The goal is not simply to erase the dichotomy of composition and improvisation, but rather to create situations where those modes—formal design and spontaneous action—are both necessary, where structure and freedom don’t cancel each other out, but instead make the music even more vivid and alive.

Rehearsals for *Notebook* were therefore less about “getting it right” than about collectively internalizing systems. Techniques such as headphone isolation, using polymetric drumming as a cueing device, and soloists being “shadowed” by background solos, even if described on a page, could only be learned by doing. Some pieces, like *Kaleidoscope Point*, evolved over years, relying on the ensemble’s growing familiarity with these methods and with one another. Others, like *Intermediate Vector Bosons* and *Uncommon Notion*, place more of the burden on real-time coordination: The performers are asked to maintain several conceptual threads simultaneously, with notated components and improvisation coexisting in carefully designed environments.

This album documents the first full manifestation of *Notebook*. All four pieces are narrative in the broadest sense, unfolding as journeys in which materials are introduced, reframed, and transformed. There is always a sense of dramaturgy—of tension and release, of dreamlike drift and sudden focus—shaped as much by the individuality of the performers in these conditions as by the notes and rhythms themselves. Form becomes less a static architecture than a behavior enacted collectively under particular constraints, with each performance tracing a slightly different path. Interpretation and invention merge in ways that cannot be disentangled. *Notebook* is to Ligeti’s Brooklyn as *Burkina Electric* is to his Ouagadougou, presenting his artistic voice in close dialogue with a specific circle of collaborators, providing those musi-

cians a space to think aloud, to be recognizably themselves within the framework he has designed.

## The Music

*Intermediate Vector Bosons* (2014) takes its title from particle physics. As Ligeti describes the opening:

Each musician has an individual melody, which they play in alternation with a fixed tone. The result is a complex counterpoint in which melody and rhythm are considered as separate, rather than interdependent, phenomena, while also improvising—perhaps the sound of elementary particles speeding through space along their individual vectors. The players are tasked to maintain several conceptual threads at once, and while the notated component dominates in this piece, they are not interpreting so much as they are thinking out loud.<sup>3</sup>

This may register to the listener as a cloud of similar melodies, all moving at the same pace, with no obvious hierarchy. But the underlying design belies the casual pencil sketch that greeted the players at the first rehearsal: Each instrument’s phrase length is unique; if all parts were played strictly as written, it would take an astronomically long time for the composite pattern to actually repeat. As a listener, one feels the repetition and the cohesion, but the composite is decentered, like ripples in a pond. This gives the listener a multitude of “possible paths” to follow: With each listening, one’s ear traces a different one. After a couple of minutes Ligeti—conduct-

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3 Ibid.

ing but not playing—begins cueing individual players to alter their tempi and move toward other material. As individual tempos shift, the result is a controlled blur of micro polyphony, in which overlapping lines create an ever-changing balance of clarity and turbulence. Ligeti has described this as a situation in which he “wants the players to be a little stressed out,” but also one with “infinite amounts of right.”

*Color Gradations* (2015) begins almost as a photo-negative of *Bosons*, in a similar state of coherent complexity, but with reversed polarities. As in *Bosons*, the ensemble begins together and on equal terms: this time with shared pitches in a single eight-bar cycle, oscillating between a half-step in individuated rhythms. On each repetition of the cycle, the higher pitch shifts upward, first collectively and systematically, then individually and more freely until, as Ligeti puts it, “the contours between the composed and the improvised are at times difficult to discern.” The feeling of entropic inevitability is abetted by the controlled chaos of Tom McNalley’s electric guitar, or more precisely, the “rogue element” of his effects pedals, “unpredictable in nature ... highly unstandardized, and player-dependent,” which introduce an element of volatility into an otherwise tightly structured context. The piece functions as a kind of concerto for effects pedals, with the boundary between composed and improvised material intentionally difficult to pinpoint.

Ingenuously, Ligeti composed with rhythmic precision the foot patterns used to activate and switch pedals, while leaving the physical arrangement of the pedals—and therefore the choice of which to activate—to the player. A microphone is placed near the pedals to pick up the clicks and thumps of the footwork: These mechanical sounds—generally undesirable and/or ignored—become structural events, audible markers of shifts in color and density, reminders that technology is not a neutral conduit but an active participant in the music.

Out of this ever-changing mist, simple haunting melodies begin to emerge,

but at varying, impossible-to-notate tempi (they are fully written out, but with the added marking “not in time”). A simple process, applied to simple material, yielding complex results that somehow feel very emotionally direct: tunes appearing intact from a swirl of altered timbres, then dissipating into the fray.

*Uncommon Notion* (2017) is far less notation-reliant. Each musician listens on headphones to pre-recorded material downloaded onto their cellphones, and therefore—while identical—impossible to synchronize perfectly. The players imitate what they hear, but what they hear is deliberately impossible to imitate: The source is Ligeti improvising on an “extremely out-of-tune harpsichord” from his old office at UC Irvine. This “loose, blurred” canon stumbles between fluidity and enfeeblement, a heterophony of infinitudes. There is coherence but never unanimity: motivic relations but never strict resemblances. At a single, brief moment (you’ll hear it), the ensemble snaps into tight alignment, then just as suddenly returns to their subjective, isolated activities.

Ligeti describes *Uncommon Notion* as a comment “on the isolation we can experience while connected to our smartphones.” At the same time, the piece suggests that coherence does not require uniformity, and can in fact enable quite fierce individual expression, in this case blistering solos by Ricardo Gallo on synth and Adriana Mateo on violin. Is this social critique about technology and isolation, or is it an exploration and demonstration of how an ensemble can find connection while its members are literally not on the same page?

*Kaleidoscope Point*, the earliest of the four works, was composed in 2009 for a concert at New York’s Whitney Museum. It introduces many of the ideas that Ligeti and the band would explore in later works, including soloists being “shadowed” by background solos, players cueing individually from specific drums within poly-metric kit patterns played by Ligeti himself, and the use of unnotatable sounds as

(3)

Kaleidoscope Point, excerpt

“equal partners in melody and harmony.”

It also contains layers of referentiality to Ligeti’s prior work, specifically his deep immersion in African popular music, from fully intact guitar riffs to more abstracted cyclical tunes and rhythms. These slices of reality gradually blur and merge into a dream-like landscape. As the piece progresses, similar scenarios play out: more concrete fragments—bursts of groove, shards of melody, and Ligeti’s own drumset playing—little universes progressing from Big-Bang to differently entropic dream states. In the end, Ligeti leaves us, whistling to a pre-recorded piano, itself played back on a handheld cassette recorder.

Fundamentally my musical imagination is my own voice, singing simple tunes...I never want to swear off the idea of having melodies. I like to remember melodies.<sup>4</sup>

*Notebook* is a music of full engagement: intellectually alert, rhythmically embodied, emotionally unguarded. The ensemble negotiates intricate structures without ever sacrificing humanity or risk; they create luminous textures and manifest Ligeti’s ingenious designs, while always conveying a sense of people thinking and feeling together in real time, creating beauty out of the interplay of order and chaos, simplicity and complexity, individuality and group effort, rigor and spontaneity.

— Evan Ziporyn

*Evan Ziporyn is a composer/clarinetist, founder of Gamelan Galak Tika, and founding member of the Bang on a Can All-stars. He is currently Kenan Sahin Distinguished Pro-*

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*fessor of Music at MIT, where he also serves as Faculty Director of the Center for Art, Science & Technology.*

Austrian/American composer **Lukas Ligeti**'s innovations include new methods of polymetric ensemble interplay and *experimental intercultural collaboration*, an approach he developed in groups he co-founded in Africa, Beta Foly (Côte d'Ivoire) and Burkina Electric (Burkina Faso). An Alpert Award laureate, his music is commissioned and performed by some of the world's top ensembles and published by Edition Peters. For many years an active member of New York's creative music scene, he co-leads the trio Hypercolor and performs solo and with fellow improvisors worldwide. Currently based in Brussels and Johannesburg, he is Professor of Composition at the Conservatoire royal de Bruxelles. [www.lukasligeti.com](http://www.lukasligeti.com)

Saxophonist, composer and educator **Dan Blake** has performed and recorded with Grammy-winning artists and with his own projects. His work brings together a range of cross-disciplinary interests including animation, ballet, and social justice activism. He is Assistant Professor of Music at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.

New York-based pianist, keyboardist, electronic musician, and composer **Ricardo Gallo** creates 21st-century Planet Earth music. He has written for acoustic and electro-acoustic formats, short films, videos, dance, installations, and multimedia stage productions, has performed and written for improvisatory groups, and has had an ongoing collaboration since 2016 with Cecilia Vicuña.

Los Angeles-based guitarist **Tom McNalley** has played with artists such as Rob Blakeslee, Michael Vlatkovich, and Ornette Coleman, as well as his own groups.

**Eyal Maoz** is internationally renowned as a wild and unconventional player in the progressive jazz-rock-avant guitar world. Known for his bold, self-developed genre-defying works, he has released albums on leading labels, collaborated with John Zorn and Eugene Chadbourne, and performed at major festivals, including Newport Jazz and Montreal Jazz.

Violinist, singer-songwriter, and actress **Adrianna Mateo** has performed as a soloist at Carnegie Hall, opened for Alicia Keys, performed a violin concerto written for her by Mitchell McCarthy with the ensemble Contemporaneous, and recently made her feature film debut in *Song Sung Blue* (starring Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson).

**Rick Parker** casts a broad net with his trombone playing augmented by electronics and synthesizers. He has released numerous CDs as a leader/co-leader and performed and recorded with a wide range of musicians including Tim Berne, the Mingus Big Band, Muhal Richard Abrams Orchestra, and Frank Lacy.

Brooklyn-based visual artist **Josette Urso** makes exploratory drawings, paintings, and collages that trace perception, form, and chance through close observation. Her awards and residencies include those from the Gottlieb and Pollock-Krasner Foundations, Camargo, Ucross, and Yaddo. She has exhibited widely and is represented by Markel Fine Arts, New York. [www.josetteurso.com](http://www.josetteurso.com)

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

### Lukas Ligeti

*Afrikan Machinery*. Tzadik TZ 8054.

*Mystery System*. Tzadik TZ 7099.

*Pattern Time*. Innova 732.

*That Which Has Remained... That Which Will Emerge...* col legno WWE 1CD 20452.

### Burkina Electric

*Paspanga*. Cantaloupe Music CA21057.

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*Hypercolor*. Tzadik TZ 7811.

### Lukas Ligeti & Beta Foly

*Lukas Ligeti & Beta Foly*. Intuition Music INT 3216 2.

### Raoul Björkenheim & Lukas Ligeti

*Shadowglow*. TUM CD 006.

### Thollem McDonas & Lukas Ligeti

*Imaginary Images*. Leo Records LR 709.

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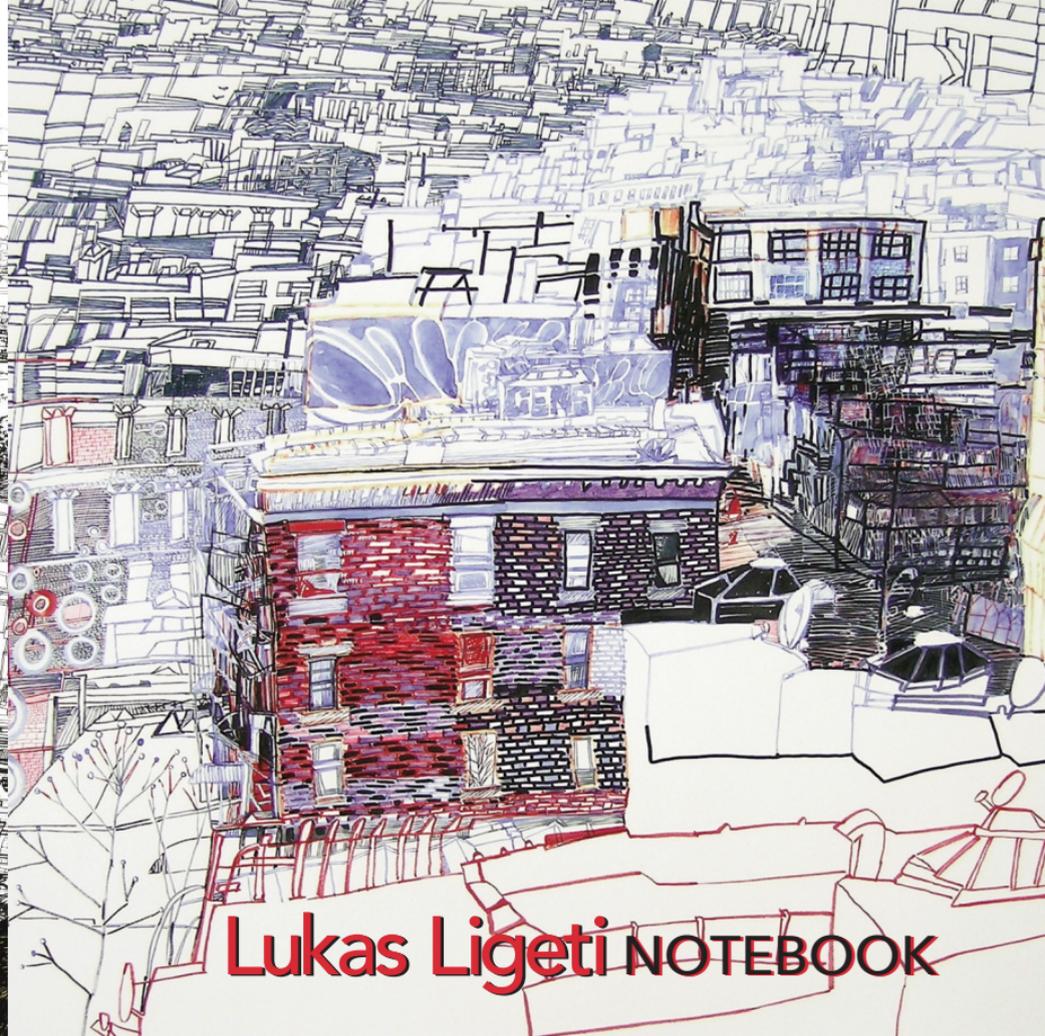
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