



# EX NIHILO

- |           |   |       |  |
|-----------|---|-------|--|
| <b>01</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b> (1923–2006)  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata I. Sostenuto - Misurato - Prestissimo  | 02:32 |  |
| <b>02</b> | Musica Ricercata II. Mesto, rigido e ceremoniale  | 03:42 |  |
| <b>03</b> | <b>Brecht Valckenaers</b> (2000)  |       |  |
|           | Rhythm Studies I. Distorting Time   | 02:37 |  |
| <b>04</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b>  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata III. Allegro con spirito   | 01:06 |  |
| <b>05</b> | <b>Helmut Lachenmann</b> (1935)   |       |  |
|           | Ein Kinderspiel I. Hänschen klein   | 00:53 |  |
| <b>06</b> | Ein Kinderspiel VI. Glockenturm   | 01:45 |  |
| <b>07</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b>  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata IV. Tempo di valse<br>( <i>poco vivace - "à l'orgue de Barbarie"</i> )         | 02:18 |  |
| <b>08</b> | <b>Brecht Valckenaers</b>   |       |  |
|           | Rhythm Studies II. A Bit Drunk  | 02:46 |  |
| <b>09</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b>  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata V. Rubato. Lamentoso   | 03:14 |  |
| <b>10</b> | <b>Henry Cowell</b> (1897–1965)   |       |  |
|           | Irish Legends III. The Voice of Lir   | 04:07 |  |
| <b>11</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b>  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata VI. Allegro molto capriccioso  | 00:45 |  |
| <b>12</b> | <b>Brecht Valckenaers</b>   |       |  |
|           | Rhythm Studies III. Distorting Mirror   | 03:35 |  |
| <b>13</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b>  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata VII. Cantabile, molto legato   | 03:47 |  |
| <b>14</b> | <b>Béla Bartók</b> (1881–1945)  |       |  |
|           | Out of Doors IV. The Night's Music  | 05:38 |  |
| <b>15</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b>  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata VIII. Vivace. Energico   | 00:55 |  |
| <b>16</b> | <b>Brecht Valckenaers</b>   |       |  |
|           | Rhythm Studies IV. Mixed Feelings   | 02:54 |  |
| <b>17</b> | <b>György Kurtág</b> (1926)   |       |  |
|           | Játékok, Book V Bell-fanfare for Sándor Veress  | 01:07 |  |
| <b>18</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b>  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata IX. Adagio. Mesto<br>( <i>Béla Bartók in memoriam</i> )                        | 02:12 |  |
| <b>19</b> | <b>George Crumb</b> (1929–2022)   |       |  |
|           | Makrokosmos, Book II  |       |  |
|           | III. Rain-Death Variations ( <i>Pisces</i> )  | 01:44 |  |
| <b>20</b> | IV. Twin Suns ( <i>Gemini</i> )   | 03:21 |  |
| <b>21</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b>  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata X. Vivace. Capriccioso   | 01:23 |  |
| <b>22</b> | <b>Brecht Valckenaers</b>   |       |  |
|           | Rhythm Studies V. Chaconne des Cloches  | 06:33 |  |
| <b>23</b> | <b>György Ligeti</b>  |       |  |
|           | Musica Ricercata XI. Andante misurato e tranquillo<br>( <i>Omaggio a Girolamo Frescobaldi</i> ) | 04:02 |  |

TT: 63:10

# Brecht Valckenaers

piano



## EX NIHILO: A PROGRAMME IN THREE LAYERS

This programme is an uninterrupted flow, structured in three layers. The first and most important layer is György Ligeti's *Musica Ricercata*, a series of eleven short compositions in which the composer experiments with various compositional techniques and styles. Interwoven between these pieces are two additional complementary layers: one consisting of works by 20<sup>th</sup> century composers that resonate with *Musica Ricercata*, and another of five interludes composed by my own specifically for this programme.

When Béla Bartók passed away in New York in 1945, György Ligeti was only 22 years old, yet he was already destined, alongside his contemporary György Kurtág, to shape the musical landscape of post-war Hungary. At that time, Ligeti was still studying at the Budapest Conservatory under teachers such as Zoltán Kodály and Sándor Veress, and he later became a lecturer there in harmony, counterpoint, and music analysis. Through Vienna, which would later become his home base, he eventually arrived in Cologne, where he was exposed to the full spectrum of Western European avant-garde music. *Musica Ricercata* predates this period. Ligeti composed the work between 1951 and 1953, giving it a kind of hinge function between past and future. With this piece, he sought to break free from the inevitable shadow of Bartók — a goal he admittedly did not fully achieve here. At the same time, Ligeti described his intention as experimenting “with very simple structures, rhythms, or sonorities, as if beginning *ex nihilo*.”

The title *Musica Ricercata* carries a double meaning. On the one hand, “ricercata” refers to an old contrapuntal genre, the *ricercar* (see *Musica Ricercata XI*). On the other hand, “ricercata” literally means “researched music” in Italian. The work can therefore be understood as both an exploration of music and a quest for a personal style. In a literal sense, Ligeti enacts this exploration in the structure

itself: the first piece uses only two notes, and in each of the following ten pieces, one additional note is introduced, culminating in the full chromatic set of twelve tones in the eleventh piece. This gradual expansion increases the possibilities for melody and harmony, while simultaneously increasing complexity. Moreover, throughout the movements, Ligeti draws inspiration from a wide range of genres and styles. Clear echoes can be heard of Bartók, Eastern and Western European folk music, atonality and polytonality, and early Baroque counterpoint.

“Ex nihilo” and this exploratory element became the central theme of this concert, with all other works relating to it in some way. The pieces by Lachenmann, Cowell, Bartók, Kurtág, and Crumb treat the piano as an instrument *ex nihilo*, as if discovering it for the first time, exploring the possibilities it offers. This results in unconventional textures and playing techniques, such as using the palm of the hand or the forearm (Cowell and Bartók), producing overtones (Lachenmann and Crumb), or playing directly on the strings rather than the keys (Crumb).

My *Rhythm Studies*, in contrast, explore rhythmic possibilities, pushing and challenging my own temporal boundaries. *Distorting Time* and *Distorting Mirror* are studies in less common subdivisions of the beat (respectively quintuplets and septuplets) and their interactions with polyrhythms. *A Bit Drunk* — a nod to similarly titled works by Bartók and Lachenmann — is a study in irregular subdivisions of a large measure (28/16 divided into 8/16 + 7/16 + 6/16 + 7/16), creating an unstable, drunken sensation. *Mixed Feelings* examines rapidly changing subdivisions or “feels”, hence the title. In *Chaconne des Cloches*, time itself is central: the piece opens with eleven bell strikes from four different bells, followed by a chaconne of twelve cycles built on a five-measure chord pattern — symbolic of the twelve hours on a clock and the five minutes between each numeral. In this way, one symbolic hour passes during the piece, which concludes as it began, with bell strikes — this time twelve.

Throughout the programme, several sub-themes recur, including bells (Lachenmann’s *Glockenturm*, Kurtág’s *Bell-fanfare*, Ligeti’s *Musica Ricercata IX*, my *Chaconne des Cloches*), children’s pieces (Lachenmann’s *Ein Kinderspiel*, Kurtág’s *Játékok*, indirectly Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos* and Crumb’s *Makrokosmos*), homages (Kurtág’s *Bell-fanfare for Sándor Veress*, Ligeti’s *Musica Ricercata IX* — *Béla Bartók in memoriam* and *XI* — *Omaggio a Girolamo Frescobaldi*), historical forms (Ligeti’s *Musica Ricercata XI*, my *Chaconne des Cloches*), and clusters (Cowell’s *Voice of Lir*, Bartók’s *The Night’s Music*).

## BETWEEN TRADITION AND CREATION

Composing and improvising have been part of my musical life from an early age. I started with drums and soon after took up the piano, creating my own pieces even before I learned to read scores.

When I was ten, I recorded my first little CD at home for fun, featuring both classical works and my own compositions and improvisations. Looking back, I can already see in that moment the seed of what would now become my artistic path.

Around the age of twelve, I began to truly discover the classical repertoire — by listening and playing — and became completely captivated by it. It felt natural to go on to study piano at the conservatory, with the ambition of becoming a concert pianist. During that time, I deliberately set aside composing in order to focus entirely on performance.

After several years, however, I began to feel that something was missing. I started to question my role as a performer: what could I still add to music that has already been played and recorded so often, and at such a high level? That question led to

a period of reflection about what music means to me, and how I might use it to mean something to others.

Gradually, I found answers in two directions. On one hand, in rediscovering my own creativity through composition and improvisation — writing new music that might hopefully resonate with others. On the other hand, in reaffirming the lasting value of the classical repertoire: an inexhaustible source of beauty, knowledge, and meaning that must be kept alive by actively sharing it.

I see classical music as my musical parents — from whom I will always continue to learn and whom I will always love — yet I don't want to remain solely "in their service." I like to compare it to a city: it is important to keep maintaining the old cathedrals so that people can continue to enjoy and learn from them, but a city without new buildings becomes a museum city – beautiful, but lifeless.

## THE COMPOSER-PERFORMER

The tradition of the composer-performer is deeply rooted in music history. In the time of Mozart and Beethoven, it was natural for performers to play their own works or improvise. Only from the Romantic period onward did an increasing interest in the past emerge, and gradually the separation between composing and performing as we know it today took shape. In the twentieth century, this divide became even greater, partly due to growing specialization and the development of compositional practice independent of instruments.

This evolution has led to extraordinary achievements in both performance and composition, but it also raises questions. If we compare music to a language, it can sometimes seem as though performers are only able to recite existing texts,

without being able to speak for themselves. And composers, in turn, write texts they cannot pronounce. In that sense, music risks becoming a dead language.

I try to approach music as an active language — one in which I can speak, write, and recite: to improvise, compose, and perform. These different facets are inseparably connected and continually nourish one another.

I hope that the tradition of the composer-performer will once again find more space within the classical music world, as I believe it can help keep our musical culture alive and relevant. How fascinating would it be if Chopin were alive today, releasing his own albums?

Fortunately, this shift does seem to be taking place in recent years. More and more musicians are seeking a balance between interpretation and creation, and music education increasingly encourages this connection. For me, this is a hopeful evolution — one that can help classical music remain a living art form, a tradition that honours its past while actively shaping its future.

## PROGRAMMING AS COMPOSITION: CREATING A MUSICAL NARRATIVE

Programming has always fascinated me. In the beginning, it was mainly about finding a few pieces that flowed naturally into one another; later, I started creating half-length programmes built around a unifying theme, and gradually the ambition grew to construct larger, more cohesive entities. When Festival 20-21 invited me, for our first collaboration, to create a solo recital, it felt like the perfect opportunity to take the next logical step: for the first time, to design a full-length programme conceived as one continuous whole. This eventually became the programme recorded on this CD.

I've always felt a bit envious of art forms such as film or theatre, where the dramatic arc can unfold over a long span of time, leaving you with the sense of having truly experienced something by the end. Large musical forms, like symphonies, share that same capacity: they take you on a journey in which every moment gains meaning through its place in the larger whole.

In classical concert practice, programmes are often assembled as a kind of patchwork of unrelated works. That can certainly lead to wonderful concerts — I've experienced many myself — but I feel drawn to approaching it differently. For me, programming is not just about placing pieces side by side, but about creating a context in which each work can be experienced at its best, or even gain an additional layer of meaning through its surroundings.

A well-constructed programme, to me, is more than the sum of its parts: the transitions between works, the order, the sense of pacing and tension, the interplay of styles — everything contributes to the experience as a whole. In that sense, creating a programme feels almost like composing. Each element has its place within a larger narrative, and the final result becomes, to me, a single, unified composition.

*Brecht Valckenaers*





**Brecht Valckenaers** (b. 2000, Leuven) is a versatile pianist and composer who combines his love for classical and contemporary repertoire with his own compositions and improvisations.

He studied for eight years with Nikolaas Kende at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp and is currently continuing his studies with Claudio Martínez Mehner at the Hochschule für Musik Basel and Eliso Virsaladze at the Scuola di Musica di Fiesole.

Brecht has won prizes at several competitions, including the Steinway Piano Competition, Cantabile Piano Competition, Breughel Piano Competition, Concours de Piano Andrée Charlier, and the EPTA Piano Competition.

In 2025, he received the Third Prize and the Prize for the Best Performance of a Dutch Work at the YPF European Piano Competition in Amsterdam.

He has appeared as a soloist with orchestra and has performed in venues such as Bozar, Flagey, deSingel,

Palais des Beaux-Arts de Charleroi, Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, and Bimhuis Amsterdam.

His compositions — marked by strong rhythmic inventiveness — have been broadcast on national radio and received enthusiastic responses on YouTube.

After a celebrated appearance at Festival 20-21 in 2024 with his project *Ex Nihilo*, Brecht is delighted to continue his collaboration with the festival as Artist in Residence. Over the next editions, Brecht will perform all of Ligeti's works in which the piano takes centre stage, alongside other projects. *Ex Nihilo* will be released in spring 2026 on Antarctica Records, with the support of the City of Leuven.

Driven by a desire to keep exploring and pushing his musical boundaries, Brecht approaches music as a language to be experienced in all its forms: reading and reciting through the performance of classical and contemporary repertoire,

speaking through improvisation, and writing through composition.

Brecht gratefully acknowledges the support of the Stichting Robus and the SWUK, with which he is Artist in Residence.

## Acknowledgements

Countless people have, directly or indirectly, contributed to this project.

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My piano teachers — Nikolaas Kende, Claudio Martínez Mehner and Eliso Virsaladze — and my composition teachers — Pieter Schuermans, Boudewijn Cox and Mathias Coppens — have not only contributed to this project, but have also laid the foundations of my artistic development, in ways that reach far beyond this recording.

Other teachers who have shaped me, and who may not even realise how much they have contributed to this project, include Alain Craens, Wim Henderickx, Piet Kuijken, Nicolas Callot, Wietse Beels, Stéphane Galland, Joost Van Kerkhoven, Jeroen Malaise, Korneel Bernolet, Yves Senden, Frank Agsteribbe, Ewald Demeyere, Peter Thomas, Piet Stryckers, Steven Pregelns and Carl Vandoorne.

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And finally, to my family — for their constant support, help, and so much more: Gerrit, Ilse, Hanne, Katrien, Sebastian and Iola — thank you, for everything.

With the support of



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Recording, mixing and mastering **Steven Maes**  
for Motormusic  
Mastering **Tijs Wylin**  
Assistant engineer **Sergey Steenackers**  
[motormusic.eu](http://motormusic.eu)

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An Antarctica Records production.

**Instrument specifications**  
Steinway & Sons grand model D (615120)  
Tuning: 442 Hz  
Technician **François Boderi**  
Service delivered by Piano's Maene

This is a high resolution audio recording.

Graphic design & layout **Lucia Ghielmi, Giulia Molinari,**  
**Lise Bruyneel (la fabrique des regards)**  
Technical supervision **Helena Gaudes**  
A&R Manager **Mario Morese**  
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Photos **Koen Broos, Malou Van den Heuvel, Annelies Boon**

It's customary to associate Spring with the concept of beginnings, rejuvenation, of (re)birth. It is however uncommon knowledge that this also applies to an allegedly barren region of Antarctica. Contrary to common belief, this conceived arid landscape is bursting with plant and animal life at the start of every vernal equinox. Penguins, in particular, are fierce nesters, this in eager anticipation of their chicks, who once hatched, are cared for and nurtured with ferocious tenderness and devotion. Comparable to our winning waddlers, we (Evil) Penguins nourish and steadfastly harbor the evolution of our invaluable new (and existing) artists. We give an introduction into the fighting frosty world of the record market, a selection of compelling musicians whose talents and creativity are characterised by noteworthy essence and individuality. With unwavering guidance and support we solidly assist our artists each step of the way, from A to Z, from start to finish, at birth and rebirth, in this formidable environment. Whilst forever looking on to the exciting potentiality of our artists' rise.

antarctica spring