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Dolores Pesce, *Liszt's Final Decade* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014). xiv + 369 pp. £55.00

In the 'prologue' to the third and final volume of his Liszt biography, Alan Walker described Liszt's final years as chiefly characterised by 'artistic frustration, arising from the widespread rejection of his music... Because of the many setbacks he endured... Liszt's embattled character succumbed to a series of depressions, culminating in 1877 in a desire, several time repeated, to commit suicide—an act of despair from which only his devout Catholicism saved him.' Walker then goes on to mention that Liszt's correspondence with Olga von Meyendorff 'tells it all'.¹ This appears to be Dolores Pesce's point of departure: a more thorough examination of Liszt's battle for artistic recognition and his putative depression in the years 1877–86, as reflected mainly in his correspondence with his closest confidantes: the woman whom he almost married, Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, and the woman with whom he apparently felt comfortable enough to speak about his physical and mental health, the aforementioned Olga von Meyendorff, an erudite as well as beautiful woman, who was often at Liszt's side since becoming a widow in 1871. The necessary addition of the less attractive and genial Carolyne, provides insights into musical matters Liszt preferred to confide in the latter (p. 5).

But Pesce does much more than merely provide more detail. First, her in-depth analysis of Liszt's correspondence from these years is based on the highest critical standards: primary

¹ Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Final Years, 1861–1886* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 3–4.

sources rather than translated collections (including hitherto unpublished letters), endnotes always provide the original French text, and specific words as well as Liszt's relationship with both correspondents are examined in context. Secondly, Pesce questions the nature of Liszt's 'depression' and corrects the simplistic notion that professional disappointment was its main cause. She examines aspects of his public life that bespeak of success rather than failure, contextualises 'melancholia' as a literary and iconographic aesthetic as well as a medical condition, and produces some evidence that Liszt's mood dips may have been seasonal and unrelated to external events in his life. Third, the idea that Liszt's Catholicism 'saved him' is both qualified and substantiated through an examination of particular religious ideas, as well as sacred works that reflect a moral philosophy of resignation. This music is the least well-known of Liszt's late oeuvre, and therefore its close consideration constitutes an important scholarly contribution in itself. Finally, Pesce is not really offering a chronological biography, but rather a series of studies that allow her to focus on particular critical issues, rather than get distracted by the endless detail of Liszt's extremely eventful life.

The first chapter is a good example of an essay that can be read separately, as a study in nineteenth-century celebrity, though Liszt old-age celebrity was something of a phenomenon in its own right. The chapter title, 'Decorated Cleric', captures in two words the unlikely combination of ostentation and humility embodied in the persona of the Abbé Liszt, as presented to the public—in striking poses—by both Liszt and his critics. Pesce thoughtfully discusses this issue through twenty illuminating images (from paintings and official photographs to illustrations and caricatures), Liszt's communications to his two chief

correspondents, and criticisms by the likes of Hanslick and Saint-Beuve. This area is so vast that some stones are bound to remain unturned.²

The second chapter follows with another important facet of Liszt's public life, his promotion of his students and allies. It seems that in his old age Liszt continued and even perfected a well-established *modus operandi* from his years in Weimar. Pesce debunks the myth of Liszt's overgenerous indulgence of mediocrity by presenting evidence of his exacting judgement in choosing students, whom to promote professionally and to what extent. His reserve towards supposed supporters, like Hermann Julius Richter, is particularly illuminating in that respect. The image of the saint who forgave all slights is likewise challenged, particularly the case of Liszt's lack of enthusiasm for supporting a Berlioz monument after his old comrade's death. Pesce convincingly links this to Berlioz's famously cool reception of the 'Gran' Mass, which occurred only four years before (1866) and cut Liszt to the quick.

The chapter 'A Slow and Perilous Road to Vindication' completes the picture of Liszt's eminence in the music world by showing him at the receiving end of the harshest forms of criticism. Here we learn the extent to which Hanslick still concerned himself with Liszt after the well-known hostile essay on Liszt's symphonic poems from 1857, and that Liszt still cared about such slights as late as 1881. Whatever one thinks of Hanslick's bracing manner,

² A random example: why do the fiercest attacks on Liszt's Catholic image come from the Hungarian satirical journal *Borsszém Jankó* in particular? What is the context? I also missed the more familiar (and brilliant) caricature from this journal (6 April 1873), which contains barbed comments on Liszt's mannerism, image, and 'imposing modesty' (!).

there is at least a fierce consistency to everything he wrote about Liszt that reflects widespread musical opinion and taste in Austria and Germany of his day. It would seem he knew very little of the change in Liszt's style, partly because most of the works he witnessed in performance were from the 1850s and 60s. On the rare occasion he heard a work from a later period (*Die Glocken des Straßburger Münsters*), he seemed not to have noticed or care about such stylistic changes: for him it was simply more of the same, only worse. In examining Liszt responses to these attacks, Pesce exposes his vulnerabilities and forgivable human weaknesses without attempting to prejudge or excuse them. Her ultimate purpose is to demonstrate Liszt's resilience, so that later we will judge this against his supposed depression and withdrawal from the world. Thus the story of his belated success with the 'Gran' Mass and 'Dante' Symphony towards the end of his life, contradicts the image of an embattled and contrarian 'late' composer (chapter 7 continues to develop this theme).

Chapter 4, 'Challenges of Composition and Publication', finally focus on the question of professional failure. Some familiar stories, such as the rejection of avant-garde sacred works (the *Via Crucis* in particular) by Pustet, are explored further, so that we learn of the possible involvement of the leaders of the Cecilian movement. A few musical examples could have helped the reader evaluate this rejection, e.g. examples of the kind of reformed Catholic music Witt and Haberl espoused in contrast to what Liszt had in mind (readers can consult examples of Liszt's music in chapter 7, pp. 220-45). But at least this account provokes the inevitable question: why did Liszt, who presumably had a very realistic understanding of the business of publishing, believe these works will be accepted?

The second part of the book provides a theologically informed reading of Liszt's correspondence. The chapter 'Imagined Identities' begins with concepts such as vicarious

suffering (taking on the sufferings of others) and *imitatio Christi*. We learn of Liszt's identification with biblical figures such as Job and the Good Thief, and his familiarity with theological writings of contemporaries such as Joseph de Maistre, Jean-Joseph Gaume, the Abbé Lamennais, Alphonse de Lamartine and Chateaubriand. It is interesting to note that this theological-intellectual background is French, some of it liberal and some deeply conservative. Once again, Liszt resists easy pigeonholing.

Chapter 6, 'Soul Bearing' forms in some sense the core of this book, as it deals with the issue of Liszt's depression. The problem has always been how to judge all the evidence from letters, testimonies about Liszt's dark moods and alcoholic self-medication, and some particularly brooding piano works. Putting the music aside in this chapter, Pesce concentrates on the letters that reveal this side of Liszt, decoding some of his meaning through nineteenth-century notions of melancholia (medical as well as cultural), and the theological imagery discussed in the previous chapter. Aesthetic aspects of melancholia form a particular problem, as on those occasions Liszt appears to relish this state of mind (for example, when he praised a medallion from 1880 featuring him, in his view, as a melancholic). Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that his particular condition—whatever it was—was real enough, and hardly enjoyable. Excerpts from the letters suggest his lethargy and a mood disorder did not stem from any discernible cause, and was occasional and unpredictable, followed by lengthy months (even a whole year) of stability. Pesce's interesting conjecture that Liszt may have been suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is inconclusive, but at least we have a more accurate and realistic description of the symptoms now, with illuminating cultural interpretations not available before.

Chapter 7, ‘Compositional Legacy’, assesses Liszt’s psyche and the role of his faith in relation to the works he wrote in this period. It opens with the iconic *Nuages gris*, not as a cause for celebrating austere textures, dissonance and post-tonality, as might be expected, but rather to critique the scholarship that has focused on such features and works (typically unpublished in Liszt’s time) that contained them, at the expense of much else. That simply left out most of Liszt’s oeuvre from this period. A succession of tables that orders works from this period according to the circumstances of their publication (immediate, delayed, or posthumous, with a very good statistical summary in table 7.4), shows us just how much we have been missing, and soon a pattern begins to emerge. It seems Liszt was very willing to meet the ‘market demand’ for bacchanalian and macabre works (and, one could add, the demand for celebratory and sacred music), but ‘apparently made no effort to publish those inward-looking works [like *Nuages gris*] that lacked familiar generic features to distract from possible interpretation as personal revelations,’—or, in other words, he preferred to keep his ‘existential struggles’ private, at least while he lived (p. 216).³

The chapter then explores those works that Liszt did care to share with others, particularly his sacred works. Psychological and religious themes developed in the two previous chapters continue to inform the interpretation of works such as *Via Crucis* (1878–79), Psalm 129 (1880–81), and lesser-known ones, such as *Qui Miriam absolvisti* (1885). Pesce highlights the affective use of keys, dissonance and consonance, chromaticism and diatonicism—the

³ Conversely, this fine argument means he could express existential struggles under generic cover (see for example Hungarian Rhapsody No. 17); and it explains why for postwar rehabilitators of Liszt it was precisely the suppressed, dissonant and post-tonal works that conjured the irresistible image of a misunderstood prophet of twentieth-century music.

latter (so marginalized by the habitual emphasis on post-tonality) often symbolic of hope. Liszt directs this expression of hope at others as well as himself, a communitarian impulse that, Pesce argues, ‘does not fit squarely into the mould of Said’s late artist for whom there is no solace or optimism’ (p. 243). On the other hand, we have already seen in chapter 4 how Liszt ‘exiled’ himself (to borrow Said’s term) from accepted norms of sacred music to the point that even his would-be allies in the business of church reform found some of his works unsuitable for publication.

The concluding chapter, ‘Final Words’, could have been entitled ‘Resignation’. According to Pesce, resignation fortified Liszt against disappointment and doubt, and in his letters it took on the form of identifying with biblical characters that transcended suffering (discussed in chapter 5) and viewing his compositional work as a moral duty. As he wrote to Olga in 1879, ‘in the end, the father of heavenly mercies will reward the long and persevering *labour* of mankind. That is our hope!’ (p. 255). Pesce’s point is not merely the uncontroversial notion that religion comforted Liszt. Here, as well as in chapters 5 and 7, we learn about specific theological notions of suffering, charity, hope, resignation and so on, because these were the ideas that greatly mattered to Liszt and were aesthetically channelled into many of his late works. The book appropriately concludes with a brief look at *Resignazione* (1877), a chorale-like piano miniature in the ‘religious’ key of E major, whose inconclusive end looks ahead towards the unknown. It was composed in the first year of Liszt’s final decade.

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