

Franz Liszt: biography and works



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Franz Liszt and the New German School

In pre-modern Europe, most artists were content to follow a proud classical tradition, offering creative embellishments of their own as a contribution to the field and following the rules of composing a proper sonata, concerto, or waltz paying special attention to chord progression, harmonics, and tonality. Because much of the music was purely instrumental, each piece identified a theme in the title (i. e. *Danse Macabre* , *Mephisto's Waltz* , *Liebesträume* , *Moonlight Sonata* etc.) and sought to bring it to life through music. While there were noteworthy artists in the field, very few had the creative ability to usher in a new era or popularise a new form of expression, which is probably why only a handful of Europe's finest are known offhand today such as Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart and Wagner. In the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of the New German School was born and Franz Liszt was one of the most important members. It did not matter that he was not born in Germany, but because the art and culture of Germany had such great influence over his work, he was claimed as one of the Great German Artists by Franz Brendel and other music commentators associated with him.

Most classical aficionados have heard of Franz Liszt because of the dark dynamic quality of his work, and the artistic risks he had taken in many of his compositions—he broke conventions relating to harmonics, chord structure, tonality, and quite often did not give the work a suitable ending. ^[1] This is rather startling because most people settle into a routine at an advanced age—i. e. they would have ' found their voice' and spent much of their time refining the message—indeed, it was expected. However, many of his critics believed that Liszt's later work was not the birth of something new. Instead,

it was considered a diminishment of capabilities and a sign of some internal sickness that attacked one's artistic sensibilities. According to Ernst Günter, 'the music of Liszt's final decade (1876-1886) is the product of aesthetic weariness and distrust of the very principles of art. The disaffection of the later Liszt, which he vouched for only in isolated remarks, becomes effective in the compositions as the destruction of the aesthetic norms.'

However, one can argue that his later work was a natural progression of his earlier work and tragic events in his personal life and the rapid rate of change in the world may have had a greater influence on his later compositions than simply mere disenchantment with art itself. Instead, much of the research suggests a growing disenchantment with the world itself as he comes to face his own mortality and his interest and focus is further removed from the world around him to the afterlife instead. This paper will examine a sample of Liszt's final works and attempt to answer the question of whether his change in style is the result of 'aesthetic weariness' or the next logical step in his creative path and reflective of his journey as an artist reflecting the times in which he lived. We will examine a few of his past compositions to establish a context and then discuss personal events that had taken place around the time he began to exhibit the noteworthy abandonment of 'norms.'

Liszt's Persona

Even today, scholars have a difficult time characterising Franz Liszt's contribution to the musical world and what he stood for. He certainly had harsh critics and adoring fans during his stage career as expert interpreter and composer and his biography makes it difficult to put him into a box,

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personally or artistically. According to Liszt Scholars Michael Saffle and Rossana Dalmonte:

‘ Here is where many differences of opinion concerning Liszt and his music originate. Liszt’s lifetime spanned the transitions from Napoleon’s Europe to Bismarck’s, and from the earliest railroad trains to electric lighting; his works reflect both romantic (which is to say, modern) and post romantic (which is to say, modernist) concerns. Thus, in the last analysis, it proves extremely difficult to place or describe Liszt, even through comparisons to other great figures of the past. So much is lost if we simply consign him to this or that box.’ [2]

During his career, he had become something akin to the nineteenth century equivalent of a rock star. Women would fight over his handkerchiefs and gloves, and the expressive passion he brought to his performances often reduced many a patron to tears. Not surprisingly, he was renowned as a ladies’ man and often found patronage (and love) from wealthy noble women. During his travels, he introduced much of the work of German composers such as Schubert, Schumann, Franz, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn to the rest of Europe, and when he switched gears from performance to composition, the German influence became evident although he hails from Hungary. As a composer, his primary aim was to wed music and poetry—a fact that he shared with Agnes Street-Klindworth, a woman with whom he had an affair and corresponded with until his death in 1886. [3]

As with most poets, his songs reflected his internal state. At the time, he was absorbed in presenting dramatically flawless interpretations of the masters

and he incorporated some elements of theirs into his music, though many of his critics believed that he had taken the wrong ones (i. e. Brahms). [4]

Intriguingly enough, many of his contemporaries acknowledged that many of his transcriptions and interpretations of other's works are so creative that they had taken on a life of their own. However, one can speculate that his early compositions reflected his own grand ambition to utterly master the piano as he rearranged the songs of many of the greats in his field into something that only he, with his unusual hands, could play. [5]

Toward the end of his life, he had become much more contemplative, devoting much of his time composing spiritual choral pieces and wandering across Europe, which may also be considered 'unconventional' for a man in his mid-sixties (especially as most people did not get to live that long in the first place). Gunter notes that Liszt's work began to 'slip' after 1876, however, it can be argued that his style began to shift radically from the mainstream to a new form of expression entirely. As with many artists, much of the inspiration from Franz Liszt's music had come from his life experience, his natural temperament, and his passion for his art. In *Ihr Glocken von Marling* a late composition, it becomes increasingly clear that he is turning toward the more religious themes that started to creep into his work during the latter part of the 1860s.

That decade brought much personal loss to Liszt. He had buried his son, daughter, and mother, his marriage to Princess Carolyne was thwarted, and he had to endure smear campaigns by a psychotic stalker. [6] At the same time, he began to turn away from the material toward the spiritual and he

began to resemble more closely the archetype of the wandering ascetic. In 1876, he suffered an accident that left him the use of only nine of his fingers—even so, he was still the standard by which most pianists of his time compared themselves and composed at the speed most people write letters.

[7]

In his final decade, his compositions had become more concerned with the themes of death and dying as his growing ill health and spiritual sentiment was coupled with his belief that he truly had no talent. For instance, *Ihr Glocken von Marling* approximates the sound that calls the villagers to worship. The repetition of the chords imitates the pealing of the bells in the churchyard. The fact that it is more or less written entirely in the treble clef lends an ethereal sound to the work. [8] While that claim is ludicrous, it is a rather valid concern because he did spend most of his career creating transcriptions of other compositions. He has always had an obsessive and perfectionist streak, which he channelled effectively through his art. In one of his later letters he writes:

‘ For the last two weeks I’ve been absorbed in *cypresses* ...I have composed two *groups* of cypresses, each of more than two hundred bars, plus a *postludium* , to the cypresses of the Villa d’Este. These sad pieces won’t have much success and can do without it. I shall call them *Therenodies* , as the word *elegie* strikes me as too tender, and almost worldly. A few more leaves have been added to the cypresses—no less boring and redundant than the previous ones! To tell the truth I sense in myself a terrible lack of talent compared with what I would like to express; the notes I write are

pitiful. A strange sense of the infinite makes me impersonal and uncommunicative.’ [9]

Perhaps his uncommunicativeness can be interpreted as his growing inability to conform to mainstream preferences. It is true that many of his later works focus on spirituality and Hungarian nationalism. This religious sentiment grew to a raging crescendo as he was writing the *Via Crucis* in which he was forced to contemplate the passion and death of Jesus and his own emotions on the matter, as he was a deeply religious man.

‘ The *Via Crucis* possesses a complex cyclical structure unified on a variety of levels through precisely controlled motives and pitch relations, many of which take on an iconographic significance. This strange and profound work should silence those who cast doubt on the sincerity of Liszt’s religious beliefs. It is the product of deep, anguished contemplation of the passion of Jesus, a process during which one can well imagine Liszt came to identify strongly with the suffering Christ. *Via Crucis* conveys not only the horror and sorrow of the crucifixion, but also the wonder of God’s redeeming love for humankind.’ [10]

It is very clear that at this point in his career, he is finished competing with the greats of his age and is simply looking to express his true self through his art. In other fields, refusal to imitate was often seen as an affront to the scene and the fruits of one’s labour were not even considered art (i. e. Vincent van Gogh). Rather than simply producing brilliant transcriptions, he is looking to himself as a Christian, as a Hungarian, and a man that is looking at the winter of his life for inspiration. Instead of becoming despondent about

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his art, he was invigorated with passion, creating pieces that he intended for performance, particularly about the great Hungarian heroes in history, Mosonyi in particular. Although he had not previously done much work in the Hungarian style during the 1870's, during the 1880s, he had become much more interested in freeing himself from the stylistic constraints of Western European music. When we had quoted him previously, Liszt said that he lacks the talent to express what he wants to say because there are so many tropes and ideas that he wanted to create through music and he simply did not have sufficient talent to carry it out. From what we know of him historically, he was never one to suffer from a lowered sense of self so he may have meant that his ideas have simply outgrown his ability to express them in art. Using the portrait theme was one of the defining art forms of the 1870s as Mussorgsky created his famous *Pictures at an Exhibition* ten years before. However, unlike the nationalist sentiment that had become a form of religion in modern Europe, it did not displace his faith in God as noted in Liszt's letter to his publisher when he first brought up the idea in 1885. ^[11] As with *Via Crucis*, scholars concur that his *Hungarian Portraits* have the depth, resonance, and relevance to the period and served as a foreshadowing of other pieces of that nature.

' The piece touches upon a number of harmonies which resonate with significant moments earlier in the cycle. It builds to a climactic apotheosis of the main theme in D minor, which subsides to a tender recollection of the contrasting theme in D major, and closes on a solemn note of faith and hope. In spite of the strong projection of the tonic at the conclusion, however, Liszt rigorously avoids stating the tonic root in the low bass, perhaps signifying

that life is part of a greater continuum in which only God has the final word.'

[12]

Conclusion

Much of Liszt's work in the last decade of his life revealed an even deeper understanding of life than when he was younger. Although he was more likely to observe the conventions of composition in his youth (quite brilliantly in fact), he did not yet have more than the intellectual understanding that art was expressive and indicative of life—indeed, that it was not separate from that of the creator but instead flowed organically from his mind and his talents. Unfortunately for Liszt, his knowledge of life's pain and the existence of other great talents in the arena (i. e. Wagner) led him to doubt his own abilities as an artist. Because he had experienced one of the most devastating losses of all—the deaths of his children, he may have lost all faith in the 'natural order of things' recognising that life was often chaotic, out of harmony, and progressed along unexpected paths. Because art is not formed in a vacuum, he poured his energy into creation, which is why the body of his later work is characterised by a focus on the sacred, death and dying. In his later years, he tried to turn these realizations into art, and indeed succeeded in creating poetry from his music. Do Liszt's late compositions perpetuate the progressivism of the 1860's? Not by a long shot: his songs are religiously themed with sub-themes of destruction, death, and dying in a time characterised by invention, discovery and increasing secularism. Nevertheless, it would not be fair to say that his works signalled artistic breakdown because his exploratory approach created the brilliant sacred pieces *Via Crucis* and *Rosario*, *Years of Pilgrimage*, and *The*

Hungarian Portraits among many others. However, in an age where spirituality becomes increasingly unpopular, artists that reflect it in their work are often alienated by the mainstream and their work is deemed inaccessible.

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Footnotes

[1] Leon Botstein. ' A Mirror to the Nineteenth Century: Reflections on Franz Liszt', *Franz Liszt and His World*. (eds. Christopher H. Gibbs & Dana A. Gooley) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 2006) 518

[2] Michael Saffle and Rossana Dalmonte. *Liszt and the Birth of Modern Europe*. (New York: Pendragon, 2003) 8

[3] Franz Liszt & Agnes Street-Klindworth. *Franz Liszt and Agnes Street-Klindworth: A Correspondence, 1854-1886* . (New York: Pendragon Press, 2000) 116

[4] Hamilton, Kenneth. ' Liszt's early and Weimer Piano works' in Ed. Hamilton, Kenneth. *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt* . (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 57

[5] Hamilton, 65

[6] Alan Walker. *Franz Liszt: The Final Years, 1861-1886* . (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1997) 175

[7] Walker, 369

[8] Lorraine Gorrell. *The Nineteenth-Century German Lied*. (New Jersey: Amadeus Press, LLC, 2005) 246

[9] Liszt qt. Walker, 370

[10] James M. Baker. ' Larger Forms in the Late Piano Works' in Ed. Hamilton, Kenneth. *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt* . (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 126

[11] Baker, 134

[12] Baker, 135