



"Nella Selva Oscura"...: Discovering Liszt

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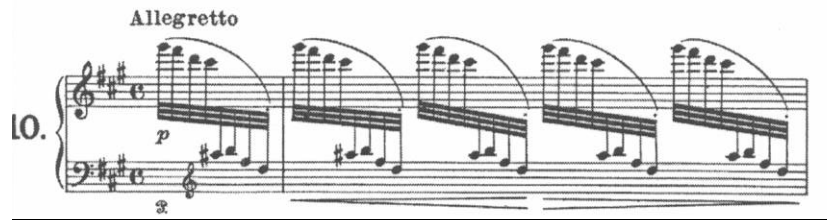
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My teacher proceeded to sit at the piano and played for me a measure of the “Legend of St. Francis Preaching to the Birds,”



Liszt, *Saint-François d'Assise: la prédication aux oiseaux, Légende No. 1*, m. 1 (from Franz Liszt, *Klavierwerke*, Vol. 5: *Original Kompositionen für Klavier zu zwei Händen*, ed. Emil von Sauer, Leipzig: Peters, Plate 9880)

She followed it with the first measure of Brahms's *Klavierstück*, Op. 76, No. 1:



Brahms, *Klavierstück* Op. 76, No. 1, m. 1 (from Johannes Brahms, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 14, ed. Eusebius Mandyczewski, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, Plate J.B. 62)

I immediately understood what she wanted to show me: there was an objective, an immediate effect in that one measure of Brahms, dense, simple, and beautiful, so immanent. By comparison, Liszt's measure seemed "lost"; it did not make "sense" immediately, and needed a "whole," a context. The demonstration was a brilliant bit of teaching. It was necessary, we agreed, to put these measures into context, into the totality of the works from which they were taken. I then realized that the music of Liszt was a music that went beyond sound, musical "natural" and logical effects, and especially piano patterns and techniques.ⁱ I asked my teacher if I could work on Liszt's *Gnomenreigen*—provided that I also agreed to study the "Variations" from the String Sextet No. 1, Op. 18, by Brahms.

This experience made me love Liszt more as I began to understand that nothing of his flowed easily; instead, one had to search for it. I think this episode was actually my first lesson of "applied aesthetics," through which I caught a glimpse of what "absolute" and "programmatic" music were all about: subjects I would later study at university not only at the piano, but through the powerful thoughts of Carl Dahlhaus and his fellows.ⁱⁱ Incidentally, since then Hélène Desmoulin has become an ardent Lisztian; in Angers and with Joëlle Lemée, for example, she presented a little known version for piano four-hands of *Le triomphe funèbre du Tasse* owned by the Library of Congress (2005),

as well as two first performances in this city of the *Dante* symphony arranged for two pianos and children's choir (2008 and 2011). And I became a fervent Brahmsian as well.

After the “hits” of Liszt piano, I explored the rest of his piano repertory: the Sonata, the Etudes, the other Rhapsodies, and everything else I could find in scores and recordings; a trip to Budapest in 1998 had allowed me to acquire a few volumes of the useful *New Liszt Edition* and Hungaroton recordings that I could not easily find in France. (Online shopping was not really developed at that time; later, I came to appreciate the possibility to buy everything from everywhere in the world...). Then came the selection of orchestral music: the two Piano Concertos, Les Préludes, Mazeppa ... again the hits. Then *Totentanz*—a shock. Followed by the two symphonies (*Faust* and *Dante*) and “everything else,” all I could read or listen to.

And finally, the religious music: the *Via Crucis*, *Christus*, the “Gran Mass,” *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth*. Hits, over and over—but they became more and more surrounded by a murky mystery. Of course, finding recordings and scores of some of the rare works wasn't always easy; but listening to some of the motets and masses, combined with assiduous study of the piano compositions and transcriptions, including the lesser-known pieces, became part of my daily work.

The breaking down of Liszt's music seemed, and seems to me, an unending story, because another masterpiece or another version always tempts me to take to my piano again. The scores were useful tools in the first part of my exploration, but so were the Naxos recordings—Naxos: the label that dared, for the lowest prices (and that I could afford), to think outside the box. It was the first volumes of the Naxos “Liszt series” that moved me when I listened to striking performances of such masterpieces as the *Scherzo und Marsch*, *Urbi et orbi*, the “Ave Maria” for Lebert's und Stark's *Grosse Klavierschule*, and so on. I have already mentioned other disks, including famous Hungaroton reissues of old recordings (the old versions, unfortunately do not always give the best image of Liszt's music). Although the chaos of scores has remained unsurpassed, the unparalleled pianistic odyssey of Leslie Howard on the Hyperion label helped me gain a detailed appreciation of the piano works. This was indeed a valuable gateway into much of the rest of Liszt, thanks especially to the transcriptions. The piano is definitely the alpha and omega of Liszt's music, at least as a medium of comprehension, a first way of accessing his musical world.

Aside from the courageous editors at Hyperion (who must be praised along, with a few others), record labels and concert planners generally get cold feet when it comes to Liszt. This reduces exposure to his expansive and diverse output. Unfortunately, it seems that profits too often govern concert schedules.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet Liszt fought to be recognized not only as a pianist, but also as a composer.

In fact, he achieved greatness by the time he turned twenty years old, and his “Virtuoso Years” lasted for about ten years: these statistics are drafted by a career that was sixty-three years old.^{iv}

Liszt had deep faith in the future. He wanted to pursue his dreams and he expressed what he thought without worrying about an immediate response. With him, in a way, creation and reception were never entirely connected, his position as a composer was almost the total opposite of his career as a virtuoso (the latter desperately dependent upon immediate public success). He left a great deal of evidence on these subjects in his letters to the Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein and Agnes Street-Klindworth, and he could probably have made his own words as famous as the words of Goethe, who once confided to Eckermann: “My works shall never become popular; whoever thinks about such things and strives for them is in error. They are not written for the masses, but for exceptional individuals, those who will and seek for something similar [to my own goals] and who find them in similar circumstances.”^v It is here that the famous metaphor about the javelin finds its place. It is taken from a letter Liszt wrote to the Princess on February 9, 1874, and later published by La Mara:

Ma seule ambition de musicien était et serait de lancer mon javelot dans les espaces indéfinis de l’avenir – comme nous disions autrefois dans le journal de Brendel [*Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*]. Pourvu que ce javelot soit de bonne trempe et ne retombe pas à terre – le reste ne m’importe nullement !^{vi}

In a way, it is for posterity to understand what the javelin metaphor means, to understand his path and help his flight continue.

For those who love ideas in motion, Liszt is a perfect object of study.

In fact, this famous letter is a direct response to a letter the Princess wrote between February 2-5 of the same year. Here we must digress to a methodical and critical reflection on the sources of these letters. In the original we see that Liszt wrote several phrases in quotation marks, including the successful formula “to throw my javelin” that is so often cited in the Liszt literature. In fact, Liszt quotes the words of Princess Wittgenstein.^{vii} Important details and even complete sentences from Liszt letters disappeared from La Mara’s editions. This detail is particularly significant, because it emphasizes the strong ties between the Princess and Liszt, which I cannot pause to describe in detail. In art history, Daniel Arasse has demonstrated that insight and analysis is made possible by studying details, because “one detail can bring great material importance to the whole image.”^{viii} This famous letter of February 9, 1874, is a concrete example of the epistemological problems raised by

the critical study of sources and of research challenges for the future. One can imagine how many others may change our knowledge of Liszt and his music. The task is huge.

After several years I realized that, with Liszt, there was a world to explore: a world made of his music and his writings, but also of academic literature, and manuscripts. In fact, I noticed that there was always something to learn and that one could spend hours reading his scores as well as catalogs of his works and manuscripts in order to understand the complexity and the rhizomatic structure to which they testify.^{ix} When one really dives in, one realizes that the works of Liszt illuminate each other and open the way to new answers and new interpretations. Rena Mueller wrote that Liszt was perpetually creating more and moving forward.^x I wonder if this feature will ever rebound on me, because listening and analyzing his music is a never-ending story. His work seems a bit like the famous dark forest Dante created, both intriguing and frightening, because *the path isn't right*. Nevertheless, there is a whole world, rich and surprising, indivisible and “amalgamated,” that offers us a hodgepodge explained metaphorically by Baudelaire in “Le Thyrses” (1863):

... The Thyrsus is an illustration of your astonishing duality, mighty and venerated master, dear Bacchant of mysterious and passionate Beauty. Never did wood nymph, exasperated by the invincible Bacchus, shake her Thyrsus over the heads of her distracted companions with more energy and more caprice than you wave your Genius over the heads of your brothers. The stick represents your will, straight, constant and unshakable; the flowers, the wandering of your fantasy around your will; it is the feminine élément executing alluring pirouettes around the male. Straight line and arabesque, intention and expression, inflexibility of the will, flexibility of the word, unity of the end, variety of the means, all-powerful and indivisible amalgam of Genius, what analyst would have the odious courage to divide and to separate you?

Dear Liszt, through the mists, beyond the rivers, above the cities where the pianos sing your glory, where the printing-press translates your wisdom, wherever you may be, in the splendours of the Eternal City or in the mists of those dreamy lands consoled by Cambrinus, improvising songs of delight or of ineffable sorrow, or confiding to paper your abstruse méditations, singer of eternal Pleasure and of eternal Anguish, philosopher, poet and artist, I salute you in immortality!^{xi}

A word about the religious music: Liszt himself placed it at the center of his work, and with the exception of a few recordings it simply isn't performed (outside Hungary, that is), nor has much been written about it. For these reasons I quickly decided to devote myself to its study. I read Paul Merrick's *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt*,^{xii} at the time (and still) the only really important work on the subject. Much later, I carried out a statistical study based on the second edition of the indispensable “Guide to Research,” through which Michael Saffle confirmed my feelings and allowed me to quantify this sad state of affairs.^{xiii} Thus, in October 2000, I joined the Université

François-Rabelais, Tours, determined to write a thesis on the religious music of Liszt, which I defended on 24 June 2008.^{xiv} Currently I am working in Weimar as a postdoctoral fellow with sponsorship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the Institut für Musikwissenschaft Weimar-Jena. I also teach the history of music at the Conservatory of Angers, where I pay my debt to the city in which I had the chance to study music with remarkable teachers. In Weimar, I am currently exploring Liszt's profound and essential relationship with the Grand Duke Carl Alexander and, more generally, the "Kulturpolitik" in which they engaged in order to prepare a new edition of their correspondence. In Angers, I have the chance to teach and "pass on," for transmission seems to me fundamental: it inspires reflection and research. Right now the Franco-German dimension is critical in my scientific and even to my personal identity.... Yet this is not where I had originally aimed to be: initially I was attracted by Italy, to the point of studying for some time at the Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza. Germany, Italy, France: three countries united by Madame de Staël, who wrote in French *De l'Allemagne* but also *Corinne ou l'Italie*. There is so much to say about European culture and identity.

I also consider it a big part of my job to work with musicians, and I am never happier than when I can cooperate with them in making preparations for recordings and concerts, and when I introduce them to little-known compositions. Working for general audiences and for newer (and younger) audiences is also a part of what I consider my duty. I am very glad about the above-mentioned concerts in Angers, and others elsewhere. I would like to mention a project created especially for the Liszt Jubilee in France: the so called "Année Liszt en France": a "Célébration nationale."^{xv} The orchestra Les Siècles, whose musicians play historical instruments and which is conducted by François-Xavier Roth, recently recorded the *Dante* symphony; between August 2011 and January 2012 they will give 12 concerts in France, Belgium, and Germany, supplemented by the projection of William Blake's watercolors for the *Divine Comedy*—a kind of display Liszt had dreamt of and which I had studied in my dissertation.^{xvi}

In recent years, my thinking and research have been carried beyond the field of religious music to subjects that might be considered "peripheral," but in my opinion, still necessary in the reconstruction of the complete Lisztian spectrum. That is how I first became interested in Liszt's writings, which are sometimes thrown away instead of treated as fundamental objects of study. They offer opulent opportunities for methodological and epistemological consideration, because they point out problems about the avant-garde, the new industry of composing music in nineteenth-century Europe. Furthermore, they exist in a wonderful new, critical edition, the not-yet-complete

Sämtliche Schriften published by Breitkopf & Härtel under Detlef Altenburg's supervision. The exegesis in this valuable edition raises other new musicological issues.^{xvii} Liszt should neither be ignored as a man of networks, and as a secret adviser to the Grand Duke of Weimar (a position similar to the one Goethe held), he played a fundamental role not only in the (cultural) politics of Weimar, but also of Germany and Europe. Grand Duke Carl Alexander told Liszt one day that he could have been a great prince, but also a great diplomat.^{xviii} A little-known fact: in 1860, Liszt's secret correspondence with Princess Wittgenstein traveled from Rome to Weimar in the pouch of the French diplomatic legation!^{xix} In order to follow as closely and as accurately as possible the different facets of Liszt, it is necessary to study a variety of sources according to strict methodological and epistemological principles.^{xx} Their critical analysis, dissemination, and exegesis are the common denominators that have so far ruled my research—not, it should be understood, as ends in themselves, but as a way to reconstruct as accurately as possible the reality of the amalgam through Liszt introduced himself to his contemporaries and appears to us today—a strength and a weakness at the same time.

Like the quotation marks omitted by La Mara in her edition of the February 9, 1874, letter, details of all kinds carry meanings and serious consequences. Many other elements involved with philological and empirical research may also clarify our knowledge and establish a dialogue between “empirical” reality and the “poetic” reality of Liszt—two categories referring to Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.^{xxi} It is encouraging because, really, with Liszt, we never stop learning. Systematic doubt serves as the guarantor of new discoveries. It was not only Descartes who praised its importance by stating that he began with doubt. Friedrich Nietzsche, Gaston Bachelard, and many others have subsequently sought to question the foundations of knowledge. But Seneca long ago invited us to the same prudence and modesty by claiming that even:

Multum adhuc restat operis multumque restabit, nec ulli nato post mille saecula praecludetur occasio aliquid adhuc adiciendi [...] Veneror itaque inventa sapientiae inventoresque; adire tamquam multorum hereditatem invat. Mihi ista acquisita, mihi laborata sunt. Sed agamus bonum patrem familiae, faciamus ampliora quae acceperimus; maior ista hereditas a me ad posteros transeat.^{xxii}

There remain many things to unlearn before we can learn.

Jerusalem, July 2011

ⁱ See Márta Grabócz, *Morphologie des œuvres pour piano de Liszt: influence du programme sur l'évolution des formes instrumentales* (Paris: Kimé, 1996).

ⁱⁱ For example, Carl Dahlhaus, "Die Idee der absoluten Musik," in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Danuser (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 2002); Vol. 4, 11-126.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Nicolas Dufetel, "Editorial," *Ad Parnassum*, 9/17 (April 2011), 5-6.

^{iv} Due to Liszt himself, it is customary to regard the beginning of his artistic career as April 13, 1823, when he gave an important concert in Vienna.

^v Translated from Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, ed. Christoph Michel and Hans Grütters (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassik, 1999) = Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, Vol. II, no. 12, 287 (October 11, 1828).

^{vi} Liszt to Princess Wittgenstein, February 9, 1874. Quoted from *Franz Liszt's Briefe*, ed. "La Mara" [pseud. Marie Lipsius] (Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel, 1902); Vol. 7, 57-58.

^{vii} Compare Liszt's letter (D-WRgs 59/89, no. 7) to the Princess (D-WRgs 59/47, 1). See Nicolas Dufetel, "Religious Workshop and Gregorian Chant: Liszt-Janus, or How to Make New with the Old." To be published in *Liszt's Legacies: Proceedings of the Ottawa 2011 Liszt International Conference*, ed. James Deaville.

^{viii} See Daniel Arasse, *Le détail. Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992).

^{ix} See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*, vol. 1. [*L'Anti-Œdipe*] (Paris: Minuit, 1972).

^x Rena Charnin Mueller, "Sketches, Drafts and Revisions: Liszts at Work," in: *Die Projekte der Liszt-Forschung. Bericht über das Internationale Symposium in Eisenstadt 18.-21. Oktober 1989*, ed. Detlef Altenburg and Gerhard J. Winkler (Eisenstadt, Burgenländisches Landesmuseum, 1991), 26-34.

^{xi} Published originally as Charles Baudelaire, "Le Thyrses. À Franz Liszt" [*Petits poèmes en prose*], in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, Vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 335-36. Translated into English by Arthur Symonds in *Baudelaire, Poetry and Prose* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1926), 60-61.

^{xii} Merrick's book was published in 1987 by Cambridge University Press; it was reprinted in 2008. [See Merrick's contribution to the present volume. – Ed.]

^{xiii} See Michael Saffle, *Franz Liszt: A Research and Information Guide*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009). For the statistics, see Dufetel, *Palingénésie, régénération et extase dans la musique religieuse de Franz Liszt*, 2 vols. (dissertation: Université François-Rabelais, Tours, 2008); Vol. 2, 535-37 (publication in preparation).

^{xiv} Dufetel, *Palingénésie*.

^{xv} See www.anneeliszt.com; accessed 1 August 2011.

^{xvi} [See Evangelia Mitsopoulou's contribution to the present volume concerning her work with Giovanni Buonaventura Genelli's images and Liszt's *Dante* symphony. – Ed.]

^{xvii} Dufetel, "Les écrits de Franz Liszt. Quelques réflexions épistémologiques et méthodologiques sur leur paternité et leur typologie," in: *Ecrits de compositeurs (1850-2000). Problèmes, méthodes et perspectives de recherches*, ed. Michel Duchesneau, Valérie Dufour, and Marie-Hélène Benoit-Otis (Paris: Vrin): in press. See the other articles in this volume as well as its introduction. [Janita Hall-Swadley is currently at work on a complete, English-language translation of Ramann's *Schriften* edition; *F. Liszt*, the first of Hall-Swadley's nine volumes, appeared in print in July 2011. It is discussed in her contribution to the present volume. – Ed.]

^{xviii} See the letter from Carl Alexander to Liszt, 23 July [1878]: "Décidément, mon cher ami, Vous avez manqué Votre vocation car Vous auriez dû devenir diplomate puisque Vous savez atteindre Votre but et que Vous savez charmer" [D-WRgs 59/12a, 92]. See, too, the *Journal inédit* of Carl Alexander: "Le soir petit concert chez la G[rande] D[uchesse]. Il fut ravissant. Liszt joua et accompagna [...] en génie. Il est prince dans le domaine de l'art, de l'esprit et du caractère" (21 décembre 1860) [D-WRI Grossherzogliches Hausarchiv A XXVI, 1959, 34r].

^{xix} D-WRgs 59/82, 1, which contains the text of a letter from Liszt to the Princess, January 10, 1861.

^{xx} Dufetel, "Les écrits de Franz Liszt."

^{xxi} About the two categories of "truth," see John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 91: "Understanding the paths along which Wagner's imagination set off is more important than correcting conscious or unconscious inaccuracies. Yet editorial meticulousness is not to be despised: it is only against the background of empirical truth that the 'poetic truth' can be recognized for what it is—another truth and not a distortion that the exegete is at liberty to dismiss." See too Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3-17. With regard to Liszt, see Alexander Rehding, "Liszt's Musical Monuments," *19th Century Music* 26, no. 1 (2002): 52-72; "Inventing Liszt's Life: Early Biography and Autobiography," in: *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, ed. Kenneth Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 14-27; and Dufetel, "Franz Liszt et la 'propagande wagnérienne': Le projet de deux livres en français sur l'histoire de l'opéra et sur Wagner (1849–1859)," *Acta musicologica* 82, no. 2 (2010): 263-304.

^{xxii} Quoted from Seneca, *Lettres à Lucilius*, 5 vol. (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1969), Vol. 2, 104 = Book IV, letter 64.