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MIND AND WORK**

A LECTURE DELIVERED BY  
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LOUIS CHARLES ELSON was born on April 17, 1848, and died on February 14, 1920. He was educated in Boston, his native city, and Germany. As a teacher at the New England Conservatory of Music, as music editor for Boston newspapers, he exerted a great influence for music in this country over a period of many years. He also served as musical correspondent for several European and South American papers, and enjoyed distinction as a lecturer to the public as well as in the classroom. As author, composer and editor, he had a career of great significance in America's musical development.

In 1945 the Library of Congress received a bequest from the late Mrs. Bertha L. Elson, widow of Louis Charles Elson, to provide lectures on music and musical literature in memory of her husband. Mr. Barzun's lecture was one of the series made possible by Mrs. Elson's generous bequest.



## LITERATURE IN LISZT'S MIND AND WORK

One of the curiosities of criticism as it is practiced today is that although the relation to the human mind of literature—words and ideas—is taken for granted as the most natural thing in the world, and the gift of song likewise, the relation of literature to music is held to be unnatural, indeed illicit. It is as if the mind had a solid partition between its faculties. The use of language to talk about music is deemed illegitimate, so that the voluble music lover and the voluminous music critic have really no right to exist. What is said among friends leaving the concert hall and what is printed the next morning in the paper are alike nonsensical; these familiar habits are at best tolerated absurdities.

The same relation in reverse is reproved even more vehemently: subjects called literary can find no embodiment in musical sound. But since many composers seem unaware of the prohibition, they have to be dealt with somehow; they are tagged as “programmatic” and charged with lack of “purity” for their determination to make music out of “extra-musical” ideas.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Mr. Elliott Carter's tribute to the late Roger Sessions: “His devotion to the purest tradition of his art is such as to eliminate all non-musical, literary elements.” This virtue is one of those cited by the critic as proof of the composer's “high moral stand . . . in every aspect of his mature life.” (*Proceedings of the American Academy-Institute of Arts and Letters*, 1985, p. 57.)

To the general public these distinctions are not vivid, though it grasps the bearing of the words *program*, *literary*, and *pictorial* as commonly applied to certain works or particular passages within them. Some composers are, as it were, notorious for their flouting of purity; they argue that theirs is a genre of equal rank with the pure. They are like divorced persons 75 years ago claiming to be respectable. One such composer is Franz Liszt, the centenary of whose death was lately celebrated in many cities of Europe and America—apparently in spite of his dubious status. He is thus the perfect instance to examine if the dispute over purity is ever to be shelved as one of those historical polemics that in retrospect are judged to be noise without contents.

That judgment will probably not be reached if one attempts to deal only with the musical works and their titles, programs, or literary sources. By the very statement of the case that “some do and some don’t” we are forced to consider types of mind and kinds of human experience. Liszt was one of the incriminated breed who advertised his heresy in prefaces and argued for it in letters and articles. We must therefore try to find out how he came to this sinful state and why the time in which he lived at first permitted and then condemned what he did and said.

For this purpose one must take the word *literature* in its broadest possible sense. I shall mean by it anything that ordinarily goes by that name—tales, plays, poetry—and also whatever is or has been a topic for discourse and description. It is the whole realm of ideas, of verbalized experience and imagination, that is at issue; it is the role of ideas during Liszt’s long life that should explain, indeed justify, his advocacy and practice as a composer.

The first important portion of “verbalized experience” that shaped Liszt’s mind goes by the historical name of Romanticism. At that word, a host of meanings and associations rush into the mind, mostly from conventional criticism. They should be put aside in favor of different meanings and associations, untouched by the perspective and critiques of the last 150 years, and thus closer to what Liszt and his contemporaries understood by Romantic.

For although some of the ideas and feelings of that past time are still with us, they no longer evoke the same judgments, their connections have changed; we do not speak the same language about them. To

illustrate this difference about one such feeling which I believe still has currency, the feeling of love, Constant Lambert long ago drew a comparison: "There was nothing forced," he says, "about Liszt's romanticism. It was the most natural thing in the world for Liszt to take his young countesses on Lake Como and read them Tasso and Victor Hugo. If anyone still thinks this spirit exists, let him visualize himself taking his young woman on the Serpentine and reading her T. S. Eliot."<sup>2</sup>

And Lambert goes on to point out the inhibitions, social and individual, that would make such a modern scene impossible or that would make it ridiculous instead of touching if it did take place.

Again in speaking of his first love Liszt said she was "a soul pure and chaste like the alabaster of which sacred vessels are made."<sup>3</sup> We may think this is a foolish description of any human being: we know all about glands and complexes and prefer to discuss those instead of the soul. But it was a power, not a weakness, to see the beloved as Liszt did. It was the power that enabled him to compose the "Gretchen" movement of the *Faust* symphony. Our glands and complexes sing a different music.

The explanation of the difference is that Romanticism as an historical movement that swept over Europe and America in the first half of the nineteenth century did not consist merely of young love glorified; it was love fused with Tasso and Victor Hugo. What do I mean by that? I mean that love was a more than personal concern of the body and the emotions; it had multiple connections with every new current of thought—artistic, social, political, and religious.

Twenty-five years of war—the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon—had bred a new sensibility, through repeated experiences of horror and glory, victories and massacres, betrayal and heroism, high energy and incessant anxiety. One unexpected result was that in the generations that came of age between 1790 and 1830 there appeared an amazing galaxy of geniuses in all fields. Among them, Franz Liszt, born in the exact middle year 1811, is conspicuously representative.

<sup>2</sup> Constant Lambert, *Music Ho*, London, 1934, pp. 178-9.

<sup>3</sup> Liszt, "Lettre d'un bachelier, etc." (to George Sand) in *Pages Romantiques*, ed. Jean Chantavoine, Paris, 1912, p. 103.

He was, to begin with, conspicuous as a lover; so let us look again at the scene on Lake Como, to which, in 1835, he had taken, not "young countesses" in the plural, but one, Marie d'Agoult, who was not so very young, being thirty years old, six years older than Liszt. They had been lovers in Paris, where Liszt had become a celebrated virtuoso of the piano, and where she was known as a woman of remarkable character and cultivation. She left her elderly husband and young children to follow Liszt, not as an escapade of the sort we witness in twentieth-century films, but because to her and to Liszt, love was one of the high and rare powers reserved for certain chosen spirits. Love, I repeat, was not simply sexual instinct and emotional glow; it was not yet regarded as a therapeutic measure or a neurotic habit. It was a passion. As such it underlay every important and noble endeavor. It was the inner engine that drove some beings to be heroes and artists; it required a strong and beautiful soul to sustain it, and although it was Woman that enshrined love and elevated mankind (as Goethe had just said in *Faust*), the same passion could unite persons of the same sex in lifelong friendship.

All this is what Constant Lambert meant when he spoke of Liszt's behavior on Lake Como as not forced. And all this is what Liszt himself took for granted when he thought about life and love.

In the village of Bellagio on the Lake, he and Marie would read to each other among the trees, at the foot of a statue of Dante and Beatrice. It was by an inferior sculptor and it made Liszt indignant because (he says) Beatrice was shown as "squat and material." But he was also puzzled by Dante, who made Beatrice typify divine science—theology—instead of love.<sup>4</sup> Since it is Beatrice who draws Dante upwards on the last part of his journey, Liszt thought the abstractions of theology inadequate as motive power. The Romantics had high ideals, but they believed above all in concrete realities.

At this point, one ought to speak Chinese, or rather to speak about the Chinese language, in which (as I understand) there is a word *h-s-i-n*, which means mind-and-heart, all in one. It is not a union of two things, but a single concept. The very notion is what Liszt and his fellow Romanticists discovered for themselves, without knowing a word

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

of Chinese. They knew and felt that feeling and thought are not separate forces that sometimes clash and sometimes join; they are the single mysterious energy we live by. They went on to say that it can be best understood by looking within and then expressing the findings in poetry, drama, music, painting—all the arts, and the sciences besides. This is the reason for their concern with the self, their egotism, if you like; the self was their research material, and the arts were the form in which the findings were expressed.

These facts should help to hold in check the tendency to think of Romantic with a capital R as the adjective that denotes romance with a small *r* and nothing more. The love, the passion, one might even say, in modern jargon, the libido of the Romanticists is the clue to their achievements, to what their mind-and-heart conceived and created. Liszt is representative because of the range of these passions in him.

In his seventeenth year, after a shattering disappointment in love, he experienced simultaneously a religious crisis and a nervous breakdown. He was reported dead and subsequently had the pleasure of reading his own obituary. From then on, he never ceased being haunted by the need for love and for God. Long before his well-known entry into the Church, he had given himself heart-and-mind to several quasi-religious causes. In Paris, after the revolution of July 1830, he became what would now be called a fellow-traveler of the socialist movement inspired by Count Saint-Simon.<sup>5</sup> The Saint-Simonians could be described as Christian Technocrats. Their reform of society was to be accomplished for the good of all, and without class struggle, by industrialists and bankers, whose aim would be to establish a divine community on earth. In this task, the artist was to be the mediator between God and man; he would in fact be an artist-priest, and meanwhile a propagandist for the faith. So the cult actively recruited poets and musicians for the creation of songs and marches, and at least one unknown graphic artist must have been snared to design the pale blue troubadour costume in which the band of singing converts paraded on the boulevards.

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent account of Liszt's participation in the work of the Saint-Simonians, see Ralph P. Locke: *Music, Musicians, and the Saint-Simonians*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986.

Liszt did not compose music for them, but played at their gatherings and did compose, on the basis of their tenets, a long article on "The Situation of Artists in Society." Like his fellow artists, he thought that situation abominable. Genius starved, patronage was humiliating, and success could be bought only by charlatanism. These considerations caused, or coincided with, Liszt's disenchantment with the role of virtuoso—the show-off who could play faster and louder than anybody else. He was also disenchanted with the type of composition for which virtuosos were known—fantasias and variations, always labeled "brilliant," on airs from the latest popular opera, usually Italian. He decided to compose and perform serious music.

The liberal Revolution of 1830, the socialism of Saint-Simon and other reformers, the passion for experience, the innovations emerging in every art, taken together, show that the time was bent on construction, on reconstruction, in fact, after the destruction of the Old Regime. The prerequisite of all these efforts was: new principles of organization. Socialism was one. Another was Nationalism. Liszt could not fail to feel its attraction. Here again, it is important to avoid giving a word its twentieth-century connotations. To the Romanticists, the love of nation did not mean an aggressive, self-satisfied attitude toward other peoples. On the contrary, it meant an appreciation of diversity among the national traditions. The nations of Europe were compared to a bouquet of cultures, each with its characteristic fragrance. What this conception opposed was the cosmopolitan outlook of the previous period, the idea that Man with a capital M was the same the world over.

The cultural nationalism that Liszt espoused went hand in hand with other novel ideas. It implied that not only the elite but also the people were bearers and creators of culture. This belief started the study of the folk and its lore—folklore: collecting popular songs and dances, popular customs and myths, and making use of them in literature and the arts. These studies formed part of the new passion for history and its ruling principle—evolution: the state of society and culture was seen, not as the work of pure reason by a handful of philosophes, but as the product of history, a slow development to which all individuals and all nations had contributed.

Inspired by such beliefs, Liszt set off on another intellectual adventure. He was born a Hungarian and proud of the fact; but he had not been brought up to learn the language—a lack he always regretted.<sup>6</sup> He spoke German, French, and Italian, and as a traveling performer was at home in every country. This made him a cosmopolitan of a kind, but it also heightened his sense of national differences, and it is noteworthy that in composing the songs or other works on subjects that inspired him, he made use of the musical idiom from the appropriate nation. Thus in his paraphrase of Petrarch's Sonnet 47 he opens with a clearly Italian motif; in his Historical Portraits of seven Hungarian heroes, the rhythms and intervals derive from Hungarian music.

This putting together of elements originating within national boundaries came to Liszt naturally: he did not make a point of it. But his attachment of mind-and-heart to Hungary impelled him to one highly conscious effort. He determined not only to compose on Hungarian themes, as Chopin had done on Polish, but also to study where those song and dance tunes came from. He did much reading and field work—visiting remote villages and camping out with Gypsies and finally publishing a large book.<sup>7</sup> Here surely is a fine instance of Romantic nationalism proving its open-minded, nonaggressive nature, for Liszt's conclusion was that the source of Hungarian music was actually Gypsy.

Liszt used these themes and rhythms both in works like the nineteen Hungarian Rhapsodies and the Rakóczy March, where they are developed by themselves, and in works such as *La Notte* (inspired by Michelangelo), where they mingle with other national or international formulas. He also worked up Italian, Polish, Russian, and Spanish folk tunes. The time of composers specializing in the music of one nation, in the manner of Dvořák, Smetana, Grieg, Ives, or Copland, had not yet come.

It is clear that Liszt was by temperament impressionable, eager, inquisitive, and supercharged with restless energy; obviously a genius,

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<sup>6</sup> Bence Szabolsci, *The Twilight of Franz Liszt*, trans. A. Deak, Budapest, 1959, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Liszt, *The Gypsy in Music*, trans. F. L. Reeves, 2 v., London, n.d., p. 296.

yet so receptive to every influence as to suggest the lack of a strong directing center; he was always in search of one, on earth and in heaven. After the Saint-Simonian cult, he attached himself to an eloquent priest named Lamennais, who had gathered a few disciples at his place outside Paris. Liszt lived there for weeks at a time, imbibing a different brand of Christian socialism aimed at the working classes. And whereas the Saint-Simonians wanted to become the new church, Lamennais had no wish to break with Rome, though in the end Rome broke with him; it should have been a forewarning to Liszt.

The most curious fact about these adventures of the mind-and-heart is that, once caught, Liszt remained faithful, even though no longer in touch. To the end of his life he kept speaking with respect of these incompatible socialist pioneers and as one who still believed. He had truly given himself to them. After a severe strike of the silk workers in Lyon in 1834, he composed a piano work in their honor, and a little later went with a singer friend to that city, to give a benefit concert for the unemployed. He composed choruses on the dignity of labor and even on particular trades. Liszt's memory of his passionate encounters always led to action or creation. The story of his struggle to organize—and subsidize—the putting up of a statue to Beethoven in Bonn, with concerts (including a cantata of his own) that should bring together in celebration all the musical genius of Europe, is an epic in itself. In a word, hardly any person or place or idea of importance in Liszt's lifespan is without an echo in the catalog of his musical works.<sup>8</sup>

In his friendships and love affairs one finds the same pattern, modified by the failure of human beings to stay as constant to persons as to ideas. Liszt's choice of Marie d'Agoult, and later of the Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, was preeminently a response to their strength of mind and character. For Marie's looks were striking

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<sup>8</sup> *Lyon* (piano solo, 1840); *Arbeiterchor* (soloists, chorus, and piano, 1848); *Le Forgeron* (on words of Lamennais; male chorus and piano, 1845); *An die Künstler* (Schiller; soloists, male chorus, and orchestra, 1853); Duo concertant sur 'Le Marin' (violin and piano, 1837-49).

rather than handsome and Carolyne was positively ill-favored.<sup>9</sup> Both women were intense, learned, and humorless. Liszt's early writings, in French, were in fact collaborations with Marie, who later wrote novels on her own; his writings in German were collaborations with Carolyne, who later produced a twenty-four-volume work on the salvation of Europe through a reform of the Catholic Church.

These two women did not so much inspire as direct Liszt's literary and musical energies during two important periods totaling twenty-one years—and not solely his political and social opinions. For example, Liszt, having made his mark through the piano, felt very insecure about scoring for orchestra, and until his forties he relied on two or three helpers for his instrumentation. Seeing this, the princess uttered a reproach: "Why do you use Raff to orchestrate the march?" she asked. "What painter would content himself with handing over his drawing and leaving the colouring of it to his apprentice? . . . I think that you do not put enough emphasis on giving colour to your musical thoughts. You content yourself with retouching . . . if I compare this with literary style, correction is never as good as original writing."<sup>10</sup> Very sound advice, which Liszt finally accepted. He may have remembered that his Saint-Simonian comrades held that Woman should be worshipped as the Revealer of Truth.

Nor was Liszt a one-man dog in his submissiveness; having told Wagner that he was working on a symphony in three movements about Dante, he received a long letter back arguing that although a composer could readily express in music the ambience of Hell and of Purgatory, Paradise was not possible.<sup>11</sup> Wagner had a way of improvising

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<sup>9</sup> Liszt, in a letter to his mother, asserted that Carolyne was beautiful, "indeed very beautiful"; that he was a connoisseur in these matters: "her soul lends her face to transfiguration of the highest beauty." (Quoted from LaMara in Ernest Newman, *The Man Liszt*, New York, 1935, p. 161.) In so saying, Liszt was consistent, for speaking in an early essay on the influence of the love of woman, he had written that it did not depend on the deceptive lure of the senses. (*Pages Romantiques*, p. 165.) But others confirmed the gossip that prompted Liszt to write as he did to his mother. George Eliot, travelling in Germany, met the Princess in Weimar and noted in her diary: "She is short and unbecomingly endowed with embonpoint . . . the face is not pleasing, the profile especially harsh and barbarian . . . her teeth unhappily are blackish too." (Gordon S. Haight, *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, New Haven, 1985, p. 139.)

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Humphrey Searle, "The Orchestral Works," in Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*, New York, 1970, pp. 280-1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

theories of this sort, which he promptly forgot or contradicted. But Liszt was earnest, pondered the arguments, and cut back poor Dante to two-thirds of his symphony.

In these and other ways, Liszt presents the unusual spectacle of a genius as it were "available" to multiple and unpredictable influences. Ordinarily, this is a sign of youth. We are not surprised when we hear the critics say that Liszt in his twenties was "profoundly influenced" by Berlioz, "profoundly influenced" by Paganini, "profoundly influenced" by Chopin, to say nothing of their contemporaries in Paris during the 1830s—Victor Hugo, George Sand, Heinrich Heine, Sainte Beuve, Vigny, and the rest. The satirical Heine wrote an article making fun of Liszt's plural enthusiasms, which upset Liszt into replying.

But there was no frivolity in his stockpiling of mentors. We find their imprint not just in early works but in early and late, and Liszt keeps adding to them. In midcareer he discovers Glinka and proceeds to call himself his disciple. He comes across the Russian Five and Russian folksongs and adopts their ways. On one occasion, he went so far as to tell a gathering of musicians that everyone in the room was a greater master than he.<sup>12</sup> The remark struck some people as insincere; Liszt had a reputation for vanity which seemed incompatible with this humble acknowledgment. But Liszt's vanity was not conceit; it was a boyish pleasure in being on stage, handsome, potent, and wildly applauded; and that is a feeling quite compatible with the feeling of indecisiveness, of uncertainty about the direction to follow next. The complication of mind-and-heart was the price he paid for being so susceptible to novel ideas.

No doubt it was troublesome at times. It made Liszt loosen the ties of his friendship with Berlioz, who was a firm friend and supporter, and become a devotee of Wagner, who was an exploiter. Liszt's music and fame did not greatly matter to Wagner, who, after their quarrel, had only one thing to say: "He has served me well."<sup>13</sup>

Liszt in his fifties rediscovered Catholicism and the beauties of

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<sup>12</sup> Ernest Newman, *The Man Liszt*, New York, 1935, p. 281.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Szabolsci, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

Gregorian chant. He lived in Rome a great part of each year. But he was an embarrassment to the Vatican because of his liaison with the princess. He had made all arrangements to marry her on his fiftieth birthday and he wrote a piece for the occasion, but she had been divorced and the Church refused to sanction the marriage. He went into retreat and two years later took minor orders. He was made a door-keeper, acolyte, lector, and exorcist, but had no right to the title of *abbé*, by which he became known. The conversion did not make him more acceptable to the Roman ecclesiastics, but one good result was his new mission—to reform church music—and that produced at least one great work in his latter years.

In those declining years, like many artists and others of his generation, Liszt suffered unhappiness and misunderstanding. The revolutions of 1848 all over Europe had effected a radical change of temper while he remained himself. Four years of brutal war cost many lives and the aftermath of repression broke many spirits. Art, genius, love, and the cult of the new no longer ruled the imagination; it was submerged in politics and machine industry. Reform gave way to class war; the artist turned outsider and enemy of society, or else adopted a sober classicism as a retreat. The young developed contempt for grandeur and heroism; in short, the Romanticist impulse had been killed; its fusion of the ideal and the real was reduced to an angry study of the physically actual, mistakenly called Realism.

With his great fund of passionate energy, Liszt did not succumb at once. Indeed, in the ten years following 1848, when the Princess Wittgenstein joined him at Weimar, he had a most fruitful period of composing and of conducting the “new music”—Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner formed the *avant-garde*. But the hostile reaction was prompt. In 1854 Hanslick, a far from negligible critic, declared war on the new school in a best-seller called *Beauty in Music*; and in 1860 the young Brahms drafted and circulated a manifesto singling out Liszt as a nefarious influence. The year before, Liszt’s only son Daniel had died; two years later his older daughter Blandine. It was in the year

following that Liszt, balked in his desire to marry the princess, withdrew into religious seclusion. He did make a comeback into the secular world in 1869, dividing his time between Rome, Budapest, and Weimar, where he acquired his numerous pupils. But in those final twenty-five years he felt misjudged by his contemporaries, unrecognized as a composer, and hopeful only that posterity would make amends, as it had for his poet-hero Tasso, around whose image he composed a second orchestral work.

It was surely this singular combination of restlessness and fidelity that made Liszt a great disseminator. By instinct he played the busy bee going from flower to flower, and like the bee he picked up and spread pollen. What is more, in spite of his cumulative infatuations, he managed to produce music that was distinctively his. In his production of more than 1,700 songs, piano pieces, choruses, symphonies, masses, and arrangements, one finds much that is not home-grown, unassimilated elements that jangle, and ideas that he could not handle satisfactorily. But from his tremendous output a remarkable body of work remains that is Liszt himself—so remarkable that it has lately been revalued and raised by some critics to the highest rank. Bartók said that Liszt was more important than Strauss or Wagner. Virgil Thomson and others in our midst consider Liszt the precursor of twentieth-century atonality and harmonic methods. I would add, for my part, the very modern habit of sudden changes of mood for no dramatic purpose.

This case made in Liszt's behalf depends on the way one gauges importance. Does greatness in music reside in showing new ways of composing, or in producing works whose hearing affords an experience of the kind called profound and unique? In other words, is it historical or aesthetic importance that matters? The professional musician is captivated by the former; the selfish music lover prefers the latter. Some might say, why not have both? To satisfy these greedy ones, Liszt offers a relatively small number of works, among which a consensus has settled on at least three—the Piano Sonata in B minor, the *Faust* Symphony, and the *Gran* Mass. Many other works are fine or interesting, or both, but not unquestionable masterpieces. Still, it is not given to everybody to create fine works that are also mile-

stones in the development of the art. Hence the need to say a word about Liszt's place in nineteenth-century music, especially since he himself wrote about his intentions at length. They were one of his literary adventures; the "new music" was one of his passionate causes.

If in the books on music history you turn to the pages on Liszt, your eye will probably fall on the phrase "Program Music," followed by something about the symphonic poem and "the School of Berlioz and Liszt." It is assumed that everybody knows what program music is and that these two composers must be credited with establishing it as a genre. The assumption is false, and the assertion mistaken. Liszt's achievement, let alone that of Berlioz, cannot be understood if this conventional opinion is accepted as tenable. Therefore, as with Romanticism, Socialism, and Nationalism, one must set aside whatever ideas you may have about program music.

To begin with, if you go beyond the two phrases I have quoted, you find nothing but confusion and contradiction. Take the standard scholarly work by Frederick Niecks entitled *Program Music*.<sup>14</sup> It discusses six periods of such music, beginning with the sixteenth century, where you find Janequin, Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, and others "programming" right and left, 300 years before Liszt was born. And toward the end of the book you find Brahms, who over his own signature said that he did not approve of programs.

So the very writers who believe in the existence of program music show that it cannot have been invented or established by Berlioz and Liszt. The truth is, so much bad thinking and poor verbalizing has been expended on what is really a simple matter that it would take a small book to untwist it. Here only a sketch of an answer can be given to the metaphysical riddle of program music.

Forget the word *program*; substitute the word *plan*. Obviously, any piece of music must have a plan. If one is inspired to write a four-bar theme and leaves it on one's desk, it will not rise overnight like a bowl of dough and develop itself into a piece. The composer must choose to write a fugue, a rondo, a sonata, a set of variations, or whatnot. These are recognized recipes. Sonata form implies two contrasting themes,

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Niecks, *Program Music*, London, 1906.

distinct tonalities, transitions, repeats, and a recapitulation. These together supply an outline within which freedom for inventions remains. This outline is a plan; it is a preestablished program of work, which somebody in the past devised or developed from a still earlier formula. All formulas come from outside the material itself. So when one reads or hears that this or that work by Liszt is based on "extramusical ideas," ideas outside music, it is useful to remember that no music is composed in any other way.

The illusion that somehow the sounds themselves generated the formulas is due to the force of tradition. We do not know who decided that a suite should have three movements and that these should be fast-slow-fast; but after ten million suites have been written the plan seems inevitable. In like manner, some may think that a sonnet of fourteen lines, with a division after the eighth, was decreed from the dawn of human speech. But we happen to know that the first sonnets varied greatly in length and that George Meredith got away with a long series of sonnets of *sixteen* lines.

Sonnet means little song and brings us back to the various plans in use for music. Undoubtedly the first plan was to fit sounds to the words of poems or to the steps of a dance. These two purposes are obviously extramusical; they are programs. For example, a piece of dance music repeats many more times than a song—for practical, external reasons. When we get to church ritual and later to opera, the shaping of musical material by an outside requirement becomes even more obvious.

From all this it follows that the overwhelming bulk of all the music we have has been composed for purposes outside itself and shaped accordingly. These shapes are further conditioned by the physical limitations of the voice or the instruments; which does not mean, of course, that the interrelations of the sounds themselves did not suggest various devices within the plans. But even with sounds there has been outside interference in the form of inspired cheating called the even-tempered scale.

Now we come at last to the point where Liszt plays his part. He is supposed to have said: let us drop the traditional plans and substitute stories and pictures as principles of organization. He gave his

pieces the names of people, of scenic spots, of famous literary works. He changed the name symphony to symphonic poem. He wrote prefaces to his big scores. He even projected a history of the world jointly with a painter—twelve panels each, in paint and in music. All this is what set the angry lions roaring. Music was being destroyed, annihilated by literary and pictorial purposes.

In their outcry, these opponents of Liszt made one obvious and unanswerable point: music by itself cannot tell a story or depict a scene. That is so true that one wonders why a composer should be attacked for doing what cannot be done. Perhaps the critics would say, the crime consists in the attempt. But *did* Liszt try to do the impossible? One of his piano pieces is called "After reading Dante"; another is: "The Fountains of the Villa d'Este"; one of the symphonic poems is named after our old friend Tasso. Was Liszt so stupid as to believe that these works somehow copied or retold what he had read or seen out of his window? Let us hear what he himself said about the purpose of a title or a written-out program:

A program, he writes, is "any foreword in intelligible language added to a piece of pure instrumental music." One of its purposes is "to guard the listener against an arbitrary poetical interpretation and to direct his attention in advance to the poetical idea of the whole"; another is to indicate preparatively the spiritual moments which impelled the composer to create his work."<sup>15</sup> In other words, the listener is expected to *associate* the music with a scene or character, as the composer says that he himself has done and as he sometimes records by means of a title or subtitle.

So far was Liszt from trying to blend abstractions with music that he points out the superiority of music over words: "Only in music does feeling freely dispense with the aid of reason and its means of expression, which are so inferior to intuition."<sup>16</sup> What is taken from life then—not the fact or story, but their experiencing—is intuited

<sup>15</sup> Serale, op. cit., p. 300n. "Poetical idea" is no invention of Liszt; the Romanticists—Coleridge, Hoffmann, Berlioz—established the idea that "poetry" is a common quality of all the arts. Beethoven made a point of saying that to compose as he did was *dichten*.

<sup>16</sup> Niecks, op. cit., p. 279. The use of such words as *spiritual*, *intuition*, and *expressiveness* to characterize the highest art came from the conviction that works of genius demanded more than craft. For the same reason, inspired music conveyed the ineffable and did not do so by mere scene painting or story telling. Beethoven put it in a nutshell: Nicht malerei, aber Ausdruck der Empfindung.

in the music or overlooked entirely; it does not matter, but if intuited, it is pleasant to know what nameable fragment of experience is at the root of the intuition.

Take for example Liszt's *Tasso*. What moved Liszt was not the poet's epic poem about the crusades, but his life as Byron dramatized it in the monologue called "The Lament of Tasso." Accordingly, Liszt's work is subtitled *Lamento e trionfo*—lament and triumph. From the foreword we learn further that the minuet section suggests Tasso's presence at the court of Ferrara. Incidentally, Byron says that he wrote his poem after a visit to Ferrara, where he saw the hospital cell in which Tasso had been confined as a madman. That cell is therefore the program behind the poem which is the program behind the music.

What may we conclude? First, that such titles and programs afford but very mild and vague indications—a mere orientation of one's mood; and next, that they relate to the music at very few points. They cannot possibly direct or control the course of the music to the same extent as a musical form of the kind I have called a plan. Compare the casualness of the title or a program with such rigid prescriptions as classical fugue and modern serial composition. Nor did Liszt and his followers—much less Berlioz and Mendelssohn—go in for inserting in their music messages in code, as we have recently learned that Alban Berg did in his last work.<sup>17</sup>

The influence of mood, then, is indefinite and intermittent. A mood, moreover, can have many different causes. This is well illustrated by another of Liszt's symphonic poems, the one called *Les Préludes*. Here is the gist of the blurb: "What is our life but a series of preludes to that unknown song of which Death intones the first solemn note? Love is the enchanted dawn of every life. . . ." It goes on in the same generalizing way for another ten lines. For years, this program has been known as a paraphrase of a poem by Lamartine, and the music has been praised or damned as a faithful rendering of this moonshine.

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<sup>17</sup> George Perle, "The Secret Program of the Lyric Suite" (*The Musical Times*, Aug., Sept., Oct., 1977). In the third installment (Oct., p. 809), Mr. Perle imagines how useful it would be to have a score of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* annotated as Berg annotated the Lyric Suite, thus giving clues to the secret code Perle discovered. Berlioz (and Liszt) never composed in a manner suitable to encoding messages. They would have thought it an exercise in ingenuity harmful to musical expression.

Well, it turns out that the music was originally composed in response to another poem by another poet—something called “The Four Elements” by Joseph Autran. When years later Liszt prepared the work for publication the princess said in effect: “Whoever heard of Joseph Autran and his four elements? Make it Lamartine,” and *she* wrote the program.

Meanwhile the music stayed put with its old mood on its head. What does the listener make of it? Neither four elements nor a series of preparations for death, but a simple contrast between a calm, pastoral piece and a bustling one that could be called warlike. How mood or atmosphere gets translated from “intuition” into music so as to awaken a similar intuition when heard is a large subject that calls for separate treatment. Rhythm, dynamics, and other contrasts, the associations of tempo and timbre, all play a part in this magic—a magic, by the way, which the artist who writes poems, novels, or plays also has to master; for words in literature cannot simply tell; they must evoke, reawaken the intuition of life, in a fashion parallel to music.<sup>18</sup>

To sum up, titles and programs do not make music literary or pictorial, as some affect to believe; the verbalizing merely reports an association of mood, place, or reading matter that the composer chose for his work, either before or after producing it. He reports the link as a sort of setting or occasion.<sup>19</sup> The ways in which he reproduces his intuition, his successive moods, are necessarily technical ways, and in that sense “purely” musical, “intramusical” par excellence.

It may be objected that a determined programmer will distort proper musical form so as to fit some part of his program. The rejoinder is that, if so, the attempt is self-defeating: the listener and critic would detect the flaw and declare the work a bad piece of music—incoherent or ill-balanced. What then, of Liszt’s crusade against the rules of classical form, which he wanted the symphonic poem to supersede? The

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<sup>18</sup> See “Note on Imitative Music” below.

<sup>19</sup> “Occasions” were important to the Romanticists by reason of their lively interest in history. Many of Wordsworth’s poems, for example, are preceded by head notes on the time, mood, or place of composition, e.g., Tintern Abbey. They are little programs. Byron similarly noted the when, how and where of his verse tales, and those today who tend to deride this documentation might remember that T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland* could hardly be understood without the footnotes. Program poetry is no unheard of thing.

answer is, he overstated his case. Where he himself departed from strict sonata form, he was only taking the same musical liberties as Haydn and Beethoven did. Modern students of Liszt's work have found nothing wild about his methods of composition. The latest analyst of the symphonic poems writes: "Rather than claim that Liszt 'invented a form,' . . . one might say at most that he invented a genre. To be even more precise. . . he really invented only the *name* of a genre." And he adds: "Liszt's sonata form makes constant reference to those of earlier composers, especially Beethoven and Berlioz. . . . The radical quality of Liszt's musical thought resides in his harmonies and melodies, his gestures and contrasts: in short, in his rhetoric rather than in his craftsmanship."<sup>20</sup>

Rhetoric is the word. For every composer has preferences and habits that are distinctive and thus uniquely "extramusical" and "intramusical" at the same time. Liszt was fond of repeating long sections. He himself said that this practice was not lack of invention but a means of achieving "clarity, order, and effect."<sup>21</sup> An anecdote suggests a further reason. Felix Weingartner, who was one of Liszt's last pupils and later a famous conductor, showed the master the score of an opera he had composed. Liszt studied the work and said about one passage, "Now that is very beautiful, but it comes only once; you must repeat it. Always repeat a beautiful passage." Weingartner was pleased but had to reply: "That's the entrance of the king; I can't have the king entering twice." "Never mind," said Liszt, "don't think so much."<sup>22</sup> What price program now?

The truth is, the whole program controversy which Liszt thought of great moment is a mare's nest. Program music itself is the Loch Ness monster—people think they have seen it and that it is a beast of a new species, but it does not exist. Yet one can understand why Liszt devoted so much time and thought to the fight. He was first of all reaffirming the Romanticist principle of freedom to innovate; but, more important, he was using his fame and strength to promote

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Kaplan, "Sonata Form in the Orchestral Works of Liszt" (*Nineteenth-Century Music*, VIII-2, Fall 1984, pp. 144-5, 152).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>22</sup> Felix Weingartner, *Akkorde*, Leipzig, 1912, p. 50.

the idea that music is an art as far-ranging and as profound as the others. We now take this proposition for granted, but it was by no means self-evident in the 1830s and 1840s. Beethoven had just died, and it was not his symphonies that enthralled the public, it was grand opera—and opera was a diversion. Instrumental music was only just coming out of the private house into the public concert hall where, aided by technology, it was exploring the possibilities of two virtually new instruments—the piano and the orchestra.

The modern piano engendered the virtuoso, a kind of audible acrobat and prestidigitator. Liszt was one of those, and he produced his own repertory in the form of dazzling, thundering variations on tunes the public had learned at the opera. But as we saw he tired of these empty feats; being the earnest youth that we know, he could not contemplate turning out pyrotechnic trivialities forever. So he ventured to make a transcription of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*—a landmark in orchestration—and played it to great applause. Moreover, Liszt had the example of Chopin's original and serious handling of the piano. The final push toward showing music as an all-encompassing art was to link it spiritually with contemporary masterpieces in the other arts.

To the Romanticists, the works of Goethe and Byron, Scott and Balzac, as well as the freshly rediscovered Dante and Shakespeare, were not just literature; they were revelations; they were secular scriptures. As such, they furnished themes to the new artists, as in the past the Bible had done. The painters no less than the musicians were inspired by Hamlet, Faust, Beatrice, and the ubiquitous Tasso. And since the general public is usually but half aware, it had to be told again and again what the new art, the new music signified. Hence the program. Beethoven's symphonies were popularized thanks to fanciful programs that other musicians wrote. And from that day to this, we have had associative titles—not just an *Eroica*, but a *Domestic Symphony* from Strauss, *Images* and *Footsteps in the Snow* from Debussy, *The Moldau* from Smetana, portraits galore from Elgar and Mussorgsky to Copland and Virgil Thomson, and strange semiscientific tags from Varèse and Boulez. Liszt has not been a solitary criminal.

A look at us, the listeners: for us printed commentary precedes

every concert and surrounds every disc—notes biographical, critical, and miscellaneous, which are even less relevant to the music than Liszt's and the princess's rhetoric.

The present discussion has brought us back to Romanticism as it shaped Liszt's mind-and-heart in his early youth. Looking at him again under that bright light, a rising star in the galaxy, we are reminded that there is one kind of "program" that underlies every piece of music, every work of art. I mean the continuous force of suggestion and desire that impels the artist to do one thing rather than another at each moment of composition; it is the program dictated from within. This unrolling stream of intent, made up of memories, feelings, ideas fused together, is of course guided by technique and later reviewed by critical judgment; but unless that inner plan, half lucid and half visceral, is inherently good, no amount of acquired skill will make up for it. Its richness and freshness is what makes one fugue thrilling and another dull though it obeys all the rules.

This bubbling spring within, Liszt externalized with special brilliance in his improvisations, and it was doubtless through these that he came to be the innovator in harmony which is now his highest claim to fame. But all his genius, all his hopes, loves, and causes, all his generousities and conversions, all his ventures in ideas would have gone for naught if he had not been also a tremendous worker; a Titan at the keyboard, he was a Hercules at the desk. On this point too he represents the Romanticist tenacity. Despite the pain of being at the last a kind of King Lear to his daughter Cosima Wagner, he affected a reconciliation and went to Bayreuth for the first rehearsals of *The Ring*. Art was the best mistress, and his proud motto prevailed: *génie oblige*.

## NOTE ON IMITATIVE MUSIC

When a discussion of "program music" leads to the subject of means, it is likely to slip into a different topic—the imitation in music of natural sounds—e.g., the sheep in Strauss's *Don Quixote*. That practice in western music is anything but new, nor does it depend on modern instrumentation, as Janequin's vocal "Battle of Marignan" is there to show. And few composers have resisted this temptation to mimic: Bach studiously puts in the gospel's tearing of the veil and the earthquake in his *Passions*, as well as other "events" in his cantatas. One movement of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony similarly "copies" pastoral sounds. Critical opinion today is apt to look upon these passages as childish in purpose and effect. The truth is that in nearly all the innumerable instances, the listener would not know he was hearing a brook or a veil being rent without some words to tell him so. In opera and symphonies, association or visual elements supply the clue: bells connote churches, horns and trumpets hunting and war, and so on. But all those "effects" are momentary. Prolonged, they would be unendurable.

Expressiveness, mood, or character in an instrumental piece is an altogether different aesthetic aim. It governs whole movements and it relies on the imaginative use of the basic elements of music, not on actual approximation between sounds. The eighteenth-century attempt to set down a "vocabulary" of formulas by which the various "affections" (emotions) could be stirred was a failure, precisely because music is not denotative. The same devices in diverse contexts and styles produce unlike results; tonalities have no intrinsic "meanings," even though the Greeks thought they had.

These facts of experience form another proof of the contention that music can render the intuitions of the human spirit by its own pure means; it has no need of a code of signals. When Haydn in *The Creation* modulates to C-major on the words "And there was Light," the appropriateness does not mean that C-major = light—or that the effect on the listener is "pictorial." It is a definite but nameless intuition. His response, in the absence of words or dramatic context, might be experienced as "glory" or "salvation" or "Eureka!" This explains

once again why the program of Liszt's *Les Préludes* could so easily be changed, the music remaining the same. In the same way, opera composers can shift arias from *Ivan the Terrible* to *Faust* (Gounod) or can make a masterpiece out of many fragments composed for earlier works—Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*.

In truth, all these points are or should be obvious from the study of any great song by Schubert or Berlioz, Brahms or Hugo Wolf. The perfect adaptation of sound to sense without distorting any musical value or formal beauty is a feature of the plastic material ever at the composer's disposal.







