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LISZT'S GREGORIAN SOURCES IN BUDAPEST AND WEIMAR:***Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth and Christus*****Nicolas Dufetel**[International conference *Der ganze Liszt – Liszt-Interpretationen*

Weimar, October 19th, 2011]

Introduction

Scholars have long known about the existence of Gregorian melodies in Liszt's works, and his interest in this part of the religious repertory has already been studied. But apart from Heinrich Sambeth's now old dissertation from 1923, *Franz Liszt und die Gregorianischen Melodien und ihre Bedeutung für die Entwicklung seiner Religiosität und Kunstanschauung*, there is still no detailed study of a phenomenon that preoccupied Liszt during the whole of his career. In short, we are dealing here with a particularly fertile field of study that covers his complete output, whether it be sacred or profane, vocal, orchestral or pianistic. And it extends over more than fifty years. Moreover, the available sources relating to the theme of Liszt and Gregorian chant are not only plentiful in number but for the most part still largely unexamined. In the main these sources comprise Liszt's own music manuscripts, together with the books that he owned and annotated in his own hand. These are now divided between the Herzogin Anna Amalia Library in Weimar and the Liszt Memorial Museum and Research Centre in Budapest. My aim today is not to present you with a general picture of the situation but to concentrate on the late 1850s and early 1860s, which is the period when Liszt was working on *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth and Christus*. This will allow me to ask the following question: how did Liszt know about the Gregorian melodies that he used in his two completed oratorios? In other words, where did he find these melodies? But before going into detail, I should like to establish a few basic facts in order to define the context and gain a better understanding of it.

I. Gregorian melodies in Liszt's music

a. *Where are the Gregorian melodies in Liszt's music and how are they treated?*

As I have just said very briefly, Gregorian melodies can be found in almost every area of Liszt's output. They appear in three different ways.

First, the Gregorian melodies may be reduced to recurrent cells and in that way assimilated into Liszt's musical language. He takes his inspiration from these melodies and uses them in the same way that he uses other motifs of his own invention. This is the case, for example, with the introduction to *Die Seligkeiten* from *Christus* quoting the Gregorian melody of the *Rorate coeli desuper* from the opening of the oratorio.

Second, the Gregorian melodies may be quoted, arranged and/or harmonized in their entirety, as in the contrapuntal treatment of *Benedicamus Domino* in the little motet 'Sancta Caecilia'.

The third and final way in which Gregorian melodies appear in Liszt's works is one that is the very opposite of the one I have just described. That is to say, Liszt took over the Gregorian melodies but left them unaccompanied and unharmonized. Here I may cite the example of the *Angelus ad pastores ait* from *Christus*.

b. Oral and written traditions

There were two ways in which Liszt could have known or discovered Gregorian melodies. The first of these ways was the oral tradition. As a good Catholic, Liszt was brought up listening to melodies from the Gregorian repertory, which he heard during church services and in other faith-related contexts. Those who knew the rite before the reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council and those who are familiar with the communities in which the Latin tradition is preserved know very well that it is impossible to avoid the Gregorian melodies that have been handed down from generation to generation since the Middle Ages.

In theory it is possible to know which Gregorian melodies Liszt heard in European churches, but this would take us into an extremely complex and extensive field of research that includes the fascinating world of ethnomusicology and religious history.

The second way in which Liszt could have got to know Gregorian melodies was the written tradition. Here we are of course more fortunate from a methodological point of view. His liturgical books of one kind or another: Roman missals and graduals, books on the history of music, and theoretical and practical treatises on plainchant, are preserved in Budapest and Weimar, with his annotations.

c. *The problem of rites and editions*

Whether they are oral or written, Liszt's Gregorian sources raise the problem of the rite to which they relate. In Liszt's day, the Roman rite had not yet been fully adopted in France, where there were still many relics of the Gallican rite on points of liturgical and musical detail. There is a good chance, therefore, that Liszt heard Gallican chant in French churches in the 1830s. The *De profundis*, at all events, is part of a Gallican tradition, making it a special case in respect of Liszt and Gregorian chant, for although the *De profundis* is associated with the Gregorian repertory, it is most definitely not a Gregorian melody but, specifically, a fauxbourdon.

But Liszt's books on Gregorian chant kept in Budapest and Weimar all reflect the Roman rite, even those published in France. It is natural that Liszt is faithful to the Roman rite, which transcended national barriers and represented a universal version of the Catholic liturgy.

d. *Why Gregorian chant?*

There were several reasons why Liszt took an interest in plainchant. First – and more generally – everything that is old and hieratic, everything that is traditional is dear to the Catholics. Second – and more particularly – Gregorian chant was regarded by Catholics as the mother tongue of the Church. Plainchant can look back on a centuries' old tradition, with the result that for Liszt it had a particular value and force. It was in this sense that he wrote to Agnes Street in 1855, when discussing the religious music that he was planning to compose: “Là comme ailleurs, il s'agit de “remonter aux fondemens” comme dit Lacordaire, et de pénétrer à ces sources vives qui rejaillissent jusqu'à la vie [é]ternelle.” In Catholic music, these ‘basics’ were Gregorian chant and Latin, the two being inextricably linked. In 1860, while he was reflecting on what he called a ‘plan,’ he wrote to Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein that he wanted to suggest to the pope the idea of “établir pour ainsi dire *le canon* du chant d'Église, sur la base exclusive du Chant grégorien”.

Liszt then went on to explain that he would have to undertake some research, and, I quote,

« employer les matériaux fort bien préparés déjà à Ratisbonne par les publications du Chanoine Proske, et Mettenleiter (dernièrement décédé) – de plus il me faudra faire quelques recherches à Bruxelles, Paris, – et surtout Rome. (...) j'en tracerai préalablement le plan très simple en lui-même, car il s'agit là pardessus tout de fixer ce qui est im- [m]uable dans la Liturgie catholique ».

Even so, we need to bear in mind two particular aspects of Liszt's approach. In the first place, he was a composer in his own right and so his approach was different from that of the plainchant revivalists whose writings he read. His approach was more practical, more artistic and more sensitive. Second, although Liszt was fascinated by the centuries' old tradition of plainchant and although he recognized its importance, he did not want to preserve it in any sterile way. It is within the context of a dialectic between tradition and modernity that we need to examine the presence of Gregorian elements in his music. In Liszt's eyes, this repertory was not just old, dusty and forgotten, it also offered him a guarantee of newness. As he wrote to Joseph d'Ortigue at the time of *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth* and *Christus*: “Les témérités les plus excessives de la musique de l'avenir ne sont que des timidités enfantines, en regard de l'héroïsme du vénérable Plain-Chant, farci de quarts de tons, de tristrophus, et de groupes strophicus, authentiqués par Mr l'abbé Raillard. »

Gregorian chant, finally, was intimately linked to questions concerning the liturgy, and these were questions in which Liszt took a deep interest. At the heart of the liturgical year the Gregorian melodies form a fine-spun web full of meaning and theological symbolism. As a result liturgical questions are fundamental for they allow us to see that the melodies chosen by Liszt have a theological significance that makes sense in relation to the work in which they are used.

The self-contained world of the liturgy, with its feast days and its calendar of saints, is fundamental to our understanding of the majority of Liszt's religious works, which must be read in parallel, as if in a mirror. In his letters, he often refers to the saints and to feast days that were important for his private worship.

II. Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth

At the end of the score of *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth*, Liszt inserted a “Schluss-Bemerkung” and a “Verzeichniss der Motive” that are present in the oratorio.

There are four of these motifs, together with the intonation of the *Magnificat*:

- 1) The Gregorian melody *Quasi stella matutina*, which Liszt indicates as being ‘In festo sanctae Elisabeth’. He quotes the musical incipit in square-note notation;
- 2) an “Ungarisches Kirchenlied zur heiligen Elisabeth”, the melody of which Liszt quotes without bar-lines and with all sixteen verses of the Hungarian text;
- 3) an instrumental « Ungarische Volksmelodie » that Liszt claims was given to him by the violinist Reményi;
- 4) an « Altes Pilgerlied angeblich aus der Zeit der Kreuzzüge » in modern musical notation. It was passed on to him by Gottschalg.
- 5) Finally, Liszt mentions the intonation g–a–c, which he claims was often used in the Gregorian repertory, notably in the *Magnificat* and *Crux fidelis*. Liszt admits to having used it himself three of his works. In *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth*, he explains that these notes represent the ‘symbol of the Cross’.

Liszt indicates very precisely where these five melodic elements occur in his oratorio. They represent a kind of musical, national and religious universality inasmuch as they comprise a melody and an intonation taken from the Gregorian repertory, the theme of a Hungarian hymn, a popular Hungarian instrumental melody and a German melody that has all the attributes of a chorale. It has already been observed that Liszt was mistaken when he claimed that the melody *Quasi stella matutina* was associated with Saint Elisabeth of Hungary. It is in fact associated with Saint Elisabeth of Portugal. True, Liszt was mistaken. But it is the same kind of error as the one that we find in the case of the polemics bound up with the Hungarian – or gypsy – Rhapsodies. What is important is that Liszt did everything he could to bring a sense of local and historical colour to the material that he used in his oratorio. It was not his mistake: as we shall see, the melody associated with Saint Elisabeth of Portugal was given to him by Hungarians who had found it in Hungarian libraries and who believed it to be authentic.

Before starting work on *Saint Elisabeth* in 1858, Liszt wrote to a number of his acquaintances scattered across Europe from Paris and Brussels to Budapest, asking them for their help. He put in place a network of informants who he hoped would find authentic liturgical melodies associated with Saint Elisabeth. He contacted friends and

colleagues, including Émile Ollivier, Joseph d'Ortique, Charles de Montalembert, Fétis, Eduard Lassen, Antal Augusz and Mihály Mosonyi, inviting them to look for melodies in ancient manuscripts and books. Only the Hungarians were thanked in his "Schluss-Bemerkung" in the score, for they alone provided information that Liszt could use. "J'ai la persuasion, he wrote, qu'il doit se rencontrer à *Pest* de vieux manuscrits de Plain-Chant avec l'office de *Ste Elisabeth* dont j'aurai un grand parti à tirer. »

At a conference organized by James Deaville in Ottawa this summer, I summed up the various stages of what Mosonyi, in a letter to Liszt of 1 July 1858, called a "authentisch-kirchlich-liturgische Jagd". Mosonyi explained that Liszt had entrusted this hunt to him, 'the best truffle dog' ("dem besten Trüffel-Hund"). Mosonyi struggled to find melodies himself and sought help from various individuals, including Antal Kronperger, Father Maurus Czimar and Father Guardian, all three of whom were thanked by Liszt in his concluding remarks. All of these enquiries are documented by material preserved in Weimar.

Mosonyi's letter to Liszt of 1 July 1858 was sent with copies of music. The shelf-Mark GSA 60/Z50 contain many plainchant related material, notably the copies sent by Mosonyi. There are 3 folders.

1. The first one contains two pages of music, almost certainly copied out by Mosonyi himself, in square-note notation and with early clefs. At the beginning of each of the 5 melodies, Liszt has added in pencil the names of the clefs in French and the notes of the first notes, as to help his reading. On the second folio there is also a note in Mosonyi's hand explaining that it would be difficult to find anything more authentic ('Musikalisch authentisch wird schwerlich mehr zu finden sein') and that Father Guardian of the Franciscans in Ofen had been more than willing to copy out these melodies.

2. The second folder contains the eight melodies copied out by Mosonyi, among them are six antiphons including the famous *Quasi stella matutina*. At the beginning of seven of the melodies Liszt had added notes similar to those that he added in pencil to the contents of the first envelope. There is also a letter from Mosonyi addressed to Liszt in which he explains that Kronperger undertook his research in Martinsberg and asked the abbey's librarian, Maurus Czimar, to transcribe some old parchment manuscripts and that it would be good if Liszt could write a 'little' letter to the abbot, Mihály Rimely, to thank him. Rimely is also thanked in the concluding remarks in the score.

These documents were sent from Hungary by Mosonyi. It is clear from the annotations that they contain that Liszt read them. In particular, it was here that he found the *Quasi stella matutina*, the principal melody in his oratorio. It came, then, from Martinsberg Abbey.

The third envelope shelved under shelf-mark GSA 60/Z50 concerns neither Mosonyi nor Hungary. Instead, it attests to the research undertaken on Liszt's behalf by Eduard Lassen in Brussels. It is one of the most interesting of all these documents, for it is a nine-page copy in early notation of what seems to me to be the complete office of Saint Elisabeth, "Letare Germania". The copy was made by Lassen himself between late July and late August 1858. A letter from Lassen was enclosed with the manuscript and includes indications on how to read the notation. The copy contains no annotations in Liszt's hand, and the melody was not used in his oratorio.

In another letter, conversely, Lassen refers to the lyrics of the prosa 'Decorata novo flore.' Here he writes: « après avoir cherché bien longtemps avec le frère bibliothécaire nous avons fini par trouver la prose, écrit-il ; Decorata novo flore &, mais sans aucune notation et le frère m'a assuré qu'il faudrait un bien grand hazard pour mettre la main sur la notation de l'un de ces textes ». This text was included in Montalembert's *Life of Saint Elisabeth*, the source of Otto Roquette's libretto. It is sung by the Kirchenchor and then by the Chorus of Hungarian Bishops at the end of Liszt's oratorio, but on this occasion Liszt wrote an original melody which sounds more like a choral.

III. Christus

Liszt had not yet completed *Saint Elisabeth* before he started work on *Christus*. According to its title-page, *Christus* was composed « nach Texten aus der heiligen Schrift und der katholischen Liturgie ». Liszt chose these texts himself. Here I want to mention the dissertation of Daniel Ortuno-Stühling, who has examined the way in which Liszt has constructed his image of Christ.

Liturgical texts imply Gregorian melodies, and for *Christus*, too, Liszt used chants from the liturgy. Whereas Liszt sought help on *Saint Elisabeth*, he seems to have conducted his own research on *Christus*. At all events, I can find no trace in his correspondence of his asking third persons to run errands for him. Quite the opposite, in

fact. In 1860 he specifically mentions the research he was planning to undertake on his own in what he called 'dusty sources', especially in Rome. Although his correspondence is relatively thin in this regard, his books on Gregorian chant and his various sketches for *Christus* contain information on the melodies that he used or envisaged using in *Christus*.

A small manuscript with sketches for most of the numbers that make up *Christus* is kept in Weimar. What is particularly interesting on this page are the annotations appertaining to some of the music that makes up the opening melody of the *Einleitung*, the *Rorate coeli desuper*: the number 184 is followed by the music to the words 'Rorate coeli'. This is followed by the number 252 and the words 'Collegite primum zizania', the antiphon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany. The next entry reads '805. Desiderium pauperum exaudivit Dominus preparationem cordis eorum audivit aures tua' from Psalm 10. This is also the Offertory for the Feast of Saint Joseph Calassanctius. The final entry reads: '509. 18th Sunday after Whitsun: Da pacem Domine sustinentibus te', which is the Introit for the Eighteenth Sunday after Whitsun.

These annotations indicate that Liszt compared the different versions of the melody of the *Rorate* as they appear at other times in the liturgical year. The antiphon 'Collegite primum zizania' and the introit 'Da pacem Domine' both use the same melody. This raises the question as to the source of this information, which must be a plainchant collection that I have been yet unable to identify.

It is worth reminding that in the years around 1860 Liszt was in the habit of comparing different versions of the same Gregorian melody. In my dissertation I compared two pages from the sketchbook N4 in the Goethe- und Schiller-Archiv in Weimar in which Liszt copied out three versions of the *Pange lingua* and *Crux fidelis* and as many as four versions of the *Magnificat*.

Liszt's own personal weimarian copy of Mettenleiter's *Enchiridion chorale* includes some puzzling page markers: several pages have been folded and all correspond to each other. Is it Liszt who was responsible? There are also two page references in pencil that could be in his hand. I cannot be absolutely certain. These page markers and the page numbers relate to the *Crux fidelis* and *Vexilla Regis prodeunt*. Another copy of the *Enchiridion chorale* is preserved in Budapest and contains a red cross on the page of the introit 'Majorem ac dilecti', which also uses the melody of the *Rorate coeli desuper*.

Another manuscript is very important for the reconstruction of the web of documents which help us to have an idea of Liszt *working* on Gregorian melodies. It is the autograph score of the piano version of the *Vexilla Regis prodeunt*.

verso of folio 3 contains some very brief sketches for an Agnus Dei and, more importantly, a modal melody with the words 'Surrexit Christus' ('Christ is risen') and 'Scimus Christum surrexisse' ('We know that Christ is risen'). They relate to the final movement in *Christus*, the *Resurrexit*. These words are taken from the final verses of the sequence for Easter, the famous *Victimae paschali laudes*. The music is taken directly from the penultimate phrase of the plainchant melody corresponding to these words. As you can see, Liszt noted the Gregorian outline of one line, then, immediately beneath it, he conducted an experiment and arranged the words of the 'Surrexit Christus' and 'Scimus Christum surrexisse'. In the first line we can see an example of 'flat', regular singing, and beneath it, the way in which Liszt reconstructed the rhythm simply by means of Latin tonic accents – his prayer books are full of Latin syllables that have been underlined in this way. Even so, Liszt's version is a hybrid, for it manipulates the plainchant melody and words in order to create a new version. Liszt hasn't used the melodic fragment that goes with the words 'Surrexit Christus' but has adapted only the fragment that goes with 'Scimus Christum surrexisse'. Was Liszt planning to use this melody in *Christus*? It would certainly have made sense for him to do so as it is the Easter sequence. But it is not found in the oratorio.

On the same sheet, one can also find the motif which will eventually be the subject of the fugue in the *Resurrexit*, a succession of three ascending fifths, the symbolically 'ascending'.

To sum up: Liszt initially – and logically – thought of using the Easter sequence of the *Victimae paschali* in his *Resurrexit*, which would have allowed him to use a liturgical Gregorian melody. In the end, however, he produced the motif of ascending fifths, which perhaps offered him a greater compositional potential, notably when it came to the fugue.

Conclusion

There are many pages of sketches and many of Liszt's books containing his own annotations and forming a complex web of philological sources that remain to be discussed, just as there are other links between his religious music and the Roman liturgy on which we could comment. It is essential that we take account of the Roman

liturgy when examining Liszt's use of Gregorian chant and, more generally, his liturgical and para-liturgical religious music. (The *Via Crucis* is a good example of this para-liturgical category.) Liturgy, theology, melody and the Latin language are intimately linked. Plainchant is the connection between two elements: a text and a melody whose outline, accents and rhythm are dictated by the words. Together, they acquire their meaning as a function of the ways in which they are used at various points in the liturgical calendar – and this is a key concept if we are to understand Liszt's life as a believer.

Finally, I should like to draw your attention to two other sets of documents that are extremely interesting: they are in Weimar under the shelf-marks GSA 60/Z48 and Z49, and are copies of the Gregorian melodies for the liturgy of Saint Stanislaus and Saint Stephen. The surviving music of the unfinished oratorio *Saint Stanislaus* show clearly that, like *Christus*, this oratorio, too, opened with a plainchant melody. As we leaf through these liturgical copies we may be inclined to dream about the melodies that would have provided a solid foundation for the oratorios about Saints Stanislaus and Stephen, just as they do for *Saint Elisabeth* and *Christus*. But that's another story, the one of the works Liszt left incomplete, or did not compose. And that's a HUGE part of his output.