

PERFORMING LISZT'S PIANO MUSIC

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THOUGHTS ON THE MAN LISZT

Sincere and intense religious devotion dominated Liszt's life and thought from early childhood onwards. Contrary to popular belief, Liszt was in many ways a loner, who craved solitude. An only child, with an especially lonely adolescence, he never really fit in comfortably anywhere. "Everyone is against me. Catholics because they find my church music profane, Protestants because to them my music is Catholic. . . . To Bayreuth I am not a composer but a publicity agent. The Germans reject my music as French, and French as German; to the Austrians I write Gypsy music, and to the Hungarians foreign music."(1)

Liszt was a zealous, eager, intensely enthusiastic person who gave all of himself to everything he undertook, often wearing out those around him. "I can't be around Liszt very long; this restlessness, this instability, so much animation. It's all very exhausting," wrote Clara Schumann.(2)

Liszt had a profound and intense interest in all aspects of life and death. His music frequently is an autobiographical expression. A complex man, his joking description of himself as "half Gypsy, half Franciscan" contained much truth.(3)

Liszt believed the musical artist had a role and obligation to transform and uplift society akin to the priesthood.(4)

Selflessness, generosity, and idealism were integral parts of Liszt throughout his life. "Caritas" was his motto. With much of the world's failure to appreciate Liszt in his time, and since, Paul Roes was perceptive to see a similarity to the reaction accorded to Don Quixote.(5)

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF LISZT'S WORKS

- 1) Belief in music as a powerful force to uplift, elevate, and transport the listener to a higher world.
- 2) Total belief in Liszt's music as a regenerative force and as a product of a totally sincere human being. The performer's conviction and commitment are essential to make the music come alive, as it doesn't succeed by itself in the way that the music of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert can.
- 3) Willingness to be a Romantic in an unromantic age. When one performs Liszt, one must open up and expose his/her entire heart and soul in reflecting the heights and depths of the entire human experience. At the same time, one seeks a transcendence of oneself, an aspiration of something higher, and a desire to experience the Sublime. Liszt's larger works are dramas, which require the player to assume every kind of role. Some of these

works seem to embody a struggle between Darkness and Light, the negative and positive, denial and affirmation. This struggle can assume cataclysmic proportions.

4) Identification with the theatrical, and a relishing of creating dramatic effects. As Claudio Arrau wrote, “Liszt made the concert room a theater . . . and turned it into a church.”(6) Charles Rosen has pointed out that Liszt’s music has elements in common with the Gothic novel.(7)

5) Understanding Liszt’s sincere, constant immersion in the world of 19th century European Roman Catholicism. Rosen has noted that the “saccharine religious art of the style known as Saint-Sulpice plays a role” in many of his works.(8)

6) Viewing Liszt’s music as an expression of Love in many forms—human love and spiritual love. Liszt sometimes did not maintain a clear distinction between these forms of love. For example, the key of E Major is used for both, whereas A-flat Major is employed in the depiction of human love, and F-sharp Major for Heaven. Liszt’s music appears at times representative of Wagner’s “Redemption by Love” concepts and Goethe’s “Eternal Feminine.”

7) Willingness to make the music one’s own, and make a personal statement. The notes are merely the starting point, and it is the performer’s vision which allows the music to pour into the heart of the listener. When Liszt performed, he had internalized and made every piece his own. He would want us to do no less with his music, and our delivery is a critical part of the listening experience. The performer must take it and run with it.

SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS FOR PERFORMANCE OF LISZT

1) Above all, Liszt’s music should not be seen as a vehicle for showiness. Such an approach results in banality and emptiness, and is the reason why many listeners find Liszt’s music to be off putting. A symptom of this can be excessive speed and/or the ubiquitous “banging.” What is often viewed as “showy” in Liszt’s writing is frequently an orchestral effect, a representation of dramatic emotion, or an innovative use of the keyboard—all of which were representative of an expressive purpose.

2) Beethoven was Liszt’s role model from earliest childhood, and one of Liszt’s primary missions was the promotion of Beethoven’s music. Liszt’s music benefits when the interpreter views it as having much in common with Beethoven’s, and sees Liszt as Beethoven’s spiritual descendent.

3) The piano should be conceived of as an orchestra, both in its capacity for huge sonority and as representative of different instrumental colors.

4) An operatic conception—in terms of lyricism and of drama—is a key ingredient in Liszt playing. One cannot fully understand Liszt’s music without knowing the Wagner

operas. The interpreter needs to breathe as a singer and view the music as a Wagnerian conductor would.

5) One needs to employ the entire possible range of dynamics in Liszt's piano music. At times the intimacy of the music calls for the most delicate control, in a "Chopinesque" or "impressionistic" manner. At other times, the music demands the most massive sonorities, which are, hopefully, realized in terms of warmth and richness, and never harshness. (However, it is interesting that Liszt, on occasion, was willing to sacrifice a consistently "velvet" sound in the quest for dramatic truth, and was opposed to precious, affected, exaggerated tiny nuances that interfered with the musical message.) (9) All dynamic gradations between the two extremes also need to be noticed and realized.

6) Liszt's music can be perceived in terms of emotional waves and gestures, and one needs to sense where to push ahead, and where to pull back. This can result in a great flexibility of the beat, which Liszt was famous for employing as a conductor. (10) This does not mean that every note is not deserving of its precise placement according to the demands of the music. But those demands trump the previously more metronomic approach to music-making with its "tyranny of the bar line." It involves feeling the music at a more macro-rhythmic level, based on the destinations implied by the melodic and harmonic tension, and the various structural points of arrival. These points of arrival must themselves then be organized over the long-range to create an over-riding unified architectural structure. The setting up of the various degrees of climactic moments is one of the principal ingredients of Liszt interpretation, necessitating much experimentation as well as analysis. (11)

Certainly, it is the shaping of all elements which results in great music making. Melodic inflection in Liszt's music is especially critical since his melodic lines are often not merely single notes, but instead, octaves and chords. The low bass notes, whether single notes or bottom notes of chords, also form very important melodic lines, as well as outlining the harmonic progressions. Each low bass note needs to be related to its predecessor and successor. The intensity and color of each chord also needs to be weighed against the nearby chords.

It is interesting that the music of Liszt, that most "romantic" of composers, requires as much or more analysis than other composers in order to be musically fulfilling. Holding together and unifying Liszt's improvisatory, rhapsodic, episodic structures is not an easy task, and it is significant that some of the great Liszt interpreters are also highly regarded interpreters of 18th century works.

An important issue in Liszt interpretation is the handling of fermate over long notes and rests. At times, great length is requisite. Yet, the intensity and unity of a work should not be sacrificed, and the interpreter must feel the musical line continue through the held note or rest.

The use of allargando is a very effective method to stress arrival points, as is the practice of delaying especially meaningful notes, and playing rolled chords very slowly and expressively. It is never acceptable to be early to an important note, but frequently appropriate to be late. But, squareness and stodginess should always be avoided, and one must sense where and how much to push a line ahead in lyrical and dramatic sections.

Not only must the horizontal sonorities and notes be shaped, but one must balance and project the desired upper, middle, or lower voices— melodic lines in the latter two registers being frequently overlooked.

In summary, interpretation is seeing everything in relation to everything else, and feeling the relative importance of every note and chord.

7) In order to bring out the depth of Liszt's music, it is essential that tempi not be taken too fast. Liszt frequently warned against taking his faster works too quickly. (12) Excessive speed can rob a work of heroic nobility of character, and sections that have potential for sublime grandeur can be degraded into bombast or become trivialized. Unfortunately, in Liszt it is a thin line between drama and cheapness. Rushing the slower sections can deprive them of the mood and atmosphere they represent. But it is important that direction and line always be maintained, even in spacious tempi.

8) Despite all the analysis necessary to proportion the various elements in Liszt's music, the performer must exude spontaneity. Liszt was the ultimate improviser, and never would play a work the same way twice. He loathed the conservatories with their conservative, academic approach, and idolized the Gypsies with their fiery, uninhibited immediacy.

9) Much 19th century performance practice has been lost in the century since. Today we know and put to use huge amounts of information regarding Renaissance and Baroque performance practice from four, five, and six centuries ago. Yet, in 19th century music we fail to add our own rolls to chords, to spread notes written simultaneously between the hands, and to add octaves to low bass notes—practices which were integral to the style of composers such as Liszt, who died only a century and a quarter ago. Experimentation with these technics can add a whole new dimension to Liszt's works. (13)

10) Pedaling experimentation in Liszt's music is frequently overlooked. His abundant pedal markings, many of them for long durations, indicate his desire for much pedal. Yet, the changes in the piano since his time necessitate modifying many of his instructions in the interest of clarity and transparency. He called for, and made extensive use of, the una corda pedal, and it is interesting that he played passage-work in the high treble register very softly, where today pianists tend to play it with brilliance. (14)

LISZT'S TECHNICAL APPROACH

Warning: A pianist can become injured, and even end his/her playing days through experimentation with technic. Extreme care must be taken if one attempts to incorporate some of the following concepts into one's playing. These concepts are liberating and produce increased ease if applied correctly. However, even a slight miscalculation, misunderstanding, or exaggeration is capable of producing tragic consequences. Caveat Emptor.

It is one of history's great losses that Liszt said very little about technic. Most of what is frequently quoted dates from 1832, before Liszt had worked out many of the technical concepts that enabled him to accomplish his transcendental feats.

Bertrand Ott, in his fascinating and little known book, Lisztian Keyboard Energy: An Essay on the Pianism of Franz Liszt, performed an enormous service by collecting relevant information on Liszt's apparent views on technic, as well as analyzing an extensive number of photographs, drawings, paintings, and perhaps most valuable of all, the caricatures of Liszt at the keyboard. What is written below is based on Ott's book.

Liszt conceived of technic as being intertwined with the musical gesture. His physical approach was built on the concepts of effortlessness, lightness, and suppleness. The agility of Paganini had been his model for swift and smooth movements. Liszt's fluidity was based on continuous, uninterrupted motions, an energy of unbroken curves and spirals. He floated lightly above, and glided over, the keys. He did not advocate dropping "weight," believing that such an approach constricted the arm and hand, caused keybedding, and prevented the crucial activity of "rebound."

This rebound consisted of feeling the upward release as the follow through of the downward motion. The control of the rebound is part of the same motion which had initiated the tone, and results in elasticity and fluidity.

Liszt had a commanding appearance at the keyboard and his posture was primarily adopted to gain maximum freedom of movement. He sat back—far back—which he felt allowed him to hear better as well as permitting more arm freedom. He sat straight up, and did not lower his head. He rarely looked at the keys, instead, keeping his eyes straight ahead, believing that he could listen better. His face radiated whatever the music expressed.

His body usually inclined backwards, and he was, as a rule, opposed to leaning forward. But there were instances in loud passages when he did lean forward. He also leaned to the left or right when the pianistic demands necessitated it. His bench was high through most of his performing years, though he recommended to sit, and sat considerably lower after 1860.

Impulses toward the keyboard originated from the shoulder. A key feature of his technical approach was the "suspended arm," which provided his elasticity, mobility, and lack of constriction or being weighed down. He developed a technic of gestures that gave his arms this relaxed freedom and lightness, and he was described as making "a sail in the air with his arms." To facilitate this, he extended his entire arm, and by leaning back, the angle of the arm promoted increased relaxation. He never pushed at the keyboard, and instead floated as if suspended. He pulled with the arm and hand, drawing them towards himself. While doing this, he could feel the "rebound."

Liszt's elbows were extended out quite a ways from his body, though later in life he extended them less, which lowered them to the keyboard level.

Forearm rotation was employed by Liszt, with the second finger forming the axis. There has been controversy as to whether Liszt primarily employed pronation (hand slanted toward thumb) or supination (hand slanted toward fifth finger). Though Otto Ortmann later concluded supination was the more natural way to play, the traditional approach before Liszt was pronation, and Liszt is known to have advocated pronation in his younger years. However, in his later years, he advocated supination.

The wrist was pivotal to Liszt's technical approach to the piano. He consistently kept it raised --- higher than the back of the hand, which hung from the wrist. This served a variety of purposes:

--It promoted ease, flexibility, and lightness.

--It facilitated a pulling return of the hand, originating at the wrist.

--It facilitated a singing tone for melodies.

--It reinforced the strength of the thumb .The thumb also became like a long finger hanging from the raised wrist, and its feeling of lightness was increased.

He employed a lower, but still slightly raised wrist later in life. .

Liszt was opposed to isolated finger movements and lifting of the fingers, and he detested curved fingers. He advocated using the pad of the finger, and not the finger tips.

He advocated pulling the keys towards oneself rather than attacking or hitting them, a practice he greatly abhorred. He caressed and massaged the keys, and recommended that one adhere and feel glued to the keys. "In this contact with the keys is hidden the whole inner world of the source of dynamic energy," Liszt said. This allowed one to create a blossoming sound.

The intent was that one should pre-hear the desired tone, and with fluidity and ease, control the speed of key descent to obtain that tone.

PLAYING THE LATER LISZT WORKS

These highly introspective works were not intended for public performance, and some were never meant to even be published. They are the product of a burned-out, depressed, despairing individual, who felt a great "bitterness of heart" after suffering so many disappointments in life. They are usually concerned with one or more of the following: retrospective qualities, religion, death, Hungary, and compositional experiments.

The works from the later 1860's and earlier 1870's are considerably milder than the intensely bitter qualities found in some of the works from the 1880's. Yet even in this latter period, there are many works of great simplicity and tender peacefulness.

All these works tend to be fragmentary, sparse, bare-boned, and thin-textured, and frequently inconclusively float off into a vague ethereal nothingness.

Tonality is sometimes stretched to the limits with extreme chromaticism, whole-tone and other scales and modes, and abundant parallel augmented and diminished chords. Liszt's compositional intention was, in some of these works, to "hurl a lance as far as possible into the boundless realm of the future."

These later Liszt works, like late Beethoven, demand an interpreter who can feel concentrated anguish and grief, along with understated peace and simplicity. Much of the Lisztian rhetoric required for his earlier works is minimized, or even not desirable, in these works.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When Liszt was 25 years old, he once signed himself into a hotel with the following notations:

“Place of birth: Parnassus; Profession: Musician—Philosopher;
Coming from: Doubt; Journeying towards: Truth.” (15)

Humorous as it may seem, it says a lot about how Liszt viewed himself.

His student Arthur Friedheim would write many decades later: “All through life Liszt sensed the spiritual, could see and hear things and sounds beyond ordinary ken. He had the intuition, the mystic power to penetrate beyond the empyrean. To me, mysticism and genius glows in the soul of the genius and stimulates him to extraordinary expression. So Liszt functioned as a medium in the most immaterial of all arts which, in its highest revelations, can rightly be regarded as the language of mysticism. The keys and wires of a piano were the media to voice his mystical-spiritual ecstasy.” (16)

BACKGROUND RESOURCES FOR PERFORMING LISZT’S PIANO MUSIC

1) Knowledge of Liszt’s non-keyboard works including: the 13 Symphonic Poems, the Faust Symphony, the Dante Symphony, the religious works including the oratorios Christ and the Legend of St. Elisabeth, and the 70 songs in six languages.

2) Exploration of the hundreds of solo piano works of Liszt, which are nearly unknown

3) Knowledge of the Wagner operas, especially through the performances of James Levine.

4) Knowledge of the symphonic and operatic works of Berlioz.

5) Experience performing Chopin with true elegance

6) Books:

Walker, Alan. Franz Liszt. Alfred A. Knopf, Vol. 1, 1983; Vol. 2, 1989; Vol. 3, 1996. (This is the only biography one needs and possibly the only one that can be completely relied upon.)

Walker, Alan, editor. Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music. Barrie and Jenkins, 1970.

Bazzana, Kevin. Lost Genius: The Curious and Tragic Story of an Extraordinary Musical Prodigy [Ervin Nyiregyhazi]. Da Capo Press, 2007.

Brendel, Alfred. Alfred Brendel on Music. A Cappella, 2001.

Fleischmann, Tilly. Aspects of the Liszt Tradition. Robertson Publications, England, and Theodore Presser, USA, 1991.

Friedheim, Arthur. Life and Liszt: The Recollections of a Concert Pianist. Taplinger Publishing Company, 1961.

- Goellerich, August. The Piano Master Classes of Franz Liszt 1884-1886. Richard Zimdars, trans. Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Hamilton, Kenneth, ed. The Cambridge Companion to Liszt. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Hamilton, Kenneth. After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Horowitz, Joseph. Conversations with Arrau. Alfred A. Knopf, 1982.
- Merrick, Paul. Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt. Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Ott, Bertrand. Lisztian Keyboard Energy: An Essay on the Pianism of Franz Liszt. Donald H. Windham, trans. Edwin Mellen Press, 1992
- Poli, Roberto. The Secret Life of Musical Notation: Defying Interpretive Traditions. Amadeus Press, 2010.
- Rosen, Charles. The Romantic Generation. Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Wagner, Richard. On Conducting. Edward Dannreuther, trans. William Reeves, 1887.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Liszt, quoted in Walker, Vol. 3, p. 411.
- (2) Clara Schumann, quoted in Peter Ostwald, Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius, p. 162.
- (3) See Walker, Vol. 1, p. 64, re this quotation.
- (4) See Walker, Vol. 1, pp. 152-160, 177 which discusses the huge influence of Lamennais on Liszt. Merrick discusses this and many related subjects.
- (5) Roes, Paul. Music: The Mystery and the Reality. E & M Publishing, Chevy Chase MD, 1978.
- (6) Arrau, p. 131.
- (7) Rosen, pp. 488-491.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) Ott, pp. 10, 35-36, 128, 143, 146.
- (10) Wagner devoted much of his On Conducting to this subject.
- (11) Friedheim described how “Liszt would draw attention to the structure and proportions of the opus, and point out its leading moments of eloquence and climax.” Friedheim, p. 48. Strong accentuation was an important component of achieving those goals.
- (12) Among numerous sources, Carl Lamond, quoted in Ott, p. 56. Goellerich includes numerous instances. See also Hamilton, After, pp. 248-253.
- (13) Hamilton, After, discusses these subjects in great detail. See also Hamilton, Liszt, pp. 190-191.
- (14) Hamilton, Liszt, pp. 175-178, 185-191, discusses Liszt’s pedaling in detail.
- (15) Walker, Vol. 1, p. 221.
- (16) Friedheim, p. 159.