

LISZT, HIS SCHOLARS, AND THE B-MINOR BALLADE:
A STUDY OF TEXTURAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

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Franz Liszt (1811-1886) has long been valued as a colorful and controversial figure in nineteenth-century music, but the early debates surrounding his artistic output continue to influence his reception today. The movement of musicology towards cultural studies has provided scholars with a way to study Liszt within his social context while reframing the musical and moral polemics of his biographers, and the discovery of Liszt's late piano music allows theorists to interpret Liszt as a harbinger of musical modernism while skirting tired debates over the "New German School." This divided approach has led to a renewed appreciation of Liszt's place in compositional and cultural history while setting aside the aesthetic values and problems of his music.

In this study, I analyze the intersection between biographical, cultural, and music-theoretical studies on Liszt, arguing that the recent emphasis on cultural and theoretical research does not fully engage a number of Liszt's best works. Following Joseph Kerman's call for a music-centered approach in musicology, I offer a close-to-the-text reading of Liszt's Ballade in B minor (1853) as a case study, revealing how a music-centered analysis can nuance cultural and theoretical approaches. A detailed analysis of the Ballade demands that we treat texture and virtuosity as rational structural elements, and this interpretation reveals new avenues possible in both theoretical and cultural literature: musicologists have generally focused on the significance of Liszt's virtuosity for cultural and biographical studies, while theorists have privileged other, more mainstream compositional devices as markers of innovation.

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Dedicated to my dear friends
THOMAS A. CHASPER
and
THEODORE F. TODHAM
May your society ever live on

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INTRODUCTION

There are two musics (at least so I have always thought): the music one listens to, the music one plays. These two musics are two totally different arts, each with its own history, its own sociology, its own aesthetics, its own erotic; the same composer can be minor if you listen to him, tremendous if you play him (even badly) – such is Schumann.
—Roland Barthes, “Musica Practica” (1970)¹

Just as Wagner prescribes that the virtuoso should overflow the boundary of a discrete ego, Liszt’s predicates extend without limit or distinctions. There are no adequate criteria for determining the boundaries of “sources.” Should one examine, and possibly privilege, his compositions, his visual images, or his texts? Do all have equal, or indeed any, authority? Liszt developed piano technique that has influenced keyboard pedagogy ever since; is not this, perhaps, the place to look for him? Can we be certain that, at any piano concert, we do not hear Liszt...?

—Susan Bernstein, “Liszt’s Bad Style”²

Roland Barthes’s aesthetic judgments would have infuriated Robert Schumann and his Leipzig contemporaries, who would have applied this backhanded praise to their nemesis Franz Liszt (1811-1886) instead. Schumann himself dismissed Liszt’s early attempts at composing—“if he attained unbelievable heights as a player, the composer was left far behind”—and the following generation of critics continued this theme after Liszt’s prominent tenure as *Kapellmeister* in Weimar.³ If they, like Barthes, kept silent about the aesthetic merits of playing Liszt’s music, it is because the values of amateur piano playing were an assumed part of contemporary bourgeois society. Moreover, Schumann and his colleagues believed that much of Liszt’s music was both technically and musically unworkable for anyone besides Liszt himself.⁴

¹ Translated by Stephen Heath in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 149-54.

² Chapter 5 of *Virtuosity of the Nineteenth Century: Performing Music and Language in Heine, Liszt, and Baudelaire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 109-30.

³ See Leon Plantinga, *Schumann as Critic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), 214-18; Louis Crompton, ed., *The Great Composers: Reviews and Bombardments by Bernard Shaw* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 131-39; Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt*, 3 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983, 1989, and 1996), II: 360-63 and III: 14-17.

⁴ As Eduard Hanslick claimed, Liszt’s “purely original works represented a mixture of trivialities and oddities, tolerable only when he played them himself”; see Hanslick’s essay on “Liszt’s

On the other hand, Susan Bernstein's more recent appeal to the Liszt legend reveals that his reputation has widened to include his compositions, his literary output, and his iconography. Yet Liszt is most valued by scholars for his position in Romantic musical culture as well as for his compositional innovations, which include a series of harmonically enigmatic late piano works in addition to earlier experiments in form, program, and harmony as the vanguard of the "New German School."

Nineteenth-century critics frequently mauled Liszt's Weimar-era works, even the now-canonical "Faust" Symphony (1857) and Sonata in B minor (1853).⁵ What complicates Liszt's legacy is that his large repertory is of inconsistent craftsmanship when judged by traditional values of structural unity and formal development; this dubious quality of Liszt's music is acknowledged by all but his most devoted scholars. In his magisterial study on *The Romantic Generation*, Charles Rosen sums up the evidence against Liszt:

The charges are astonishingly heavy and detailed: Liszt's melodies are banal, his harmonies tawdry, his large forms repetitious and uninteresting.... The durability of the old criticism is exceptional, and suggests that the importance of [Liszt] is felt

Symphonic Poems" in *Music Criticisms 1846-99*, trans. Henry Pleasants (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1950), 53. Schumann's characterization of the *Grandes Études* as "studies in storm and dread for, at the most, ten or twelve players in the world" is well known, though it must be mentioned that Schumann had retired from his editorship of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* by the time Liszt began publishing his more important Weimar works; see Walker, I: 305. George Bernard Shaw has a more nuanced retrospective view, writing that Liszt's "studies and transcriptions, if not wholly irreproachable in point of taste, shew [sic] an exhaustive knowledge of the pianoforte; and, unplayable as they are to people who attack a pianoforte with stiff wrists and clenched teeth, they are not dreaded by good pianists"; see *The Great Composers: Reviews and Bombardments by Bernard Shaw*, 138.

⁵ Eduard Hanslick, having listened to Hans von Bülow's performance of the Sonata, declared that "anyone who has heard this and finds it beautiful is beyond help"; Clara Schumann called it a "blind noise"—see Kenneth Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata in B minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ix and Walker, II: 157. Hanslick also attacked Liszt's programmatic symphonies in his *The Beautiful in Music [Vom Musikalisch-Schönen]*, stating that they "denied to music more completely than ever before its independent sphere and dosed the listener with a sort of vision promoting medicine"; see Gustav Cohens's translation (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 5-6.

instinctively but only imperfectly grasped.... Most of the piano works by Liszt that have remained in the repertory today were written, at least in their initial form, before 1850, and the musical material is either invented by someone else or, with some very significant exceptions, it is shoddy and tired, likely to grate on the nerves of any musician of delicate sensibility.⁶

Humphrey Searle, who offered the first substantial survey of Liszt's music in English, admits that "many of Liszt's works are superficial, overwritten, or merely dull," but hastens to add that "he did also write a great deal of extremely fine music, and it is by that that he should be judged...."⁷ Some recent commentators, however, see this "lack of quality control" as an essential part of Liszt's appeal. As Kenneth Hamilton states, it is "the sheer size and staggeringly uneven quality of his output that ultimately makes it so mesmerizing; this awkward balance between fulfilment [sic] and insufficiency, between genius and empty gesture."⁸ Alan Walker, Liszt's most prominent English-language biographer, is also one of the staunchest defenders of Liszt's music and its value for posterity. In the final volume of his massive biography, he confidently asserts that Liszt's music will survive aesthetic controversy:

...The rough-and-tumble of critical debate about Liszt is likely to continue, although it is today better informed. Let us not forget, however, that a composer's worth is not settled by debate, however distinguished the debators [sic]. If history should ever pronounce a final verdict on Liszt, it will not be because the views of one group of musicians have prevailed over those of another. It will be because the music itself, properly performed and appreciated, has prevailed over both.⁹

Not all scholars find Liszt's output so compelling, and the prospect of such a "final verdict" seems unlikely. More recently, Christopher Gibbs and Dana Gooley have emphasized Liszt's other attractions; they claim that "the values of an older generation of musicology—favoring

⁶ Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 472-73.

⁷ Humphrey Searle, *The Music of Liszt* (London: Williams & Norgate Limited, 1954), 122-23.

⁸ Hamilton, "The Suffering and Greatness of Franz Liszt," in *Liszt: A Chorus of Voices: Observations from Lisztians Around the World*, eds. Michael Saffle, John C. Tibbetts, and Claire McKinney (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2012), 164-71.

⁹ Walker, III: 17.

structural integrity and consistency in the music, and ascetic artistic commitment in the life—tend to work against Liszt,” while the more pluralistic goals of cultural studies and the “new” musicology are more accommodating to Liszt’s legacy.¹⁰

This changing focus from Liszt’s music to his place in cultural studies reflects a much broader trend at work in Liszt studies—if anything, Gibbs and Gooley are late to the party. For the last thirty years, Liszt’s music has been appropriated for all sorts of scholarly purposes, though Liszt’s place in Romantic culture and his compositional innovations receive the most attention. Most of these publications avoid judgments of musical value—in fact, the music is often remarkably absent, as I later demonstrate in detail. Significantly, a work like the Ballade in B minor (1853)—which albeit from a limited perspective seems to have little to add to the history of musical development—falls through the cracks between current trends in cultural and compositional scholarship, partly because the Ballade itself defies easy categorization in both areas.

In the following chapter, I survey recent Liszt studies and analyze the gap between cultural studies and formalist analyses. Even a cursory look at the literature reveals that studies that illuminate specific works are decidedly on the decline. This trend reflects broader movements in musicology, of course, but it has become unhelpfully exaggerated in Liszt studies. Surveys often peruse the same compositions and cross-reference the same studies, but journal articles and major monographs generally treat the music itself as a secondary topic and focus on its value for cultural history instead. Even formalist analyses are not always illuminating of particular works, as studies frequently appropriate a scattering of Liszt’s once-obscure later pieces as proof that Liszt foreshadowed any of a number of twentieth-century compositional

¹⁰ Gibbs and Gooley, eds., *Franz Liszt and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), xvi-xvii.

trends, such as the common argument that Liszt anticipated atonality and musical impressionism. In arguing for a sustained, close-to-the-text engagement with Liszt's music, I have intentionally aligned this particular study with Joseph Kerman's model for a musicology that moves "from the various branches and methodologies of music history towards actual music."¹¹ Although both paths—from music to musicology and vice versa—may travel through the same territory and visit some of the same landmarks, the opposing methodological directions generate a different set of insights.

In Chapter 2, I analyze Liszt's Ballade in B minor as a case study. The Ballade is widely acknowledged as a masterpiece among pianists, but it is almost completely overshadowed in the literature because of its proximity to the Sonata in B minor (1852-53). In the course of a work-centered study of the Ballade which includes its treatment in criticism, its compositional history, and its pianistic writing, I argue that the Ballade has been a latecomer to the literature because it is primarily motivated by keyboard textures and their rational progression, rather than by the avant-garde harmonies, forms, and thematic transformations that are usually associated with Liszt. I then consider the keyboard textures as a parameter of analysis and demonstrate that the biggest effects of the work—the pianistic "tricks" for which Liszt has been so famously derided—are actually the result of logically developed elements that underlie the entire compositional structure. In light of the sophisticated control that Liszt shows over the keyboard and its possibilities, I argue that the Ballade reveals that Liszt was exceptionally aware of his own technique and its compositional potential, and that his virtuosity should be considered as a structural rather than surface-level process.

¹¹ Joseph Kerman, *Musicology* (London: Fontana Press/Collins, 1985), 126.

CHAPTER 1

PERSONALITY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AND THE AVANT-GARDE: REEVALUATING SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ON LISZT'S MUSIC

Introduction

If we had to speak here in academic terms of the development of piano music, Chopin's works would yield a rich harvest for comment. First, we would explore his nocturnes, ballades, impromptus and scherzos that are filled with harmonic refinements as unfamiliar as they are unexpected, and then we would turn to his polonaises, mazurkas, waltzes and boleros. But this is neither the time nor the place for such a task, which would be of interest only to those knowledgeable in counterpoint and figured bass.

It is the feeling, highly romantic and individual, which suffuses these works that has made them widely known and popular. They are characteristic of the composer while being sympathetic not only to that country to which he brings honour but also to all those who are touched by the misfortune of exile and the tenderness of love.¹²

Thus Franz Liszt opines in the opening chapter of his controversial 1852 biography on Frédéric Chopin.¹³ True to his meandering thesis, Liszt indulges in the purplest generalities and platitudes in discussing Chopin's life and music: even in chapters ostensibly on Chopin's mazurkas and polonaises, one is hard-pressed to find more than scattered references to any specific musical work, though allusions to Chopin's lofty character and ideals abound. To be sure, Liszt "romanticized" Chopin, eschewing musical specifics in favor of literary description of his personality.

Later scholars treated Liszt similarly, valuing his fabulous celebrity and complex personal roles in the musical politics of nineteenth-century Europe and treating his music as an artifact of his personality. Recent research emphasizes what Carl Dahlhaus called the "history of

¹² Meirion Hughes, ed. and trans., *Liszt's Chopin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 62; cf. Janita R. Hall-Swadley, ed. and trans., *The Collected Writings of Franz Liszt, Volume 1: F. Chopin* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 59-60.

¹³ For more on the literary history and composition of this controversial work, see Hughes's introduction to *Liszt's Chopin*, 1-49; Alan Walker's chapter "The Scribe of Weimar" in *Franz Liszt*, 3 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983, 1989, and 1996), II: 368-96; and the introduction to Hall-Swadley's translation *F. Chopin*, 1-52.

ideas,” while criticism and analysis have become a less urgent priority.¹⁴ Problematizing such a development may seem like an anachronistic throwback to Joseph Kerman’s assertion that musical criticism should serve as the top rung on the ladder of musicology.¹⁵ Yet more recent scholars have also questioned this direction, most notably Jim Samson in his study of the Transcendental Études:

I see every reason to value music’s commonalities with other disciplines, provided that its specificities are also protected. Likewise, I accept the potency of enriching metaphors, provided that their status as metaphors is not in question. At root, though, I believe that a direct, close-to-the-text engagement with musical materials is likely to prove more revealing than the seductive hermeneutics of the 1980s and 1990s, and that such an engagement need not signal an undeconstructed formalist orthodoxy; on the contrary, it may provide the necessary ballast for a more thoroughly grounded, evidence-based hermeneutics.¹⁶

In appealing to the calls of Kerman and Samson—to keep the *Musik* in *Musikwissenschaft*—I do not mean to argue that cultural and intellectual history is irrelevant, nor do I believe that Liszt studies should return to the early fawning hagiography of Lina Ramann and others. Rather, I suggest that a renewed attention to compositional studies might yield a more productive synthesis of these historical extremes in the Liszt literature.

To be sure, the connections between Liszt’s life, cultural roles, and music are unusually deep and pervasive, even in the context of a century that was undoubtedly the most confessional in Western art-music history. Commentators seized upon the biographical parallels between Liszt

¹⁴ Dahlhaus, “Nationalism and Music,” in *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 79-101.

¹⁵ Joseph Kerman, “A Profile for American Musicology,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1965): 61-69. While Edward Lowinsky took offense at Kerman’s metaphor privileging the lofty role of criticism in the quest for musical understanding, it must also be remembered that a ladder with only a top rung is of no use to anybody; see Lowinsky, “Character and Purposes of American Musicology: A Reply to Joseph Kerman,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1965): 222-34.

¹⁶ Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

and his works from the beginning: for example, Ferruccio Busoni opined already in 1908 that “the studies in their entirety, give as do no other of his works, the picture of Liszt’s pianistic personality in seed, in growth, and finally in self-clarification.”¹⁷ The Transcendental Études (1851) are a classic example; as Alan Walker puts it, “In the Transcendentals Liszt really unfolds a part of his musical autobiography in public: Liszt the supreme virtuoso openly reminisces about Liszt the youthful prodigy.”¹⁸ Even the notorious Liszt detractor Ernest Newman states that the “parallelism between [Liszt’s] life, his character, and his work is often obvious; few composers have painted themselves so accurately in their music.”¹⁹ Among those who read Liszt’s compositions as autobiography, Eleanor Perényi makes the widest claims:

I believe... that an enormous amount of his music *was* confessional – in a way, the autobiography he didn’t write. It all seems to be there: landscapes observed, airs overheard; erotic and religious experience; poetry and history; treasures and trash. It wouldn’t be difficult to draw a picture of his life from the music alone.²⁰

In this way, Liszt’s output is the ultimate statement of the Romantic ideal of art imitating life—an ideal that Liszt explicitly claimed as an influence on his early compositional style. As Liszt himself wrote in an open letter to his fellow “poet-voyager” George Sand:

About that time [1830s] I wrote a number of pieces that inevitably reflected the kind of fever that was consuming me. The public found them strange and incomprehensible, and even you, my friend, have criticized me at times for being vague and diffuse....

The work of some artists is their life. Inseparably identified one with the other, they are like those mythical divinities whose being was inextricably linked to that of a tree in the forest.... The musician, especially, as one who is inspired by nature but does not copy it,

¹⁷ From the “Foreword to the Studies by Liszt,” in Ferruccio Busoni, *The Essence of Music and Other Papers*, trans. Rosamond Ley (London: Rockliff Publishing Corporation, 1957), 154.

¹⁸ Walker, *Liszt*, I: 307.

¹⁹ Ernest Newman, *The Man Liszt* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), 299.

²⁰ See her *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1974), 43-44; the emphasis is Perényi’s.

exhales the most personal mysteries of his destiny in sounds. He thinks, feels, and speaks in sounds.²¹

It may have been a deeply felt *credo*, tabloid posturing, or some combination of the two, but Liszt clearly aligned himself with the Romantic cult of autobiographical artistry and used its cultural currency to deflect criticisms of his early works.

These confessional elements excited the interests of Liszt's biographers, but the avant-garde compositional components in Liszt's piano works have commanded equal consideration from musical theorists, critics, and historians.²² Whether Liszt's innovations are taken as radical departures, incremental advances, or historically unavoidable landmarks in musical "progress" depends both on the commentator's polemical position on Liszt as well as any potential allegiance to the pervasive notion of musical progressivism stimulated by the works of Hegel and his musical disciple Franz Brendel.²³ For Alan Walker, Liszt's programmatic orchestral works "show some stunning departures from those conventional uses of sonata form still employed by his contemporaries," while Richard Kaplan argues that the "Faust" Symphony (1854-57) contains "numerous and prominent correspondences" to earlier models of sonata form, with "constant references" to works by Berlioz and Beethoven.²⁴ Charles Rosen downplays the prophetic elements of Liszt's harmony; on Liszt's 1856 song *Die Lorelei* and its anticipation of

²¹ Published in the *Gazette Musicale*, 12 February 1837; qtd. and trans. in Charles Suttoni's *An Artist's Journey: Lettres d'un bachelier ès musique, 1835-1841* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 18.

²² In order to streamline the engagement of musical theory in the remainder of this thesis, the terms *theory* and *theorist* will refer to musical theory rather than critical or cultural theory unless otherwise noted.

²³ Franz Brendel's *Geschichte der Musik in Italien, Deutschland, und Frankreich von den ersten christlichen Zeiten an bis auf die Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Hinze, 1852) appeared in many editions over fifty years. For a recent study of Brendel's influence, see Gustav Gur, "Music and 'Weltanschauung': Franz Brendel and the Claims of Universal History," *Music and Letters* 93, no. 3 (August 2012): 350-73.

²⁴ Walker, II: 308 and p. 152 of Richard Kaplan, "Sonata Form in the Orchestral Works of Liszt: The Revolutionary Reconsidered," *19th-Century Music* 8, no. 2 (Autumn 1984): 142-52.

the “Tristan” chord, he states that “Liszt’s stature is not magnified by observing that he did some of Wagner’s work for him.... The influence on Wagner is only a distraction if we wish to appreciate the greatness of Liszt’s *Die Lorelei*.”²⁵ Louis Kentner, on the other hand, sums up Liszt’s development as a progression from Romantic wild child to harmonic prophet, claiming that the “elusive common factor” of Liszt’s output is:

...the gradual breaking away from the Romantic Movement which enslaved Liszt in his youth, from which he appears to have entirely freed himself in his old age. This battle, this wandering in deserts and oases, with a final glimpse of the Promised Land, the twentieth century, seems to me the whole story of his middle-period piano music.²⁶

Rarely do scholars deck out Liszt—or any other composer, for that matter—in such explicitly biblical garb as a Moses of musical modernism, and suggesting that twentieth-century art music is anyone’s “Promised Land” strikes a critical readership as frankly silly.²⁷ Nevertheless, more respectable Liszt specialists also frequently paint Liszt as a prophet of harmony, and Liszt did in fact anticipate certain limited aspects of atonality as well as musical impressionism by several decades.²⁸

Thus to discuss Liszt’s music is to tackle a long-standing enmeshment of personality, nineteenth-century intellectual trends and—to a lesser extent—music. This intersection is evident in literature of the past three decades, which I analyze in the remainder of this chapter.

²⁵ Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 477.

²⁶ Louis Kenter, “Solo Piano Music (1827-61),” in *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*, 79.

²⁷ The metaphor may be less frivolous than it appears, as the Promised-Land tenure of the Children of Israel was plagued by despair and violence within a generation or two of Moses’s legendary demise; cf. the unrelentingly dreary biblical Book of Judges.

²⁸ For a brief description of Liszt’s late explorations in the outer bounds of tonality, see Walker’s “Liszt and the Twentieth Century,” in *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*, ed. Alan Walker (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), 350-64; for more rigorous theoretical analyses, see Ramon Satyendra, “Liszt’s Open Structures and the Romantic Fragment,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 19, No. 2 (Autumn 1997): 184-205; James M. Baker, “The Limits of Tonality in the Late Works of Franz Liszt,” *Journal of Music Theory* 34, no. 2 (Autumn 1990): 145-73; and Allen Forte, “Liszt’s Experimental Idiom and Music of the Early Twentieth Century,” *19th-Century Music* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1987): 209-28.

Musical Biography and Autobiography

Liszt is a classic subject for musical biography: He held a central position in French Romanticism, had an unbelievably wide circle of glittering acquaintances, and engaged in wide-ranging musical exploits. Liszt's phenomenal energy and wide activity gave him considerable agency in nineteenth-century musical life. As Dahlhaus remarks in his "Does Music History Have a 'Subject'?":

The most cursory glance at recent music histories will suffice to show that it is not 'music' as such – i.e. the musical 'event', an amalgam of composition, performance, and reception – so much as individual composers that serve as vehicles for the lesser sub-histories that go to make up 'music history'....

The subject does not simply 'have' a history; it must produce one, and only in so doing does it become a subject at all.²⁹

Dahlhaus's statement illustrates Liszt's relationship to his scholars, yet the Liszt literature began long before he achieved notoriety as a composer. Joseph d'Ortigue claims the first publication with his 1835 biographical sketch of the 23-year-old Liszt, and this biographical lineage continued in Lina Ramann's three-volume *Franz Liszt als Künstler und Mensch* (1880-94), of which the first volume was published during Liszt's lifetime.³⁰ The twentieth century saw the publication of Peter Raabe's two-volume *Liszt: Leben und Schaffen* (1931) and Emile Haraszti's biographical essays on "Liszt à Paris" (1936), sources which remain important in Liszt historiography. At about the same time Liszt received his first major English-language studies, including Sacheverell Sitwell's *Liszt* (1934), Ernest Newman's *The Man Liszt* (1935), and Humphrey Searle's classic survey on *The Music of Liszt* (1954). Arguably the most influential

²⁹ Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. by J. B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 44-45.

³⁰ For more detail on Liszt scholarship, see Michael Saffle's *Franz Liszt: A Research and Information Guide*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), as well as "Liszt and the Literature" in Walker, I: 3-29.

publication on Liszt is Alan Walker's three-volume biography (1983-1996), which is widely read and cited even by its detractors. Most of these works contain extensive readings from Liszt's music to illuminate his life, a logical counterpoint to the program-note practice of explaining concert music through biography. In deploying Liszt's music as evidence for their arguments, scholars are understandably concerned with questions of artistic influence and growth.

The problem of artistic influence swirls around most of Liszt's pre-Weimar piano works. After addressing the juvenilia, which show an obvious debt to Liszt's piano teacher Czerny, biographers move to the 1830s Parisian influences of Niccolò Paganini and Hector Berlioz.³¹ Liszt's first essays in his new virtuosity, the Paganini-inspired *Grande Fantaisie de Bravoure sur La Clochette* (1832; revisited in 1851 as the better-known *La Campanella* étude) and the transcription of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (1833), have both become staples in the literature despite their negligible presence in the concert hall. The *La Clochette* fantasy is generally summoned only to be dismissed: Walker states that "No one plays *Clochette* nowadays," while Perényi sums up the work as "horrendously difficult," suggesting that empty virtuosity is the work's most prominent feature.³² Philip Friedheim argues that Liszt's primary purpose in transcription was to "demonstrate his own ability to perform anything at the piano" while also suggesting that "the element which goes beyond the stage of virtuoso pyrotechnics to something fundamental in Romanticism is a belief in the infinite capability of the human being.... Nothing is beyond the potential range of his vision."³³ Although this explanation of

³¹ See Derek Watson's chapter on transcriptions in his biography/survey *Liszt* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1989), 193-217; Ronald Taylor, *Franz Liszt: The Man and the Musician* (London: Grafton Books, 1986), 23-27; Walker, I: 168-89; Alan Walker's "Liszt's Musical Background," in *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*, 36-78; and Perényi, 52-54 and 68-75.

³² Walker, I: 175; Perényi, 53.

³³ See Philip Friedheim, "The Piano Transcriptions of Franz Liszt," *Studies in Romanticism* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1962): 83-96.

Liszt's virtuoso element seems cautiously affirming—Friedheim suggests that “an objective consideration of these [pianistic/textural] elements may bring some new dignity to this music”—his descriptions of Liszt's techniques as a “trick” and *trompe d'oreille* suggest that he believes the music to be as trivial as previous scholars felt.³⁴ Friedheim includes many musical examples, but he is far less interested in explicating any particular work than in showing how clever (and, in the case of Liszt's Paganini transcriptions, “almost pathologically difficult”) Liszt's textural arrangements are.³⁵

In dealing with Liszt's relations with other musicians, biographers also cite Liszt's *Symphonie fantastique* transcription to demonstrate his ethical standing among his contemporaries. Walker uses the work as an example of Liszt's famed generosity: “His chief motive was to help the poverty-stricken Berlioz, whose symphony remained unknown and unpublished”; Perényi has a similar interpretation.³⁶ Friedheim disagrees on Liszt's motives, claiming that:

A performance of the symphony on the piano could only mislead anyone who had not heard the music in its original form, and displease anyone who had.... Since Liszt was a conductor, he was quite capable of presenting Berlioz'[s] music in its proper orchestral setting. From this mass of contradictory facts, one can only conclude that Liszt transcribed the *Symphonie Fantastique* [sic] solely as a challenge to his abilities as an arranger and performer, precisely because the work was basically unsuited to the piano.³⁷

³⁴ Ibid., 88-90.

³⁵ Ibid., 88.

³⁶ Walker, I: 180; Perényi, 70.

³⁷ Friedheim, 85. Friedheim's arguments are misguided: it would be another decade after Liszt wrote the transcription before he gained any significant notoriety as a conductor, and Liszt was not in a position to present *anyone's* music in its “proper orchestral setting” in the mid-1830s. As an itinerant musician in the 1840s, he conducted several Berlioz works and, while tenured at Weimar, even sponsored two weeklong Berlioz festivals in 1852 and 1855 (see Walker, II: 285-95). Finally, Liszt had transcribed hardly anything of value at the time of the *Symphonie fantastique* transcriptions, and he was just coming into his powers as an iconic pianist of his generation: even if he only produced the work as a challenge to himself, is this really cause for blame?

Jonathan Kregor has a more nuanced view, noting that the benefits of the Liszt-Berlioz were not one-sided: in fact, Liszt's work in transcription was of "fundamental importance" for his developing compositional aesthetic.³⁸ This debate illustrates how ethical judgments on Liszt's controversial artistic persona and lifestyle still color the interpretation of his music today.

Liszt's spiritual influences form one of the more complex aspects of his personality, and his religious sentiments found early musical expression. The 1830s piano character pieces *Lyon* and *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (not to be confused with the 1847-1852 cycle) have received special comment as the fruits of Liszt's involvement with Abbé Felicité de Lamennais and the Saint-Simonians. Walker contends that these represent Liszt's discovery of "himself as a composer" and that they "bear the unmistakeable imprint of his mature style," though he gives the music itself only passing comment.³⁹ Perényi also glosses over the music ("remarkable"), though she argues even more forcefully than Walker for the importance and intensity of the spiritual encounter with Lamennais, claiming that Liszt "received his vocation" at this time.⁴⁰ There is near-universal agreement about the importance of the Lamennais-Liszt connection, but the details of how this relationship played out are less clear; Alex Main argues that *Lyon* is actually an artifact of a quarrel with Lamennais over the conflicting demands of "humanitarianism versus art."⁴¹ Though Liszt wrote sacred music throughout his life, these early works remain popular for biography because they illustrate Liszt's emerging views on the future

³⁸ See Jonathan Kregor, "Collaboration and Content in the *Symphonie fantastique* Transcription," *The Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 195-236.

³⁹ Walker, I: 157.

⁴⁰ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 107-109.

⁴¹ Alex Main, "Liszt's 'Lyon': Music and the Social Conscience," *19th-Century Music* 4, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 228-43.

of church music and the artist in his society—views that Liszt explicitly discusses in contemporary polemical essays.⁴²

Scholars also debate over the influence of Liszt's mistresses in both his literary and musical output. The *Album d'un voyageur* (1835-38) and the Swiss and Italian volumes of the *Années de pèlerinage* (1848-55 and 1839-49) have long been favorite works for biographical analysis, both as evidence of Marie d'Agoult's agency within the Liszt repertoire as well as the music's role as a memoir of landscape, literature, and image—and rightly so; they are probably the most important musical evidence that Liszt composed autobiographically. Of the various numbers in the *Années*, none has attracted as much consideration as the “Dante” Sonata (1839-1849), which involves problems of literary, personal, and musical influence. Sharon Winklhofer treats the Sonata as a biographical problem, decisively refuting Ramann's Romantic notions that Liszt composed the work during his stay with Marie d'Agoult at Lake Como.⁴³ After this bit of careful detective work, Winklhofer then deals with the couple's literary relationship to Dante Alighieri (ca. 1265-1321), which is the real focus of her study:

Clearly Dante provided Liszt with a model for his relationship—and even for his behavior—with Marie d'Agoult. Eventually the Dante-Beatrice roles proved impossible to uphold, at which point Liszt's view of Dante as well as his comprehension of the *Divine Comedy* changed significantly. The “Dante” Sonata not only signaled this occurrence, but through its own evolution articulated the composer's own process of maturation.⁴⁴

⁴² See “On the Situation of Artists: Six Articles,” and “About Church Music of the Future: A Fragment,” in *The Collected Writings of Franz Liszt, Volume 2: Essays and Letters of a Traveling Bachelor of Music*, ed. and trans. Janita R. Hall-Swadley (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 73-145.

⁴³ Sharon Winklhofer, “Liszt, Marie d'Agoult, and the ‘Dante’ Sonata,” *19th-Century Music* 1, no. 1 (July 1977): 15-32.

⁴⁴ Winklhofer, 16.

Although d'Agoult's desire to be taken as Liszt's muse has been largely discredited, it remains undeniable that Liszt traveled widely with her, produced literary works with her assistance, and composed early versions of many important piano works while connected to her.

Artistic influence is also related to the question of personal evolution—that is, the influence of past selves on a future identity. Liszt's growth as a composer is another classic scholarly concern, and Liszt's idiosyncratic working habits create unusual problems as well as remarkable openings for biographers and historians. The central difficulty is that many of Liszt's works—particularly those from the middle of his career—exist in multiple versions, which represent various stages of revision and even recomposition. The opportunities for comparative analysis are both deep and wide-ranging but are a cause for controversy in themselves. Samson points out that Liszt's recompositions introduce aesthetic and historiographical tensions, as “compositional borrowing, including self-borrowing,” has a problematic relationship with “a Romantic ideology that privileged the singular and the inimitable.”⁴⁵ Despite these theoretical quandaries, Liszt's recompositions are widely read from perspectives of both compositional history and biography.

Liszt's etudes have been briefly mentioned but they merit a deeper investigation as the primary document around which scholars have based one of the major Liszt narratives, the development of Liszt's piano virtuosity.⁴⁶ The Paganini etudes exist as violin caprices (1819), piano transcriptions (1838), and a final revision as the *Grandes Études de Paganini* (1851), while

⁴⁵ Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work*, 5.

⁴⁶ The importance of Liszt's virtuosity has been almost universally acknowledged even by his severest contemporary critics. Hanslick, for example claimed that Liszt's “piano compositions were consistently of such mediocre invention and execution that barely one of them could have claimed lasting existence in the musical literature,” yet he conceded that Liszt had “a profound knowledge of pianistic effect”; see *Music Criticisms*, 53. Shaw admitted that the etudes reveal “an exhaustive knowledge of the pianoforte”; qtd. in *The Great Composers*, 138.

the Transcendentals appear as Liszt's early *Étude en 48 exercices* (1827; only 12 written), the 24 *Grandes Études* (1837; still only 12 written), and the final Transcendental Études (1851). Rosen elegantly characterizes these sets as self-transcriptions:

The new versions of the Transcendental Etudes are not revisions but concert paraphrases of the old, and their art lies in the technique of transformation. The Paganini Etudes are piano transcriptions of violin etudes, and the Transcendental etudes are piano transcriptions of piano etudes. The principles are the same.⁴⁷

Walker takes a more biographical stance, reading the revisions—and Liszt's suppression of earlier versions—as a shift in Liszt's attitudes towards his own virtuosity. Walker further claims that Liszt “wanted to place some distance between himself and his virtuosity; by 1851 there were aspects of his *Glanzzeit* [glory days of concert touring] that he was anxious to disown.”⁴⁸ Walker concludes that the simplified final versions are more significant than the absurdly difficult second set because:

...their greater simplicity stands in inverse proportion to their increased proportion to their increased brilliance, and that had never happened before. They are a perfect illustration of the law of economy to which all physical motion strives: “Minimum effort, maximum result.” Only the greatest master could conserve more energy than he expends while at the same time achieving a more powerful result. Paradoxically, virtuosity is used here to transcend virtuosity itself.⁴⁹

In this passage Walker reveals his pro-Liszt stance, painting Liszt as “the greatest master” of the keyboard and as a composer who transcended the virtuosity that brought him so many detractors. This agenda, which lends his life's work controversy despite its magisterial scope and undisputed scholarly value, is more clearly visible in the biographical prologues of Liszt as a “Giant in Lilliput” and a “King Lear of Music.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Rosen, 499.

⁴⁸ Walker, II: 147.

⁴⁹ Ibid., II: 149.

⁵⁰ Walker, II: 3-22 and III: 3-17.

Walker's polemical stance is simply one of the most prominent of many. Many scholars delve through the more obscure regions of the Liszt repertory, appropriating both acknowledged masterworks and acknowledged trash for their biographical arguments. More recently, the focus has shifted from the flooded fields of biography to Liszt's place in cultural history, which has been less thoroughly explored.

Liszt and Cultural History

Liszt has been long celebrated for his development of the modern solo recital, the international concert career, and the symphonic poem, categorical achievements that cultural historians have recently sought to nuance. Liszt's music generally appears via brief cameos in cultural studies, illustrating his choice of repertory for popular concerts and his appropriation of literary and epic texts.

Liszt's concert career is an essential part of his legend, and the excesses of Liszt's stage persona have been passed down through the excesses of popular biography.⁵¹ In his study on *Liszt in Germany 1840-1845*, Michael Saffle opens with an intriguing statement:

This book has been written neither to praise Liszt nor to condemn him; I hope the days of simple-minded Liszt deification and denigration are over. Instead, I have made every effort to present a complete and "objective" account of Liszt's German sojourns, and of some of their ramifications for his reputation and career.⁵²

The "I hope" is revealing: as late as 1994, one of Liszt's most prolific scholars felt the need to explain the lack of a polemical stance in a major work of reception and concert history. Saffle succeeds in his aim for an even-handed treatment, using neutral language even when discussing

⁵¹ See, for example, Harold C. Schonberg's chapter "Thunder, Lightning, Mesmerism, Sex," in *The Great Pianists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 151-71.

⁵² Michael Saffle, *Liszt in Germany 1840-1845: A Study in Sources, Documents, and the History of Reception* (Stuveysant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1994), xi.

the “adulatory” tone of Liszt’s critics and when noting that the “most powerful factor governing Liszt’s repertory and programming strategy seems to have been showmanship.”⁵³ Saffle’s desire for impartiality appears to be a partial reaction against the tone of Walker’s study of the previous decade, in which Walker defends Liszt’s legendary bad taste in concert programming:

[Liszt] will never be freed of the charge of not doing more to raise the level of public taste, through his enormous prestige, instead of pandering to its base desires for pyrotechnics.... Yet to accuse Liszt of poor taste shows a lack of historical imagination. In 1847 he had nothing to guide him. Indeed, he felt it quite proper to let others plan his programmes for him.⁵⁴

Saffle disagrees, noting that Liszt “seems to have established his own performing strategies and chosen his own solo repertory.”⁵⁵ Saffle backs up his opinions with an exhaustively researched appendix on Liszt’s known concert programs, but he carefully avoids any critical commentary on the programs themselves; the same is true of Christopher Gibbs in his account of Liszt’s Vienna concerts, where Liszt’s career collided with contemporaries Sigismond Thalberg and Clara Wieck.⁵⁶ Dana Gooley is also uninterested in making judgments on musical value in his study of the Liszt-Sigismond Thalberg rivalry, which upsets the myth of Liszt as a virtuoso who systematically swept away all his contemporaries.⁵⁷ These studies have greatly deepened our knowledge of Liszt’s concert career, complicating a narrative that sealed Liszt’s reputation in his own lifetime but has been subject to much myth-making and exaggeration.

Cultural historians also delight in Liszt’s orchestral works, which afford many opportunities to tie Liszt to his literary and linguistic context. Liszt’s relationship to Dante and

⁵³ Saffle, *Liszt in Germany 1840-1845*, 202-203.

⁵⁴ Walker, I: 291.

⁵⁵ Saffle, 198.

⁵⁶ Christopher H. Gibbs, “‘Just Two Words: Enormous Success’: Liszt’s 1838 Vienna Concerts,” in Gibbs and Gooley, eds., *Franz Liszt and His World*, 167-230.

⁵⁷ “Liszt, Thalberg, and the Parisian Publics” in Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18-77.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* are well known, but recent scholarship has also widened this examination to include Liszt's more obscure symphonic works. In a work of pure literary history, Eric Jensen traces the development of Liszt's relationship with French writers Gérard de Nerval and Alexandre Dumas and their proposed collaboration on a Faust opera. Jensen also explores Nerval's involvement in the popularization of the Faust legend, including his translation of Goethe's *Faust* that sealed his contemporary fame and provided the basis for Berlioz's Faustian works.⁵⁸ Paul Bertagnolli also ties Liszt's orchestral works to Goethe, but through the lens of the symphonic poem *Prometheus* (1850, 1855) rather than the more widely known "Faust" symphony.⁵⁹ Bertagnolli makes the intriguing observations that Liszt's preface reflects Goethe's dialectic, that the music itself reflects the conflict between what Liszt called "Malheur et Gloire!" ("misery and glory"), and that the harmonic irregularities of the opening mirror the unusual linguistic constructions of Goethe's poem.⁶⁰ Other scholars have recently continued this linguistic approach, analyzing the sentence structure and "codeswitching" of Liszt's other symphonic poems.⁶¹

Cultural studies of Liszt are certainly on the rise. Although this growth is undoubtedly a reflection of larger currents within contemporary musicology, it also can be explained as a logical solution to the historiographical problems created by the extreme polemics of Liszt's

⁵⁸ See Eric Frederick Jensen, "Liszt, Nerval, and 'Faust,'" *19th-Century Music* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1982): 151-58.

⁵⁹ Paul A. Bertagnolli, "Liszt, Goethe, and a Musical Cult of Prometheus," in Saffle and Dalmonte, eds., *Liszt and the Birth of Modern Europe*, 169-96.

⁶⁰ Bertagnolli, 190-93.

⁶¹ Steven Vande Moortele, "Sentences, Sentence Chains, and Sentence Replication: Intra- and Interthematic Formal Functions in Liszt's Weimar Symphonic Poems," *Intégral* 25 (2011): 121-58; Joanne Cormac, "Liszt, Language, and Identity: A Multinational Chameleon," *19th-Century Music* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 231-47.

biographers—in particular those of Ramann and Newman.⁶² This scholarly tactic, hinted at by Saffle, is made explicit by Gibbs and Gooley:

Over the past twenty years scholars have shown an impressive determination to organize and clean up Liszt's shop, which was left messy by a huge output of letters and music, by the geographical dispersion of his papers, and by an enduring capacity for mythmaking on the part of his admirers as well as his detractors.... A disadvantage of these preoccupations is that they have tended to isolate Liszt studies in a hermetic world, relatively out of touch with the larger field of musicology.... The resulting loss of intellectual vitality has found poor compensation in the defensive or even righteous tone that one characteristically finds in liner notes and biographies.... [Liszt] is defended to his detriment....⁶³

It is unfortunate that avoiding musical criticism should be necessary because of the zealotry of Liszt crusaders, but it may have been historically unavoidable. Today's cultural studies provide a way to study Liszt in his context while avoiding unnecessary involvement in debates on Liszt's character and compositional value.

Liszt as Avant-Garde Prophet

But what of those who engage with the music, confronting the issue of compositional value head-on? Liszt's experimental approach toward form, harmony, and program has been well-known among Lisztians for many years, and their determined efforts have ensured that Liszt's influence is now widely known.⁶⁴ The fragmentary and harmonically mysterious late

⁶² Lina Ramann's biography is frequently cited and censured; a relatively even-handed introduction to the project and its troubles appears in Walker, III: 275-79. Newman's *The Man Liszt* has provoked much criticism: Walker refers to the work as a "foolish character assassination" and a "one-man crusade against Liszt," while Adrian Williams calls it "disparaging and inaccurate"; see Walker, I: 25 and 210n; and Williams, *Portrait of Liszt: By Himself and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 277n.

⁶³ Gibbs and Gooley, xv-xvii.

⁶⁴ For a study from the 1970s, see Lajos Bárdos, "Ferenc Liszt, the Innovator," *Studia Musicologia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 17, Fasc. 1/4 (1975): 3-38.

works fascinate theorists, yet they generally ignore the aesthetic experience of the music.⁶⁵ This is a particularly foreign approach to Liszt's works, as his compositional style is arguably the most performance-driven of any nineteenth-century composer—as Rosen claims, “Liszt is perhaps the first composer of instrumental music whose music is, for the most part, conceived absolutely for public performance.”⁶⁶ Although Liszt did not expect or even desire performance of his late music during his lifetime, it seems unlikely that he would create this music hermetically, without even a future listener in mind. In addition, the idea that Liszt had abandoned the listener is absurd when one considers his lifetime of polemical writings on the artist's place in society; his well-known motto (*Génie oblige!*) is diametrically—if anachronistically—opposed to Milton Babbitt's (or, perhaps his editor's) “Who Cares If You Listen?” In dealing with Liszt's compositional advances, many fall into an uncritical adoption of the agenda of the Hegel-Brendel-New German School tradition of musical progress, which ironically has led to the devaluation of Liszt's “New German” music *as* music.

The ambiguous formal and harmonic properties of Liszt's late works have drawn much attention, though theorists disagree on whether the traditional or futuristic elements are more illuminating. David Berry seeks to explain the “atonal” features of the *Bagatelle ohne Tonart* (1885) through pitch-class and Schenkerian analyses, attempting to determine *how* and *why* Liszt should choose to write in an atonal idiom.⁶⁷ James Baker inspects a larger grouping of works in his study—*Unstern!* (188?), *Nuages gris* (1881), and *Die Trauer-Gondel II* (1885), among others—but rather than viewing Liszt's “atonality” as a radical departure he argues that Liszt's

⁶⁵ As Walker has it, “the path-breaking compositions of Liszt's later years have been treated by theorists and analysts as if their chief importance were to make a contribution towards the history of harmony”; Walker, III: 437.

⁶⁶ Rosen, 507.

⁶⁷ David Carson Berry, “The Meaning[s] of Without: An Exploration of Liszt's *Bagatelle ohne Tonart*,” *19th-Century Music* 27, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 230-62.

tonal structures “gradually became... less explicit.”⁶⁸ David Cannata focuses on the traditional elements in Liszt’s late works, highlighting the “network of allusion” that ties these works together and deliberately testing the “experimental” stereotype of the group as a whole.⁶⁹ For Cannata, it is Liszt’s fascination with chromatic voice-leading, along with the web of religious and personal allusion, that provide the keys to the riddle.⁷⁰ Ramon Satyendra, by contrast, ties these works to the “Romantic fragment,” suggesting that Liszt’s music descended from the aesthetic trends of its time even as it foreshadowed twentieth-century developments.⁷¹

The desire to invoke Liszt as a harbinger of musical modernism is rarely more explicit than in the work of distinguished theorist Allen Forte, who asserts that despite the “extraordinary” surface features of Liszt’s late piano pieces, the real interest is that they represent “a systematic expansion of traditional voice-leading and harmonic models....”⁷² Forte takes a similar attitude to Liszt’s Weimar-era works, claiming that the “main interest” of the introduction to the symphonic poem *Hamlet* (1858) “lies in the projection of structures theoretically outside the traditional tonal sphere.”⁷³ In a revealing passage, Forte reads Liszt’s unusual approach to harmony as an anticipation of the tetrachords of Stravinsky and Schoenberg:

The passage from *Hamlet* suggests... that as early as the Weimar period, and probably even before, Liszt was composing with tetrachords that are essentially non-tonal in nature, independent sonic objects that are not treated according to the syntactic rules of tonic-dominant tonality. With the advent of atonal and other non-tonal music around 1908, the tetrachord became the basic harmonic building block of new music, replacing

⁶⁸ See p. 149 of James M. Baker, “The Limits of Tonality in the Late Music of Franz Liszt,” 145-73.

⁶⁹ See p. 179 of David Butler Cannata, “Perception & Apperception in Liszt’s Late Piano Music,” *The Journal of Musicology* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 178-207.

⁷⁰ Cannata, 197 and 207.

⁷¹ Ramon Satyendra, “Liszt’s Open Structures and the Romantic Fragment,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 19, no. 2 (Autumn 1997): 184-205.

⁷² Forte, “Liszt’s Experimental Idiom and the Music of the Early Twentieth Century,” 227.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 214.

the triad in that role. Liszt had already made that replacement in the music of his experimental idiom shortly after the middle of the nineteenth century, at the latest....

This remarkable passage, which is not at all atypical of the experimental idiom, could serve as a model for many in Schoenberg's atonal or in Stravinsky's early non-tonal works.⁷⁴

Although Forte appears to be applying anachronistic intellectual categories to Liszt's works, he is careful to qualify this connection elsewhere, noting that Liszt's "atonal" works were unpublished and unknown during the flowering of musical high modernism.

The above-cited authors largely study this repertory for its compositional innovations, but some defend Liszt's reputation by contextualizing his earlier, less "enigmatic" works within nineteenth-century compositional history. In a study of the "Faust" symphony, R. M. Longyear and Kate Covington work from this explicit motive:

Reproaches of "formlessness" and "lack of coherence" have repeatedly been made against Liszt's larger works.... We seek to show that Liszt's acknowledged masterpiece among his orchestral compositions, the *Faust Symphony*, is firmly constructed architectonically through a tonal and harmonic coherence that operates at various structural levels, including those of the traditional sonata and ternary forms.⁷⁵

Richard Kaplan gives a very different analysis, but also aims at putting down the notion that Liszt's formal experiments were somehow a historical aberration in the nineteenth century. He notes the "constant references" to the music of Berlioz and Beethoven and claims that Liszt's developments led to the stylistic advances of Mahler and contemporaries.⁷⁶ Yet many scholars value Liszt's earlier repertory for its perceived novelty, including Rosen, who has an otherwise refreshingly non-pitch-centric approach to Liszt's compositional style:

⁷⁴ Forte, 215.

⁷⁵ R. M. Longyear and Kate R. Covington, "Tonal and Harmonic Structures in Liszt's Faust Symphony," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 28, Fasc. 1/4 (1986): 153-71.

⁷⁶ Kaplan, "Sonata Form in the Orchestral Works of Liszt: The Revolutionary Reconsidered," 152.

In his concentration on tone color Liszt may be seen as the most radical musician of his generation. His example attacked some of the basic assumption of Western music, in which pitch and rhythm were the essential determinants of form, and spacing and tone color were subordinate, only a means to the realization of sound.... Beautifully sensitive to the character of his musical material, and deeply indifferent to its quality, all Liszt's genius was directed towards the realization in sound.... The invention of material was never his strong point; one suspects that as he developed new effects of realization, he created material fit to show them off.⁷⁷

We come full circle: Rosen also values Liszt's music for its radical nature, even though he considers it valuable for its new, virtuoso use of timbral resources rather than its musical quality. The virtuosity that fascinates biographers and cultural historians finds a home in musical analysis, too, and it is still considered more important than the musical materials.

Towards a Music-Centered Synthesis

Liszt is clearly fertile ground for theoretical and cultural work, but the extent to which these two areas are in productive dialogue is less certain. As Kerman wrote, "if the musicologists' [sic] characteristic failure is superficiality, that of the analysts is myopia. Their dogged concentration on internal relationships within the single work of art is ultimately subversive as far as any reasonably complete view of music is concerned."⁷⁸ Theory has its contributions, of course, but it is also possible to get too close to the text. It is of immense value to a certain population to know the chemistry underlying Michaelangelo's *David*, but that population is far removed from the vast majority of audiences; although a grammatical analysis might help in decoding James Joyce's *Ulysses*, such an analysis would be pointless for the well-educated reader curious about the novels of E. M. Forster or Evelyn Waugh.

⁷⁷ Rosen, 507.

⁷⁸ Kerman, *Musicology*, 73.

To be sure, cultural and theoretical analyses have transformed a niche dominated by soft-headed criticism and hagiography into a much wider, more rigorous, and yet more inclusive field of study. Nevertheless, these modes of analysis have generated their own narratives on Liszt's innovative roles in French Romanticism, nineteenth-century concert life, and the compositional avant-garde, narratives that have allowed a number of significant works to fall through the cracks.

One such work is the *Ballade in B minor*. To this end, I now turn to a musical analysis of Liszt's *Ballade*, a piece which appears to hold no promise for fruitful theoretical or cultural analysis of any sort. The harmonic and formal language contains nothing exceptional within Liszt's output, the pianistic writing seems at first glance to be merely a compendium of Liszt's most excessive and bombastic effects, and the piece cannot be clearly tied to any major avenue in Liszt biography or cultural studies. Nevertheless, this understudied work holds unexpected rewards for a music-centered analysis that synthesizes the extremes of Liszt studies, and it has a great deal to teach us about Liszt's compositional approach.

CHAPTER 2

LISZT'S RATIONAL VIRTUOSITY: TEXTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE B-MINOR BALLADE

Introduction

It was Liszt's own great B minor Ballade that [Edwin] Klahre had brought today—a favorite piece of the Master.... The lesson was a wonderful one. His remarks came so fast I could not make note of them all.... He wished the pedal used in the low bass runs, giving a peculiar effect that is quite Lisztian, and which if done with some other composer's music would seem sacrilegious. Again, near the ending, when the pupil pounded with too much ardor which he should have eased a bit after the occasional loud chords, the Master, holding up his right hand in alarm, admonished: "Do not make noise, make *music*!"

—Carl Lachmund⁷⁹

On May 21, 1873, Franz Liszt entered the music room of the Hofgärtnerei, made his way to the table, and rummaged through a stack of scores brought as offerings by a large party of hopeful, nervous students. After a few moments, he came across a work he wrote almost exactly twenty years earlier, the Ballade No. 2 in B minor. "Who plays this great and mighty Ballade of mine?" he asked. Amy Fay, a young American student, answered "*Ich*."⁸⁰ Liszt was proud of the work for the rest of his life; as late as 1884 Carl Lachmund, another American eyewitness, confirmed that the Ballade was a "favorite piece with the Master."⁸¹ This work has a secure place in the performance canon, and among its interpreters have been such giants as Jorge Bolet, Claudio Arrau, Vladimir Horowitz, and more recently Stephen Hough.

Liszt wrote the Ballade in 1853 while in retirement in Weimar. Not content to rest on the laurels of eight years of acclaim as a touring concert pianist (1839-47), he had recently

⁷⁹ From *Living With Liszt: From the Diary of Carl Lachmund, An American Pupil of Liszt, 1882-1884*, ed. Alan Walker (Stuveysant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1995), 307-309.

⁸⁰ The whole anecdote can be found in Fay's *Music-Study in Germany* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), 216-17. Fay particularly remembered the occasion because it was her birthday and so she had to "go to Liszt by way of celebration," though she did not feel ready for the performance.

⁸¹ *Living With Liszt*, 307.

established himself as a prominent—if controversial—composer, conductor, and teacher. In the five years prior to composing the Ballade, Liszt completed or revised many of his most famous works for piano, including the Sonata in B minor (1853), the Transcendental and Paganini études (1851), the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (1847-52), and the second book of the *Années de pèlerinage* (1839-49). The Ballade itself is a large-scale work in an extended sonata form—a form that Liszt experimented with extensively during this period—and includes many of Liszt’s typical virtuosic devices: chromatic runs, heroic chordal passages, and substantial sections of interlocking chords and octaves.⁸² The piece also features the technique of thematic transformation common in Liszt’s other works from this period.⁸³

Liszt’s high opinion of the Ballade has also been widely mirrored by his scholars, who frequently compare the work to his Sonata or to the renowned ballades of Frédéric Chopin because of its imposing proportions and virtuosic demands. Sacheverell Sitwell calls the piece “a really magnificent thing” and continues in his characteristically breezy way: “It is less passionate and more full-blooded [than the Ballades of Chopin]; concerned, as it were, less with personal suffering than with great happenings on the epical scale, barbarian invasions, cities in flames....”⁸⁴ All agree that the work is substantial: Delores Pesce names it “a distinctive contribution” to the ballade genre, while James Parakilas states that it is “one of [Liszt’s] largest,

⁸² For a study of Liszt’s innovative approaches to form in piano works of this era, including a short formal analysis of both Liszt’s Ballades, see Minna Re Shin, “New Bottles for New Wine: Liszt’s Compositional Procedures,” (PhD diss., McGill University, 2000), 65-108. A discussion of form in Liszt’s contemporary symphonic poems can be found in Keith T. Johns, *The Symphonic Poems of Franz Liszt*, ed. Michael Saffle (Stuveysant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1996), 5-9.

⁸³ Thematic transformation involves recasting a theme through extensive and characteristic changes in register, dynamics, and texture. See Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt*, 3 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983, 1989, and 1996), II: 309-10.

⁸⁴ Sitwell, *Liszt* (London: Columbus Books, 1988), 193; reprinted from the 1955 second edition.

most powerful piano works, fully narrative or programmatic in nature.”⁸⁵ Ben Arnold agrees, opining that the “second Ballade remains one of Liszt’s most successful large-scale works and a major contribution to the Ballade genre.”⁸⁶

Despite agreeing on the Ballade’s musical worth, scholars rarely see eye to eye on the Ballade’s place within the Liszt repertory. Alan Walker groups the Ballade with a number of other pieces that Liszt wrote after Chopin’s death, claiming that these works in Chopin’s forms represent a “body of piano music in which Chopin’s personality continues to speak to us, as it were, from beyond the grave.”⁸⁷ Parakilas disagrees at least as far as the Second Ballade is concerned, arguing that although it was influenced by Chopin, it is far more closely related to Liszt’s own large-scale works of the period: “It is a real question, then, how much this work has to do with Chopin’s Ballades or Liszt’s own earlier Ballade, [or] how much it really belongs to the *ballade* genre at all.... Its importance in the history of the *ballade* lies precisely in its distance from Chopin....”⁸⁸ Derek Watson takes the same stance, duly noting that some of Liszt’s works from the era display Chopin’s influence but that the Ballade is not “particularly in the mould of Chopin.”⁸⁹ Other scholars link the Ballade to the Sonata in B minor: Hamilton calls it a “significant afterthought to the Sonata,” and Watson writes that the piece is “a remarkable

⁸⁵ Pesce, “Expressive Resonance in Liszt’s Piano Music,” in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, ed. R. Larry Todd (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 395; James Parakilas, *Ballades Without Words: Chopin and the Tradition of the Instrumental Ballade* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1992), 101.

⁸⁶ Ben Arnold, “Piano Music: 1835-1861,” in *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 110.

⁸⁷ Walker: II, 146.

⁸⁸ Parakilas, *Ballades Without Words*, 101, 113-14.

⁸⁹ Derek Watson, *Liszt* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1989), 238.

extension of his thoughts in the same key of B minor.”⁹⁰ Judging from these statements, one would assume that the Ballade was a composition of only secondary importance, written under the influence of Chopin’s works or in the shadow of Liszt’s own Sonata.

Scholars almost always situate the Ballade on the periphery of the Liszt repertoire, giving their glowing appraisals a backhanded quality; few authors study the Ballade on its own terms.⁹¹ Though the piece showcases many of Liszt’s most important stylistic innovations, it is overshadowed in the literature by other works and other trends. However, the Ballade’s blighted scholarly fortunes make the work an ideal lens through which to analyze Liszt historiography: its late arrival in serious academic work can tell us much about which historical perspectives and analytical tools have been favored.

In what follows, I examine these values on two levels. First, I discuss the Ballade’s relationship to the favored innovations of Liszt’s Weimar-era music: form, program, harmony, and thematic transformation. I then explore texture as an analytical tool, which has been unjustly neglected in Liszt studies even though Liszt’s virtuosity precipitated a revolution in the textural

⁹⁰ Kenneth Hamilton, “Liszt’s Early and Weimar Piano Works,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, ed. Kenneth Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 79; Watson, *Liszt*, 242.

⁹¹ Walker, for example, does not mention the work at all in his epic biography aside from the above-mentioned connection with Chopin’s forms. Watson references the Ballade a few times, mentioning it as an example of Liszt’s habit of repeating entire sections a half-step up or down in his *Liszt*, 188. Eleanor Perényi focuses on the same detail in her only reference to the Ballade; see her *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1974), 403n. Ernest Newman does not cite the Ballade at all in his notorious biography/character assassination *The Man Liszt* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935); nor does Ronald Taylor in his *Franz Liszt: The Man and the Musician* (London: Grafton Books, 1986). Klára Hamburger also leaves out the Ballade in a biographical sketch even though she includes a table of major piano works of the Weimar era; see Arnold, ed., *The Liszt Companion*, 14. William Wallace ignores the Ballade in his *Liszt, Wagner, and the Princess* (London: J. Curwen and Sons, Ltd., 1927), understandably emphasizing Liszt’s orchestral output rather than his piano works. Sitwell briefly touches on it as one of the best of a long list of mature piano works, though he gives the piece two stars (for “indubitable masterpieces”) in his catalogue of works; see *Liszt*, 193, 338, and 340.

possibilities of the piano. If any music has ever needed illumination through textural analysis, surely it is Liszt's virtuoso piano works, an argument I advance with a close reading of the Ballade's textures. This reading leads me to propose a new approach to Liszt's music, one in which textural transformation functions structurally as the inverse of thematic transformation; rather than transforming a theme by clothing it in different textures, Liszt actually uses a theme as a clear mediator for textural accumulation and transformation.

Cultural studies delight in Liszt's years of public bad behavior as a compulsive showoff while theorists favor the avant-garde late works, but these perspectives have less thoroughly interrogated Liszt's mature piano output of the 1850s. Far from being a jumble of overloaded textures, Liszt's Weimar works demonstrate his sophisticated control over the keyboard. At first glance, the Ballade seems to be afflicted with the disease of empty virtuosity that his contemporaries loathed, but a more rigorous analysis reveals that the keyboard textures—the scalar runs, the interlocking chords and octaves, and the arpeggios—are actually developed organically as consistent musical elements throughout the work.⁹² The Ballade is one of Liszt's most technically coherent large-scale piano compositions, a masterpiece of textural transformation that parallels his earlier achievements in thematic transformation with the Sonata.

The Ballade's Compositional Context

For nineteenth-century authors working under the intellectual shadows of Hegel and Brendel, Liszt confirmed their belief in musical progress, especially as the composer positioned

⁹² Although Janet M. Levy has called into question the use of organic metaphors in musical criticism, it must also be noted that Liszt composed the Ballade during the century in which metaphors of organicism were most pervasive; see Levy's "Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings About Music," *The Journal of Musicology* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 3-27.

himself in the vanguard of the “Music of the Future.”⁹³ During his time in Weimar, Liszt continually developed his idiosyncratic approaches to program, harmony, form, and thematic transformation, innovations that stimulated the minds of analysts, as noted above.⁹⁴ Liszt wrote an enormous quantity of music while in Weimar, and much of it circles around the same compositional problems despite appearing in both symphonic and instrumental modes.

Since so many of Liszt’s contributions are concentrated in this very short span of time (1848-1861), the Weimar works have attracted the lion’s share of Liszt scholarship. The symphonic poems are tightly knit in terms of both motivic and programmatic content, and the rhetorical unity of these works finds parallels in Liszt’s contemporary piano compositions.⁹⁵ The Sonata was the culmination of a tremendous amount of formal experimentation: Liszt used variants of sonata form in several of his Transcendental Études, the “Dante” Sonata, and the *Fantasy and Fugue on “Ad nos, ad salutarem undam”* (1850); he was also aware of the “Wanderer” Fantasy op. 15 (1822) of Franz Schubert and the Fantasy op. 17 (1836) of Robert

⁹³ See Glenn Stanley, “Historiography,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (accessed September 24, 2013); for Liszt and the “Music of the Future” (*Zukunftsmusik*) see Walker: II, 336-37.

⁹⁴ For a general discussion of Liszt’s Weimar-era harmonic advances, see Walker: II, 324-26. Howard Cinnamon analyzes Liszt’s “Sposalio” and “Sonetto 123 del Petrarca” from the *Années de pèlerinage* as well as the *Faust Symphony* in “Tonic Arpeggiation and Successive Equal Third Relations as Elements of Tonal Evolution in the Music of Franz Liszt,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 8 (Spring, 1986): 1-24. Analysts are perhaps even more attracted to Liszt’s late music—see Zdenek Skoumal, “Liszt’s Androgynous Harmony,” *Music Analysis* 13, No. 1 (March 1994): 51-72; Ramon Satyendra, “Liszt’s Open Structures and the Romantic Fragment,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 19, No. 2 (Autumn 1997): 184-205; James M. Baker, “The Limits of Tonality in the Late Works of Franz Liszt,” *Journal of Music Theory* 34, no. 2 (Autumn 1990): 145-73; and Walker: III, 437-56.

⁹⁵ On the symphonic poems, see Part I of Keith T. Johns, *The Symphonic Poems of Franz Liszt*, 5-82. Winkelhofer ties Liszt’s large piano works of this era to his symphonic poems, suggesting that Liszt was simply attempting to work out the same problems in both orchestral and pianistic genres; see Winkelhofer, 88.

Schumann, both of which are sonata-length works in one long movement.⁹⁶ An examination of the Sonata's performance history confirms its primacy within Liszt's repertoire.⁹⁷

This focus on the Sonata and its context—to the almost total exclusion of the Ballade—demonstrates two salient points: first, that during the early 1850s Liszt was pouring his energies into creating a *magnum opus* for piano that would rival his symphonic poems in musical and technical scope; and second, that the Ballade is therefore out-of-place, as it followed immediately after the Sonata and cannot be considered an experiment or preparatory sketch. By studying the Ballade in its compositional context it becomes clear that the piece synthesizes many of the musical problems that concerned the maturing Liszt. Ironically, this synthesis is sometimes neglected because the Sonata and the Ballade both occupy a similar compositional intersection of program, harmony, form, and thematic transformation.

Liszt gave no explicit program for either the Ballade or the Sonata, but both have since acquired programmatic interpretations. It seems natural, considering Liszt's other music of the period—one thinks of any of the symphonic poems, the Dante and Faust symphonies, or even the Transcendental Études, which Liszt only titled in their final (1851) version. The Sonata has at least five different suggested programs, some more plausible than others.⁹⁸ The Ballade has been tagged with only one program: the myth of Hero and Leander. No one cites any firsthand source

⁹⁶ Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata in B minor*, 11, 13, 18-19, 21.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65; Winkelhofer, 90.

⁹⁸ Suggested programs include: (1) a Cross motif; (2) thematic ciphers on Liszt and Carolyne; (3) Faust; (4) Paradise Lost; and (5) a musical autobiography; and there are probably others as well. For a general background, see Alan Walker, *Liszt: The Weimar Years*, 150; for ciphers, read David Brown, "The B Minor Sonata Revisited: Deciphering Liszt," *The Musical Times* 144, No. 1882 (Spring 2003): 6-15; a substantial exposition of the Faust theory can be found in Minna Re Shin, "New Bottles for New Wine: Liszt's Compositional Procedures," 121-52.

for this association, and it is usually ascribed to “oral tradition.”⁹⁹ The pianist Claudio Arrau claims that this programmatic reading was “well known in Liszt’s circle,” and he links the series of episodes to Leander’s watery comings and goings; it is certainly possible that Liszt had something like this in mind and simply decided not to put it in print.¹⁰⁰

During his stay in Weimar, Liszt experimented with harmony, researching third-related harmonic progressions and incorporating whole-tone, octatonic, and Gypsy flavors into his pieces, aspects reflected in both the Ballade and the Sonata.¹⁰¹ Although the Ballade is relatively tame compared to the symphonic poems or the “Faust” symphony, it has a number of unusual chord progressions and startling modulations. Consider the following cadence, which appears twice at climactic junctures in the music (see Figures 1-2):

⁹⁹ Almost every substantial source on the Ballade references the story of Hero and Leander; the story was mentioned by my own piano instructor when I learned the work during my master’s studies.

¹⁰⁰ See Joseph Horowitz, *Conversations with Arrau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 142-46. Arrau studied with Liszt pupil Martin Krause at the Stern Conservatory of Berlin within thirty years of Liszt’s death, so his claims are highly plausible. Liszt clearly was aware of the Hero and Leander story since he referenced it in his correspondence, but it remains impossible to state conclusively whether Liszt intended the program or not. For Liszt’s reference to Hero and Leander, see Howard E. Hugo, trans., *The Letters of Franz Liszt to Marie zu Sayn-Wittgenstein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 241; note that this letter dates from January 23, 1880—almost thirty years after Liszt composed the Ballade, though it is likely that Liszt came across the story during his extensive reading throughout his teens and twenties.

¹⁰¹ See Cinnamon, “Tonic Arpeggiation and Successive Equal Third Relations as Elements of Tonal Evolution in the Music of Franz Liszt,” 1-24.

Figure 1: Octatonicism at cadence leading to theme 3 (*a piacere*)
(Ballade in B minor, mm. 129-138)

The musical score for Figure 1 consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (mm. 129-138) features a complex octatonic cadence. The right hand has a melodic line with a trill and a grace note (m.g.), while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment. The tempo is marked *espressivo*. The second system (mm. 139-142) introduces the theme *a piacere cantando* in the right hand, marked *p* (piano). The left hand continues with a rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo is marked *ritenuto*.

Figure 2: Cadential octatonicism cont'd; transition into coda/recapitulation
(Ballade in B minor, mm. 214-224)

The musical score for Figure 2 consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (mm. 214-224) features a complex octatonic cadence. The right hand has a melodic line with a trill and a grace note (m.g.), while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment. The tempo is marked *espressivo*. The second system (mm. 225-232) introduces the theme *a piacere cantando* in the right hand, marked *p* (piano). The left hand continues with a rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo is marked *ritenuto*.

The cadence clearly circles around an inverted dominant seventh chord (m. 130, beat 2 in Figure 1), but in a pungent octatonic configuration that is relieved only at the highest note of the phrase, turning the chord into a dominant ninth. This bold harmonic coloring disorients the listener and prepares the following distant modulation.

Liszt's works in Weimar reveal a craftsman searching for new expressive forms, and both the Sonata and Ballade fit into a larger pattern of formal experimentation. Having already struck gold with the sonata-across-sonata-form of the Sonata in B minor, Liszt simplified his approach and cast the Ballade as a symphonic poem for piano.¹⁰² Interpreting the Ballade as a sonata form has some merits: the opening two themes follow a tonic-dominant polarity, and the repetition of the first two themes (albeit a semitone lower) functions as the repeat of the exposition in a Classical sonata. This hypothesis becomes more difficult at the “development” section, where an apparently unrelated march and an ominous whirlwind of broken octaves take the stage for two pages before the first theme comes crashing in again; some analysts try to resolve this by calling the first two themes “co-themes” and labeling the *Allegro deciso* as a transition leading to the second theme in the mediant (m. 135; see second system of Figure 1).¹⁰³ Rather than force the piece into a sonata form or style it as a “sonata variant”—which could mean almost anything even remotely ternary—it is closer to the dramatic and emotional structure of the piece to think of it as a symphonic poem for piano.

In the Ballade, Liszt continued using thematic transformation, a technique he learned from Schubert's “Wanderer” Fantasy. By 1853, thematic transformation was a Lisztian hallmark: the Transcendental Études employ it extensively, as well as the symphonic poems (most famously the 1848 *Les Preludes*) and the Sonata in B minor. The Ballade's transformations seem quite basic in comparison; the first minor-key melodic line in whole- and half-notes appears throughout the piece in various guises, finally taking on a completely different character when it

¹⁰² Liszt constructed the Sonata in one continuous movement, but smaller sections within the Sonata can be interpreted as a traditional three- or four-movement structure. For more on this double-function form, see Arnold, *The Liszt Companion*, 119-26; Arnold includes a helpful table that collates the single-movement interpretations of William Newman, Rey Longyear, Sharon Winklhofer, Humphrey Searle, Alan Walker, Derek Watson, and Kenneth Hamilton.

¹⁰³ See Arnold, *The Liszt Companion*, 110.

changes to major mode in the coda. The secondary themes appear in varying forms as well but their transformations are less striking.

The Ballade is representative of Liszt's style at the time and intersects with many of the musical problems that he cared about deeply. It is also the last work in an extraordinary five-year run that includes many of Liszt's most celebrated works for the keyboard, including a number of his largest stand-alone piano pieces (see Table 1).

Table 1: Selected keyboard works of Liszt, 1848-53

1848	<i>Trois études de concert</i> , 6 <i>Consolations</i> , a number of transcriptions including Schumann's <i>Widmung</i> and Wagner's <i>Tannhäuser</i> overture
1849	<i>Grosses Konzertsolo</i> , the final version of the second book of the <i>Années de pèlerinage</i>
1850	<i>Fantasy and Fugue on "Ad nos, ad salutarem undam"</i> (for organ)
1851	<i>Scherzo and March</i> , the final versions of the Paganini and Transcendental Études, the two-piano arrangement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony
1852	<i>Ab Irato</i> , <i>Soirées de Vienne</i> , the final version of the <i>Harmonies poétiques et religieuses</i>
1853	Sonata in B minor (1852-53), Ballade No. 2 in B minor. ¹⁰⁴

Although Liszt continued to write for piano after 1853, his output slowed for the next five years.¹⁰⁵ A contemporary letter to Louis Köhler shows that Liszt considered this the close of an era in his own piano compositions:

For the present I allow myself to send you my Sonata, which has just been published at Härtel's. You will soon receive another long piece, *Scherzo and March*, and in the course

¹⁰⁴ This list uses dates from throughout Adrian William's *Franz Liszt: Selected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹⁰⁵ Aside from the final version of the *Suisse* volume of the *Années de pèlerinage* completed in 1854, Liszt wrote no piano pieces that have remained in the standard repertoire until 1859, when he wrote his *Rigoletto* paraphrase and the revised version of *Venezia e Napoli*; the following year he completed his "Mephisto" Waltz No. 1.

of the summer my *Years of Pilgrimage Suite of Piano Compositions* will appear at Schott's; two years – Switzerland and Italy. With these pieces I shall have done with the present with the piano, in order to devote myself exclusively to orchestral compositions, and to attempt more in that domain which has for a long time become an inner necessity....¹⁰⁶

Four of these pieces—the *Grosses Konzertsolo*, the *Scherzo and March*, the Sonata in B minor, and the Ballade in B minor—form a kind of set: they are all heroic in scale, uncompromisingly virtuosic, written in minor keys, and shaped into large ternary forms. Of these pieces, the *Grosses Konzertsolo* and the Sonata are closely related because of their similarities in structure, tempo designations, and even thematic material; Hamilton notes that the *Konzertsolo* “has often been considered a preliminary sketch for the Sonata in B minor.”¹⁰⁷ Hamilton also calls the *Scherzo and March* “Liszt’s final pianistic preparation for the Sonata in B minor,” but the piece seems more closely related to the Ballade in its emphasis on keyboard figuration and on diminished seventh harmonies (see Figures 3-4).

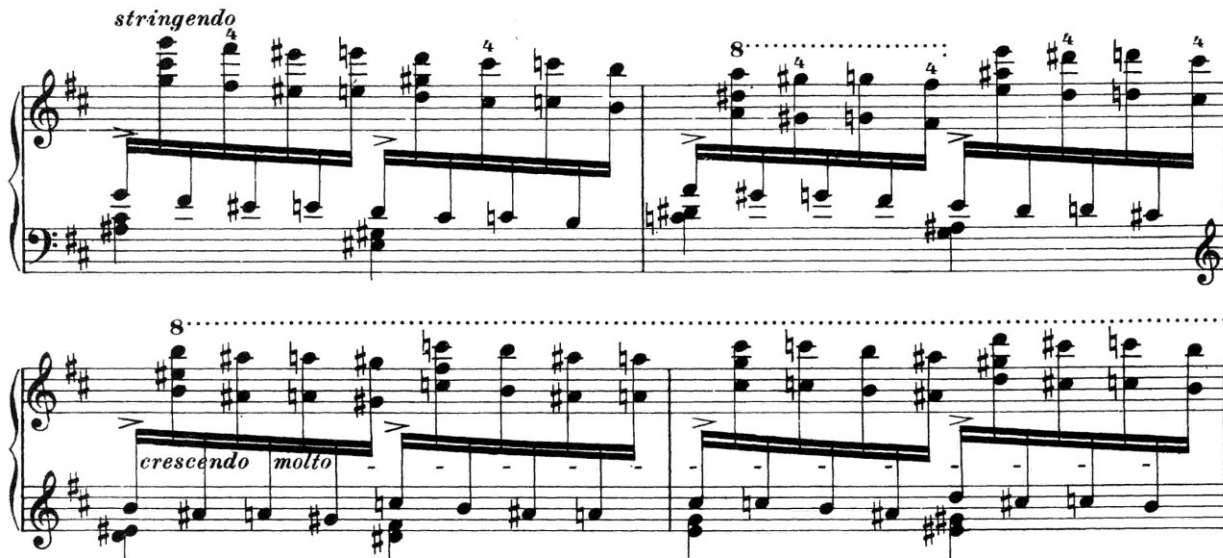
¹⁰⁶ Letter of 1854, quoted in Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata in B minor*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata in B minor*, 20.

Figure 3: Textural similarities between the Scherzo and the Ballade
(*Scherzo and March*, mm. 235-242)



Figure 4: Textural similarities between the Scherzo and the Ballade, cont'd
(*Ballade in B minor*, mm. 199-202)



The Sonata's compelling synthesis of programmatic ambiguity, formal innovation, and thematic transformation is a notable achievement within Liszt's repertory, and the similarities between the Sonata and Ballade may lead one to question why Liszt bothered to write the Ballade at all. As one of Liszt's biographers puts it, the Ballade represents "a remarkable

extension of his thoughts [from the Sonata] in the same key of B minor.... the B minor Ballade is yet another one-movement drama which re-shapes [sic] sonata-form concepts.”¹⁰⁸ The key to the Ballade lies not in the usual suspects—program, harmony, form, and thematic transformation—but rather in Liszt’s virtuosity, and specifically the musical implications of that virtuosity.

The Case For Textural Transformation

Liszt’s technical prowess was unparalleled at the time, but it also led critics of his day to ignore his achievements as a composer and conductor. Liszt’s virtuosity—and his occasional misuse of it—has made him a controversial figure in music history; many discussions of his virtuosity treat this phenomenon as a social construction, though here we will instead emphasize Liszt’s virtuosity as his textural and mechanical innovations in instrumental technique.¹⁰⁹ There are many analyses of Liszt’s pianistic technique, but musical texture—intimately connected as it is to the physical constraints of virtuosity—remains understudied, though Janet Levy and Frank Lorince have done pioneering work on texture in the pre-Romantic repertory.¹¹⁰ Central to the

¹⁰⁸ Watson, *Liszt*, 242-43.

¹⁰⁹ For two recent discussions of Liszt’s virtuosity, see Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and David Trippett, “Après Lecture de Liszt: Virtuosity and Werktreue in the ‘Dante’ Sonata,” *19th-Century Music* 32, No. 1 (Summer 2008): 52-93.

¹¹⁰ See Alan Walker’s chapter “Liszt and the Keyboard,” in Walker, I: 285-318, though here much of the discussion is on Liszt’s virtuoso career rather than an analysis of the technical aspects of his compositions. See also chapters “Of Maps and Materials,” and “Composing the Performance,” in Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29-65 and 66-102; Samson again considers Liszt’s études within their performing and virtuosic contexts, but also includes some detail on the virtuosic writing itself. See also Janet M. Levy, “Texture as a Sign in Classic and Early Romantic Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 35, No. 3 (Fall 1982): 482-531; Frank Lorince also studied musical texture in minute detail in his “A Study of Musical Texture in Relation to Sonata-Form as Evidenced in Selected Keyboard Sonatas from C. P. E. Bach to Beethoven” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, Eastman School of Music, 1966).

following discussion is the distinction between texture and content, between thematic (or melodic) transformation and textural transformation.

Thematic transformation is a relatively common idea, being nothing more than an intense variety of musical variation. In Liszt's works, themes are frequently transformed into an entirely different character through radical changes in tempo, dynamics, registration, and texture. In his pianistic works, keyboard texture often takes a leading role in varying the musical content, but in the Ballade Liszt treats the textures themselves as an integral part of the musical argument and uses the themes to mediate the transformation of the textures. In the following section, I focus on the two main textural elements of the Ballade and trace their progression throughout the work, and then briefly cover transitional elements before analyzing how all of the textural elements interact in the coda. Studying the coda by itself reveals that Liszt sought to resolve all the main textures as well as the main themes.

The Ballade opens with a characteristic texture: a sweeping chromatic line rumbles across the bass register, clarifying the harmonic progression by leaping to the bass at the end of every measure (see Figure 5). This texture, which many have programmatically identified with the stormy seas dividing Hero and Leander, is one of the most distinctive elements in the piece and recurs in many forms. It is frequently—though not always—associated with the first theme, an ominous four-note tetrachord that fills the space from the dominant to the tonic. Liszt's own performance of this opening highlighted its dramatic qualities: he colored the runs with his pedaling and phrased them independently of the melody; Lachmund wrote later that Liszt played

the melody “with a weighty, very marked touch, and large tone; in doing this he lifted his hand fully a foot high.”¹¹¹

Figure 5: First textural element and first theme
(Ballade in B minor, mm. 1-6)



This texture appears again almost verbatim in the key of B-flat minor (mm. 36-51), functioning much like the repeat of a sonata-form exposition. The first significant transformation of this texture appears at the first developmental section, where Liszt trims the texture and uses it as filigree for a fanfare-like theme. (See Figure 6, mm. 72-75.) This “development” is where it

¹¹¹ I have yet to come across any evidence that Liszt ever played the Ballade in public; this particular performance was incomplete and given in a master class in the 1880s. See Carl Lachmund, *Living with Liszt: From the Diary of Carl Lachmund, an American Pupil of Liszt* (Stuveysant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1995), 308.

becomes more difficult to fit the piece into sonata form, because the melodic material appears to be completely new and no familiar themes appear for forty measures.

Figure 6: First developmental section (mm. 72-84)

The musical score for the first developmental section (mm. 72-84) is presented in four systems. The first system (mm. 72-75) shows a triplet figure in the right hand and a marcato marking. The second system (mm. 76-79) continues the triplet figure and includes a marcato marking. The third system (mm. 80-83) features a più crescendo marking and a rinforzando molto marking. The fourth system (mm. 84) features a scalar filigree in the right hand and a marcato marking.

This section makes sense as a development if we consider it as a manipulation of textures rather than themes: the first textural element appears as scalar filigree, which expands outwards to fill an octave by including leaps, then finishes by transforming into dramatic flourishes up and down the keyboard. To tie this section together, Liszt uses a triplet figure, which accelerates

from appearing once every two measures (mm. 72-78) to every measure (mm. 78-80) before slackening again (see Figure 6).

The next major transformation involves a more literal kind of expansion: a single chromatic line becomes a double chromatic line through the use of broken octaves (see Figures 7-8). What appears to be new melodic material joins in the left hand, but it is actually a shadow of the first theme. Once again a low-range melody outlines the space between B and F#, only now in reverse and in a chromatic configuration, which expands the number of notes from four to five (F#-G-A-B versus B-Bb-A-G#-F#). The broken octaves, which must now fit into a diminished rather than dominant-minor tonic polarity, have become less purely chromatic than the opening runs. As the shadow theme grows and reaches its climax, the first theme makes a dramatic reentry, though now in the key of the minor dominant.

Figure 7: First textural element expanded (mm. 96-98)

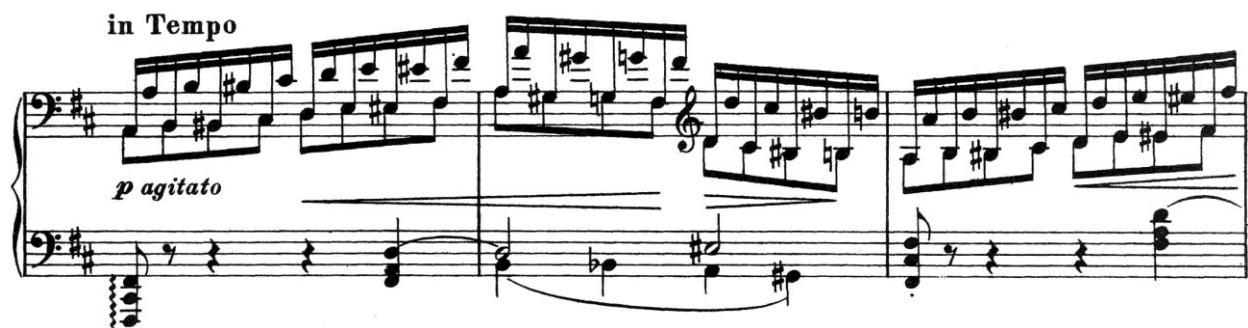


Figure 8: Return of first theme over expansion of first textural element into broken octaves (mm. 111-116)



After this section spins itself out, Liszt turns to other themes and textures until mm. 162-204, where the first textural element emerges again in its most linear treatment. It proceeds directly from single chromatic lines (m. 162) to broken octaves (m. 176), to interlocking chords and octaves (see m. 199 in Figure 9), and finally to “Liszt” octaves (chromatic runs in interlocking octaves; see Figure 10), one of the composer’s best-known pianistic effects. The alternation of triplet chords and “Liszt” octaves mirrors the chords and filigree shown in Figure 6, further integrating apparently unrelated thematic material into the textural core of the piece.

Figure 9: Expansion of first textural element into interlocking chords and octaves (mm. 197-200)

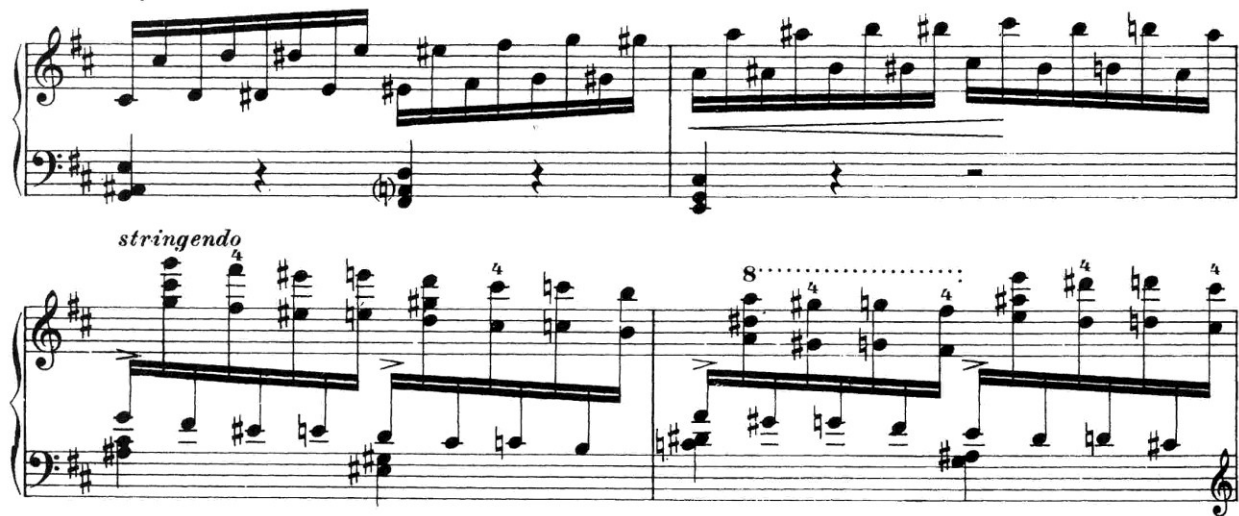


Figure 10: Expansion of first textural element into “Liszt” octaves (mm. 209b-213)

Therefore, this first element is transformed through almost continuous expansion. Liszt broadens this straightforward texture throughout the piece until it reaches an explosive climax, which manages to satisfy the demands of both virtuosity and structural coherence.

Liszt presents a total shift in both technical and emotional profile with the second textural element, which is built on a series of arpeggiated melodic chords (see mm. 24-27 in Figure 11). Chromatic scales become diatonic arpeggios and single (or harmonically “open”) lines are turned into stable, consonant chords; melodic tones are decorated and inflected instead of stark and somber.

**Figure 11: Transitional passage and second theme/textural element (Allegretto)
(mm. 20-27)**

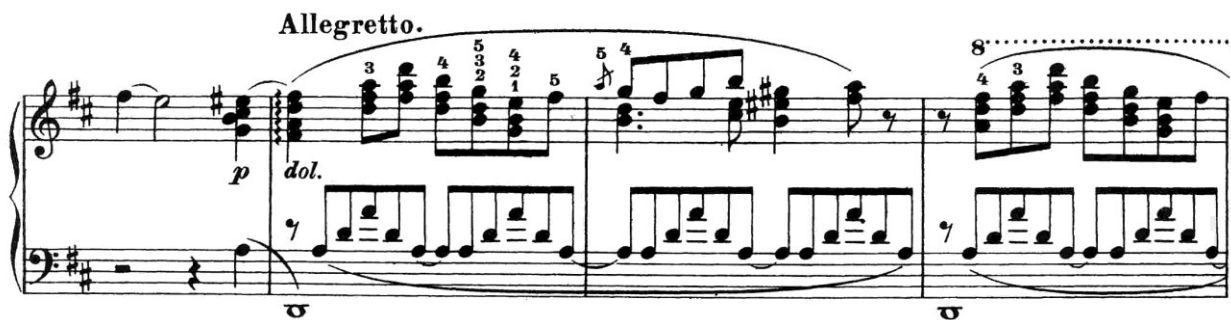


A number of authors have noted a kind of complementarity of the first two themes (or, for this analysis, the first two textures) and have argued that they form a sort of theme and co-theme group, rather than two distinct themes; this is an important observation on the emotional polarity of the work.¹¹²

¹¹² This view is taken by Márta Grabócz in her *Morphologie des oeuvres pour piano de Liszt* (Budapest: MTA Zenetudományi Intézet, 1986) 160, 165-66, 186-89; an explanation in English can be read in Parakilas, *Ballades Without Words*, 102-103. Marischka Hopcroft takes this interpretation further and argues that the first “masculine” theme takes on qualities of the “feminized” second theme throughout the course of the composition, signifying a kind of

While the first textural element undergoes expansion, the second textural element is continuously concentrated, increasing in sonic density throughout the composition. Unlike the first element, the second element—as a specifically melodic texture—is clearly associated with its theme, making its varied appearances seem more similar to Liszt’s usual thematic transformations. Even with this caveat, the gradual metamorphosis of the texture is so clear and effortless that it fits into the category of a textural transformation as well. The texture is first altered by condensing the open-spaced chords to closed spacing, which brings the ethereal sonority down to a more earthly level. To counteract this loss of spaciousness, Liszt adds a gently cross-rhythmic accompaniment (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Second textural element condensed (mm. 142-145)



Liszt then transposes the texture/theme to G major before suddenly modulating into the distant key of G-sharp minor; this key change leads to a section dominated by the first texture.

The next transformation of the second texture comes directly before the coda, and for the first time the texture is set on the tonic—though now the piece falls squarely into the tonic major. For this iteration, Liszt places the melodic chords much lower on the keyboard and sets them with almost no accompaniment. This change of key and registration gives it a much denser, more

androgynous reconciliation between the two themes; see her “Franz Liszt as Virtuoso Critic” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2001), 165-219.

burnished quality than earlier statements, making the expression more urgent and direct (see Figure 14, mm. 233-235).

This theme, embodied as a texture completely distinct from the first theme, makes its last appearance at the very end of the piece after the coda has spun itself out; only there does the texture move back somewhat to its earlier transparency, befitting the more contemplative mood that Liszt intends for this section. Curiously, Liszt drafted two alternate endings before deciding on a quiet finish; both rejected drafts violate the Ballade's textural coherence by subjecting this second element to a thematic rather than a textural transformation—the earliest version changes it to a jaunty dotted-rhythm figure, while the second version pares it down to single notes and zooms along in *presto* triplets.¹¹³

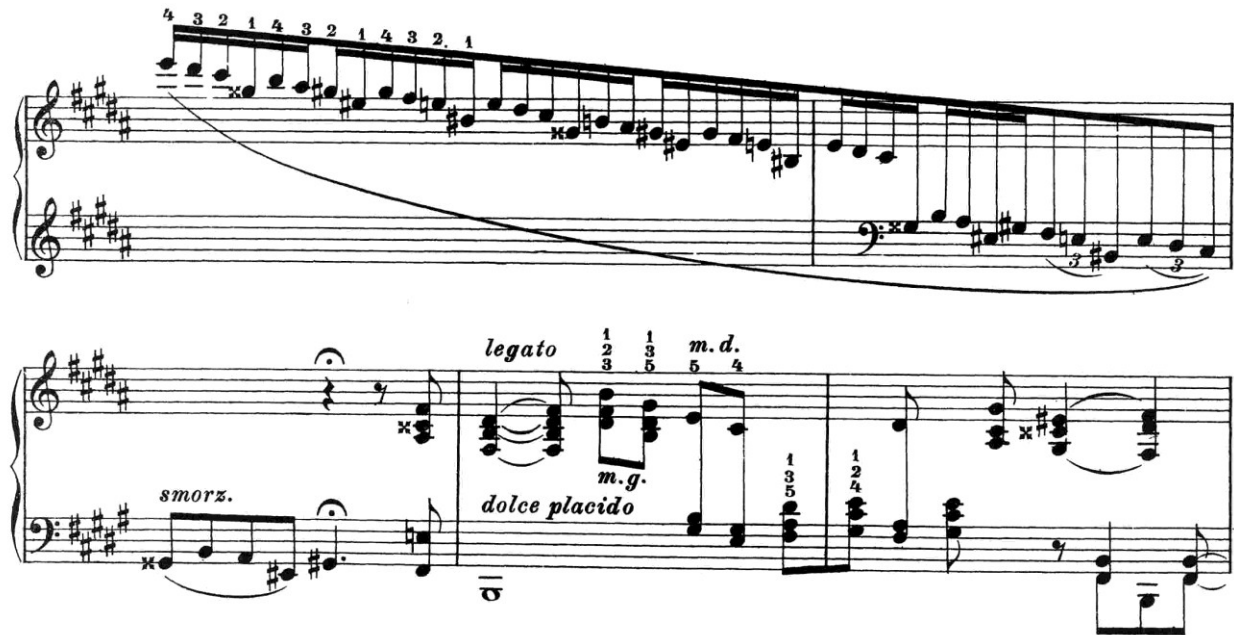
Like all large-scale compositions, the Ballade has its share of developmental passages. These passages relate to each other closely, and these relationships have textural implications for the rest of the piece as well. The initial transition between first and second elements is mediated by a tenor cadenza; Liszt later restates this tenor line in an expanded cadenza that has the same basic figurational shape. The two cadenzas are functionally related: both immediately lead to the second theme (see Figures 13-14).

Figure 13: Cadenza-like transition from first theme to co-theme (mm. 17-19)



¹¹³ The Peters and Breitkopf editions include the second version of the Ballade's ending; the much rarer first ending is reprinted in Parakilas, *Ballades Without Words*, 108-109.

Figure 14: Cadenza expanded and next transformation of the second textural element (mm. 231-235)



The other half of the transition features widely spaced open chords that prepare the open spacing of the second textural element (see Figure 15). The bass movement echoes the first theme in its long-short-short-long rhythmic organization, although it now ends on C-sharp instead of B, reflecting the motion of the piece away from the tonic and toward the dominant. The emphasis on G in the bass anticipates the Phrygian orientation of the first developmental passage (see Figure 6).

Figure 15: Second half of transition from theme to co-theme (mm. 20-23)



The only other distinctly new thematic material is the third theme, a “conciliatory” theme that “negotiate[s]” the two main themes, to borrow Marischka Hopcroft’s terminology (see Figure 16).¹¹⁴ This theme, although it is featured far less often than the others, has a powerful formal role in the Ballade, as every time it appears it opens up a new key area: the theme first states the relative major and the parallel major, and the last time it appears it forms a secondary (dominant) key area for the coda. Curiously, this theme is similar in intervallic content to the “cadenza” transition in Figure 13—remove the passing tones and turn and the melody outlines A-E-C-G, an exact inversion of the E-A-C#-F# outlined in m. 18. Simple arpeggios accompany the theme, a standard texture conspicuous in this piece for its relative absence; this texture is almost unchanged at the return of the theme in mm. 225-230. Significantly, rolling and arpeggiated accompaniments only appear after the texture is introduced alongside this theme—earlier arpeggiated textures function either melodically (see Figures 11 and 13) or as brilliant filigree (see Figures 6 and 8).

Figure 16: Third/transitional theme with arpeggiated accompaniment (mm. 135-138)



The coda (mm. 254-316) brings all the textural elements of the piece to an apotheosis. Liszt constructed the coda in a series of couplets, each of which focuses on one particular theme while subjecting it to a number of textural transformations: (1-2) the main theme appears for the first time in major, (3-4) the third/transitional theme follows in the dominant, (5-6) the main

¹¹⁴ Hopcroft, “Franz Liszt as Virtuoso Critic,” 174.

theme reappears for the last time followed by a short but bombastic cadenza, and with (7) the co-theme returns and finishes all in a quiet glow.

The first couplet (mm. 254-268) returns the first theme to its original registration, but rather than accompanying it with the first textural element, Liszt opted to fill out the harmonies with arpeggios much more similar to the accompaniment to the third theme (see Figures 17-18). The following phrase (mm. 262-268) immediately doubles both the melody and the accompaniment. The doubled accompaniment—though not melodic—nevertheless takes on some of the character of the second textural element, because the two arpeggiated strands are synced to create consonant chords in an open spacing.

Figure 17: Transformation of first theme in coda (mm. 254-257)



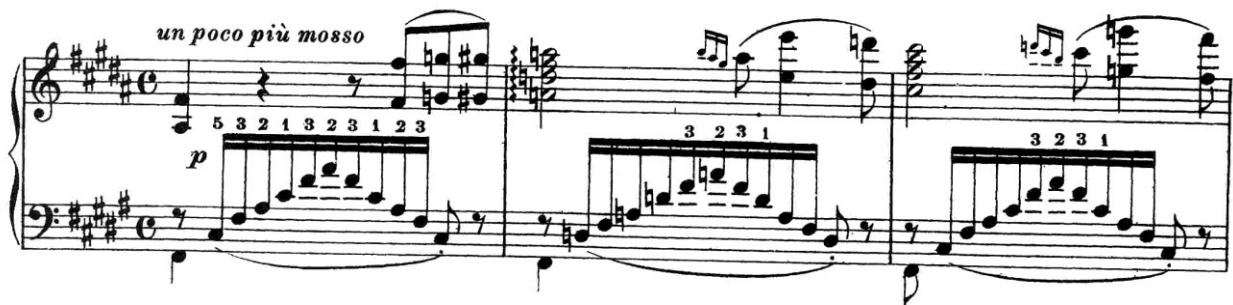
Figure 18: First theme and accompaniment doubled (mm. 262-264)



When the third theme makes its final appearance, it once more functions as a new key area, moving from the tonic to the dominant—a role that the second theme played in the original “exposition” (see Figure 19). This transitional theme takes on its original texture, but it now

sweeps across a much larger part of the keyboard. The arpeggios range more and more widely before erupting into a cascade of octaves on the black keys, which prepare for the final statement of the main theme.

Figure 19: Third theme as transition in dominant key (mm. 269-271)

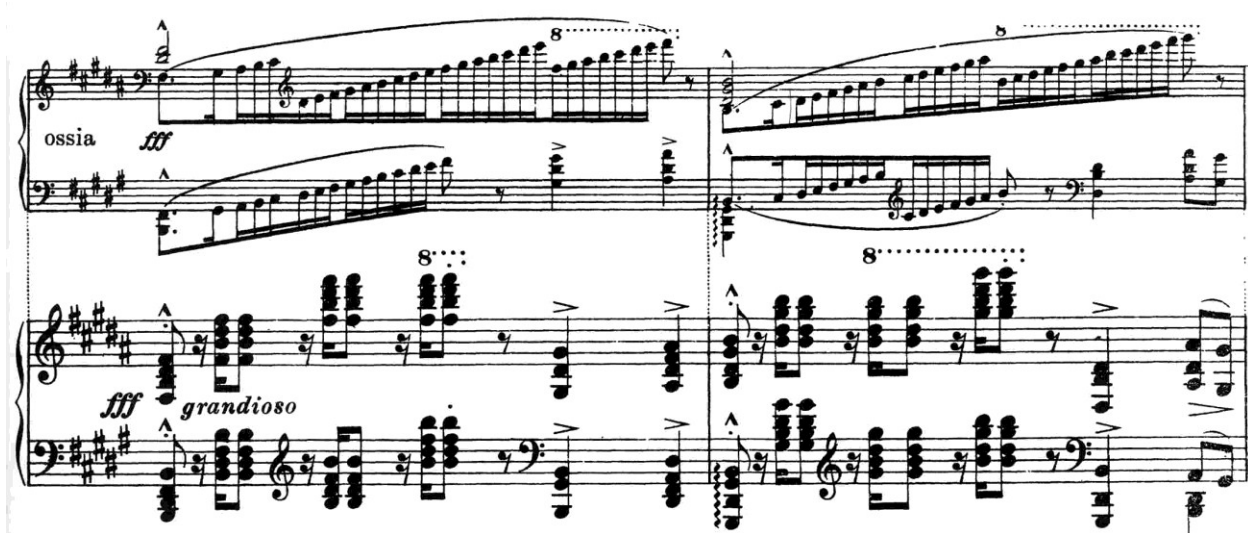


The main theme returns, and this time it is accompanied by its original scalar accompaniment—except that the scales are now all diatonic (see Figure 20). It is tempting to see the thick registration of the chords as a logical extension of the second textural element (see Figure 14), but this becomes a bit murkier as this theme has already appeared in thick chords (see mm. 181-184, for example). Nevertheless, it is clear that both textures are amplified in the second part of the couplet—Liszt wrote out two alternate versions of this final statement, one in scales (vastly preferable from a pianistic and coloristic perspective) and one in chords (see Figure 21). Both are colossal; both are virtuosic—and yet one wonders if Liszt might have conflated both versions if he had had an extra hand or two.

Figure 20: Return of main theme in coda (mm. 284-285)



Figure 21: Final statement of main theme, both versions (mm. 292-293)



The Ballade has an impressive array of interconnections, particularly in its textural construction, but the critic could ask—and very fairly—whether these textural transformations may not be such a unique phenomenon, or if they may be a simple fluke that Liszt happened upon in the construction of this piece. And if this work is a unique animal among Liszt’s works from the perspectives of virtuosity and pianistic texture, what does that mean for its importance in the Liszt canon?

Textural transformation is hardly limited to the Ballade. Liszt clearly meant to do something similar in his étude “La Campanella,” which over the course of three revisions metamorphosed from a tasteless mass of chords and cadenzas (the *Grande fantasie di bravura sur La clochette*) to a tightly organized set of double variations in which the main theme gradually snowballs from single notes to repeated octaves. And yet it seems safe to say that, among Liszt’s standard works, nothing has such a deeply developed textural scope as the Ballade. Certainly his other works of the Weimar period—the Sonata, the *Grosses Konzertsolo*, and the *Scherzo and March*—are all far less texturally coherent. Even the Transcendental Études, which one might expect to show Liszt’s most sophisticated thinking on piano texture, do not

quite match up: they are either too diffuse (like *Mazeppa* and *Feux Follets*) or too unified (No. 2, *Molto Vivace*). There simply is no way that Liszt could have unconsciously constructed the themes and the accompanimental textures in such a way that they would lead logically and inexorably to his most characteristic virtuosic effects. We have a number of overwritten, unplayable virtuoso vehicles from the 1830s to prove it.

The Ballade represents a local peak in the Liszt canon—not the zenith of Liszt’s melodic or formal technique, but rather his final statement on pianistic virtuosity. With the Sonata and Ballade, Liszt crowned his textural and compositional achievements in piano music, thereafter shifting his focus to orchestral works for the rest of the 1850s, including the *Dante* (1855-56) and *Faust* symphonies and the “Gran” Mass (1855). Liszt’s textural accomplishment in the Ballade paved the way for later experimentation in radically different modes, from the studied simplicity of *Nuages Gris* and related works to the futuristic virtuosity of *Les jeux d’eaux à la Villa d’Este* (1877). A close reading of the Ballade demands that we treat texture and virtuosity as rational structural elements, and this interpretation reveals new avenues possible in both theoretical and cultural literature: musicologists have generally focused on the significance of Liszt’s virtuosity for cultural and biographical studies, while theorists have privileged other, more mainstream compositional devices as markers of innovation.

CONCLUSION

Liszt presents and represents a confusion of distinctions, a constant combining and recombining of contradictory traits that problematize the reliability of predication in general.... The greater the accuracy of the research, the greater, finally, the deviance from what is meant by “Liszt.” For Liszt *is* that unexamined impression, a vague character or image engraved with historical imprecision: he is a theme, a thought entertained by a member of the public, a word read by an indistinct and undistinguished reader. Liszt is an error that answers to no correction.¹¹⁵

—Susan Bernstein

Bernstein’s claim seems an extraordinary statement at first glance, but a survey of recent Liszt studies confirms her point: the polemical narratives surrounding Liszt’s life and personality have overwhelmed the literature to the point that studying Liszt demands an extended engagement with his legend. In dealing with the morass of biographical and cultural problems inherent in Liszt studies, scholars often pass over the aesthetic realities of the music in order to avoid the partisan debates that continue to affect Liszt’s reception today. Even the extensive theoretical literature on Liszt regards his works from an uncritical Hegel-Brendelian perspective, focusing on the avant-garde elements of Liszt’s works and devaluing the music *as* music.

This theoretical lens, which values form, harmony, and thematic development as the most important musical elements, leads to an inaccurate assessment of Liszt’s output because so many of Liszt’s advances had to do with so-called “surface” elements of music, such as texture and virtuosity. While theorists have generally relegated virtuosity to the margins of “serious” musicality, musicologists have been more concerned with what Liszt’s career reveals about his concert audiences than with the music that astonished those audiences in the first place. This divide in Liszt studies creates new opportunities for a music-centered approach to musicology, an approach that, as Joseph Kerman suggested, aims all critical and theoretical methodologies towards the understanding and appreciation of the music itself.

¹¹⁵ Bernstein, 109; the emphasis is Bernstein’s.

A Kerman-inspired analysis of Liszt's Ballade in B minor reveals a number of striking anomalies in the work's compositional style and context. Liszt composed the Ballade during a period of furious activity, yet its creation immediately after Liszt's masterful Sonata in B minor suggests that Liszt intended to engage new compositional problems. The Ballade does not contain new developments in program, harmony, form, or thematic transformation, but a close reading of the Ballade reveals that the work is driven by organic transformations in texture. The Ballade is Liszt's most accomplished and most coherent essay in pianistic texture, demonstrating that Liszt took great care over the textural and instrumental developments in his works—a fact that should not surprise anyone given Liszt's extraordinary activities as an arranger and transcriber, but a fact which has been sometimes overlooked because of the stereotype of instrumental virtuosity as an intuitive process. Furthermore, treating Liszt's virtuosity as a rational process creates new ways of interpreting his mature piano works, developing novel interpretive strategies that have been latecomers to the Liszt literature.

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