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CONVENTIONS, GENRES, PRACTICES IN THE PERFORMANCE OF LISZT'S PIANO MUSIC

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To Patrícia Sucena Almeida

Performance Practice as an Area of Study in the Music of Liszt

The very existence of performance practice as a field of scholarly research, with implications for actual performers and performances, remains a controversial area, nowhere more so than when such study involves the nineteenth-century, the period which forms the core of the standard repertoire for many musicians of all types. The most die-hard 'old-style performance' advocates will probably concede that there are good reasons for performing Bach or Vivaldi with smaller groups of players than those in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, and that the approach to phrasing, articulation that works for Wagner might not necessarily be the most appropriate in this context. Even with the music of Haydn or Mozart (though not so much with that involving keyboard) there can be grudging acceptance that the wave of historically-informed performances of this repertoire that have sprung up in recent decades might have produced some illuminating results. But the nineteenth-century remains a intensely fought-over battleground, despite the fact that historical performance research and its application to music of this period remains in a state of relative infancy.

The earliest applications of performance practice research to the nineteenth century involved the music of Beethoven, Schubert, Berlioz and Schumann, to works written in the earlier half of the century. As far as the latter part of this century is concerned, there have been a certain number of performances and recordings, mostly on small labels, but few that have presented such an integrated and absorbed approach to both interpretative detail and fundamental conception as, say, the performances of Berlioz by Roger Norrington and John Eliot Gardiner, the Schubert sonatas in the hands of Malcolm Bilson or Andreas Staier, or the Schumann Symphonies as conducted by Gardiner. When it comes to the music of Liszt (who I consider as the most important composer who bridges the two halves of the century, as opposed to Schumann or Chopin, located firmly in the former half, or Wagner, Brahms and Bruckner, who I would place in the second (despite the fact that Wagner was only three years younger than Schumann, and that his early operas overlap with the last decade of Schumann's life)), there is an extremely substantial amount of information available about his playing, teaching and compositional ideas (far more so than is the case with, say, Schubert), which has indeed been investigated and written about to a degree, but the issue of attempting to marry such research to actual performance comes up very infrequently.

Why this is surely has to do with a lot of preconceptions about the type of composer and performer Liszt himself was. Is he not surely the figure who gives the lie to claims about the value of 'scholarly' performance? A highly spontaneous performer who took huge liberties with his own and others' music in concert, a composer for whose music the written score is merely a starting point, to be brought to life by the performer's vital imagination, in contradistinction to the literalism of the 'authenticity' movement?

In some ways these sorts of arguments are true (though they need to be nuanced), but in terms of performance practice research and its application such opinions are often predicated upon a highly caricatured view of the nature of such a field. In his definitive study of Liszt's life and work, Alan Walker writes that:

The early twentieth century saw the rise of musicology, with its emphasis on "authenticity," in which the composer's original thought was perfectly preserved, in which every note was sacrosanct, in which the "sonic surface" of the music was reproduced as nearly as he himself envisaged it. The crime of the paraphrase now was that it was a paraphrase. It was not interested in preserving the "original thought"; it changed music's notation with impunity; it lacked reverence for the "sonic surface" of a work; indeed, it often flitted about, chameleon-like, donning the most far-flung acoustic disguises, lording it over territory it had no business to occupy. Liszt's sixty-odd paraphrases, out of temper with the times, were hushed up and forgotten.¹

This sets up a straw-man argument in terms of musicology or so-called "authenticity". The use of period instruments, a defining attribute of such study, is very much about timbre and the 'sonic surface' of works, though introducing different types of sounds and colours from those which had been customary. But more broadly, the study of performance practice of historically distant eras has not been simply about preserving 'the composer's original thought', but rather about attempting to *expand* the range of performance possibilities away from the normative application of a single set of late-romantic conventions (with roots in the period around the 1930s) applied to all types of music from whichever period. And it is in large measure due to the efforts of historically-informed performers that we have seen the resurrection of some of Bach's transcriptions of Vivaldi, Mozart's re-orchestrations of Handel, and even recently Mendelssohn's performances of the Bach *Matthäuspassion*. Some of these developments have antedated Walker's comments, for sure; nonetheless I still believe one of the primary motivating factors for exploring archaic performance practices was an interest in the *diversity* of the past as an antidote to perceived homogeneity of the present day. And, as I shall explore below, there is no reason why this might not be a stimulating and productive area of study with regard to Liszt's paraphrases as well.

In a thoughtful article which constitutes one of the most prominent of recent writings on performance practice in Liszt, Kenneth Hamilton writes:

[H]ow did Liszt expect his music to sound, and what interpretative approach should we adopt if we wish to respect this? We could well argue – and this would ironically be a typical nineteenth-century view- that Liszt performance in the twenty-first century ought to be moulded by modern concert conditions, instruments and expectations, and not those of a bygone era. But even if this attitude is adopted, it is surely better adopted on the basis of knowledge of what we are rejecting, rather than as a merely plausible substitute for ignorance.²

I agree very strongly with Hamilton here, whilst myself having a certain degree of scepticism about the value of slavishly trying to recreate older practices. Learning about the sort of practices with which a composer was familiar, or which they desired or aspired to when composing (which can be a very different thing) can illuminate

¹ Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years 1811-1847* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p. 315.

² Kenneth Hamilton, 'Performing Liszt's piano music', in Hamilton (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 171. Much of this article constitutes an extended version of Hamilton's chapter 'Performances and Pianos' in his *Liszt: Sonata in B Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 65-82.

much in terms of the very conception of a work of music (which is a quantity I do not wish to divorce entirely from its possible realisation in sound – and that extends to considerations of particular instruments). Then one is better equipped to construct a modern interpretation on the basis of such informed knowledge.

Yet even Hamilton slips into rather simplistic clichés about modern performers when he says that:

Most performers nowadays take it as axiomatic that, however important their role, it should be limited to relaying as accurately as possible the composition as they believe the composer intended it; they should attempt to subsume their individuality in that of the composer. To do this completely is impossible, but the aim of sympathetic accuracy is usually there.³

This may be true of session musicians and some orchestral and ensemble players, but I do not believe it to be a fair portrayal of the diverse world of modern performers. The composition ‘as the composer intended it’ is by no means a singular entity; this rather positivistic way of describing it is in itself problematic, though does hold some sway in the primarily positivistic intellectual climates to be found in the English-speaking world. Instead of thinking of ‘what the composer intended’, we would do better to think of ‘what are the boundaries of interpretative possibility that are not inconsistent with the composer’s desires’? In the case of Liszt such boundaries enclose a wide range of possibilities (to be ascertained on a case-by-case basis), but that is by no means the same as an aesthetic of ‘anything goes’. To give a highly individual, personal, spontaneous performance is frequently an integral part of Liszt’s wishes, with the proviso that one should respect certain stylistic and other principles. Performance practice research attempts to discover such underlying principles as the *starting point* for constructing an interpretation. Even if one is to diverge from such principles (any many extremely fine performances of all types of repertoire do), having prior knowledge of them can surely do no harm in making such divergences meaningful.

As mentioned before, there is a rich range of sources for learning about Liszt’s performance and teaching. Primary amongst these are three works, the collections of detailed descriptions of Liszt’s teaching in his late years as collected by his students August Göllerich⁴ and Carl Lachmund⁵ and by Lina Ramann⁶, as well as a variety of memoirs by such students as Emil von Sauer⁷, Frederich Lamond⁸, Moriz Rosenthal⁹,

³ Hamilton, ‘Performing Liszt’s piano music’, p. 172.

⁴ Richard Zimdars (ed. and trans.), *The Piano Masterclasses of Franz Liszt, 1884-6: Diary Notes of August Göllerich*. Edited by Wilhelm Jerger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

⁵ Alan Walker (ed), *Living with Liszt from the Diary of Carl Lachmund, an American pupil of Liszt, 1882-84* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1995)

⁶ Lina Ramann, *Liszt Pädagogium*, edited Alfred Brendel (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1996). My research for this article was primarily based upon the five-volume 1901 Breitkopf edition of this work, which I will refer to in the footnotes, except in the case of the Sonata. I am grateful to Ana Katrine of Breitkopf for providing me with copies of the appropriate sections from volume 5 (alas missing from the copy in the British Library) pending a copy of the complete work was being prepared. See Hamilton, ‘Performing Liszt’s piano music’, pp. 178-179, for more on this source.

⁷ Emil von Sauer, *Meine Welt* (Stuttgart: Spemann, 1901)

⁸ Frederich Lamond, *The Memoirs of Frederic Lamond*, with a foreword by Ernest Newman, introduction & postscript by Irene Triesch Lamond (Glasgow; William Laclellan, 1949).

⁹ Mark Mitchell and Allan Evans (eds), *Moriz Rosenthal in Word and Music: A Legacy of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006)

Alexander Siloti¹⁰, Arthur Friedheim¹¹, William Mason¹² and others. As Hamilton points out, most of these sources refer to the last two decades of Liszt's life, at which point he argues that 'his approach had undoubtedly become more severe'¹³. Certainly one can find numerous instances of Liszt talking dismissively of his earlier works (referring to the fantasy on Bellini's *La Sonnambula* as 'nonsense'¹⁴ or even calling the third of the *Liebesträume* 'frivolous business'¹⁵) and a relatively high degree of fastidiousness when it comes to the teaching of the works of other composers or Liszt's transcriptions thereof (though not always so). However, it remains difficult to arrive at very generalised conclusions about Liszt's pianistic and interpretative wishes. He could say to one woman pianist that her playing was 'innocence bordering on stupidity' ('*Es ist Unschuld an Dummheit grenzend*'), telling her to make a mordent more 'biting'¹⁶ and elsewhere ask that one should play his transcription of Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnerade* 'in a coy, demure manner'¹⁷. Liszt was a versatile and diverse performer and teacher who would approach each work on an individual basis; in studying performance practice as appertains to his work we would do well to adopt a similar approach.

But whilst first-hand accounts of Liszt's teaching apply primarily to his later years, we can also learn a lot about his playing and wishes for his music in earlier years through the voluminous amount of reports of his performances, correspondence and writings. These are obviously too large in quantity to deal with comprehensively here, but can form the basis for future research. A full volume on performing Liszt, akin to the excellent recent collection of essays on Brahms¹⁸ would be a welcome addition to the literature, dealing with many aspects of performance practice and interpretation. It would be good to know more about orchestral and choral practice in nineteenth-century performances of Liszt's works, about the particular characteristics of various singers, and approaches to the chamber works, as well as of course a wider range of scholarship concerning the piano music. And study of performance need not be purely limited to historical stylistic practices; the possible consequences of analytical study of the works for performance (which is surely one of the major reasons such study should be worthwhile) also presents more fertile ground for future exploration.

Liszt is frequently seen as the founding father of the 'golden age of the piano', of particular influence on Russian schools of piano playing¹⁹. There are still a few

¹⁰ Alexander Siloti, *My Memories of Liszt*, translator unknown (Edinburgh: Methven Simpson, date unspecified)

¹¹ Arthur Friedheim, *Life and Liszt: The Recollections of a Concert Pianist*, edited Theodore L. Bullock (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1961).

¹² William Mason, *Memories of a Musical Life* (New York: The Century Co, 1901)

¹³ Hamilton, 'Performing Liszt's piano music', p. 174.

¹⁴ See Zimdars, *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 59.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 76.

¹⁶ Walker, *Living with Liszt*, pp. 272-3.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁸ Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman (eds.), *Performing Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Charles Rosen argues that 'the most genuine understanding of his music has been displayed by musicians of eastern Europe, and he may almost be considered as the founder of Russian pianism' (Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (London: Fontana, 1999), p. 540). Whether Hungary is to be regarded as part of Eastern or Central Europe is open to debate; whatever one thinks on this count, the clear divergences between Hungarian and Russian schools of pianism, the former undoubtedly indebted to Liszt, suggests that the latter half of Rosen's statement may be something of a simplification.

students of students of Liszt alive (one such being Charles Rosen, who was for a short time a student of Moriz Rosenthal). But traditions mutate even in the lifetimes of the particular artists at the centre of them. There are significant differences between the earlier and later recordings of such very different pianists as Robert Casadesu, Claudio Arrau, Vladimir Horowitz, or Glenn Gould, and there is every reason to believe that Liszt's pianistic and interpretative priorities changed not insignificantly between the 1830s and 1880s. Liszt was well aware of the opposing pulls of different aspects of nineteenth-century aesthetics, the cult of the demonic, virtuosic, but also commercial and entertaining on one hand, and that of idealism, integrity, the sublime, on the other (as you will see with my comments on the Sonata and the *Mephisto Waltz* No. 3, I believe some of the various attributes of these categories can be in conflict with one another). As sometime champion of the music of Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Verdi and Wagner, to name just a few, he could hardly have failed to ingrain such divergent aesthetics, which were reflected in his various attitudes towards performance. Hamilton draws attention to the fact that Liszt's infamous comment reported by Lamond, saying to one student 'Do you think I care how fast you can play octaves' jars somewhat with the fact that Liszt himself was deeply impressed by precisely such prowess in Tausig and others in earlier years²⁰.

And these divergent aesthetics were reflected in his changing attitudes towards performance. As Hamilton points out 'it should not cause astonishment that Liszt's attitudes to textual fidelity and to performance were complex and occasionally contradictory'²¹.

Within the predominantly Anglo-American field of the 'New Musicology', it has become customary to hold up Liszt as a shining counterexample to the xenophobically hated Germanic developments in the nineteenth century. The construction of Liszt overwhelmingly applied, or at least valued, in such circles is that of the charismatic performer-entertainer who seduced and wooed audiences; in the process he is practically equated with twentieth century heavily commercialised entertainers whose work conforms entirely to the commodity principle:

[T]he charismatic performance of one's music is often crucial to its promotion and transmission. Whether Liszt in his matinee-idol piano recitals, Elvis on "The Ed Sullivan Show," or the aforementioned David Lee Roth, the composer-performer often relies heavily on manipulating audience response through his enactments of sexual power and desire.²²

When electrifying performances cause defensive practices to "fail" or their simulated failure to become "real," audiences respond with a frenzy that both reflects and re-enacts the positions of music as the other. Institutionalized, such frenzy becomes cult-level fandom, the outer limit of which is the kind of superstar craze that begins in the nineteenth century with figures such as Liszt and Gottschalk. With the progress of mass culture, the character of the superstar evolves; figures such as Jenny Lind, Enrico Caruso, and Leopold Stokowski, who straddle high and popular art, are replaced by purely popular figures such as Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, and the Beatles. But one need only mention Arturo Toscanini, Maria Callas, Van Cliburn, and Glenn Gould to mark the persistence of the superstar role among "classical" performers. Performer cults can even be understood in Dahlhaus's terms as the

²⁰ Hamilton, 'Performing Liszt's piano music', p. 189.

²¹ Ibid. p. 171.

²² Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 151.

specific other of composer cults, the social vehicle for posing the ex-centric energies of the event against the concentric monumentality of the work.²³

If music IS sex, what on earth IS going on in a concert hall during, say, a piano recital? When the pianist is on a raised stage, in a spotlight while we are in the dark . . . are we observers of a sexual act? Are we its object? Why, exactly, are we in the dark? . . . Does it help account for the swooning over Liszt (in an 1840s construction of public group sex), over Elvis (in a 1950s construction of the same thing), over . . . Madonna . . . over, in the long-gone 1970s, Holly Near?²⁴

It should not perhaps be so surprising that we will find aggressive espousals of commodity music from the English-speaking countries, whose economic system and resulting culture are dominated by market values to a significantly greater extent than in the social-democratic countries of Western Europe; however, to find such right-wing ideologies brandished about with such empty rhetoric is telling when it comes from those self-identified with ‘progressive’ causes. Whatever, such a one-dimensional portrayal does little justice to the complexity of a figure such as Liszt. In what is generally an intelligent and thoughtful exploration of the very nature of virtuosity in Liszt, written as part of a series of books influenced by New Musicological tropes and priorities, Dana Gooley emphasises drama above most other sides to Liszt’s musical character, as in the following passage:

The dramatic, character-centered orientation of Liszt’s playing, evident in these descriptions of the *Don Giovanni* fantasy, extends beyond his approach to melody. Drama was basic to his aesthetic even when there was no specific dramatic subject. In his rendition of the Scherzo of Beethoven’s sixth symphony, a piece he played often in public, he slowed down to about half the previous tempo when he arrived at the D major melody at measure 9.²⁵

But ‘drama’ and ‘character’ can have many meanings over and above the rather reified concepts which are assigned to them within New Musicological discourse. Liszt had a profoundly ambivalent view of the world of the virtuoso artist after experiencing it first-hand (which perhaps tempered his idolisation of Paganini, at least as a model for himself?), surely a factor in his decision to withdraw from this and settle in Weimar. What would he have made of some of the portrayals of him above, in light of comments such as the following from his later years?

“How do you want me to play it?”

“How? But . . . the way it ought to be played.”

“Here it is, to start with, as the author must have understood it, played it himself, or intended it to be played.”

And Liszt played. And it was admirable, the perfection itself of the classical style exactly in conformity with the original.

“Here it is a second time, as I feel it, with a slightly more picturesque movement, a more modern style and the effects demanded by an improved instrument.” And it was, with these nuances, different . . . but no less admirable.

“Finally, a third time, here it is the way I would play it for the public – to astonish, as a charlatan.” And, lighting a cigar which passed at moments from between his lips to his fingers, executing with his

²³ Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 61.

²⁴ Suzanne G. Cusick, ‘On a Lesbian Relationship with Music’, in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, Gary C. Thomas (eds), *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) p. 79.

²⁵ Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 29. Gooley is here citing a recollection, probably from 1836, by Charles Hallé, printed in *The Autobiography of Charles Hallé*, ed. Michael Kennedy (London: Elek, 1972), p. 58.

ten fingers the part written for the organ pedals, and indulging in other *tours de force* and prestidigitation, he was prodigious, incredible, fabulous, and received gratefully with enthusiasm.²⁶

But Liszt's scepticism or even disdain as regards pandering to fashion and public taste was not limited to his later years, as evidenced by the following comments in a letter to Georges Sand in 1837 (at the height of his virtuoso career):

Social art is no more and has yet to return. What, then, do we usually see these days? Sculptors? No, just statue makers. Painters? No, just picture makers. Composers? No, just music makers. *Artisans* everywhere, and not an *artist* to be seen. And this state of affairs also imposes cruel suffering on one who was born with the pride and fierce independence of a true son of art. All about him he sees a mob of those who manufacture art paying heed to the public's caprice, striving assiduously to gratify the fantasies of rich simpletons, and obeying the slightest whim of fashion. So eager are they to bow their heads and abase themselves that it seems difficult to believe that they could stoop so low! He must accept these people as brothers and watch the crowd, confusing him with them, offer him the same coarse appreciation, the same childish, dazed admiration. And don't let anyone tell you that this is the suffering of injured vanity and self-esteem. No, no, you know it well, you who are so highly placed that no rival can touch you. The bitter tears that fall at times from our eyelids are those of one who, adoring the True God, sees His temple invaded by idols and the gullible populace kneeling before the gods of mud and stone for which they have abandoned the Madonna's altar and the worship of the Living God.²⁷

Liszt was far too complex and thoughtful an individual, and far too individualist and idealist an artist, to be hijacked for the purposes of fashionable arguments about how music should strive above all to be entertaining, to 'connect with audiences' or, worse, to 'manipulate' them (as in the McClary quote above). One of the many reasons Liszt's music continues to fascinate me is because I feel so acutely the conflicting pulls of the desire and ability to impress, beguile, hypnotise on one hand, and an inner need to strive for a more idealistic, even sometimes austere, musical conception on the other. Liszt's ability to effect some sort of synthesis of these two aesthetic positions (learning from Paganini how virtuosity can be not just simply a means to express and package an abstract musical conception, but can actually become an otherworldly (and idealistic) conception in its own right) is unequalled in the nineteenth century except perhaps by Wagner. And this is something I believe we should bear in mind when considering approaches to performance of his music.

Articulation as dramatic force in the Sonata in B Minor

The only detailed source that is known to exist on Liszt's teaching of the *Sonata in B Minor* is contained in the *Liszt-Pädagogium*. This in itself amounts to no more than a page and a half of information including musical examples. Most of the salient points are detailed in Kenneth Hamilton's excellent book on the work; I wish to concentrate on a single, but vitally important, point that Liszt made in his comments on August Stradal's performance, specifically to do with the first bar (Fig. 1). Liszt said that the staccato notes sound should like 'damped timpani strokes' (*dumpfer Paukenschlag*), achieved by playing the keys right towards the back, so as to create a smaller lever and thus give a dark colour to the tone²⁸. The *Allegro energico* is to be played proudly

²⁶ Jules Laurnes, quoted in Charles Rosen, 'Liszt', in *The Romantic Generation* (London: Fontana, 1999), p. 511.

²⁷ Liszt, *An Artist's Journey: Lettres D'Un Bachelier Es Musique, 1835-41*, edited and translated Charles Suttoni (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 30. Similar sentiments with regard to the artist and entertainment recur throughout this volume.

²⁸ Ramann, *Pädagogium* (1986 edition), Vol. 5, p. 3.

and very rhythmically, but not too fast, at minim = 72²⁹. Liszt also draws a comparison with Beethoven's *Coriolanus* Overture, in which terse staccato chords in the orchestra alternate with sustained unisons.



Fig. 1. Liszt Sonata in B minor, opening.

What I would like to suggest is that the contrasts between the 'damped timpani strokes' and the succeeding expansive melodic lines provide for one of the most fundamental determinants for the drama of the whole piece. And how one plays this very opening affects perceptions in this respect in a profound manner

Listening to a diverse selection of recordings, the most common approach here taken is that indicated by Arthur Friedheim in his edition of the score³⁰, in which he

²⁹ Written as crotchet = 72 in the *Pädagogium*, though as Hamilton points out (*Liszt: Sonata*, pp. 76-77), this is clearly a misprint.

³⁰ See Gordon Rumson, 'Arthur Friedheim's Edition of the Liszt B Minor Sonata', *Liszt Society Journal* Vol. 26 (2001), pp. 17-59, for details of Friedheim's markings. However, one should also note

indicates to use a short pedal on each of the staccato G's, and even suggests playing the lower two as grace notes to the highest note. Gordon Rumson suggests that 'This recognizes the acoustic phenomenon that pizzicato strings appear to be slightly before the beat'³¹. It does if one believes that pizzicato strings are the sound to be aimed for; I would agree more with Hamilton who argues that the 'damped timpani strokes' are a quite different sound to pizzicato strings³². Anyhow, recordings³³ by Leon Fleischer (1959), Claudio Arrau (1970), Martha Argerich (1971), Alfred Brendel (1981), Maurizio Pollini (1989), all adhere to this practice, as to a slightly lesser extent does György Cziffra (1968). Arturo Pizarro (1999) plays the opening G's more sustained than the others, sustaining them for almost a whole crotchet beat, but less so than Ernst Levy (1956), who takes a considerably slower tempo than the others and sustains the octaves almost right the way through the space separating them from each other, with only a tiny hiatus in between. To find something that sounds like 'damped timpani strokes' we have to listen to either Vladimir Horowitz (1932), Géza Anda (1954) or Leslie Howard (1990). In each of these we hear them played short, ghostly and terse, as is the outcome of following Liszt's wishes, assuming the *Pädagogium* to be accurate. Howard takes the opening considerably quicker than most of the others (Levy goes to the other extreme), creating a sense of urgency rather than brooding³⁴.

But I believe the importance of this approach to extend well beyond the opening bars. The G octave on the third beat of bar 8, also marked with a wedge (as opposed to the simple staccato dots in bar 10, the beginning of bar 11 and bars 12-13) is a continuation of this strand and should in my opinion be played equally short. Then the wedged notes in the first appearance of the third theme, in bar 14, are similar, as are the clipped ends of slurs in bars 18ff. If one conceives of Liszt's articulation as primarily serving to underline and enhance that which is implicit in the pitches and rhythms, then it makes sense to play the opening G's more sustained, so that they lead towards the sustained G of bars 2-3. But this 'organic' approach to articulation, commonly applied, reflects a certain set of priorities I do not believe to be particularly appropriate for Liszt, or for that matter to Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann, let alone later composers. With Beethoven in particular, articulation became used to colour musical material in a variety of ways, leading to distinct articulations of the same phrases upon different appearances³⁵. With Liszt, articulation, touch and colour achieve an expressive role in their own right that has a degree of autonomy from the other parameters involved, sometimes used in this manner to express the grotesque. And this is what I believe to be the case here and throughout the work. If one were to take a 'Schenkerian' view of it³⁶, the articulation

that Bernard Stavenhagen recalled Friedheim playing the opening four pages of the sonata 'totally without pedal – what a sound!' (Elgin Strub-Ronayne, "Bernhard Stavenhagen; Pianist, conductor, composer and Liszt's last pupil." *EPTA Piano Journal*, No 40, Vol. 14, p. 13, cited in Rumson p. 22).

³¹ Rumson, 'Friedheim', p. 52.

³² Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata*, p. 34.

³³ The catalogue details are as follows: Anda - Testament SBT – 1067; Argerich – Philips 456 703-2; Arrau – Philips 456 709-2; Brendel - Philips 410 040-2; Cziffra = EMI 7243 5 74512 2 2; Fleischer – Philips 456 775-2; Horowitz – Philips 456 884-2; Howard - Hyperion CDA 66429; Levy - Marston 52007-2; Pollini - DG 427 322-2.

³⁴ For a comparison of a much wider range of recordings of the work, see Philip Kennicott, 'Liszt's B minor Sonata on record', in *International Piano Quarterly*, Winter 199, pp. 40-58.

³⁵ See Charles Rosen, 'Phrasing', in *Beethoven's Piano Sonatas: A Short Companion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 13-42, for more on this subject.

³⁶ As outlined in Heinrich Schenker, *The Art of Performance*, edited Heribert Esser, translated Irene Schreier Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

would be determined purely by the harmonic function of the pitches in terms of the deep structure. But that tells us about only one element of Liszt's music and obliterates others.

It is through the evocation of the grotesque, that which impresses because of its aura, its distance, as distinct from the simple expression and instillation of emotion, that Liszt is revealed at his most 'modern'. And in some senses this could be viewed as something motivated by his disdain for the role of the performer as mere entertainer, 'striving assiduously to gratify the fantasies of rich simpletons', as mentioned earlier. Of course the grotesque and the exotic can be and have been appropriated in such a manner as well, as idle affective commodities, and look quite different from a twenty-first century perspective than they probably did to Liszt. But I believe attempts to recapture some of Liszt's modernity in ways that remain palpable today is a worthwhile venture, a positive alternative to use of the music to seduce, charm and entertain. The austerity of the 'damped timpani strokes', if played in such a fashion, is one way in which such an approach can be made manifest, if the implications are followed through in the course of the work, as I shall briefly describe here.

Throughout the whole of the *Sonata*, sustained legato melodic lines are countered by their opposite, sinister staccato utterances, creating an extended conflict between the two types of material. A passage like Fig. 2 shows this process clearly.



Fig. 2 Liszt, *Sonata in B minor*, bars 141-146.

In the tempestuous writing towards the end of the first movement, Liszt makes a clear distinction between wedged-staccato crotchets and quavers, usually obliterated by the use of much pedal on the latter (Fig. 3). Such a contrast continues through the succeeding bars, with harsh, high, whip-like wedged quavers, brought somewhat back down to ground with more solid wedged crotchets upon the return to G minor.



Fig. 3. Liszt, *Sonata in B minor*, bars 262-269.

This culminates in a ferocious confrontation between the earlier *Grandioso* theme, here configured extremely differently in a staccato rendition (*pesante* but still staccato, using the pedal only selectively can avoid this sounding grandiose, which would have been easier to achieve on the non-cross-stringed pianos of Liszt's time), and an impassioned recitative line that follows, but is answered once more by the ominous low chords (Fig. 4).

297

ff pesante

40

Recitativo
ritenuto

f appassionato

poco rall.

301

304

8

Fig. 4. Liszt, *Sonata in B minor*, bars 297-305.

The ‘slow movement’ provides some repose from all this, using sustained sonorities continuously, rightly through to the final return of the ‘damped timpani strokes’ (bar 453). But the high degree of edgy staccato writing in the fugue counteracts this, once again acting as a textural/articulative counterpart, only here the contrast is more on the macroscopic level. And so it continues, up to the wrenched *sf* that cuts short the final appearance of the ‘Grandioso’ theme (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Liszt, *Sonata in B minor*, bars 704-710.

The final note in the piece is not indicated with a wedge; nor are the preceding B major chords in bars 748-749, suggesting some sort of reconciliation between the two broad types of material defined by articulation. But the last note is a single quaver; even if pedalled, it should still presumably be quite short. Liszt does not seem to want to suggest final closure at the end of this piece, rather to leave matters open, looking ‘beyond’ (Fig. 6).

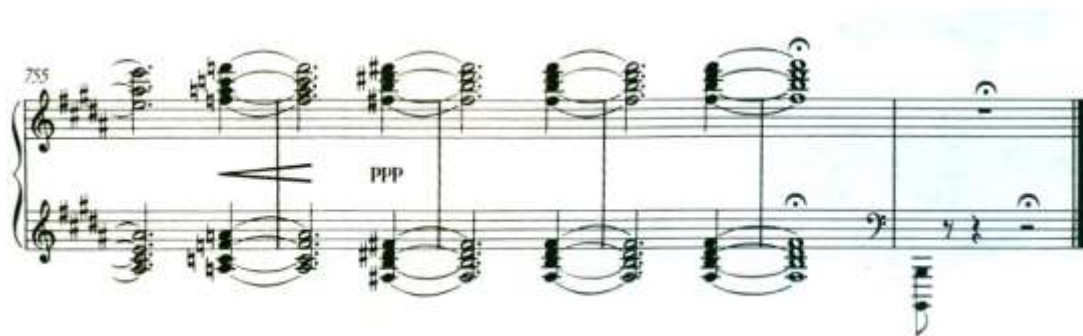


Fig. 6. Liszt, *Sonata in B minor*, conclusion.

This is not the only way in which articulation and colour come to play a function over and above simply illuminating other parameters. In the D major appearance of the second theme in bar 239ff (Fig. 7), Liszt marks bar 240 (and presumably this applies to bars 242, 248 and 250 as well) as *non legato*, which surely suggests some raising of the pedal early in the bar, thus cutting short the culminating F# of the melody (which Liszt could always have marked as a tenuto crotchet, as in the preceding bar, had he wanted that effect – though that is what is commonly played).



Fig. 7. Liszt, *Sonata in B minor*, bars 238-243.

This is the sort of effect that a colouristically-minded player like Horowitz performed exceptionally (for example in his recording of *Vallée d'Obermann*), by which what would otherwise be simply decorative figuration comes to the foreground, as if threatening to engulf the basic line, thus causing another level of dramatic tension. In this and other moments of the Sonata, what might otherwise become a somewhat banal continual re-statement of the basic thematic material is presented in such a way that the configuration is almost more important than the material to which it is being applied. And an interpretative approach that stresses continuity of line and long-range harmony above all else can fail to capture this quality of *excess* which is to me such a fascinating aspect of Liszt's music.

Some corresponding issues arise in other of Liszt's most 'demonic' works. One of the strangest of those is the *Mephisto Waltz No. 3*, which combines aspects of Liszt's earlier virtuoso idiom together with the austerity and experimentalism of his later harmonic language. To one student who played the work to him, Liszt commented that:

"I will tell you the review you will get if you play that in concert. It will say very talented young woman, a lot of technique! Only too bad that she occupies herself with such terrible pieces. The composer truly seems never to have studied the rudiments of harmony and strict form. Certainly this opening already shows that!"³⁷

Not just the opening, but much of the piece contravenes what would be expected of good harmonic practice (perhaps by the much-maligned (by Liszt) 'Leipzigers'?). Whole themes are simply repeated verbatim but shifted a semitone or a whole tone done the scale with no other variation, so that the work sometimes seems to be almost breaking apart from its own inertia. The introduction of hammered tremolos between the hands offers the only relief within such sections; however, the quieter and more lyrical passages then have an extraordinarily powerful impact. But if Liszt's Mephistopheles is to be a truly terrifying figure rather than simply a loveable rogue³⁸,

³⁷ Zimdars, *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 50.

³⁸ Though it is worth noting that Liszt marks the central F# section *pomposo*, perhaps a wry comment on something akin to the 'banality of evil'?

I feel the temptation to ‘humanise’ this piece, softening its edges, can counteract such a possibility. Fig. 8 shows the first appearance of the staccato figures which come to accompany the *espressivo* theme.



Fig. 8. Liszt, *Mephisto Waltz* No. 3.

In performances and recordings, almost invariably I hear pianists pedal the quavers with grace notes, especially those at the beginnings of bars (as well as top-voicing the passage). The variety of duration thus produced then makes it more akin to a melodic line (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Liszt, *Mephisto Waltz* No. 3, as often played.

One wants to do something other than simply play all of these notes identically, of course, but I feel that the above option does achieve precisely that effect of ‘humanising’ what I believe to be a much more sinister utterance. That effect is more ‘warm’ and endearing for a listener, but is it necessarily the optimum, or at least only, way to play it? To give some shape, one can instead put a small accent on the quavers with grace notes (small enough so that a distinction can be made with the notated

accents a few bars later)³⁹. Then it sounds non-arbitrary but still somehow other-worldly.

In this piece, the Sonata, and numerous others, a lot of performance practice and interpretative decisions come down to one's perception of what type of composer Liszt was, or what types of pieces those in question are. Is Liszt the charming, seductive virtuoso of legend, titillating the fancies of his audiences, or a different type of composer fiercely defending his right to explore other realms of experience, some of which might anticipate the music of Prokofiev and Stravinsky? The answer is almost certainly – a combination of both, though the degree of either is open to much debate. But for the performer this question is also to be combined with that of 'what is it about Liszt's music that remains important and relevant today, bearing in mind all else that has occurred in the interim period, musically and otherwise?' Walter Benjamin wrote of how 'In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition from a conformism that is about to overpower it'⁴⁰. This is a sentiment that seems so wholly relevant in examining performance practice and interpretation as alternatives to commercially-derived forms of conformism.

Issues of source, genre and mediation in the transcriptions, and their implications for performance

Liszt's arrangements and transcriptions of others' music (in which context I include the settings of Hungarian and other melodies) constitute a substantial part of his output, as all reading this journal know well. But the issues involved in terms of discerning the preferred mode of performance practice and interpretation are by no means straightforward. If we can gain some notion of a 'Liszt style' of playing, then in the context of his transcriptions we must ask to what extent the implied style for performing such works is to be found in the manner of Liszt's original works, or in the sources from which he drew (or, of course, some combination of the two)? And, perhaps most fundamentally, it is a question not simply of what the appropriate style is for performing Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Berlioz, Bellini, Meyerbeer or Wagner, but in which style did Liszt hear and appreciate the music of these composers, which may have been distinct from that intended by the original composers (so far as that itself can be known)? And to what extent is our interpretation to be influenced by the specific ways in which Liszt modified his sources or at the very least gave them a highly personal rendition – in short the role of *mediation*?

There is a certain amount of information available from Liszt's late teaching concerning his transcriptions. Of the *Norma* fantasy, he described certain 'Thalberg passages' in there as being 'often 'indecent''⁴¹, whilst in the Meyerbeer-Liszt *Illustrations de l'Africaine*, he emphasised that the themes should 'receive their due in an orderly fashion'⁴². The Bach-Liszt *Six Preludes and Fugues* should not be played

³⁹ Peter Cornelius wrote that Liszt 'was very fond of strong accents in order to mark off periods and phrases', which he would demonstrate at the piano. See Adrian Williams, *Portrait of Liszt: By Himself and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 287-288.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 257.

⁴¹ Zimdars, *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 38

⁴² Ibid. p. 33.

‘too dryly or scholarly’⁴³, though the Fugue in A minor, according to Göllicherich, has no *f* or *p* ‘because the great Bach wrote none, and one may not add anything to him; that would be a sin’⁴⁴. Lachmund reports this somewhat differently, though:

It struck me that there were no expression marks in his arrangement of the edition. When I expressed my regret at this, he said: “You see, I preferred to omit suggestions as to expression, rather than give the critics an opportunity to devour me and cry out at modernizing Bach; and pianists can put these in to suit their own tastes.” Then, rising from his seat, he added significantly, as if he wished to go on record: “That is the way I should play Bach – and I do not think Bach would chastise me for it if he were here. Nor would Beethoven, I imagine.”⁴⁵

Liszt, checking a metronome, played the Pilgrim’s Chorus from Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* overture ‘at a fairly moving pace’⁴⁶. Yet in his book on Wagner, Liszt describes the Pilgrims’ and Sirens’ choruses as ‘placed like two movements, which find their equation at the end’ and says that ‘the religious motive appears only restfully, deeply, with slow pulse beats’⁴⁷. Maybe here it would seem that Liszt had one notion of the tempo when the work was to be played by the orchestra, another in his own transcription to take account not least of the lesser sustaining power of the piano)⁴⁸?

In the transcription of the Sarabande and Chaconne from Handel’s *Almira*, Liszt indicated that, in the theme from bar 5, one should ‘lengthen the first half note somewhat (as if with a dot)’ and ‘make the second one quite short’⁴⁹, an interesting form of *notes inégales* (today’s historically aware performers would be likely to play the original music at a reasonably quick pulse and overdot the last crotchet in the bar).

In the well-known transcription of the quartet from *Rigoletto*, Liszt famously alters Verdi’s Eb-Ab-Eb-Ab at the end of the Duke’s first passage to Eb-Bbb-Eb-Bbb. There is every reason to broaden the pulse at this point to allow that tritone interval to speak fully, whereas in Verdi’s opera this is more of a throw-away phrase. In that sense the mediation involved might imply distinct approaches to source and transcription. But it should also be noted that, according to Lachmund, the gist of Liszt’s comments to a young lady playing this piece for him were that ‘Such Italian melodies must not be played like a Chopin nocturne; play them in a broader, bloated manner; more as you would imagine them sung by the boastful Italian tenor’⁵⁰.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 42.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 161.

⁴⁵ Walker, *Living with Liszt*, p. 69. Glinka was critical of Liszt’s Bach playing when he heard it during a concert tour of Russia, saying that ‘the interpretation of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* lacked the necessary dignity’. See Bertrand Ott, *Lisztian Keyboard Energy/Liszt et la Pédagogie du Piano: An Essay on the Pianism of Franz Liszt*, translated Donald H. Windham, with a preface by Norbert Dufourcq (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. 17.

⁴⁶ Zimdars – *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 54.

⁴⁷ *Gesammelte Schriften von Franz Liszt. II. Richard Wagner*, edited L. Ramann. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1910), p. 14 (my translation)

⁴⁸ Hans von Bülow wrote, in a letter to his mother in 1849, that in a performance of this piece Liszt ‘has managed to give the effects in such a wonderful manner on the piano, as no other pianist’. See Williams, *Portrait of Liszt*, p. 254. See also Sauer’s comments on Liszt’s association of Wagner’s music with certain large new pianos in *Meine Welt*, pp. 174-176.

⁴⁹ Zimdars, *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 159.

⁵⁰ Walker, *Living with Liszt*, p. 35.

In a letter to Maurice Schlesinger, editor of the *Gazette Musicale*, Liszt offered some (rather chauvinistic!) views on Italian musical life and in particular Italian singers, worth quoting in full, bearing in mind the number of transcriptions of Italian opera he made:

Beautiful voices are relatively common in Italy compared to other countries. People are born in this privileged land with a natural aptitude for the arts. They have the fiery look, the lively gesture, and the enthusiastic nature that make an artist. Yet the number of distinguished singers, male and female, is very small. The carelessness of the composers inspires carelessness in their interpreters. Roles that have not been thought out seriously by the former are surely not studied seriously by the latter. Everyone here has adopted a standard procedure, a conventional manner for rendering all feelings and situations. The public, which is quite familiar with the stereotypes, has also developed the habit of invariably applauding the effects. Typically, they are: violent and sudden contrasts of *pianissimo* and *fortissimo*, whether motivated or not; quasi-convulsive accents in the singing; and terrible cries at the end of a piece when the character's situation has become pathetic and the action turns to combat, vengeance, or despair. The Grand Cry is indispensable to anyone who aspires to become a *cantante di cartello*. An actress would not know how to fall to the floor or into an armchair without her Grand Cry. The Grand Cry is a useful replacement for the chromatic scale, the leap of a tenth, and the improvised cadenza, all of which have been declared overly fussy and in poor taste today. Scales, difficulties, and bravura are no longer in fashion. Many people credit Bellini's music with bringing about the change, taking it to be progress, a welcome revolution in the arts. I must confess that it is difficult for me to share that view. The "progress" from Rossini to Donizetti has not been clearly demonstrated to me; and as for the revolution that substituted mawkish sentimentality for agility and cheap effects for lavish profusion, I doubt that it will ever be very gratifying – except, of course, to those lazy Ladies and Gentlemen, the singers.⁵¹

Later, when writing to Berlioz in 1839, urging him to have his symphonies played in 'German lands' (*l'Allemagne*, a term which at the time included all of the Austro-Hungarian empire, including the non-German-speaking areas), Liszt said that 'it is only in Germany that a profound sense of understanding awaits them and can offer them a home' as well as that 'the current Italian style has alienated the social world from serious music, as it has done in France' (Liszt is referring here to the social worlds in Germany and France). But Liszt had by this stage already composed transcriptions and fantasies on Bellini's *I Puritani* and *La Sonnambula* (*Norma* was to follow two years later), as well as on Donizetti's *Lucia de Lammermoor* (and would compose his deranged two-part *Réminiscences de Lucrezia Borgia* the following year). As we recall, he later described the *Sonnambula* fantasy as 'nonsense', but then how is one to approach playing the work?

After the introduction, Liszt sets Elvino's 'Tutto è sciolto' from Act 2 of Bellini's opera (Fig. 10).

⁵¹ Liszt, *An Artist's Journey*, pp. 172-173.



Fig. 10. Bellini, 'Tutto è sciolto', from *La Sonnambula*, Act 2.

Liszt's arrangement, marked *Andante con molto sentimento*, and *con passione* when he gets to Elviro's actual entry, is extremely heavy on the 'mawkish sentimentality' that Liszt bemoaned in Italian opera of the time, not losing a chance to embellish it where he can⁵² (but bringing in the 'scale, difficulties and bravura' which he said were 'no longer in fashion' – this is of course a tenor rather than soprano aria, but Liszt sets it in a soprano register) (Fig. 11).

⁵² Some of Liszt's embellishments use similar conventions to those adopted in Bellini and others by such singers as Jenny Lind or Fernando de Lucia. For details of these, see David Lawton, 'Ornamenting Verdi's Arias: The Continuity of a Tradition' in Roger Latham and Alison Parker – *Verdi in Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 49-77.



Fig. 11. Liszt, *Grand Concert Fantasy from Sonnambula* (Bellini).

But I wonder if a passage like this (or corresponding writing in the *Réminiscences de Lucrezia Borgia*, overloaded to the point of being almost comical) was really meant in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion? And if so, how sincerely are the sentiment and passion to be put across in performance? Can the very overstatement of them give an ironic, parodistic quality to the music, or might one consider playing with a degree of knowing detachment?

Performing Liszt performing Beethoven

In a letter to Adolphe Pictet in 1835, Liszt wrote:

The piano is a means of disseminating works that would otherwise remain unknown or unfamiliar to the general public because of the difficulty involved in assembling an orchestra. Thus it bears the same relation to an orchestral work that an engraving bears to a painting; it multiplies the original and makes it available to everyone, and even if it does not reproduce the colors, it at least reproduces the light and shadow.⁵³

⁵³ Liszt, *An Artist's Journey*, p. 45.

He went on later in the same letter to describe how he approached transcribing Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* for piano:

I applied myself as scrupulously as if I were translating a sacred text to transferring, not only the symphony's musical framework, but also its detailed effects and the multiplicity of its instrumental and rhythmic combinations to the piano. The difficulty did not faze me, as my feeling for art and my love of it gave me double courage. I may not have succeeded completely, but that first attempt has at least demonstrated that the way is open and that it will no longer be acceptable to *arrange* the masters' works as contemptibly as has been done to this point. I called my work a *partition de piano* [piano score] in order to make clear my intention of following the orchestra step by step and of giving it no special treatment beyond the mass and variety of its sound. The procedure I followed for Berlioz's symphony I am currently applying to those by Beethoven.⁵⁴

By the time of the preface to the 1865 edition of his transcriptions of Beethoven Symphonies, Liszt wrote:

The poorest lithograph, the most faulty translation always gives an idea, indefinite though it be, of the genius of Michel Angelo, of Shakespeare, in the most incomplete piano-arrangement we recognise here and there the perhaps half effaced traces of the master's inspiration. By the development in technique and mechanism which the piano has gained of late, it is possible now to attain more and better results than have been attained so far. With the immense development of its harmonic power the piano seeks to appropriate more and more all orchestral compositions. In the compass of its seven octaves it can, with but a few exceptions, reproduce all traits, all combinations, all figurations of the most learned, of the deepest tone-creations, and leaves to the orchestra no other advantages, than those of the variety of tone-colors and massive effects – immense advantages, to be sure.⁵⁵

One can undoubtedly infer from this that developments in the instrument that had occurred up to the point where Liszt wrote the preface (though whether a clear extrapolation from this can be used to deduce that he would have thought modern instruments better still in all respects is debatable at the least⁵⁶). But there are other questions to ask when studying Liszt's conception for this works: in which manner were Beethoven Symphonies performed by orchestras during the period when Liszt wrote these works? What were his personal preferences? Which sorts of orchestral sonorities (in terms of particular instruments, relative proportions of different orchestral sections, use of vibrato, etc.) was he looking to represent on the piano? And to what extent did Liszt continue to conceive the works in uniquely *pianistic* ways, thus allowing distinct expressive and other possibilities from those available in the orchestral versions? In terms of the latter question, such possibilities seem the only real justification for continuing to play the works, when orchestral performances and recordings of Beethoven symphonies are hardly in short supply.

Liszt was very keen for his transcriptions to become well-known, writing in a letter in 1838 that 'I would gladly consent to give them *for nothing*, but only on condition that they be well *advertised*, well *published*', as well as suggesting that the preface might be published separately⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 46.

⁵⁵ Liszt, Preface (1865) to Beethoven Symphonies Vol.1, Nos. 1-5, translated C.E.R. Mueller, reprinted in Kalmus edition, K 09227.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Hamilton suggests that whilst Liszt may have admired the increased sonority in the bass register of modern cross-strung pianos, 'he is hardly likely to have applauded the modern overbearing treble, for pupils reported that he often played high passage work *una corda* even on his own instruments.' See Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata*, p. 69.

⁵⁷ See Adrian Williams (ed), *Franz Liszt: Selected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 81.

In recent decades, there have been extremely significant developments in the performance of Beethoven Symphonies, involving the use of period instruments, smaller string sections than hitherto, more selective use of string vibrato, a variety of approaches to Beethoven's metronome markings and issues of tempo flexibility, articulation and much else. These have resulted in pioneering cycles of the symphonies by such conductors as Christopher Hogwood, Roger Norrington, John Eliot Gardiner, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, and others. Of course there are many different opinions as to (a) whether such developments constitute a worthwhile addition to the field of Beethoven performance, or conversely a hopelessly pedantic form of archaism, substituting scholarship for some notion of innate 'musicality'; (b) whether the performances do represent a faithful and honest attempt to recreate the works as envisaged by the composer, or alternatively use a very selective approach to the historical data available, adhering only to that which accords with modern (or modernist) sensibilities or (c) whether, on account of the fragmentary and unreliable nature of historical data, we can ever really know with any degree of certainty how the works were played or intended to play, and thus whether the choice of approach on the part of historically-informed performers is essentially as arbitrary as any other?

These are obviously huge questions that it is beyond the scope of this article to engage with adequately. For the purposes of now, I can only offer my own personal responses to them which are (a) that these are a notable and stimulating development, though by no means without their own problems or constitutive of the 'last word' in such matters; (b) that some of the approaches to historical data are selective, and the positivistic methodology commonly employed has its own limitations, though there is still a lot to be learned and utilised in this manner and (c) that whilst knowledge of such matters can be partial and contingent, there is sufficient data available for informed decisions to be arrived at through historical research.

That Liszt placed great reverence in being true to Beethoven's markings in the original works is well-known from the accounts by Mason of how insistent he was that a performer should stick to Beethoven's metronome markings in the *Hammerklavier* Sonata⁵⁸, and this is corroborated by various other sources, including the conductor and composer Siegfried Ochs, who recalls how:

He stressed that he had asked countless times for expression marks in Beethoven to be followed not merely to a certain extent but with considerable vigour; that Beethoven made an enormous difference between *piano* and *pianissimo*, and that the distance from *piano* to *forte* was to be regarded as greater in Beethoven than that between North and South poles. . . I realized that so far as he playing of classical works was concerned, a new world was being revealed to me, similar to the one I had experienced during Bülow's rendering of the symphonies.⁵⁹

But Beethoven performance in the period 1800-1824, during which the nine symphonies were written, was almost certainly quite different to that which existed between when Liszt first transcribed Symphonies 5, 6 and 7 in 1837 and when he completed the whole set (including, reluctantly, a one-piano version of the Ninth) in 1864. Not to mention in the succeeding two decades of Liszt's life, during which period various information exists concerning his thoughts on the works' performance.

⁵⁸ See Mason, *Memories of a Musical Life*, pp. 103-104.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Williams, *Portrait of Liszt*, p. 621. A detailed description of Liszt playing the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, as recalled by the composer Wendelin Weissheimer in 1858, can be found on pp. 342-343.

Amongst the developments that began during this period was that which seems quite shocking to some modern sensibilities, specifically the rescoring of the symphonies. David Pickett examines the thoughts of Wagner and others in an essay on such practice⁶⁰. He summarises Wagner's essay *Zum Vortrag der neunten Symphonie Beethovens* as follows: in order to achieve what Wagner considered 'a correct understanding of the *melos*' one would do the following:

- (a) modify the brass parts where Beethoven had had to compromise because of the limitations of the natural instruments.
- (b) extend upwards flute and violin parts where Beethoven had shifted down the octave in such a way as to break the contour.
- (c) remodel two passages of woodwind writing in the Ninth Symphony into relief melody, which was obscured by Beethoven's instrumentation.

As Pickett points out, 'Wagner credits Liszt with the discovery of the true melodic content in his two-handed piano transcription of the work of 1864 and uses this, and not his own too-literal transcription, as the basis for the reconstruction of the passage'⁶¹. Quite apart from this fact, the implications of Wagner's suggestions for performances of Liszt's transcriptions of Beethoven's symphonies was made clear in a masterclass where Moriz Rosenthal played the Scherzo from the Ninth, as recounted by August Göllerich:

I consider Wagner's suggestions for the support of the orchestration quite superb. In Beethoven's orchestration, certain passages are never able to come out under any circumstance. Also, it is impossible for certain things to come out in a delightful scherzo by Schubert. Schubert certainly would have altered it if he had heard it once; but he never heard it and Beethoven didn't pay any attention to it. At one time I wanted to take the liberty of assisting [with the orchestration], but since I was then battling so much chicanery and disgusting things I refrained. In those days when I was seeing to these arrangements, I did not yet take the liberty of alterations in the orchestration (like those of Wagner's in the horns in the Scherzo). Wagner's suggestions are quite excellent; then naturally people like Gounod have to make the sign of the cross and cry: 'How can anyone want to improve on Beethoven?'⁶²

The specific passages in question in the Scherzo of the Ninth were bar 93ff (Fig. 12) and the corresponding place in bar 330ff, where Wagner claimed the woodwind melody was obscured by the sound of the strings.⁶³

⁶⁰ David Pickett, 'Rescoring in Beethoven's symphonies' in Robin Stowell (ed), *Performing Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 205-227

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 208. The original sources upon which Pickett draws are Wagner 'On Performing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony', in *Three Wagner Essays*, (Leipzig: Eulenburg, 1979), pp. 95-127, and (for orchestration), Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke*, XX/1 (Mainz: Schott, 1989), p. xxxv.

⁶² Cited in Zimdars (ed. and trans.), *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 86.

⁶³ Nicholas Cook points out that 'Wagner's historical perspective is shaky here; performances in the 1820s and 30s did not use as many strings as Wagner had in 1872, but they often employed doubled winds leading critics to complain that the wind band overwhelmed the strings'. See Cook, *Beethoven: Symphony No. 9* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 52. Pickett also points out that the strings Wagner envisaged for an 1872 performance were 18-16-12-10-? with 'all the other parts doubled with the exception of the percussion instruments and the bassoons, of which latter there were to be no less than eight' (Pickett, 'Rescoring', p. 207).



Fig. 12. Beethoven, Symphony No. 9, Scherzo, bar 93ff

Liszt's transcription of this passage is shown in Fig. 13.



Fig. 13. Beethoven-Liszt, Symphony No. 9, Scherzo

Wagner initially tried to solve this problem by decreasing the dynamics in the strings, but later said that were he to conduct the work again, he would add the horns to the melodic line and bring in trumpets if necessary⁶⁴. Whilst Wagner never had a chance to do put this into practice, subsequent conductors did so, most of whom were born or active after Liszt's death. One who was not was Hans von Bülow, valued highly by

⁶⁴ See Cook, *op cit*, p. 52.

Liszt as Pickett himself recognises⁶⁵, and who of course was the dedicatee of the full set of Beethoven Symphony transcriptions. Another was Liszt's student Felix Weingartner, who advocated the practice in a modified manner (noting that Wagner's suggestions if applied literally would produce an unwanted upper voice in the horns⁶⁶).

So what to conclude about performing this and similar passages in Liszt's version? It would seem paramount that the upper melody should be made clear, even bearing in mind the fact that the lower part is not doubled in higher octaves as in the orchestra. However, on modern instruments the mass of sound built up in the bass, especially if Liszt's pedalling markings are employed, can be overwhelming, so perhaps some downplaying of the second beat quaver and third beat are necessary, or the releasing of the pedal before the end of the bar. We do also know from Liszt's preface to the printed edition of his Symphonic Poems that he wished to 'see an end to mechanical, fragmented up and down playing, tied to the bar-line, which is still the rule in many places and can only acknowledge as appropriate the phrase-based style of performance, with the prominence of special accents and the rounding off of melodic and rhythmic shading'⁶⁷. What would this imply for the phrasing of the top part here? Liszt does not extend the slur at figure C onto the first beat of the following bar; can we assume that despite his wishes as regards his own works, he still wished for an accent at the beginning of the next bar, as is now common practice amongst historically-aware conductors? Or are the notational conventions he maintains to be interpreted differently in light of what we know of his other wishes?

This is not an easy question to answer; personally I feel that the pedalling indications, together with the ostinato-like nature of the accompaniment, do imply a certain accentuation of the beginnings of bars, though with variegation in degree to give some impression of a phrase over groups of four or more bars (bearing in mind that Liszt, according to Göllicher, referred to Lachner's performance of the later *Ritmo di tre battute* passage of this Scherzo as being 'as if one continually had to chop wood straight ahead'⁶⁸). In his extremely bombastic (and pianistically incredible) recording of the work⁶⁹, Cyprien Katsaris makes few differences of accentuation through this passage, echoing common pre-HIP practice, (the most obvious example being that to

⁶⁵ Pickett – 'Rescoring', p. 209. Pickett also points out that Bülow performed the Ninth in Meiningen with no doubled wind, but with 12-10-8-6-6 strings (p. 210) and argues that 'Many of the 'traditional' reinstrumentations may be traced back to Bülow' (ibid). In his reminiscences, Felix Weingartner points out that Liszt 'participated in the vociferous applause which broke out almost before the last chord of that masterly performance [of the Fifth Symphony] by Bülow and his orchestra had been struck.', (Felix Weingartner, 'A Musician's Reminiscences', translated Marguerite Wolff, in *Liszt Society Journal* 27 (2002), p. 67).

⁶⁶ See Felix Weingartner, 'On the Performance of Beethoven's Symphonies', translated Jessie Crosland, in *On the Performance of Beethoven's Symphonies and other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969), pp. 203-208.

⁶⁷ Preface to *Liszt's Symphonische Dichtungen für grosses Orchester*, 3 Vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, c. 1856), cited in Clive Brown, *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 27.

⁶⁸ See Zimdar – *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 87. This seems a similar sentiment to that reported by Lachmund, in which Liszt said to one pianist who played Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata "Ah, you will chop beefsteak for us' (Walker, *Living with Liszt*, p. 34).

⁶⁹ Beethoven/Liszt, *The Symphonies Nos. 1-9*, performed by Cyprien Katsaris (Teldec 9031-71619-2)

be found in the various recordings of Karajan⁷⁰). But it is at least worth considering, I believe, a more downbeat-oriented approach to this passage (of course not exaggerated, so as to maintain a distinction between such a passage and the marked downbeat accents at bar 127ff), coupled with a full sound in the treble to correspond to the wishes of Liszt in terms of orchestration. The post-Wagnerian ideal of the smooth ‘long line’ approach to articulation and phrasing was by no means definitively established during Liszt’s lifetime; whilst his comments on the symphonic poems show some sympathy towards such an approach, we should bear in mind his other types of fidelity to what he believed to be Beethovenian practice⁷¹.

In a masterclass on the Beethoven *Eroica* Variations, Liszt said ‘Do not connect the notes of the theme to one another, but play each separately’⁷². It is not entirely clear whether he refers to the ground bass of the opening, or the full theme that occurs after the four ‘pre-variations’. In terms of the former: Beethoven writes these notes as full minims; Liszt in his transcription of the Symphony notates them as staccato quavers, as in the orchestral score (Beethoven’s score does not have staccato dots, but this is clearly implied by the fact that they are played pizzicato). If the theme proper was the passage intended, then this would suggest a barline-focussed approach to performing the passage in question (and perhaps by extrapolation a corresponding approach to similar passages in other symphonies, including that listed above).

Also, Liszt’s comments on the second movement of the Seventh Symphony are telling in terms of his fastidiousness with respect to Beethoven’s articulation. Göllerich reports that ‘He drew attention to the fact that three kinds of nuance are applied in the theme: somewhat sustained, *portamento* (*staccato*) [*portato* is meant here], and quite *staccato*’⁷³. Lachmund gives further information on how importantly Liszt viewed the proper execution of this movement, making clear how one should consider it directly in terms of the orchestra:

“There are few who can play this simple theme just right” said Liszt; and to prove it he set us all to playing the opening measures of it. It caused some tension, as also some merriment, as one or the other could not get it; half only succeeded. As I had often heard it in the orchestra, and tried to imitate the dragging style as it sounds there, I had no difficult in getting it right.

Liszt has marked the respective orchestra instruments in his arrangement so one can differentiate when playing. In the last thirty measures the flutes and horns alternate repeatedly; here he said: “Always make a distinction between the flute parts and those of the horns The former should be played lightly, while the tone quality in the latter should be more weighty.”⁷⁴

The opening of the second movement of the *Pastoral* Symphony (Fig. 14) sounds extremely different if played with a large string section using metal strings, extensive vibrato and seamless phrasing than if performed with a medium-size compliment of strings using gut strings, clear delineation of the short slurs and selective use of vibrato (for example, on the middle notes of the slurs to emphasise the

⁷⁰ Karajan does however include a slight crescendo through bar 93 up to the beginning of the following bar (see for example his final set of the Beethoven Symphonies (Deutsche Grammophon 415 066-2). There is no sense of the final quaver of bar 93 being an unaccentuated release; furthermore, all the problems of balance that Wagner identified are painfully apparent in this recording of Karajan.

⁷¹ For example, the fact that Göllerich reported his insistence on making the rather harsh *sforzandi* clear each time in Variation 28 of the *Diabelli Variations* (Zimdar, *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 132).

⁷² Zimdar, *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 135.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 86.

⁷⁴ Walker, *Living with Liszt*, pp. 162-163.

appoggiaturas). What type of sound might Liszt have had in mind when he wrote his transcription of this very passage (Fig. 15)? He included the *Pastoral* in his list of a certain repertory of pieces that lends the genre ‘both dignity and distinction’⁷⁵, but this could imply a myriad of different things in terms of performance⁷⁶.

Andante molto mosso (♩. = 50)

2 Flauti

2 Oboi

2 Clarinetti in B

2 Fagotti

2 Corni in B

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

2 Solo-Violoncelli
con Sord.

Violoncello
e Contrabbasso

Fig. 14. Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, “Pastoral”, opening of second movement.

⁷⁵ From his essay ‘Berlioz and his *Harold* Symphony’ (1855), cited in Walker, *The Weimar Years*, p. 308 n.14.

⁷⁶ David Wyn Jones describes Liszt’s arrangement as ‘exploring to the full the sonorities of the nineteenth-century piano’ and as ‘very faithful to Beethoven’s original, though he does permit himself a few *fff* markings in the Storm and the Finale, where Beethoven was content with *ff*, plus the occasion *martellato* and *marcatissimo*’. However, the question of Liszt’s fidelity has to be conceived in terms of implied performance practice as well as notated transcription. See Wyn Jones, *Beethoven: The Pastoral Symphony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 84.



Fig. 15. Beethoven-Liszt, Symphony No. 6, “Pastoral”, opening of second movement.

So what else can be discerned, first of all, about the types of orchestra with which Liszt was familiar and favoured? His career as a conductor began in 1840 and ran through to 1884⁷⁷, most intensively during his tenure as Kapellmeister in Weimar from 1848 to 1858. He conducted Beethoven symphonies and overtures in Weimar and Berlin in the early 1840s, and the *Pastoral* Symphony in Gotha in 1844, the only occasion recorded by Walker of him having conducted this work⁷⁸. In 1845 Liszt conducted the Fifth Symphony in the festival to accompany the unveiling of the monument in Bonn (to the annoyance of Anton Schindler), as well as playing the *Emperor Concerto*⁷⁹. Liszt’s conducting activities increased as his career as a touring virtuoso relaxed; however, by various accounts his skills as a conductor and the results he produced (not least as a result of the application of his theories of conducting) were at best mixed⁸⁰.

When Liszt conducted the Fifth Symphony in Weimar in 1844, the Court Orchestra had a mere thirty-five players, which he attempted to increase, though only achieving a tiny increase to thirty-eight players by 1851 (though with a number of considerably more able musicians, including Joachim as leader)⁸¹. This included a string section of 5-6-3-4-3. Whilst not unusual for a court orchestra, this was nothing like as large even

⁷⁷ See Walker, *The Weimar Years*, pp. 285-295 for an incomplete but comprehensive list of the works that Liszt conducted throughout his career.

⁷⁸ Walker does not list the orchestra in question on this occasion, but it can probably be assumed to be the Weimar Court Orchestra.

⁷⁹ See Walker, *The Virtuoso Years*, pp. 420-421.

⁸⁰ See José A. Bowen – ‘The rise of conducting’, in Bowen (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 108-110, for more on this. Joachim came to turn against Liszt as both composer and conductor, describing his actions in the latter capacity as ‘a parade of the moods of despair and the stirrings of contrition with which the really pious man turns in solitude to God, and mingles with them the most sickly sentimentality, and such a martyr-like air, that one can hear the lies in every note and see them in every movement’ in a letter to Clara Schumann in December 1855 (Nora Bickley (ed. and trans.), *Letters from and to Joseph Joachim* (London: Macmillan, 1914), p. 114). It should be borne in mind, however, that Joachim may have been telling Clara precisely what she wanted to hear, in light of her pronounced antagonism towards Liszt.

⁸¹ See Walker, *The Weimar Years*, pp. 98-101.

as the 13-12-7-6-4 forces for the first performance of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony in 1807 or 18-18-14-12-7 (with doubled woodwinds) for the Seventh Symphony in 1813⁸². It is difficult to gauge Liszt's specific preferences in terms of orchestra size for Beethoven; what we can know for sure is that he spent a decade regularly conducting Beethoven with small forces⁸³.

As far as vibrato goes, whilst there were advocates of continuous vibrato as far back as Geminiani in the mid-eighteenth century, a great deal of research has concluded that in the majority of cases selective vibrato, and then within limits, was the norm right up until the early twentieth century, especially as regards orchestral playing⁸⁴. On this basis, we can fairly assume that the orchestras Liszt heard would not have used the degree of vibrato that was common in mainstream pre-HIP Beethoven performances in the twentieth century. In the transcription, the fact that Liszt indicates *una corda ad libitum* (which, on the Erard, Bösendorfer and Streicher pianos that Liszt owned in Weimar, not to mention earlier instruments, produces a considerably thinner sound than on modern instruments) suggests something other than a rich and full-bodied sound as would be obtained from a large string section playing with continuous vibrato.

Regarding the type of strings which would have been used, a combination of plain gut and metal-wound gut for the *g*-string was the norm for most of the nineteenth century⁸⁵, and would almost certainly have been used in the orchestras Liszt conducted. As concerns the three-note slurs, Liszt made his transcriptions during a period when there were a variety of practices that were common as concerns the accentuation of such groups. Clive Brown concludes that 'The association of accent with the beginning of a slur continued in theory books throughout the nineteenth century, even when composers were making much greater use of explicit accent and dynamic markings'⁸⁶, but also that 'Slurs that begin on metrically weak beats will often imply a displacement of accent'⁸⁷. Now Beethoven uses many long slurs spanning a whole bar or more from bar 7 onwards of this movement (first in the second violins, violas and cellos), which could not be feasibly played in a single bow by the musicians of Beethoven's time (though some later players would have been able to manage it, probably sacrificing tonal control in the process, though). With this in mind, if Beethoven had wanted a seamless effect in the first bars, would he not

⁸² Cited in Roland Jackson, *Performance Practice: A Dictionary Guide for Musicians* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p.39.

⁸³ However, it should also be noted that Liszt conducted the combined forces of the Mannheim, Darmstadt and Karlsruhe orchestras in the Karlsruhe Festival in October 1853 (see Walker, *The Weimar Years*, pp. 279-283). The programmes here included just two Beethoven works, however, the Concert aria "Ah, perfido!" and the Ninth Symphony (which may not have been seen as typical by Liszt in terms of the appropriate forces, but this is mere speculation). The rest of the programmes included works of Wagner, Joachim, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and others, numerous of which clearly demanded large forces. That 'the orchestras got into difficulties in the finale of Beethoven's Ninth' and 'they blamed him [Liszt] for the breakdown' (p. 280) is telling in terms of Liszt's experiences with conducting large forces in this music at this stage of his career. Liszt himself referred to this occasion, as recounted by Göllicher (see Zimdar, *Piano Masterclasses*, p. 86).

⁸⁴ This subject is too detailed to do justice to here, but is dealt with thoroughly in Brown, 'Vibrato', in *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice*, pp. 517-557.

⁸⁵ See Robin Stowell, *The Early Violin and Viola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 35-36.

⁸⁶ Clive Brown, *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice*, p. 32.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 32.

have notated it that way, as he did elsewhere in the movement? Whether or not the slurs directly imply bowings in the Beethoven is debatable⁸⁸. A bowing indication has no direct meaning on the piano⁸⁹, yet Liszt maintains Beethoven's notation, as he does practically throughout all of the Beethoven symphony transcriptions. Also, in the mid-nineteenth century, there were varying practices as regards earlier classical convention of shortening the last note of one such. Brahms made it clear in correspondence with Joachim that he favoured the earlier conventions⁹⁰. Liszt's addition of *legato assai* to the score (not in the Beethoven) makes clear that he did not wish such a practice to be employed here (about which he also commented in the context of the *Hungarian Rhapsody* No. 3 – see below). Yet I believe that Liszt, having conducted this and other works of Beethoven (in his later Weimar period with a highly articulation-conscious player like Joachim at the helm), would have been well aware of the sound of the indicated grouping when played by the orchestras of his time. It is possible he simply copied Beethoven's markings unthinkingly, but in light of the addition of the *legato assai* I think is unlikely. Also, the fingering he indicates - 5/3, 4/2, 3/1 on the third group - would tend to produce a slight stress which would emphasise the slur, whereas a fingering such as 4/2, 3/1, 4/2 on the same group (equally practical to play) would make this less likely.

Whilst my conclusions on these matters are provisional and are open to debate in various aspects, they hopefully suggest some of the ways in which the study of performance practice of Beethoven Symphonies both in Beethoven and Liszt's time might be fruitful and informative in the process of preparing an interpretation of these works. It is a commonplace assumption that an 'orchestral' approach to the piano is a positive thing to strive for⁹¹, especially in piano works that are directly related to those for orchestra. The question that allows for greater nuances within such a pianistic aesthetic is: what type of orchestra? And playing in what type of manner?

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⁸⁸ See Brown – *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice*, pp. 228-238, for more detail on this, particularly in the case of Beethoven.

⁸⁹ Though it can be emulated through the connection of a group of notes with an ascending wrist motion. See György Sándor – *On Piano Playing* (New York: Schirmer, 1981), pp. 66-70.

⁹⁰ The important letter in question is in *Johannes Brahms Briefwechsel VI: Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Joseph Joachim*, ed. Andreas Moser (Berlin: Deutsche Brahms-Gesellschaft, 1912), p. 168. This is discussed in Clive Brown – 'Joachim's violin playing', in Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman – *Performing Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 55, Brown – *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice*, pp. 233-235, and in Ian Pace – *Performance Issues in the Music of Brahms* (forthcoming).

⁹¹ Though Liszt was very aware of the fact that such a pianistic aesthetic is more appropriate to some composers and pieces than others, as evidenced by his comments on Chopin: 'Chopin, so far from being solicitous for the noise of an orchestra, was content to see his thoughts integrally produced on the ivory of the keyboard, and to succeed in his effort to lose nothing in power, without claiming any pretension to orchestral effects or to the brush of the scene-painter.' (Liszt - *Life of Chopin*, second edition, translated John Broadhouse (London: William Reeves, [1913?]), p. 7.

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