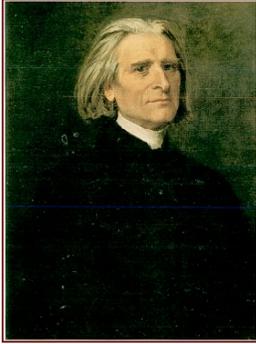


Mark Salman Introduction to Liszt Series



Liszt is a composer I have been fascinated with since my student days. I have always been attracted not only to the colossal emotional power of the music, but also to its extraordinary range and diversity, and the fearless experimentation with new harmonic and formal innovations, in his final works even anticipating the music of the 20th century. Of all the great romantic period composers Liszt was the one who most emulated Beethoven in believing that music had no expressive bounds. I was also intrigued by how much of his music was generally unknown, and how much significant music was lying around virtually unexplored more than one hundred years after his death. As a personality he was one of the most remarkable of the whole 19th century, a man of incredible generosity, using his extraordinary celebrity and influence to further the careers of any talented musician he thought worthy (most notably Wagner), never expecting anything in return. One of the ways to explore an artist's contributions to his medium could be to question how later art would be different if he hadn't existed - in Liszt's case the whole music world of the late 19th and first part of the 20th would have to be radically different. Would Wagner have been as well known, would his works ever have been produced, would his harmonic language have evolved in the direction it took? Styles of piano writing from Brahms to Debussy to Bartok and Prokofiev would certainly be changed.

I have always been disturbed by the pervasive misconceptions that surround Liszt's music, his contributions to music historically, as well as his personality. Even among musicians one hears the opinion that Liszt's music is all flash and no substance, that it is only a vehicle for technical display. Many performers will play it from this point of view, having grown up hearing this typical outlook on Liszt's music from teachers and writers on music, perpetuating the stereotype. The tremendous emotional depth of the music, its originality, and its countless influences on later composers are regularly overlooked. Even Liszt's personality is often characterized as that of the vain performer, one who used the music solely as a vehicle to exhibit his own personality.

The reasons for these misconceptions are not hard to trace. Like that of most composers, one's understanding of his music only truly develops with a close acquaintance with a wide range of his music. With a relatively small percentage of his works in the typical pianists repertoire, it is difficult to gain this perspective. On the surface, the extreme technical difficulty of the music seems the most obvious characteristic, and it is only through the in-depth study of his works that one can realize that most of these technical figurations are a translation of varied orchestral colors and sonorities to the piano. (It is significant to note that much of Liszt's music was not well received by audiences of his day, the unusual, advanced harmonic language being beyond their comprehension. Even pieces that would now be considered real crowd pleasers, such as his piano concertos, took many years to be accepted by the public.) The many composers who profited from Liszt's formal and harmonic innovations were naturally not eager to point out their indebtedness, particularly in the case of Wagner. Such a cult of hero-worship surrounded Wagner in the late 19th and early centuries that his biographers, eager to enhance the stature of their hero, did all they could to make Liszt's influence on him seem insignificant, and to give Wagner credit for Liszt's innovations. Finally, the Liszt biography that received the widest circulation in the mid 20th century was written by Wagner's biographer, who felt it necessary to cut down Liszt's character (to present Wagner's rather "difficult" personality in a better light) as well as artistic achievements: he used as the basis for his picture of Liszt's personality a character meant to depict Liszt in a "revenge novel" written by the Countess d'Agoult after the break-up of their relationship! (This was commonly done at the time; George Sand wrote a novel featuring a character obviously meant to be Chopin. All of these past inaccuracies have been detailed in Alan Walker's recent three-volume Liszt biography.)

The reasons for these misconceptions are not hard to trace. Like that of most composers, one's understanding of his music only truly develops with a close acquaintance with a wide range of his music. With a relatively small percentage of his works in the typical pianists repertoire, it is difficult to gain this perspective. On the surface, the extreme technical difficulty of the music seems the most obvious characteristic, and it is only through the in-depth study of his works that one can realize that most of these technical figurations are a translation of varied orchestral colors and sonorities to the piano. (It is significant

to note that much of Liszt's music was not well received by audiences of his day, the unusual, advanced harmonic language being beyond their comprehension. Even pieces that would now be considered real crowd pleasers, such as his piano concertos, took many years to be accepted by the public.) The many composers who profited from Liszt's formal and harmonic innovations were naturally not eager to point out their indebtedness, particularly in the case of Wagner. Such a cult of hero-worship surrounded Wagner in the late 19th and early centuries that his biographers, eager to enhance the stature of their hero, did all they could to make Liszt's influence on him seem insignificant, and to give Wagner credit for Liszt's innovations. Finally, the Liszt biography that received the widest circulation in the mid 20th century was written by Wagner's biographer, who felt it necessary to cut down Liszt's character (to present Wagner's rather "difficult" personality in a better light) as well as artistic achievements: he used as the basis for his picture of Liszt's personality a character meant to depict Liszt in a "revenge novel" written by the Countess d'Agoult after the break-up of their relationship! (This was commonly done at the time; George Sand wrote a novel featuring a character obviously meant to be Chopin. All of these past inaccuracies have been detailed in Alan Walker's recent three-volume Liszt biography.)

As Liszt's best music was too advanced to be appreciated by critics and the public during his lifetime, and with the change in artistic esthetic of the early 20th century to a rather anti-romantic style in a reaction against the 19th century, much of Liszt's music was overlooked (extremely ironic in that of all the composers of his time he was the most interested in new developments, and foreshadowed much of the early 20th century in his last works.) In our rather self-important, "music is just the perfect reproduction of the composer's notation on the page" time, Liszt's passion and grandeur, humanity, and humor are regarded with suspicion, and his works are too rarely seriously investigated.

(Copyright 2004 by Mark Salman)