

Some Random Thoughts on Franz Liszt

by Trent McDonald

“Of course Liszt was a child compared to Brahms.”

I was reading a user review of a CD of lieder on Amazon when I saw that line. The reviewer was trying to explain why the Liszt lieder was more successful than the Brahms by saying a mediocre singer (Thomas Quasthoff) is better able to pull off lieder by a mediocre composer (Liszt). That Thomas Quasthoff is considered by many to be one of the best talents of his generation (I'm going to see him with the Boston Symphony in March) or that this CD won *Cannes Classical Award* in 2001 is irrelevant.

In the previous months before I saw this review I had looked at hundreds, if not thousands, of user reviews of CDs featuring Liszt's music and had never seen any review so blatantly negative to the composer.

But when I started looking at lieder I noticed a lot of negative comments creeping in. I assume I only saw this in the lieder because there are few, if any, CDs that have lieder by only Liszt, so people looking for other composers were “forced” to listen to that awful composer, Liszt. Somebody actually looking for works by Liszt most likely won't complain about a CD because it happens to include a piece or two by Liszt.

As far as comments creeping in, I did see a few. Most of the comments were along the lines of “this CD would be great except the singer insisted on putting Liszt on the program”. There were also a few that were a little less kind (“if you actually like Liszt, God help you, you might enjoy this CD”).

It wasn't just on Amazon, though. I found more than one place where a respected author or composer spoke poorly of Liszt, calling him second rate or worse...

And to tell the truth, a year ago I may have said much the same.

The Start of a Journey

A couple of years ago I started to study the great (and some not so great) composers of the past.

I have found that the better I understand the music of, say, Mozart, the better I understand all of the music that came after him, including “modern” music that seems to have little to do with Mozart.

Taking this as my premise, I started with the music of Bach and have worked my way up to the mid-19th century. In the next couple of years I hope to reach living composers and new music.

My plan with the “Romantic Generation” was to do an overview of Liszt, a quick run through of Mendelssohn, a bit deeper into Berlioz, much deeper into Chopin (I had previously spent a few months on Chopin) and end with a very comprehensive study of Schumann.

Well, a little way into Berlioz I went back and looked a little deeper into Liszt. Later, when I was finishing Chopin, I again took a closer look at Liszt.

At each step my admiration of Liszt grew. I saw more and more in the music of this composer.

Actually, I became fascinated with Liszt and his music.

When I finished Schumann I couldn't resist – instead of moving on to Wagner, as originally planned, I took a longer journey into the music of Franz Liszt.

Several months, hundreds (thousands?) of pages of material on Liszt, dozens of CDs (including original piano music, transcriptions, organ music, lieder, symphonic poems, symphonies, concertos, music for orchestra and solo piano, choral music and an oratorio) later I have finally come to the end of my studies. At least for now.

The Liszt Problem

Before I really put much into my studies of Liszt I thought of his music as shallow, overly virtuosic, bombastic, formless and vulgar. Yes, “vulgar” is actually a word I often see associated with his music.

At the same time I actually enjoyed listening to his music, or that little corner of his music that was available to me at the time.

It was a guilty pleasure, though – “Forgive me father for I have listened to the second Hungarian Rhapsody and enjoyed it. In fact, I hit the repeat button and listened to it twice in a row.”

That is pretty much how his music has been treated during the last 120 years since his death – many of the virtuosic pieces have stayed in the repertoire, but he has consistently been looked down on as a composer.

Actually, this was a problem throughout his life.

There were, unfortunately, some people who prudishly judged his music by his lifestyle. Beyond this shallow assessment there was actually a little substance to many of the other complaints.

Although a child prodigy, Liszt was no Mozart or Mendelssohn. Composition did not come naturally to him at a young age and, against Salieri's wishes, his composition instruction was cut short so he could make money as a traveling virtuoso and child prodigy (he did take some composition lessons later). In other words, his early music, pretty much anything from the 1820s, isn't very good, including works such as the etudes that he was to revisit later in life.

When his composition skills improved he developed a very experimental style. For instance, in 1833 he composed *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (later reworked, and greatly tamed down, it was called "Pensée des morts" which became part of a larger work also called *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*). This piece began with no key signature or time signature (the revision has no key but goes between 5-4 and 7-4). The beginning was very chromatic and did not settle down into a recognizable key area until far into the composition. Every measure was a different length and the rhythms kept shifting. In other words, in 1833 he was writing atonal music that constantly changed meter on the order of Stravinsky.

The people of the early to mid 1830s had no idea what to make of such music. Throughout his life his music was always what we would today call "avant-garde". Music conservatives, such as Clara Schumann, didn't understand this as even being music and tried to have such "music" banned to help protect the innocent from being polluted by such rubbish.

Also making his music hard for some people, particularly those same musically conservative people, Liszt did a lot of experimentation with form.

After Beethoven died, some musicians tried to strictly define sonata form. As Charles Rosen points out in his excellent book "Sonata Forms", this actually killed the living entity "sonata form" and created a cold template: the form became a formula in which to pour musical material.

Liszt understood this and tried to avoid the formulaic. Some mistook this as a renunciation of form itself – I saw a modern source that said all of the symphonic poems are formless and are only understandable with a program in hand.

Most of Liszt's works use modified versions of existing forms. In fact, he almost overused a modified version of sonata form – 1st theme group in tonic minor, 2nd theme group in major raised mediant, development, recapitulation and coda in tonic major. Of course he put enough variation in this form so it never became a formula. Like Beethoven before him, he twisted the form depending on the material and his own needs.

Liszt's use of chromaticism, along with a lot of people's too heavy emphasis on his use of "thematic transformation", often obscures the underlying form, and his music begins to sound like just a series of loosely related episodes. To some it seems formless. Even Schoenberg, who followed Liszt's form on works like the *Chamber Symphony*, while praising Liszt's harmonic invention damns his lack of form.

Early on, and through his life, Liszt also often relied on previously written material. "Reminiscences" or "Fantasy" on themes from opera figured large in his virtuosic touring

days, and he continued to write them to the end. There are also, of course, the various transcriptions. And then there are all the various re-workings of his own original material – maybe several piano versions and an orchestra version of a work original conceived of as a lieder. Many people thought Liszt couldn't write an original theme to save himself and had to rely on the works of others to do anything. That is, they thought of him as being very unoriginal.

Besides all of this, a lot of his music, particularly that written before his Weimer days, was obviously written to please or impress his audience. To the very end Liszt wanted to please the crowds – it was his bread and butter. He might play Beethoven's Opus 106 sonata (Hammerclavier) to the masses, but he had better play a lot of fun works before and after to keep his audience awake.

To make his music interesting he “resorted” to a lot of “tricks”. He could make the piano mimic other instruments, even a full orchestra. He would also use diminished 7th chords for their effect even after other composers considered such use passé. People often considered him a charlatan that used cheap tricks to wow his audience and he even admit to some “charlatanry”.

What people seemed to be left with was music that was either incomprehensible or music that seemed to be empty virtuosity and parlor tricks designed to please large crowds. It often seemed formless and just rambled on, held loosely together through thematic transformation and its shimmering, virtuosic, surface. There was little original material and what little was there was used over and over again.

All this written by a guy who twice ran off with a married woman (royalty to!), had three kids out of wedlock with one of them, and yet, if rumor be true, slept with every harlot between Dublin and Moscow as he crisscrossed Europe on his extended tours. And after all of that, later in life, in what most took as some twisted publicity stunt, Liszt took minor religious orders and was called Abbè Liszt for the rest of his life.

What mess! No wonder people thought so little of him.

A Change of Perspective

Of course that is a very limited view, and a very prejudiced viewpoint at that.

To start with, I feel that Liszt understood music better than anyone else in his generation and possibly at a level only equaled or bettered by the small handful that includes Bach and Mozart.

One thing that must be remembered, Liszt had a larger repertoire at his command than perhaps any previous musician. He played works by Bach (and before), Mozart, Clementi, Beethoven (he is credit with the first public performance of the Hammerclavier sonata),

Weber and Hummel. On his tours he even played what was then the modern music of Schumann and Chopin, who he adored.

Through his life he continued to play and explore the music of a wide range of composers, from the French to the Germans, the Italians to the Russians. He studied symphonies and operas, sonatas and concertos, lieder and masses – little escaped his notice.

It wasn't just that he played this music - through his reminiscences, fantasies and transcriptions, representing over 80 composers, Liszt showed a deep understanding of the music he studied. If you have never heard the transcriptions of the Beethoven symphonies, you should, particularly the choral symphony (No. 9). He created works that are true to the original (if you ever see a reduced score of one of these symphonies in a book, it is most likely Liszt's version) and yet sound like original works for the piano. I've read statements by people who are amazed that Liszt's transcriptions for piano of some of Bach's fugues for organ sound so much like Liszt and yet are faithful to the note to the original – nothing added or subtracted.

There are stories about Liszt sight-reading through the scores of symphonies on the piano. Although those may be just stories, there are many first hand accounts of him sight reading hand written copies of difficult piano works and commenting on the form, chords, etc as he played. He once played Grieg's Violin Sonata at sight in such a way that a listener could hear the violin part not only as separate, but could tell it was supposed to be a violin. Chopin remarked after watching Liszt play some of his (Chopin's) etudes, that not only did Liszt fully understand them, but that he played them better than Chopin himself.

There are many such stories showing that although Liszt often played flashy for large throngs of people, when playing for connoisseurs he proved an excellent interpreter full of insight and subtleties. He was, undoubtedly, the best piano player and interpreter of piano music during his lifetime, possibly ever.

Besides being one of the greatest pianists ever, Liszt is perhaps unique in the sheer numbers of composers and musicians he worked with in his long life.

His father worked with Hayden and was taught by Hummel, who at the time was considered second only to Beethoven (though Czerny is famous as Beethoven's pupil, on hearing Hummel play he dropped his lessons and took up with Hummel) and he most likely met this important, if almost forgotten composer. He worked with the aforementioned Czerny and with Salieri, this contemporary of Mozart who had taught Hummel, Beethoven and Schubert. I never read anywhere that Liszt met Schubert, but his meeting with Beethoven is famous. Although it is doubtful the by-then deaf Beethoven really thought of Liszt as his successor, he made a big enough impression for Schindler to forge conversation logs to try to persuade people that Beethoven didn't like Liszt.

Of course Liszt knew and worked with or corresponded with the important composers of his generation. His relationship with Berlioz and Wagner were particularly close (in his old age he became Wagner's father in law!). He greatly helped Wagner during his exile and staged

several first performances of his work. Wagner, in private, admitted that Liszt's use of harmony greatly influenced him.

Liszt helped struggling composers get their start, including Smetna. He had a large corresponded with and advised "the Russian Five" ("Mighty Handful") and even met Bordin, if not others, of this important group. He spent a lot of time working with French composers such as Franck and Saint-Saens and several times met with Debussy.

Of course this is just the tip of the iceberg. Since Czerny and Salieri gave him free lessons he seemed to feel obligated to return the favor and give advice and lessons to struggling composers and musicians.

As a sad side note on correspondences – on Mahler's death it was discovered that he had a note from Liszt that was very negative and discouraging. A study of the note found it to be a fraud – neither handwriting nor signature were Liszt's. The writing style was not Liszt's and the content was nothing at all like any known authentic note from Liszt. Since Princess Carolyn wrote some anti-Semitic articles under Liszt's name, it is probable Mahler felt Liszt was discriminating against him. Although Mahler did show a little influence from Liszt's music, he never said a kind word about the earlier composer. But I digress here.

I know that a pianist doesn't necessarily need great understanding to play well, but it helps. Nor is it necessary to understand a piece to transcribe it – some of Liszt's own transcriptions of Schubert lieder is a bit unsympathetic to the original, but taken as a whole Liszt did a remarkable job on most pieces he transcribed or mined for source material. And just by working with a large number of composers and musicians, even a list as impressive as Liszt's, doesn't presuppose knowledge.

All that being said, I stand by my original statement that Liszt understood music better than almost any other composer.

First Modern

Liszt did not put this knowledge to waste. From the very beginning he experimented with harmony, texture and form.

Liszt's experimentation may be summed up in the following quote – "My sole ambition as a composer is to hurl my javelin into the infinite space of the future." Liszt often composed with the future firmly in mind.

Just a few things about some of Liszt's music.

He treated meter much more freely than most composers of his time period, using (for the time) such unusual meter as 5-4, 7-4 and 7-8. (One of my favorite uses of 7-4 is the love theme in the first movement of the Dante Symphony – the sense of longing created is astounding.)

He also experimented with different scales. The church modes were all widely used, as was the so-called “Gypsy scale”. He also used the pentatonic scale and the whole tone scale. The sonata, in fact, starts with 2 scales – a Lydian and a gypsy scale.

He experimented with different harmonies, including having up to 8 tones sounding simultaneously (maybe there are cases with more, but this is the most I’ve seen). He also often used cross relationships in chords, i.e., he might have a c natural and c sharp sounding simultaneously. He even did experiments with long rows of simultaneous 5ths (“Is one permitted to write such a thing, or to listen to it?”) and chords build on 4ths. Some of his music, such as “Nuages Gris” and “Unstern: Sinister, Disastro”, are as dissonant as anything from the early 20th century while the “Bagatelle “Ohne Tonart” is, as the name implies, an attempt to write an atonal (but actually not really very dissonant) work.

Liszt started experimenting with suspending tonality back in the early 1830s. These experiments didn’t stop there – they continued through his whole life. No, Wagner’s famous opening of Tristan and Isolde was not the first such suspension of tonality (nor did Liszt invent it), but was in fact borrowed from Liszt with the change of a diminished seventh into the famous “Tristan chord”.

Some also credit Liszt with the first purposeful 12-tone row. The Faust Symphony opens with such a row, which is used as one of the major themes throughout the first movement of the symphony.

Thinking of tone rows, in an article that is often critical of Liszt’s music, Schoenberg does praise his harmonic inventiveness and his work with suspending tonality. He even goes so far as to say, “Was he not after all one of those who started the battle against tonality, both through themes which point to no absolute tonal center, and through harmonic details whose musical exploitation has been looked after by his successors? Altogether his effect has perhaps been greater, through the many stimuli he left behind for his successors, than Wagner’s has been”.

Bartók made a similar statement when he said, “For the future development of music Liszt’s oeuvre seems to me of far greater importance than that of Strauss or even Wagner”.

Without Liszt’s music as an example much of the music we call “modern” would not be possible.

Tarnished

Although the numbers of composers and musicians influenced by Liszt, either directly or second hand, was great, in his lifetime he never really gained the reputation as a composer that he deserved. His music was often scorned and used as the polar opposite of the more respected music of Brahms.

After his death, Liszt’s reputation took a nosedive while that of his friend Wagner continued to grow.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century virtuosity was looked down on. Many thought of Liszt as a virtuoso first and so all of his music was suspect on those grounds. How could a mere virtuoso, something of a charlatan manipulating the public, actually be considered a serious composer?

Liszt's reputation didn't suffer so much in Eastern Europe, but even there he wasn't always put into the "A-list" of composers. Some continued to sing his praises, for example the following quote by Rimsky-Korsakov: "Study Liszt and Balakirev more closely and you will see that a great deal in me is – not me."

Liszt was over-shadowed, and eventually totally eclipsed, by Wagner. It is interesting to hear music that shows a huge Liszt influence only to read of Wagner's influence. It almost seems that people were embarrassed to admit that they actually liked Liszt, even composers such as Debussy, who was obviously greatly influenced by him.

Debussy once spent quite a bit of time abusing "Mezzepa", saying it was full of faults and at times "vulgar". At the end, however, he said, "Yet all that tumultuous passion... exerts such a force that you find yourself liking it, without quite knowing why... the fire and abandon which Liszt's genius frequently attains are much preferable to white gloved perfection."

In other words, he really enjoyed listening to Liszt even when he thought the music "imperfect" and even somewhat vulgar. Listening to Liszt is something of a guilty pleasure.

Which brings us back to the beginning.

Resolution?

But maybe Debussy's words are the ones to follow.

Liszt did sometimes write music that is virtuosic and bombastic. He was sometimes uneven in other ways.

Liszt's failures are often more fascinating than others' successes.

Charles Rosen doesn't seem to think that way, saying the music of Debussy, Schoenberg, etc. that is often foreshadowed in Liszt is always much more interesting in the final, 20th century form. However, he does say that with Liszt the "vulgar" is sometimes the point and that we sometimes have to suspend our good taste and just enjoy our music. If we do this we will get so much more out of the music.

I disagree on both points - 1. Yes, Berg may be better than proto-Berg, but Rosen doesn't seem to be following his own advice on this – he needs to take Liszt on his own and not compared to music written more than 20 years after his death; 2. I think even Liszt's virtuosic works can be enjoyed without suspending good taste. Maybe it is snobbery that needs to be suspended.

Overall, though, he is right. People do judge Liszt by the wrong standards.

Liszt wrote a huge amount of great music. He also wrote a lot of music that might not be so great but makes great listening. He also wrote some music that missed.

Nobody is perfect – listen to Beethoven’s “Wellington’s Victory” someday, a piece that he was actually proud of. We never point to “Wellington’s Victory” and say, “Beethoven was an awful composer”, so why do we seem to do it to Liszt?

A quick question – what makes a great composer (or, phrased another way, what makes a composer great)?

I would say great composers, while being part of their own time period, foreshadowed music that was to come – they are ahead of their times. A great composer influenced other composers. A great composer is inventive. A great composer understands what came before and uses that knowledge to shape what is to come. A great composer writes music that is deep and can be understood beyond just the surface. A great composer invents and originates. A great composer communicates.

To me that last paragraph reads like a perfect description of Franz Liszt, one of the greatest composers of the 19th century.

Epilogue

While writing this essay I continually threw out material. There is just so much available and it would be impossible to include everything, particularly in something of this scale. I wanted the essay to flow and often had to pick and chose which ideas to use to keep that flow. Maybe 80% (or more) of the material I wanted to include ended up on the cutting room floor.

There were times, however, that I felt that leaving things out might give the wrong impression. Somebody who doesn't know the material might come to the wrong conclusion and people who do know the material might wonder why I skipped an important point.

For instance, somebody might come to the conclusion that I think Wagner owed it all to Liszt, that he wasn't very important. I really don't feel that way, though without Liszt, Wagner's exile may have come to a much worse end. Liszt himself recognized Wagner as a genius, and although their personal relationship may have not been great, they always had a mutual respect of each other's music. There was a give and take with Wagner often being the innovator.

Liszt did not live in a vacuum and often "borrowed" ideas from his contemporaries. Even in his more experimental late work he showed the influence of other composers.

I am also not one of those people who feel I need to be totally blind to Liszt's faults or apologize for any perceived shortcomings. As stated in the essay, all composers write flops but Liszt wrote more than his share. He was not as meticulous as Chopin and sometimes put things out when they weren't ready.

In my opinion, though, his best works far outnumber the not so good ones.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Charles Rosen "The Romantic Generation Harvard University Press 1995

Derek Watson "Liszt" from The Master Musicians series Oxford University Press 1989
(paperback 2000)

Kenneth Hamilton (editor) "The Cambridge Companion to Liszt" (11 essays by various authors) Cambridge University Press 2005

Kenneth Hamilton "Liszt: Sonata in B Minor" from the Cambridge Music Handbooks series
Cambridge University Press 1996

Liszt piano music (check title of both sources) Dover Press

Secondary Sources:

Leon Plantinga "Romantic Music; A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe"
WW Norton & Company 1984

David Dubal "The Essential Canon of Classical Music" North Point Press 2001

Wikipedia

Arnold Schoenberg "Franz Liszt's Work and Being" in the book "Style and Idea; Selected
Writings of Arnold Schoenberg" University of California Press 1975 (paperback 1984)

Charles Rosen "Sonata Forms"

Various CD covers and reviews on Amazon (both categories numbering in the dozens)