

## György Ligeti, Nonsense Madrigals

György Ligeti (1923-2006) is one of the great giants of post World War II musical modernism, variously described as "one of the most important avant-garde composers in the latter half of the twentieth century" and "one of the most innovative and influential among progressive figures of his time". Born in Transylvania, Romania, he lived in Budapest until 1956 when, two months after the Hungarian revolution was put down by the Soviet Army, he fled to Vienna, becoming an Austrian citizen in 1968.

Commissioned by the English male vocal sextet The King's Singers, Ligeti's *Nonsense Madrigals* (1988–93) form a set of six a cappella compositions employing as texts Victorian era children's literature in English, from William Brighty Rands, Lewis Carroll, and Heinrich Hoffman. Three of the six madrigals will be heard on tonight's program. *The Cuckoo in the Pear Tree*, is a text by William Brighty Rands (1883-1892), one of the major authors of Victorian nursery rhymes. The simple narrative is in the form of a dialogue, and Ligeti's setting is laid out in three large sections. *The Alphabet* is the most unusual madrigal of the set in that it uses no poetic text but rather the letters of the English alphabet. While the concept of setting the alphabet to music for purely aesthetic purposes might well be a humorous idea, *The Alphabet* juxtaposes serious emotional elements with humor, an idea found often in Ligeti's music, as in his opera *Le Grande Macabre*, where scenes of great terror combine with comedy in Kafkaesque fashion. The third nonsense madrigal on tonight's program, *The Lobster Quadrille*, is taken from the fifth chapter of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where Alice meets the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, two strange creatures who teach Alice a dance. Carroll writes, "So they began by solemnly dancing round and round Alice, every now and then treading on her toes when they passed too close, and waving their fore-paws to mark the time, while the Mock Turtle sang this [the poem], very slowly and sadly."

Nordic Voices writes: "When György Ligeti named his collection of settings *Nonsense Madrigals*, he was probably not only referring to the comical absurdness of the texts, involving different animals in not-very-usual situations, but the music itself is also packed with musical pranks, rhythmical extravaganzas and bizarre vocal effects."