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Franz Liszt: A Bicentennial Tribute

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Liszt was once asked why he never wrote his autobiography. ‘It is enough to have lived such a life as mine,’ was his reply.¹ When we consider the rich complexities of his life, and the vast extent of his musical output, we realize that he spoke no more than the simple truth. He really was too busy living his life to write it.

Liszt’s career unfolded in at least six different directions simultaneously. He was the world’s greatest pianist; he was the composer of more than 1400 individual compositions; he was a charismatic teacher through whose hands more than 400 students are known to have passed, some of whom became eminent; he was an orchestral conductor who introduced a new range of body signals on the podium, which still leave their mark on conductors today; he was a director of international music festivals, designed to promote the music of his great contemporaries, Wagner, Berlioz, Schumann and others; and finally he was a writer of books and articles, some of which contain deeply philosophical observations about music and musicians.

1. “C’était bien assez de la vivre, ma vie, répondit-il en devenant grave.” Janka Wohl, *François Liszt. Souvenirs d’une compatriote* (Paris: Paul Ollendorf, 1887), 102. In English: *François Liszt: Recollections of a Compatriot*, trans. B. Peyton Ward (London: Ward and Downey, 1887), 88.

To excel in any one of these fields would be reason enough for celebration. But to excel in them all makes Liszt possibly unique. He leaves us no choice but to describe him as a genius. But the moment we introduce that tired, overworked term (which has almost fallen out of use in the banal world of equivalence in which we live today) we run the risk of retreating into platitudes. When I use the word genius I am not thinking of anything vague. I am thinking of the differential diagnosis that Arthur Schopenhauer made in his famous commentary ‘On genius versus talent.’

‘A talent,’ Schopenhauer wrote, ‘is like a marksman who can hit a target that the others cannot hit. A genius, is like a marksman who can hit a target that the others cannot even see.’² All his life Liszt was hitting targets that the others could not even see. In all six fields that I have mentioned Liszt did something new. He introduced the solo piano recital even giving it the name ‘recital.’ In the field of composition he introduced new genres such as the Symphonic Poem, and he developed the harmonic language of music, pushing it to the brink of atonality. As for teaching, he introduced the concept of the masterclass, which is alive and well in pedagogical circles today. On the orchestral podium he was far more than a simple time-beater, and at a time when it was a minor triumph to get the band to start and finish together, he was able to bring out the nuances of orchestral performances through a new range of body-signals. As a director of music festivals he showed uncommon diplomatic skills in bringing players and singers to Weimar from across Thuringia – Jena, Eisenstadt, and Erfurt – to form large festival orchestras of 150 players or more and choirs of 200 singers. And finally, while all this was going on, he was writing pamphlets and books, which reveal his philosophy of music and contain some timeless aphorisms about music and musicians.

1

It was well said of Liszt that had he not been a musician he could have become the first diplomat in Europe. And he had the skills to do it, to say nothing of the contacts. His position in the world of musical diplomacy was well illustrated when he went to London, in 1840. He mixed with high society, met royalty, including Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and had an encounter with Lady Blessington, an intimate of Lord Byron, and whose claim to literary fame still rests on her ‘Conversations with Byron.’ She examined Liszt through her lorgnette, admired what she saw, and exclaimed: ‘What a pity to put such a man to the piano!’³ That was at the beginning of the Victorian era, when the career of

2. “Das Talent gleicht dem Schützen, der ein Ziel trifft, welches die Uebrigen nicht erreichen können; das Genie dem, der eines trifft, bis zu welchem sie nicht ein Mal zu sehn vermögen.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Bd. 2 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1859) 446. In English: *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (London – New York, 1966), vol. II, 391.

a musician was not considered to be a suitable activity for a gentleman. Even so, the remark went deeper than we may realize. Liszt's diplomatic skills were already well honed. He had assumed a position of leadership in the profession of music. When Liszt walked on stage wearing his medals, and his clanking sword of honour given to him by the Hungarian nation, it was not merely to display them to the world, but rather to raise the status of musicians everywhere. 'Here', he seemed to say, 'is a musician with as many decorations and titles as a prince'.

Consider his famous reply to Tsar Nicolas I of Russia when the two men had their first encounter in St. Petersburg, in 1842. Nicolas made a noisy entrance during one of Liszt's recitals, and continued chatting to his entourage during the performance. Liszt stopped playing and sat before the keyboard with bowed head. When Nicolas inquired why he had stopped, Liszt replied: 'Music herself should be silent when Nicolas speaks.' The remark has earned a place in the annals of musical diplomacy. It is also said to have cost Liszt a medal. As Sacheverell Sitwell pointed out, it was the first time in history that 'Music herself' had answered back.⁴

Finally, a much more private incident concerning Robert Schumann, which throws light on Liszt the man: Liszt visited the Schumanns in Dresden, in 1848, and got into an argument about the merits of Felix Mendelssohn who had just passed away. Schumann became so agitated in defence of Mendelssohn that he struck Liszt on the chest and disappeared from the room. Liszt calmly turned to Clara Schumann with the remark, 'Please tell your husband that he is the only man in the world from whom I would accept such behaviour.'⁵ Again we observe the diplomatic grace under pressure, so typical of Liszt the man. These anecdotes, with their verbal adroitness, suggest that he was cut from the same cloth as an ambassador, a man for all seasons, someone with a suitable remark for every occasion.

In the third volume of my life of Liszt I tried to enumerate all the titles and medals that Liszt received during his long and productive life. Altogether I counted forty-eight, and I am sure that the list is incomplete. Even so, it ranges from an Austrian knighthood to the Freedom of the City of Weimar; from Commander of the French Legion of Honour to the Hungarian Sword of Honor; from the Order of St. Michael of Bavaria (bestowed on him by King Ludwig II) to the Freedom of the City of Jena. It would be an impressive enough catalogue for an aristocrat. For a musician it probably remains unmatched in history.⁶

3. *Correspondance de Liszt et de la Comtesse d'Agoult*, ed. Daniel Ollivier (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1933), vol. 1, 433.

4. Sacheverell Sitwell, *Liszt* (New York: Dover, 1967), 121.

5. Berthold Litzman, *Clara Schumann: Ein Künstlerleben*, Bd. 2 (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1905), 121–122; F. Gustav Jensen, *Robert Schumanns Briefe: Neue Folge* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1904), 523.

6. For a comprehensive catalogue of Liszt's various distinctions see Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt, vol. III: The final years 1861–1886* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 549–551.

Towards the end of his life, when his pioneering battles to secure a better deal for musicians had been won, Liszt noticed that such decorations were being devalued, especially by the French, because unworthy people were now receiving them. That explains his acid remark: ‘Whenever you are in Paris you *must* wear your medals, otherwise you are so noticeable on the boulevards.’

2

And behind it all was his watchword: ‘Génie oblige!’ – ‘Genius carries obligations!’ Because music is a gift of Nature, even of God, Liszt argued, we have a duty to give something back. During his lifetime a river of gold poured in. But a river of gold also poured out. Liszt gave generously to a variety of humanitarian causes: to the victims of the Danube floods; to the casualties of the great fire of Hamburg; to the building fund of Cologne Cathedral; to the foundations of schools and music conservatories; and to the erection of statues to Beethoven and Bach. He also did much good by stealth, giving money anonymously to people who needed it but did not know him. And it is well-known that Liszt never charged a penny for his lessons. One of the more touching scenes from his sunset years comes to us from his Hungarian pupil Janka Wohl. She recalls seeing him sitting at his desk putting bank notes into envelopes and addressing them to people in Budapest who had pleaded with him for financial help. Small wonder that as he approached old age, having divested himself of a fortune, Liszt faced a life of genteel poverty. And he did it willingly.

What drove him to occupy such a position? Underpinning his view of music as an ethical force (for that is surely the deeper meaning of his imperative ‘Génie oblige!’) was a profound and unusual theoretical picture of Art. Music, for Liszt, was a *vocation*, a calling, a term of which we hear hardly anything today. He argued that music must never be confused with a mere trade, although it frequently is. The butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker can all exchange places with one another; but not one of them can exchange places with a musician. No one is called upon to become a candlestick-maker! Even in Liszt’s time, there were candlestick-makers in the profession. And there are many more today, people for whom music is just a job of work, a way of making money. Liszt despised them. He even accused them of ‘Mammon worship.’ They not only lacked a sense of vocation, they lacked what he called ‘a sacred predestination’ – that sense of destiny which marks the artist from birth. ‘It is not *he* who chooses his profession – it is his profession that chooses *him*’, he observed.⁷ If we think this through, it would mean that one could no more determine to become a musician than one could determine the colour of one’s eyes. You may develop your tal-

7. Franz Liszt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Lina Ramann, Bd. 2 (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1881), 135.

ent, but you cannot develop what was never given to you in the first place. This is a deeply Freudian notion, and Freud himself found the words for it in his timeless aphorism, 'We are lived.' We are not drawn from in front but pushed from behind. Such a fatalistic notion was not unknown even to Arnold Schoenberg, who once declared that the true musician is in the grip of forces he cannot understand but has no alternative but to obey.

3

It should come as no surprise to learn that a musician who believed that music was God-given should have practiced what a later generation would call 'music therapy'. For Liszt was music's ambassador to the poor, the sick, and the down-trodden as well. Even as a young man Liszt visited hospitals, insane asylums, and prison-cells containing those condemned to die. He brought music to society's outcasts, and gave those unfortunates a degree of comfort in their hour of distress. The gripping accounts of his visits to the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, in 1833, where his piano-playing eased the symptoms of an incurably autistic woman, and to the insane asylum in Cork, Ireland, in 1841, make haunting reading today. When he entered the asylum in Cork, it was with the intent of playing the piano to the inmates – his usual practice. But it did not happen. He was so overcome at the horrors he witnessed that after a time he was obliged to withdraw. About thirty females were confined to one area, some howling, some bent up like animals, some scraping the walls, others rolling on the stone floor. To this menagerie of depraved human beings Liszt was offering the balm of music. We cannot begin to imagine what his distinguished contemporaries Brahms, Wagner, Mendelssohn or the fastidious Chopin would have made of this dreadful scene.⁸ Without exception they would not have gone near the building.

The musician, then, was for Liszt somewhat like the priest: a chosen intermediary between God and Man. We could almost call him a spiritual ambassador. Music was a divine fire that he brought down to earth from heaven, to enable the huddled masses to warm their spirits and enrich their souls. In a memorable phrase, Liszt once defined the musician as 'the Bearer of the Beautiful.' And when he was asked how the artistic personality itself should be fostered, he gave a reply that cannot be bettered. 'For the formation of the artist, the first prerequisite is the improvement of the human being.'⁹

8. It is described in graphic detail in the diary of the singer John Orlando Parry, with whom Liszt toured the British Isles in the winter of 1840–1841. See David Ian Allsobrook, *Liszt: My Travelling Circus Life* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 144–145.

9. Liszt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 5 (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1882), 195.

4

These were among the ideas that Liszt took with him to Weimar, where he settled in 1848. He had already given his last piano recital for money in Elisabetgrad, in Ukraine, and in the early part of 1848 he took up fulltime duties in Weimar, bearing the grand title of ‘Kapellmeister-in-Extraordinary’, with a salary that was so small he called it his ‘cigar money’. And it did indeed just about cover the cost of the cheap cigars that Liszt smoked and regularly handed out to his friends. But Weimar had attractions for Liszt. It had an orchestra, an opera house and a strong theatrical tradition. It was the city of Goethe and Schiller, and Liszt wanted to restore the city to its former glory. He wanted it to become, as he put it, ‘The Athens of the North.’

In Weimar Liszt’s diplomatic skills were put to wonderful advantage. Here, if anywhere, we may call him ‘A Cultural Ambassador.’ He not only mustered the whole of Weimar’s musical resources, but those of the province of Thuringia as well. He reached out to the satellite towns of Jena, Eisenach, and Erfurt, and brought them all into his orbit. He often pooled their orchestras and choirs and put on great Wagner and Berlioz festivals with combined forces of 150 players and choruses of 200 singers or more. His work in behalf of both composers is well known. What may not be so well known is that when Liszt decided to mount the world premier of *Lohengrin*, an opera that Wagner had dedicated to him, he was obliged to arrange 46 rehearsals of this complex work before everything came together. If you read the background correspondence, you see that this premier performance really did make him worthy of the title of ‘diplomat.’

Like the good ambassador that he was, Liszt also formed a number of musical societies for the promotion of modern music. He established the ‘Neu Weimar Verein’ in the 1850s. It was a kind of musical club that held regular meetings in Weimar’s Erbprinz Hotel; it had an executive committee, a constitution, and even a newsletter called ‘Die Laterne’ – or ‘The Lantern’ – by whose light the members were presumably meant to find their way. Its local members included Peter Cornelius, Joachim Raff, Hans von Bronsart, and Alexander Ritter. The out-of-town members included Hector Berlioz, Joseph Joachim, Karl Klindworth and Richard Wagner.

In 1859 came the Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein, a national organization intended to put ‘The Music of the Future’ on the map. It became one of the most powerful musical organizations in Germany. It still exists today. Liszt was its first president, and he remained in this elevated office until his death. After his death the Presidency was assumed by Richard Strauss.

These organizations involved Liszt in an enormous amount of labour. And in order to undertake this vast amount of administrative work he often had to shelve his own musical activities until a better moment came along. Let us not forget that during all the time he was conducting new works, teaching, composing, and

burying himself in letters and messages connected with his various festivals, he was also writing books and articles. The articles usually took the form of topical commentaries on works and composers that were being featured in the upcoming Weimar concerts, and they served as programme-notes. There were essays on Schumann, Schubert, Wagner, Robert Franz, Berlioz, Beethoven, John Field, and Gluck. And at the height of all this activity he also found time to bring out his edition of the Complete Beethoven Sonatas, and an edition of the Nocturnes of John Field. Later on he would produce collected editions of Schubert and Weber as well, and he also joined the editorial team of Breitkopf and Härtel's Complete Chopin Edition.

5

It is during the latter part of Liszt's life that his image as the *grand seigneur* of music emerges in all its fullness. That shock of flowing white hair, the lined but kindly face, the piercing green/gray eyes, the abbé's collar, and the overwhelming sense of authority that emanated from everything that he did, gave him an aura that all who bathed in it never forgot. Two images come to mind.

In 1867, Liszt attended the first performance of his 'Coronation' Mass in the Matthias Church, in Budapest. King Franz Joseph and his entourage were present, together with many high-ranking dignitaries of the courts of Hungary and Austria. At the end of the performance, as everybody streamed out of the Church, crowds lined the road all the way through the Castle area and down to the Danube, there to see the King. Suddenly Liszt appeared at the main door of the church and walked slowly through the ranks of the massed crowds. A great roar of acclaim went up as he was recognized. 'Not *like* a King,' one of his compatriots observed, 'but *as* a king!'¹⁰

The other image comes to us from Busoni, who once remarked that the Grand Duke of Weimar had told him that 'Liszt was what a prince *should* be.'¹¹ And we are reminded, too, of Liszt's own words about nobility: 'It is better to *become* noble than to be born noble.'¹² By now, much of the musical world was turning to Liszt for help and support. He was weighed down with an avalanche of correspondence, mostly from people he never met but who wanted his support. He tells us that he received upwards of 50 letters a week. 'Some write for money, some ask for letters of reference, some ask for concerts and for decorations, others send parcels of their manuscripts for me to read.'¹³ He called it 'playing Providence'.

10. Wohl, *Recollections*, 20–21.

11. Ferruccio Busoni, *The Essence of Music and Other Papers*, trans. Rosamond Ley (London: Rockliff, 1957), 138.

12. Josef von Kopf, *Lebenserinnerungen eines Bildhauers* (Stuttgart – Leipzig: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1899), 92.

13. *The Letters of Franz Liszt to Olga von Meyendorff, 1877–1886*, ed. Edward N. Waters, trans. William R. Tyler (Cambridge, Massachusetts – London: Harvard University Press, 1979), 213.

A lesser man would have ignored everything, but Liszt usually replied. That is one reason we now have well over 11,000 extant letters from him to hundreds of correspondents.

6

When we survey Liszt's life complete, and compare it with the lives of his great contemporaries – Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Berlioz, Verdi, and above all of Wagner – we see at once what makes him different. They were ambassadors only for themselves. Liszt was an ambassador for others. Can we imagine Berlioz as the President of the Allgemeiner Musikverein? Can we imagine Chopin as a writer of books and articles about other musicians? And can we imagine Wagner as a fund-raiser for needy musicians? It could not have happened. Wagner, after all, was the first Wagnerian.

With the passing of time Franz Liszt has come to be seen as the paragon of much that is best in the profession of music. We don't really know him if we see him merely as the world's greatest pianist, or as the 19th century's most experimental composer, or as its most charismatic teacher. It is only when we see him as the cultural ambassador for his generation that his exceptional personality shines forth in all its totality. Liszt was a powerful historical force. He made things happen. Voltaire used to say that if God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him, otherwise how to explain the complex world around us? If I may be allowed to borrow that image, I would say that if Liszt had never existed, it would be necessary to invent him, otherwise much of what happened in the 20th century would remain inexplicable. By putting Liszt back into history, his importance in the general scheme of things stands revealed.

Are Liszt's thoughts about music and musicians out of touch with the banal world in which we live today? Are they relevant to our everyday existence as artists? Are they, in a word, too 'romantic'? In my opinion we banish them to time and place at our peril. That would subject us all to an irreplaceable loss. Music and musicians surely function best when placed in the service of a cause somewhat higher than self-interest. We need constantly to remind ourselves that if the art of music is to have a meaningful future, if it is to rise above the level of a mere trade, it must surely look to its past, and to those ideas that Liszt was not only the first to articulate but also the first to put into practice.