

# György Ligeti Street in Budapest

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György Ligeti, one of the greatest composers of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was born 100 years ago and today a street in Budapest bears his name. The composer's widow and son were present, his 97-year-old composer colleague György Kurtág gave the dedication speech, Ligeti's works were played on the hurdy-gurdy, and brass players portrayed the figure of a 500-year-old turtle.

On 28 May 2023, the centenary of György Ligeti's birth, a street was named after the world-famous composer. It was a moving moment when Ligeti's old friend, another world-famous composer, György Kurtág, inaugurated the street with an impassioned speech and pulled the string that raised a tiny curtain and revealed the sign "György Ligeti Street" on the side of the Budapest Music Centre. If there's a good place for a Ligeti Street anywhere in Budapest (or in the world), it's at the BMC, the most important contemporary music centre in Hungary, which dedicated a major, nearly week-long festival to Ligeti's art in late May.

The dedication of the street featured some of the performers from the world-star-studded concert the night before, including violist Kim Kashkashian, cellist Steven Isserlis, pianist Víkingur Ólafsson and some of the greatest performers of the Hungarian music scene, but perhaps more importantly, György Ligeti's widow and son, Vera Ligeti and Lukas Ligeti, were present. And of course, Mr. Kurtág, who has lived at the BMC for years (he moved back here from France in 2015 with his wife Márta, who passed away in 2019).

Until now, this small street, about 150 metres long, in the 9<sup>th</sup> district of Budapest, was called Imre Street (Imre is a male given name in Hungarian). I must apologise to all the Imres who felt this street belonged to them (if it was named after Saint Prince Imre, son of the first Hungarian king from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, I apologise to him too), but for a music fan like me, the name change has made Budapest a better place. Probably many fans of Franz Liszt felt the same way when the area next to the Music Academy building, which had been part of Gyár utca (literally, Factory Street) since 1850, was renamed Liszt Ferenc Square. There are many Imre streets in the country, but only one György Ligeti street – until now.



György Kurtág, György Kurtág Jr., Vera Ligeti, Lukas Ligeti and Pierre Charial at the inauguration of Ligeti Street © Bálint Hrotkó BMC



Ligeti's old friend and world-famous composer, György Kurtág giving a speech at the inauguration of Ligeti's street with György Kurtág Jr. in the background © Bálint Hrotkó BMC

In his speech, Mr. Kurtág recalled Christmas Eve 1957, when Ligeti visited him in Paris. He had already been living in the French capital for months, Ligeti was there for the first time, and yet it was he who guided Kurtág through the city and knew all the streets and street names by heart. "He had a perfect sense of direction, he could find his bearings anywhere", Mr. Kurtág said. "On maps as well as on musical scores. He had a special affinity with streets. His musical scores were like maps of cities with a complex road system. Parallel, vertical, diagonal, twisting-turning roads and streets. He always knew which way to go and always led the way. If I couldn't follow him, that was my fault, my weakness."

Mr. Kurtág also recalled a statement by Ligeti, recalling Béla Bartók's last will, that there can be no Bartók Street or Square in Hungary as long as there is a public square named after Hitler or Mussolini. "It is my wish," Mr. Kurtág quoted Ligeti, "that nothing be named after me, but if it is, let it be called 'György Ligeti Errant Way.' [Ligeti György tévút]" Hungarian administrative law does not recognize the term "errant" (at least when naming public places), so Ligeti's wish is fulfilled by a special plaque on the wall of the BMC. "I am happy to spend the rest of my time in a building on Ligeti Street," Mr. Kurtág concluded.

At the opening of the street, barrel organ player Pierre Charial, who worked with Ligeti on several of the composer's pieces, played excerpts from the piano cycle *Musica Ricercata* on his unique instrument. Ligeti, who had a childlike fascination with machines and automata, admired Charial's hurdy-gurdy, and the hurdy-gurdy transcriptions were recorded for the Ligeti Complete Edition. I am sure Ligeti would have been pleased that the sound of this instrument was the first to fill the street that bears his name.



Ligeti's 100th Birthday Festival, Víkingur Ólafsson (piano), Steven Isserlis (Cello) © Bálint Hrotkó BMC

The ceremony ended with a short piece by Ligeti titled "The Big Turtle Fanfare from the South China Sea," played by the brass section of the Modern Art Orchestra in a beautifully harmonised form written by the ensemble's artistic director, Kornél Fekete-Kovács. The short movement, which became a solo trumpet piece in its own right in 1985, was originally written for a puppet theatre performance in 1949. According to a report in the *Népszava* newspaper on 9 October 1949, the puppet show features "the heroic Chinese maiden Spring Flower, the brave shepherd boy Faithful Heart, the 500-year-old turtle, the wise dragon – as well as masons, poor people, court servants and the Chinese emperor himself. 'Help others and help yourself,' the wise dragon teaches, and the oppressed Chinese people understand his mysterious words. Joining forces, they drive out the oppressive emperor, and as the morning star rises in the sky, a song of freedom resounds from

the lips of the liberated people.” Although his music seems very abstract, Ligeti was a deeply political figure. Even this tiny little piece gives us an important message from the past. A message that is as relevant as ever.



**Gergely Fazekas** (PhD) is a Hungarian musicologist. He studied literature and philosophy at Eötvös Loránd University and musicology at the Liszt Academy, where he is an associate professor teaching baroque and contemporary music. Between 2012 and 2017, he was editor-in-chief of the music publishing house Rózsavölgyi & Co. founded in 1850. He collected and translated all of Debussy’s writings and interviews into Hungarian (it was published in 2017), and his book on Bach and the musical form was published in 2018. In the 2017–18 academic year he taught music history as a Fulbright Visiting Professor at Bard College, NY, USA. His review of György Kurtág’s opera *Fin de partie* was selected as “Best Article of the Month” by the Board of Hungarian Chief Editors in December 2018. He is the musical advisor for the documentary on György Kurtág, which is scheduled to premiere in the fall of 2024.