Ligeti’s spectrum of ideas in his output has caused musicologists to group his work according to texture rather than genre. His works are seen as grouped and indeed some recordings are published under titles such as ‘mechanical music’, and micropolyphonic music. I propose a group of linguistic pieces which includes Clocks and Clouds, Artikulation, Cello Concerto, Galamb Barong, Nonsense Madrigals, Le Grand Macabre, Aventures, and Nouvelles Aventures. It is the last two of these which I wish to focus on today in their relationship not only to language, but to existential philosophies and their literary and dramatic counterparts.

The notion of absurdity itself, where the meaninglessness of existence caused Nietzsche’s predictions of a will to power and Kierkegaard to accept a leap of faith was hit on again by Camus and Sartre during the post-war years. It is the central theme of Dostoyevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, and Notes from Underground, which show the individual without faith as degenerative, incompetent, angry, and unsociable. As religious belief diminished in the Twentieth Century, the central issue left was the nature of existence without a god; the human condition as peeled of its former false consciousness and facing the void of an absurd universe. This became the foundation of much of the later existentialist writings, especially of Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus. It has been supposed that the original void was filled by social constructs such as nationalism and faith in human progress, only to self-destruct from their own totality in the aftermath of World War II.

Camus saw the individual as an isolated being, without reason for action, purpose for living, or any ties to truth, every act of whom being ultimately futile. He relates this problem to the Greek legend of Sisyphus, a man who after cheating death was condemned by the gods to roll a rock to a mountaintop and to watch it roll down only to repeat the procedure for all eternity.

Camus stipulates that in order to survive, the individual, creates an exclusive and individualistic raison d’être, believing that his struggle is a worthy one. Even Sisyphus himself can create meaning for his futile task.

The Theatre of the Absurd, the most prominent dramatists of which are Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett, echoes this philosophy in a manner different to the fictional writings and drama of Sartre and Camus. Where Sartre and Camus described the condition of absurdity and angst within the parameters of a world of absolutes that is linguistic form, Ionesco and Beckett compromised conventional theatrical form itself to communicate the same absurdity in their art. Ligeti’s faux-opera, Aventures goes further again, distilling the dramatic elements, antithesising itself by its subsequently nonsensical nature. The Theatre of the Absurd, akin to the wider literary movement of its time, is one without plot, truth, absolute language, or strong characters. All these elements of absurdity are also manifest in the actions and dialogue of the drama. It is a theatre close to the individual condition of the playwright, and therefore close to the condition of the generic individual due to the ubiquitous nature of existential angst. Rather than ordered as
a series of events, the Theatre of the Absurd is situational, non-progressive and non-teleological.

We see similar themes spread across 20th Century literature: the dramas of Adamov and Genet; the trapped confusion of Kafka; the superficially jumbled nonsense of Joyce’s *Ulysees*; the legitimacy of Borges’ criticisms of non-existent novels in *Ficciones*; the vivid and beautiful descriptions of invented places in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*; Subjectivity of time in Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust; the nonsense of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* those being favourites to Ligeti himself.

Ligeti’s idea in composing *Aventures* was to create an imaginary theatre. In response to Kagel’s ‘anti-opera’, Ligeti struck a balance between a complete dismantling of traditional drama and subordination to it. Ligeti’s anti-anti-opera is at once a reaction to, and a continuation of anti-opera. Without resorting to traditionalism or dogmatic methodology, Ligeti has reinstalled the emotional contexts of opera. The baritone solo in *Aventures* is an obvious mockery and assault on the operatic aria as discourse of emotional expression.

It is a mixture of fragmented residues from a wide range of sources, producing the musical text from dissolution of the barrier which traditionally divided instruments and voices. The seed of this can be chronologically seen as germinating in *Artikulation* and reaching maturity in his opera *Le Grand Macabre*. The phonemes in the singers’ parts are both the text and the raw material for musical composition. In terms of semantics, emotion, and drama, everything that happens on Ligeti’s stage is imaginary. The soprano, alto and baritone are all presented without personal characteristics, and are only discernable by the interrelationships and communications between them. Like the final scene of Ionesco’s ‘anti-play’, *The Bald Prima Donna*, one of angry hostility, the Smiths and the Martins shout in each others’ faces, armed only with meaningless inverted clichés. No grounds are revealed for their sudden antagonistic behaviour, and the semantic meaning of their speech is nil. A common feature of Beckett’s drama is that the characters are presented without personal idiosyncrasies. Vladimir and Estragon, the heroes of *Waiting for Godot*, are interchangeable, as are Clov and Hamm in *Endgame*. The audience is presented with empty characters so that any individual can be placed in their predicament, as absurdity tops the hierarchy of importance. The existential situation of the audience is manifest by its cold and distant perception of the drama. An audience who continually scrutinise and judge the performers who are neither communicating nor making sense to them.
The emotional content of *Aventures* appears in five threads, constantly in flux, weaving in and out of each other, causing a different interaction at each moment in a contrapuntal style. The liveliest sections in *Aventures* are the ‘conversation’ and the final scene. The ‘conversation’ episode begins with the direction that ‘all the expressive characters should be constantly changed… gestures that result naturally should be slightly exaggerated…’ This results in a complete lack of character in both *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*, making emotional interactions between the characters paramount.

There is in Beckett’s drama, as well as Ionesco’s a consistent and fluid series on new perspectives on a static situation. Frictions between the situational elements against each other constitute the structure of the play. Although *Aventures* may possibly be the furthest from Ligeti’s static forms, this is exactly how he constructed the emotional domain of the music.

The rapid assorted form of the above quoted directions echoes Beckett’s fondness for exhausting combinations. It is a technique that illustrates both meaninglessness and relativism, pointing to the relativism of different situations and the ultimate futility arising from them.

Beckett employs this technique not only in linguistic terms, but also in overall form. *Quad*, a play whose only sounds are those of percussion, is formed around the idea of combinations, in which four actors are directed to walk the perimeters and the diagonals of two concentric squares, until all combinations and permutations have been exhausted. Bars 12-14 of *Aventures* contain another instance of this. Both the soprano and alto are directed to clear the throat, laugh, weep, moan, groan and rattle the throat, in different order, as two incongruous forms of the same repertoire of emotion expressed through non-purist sound.

In terms of overall structure, the absurd dramas often have a circular form. Plays such as Ionesco’s *The Bald Prima Donna* and *The Lesson* end with the same situation as they began. The former with Mrs. Smith reciting the opening passage about their pedestrian lifestyle, the latter with the maid not only opening the door to another student to be murdered, but using the text verbatim. Beckett’s *Act without Words II* presents two identical revolutions of the movements of two men, one in turn carrying the other while he sleeps in a large sack. As soon as the procedure is about to be repeated again, the play suddenly ends. *Play* also concludes with the opening three texts recited by the three characters at once. *Waiting for Godot* is not exactly built upon this structure, but the two acts consist the symmetry of the play. The same events happen in both acts such as Vladimir and Estragon’s meeting with Godot’s messenger, and with Pozzo and Lucky all without remembering meeting the previous day. The revelation of *Waiting for*
Godot was not that it was merely a play in which nothing happened, but that it was a play where nothing happened twice.

None of the above-mentioned plays employ plot, characterisations, ending or beginning. This form produces an intended conclusion of dissatisfaction - or at least - the satisfaction of being emancipated from their potentially dull repetition. As with Aventures the static format is substituted by humour. Aventures does not employ such a circular structure, but nevertheless has a conclusion leaving its audience similarly unsatisfied. Without any balance between tension and resolution, the piece ends suddenly and in the most unsuspected of moments, during the alto solo. Ligeti realised that eleven to twelve minutes would exhaust the capacity of an audience’s concentration in such a piece, and so he concluded it arbitrarily. Nouvelles Aventures ends a similar way - quote - ‘as if torn off’, a stage direction used in Aventures, and also in Ramifications. The lack of resolution reflects that of Kafka’s The Castle in which the novel ends suddenly.

The form of both Aventures and Nouvelle Aventures is episodic, each section beginning and ending arbitrarily, analogous to ordinary conversation. The instrumental parts play mainly cluster forms in the earlier piece, and are given more demanding roles in the latter. Both lack overall coherency of structure, a rarity for Ligeti.

Endgame uses Hamm’s immobility, transferred to Clov, who throughout the play has talked about and planned for leaving. He is directed to remain motionless, frozen in the frustrating situation, as he metaphorically has been through the play. In Aventures, Ligeti directs from the outset of the alto solo that the other singers, instrumentalists, and conductor are not to move for the remainder of the performance. The alto follows suit during the fifteen to twenty seconds silence that conclude the piece. Nouvelles Aventures has an oppositely styled ending, but with an identical result, one of dissatisfaction, non-resolution, continuing the struggles after the performance has concluded. Similar to The Bald Prima Donna, the ending exposes the height of hostility among those concerned. Ligeti demands the ‘highest dynamic level attainable unvoiced’, before cutting off the performance.

The presence of a painting turned facewards to the wall points out that what happens on the stage is within a painting. Like Ligeti’s theatre, it is imaginary. The lack of a world outside, illustrated by Clov’s searching for other life with a telescope through the window, complements the imaginary theatre within a cosmos of nothingness.

Ionesco describes the Smiths and the Martins as interchangeable due the emptiness of their characters, and their incapacity to feel and think. The Lesson employs a procedure of a gradual exchange in personality between the professor and his pupil. In handing down absolute meanings to his pupil as he lectures her, the professor gradually becomes more confident, and inversely she becomes less so. Throughout the lesson, it is he who is increasingly in control of the situation.
The entrances of the maid disrupt this, where their employer/employee relationship is inversed. It is also a favourite theme of Jean Genet and Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel, whose work makes illusions and confusion as to the position of the characters Similar ly, Ligeti’s singers and instruments in Aventures and Nouvelles Aventures exchange roles. Without a semantic text, no roles and therefore no characteristics are fixed to any particular participant of the music. Ligeti’s five strophes of emotion weave across and between the three singers, creating what the composer describes as virtual simultaneity. However it is not only the singers who participate in this consistent crossing-over. The instruments at times imitate the voices, and in so doing dissolve the barrier that exists between them in traditional operatic discourse. The relativism of the human condition is apparent here in each case, singer or instrumentalist, as the musical text of Aventures and Nouvelles Aventures consists of music, imaginary language and what Ligeti describes as non-purist sounds.

In both pieces, the horn player is directed to sing through the instrument while playing. In bar 25 of the earlier composition, the horn is directed to ‘strike the mouthpiece a short, sharp blow with the hand’, while four bars later the flute mimics the singers’ whispering by blowing without producing a tone. Similarly the three vocal parts are directed quasi pizzicato during the ‘la serenata’ scene. The theatrical presentation of emotion is hinted at in the opening movement of Nouvelles Aventures when the percussionist is directed to ‘vehemently crumple the papers into a ball’. The use of ‘non-purist’ sounds, especially in the percussion part reflects the extra-sonorous gestures of the singers. Included in percussion are the use of a paper bag, suitcase, elastic bands, cushion and a toy croaking frog. The inverse of instrumental imitation can be found in the strongly rhythmical passage in Aventures bars 49-88. The singers here assume the role of instruments, being given very little in the way of theatrical or emotional directions.

The theme of isolation is one which is common in the Theatre of the Absurd. The human individual as one alone, lost, and without the possibility of recovery or communication is directly related to the themes exposed in Camus’ The Outsider, and Sartre’s The Age of Reason. In light of the ultimate existential choices, any personal relationship is futile. Ionesco’s Rhinoceros illustrates the individual as isolated when Berangér attempts to change into a rhino at the close of the play after he realises that he is the last human on earth. Ionesco is illustrating the futility of both conformism and individuality. Rhinoceros is inversely parallel to Kafka’s Metamorphosis, in which Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a giant beetle without explanation. His parents socially ostracise him, not willing to accept him as their son. Like Berangér in a world of rhinos, Gregor Samsa is the only beetle in a world of people.
During the ‘conversation’ episode of Aventures, Ligeti also recalls the theme of loneliness. He includes it as if it were one of the emotional states passing through his subjects showing the dialectical nature of isolation and conformism. In a period of intercommunication between the vocalists they are directed to turn to each other, to the audience, and to themselves kontaktlos meaning ‘out of touch’. In Nouvelles Aventures, the singers are firstly directed to act ‘as though turned to stone’, before ‘bursting into the restrained silence’, repeatedly being interrupted by the silence, operating as the ultimate meaninglessness, frightening the singers. Their reaction is one of horror and hopelessness. A more striking example is the alto solo, which concludes the piece. The alto part, during which the other performers and conductor remain motionless, includes the instruction that – quote

From here to the end the alto expresses a gradually increasing anxiety and desperation; her questions go unanswered, she is completely alone. Her action creates the impression that it is getting gradually darker and colder.

The emotional level of the solo is one commencing ‘espressivo, questioning, seductive, slightly hysterical; pp yet very intense,’ and gradually becoming more hysterical, more questioning, and ‘with intensified anxiety.’ until the final emotional direction: ‘with a great deal of suffering.’ Ligeti’s directions are remarkably close to those of Beckett in the finale of Endgame:- quote -

‘…he halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, until the end…”

The lack of a semantic text in Aventures and Nouvelles Aventures points to perhaps their closest link with the Theatre of the Absurd. The absurd dramatists base much of their language on patterns, word games, nonsense, and cliché, rather than argumentative speech. Because it is a situational theatre and not one whose form is built on a series of events, language is devalued, not needing to present information to its audience. The lack of absolute meaning in language relates to the potentially vast difference between illocution and perlocution. A person wishing to communicate an idea, experience, or feeling to another can only stimulate a perception in the other person, and both parties are hence trapped in their respective conception of the meaning of the words used. Because the individual sees the world within his or her totality of perception, there is a problem of communication, and it is this which gives rise to the devaluation of language. The two identical conversations in Rhinoceros illustrate the universalism of language to have multiple relative meanings. Ionesco’s fire chief in The Bald Prima Donna states that he has no time to sit, but has time to remove his helmet, and he immediately does the inverse. The narrative of The Chairs is one of inability to communicate. The old man, who feels himself incapable of making a
speech, hires an orator who fails to speak at the end of the play. The conversion of
the stage into a theatre reflects Ionesco’s own frustration as a playwright for the
same reason.

On a parallel with Wittgenstein’s conviction that the grammar of language has
been confused with that of logic, Ionesco presents us with a well-respected
logician in the opening act of *Rhinoceros*. In a lesson in logic he gives the
following as an example of a syllogism:

All cats die. Socrates is dead. Therefore Socrates is a cat.

The reversal of logic by its very own rules, and the parody of Aristotle’s famous
syllogism, exemplifies the criticism of the subjective nature of meaning in both
language and logic. Ligeti reflects this during the ‘conversation’ episode of
*Aventures*. The singers are frequently entering and leaving the conversation by
becoming *kontaktlos*, unable to understand the language around them any better
than the audience. Ionesco’s use of cliché is most prominent in the finale of *The
Bald Prima Donna*, in which the Smiths and Martins move gradually closer
together while shouting increasingly louder in mixed cliché. This episode,
beginning from after the fire chief leaves, is constructed from overused speech,
and assembled in a nonsensical manner. As Ionesco himself says, ‘language must
be made almost to explode, or to destroy itself in its inability to contain its
meaning.’ The hysteria of nonsense is also evident in Ligeti’s ‘Great Hysterical
Scene of the Soprano’. Acting as though insane, the soprano briefly awakes from
her madness only to return, and then to suddenly calm herself, the same way
Ionesco’s subjects do during the closing lines of *The Bald Prima Donna.*
Linguistic subjectivity is also apparent in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and
*Through the Looking Glass*, novels that are favourites to Ligeti, and which
provided the basis of two of the *Nonsense Madrigals*. The following example
betrays the dialectic of meaning and nonsense, objectivity and subjectivity.
The condition of Alice’s world as one of absolutes and objectivity is challenged here when she has been taken out of context, into a world of nonsense and absurdity. Alice finds herself in a chasm between meaning and meaninglessness, a predicament where nonsense appears to be contagious and will dispel any order and rules that appear to exist. It is the Beckettian world where the characters find themselves on the threshold of realising their condition of being surrounded by illusion. This borderline situation is exemplified by Vladimir in Waiting for Godot as he realises that there is somebody looking at him saying ‘he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on.’ As soon as Vladimir is about to emerge and face inevitable absurdity, Godot’s messenger arrives and suddenly plunges him back into his eternal situation, akin to Kafka’s anecdote in the ‘cathedral’ chapter of The Trial. Ligeti achieves a similar oscillation between the familiar and the foreign. At many moments when the music begins to breathe, it is suddenly cut off, sometimes to resume, sometimes not. The many pauses with which Aventures begins, leaving too few bars for the musical material to establish itself, and the interspersing of conflicting material display a similar narrative in his musical construction: that of conflicting truths, perennially in flux.
Ionesco, in his description of learning English, a task which resulted in the creation of *The Bald Prima Donna*, reveals that instead of developing a proficiency in the language, he learnt that there are seven days in week. The primer with which he learned English became the core text of his play due to its copious amount of truisms. Thus he depicts the Martins telling each other how many children they have, where they live etc. The result is an automatic language, spat out without any initial thought process. As Ionesco himself puts it, words are empty, noisy shells without meaning. Thus, the play shows language to be disintegrating into a shower of clichés, with nonsense getting in the way.

The task of communicating the absurdity of existence through language itself is a futile one, due to the reduction of existential questions to an incompetent medium.

The absurd dramatists instead choose to only present the results of absurdity - that is through the devaluation of language, and on a broader plane, society. Only in a situational context can the absurdity of language be shown. Ionesco’s example in *The Lesson* has the professor giving a lesson in language, in which he shows how the Romantic language group have common stems of words, but all are pronounced slightly differently. But as he gives examples, he makes no differentiation himself. This happens within the context of the pupil enduring an agonising toothache, of which the professor dismisses at her first complaint. As she gradually becomes worse, he notices less her ejaculations, each becoming increasingly meaningless.

The opposition of humour and the macabre is one which also can be seen in much of the work discussed. It gives rise to the ability to laugh bravely in the face of futility, and finally to celebrate meaninglessness, thus restoring human dignity. Humour is an alternative escape from absurdity to taking a leap of faith.

Ligeti’s subjects are trapped in a non-semantic world, a grossly exaggerated version of our reality. Their unpredictable hysteria, gesticulations, and powerful emotions show them to be desperately trying to communicate with their audience who only laugh back. But each successive hearing of *Aventures* becomes darker. The ensnarement extends as far as the instruments, in that the structural coherence of the piece is virtually nil.

The actions of the musicians are therefore futile, and have no relationship with the work as a whole. In what Richard Toop has described as a ‘balancing act between the sublime and the ridiculous’, Ligeti has like Ionesco, Beckett, Joyce and others taken meaninglessness for granted, and used that as a point of departure for constructing an artwork.