

Liszt and Modernity

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From the faubourg Saint-Germain to the concert halls in which he gave the first “recitals,” Franz Liszt helped to bring music into a new era. Heralding the end of the musical Old Regime, the success of his fantasias for piano reveals some of the social and cultural institutions that shaped musical production under the July Monarchy.

Reviewed: Bruno Moysan, *Liszt, virtuose subversif*, Lyon, Symétrie, coll. “Perpetuum Mobile,” 2009, 296 p., 45 €.

Musicology has traditionally focused on masterpieces, but over the past twenty years much attention has shifted to the conditions under which musical works are produced. Some scholars have thus begun to study corpuses previously regarded as minor, or at any rate little known because rarely featured on the programs of concerts and festivals.

What is interesting about this type of repertoire? What, for instance, can we learn from studying the fantasias for piano of Franz Liszt (1811-1886)—his “small fry,” to borrow Liszt’s own expression? To these questions, *Liszt, virtuose subversif* offers an appealing answer: deeply influenced by the place and period of their creation, Liszt’s fantasias reveal some of the social and cultural institutions that shaped musical production under the July Monarchy. Some but not all, because although Liszt and Hector Berlioz, his friend at that time, met often at the *Journal des Débats* (as well as in its columns), the musical and extra-musical institutions with which they had to contend were rather different. Berlioz clashed with the Conservatoire and the Opera, while Liszt played for two decades in Parisian salons. It is the latter that Bruno Moysan deciphers in this book.

Institutions, decipher: these words are still relatively seldom found in the vocabulary of musicologists. The fact that Moysan teaches at the Institut d'Études Politiques and was trained by Serge Gut no doubt explains why he ascribes particular importance to these terms, which recur throughout the work and define its analytic method and primary objective. They also offer an excellent example of what institutional and sociological analysis can contribute to musicology: a fuller, less caricatural understanding of music and its environment. *Liszt, virtuose subversif* demonstrates clearly that we can learn a great deal about a musical work by studying the role that it plays in a society which it not only reflects but also helps to transform. In other words, it may be useful to combine internalist approaches (which privilege musical analysis) with externalist approaches (which draw on other disciplines). Of course the author must master both types of method, as Moysan clearly does.

Social Subversion, Musical Transformation

Moysan's contribution is indeed considerable: *pace* those nostalgic for the age of "great creative talents," *Liszt, virtuose subversif* rather tarnishes, if it does not altogether demolish, the image of the Romantic Genius creating on the fringes of society and misunderstood by it. From the time he arrived in Paris in 1823, Liszt enjoyed the support of Paris's leading aristocratic salons—a complex social milieu, which Moysan meticulously describes. More than that, his fantasies on operatic themes would serve as his Trojan horse, enabling him to penetrate the high society that made and unmade reputations, and whose mechanisms and codes he understood perfectly. Liszt's strength was to combine two contradictory figures, "the genius and the courtier" (p. 17), and to persuade his audience to accept radical innovations without ever cutting himself off from his listeners.

Moysan's work is not merely a desacralizing reinterpretation of Liszt's society period, however. Rather, the author presents the composer in some respects as the precursor and in others as the symptom of the evolving relationship between the musician and the society in which he lived. It was in this respect, and not simply in musical terms, that Liszt can be seen as a genuine "subversive."

“The history of the fantasia on operatic themes is one of subversion of the *habitus* of the old court society by an artist who had obviously enjoyed its adulation and found it difficult to do without” (p. 17). This subversion, achieved by an artist perfectly at home in the old system of sociability yet able to contribute subtly to the emergence of a new one, can be interpreted in terms of three complementary processes, which correspond to the three parts of Moysan’s book.

Institutionally, Liszt saw the possibility of forging a novel Romantic mythology (even more potent than Beethoven’s) by making use of “three social spaces that emerged between 1830 and 1850”: *le Tout-Paris*, or Parisian high society; opinion journalism, then in a period of rapid expansion; and circles of influential writers. The young virtuoso ably exploited all three to win acceptance of his musical innovations and obtain the recognition he sought.

Musically, his fantasies enabled him to persuade a public in thrall “to the world of opera” (p. 19) to accept the transformation of an elegant virtuosity characteristic of the Old Regime into a poetic virtuosity from which profound changes in musical language would eventually emerge. The comparison of Liszt’s virtuosity with Thalberg’s is revealing in this regard.

Sociologically, finally, the two aspects of Liszt’s subversion came together to yield the recital, or performance featuring a single musician, which Liszt himself called a “musical soliloquy.” While adopting a prophetic language typical of Romantic mythology—the humanitarian language of the artist seeking to enlighten mankind—Liszt invented a new form of elitism, “incorporating in the idea of aristocracy that of talent and genius. [...] [The recital,] with its One-before-All formula, broke with the musical habits of court society. No longer a protagonist in the segregated and enlightened sociability of court and city, the artist became one of the most constructive symbols of modernity’s conquering and triumphant individualism” (p. 18).

The three aspects of the subversive character of Liszt’s fantasies reinforce one another, making the organization of the book perfectly logical and intelligible.

The Lisztian Value-Added: From Classical “Beauty” to Romantic “Effect”

As should be evident by now, the music itself is not the heart of Moysan’s book. That being the case, *Liszt, virtuose subversif* can be read as a sociological and historical companion to the author’s *La Réécriture et ses enjeux dans les fantaisies de Liszt sur des thèmes d’opéras*, published in 1998. Despite this, the parts of the new book devoted to musical analysis per se are interesting in several respects.

First, Moysan identifies a canonical form for Liszt’s fantasies on operatic themes: “*allegro (tempo primo), largo (tempo lirico), a tempo primo (tempo di mezzo), and finale (with stretti)*” (p. 138). As general as this pattern is, it provides the author with a paradigm that enables him to compare different parts of the Lisztian corpus.

Second, Moysan identifies three techniques that allowed Liszt to “transfer operatic music to the piano fantasia” (p. 156): condensation, displacement, and figuration. These ideas, which arise from his analysis, allow him to relate the musical to the extra-musical. Starting from a traditional setting, the salon, and a genre that had been in use at least since Mozart, Liszt was able to develop a new pianistic language and new forms of listening, associated with the recital.

Moysan’s effort to identify this canonical structure and to isolate the various techniques that Liszt used in composing his fantasies illustrates his determination to give his work a strong thematic structure, which many other books on the subject lack. We are a long way, for instance, from Paul Metzner’s minutely detailed narrative of Liszt’s career from 1823 to 1848 in *Crescendo of the Virtuoso* (1998).

The impartial reviewer is bound to remark that the constant effort of thematization at times lends a rather dry technical quality to the writing. Moysan’s approach also raises an important methodological issue having to do with the aesthetics of reception and cultural history in general. Since it is virtually impossible to compile an exhaustive list of texts touching on a particular musical work, how does the author proceed from a selection of published articles to a thematization of the style, which is in essence universalizing? In a passage devoted to “Liszt’s *stile fantastico*” (pp. 170-173), Moysan relies mainly on a review by Marie d’Agoult, “Liszt in

London,” and then proceeds through a series of generalizations to the idea that “Liszt [...] profoundly destabilized the old hierarchies and categories of court society without calling for their elimination” (p. 172). In this case, the cited text is chosen for its exemplarity. It allows the author to flesh out his theoretical account. On what basis can it be generalized, however? Does every particular text reflect the same general tendencies at work in society at a given point in time? Don’t Moysan’s interpretations, as intelligent and subtle as they often are, stand on feet of clay?

Conversely, one may regret the fact that the author’s thoughts about aesthetic changes in the 1830s are not always conceptually developed as thoroughly as they might be. Although Moysan describes these changes extensively, the work might have been strengthened by a comparison of the new aesthetic with classical “canonical beauty” and the Romantic “effect,” to which other musicologists such as Emmanuel Reibel have called our attention. Indeed, the idea of an “effect” comes up in four texts that Moysan quotes, two by Liszt and two by Berlioz (p. 173, 176, and 198).

Although the musical passages analyzed in the work raise some questions, they do reveal the uniqueness of Liszt’s virtuosity. The musical analyses help us to see how the music of the young prodigy differed from the virtuosity of a musician like Thalberg, who still respected the codes of classical propriety. Though not as extensive as Cécile Reynaud’s analysis in *Liszt et le virtuose romantique* (Champion, 2006), Moysan’s comparison of Liszt and Thalberg is more effective and convincing.

The Lisztian Strategy: Take Advantage of the Divisions in Parisian High Society

More than anything else, what distinguishes *Liszt, virtuose subversif* from the two works cited above is no doubt the impressive use of the sociology of networks in part one. The “human comedy” in which the young Liszt developed is carefully described. Structured by the opposition between the Old Regime elites of the faubourg Saint-Germain and the elites of the Chaussée d’Antin that emerged from the revolution of 1830, this was the world—or, rather, the battlefield—in which Liszt would build his sulfurous reputation. To do so, he took a bold risk: presenting a scandalous image of himself—that of an ultramodern republican artist—while

retaining the support of the legitimist *faubourg*. Liszt's wager was successful because he had the flair to sense what Bruno Moysan brilliantly describes:

“Until 1830, and indeed long afterward, despite the abolition of hereditary peerage and the advent of the republic, musical careers were made in the world of high society, and in the final analysis it was only the elegant who had the power to award the social status of artist. The Conservatory and its director could attempt to predict the future, but they stood outside the system” (p. 39).

What is more, and paradoxical as it may seem, the faubourg Saint-Germain was open to Liszt's revolutionary ideas. After 1830, it went into opposition and welcomed the avant-garde, insofar as it challenged the July Monarchy. Moysan's exhaustive (and at times rather arduous) study of the dedicatees of Liszt's fantasies (p. 40-53) clearly reveals the musician's strategy, which was in a sense to have his cake and eat it too: he wanted his music and his ideas to be recognized as modern while at the same time he sought to gain acceptance for them in circles considered to be the ultimate arbiters of good taste. Socially, Liszt was therefore considered a “man of the world” (p. 53), while professionally he was regarded as a “*primus inter pares*” (p. 53). The musical subversiveness of his fantasies on operatic themes was therefore inextricably linked to their socially subversive characteristics.

Subversion by “Blurring of Codes”

In the end, Liszt took advantage of a “blurring of codes” (a key concept of this work) made possible by the “persistence of the Ancien Régime” (to borrow the title of a book by the American historian Arno Mayer) in nineteenth-century French society. In conceiving this fine book, Moysan drew on a number of disciplines, most notably in the social sciences.

The result is a robust analysis of what might be called “the Lisztian strategy.” After the turn of the nineteenth century, it apparently became impossible to build a reputation without developing a keen understanding of the various circles in which recognition and legitimation were achieved, and without making intelligent use of the media in a society where the power of public opinion had become a force to be reckoned with. Still, the “Liszt phenomenon” cannot be compared to the sort of media bubble that nowadays allows the invention out of whole cloth of a character such as “Mickael Vendetta” (a French Internet phenomenon). Liszt's strategy succeeded only because it was backed by his extraordinary talent as both a performer and a composer, which was recognized as early as the 1830s.

Finally, Bruno Moysan's book also deserves notice for its methodology. Notwithstanding the questions raised earlier in this review, *Liszt, virtuose subversif* succeeds in relating the musical character of a clearly defined corpus of work to the social characteristics of the society in which that work was born. This book is of obvious interest to all music-lovers, and beyond that it may serve as an example to all musicologists.

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