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### Franz Liszt: A Pathfinder to Modern Music

"Music embodies feeling without forcing it to contend and combine with thought,

as it is forced in most arts and especially in the art of words. If music has one advantage over the other media through which a person can represent the impressions of the soul, it owes this to its supreme capacity to make each inner impulse audible without the assistance of reason... Music presents at once the intensity and the expression of feeling. It is the embodied and intelligible essence of feeling, capable of being apprehended by our senses. It permeates them like a dart, like a ray, like a mist, like a spirit, and fills our soul."<sup>1</sup>

This quote was said by one of the most significant musicians in history: the Hungarian pianist, composer and performer, Franz Liszt. The man was a pioneer in creating his original works, and provided new approaches to form. The ink on his solo works, so bold and complex, leaves the performer without a metronomic beat to follow, forcing them to create an internal pulse of their own: a natural pulse that only man can create. Even when conducting a full orchestra, he was considered the first composer to “breath life” into his scores as he conducted, taking out the robotic feature of a constant metronome. He created new ideas that were adopted by a vast number of composers during his time, which allowed his ideas to explore areas that he himself could not.

**In this paper, drawing on innovative keyboarding techniques and the creation of the symphonic poem, I will argue that Franz Liszt (1811 – 1886) was one of the greatest pioneers of his age through unique composition styles and musical innovations that have carried out way beyond his demise.**

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<sup>1</sup> Liszt Website: <http://www.essentialsofmusic.com/composer/liszt.html>

Franz spent much of his childhood in the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps his first true introduction to music came about from Father Mersitz of the church. Father Mersitz played the organ while young Franz played songs and hymns accompanying the Father.<sup>2</sup> As his mental structure developed there was arguably two major events that helped form Franz's young musicianship. The first spark of his innate ability came about after walking in on his father playing Ries's Piano Concerto in C sharp minor. This was the first actual Romantic piano concerto that reached young Franz's ears. He was "entranced by its glitter and excitement. As if in a dream, he leaned against the piano and stayed there, motionless, for a full hour, listening."<sup>3</sup>

All throughout the first 7 years of life, Liszt had continuous health problems.<sup>4</sup> These problems were grave enough to convince his parents to buy a coffin for him at age 4. Luckily, however, the child who was soon to become one of the greatest artists of his time, began to regain health after doctor visits, and quickly began learning the instrument he so fell in love with; the piano.<sup>5</sup>

His first real lesson teacher was his father, Adam Liszt. Unfortunately, due to Adam's lack of teaching skills, the lessons ended abruptly after just 3 days when Franz "got into a nervous state, threw a fit, and became feverish."<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Young Liszt

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<sup>2</sup> Iwo Załuski, *Young Liszt* (Chester Springs, PA: U.S. Editions Dufour Distributor, 1997) p37

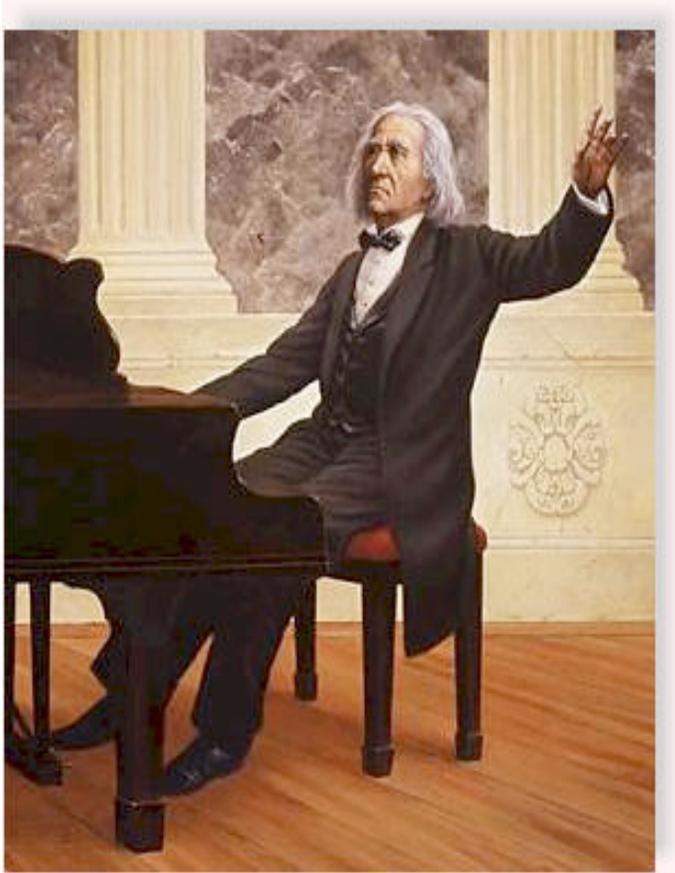
<sup>3</sup> Iwo Załuski, *Young Liszt* (Chester Springs, PA: U.S. Editions Dufour Distributor, 1997) p39-40

<sup>4</sup> Iwo Załuski, *Young Liszt* (Chester Springs, PA: U.S. Editions Dufour Distributor, 1997) p40

<sup>5</sup> Iwo Załuski, *Young Liszt* (Chester Springs, PA: U.S. Editions Dufour Distributor, 1997) p51

<sup>6</sup> Iwo Załuski, *Young Liszt* (Chester Springs, PA: U.S. Editions Dufour Distributor, 1997) p45

stayed practicing by the piano day in and day out, slowly but surely developing the young muscles in his fingers.<sup>7</sup>



Then, a few short concerts later, the name Franz Liszt started to become better known in areas like London and Paris. Perhaps the most prestigious opportunity Liszt had was when he was offered to play in Vienna, the music capital of Europe.<sup>8</sup> Every performance by Liszt in all parts of the continent made his name grow larger and larger.

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<sup>7</sup> Iwo Załuski, *Young Liszt* (Chester Springs, PA: U.S. Editions Dufour Distributor, 1997) p56-57

<sup>8</sup> Iwo Załuski, *Young Liszt* (Chester Springs, PA: U.S. Editions Dufour Distributor, 1997) 53

While his later technique adapted to that of Carl Czerny, a man named Antonio Salieri gave him the most influence in his compositions.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this was the influence that Liszt needed to spark his brilliant compositional ideas.

As Liszt entered the life of composition, he began breaking ground in newer areas that his own performances would never dream of reaching. With the magic of composition, his name traveled all across the world when the universal language of music was and still is performed in front of countless countries.<sup>10</sup> Many called his first works “a rich, lush blanket of sound that was strikingly new and compelling.”<sup>11</sup>

Liszt didn’t actually decide to abandon his performing in order to focus more on composition until 1848.<sup>12</sup> After becoming court director to the Duke of Weimar, he spent most of his time writing and revising the bulk of his more famous pieces, many of which were religious works. However, in order to keep in touch with his performance and teachings, he split up his time in both Rome and Weimar.<sup>13</sup>

What makes Liszt so unique when compared to other artists is his idea of having one large-scale piece rather than using movements for division.<sup>14</sup> A large quantity of his works broke the traditional symphonic style of a four-movement piece; instead he would write one extremely long piece. This kind of writing became the introduction to Symphonic Poem writing, which became a transformation in the idea of writing a theme

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<sup>9</sup> Laurent Philipe. *Franz Liszt and His Search for Ideals* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Laurent Philipe. *Franz Liszt and His Search for Ideals* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Samson, Jim. *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt*. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p37

<sup>12</sup> Liszt Website: <http://www.d-vista.com/OTHER/franzliszt.html#links>

<sup>13</sup> Liszt Website: <http://www.d-vista.com/OTHER/franzliszt.html#links>

<sup>14</sup> Eleanor Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist As Romantic Hero*. (Boston, Little, Brown, 1974).

with an original coherence. “In these works, the themes are modified by changes in harmony, rhythm, or even melodic outline.”<sup>15</sup> These kinds of ideas paint a picture for the listener using a psychological progression. Liszt’s idea of thematic transformation can also be found in some of his concertos. “As a virtuoso pianist, Liszt filled his piano music with fantastic technical demands, and many represent the ultimate in nineteenth century virtuosity.”<sup>16</sup> His unique innovations have also expanded the possibilities of the piano through his symphonic and operatic compositions.<sup>17</sup>

. The unique composer, in his prime, wrote some of his more memorable works between the 1840’s and 1870’s, one in particular was his Sonata in B Minor (1853).<sup>18</sup> When first performed, this piece was considered beyond it’s time and too hard to understand. As history has unfolded, we can now understand that the composition of this piece was one of Liszt’s great steps toward an undiscovered path that will be soon followed by many composers to come.<sup>19</sup>

The sonata was dedicated to a man by the name of Robert Schumann, in response to the dedication of *his Fantasia in C*, Op. 17 to Liszt in 1836.<sup>20</sup> Liszt *Piano Sonata in B minor* was most well known for his lengthy string of motivic parts that were continuously

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<sup>15</sup> Dana Gooley. *The Battle Against Instrumental Virtuosity in the Early Nineteenth Century*. RILM Abstracts of Music Literature. (2006).

<sup>16</sup> Dana Gooley. *The Battle Against Instrumental Virtuosity in the Early Nineteenth Century*. RILM Abstracts of Music Literature. (2006).

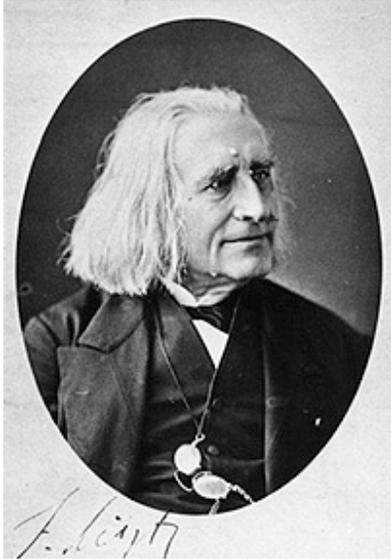
<sup>17</sup> Albrecht, Ján. “Franz Liszt, The Innovator.” *RILM Volume: 34* (1975).

<sup>18</sup> John Rea. *Franz Liszt's 'new path of composition': the sonata in B minor as paradigm*. (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1978.)

<sup>19</sup> Felix Draeseke. *Defending Liszt: Felix Draeseke on the symphonic poems*. RILM Abstracts of Music Literature. (2006).

<sup>20</sup> John Rea. *Franz Liszt's 'new path of composition': the sonata in B minor as paradigm*. (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1978.)

transformed in attempt to fit the time period of music that was written on average.<sup>21</sup> His transformation of theme in this piece can in one framework seem compulsive and coercive, while in another context turn into a breathtaking melody. This was the anomaly that sprouted in peoples minds after this piece hit stage on January 27, 1857 by his son-in-law, Hans von Bülow.<sup>22</sup>



In a less conservative sense, the piece is composed of 4 movements. While this sounds like your average sonata in the Romantic period, what may have set this piece apart from many others is the fact that there were no pauses between movements, supposedly lengthening it to sound like one large movement.<sup>23</sup> Encompassed on the four-movement piece is a single sonata form structure. Countless debates have taken place on the structure of this hour-long sonata and where the development as well as the

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<sup>21</sup> John Rea. *Franz Liszt's 'new path of composition': the sonata in B minor as paradigm*. (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1978.)

<sup>22</sup> John Rea. *Franz Liszt's 'new path of composition': the sonata in B minor as paradigm*. (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1978.)

<sup>23</sup> Liszt Website: <http://www.d-vista.com/OTHER/franzliszt.html#links>

recapitulation is located.<sup>24</sup> Many analysts believe that the development begins on the slower section and the recapitulation falls in the scherzo fugue, but it is hardly worth debating what the artists was thinking in such a long piece with no breaks.<sup>25</sup> At least in reading a piece with gapped movements you would be able to distinguish the different sections of the piece with ease.



Liszt begins the first movement of this piece with soft but staccato whole-note octaves on the low end of the keyboard, moving down a step each note, playing with a harmonic minor scale. After this suggestive intro motive, he moves quickly to a vast array of dramatic note combinations that surround his original opening, creating slightly dissonant embellishments with rising tension right before resolving up, crescendoing into tonic. His transition into the slower movement two is much like the beginning, only

<sup>24</sup> John Rea. *Franz Liszt's 'new path of composition': the sonata in B minor as paradigm.* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1978.)

<sup>25</sup> John Rea. *Franz Liszt's 'new path of composition': the sonata in B minor as paradigm.* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1978.)

more assertive, as if it were more of a closing statement and less of an opening path. He uses these staccato octaves as a theme that moves throughout the entire piece, some may consider them checkpoints when running through the extensive sonata.

Throughout his lifetime, Franz Liszt wrote many letters to his lesson teachers, pupils, friends, and lovers. Roughly recovered, he wrote more than 300 letters between the years of 1828 and 1861 alone.<sup>26</sup> Many of these letters were written to people such as Frederic Chopin, Robert Schumann, his lesson teacher, Carl Czerny, and the woman he was with at the time.<sup>27</sup> With this information we are able to track his life with much more distinct direction and match exact dates with exactly what he was doing at the time.

Not only have letters by Liszt been recovered, but many letters about Liszt have been found as well. With this primary evidence we can know for a fact how some of the other composers thought of him. In a letter by Frederic Chopin, he writes that “all Parisian pianists, including Liszt, were zeros in comparison with Kalkbrenner”.<sup>28</sup> Mendelssohn, after witnessing some of Liszt’s works being performed, wrote to his sister on December 28, 1831, “Liszt was the most dilletantic of all dilletantes. He played everything from memory, but with wrong basses.”<sup>29</sup>

Needless to say, Liszt wasn’t well liked in the conservative world of well structured classical musicians. He was considered a nobody to some, but a misunderstood genius to others. Every artist that tries something new and unexpected to

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<sup>26</sup> Alan Walter. *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*. (New York, NY: Taplinger Pub. Co. 1970.) p76

<sup>27</sup> Alan Walter. *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*. (New York, NY: Taplinger Pub. Co. 1970.) p76

<sup>28</sup> Jim Samson. *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt*. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.) p87.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Davison. *Franz Liszt and the Physiognomic Ideal in the Nineteenth Century*. (Music in Art: International Journal for Music Iconography, Spring-Fall 2005). 30

the ear is thought of as grotesque and even childish. It can be similar to ordering a soda at a fast food restaurant. You expect coke but instead you sip a dr. pepper for the first time. It almost causes you to spit it out at first until you realize that this new sensation in your mouth is genius, it just wasn't what you were expecting.

“His music evoked deep psychological and emotional impact far exceeding what previously existed. Thus he opened new dimensions not only in the world of music, but also in human awareness to the immense impact this emotional, and mysterious, form of communication could have on humans.”<sup>30</sup>

Franz Liszt's works proved to the ear that music, above all else, is the single most expressive way to communicate to one another.

Liszt was said to be possibly the first person ever to use music as a medicine to patients in hospitals.<sup>31</sup> The bulk of Liszt's music “breathe with a human beat of passion rather than a metronomic, or robotic, beat that is many times a slave to pure notation.”<sup>32</sup> Perhaps his childhood health problems may have influenced his ideas on creating life in his music. It is a combination of the nature of Liszt's character and how he was brought up among his private lesson teachers that molded him into turning music into words and feelings beyond anyone's imagination at that time period. He didn't understand the meaning of passion in performing and composition until he took lessons under Carl Czerny and Antonio Salieri.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Liszt Website: <http://www.essentialsofmusic.com/composer/liszt.html>

<sup>31</sup> Liszt Website: <http://www.essentialsofmusic.com/composer/liszt.html>

<sup>32</sup> Liszt Website: <http://www.essentialsofmusic.com/composer/liszt.html>

<sup>33</sup> Iwo Zaluski. *Young Liszt.* (Chester Springs, PA: U.S. Editions Dufour Distributor, 1997.) p67

Franz Liszt has materialized as one of the most inspiring composers in all of music history. His performances and unique composition abilities extended far beyond its 19th Century boundaries. His works flabbergasted, inspired and sparked the imaginations of the people in his own era.

Liszt took the metronome out of music and brought it to life and soul. The only beating you may hear when listening to his works would be from the heart of the piece you are listening to. His compositions “pushed beyond the mathematical Bach, the grace of Mozart and brotherhood of Beethoven. Liszt released the very heart, soul, and to some people's chagrin, demons of mankind.”<sup>34</sup>

Many of his ideals mirror exactly to what we go by these days. He was the very first person to complete his orchestral pieces entirely using a piano, and came up with the idea of piano recitals and master classes, which are used daily in today’s world of music.<sup>35</sup> He was also the first person to play by memory, a quality, which translated in many of today’s recitals. He did things that no other composer had ever thought of at that time. He began writing soloistic parts for uncommon instruments like the triangle in his first piano concerto, and the bass drum in *Héroïde Funèbre*.<sup>36</sup>

He also was extremely selfless in his decision to help promote other great composers like Debussy, Faure, Grieg, Wagner, and Borodin: all famous composers that acquired valuable ideas of ingenuity that helped better their writings simply by studying this virtuosic pedagogue.

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<sup>34</sup> Walker, Alan. *New Light on Liszt and His Music*. (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997.) p192

<sup>35</sup> Leon Botstein. *A Mirror to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Reflections on Franz Liszt*. RILM Abstracts of Music Literature. (2006)

<sup>36</sup> Ján Albrecht. *Franz Liszt, The Innovator*. RILM Volume: 34 (1975).

Liszt explored in the areas of form, and ventured into creating some pieces that were deemed the most intricate and complex ever written for the piano. He is believed to be one of the most honorable pianists in history. He had the greatest influence in music during his time and the impact of his career is still rippling through today's music. His influences encompassed a vast number of composers all through his later years as well as today. I believe that Liszt himself explained it best when he said, "Brahms' Variations are better than mine, but mine were written before his."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dana Gooley. *The Battle Against Instrumental Virtuosity in the Early Nineteenth Century*. *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*. (2006)