

V Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!¹

1 Alighieri, Dante, *La divina Commedia, Inferno, Canto I*, Mondadori, Milano, 1991, p. 51.

Introduction

«On Saturday, August 17, 1861, Liszt checked out of the Erbprinz Hotel and set out on foot for the Weimar railway station»². After many years of service to the court of Weimar the decision was made, it was time to leave the city. Walker informs us about the long journey that Liszt made in order to reach his beloved Carolyne in Rome. It took more than two months. He finally arrived in the Eternal City on October 20, 1861. However, retracing Liszt's journey is not relevant here. What is needed first is a brief explanation of the title of the present chapter. The words *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* are taken from Dante's *Divina commedia*. Liszt used these words already on October 6, 1846, in a letter to the Duke Carl-Alexander, when the pianist decided that it was time for him to leave his virtuoso career to «laisser plein vol à ma pensée»³. Thus, it might seem a contradiction to use this same sentence to open a chapter on the *Final Years*, when Liszt was already fifty years old. After the Weimar period, Liszt no longer in the middle of his life, but he, like the Italian poet, had surely lost his way. Consequently, the title is a provocation made in order to question the division of Liszt's life into three periods. If the former two periods are clear definable and identifiable, what happened after Weimar cannot be gathered into just the one homogeneous group, but it would be better to divide it into two smaller parts: the period 1861–1880, and the period 1880–1886. In turn, the first period should be divided into two sub-periods: 1861–1869 and 1869–1880. During the years 1861–1869 Liszt is in limbo: his enthusiasm for the marriage to Carolyne turns, first into disappointment, and then into depression; Liszt stays in Rome without any particular aim or reason. His daughter Blandine dies in 1862, and he tries to find some peace at the monastery Madonna del Rosario near Rome. In 1865, he enters the lower orders. In 1869 he begins his life as a pilgrim. The second sub-period, 1869–1880, is the so-called *vie trifurquée*. Liszt spent his life between Weimar, Rome, and Budapest. Between these two dates the Franco-Prussian war took place, which deeply affected Liszt. His dream of a peaceful Europe was finally broken. Then, the years around 1880 can be seen as a sort of bridge to old age, to the final loneliness and apathy, as proven by this letter to Carolyne of 1877: «Ma difficulté d'écrire augmente et devient excessive – comme aussi ma fatigue de vivre! Sans me plaindre, je souffre souvent d'exister – la santé du corps me reste, celle de l'âme manque!

2 Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years, 1861–1886*, p. 21.

3 Liszt, Franz, *Briefwechsel zwischen Franz Liszt und Carl Alexander Grossherzog von Sachsen*, letter dated 8 October 1846 p. 8.

Tristis est anima mea!»⁴. These are all very well-known aspects of his life, and so naturally a clear division into periods does not reflect the reality. Furthermore, focusing on only the piano compositions has the disadvantage of cutting away all the orchestral works. Among them, not only the symphonic poems and the “Dante” and “Faust” symphonies – whose form and aesthetics are anyway connected to the *Sonata* – but additionally even the two oratorios, *Christus* and *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth*, which responded to other musical and aesthetic principles. Here would be an ideal place to open a parenthesis on the role of the oratorios and of the sacred music in Liszt’s aesthetic view, however this would take the discourse too far away from the main topic. In any case, it is necessary to remember that, after the symphonic poems, Liszt saw in the oratorio the music of the future, namely the only genre able to embody the *Ideal der Zeit*. On the other hand, focusing solely on the piano composition presents the advantage of creating an easier path for analysis, because the piano was the privileged instrument for Liszt, and first of all he experimented on his ideas with it. After he spent his years in Weimar experimenting with orchestra, in his later years he came back to the piano. This return had several reasons, which will emerge in the present and following chapters. A relevant number of compositions from the periods just outlined, reflect both the events of Liszt’s life and his change of thought, and, at the same time, they also bring with them all the theoretical features of his previous compositions. It seems clear that it is impossible to separate the life from the works. But, while during the Weimar period the element to which Liszt devoted the majority of his energies was the war in the *Reich der Ideen*, during the *Final Years* his vigour gradually decreased, slowly extinguished by his personal life’s events. Nonetheless, the idea of progress – interpreted as a key concept of the 19th century, namely as a positive force towards the better – does not disappear from Liszt’s mind, not even after the disappointment of Weimar. It changed: sometimes it was oriented towards religious belief, sometimes towards the inward world. In both cases, it can be read as a symptom not only of his personal failure, but also as a symptom of the decline of the bourgeois society of the late 19th century. For that reason, the analysis that follows is chronologically organised, exactly because the individual and the work are inseparable.

4 Liszt, Franz, *Briefe an die Fürstin Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein*, letter dated 15 June 1877, Vol. VII, p. 193.

The years 1861–1869: the limbo

Following the failure of the project of his marriage, Liszt is in Rome and his life seems to be diminished. In addition, the Eternal City has no musical life. There are no concert halls, no professional orchestras, and no conservatoire. Perhaps is the city called “eternal” because nothing moves or changes. Everything remains tightly under the control of the Pope. It is possible to state that the only two events that enlivened Liszt’s life were his acquaintance with Giovanni Sgambati and Walter Bache. The first became one of the most famous of Liszt’s pupils in Rome, and with his cooperation he tried to promote German music in the Eternal City. Apparently, this was a very difficult task. In 1867, Kurd von Schlözer, a German diplomat, wrote that «Hier in Rom tut Liszt seit Jahren alles, um die Römer für Mozart und Beethoven zu gewinnen. Auch sein ausgezeichnete Schüler Sgambati ist bestrebt, seine Landsleute in die Tiefen deutscher Musik einzuführen, und dirigierte vor vier Wochen in der Sala Dantesca die *Eroica*, welche das Publikum allerdings nicht ganz zu verstehen schien»⁵. And it was already 1867 (Beethoven composed his op. 55 in 1803–1804). At that time, Liszt was no longer a permanent resident of the city, and he had already been working in this direction for six years. Again, nothing changes in the eternal city. The second pupil, Walter Bache, stayed in Rome for about three years, and, once he came back to England, he started to organise concerts in order to spread Liszt’s music throughout the country. We owe Bache for providing an account of many of the details of Liszt’s life during these troubled years, and to his sister, Costance, we owe her for her English translation of the La Mara edition of the Liszt’s letters. Though Liszt had many friends around him, supporting him, he was only able to find some sense of consolation in religion. And it is no coincidence that during these years he worked on his two oratorios (*Die Legende von der Heiligen Elisabeth* and *Christus*), and on his *Ungarische Krönungsmesse*. Furthermore, he composed a great deal of religious music for piano, orchestra, and chorus. The piano productions of this period do not represent one of the highest moments of the Lisztian corpus, though there are some exceptions, such as the *Isolde Liebestod*, composed in 1867.

5 Schlözer, Kurd von, *Römische Briefe*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 1913, letter dated 2 January 1867, p. 293. Sgambati conducted the third symphony of Beethoven in 1866.

Waldesrauschen S. 145/1

In the midst of these events, it seems Liszt looked to his past in search of some relief. It is therefore unsurprising that during the first years of his stay in Rome, he brought to light the two pieces *Waldesrauschen* and *Gnomenreigen*. They are the accomplishment of a commission received when he was still in Weimar. Walker reads the two studies as autobiographical, stating that «they are really nostalgic annotations to the spectacular keyboard pieces of the Weimar period, and even of the *Glanzzeit*, now lost almost beyond recall»⁶. Certainly, a possible interpretation, though, as already pointed out, in following this interpretative line one is tempted to understand the entire production of a composer as autobiographical – at least because they are the result of the activity of a human being, and not of a computer, as Hamilton said. Anyway, it is not relevant here to state whether Liszt's nostalgia was caused by the loss of his virtuoso career, or by the events which took place at the beginning of the decade. In any case, it is Walker himself, who, reporting many quotations, seems to contradict himself. The musicologist reminds us that Liszt's brilliant style did not lie in the past. The most authoritative review is without any doubt the one that Hanslick wrote after Liszt's Vienna recital in 1874:

Mit Jubel begrüßt, tritt Liszt auf, in langem, hoch zugeknöpften Abbékleide, setzt sich ans Piano und giebt dem Orchester das Zeichen zum Anfang der Wander-Phantasie (op. 15) von Schubert. Sein Spiel ist vollendet, wie ehemals, dabei von ruhigerem Geiste und milderem Gemüth erfüllt; nicht so blendend, so packend, aber einheitlicher, ich möchte sagen solider, als das des jungen Liszt gewesen. [...] Liszts Vortrag war frei, poetisch, voll geistreicher Nüancen, dabei von edler, künstlerischer Ruhe. Und seine Technik, seine Virtuosität? Ich werde mich wohl hüten, davon zu reden. Genug, daß Liszt sie nicht eingebüßt, sondern höchstens abgeklärt und beruhigt hat. Welch merkwürdigen Mensch! [...] Für den Liszt von heute ist es eine große Leistung, die er vollbracht hat; und doch that er so unbefangen, als sei das nichts und er noch der Liszt von 1840. Fürwahr, ein Liebling der Götter!⁷.

This does not merely suggest that Liszt was still able to play at the same level as his virtuoso reputation implied, and then to further produce *Glanzmusik*

6 Alan, Walker, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years, 1861–1886*, p. 41.

7 Hanslick, Eduard, *Concerte, Componisten und Virtuosen der letzten fünfzehn Jahre, 1870–1885*. Allgemeiner Verein für Deutsche Literatur, Berlin, 1886, pp. 123–125. This is the best evidence that the Viennese critic was a supporter of Liszt as a pianist, but a determined opponent of him as a composer.

at the age of sixty-two, but the quotation is evidence to support the fact that it was his own choice to quit with these kinds of compositions and this kind of life. The time of cheerful Romanticism was over; and not just for Liszt, but for the entire Romantic Generation. In any event, it is undeniable that the *Zwei Konzertetüden* S. 145 still have something in common with the works of his youth. Lest we forget that, if Emile Ollivier survived the loss of his beloved thanks to «hard physical labour», Liszt overcame the death of Blandine with hard intellectual and spiritual labour. And for Liszt, these two pieces were probably a means of escape, so as not to think about his miserable situation. A brief analysis of the first of these studies is necessary at this point, as it possesses some elements which bind it both with the *Sonata*, and with the work which will be analysed later, the *Variationen über das Motiv von Bach* S. 180.

Waldesrauschen is an étude, which perfectly responds to the romantic idea of the genre, and it is written as a series of motivic transformations of an original four bar theme (*Example 1*), first exposed by the left hand, starting in the tonality of D flat major. The right hand plays a series of «sixteenth-note sextuplet arpeggios often constructed over non-functional seventh and ninth chords»⁸. Then, at m. 15 the roles are inverted, the left hand plays the sextuplets while the right hand plays the theme (in octaves).



Example 1 – *Waldesrauschen*, theme, mm. 2–5

The form is very simple and easily recognisable, and it comes directly from Liszt's experience as an études composer: A-B-A'. It is useful to remember



Example 2 – *Waldesrauschen*, passing notes (Eb-E \sharp), m. 4

that the series of piano études of 1826 (S136), used the ternary form too. The structure of this piece is very simple. The left hand exposes the thematic material (D \flat -E), and then the right hand repeats it. Through a modulation section B starts, modulating to F, A, and finally to C. At the end of

8 Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 164.

this section a modulation brings us back to the tonality of D flat, and to the re-emergence of the first theme. This tonality scheme follows the modulation to the III grade (minor or major). During these years, this feature became a main modulation strategy of Liszt's compositional technique.

The form used by Liszt is anything but new, and it seems to contradict everything he wrote and composed during the Weimar years. Anyway, as Walker points out, *Waldesrauschen* is a nostalgic work, that looks, in what concerns the form, to the past. On the other hand, the past does not just represent a happier moment in Liszt's life, but it is also a fruitful source of inspiration, a place where Liszt looked to find new material. And here another meaning is found for the open to the past character of Lisztian works. He was capable of using the achievements of the ancient masters, giving them new life towards the future. In the next few pages it will emerge how the greatest source of his innovative language was to be found in the music of the 16th century, more so than in the unclear concept of *music of the future*. Before moving on, it is necessary to draw attention to two other peculiar elements of *Waldesrauschen*. They are nothing new in Liszt's language, but they begin to assume a new function here, which lies at the basis of the future developments in his style, and which constitute the true basic material of this étude: 1) the seventh and ninth harmonies – the arpeggios «point the way towards the shimmering textures of Ravel's "Ondine"»⁹ – 2) the chromaticism and tonal ambiguity – this ambiguity is provided in three elements: a) the modulation to the mediant, avoiding any perfect cadence; b) the continued oscillations between tonalities; c) the chromaticism. This last point is the most relevant. The chromaticism is of course nothing new, neither for Liszt nor for the entire Romantic Generation. But here Liszt confuses the listener by staying on the passing note, which is a sound foreign to the harmony most of the time, and a reduction in staying on the chord tone (*Example 2*), a procedure that recalls the more famous *Tristan Akkord*. But it is the chromatic process, taken to its extreme, which will open the door to the highest point of tonal ambiguity.

9 Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years, 1861–1886*, p. 41.

Variationen über das Motiv von Bach Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen S. 180



Example 3 – Bach, J.S., Basso from the cantata *Weinen, Klagen* BWV.12

The past is not just a source of formal inspiration, but also a source of content. During his years in Rome and at the monastery on Monte Mario, Liszt deepened his knowledge of the ancient music. The composers of the 16th and of the 17th centuries were not merely a source of inspiration for his religious works and a musical relief from his pain, but they were also a source of musical material. Part of Liszt's musical innovation finds its roots in the ancient music. Even the chromaticism principle, largely used by the Romantic Generation and often identified as one peculiarity of 19th century music, finds its roots in the past, and precisely in that past which the Romantic Generation had so recently rediscovered: the Baroque. A masterpiece in the use of chromaticism from the Lisztian repertoire is represented by the *Variationen über das Motiv Bach Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* S. 180, composed shortly after the death of Blandine in the second half of 1862. It is most assuredly an autobiographical composition. Indeed, the work is in F minor, «Liszt's key of mourning *par excellence*»¹⁰, and the chorale placed at the end, *Was Gott tut, das ist wohl getan*, is a sort of resignation to the events of life, which Liszt then tried to justify as a part of God's plan (Liszt's son Daniel died in 1859). But aside from the tragic circumstances from which the composition resulted, Liszt was able to create a magnificent work. It is one of the last piano pieces in which he used a large form. Of course, it does not possess the grandeur of the *Sonata*, but it shares some features with the Weimar composition. The *Variationen* are built upon a basso of Bach, from the cantata of the same name, composed in Weimar in 1714. The melodic line is very simple, and it possesses a chromatic descending movement¹¹ (*Example 3*).

Liszt takes this motive to build a series of variations, following approximately the same formal structure of Bach's cantata, including a short prelude, the cantata, the *recitativo*, and it closes with the chorale as previously mentioned.

10 Alan, Walker, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years, 1861–1886*, p. 52. Alfred Brendel underlines the grief of this piece, stating that «the work encompasses a wide range of grief, terror and despair. The extended lament which opens the fantasia is entirely given to three-note groups: their declamation recalls the name Blandine». See Brendel, Alfred, *Music, Sense and Nonsense*, p. 212.

11 This chromatic descending movement is of course the so called *passus duriusculus*, itself a symbol of grief.

This work clearly shows that a large form composition is still possible using the variations technique. But, if the *Sonata* represents the heroic Romanticism, here Liszt began his simplification process, which would reduce his music to its fundamental elements. In this work Liszt used both the rhythmical and the harmonic variation, following the same process used in the *Sonata*. However, if the latter can be considered as a multi-thematic work, here Liszt used just one theme, or better, one motivic element, which is a chromatic sequence covering a fourth, from F to C (*Example 4*), and he did not use this to create new thematic material. The transformation of the motive preserves «die diastematische Substanz, oder zumindest der melodische Umriß, [...] während die rhythmische Gestalt modifiziert wird, und zwar manchmal so tiefgreifend, daß es schwer fällt, bei unmittelbarer, nicht durch Lektüre des Notentextes gestützter Wahrnehmung die Herkunft eines Motivs zu erkennen»¹².



Example 4 – Variationen über das Motiv von Bach, Liszt's bass

There is however a significantly relevant difference between the two works. In the *Sonata* – whose title brings with it a precise vocabulary and therefore a stricter conception of the form – Liszt changed both the key and tempo indications several times, creating this feeling of *Formlosigkeit* experienced by Hanslick. On the other hand, in his *Variationen*, which as a genre gave him more formal freedom, Liszt did not change the key indication until the chorale section – which cannot however be considered a variation, and, consequently, it is possible to state that the whole work has just the F minor/F major tonality – and he used but a few time changes – from the initial 3/4, to 4/4, to 6/4, and to the 4/4 of the chorale. Anyway, the rhythmical variation of the motive, gradually makes the writing more dense and even more anxious, until the *recitativo* which is a calm parenthesis before the terrible pedal, which reach its «horrific *fff* climax at m. 312»¹³.

12 Dahlhaus, Carl, *Liszt, Schönberg und die größte Form*, p. 202.

13 Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 150.

Example 5 – Variationen über das Motiv von Bach, mm. 1–12

Afterwards, the salvation of the diatonic chorale enters. Despite its formal clarity, the *Variationen* are more tonally unstable than the *Sonata*. This means that for Liszt the tonality, as a functional centre and as a unifying element, is no longer useful – his music is no longer built on centrifugal force, which pushes away from the tonic and onto the centripetal force, which pushes back to the tonic. Now, the key signature suggests an atmosphere more than a precise tonality. In the next chapter, how this idea lead Liszt to the dissolution of tonality will be analysed. Let us come back to the *Variationen*, because they are worthy of a brief analysis. The beginning is quite simple and directly shows the compositional procedure. Liszt takes the motivic material (*Example 4*) and exposes it starting from D \flat (*Example 5*). The chord is in its first inversion, so the motive shows its original chromaticism (F-E \flat -E-D-D \flat). But, instead of following its path till C, and then confirming the tonality of F, Liszt lingers on D \flat – the two cadences of mm. 5–6 and mm. 7–8 confirm the tonality of D \flat minor –, and then he creates a chromatic figure based on the original motive, but this time covering a fifth (D-G), which is repeated twice and at the end collapses on F through a chromatic passage (*Example 6*).

Example 6 – Variationen über das Motiv von Bach, motive in F major, mm. 338–347

Here, as with the *Sonata*, a problem of interpretation emerges. If the formal structure resembles that of Bach, there is a noteworthy difference in the content. So, this prelude-like beginning is, upon closer analysis, neither a prelude (as in the Bach's cantata, which opens with a *Sinfonia*), nor an exposition of the motive, as one would expect from a set of variations. However, it is already a variation of the motive, which is exposed in its original form only at m. 19, and then repeated for a second time. The motive is counterpointed by the right hand since its first appearance, which uses just the head of the figure $\downarrow \downarrow$ but rhythmically varied as $\downarrow \cdot \downarrow \cdot$ (mm. 19–20). The procedure is the same as that used in the *Sonata*: exposition of the material in a tonally unstable passage, and eventually confirming the wrong key. Through a chromaticism he reaches the tonic and exposes the theme, while beginning to transform it. The “category” is used freely here. The exposition of the theme and its development are somehow inverted. Somehow Liszt starts to develop his ideas before their exposition. The motive is hidden in a dense chromatic counterpoint, and it passes from the left to the right hand continuously, and is often played in the middle voices. A multitude of themes – using chromaticism, too – grow above or below the motive, and it makes the task of a listener even harder, who expects to clearly hear the developmental adventure of the motive. The acute chromaticism of this work is a direct consequence of the chromaticism of Bach's *cantata*, and «auf der Grundlage des chromatisch fallenden Quartgangs eine Erweiterung der Harmonik bis hin zur vollständigen Durchchromatisierung aller Stimmen, und das heißt auch: bis an die Grenzen dessen, was im Rahmen der Funktions-

harmonik noch möglich ist»¹⁴. So, the chromaticism becomes a compositional method used to expand the harmonic possibilities of the tonal system. After the long *recitativo* marked *Lento* and in which the word *lagrimoso* appears two times, a section begins (*Quasi Andante, un poco mosso*), marked with the words *dolce piangendo*, further evidence of the biographical influences on this work. The atmosphere here is certainly sorrowful, but it is not as violent as before. Liszt creates a moment of religious recollection here, of meditation. This leads to the *Quasi allegro moderato* in which the previously mentioned pedal begins, and leads the music from the *pp* of m. 247 to the *ff* of m. 312. Then a little coda introduces the chorale *Was Gott tut, das ist wohl getan, dabei will ich verbleiben*. The chorale is bipartite itself. A first one, the *Lento*, is a meditative piece, resembling Bach's chorale and it ends on the chord of F major after several confirmations. With the last chord at m. 339 (*poco a poco più mosso*), the left hand begins a tremolo on a F pedal upon which Liszt inserts the chromatic motive of the beginning, but this time it is used to build a perfect cadence (I-...-V-I) to confirm the new tonality of F major (*Example 6*). Then, this figure collapses with a chromatic passage (*Quasi Allegro*) to a chorale like moment, which confirms the tonality with three fermatas on the V, on the IV and on the III-V. It is the beginning of the glorious finale, in which the faith in God and in his plans resonates. The grief expressed by the chromaticism is dissolved here in the brightness of the F major.

This is a final acceptance of God's will. Many commentators have underlined that this work has two main features: 1) the chromaticism, which here becomes a structural element, namely it substitutes the harmonic connections; 2) the psychological/poetical moment. On this last point, one of the first analyses was suggested by Lina Ramann, who wrote in her *Liszt-Pädagogium*: «Aus dem psychologischen Prozeß des ganzen lassen sich Variationengruppen unterscheiden. deren eine „Weinen“, die andere „Klagen“, dann „Sorgen – Zagen“ als ihre seelische Tonika fühlbar machen»¹⁵. In this view, the chorale is then seen as a distinct piece, that has nothing to do with what precedes, but it is not. Quite often, the transformation of the themes in Liszt's works assume a dialectical character, and it is believed that this work makes no exception. The motive of the beginning represents, through the *Chromatische Quartfall*, grief, moving through several phases and nuances. Then, this sorrowful sentiment goes through the chorale, and it emerges transformed. It is neither a chromatic fall, nor a chorale any longer. The contrast is solved in an ascending diatonic

14 Redepenning, Dorothea, *Franz Liszts Auseinandersetzung mit Johann Sebastian Bach*, p. 104.

15 Ramann, Lina, *Liszt-Pädagogium*, Breitkopf und Härtel, Leipzig, 1901, Heft 1, p. 14. Quoted in Redepenning, Dorothea, *Franz Liszts Auseinandersetzung mit Johann Sebastian Bach*, p. 105.

scale. Concluding, the *Variationen* are surely an autobiographical work, but it would be a mistake to label it as a work in which the composer exposes his suffering. Here Liszt used the chromaticism of Bach's motive as an excuse to create a total chromaticism, which is a basis for many of his works, and which gradually led him to an awareness of atonality (with a 19th century meaning).

The Years 1869–1880: the wandering Franciscan

Liszt arrived in Rome with great hope: the marriage to Carolyne. After a few months it became clear that the marriage was, and always would be, just a dream. The death of Blandine shortly after the death of Daniel pushed Liszt into depression, and the situation was worsened by the near desperation of Ollivier. The decade began under the portent of bad omens. And Liszt was clearly, deeply affected; «his sense of boundless optimism temporarily deserted him. He became introspective. His hair turned gray, and on his face appeared the numerous warts with which anybody who has seen photographs of him in later life is familiar»¹⁶. Liszt needed to escape Rome, and to find a peaceful place where he could find some repose. Therefore, he decided to settle down at Madonna del Rosario, a monastery not far from Rome. There Liszt found his home between 1863 and 1868.

Example 7 – St. François d'Assise: la prédication aux oiseaux. Birds effect, mm. 1–3

¹⁶ Alan, Walker, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years, 1861–1886*, p. 54.

In the midst of the nature and tranquility of this place, Liszt found his balance and his inspiration again, but this time away from the grief of the *Variationen* and from the hallucination of the *Évocation à la chapelle Sixtine*. Indeed, in the peaceful surroundings of the monastery, Liszt gave birth to two works, which are related both to nature and to religion, the two *Légendes* S. 175: *St François d'Assise: la prédication aux oiseaux* and *St François de Paule: marchant sur les flots*.

The works undoubtedly have a psychological interest, but they are above all relevant for the musical effects which Liszt was able to recreate with the keyboard (*Example 7*). In the first *Légende*, a work that «must be regarded as the historical link between Daquin's "Le Coucou" and Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux*»¹⁷, Liszt shows his ability to recreate the sounds of birds, and to represent their flying and twirling. In the second one, the tremolos and the sixteenth-note triplets are a musical depiction of waves (*Example 8*).

Example 8 – St. François de Paule: marchant sur les flots, mm. 9–17

These two marvellous, descriptive pieces are evidence that Liszt spent his entire life experimenting with all the different timbre possibilities of the piano, as proven by the preface he wrote for the first edition of the two pieces:

[...] Mon manque d'habilité, et peut-être aussi les bornes étroites de l'expression musicale dans une œuvre de petite dimension, appropriée à un instrument aussi

17 Alan, Walker, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years, 1861–1886*, p. 57.

dépourvu que le piano d'accents et de sonorités variées, m'ont obligé à me restreindre et à diminuer de beaucoup la merveilleuse surabondance du texte de la "prédication aux petits oiseaux"¹⁸.

However, it is in the preface of the second *Legend* that one finds something more interesting and more relevant in the definition of his aesthetics: «Saint François debout sur les flots agités; ils le portent à son but, selon l'ordre de la Foi, qui maîtrise l'ordre de la Nature»¹⁹. After all he went through, Liszt still shows his faith in progress, even if here the concept partially loses its secular character in favour of a more marked theological and teleological view. Here it seems that Liszt wants to tell us that the same rules that are valid for (religious) faith are also true for the music. And, as St. Francis of Paola walked on water following his path according to his nature, the prophet-composer must do the same. According to this *Weltanschauung*, Liszt had to follow his natural development: it did not matter whether people looked at him as a *Formlosigkeit* composer, he had to follow his path – as Bury wrote (see *Chapter II*), progress is a matter of faith. But progress is also related to Liszt's prophetic conception of artists, where the prophet has no choice but to follow his destiny. Providence and predestination are two concepts that enter into the meaning of progress. And that is what Liszt did, becoming the cause of his own isolation, which was, from his point of view, an inner necessity. If during the 1860s this positive faith in progress and in the composer's mission started to decrease, his work did not stop following these simple but cruel rules: *sint ut sunt out non sint!*, or, as Brendel wrote, Liszt «did penance for a superabundance of notes by carrying music, in his uncompromising and spare late pieces, to the brink of silence»²⁰.

18 Preface to the first *Legend*, *St François d'Assise: la prédication aux oiseaux*, in *Franz Liszts Musikalische Werke*, ed. Franz Liszt-Stiftung, Breitkopf und Härtel, Leipzig, 1927, II. Pianofortewerke, Vol. 9, p. 62.

19 Liszt, Franz, *St François de Paule: marchant sur les flots*, in *Neue Liszt Ausgabe*, Serie 1, Vol. 10, p. 14.

20 Brendel, Alfred, *Sense and Nonsense*, p. 235.

Fünf kleine Klavierstücke S. 192

The years between 1861 and 1880 are the ones in which Liszt changed his personality and turned from the “concert man”²¹ and combative critic, into an introspective and calm thinker of the keyboard, who brought with him all concerns, both personal and of the century. There is a set of pieces, which were not intended as a cycle²², but which are a perfect representation of this parabola, since they were composed between 1865 and 1879: the *Fünf kleine Klavierstücke* S. 192. If Liszt did not intend to create a cycle in the beginning, it is also true that he created a cycle a posteriori. The first piece (January 1865), in E major, is an arrangement for piano solo of the Lied *Gestorben war ich* (S. 308), composed in 1845–46, and which constitutes the basis of his *Liebesträume* No. 2 (S. 541/2; 1850); the second piece (February 1865), in A \flat is a variation on a short chromatic theme; the third (July 1873), and the fourth piece (July 1876), are both in F \sharp , and, despite three years separating them, they share the same atmosphere. They are not piano pieces, but they are also not drafts, as they are often interpreted²³, but they are musical impressions. The last piece (July 1879), was probably written «to justify drawing together various earlier pieces into a set (even though it was evidently not a set he intended for publication)»²⁴, and this is the only one with an evocative (programmatic) title, *Sospiri*. In confirmation of this view, the fifth piece is based on the harmonies of the previous four (A \flat -F \sharp -E). These five short compositions together, even if they are rooted in the past, possess some of the features of the late works. Above all their shortness, simplicity, and the absence of frills, make of this work a perfect example of the direction of Lisztian research and changes in personality. These pieces were originally intended neither for public performances, nor for printing²⁵.

21 Liszt wrote to Princess Belgiojoso that «j’ai osé donner une série de Concerts à moi tout seul, tranchante du Louis XIV et disant cavalièrement au public “le Concert c’est moi”». See Liszt, Franz, *Franz Liszt’s Briefe, Von Paris bis Rom*, letter dated 5 June 1839, Vol. I, p. 25.

22 Howard, Leslie, *Franz Liszt, The Late Pieces. The Complete Music for Solo Piano*, Hyperion, London, 1991, Vol. 11 (Hyperion CDA66445 [1991]). «The hapless Mme P-N was a friend of Olga von Meyendorff with whom Liszt kept up a lively and copious correspondence and for whom he wrote a number of pieces, including the five album-leaves which have been misleadingly published as if they form some kind of a cycle, whereas they were composed over many years and are quite independent from each other».

23 For example, Ben Arnold describes them as «so short that they seem to be fragments rather than worked-out compositions». See Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 167.

24 Hamilton, Kenneth, *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, p. 153.

25 Liszt himself during a lesson in Weimar told to Göllicher that «such music [*Evocation à la Chapelle Sixtine*] should only be played in private» (Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years*

V Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita



Ge-storben war ich vor Lie - bes-won-ne; be - gra - ben lag ich in ih - ren Ar-men;

Example 9a – Gestorben war ich, theme, mm. 4–11



Example 9b – Klavierstück No. 1, theme, mm. 6–13

The first piece of the series, though it does not have a title, is strictly related to the Lied *Gestorben war ich*. It uses the same musical material (Example 9a, 9b), though with some variations. Consequently, it could be argued that it has a programme, and it is represented by the words of Uhland's poem²⁶, even if here the music seems to be more a nostalgic commentary on the lost peace of the past, than a programmatic work²⁷. Cook suggests that this work may even be a critical commentary of the *Liebesträume* No. 2, and that the opening measures of the first *Klavierstücke* «are not merely a reminiscence of the opening measures of *Libestraum* No. 2 but also a criticism of them: fifty notes

1861–1886, p. 44). The highest point of this distinction between private and public performances is represented by the *Weihnachtsbaum*. In 1881 Liszt gave the first performance of this piece in Rome in the Hotel room of his granddaughter Daniela. «The title page bears the inscription: “First performed on Christmas Day, 1881, by amateurs in Rome”» (Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years 1861–1886*, p. 458).

26 «Gestorben war ich / Vor Liebeswonne: / Begraben lag ich / In ihren Armen; / Erwecket ward ich / Von ihren Küssen; / Den Himmel sah ich / In ihren Augen». Uhland, Ludwig, *Seliger Tod*, in *Gedichte von Ludwig Uhland*, J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, Stuttgart und Tübingen, 1815, p. 39.

27 And these were the years of his troubles with Marie d'Agoult and of the appearance of her novel *Nélida*.

in the 1865 version do the work that took sixty-six in the *Liebestraum*. [...] In this aspect, as in its concision, its lack of rhetoric, and its extreme technical simplicity, *Kleine Klavierstück No. 1* can be regarded as a critical reinterpretation of *Liebestraum No. 2*.²⁸ The work opens with an introduction (mm. 1–5) based on a diminished seventh chord (C♭-D♭-F♭-A), which seems to lead to C♯ minor. Instead, a fermata leaves the chord unresolved. At this point it seems clear that Liszt used the unresolved diminished seven chords not only to create tonal ambiguity, but as functional elements. They assume harmonic relevance in the overall structure of a piece. The structure (4+4), as well as the material, is extremely simple: the theme (*Example 9a*), is exposed two times, and then it is twice repeated in octaves. A contrasting section begins at m. 23, and a crescendo leads to the *ff* climax, which corresponds to the words «Den Himmel sah ich» of Uhland's poem. A descending chromatic scale reintroduces the theme, with which a *morendo* reaches the conclusion with a traditional V⁷-I cadence. The form used here by Liszt (A-A-B-A) is one of the oldest and simplest musical forms. Liszt probably used this form for the simple reason that he had Uhland's poem in mind, whose theme is love, but such an intense love that it is almost death-like. The lyrics narrate a dualism between physical love, which is likened to a sensation of death, and spiritual love, which opens a door to the absolute. Liszt seems to ignore this contrast, and sets the words of the poet to music as if they were written by a *Minnesänger*. This is the simplest way to set any lyrics to music. However, the use of this form assumes another meaning here, too. The form A-A-B-A contains *in nuce* the principle of variation. Of course, Liszt knew this principle very well and had applied it successfully in several of his works, from the *Sonata* to the *Variationen*; but here it assumes another meaning. The variation technique is no longer used to create large works, but to create small pieces, in which everything is reduced to drafts, impressions; everything is outlined, with no intention to develop it further. The variation itself, as a musical principle, has lost its power. A musical impression has no time to change, because it is just a moment committed to paper. Briefly, the idea of an extended use of the variation is related to the positive idea of progress. Since, as the future will always be better, then the composer reworks his musical ideas in order to create a dialectical movement between them and progress itself. The musical impressions, where variation is limited to very few changes, is related to a negative concept of progress; namely, the composer notes on paper a precise moment and feeling, in order to illustrate for the future generations that they do not have to expect great developments during

28 Cook, Nicholas, *Rehearings. Liszt's Second Thoughts*, pp. 170–171.

their earthly lives. The harmony is simple, too. The theme goes through very small variations during its repetition, and the B section does not go through great variations, but it presents a simple and not excessive moment of contrast (*Annex I*). The dialectical process of the thematic transformations, which lie at the basis of the sonata form, and which Liszt used several times, is no more than an old memory here. Music is reduced to its essential elements. The ambiguity of these pieces lies in their incompleteness.

The second piece has some features in common with the first, but here Liszt worked with the variation more. The theme is exposed first by the right hand on a carpet of syncopated chords, and then it is restated in octaves. This second time, however, it is used to modulate to the area of G \flat (subdominant of the subdominant). Here section B begins, a brief development based on the head of the theme and alternating between the right and left hands (*Annex II*). It ends with the climax of m. 39 (*fff*), which extinguishes in a diminuendo within two chords, and dies against a rest. A chromatic scale in octaves introduces the last variation of the theme, which, after a series of (diminished) seventh chords, ends on the tonic. The structure of this piece is again A-A-B-A, but here every occurrence of “A” is varied. Furthermore, there is a higher tonal instability, due to the chromatic movement of the theme, which introduces sounds foreign to the harmony.

The third and fourth pieces are often dealt with together, as they are both very short, respectively 24 and 21 measures, and they are therefore both considered more as fragments than as fully fleshed-out compositions. But what makes these two “fragments” two small masterpieces is precisely their inner consistency. For this reason, they will be analysed here individually. Furthermore, one was composed in 1873, and the other three years later in 1876, namely eight and eleven years after the first two pieces. During these years Liszt went through many changes. The first and the second *Klavierstück* arose in Rome, just a few short months before Liszt took the tonsure. This explains the aura of nostalgia which surrounds the first number. The pieces from 3 to 5 were born in Weimar, during the summers Liszt spent there giving piano lessons. Then, between the first two and the last three numbers there is the tonsure, the journeys, the beginning of his *vie trifurquée*, the Bülow-Wagner affair, the Franco-Prussian war, and the subsequent capture of Rome as the final act of the Italian unification. Liszt lived through all these events with great anxiety. In 1870 he could not come back to Rome, because, as the princess Wittgenstein wrote him, the situation was too dangerous, as the troops of Vittorio Emanuele entered the city, and the French army moved out in order to defend their invaded fatherland. But Liszt was, above all, concerned about the destiny of Europe, depending on the outcome of the

Franco-Prussian war. Liszt was definitely a supporter of the idea of a united Europe, on the basis of Kant's theories, but he was chiefly both German and French, and his career was intertwined these two countries, too. Furthermore, in 1861 Carl-Alexander made Liszt his chamberlain. He was then officially a German citizen, and, as chamberlain of Weimar – which entered the war at Prussia's side (even if in *Samariterdiensten*) – he even had a diplomatic role. Conversely, he was «personally acquainted with Napoleon III,» and he «had been decorated by that monarch with the order of Commander of the Legion of Honour»²⁹. Furthermore, his son-in-law Emile Ollivier was the Prime Minister when the war begun³⁰. Several times Liszt expressed his favour for imperial France³¹, and he even expressed grief when he realized that his daughter Cosima repudiated her French side (her mother was the Franco-German countess Marie d'Agoult)³², and he hated Wagner for his nauseating «public gloatings over each Prussian victory»³³. All these events surely changed Liszt's personality, and they lessened his faith in a peaceful humanity. It is therefore no coincidence that the third number of the series appears to be just a musical impression.



Example 10 – Klavierstück No. 3, theme, mm. 1–3

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- 29 Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years 1861–1886*, p. 212.
- 30 For all these reasons, some musicologists stated that Liszt spied for France. See Paillard, Bertita, Harszti, Emile, Wager, Willis, *Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner in the Franco-German War of 1870*, in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 1949), pp. 386–411.
- 31 See Liszt, Franz, *Franz Liszt's Briefe, an eine Freundin*, Vol. III, p. 203, letter No. 121, dated October or November 1868, and Franz Liszt, *Franz Liszt's Briefe, an die Fürstin Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein*, Vol. VI, p. 263, letters Nos. 240–241, dated [september] 1870.
- 32 See, for example the entry of her diary of the 10–14 January 1871. She shows no compassion for her old Parisian friends, who were dying under Prussian bombing.
- 33 Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years 1861–1886*, p. 223. Even if the relationship with Wagner was not at its highest point, Liszt composed in 1867, namely in the middle of the Bülow-Wagner affair, his paraphrase on the *Isolde Liebestod* from Wagner's *Tristan*, and in May 1872 when the two composers met again; the quarrel was over.

The *Sehr langsam* appears as a chorale, whose theme is exposed by the soprano voice, and counterpointed by the alto. The harmony is very simple here, and it touches only the I-V⁷-I grades of the scale (*Example 10*). The theme is immediately repeated, but this time Liszt creates a cadence on the V, and there begins the “development”. It is an eight measures section, in which the progression of the two upper voices is counterpointed by the two lower ones. The B section ends with two diminished seventh chords left unresolved. Thereafter, two small codas based on the theme material, lead to the final F \sharp chord. The structure of this piece is again very simple. If Liszt privileged the sonata form to build some of his most elaborate works, such as the *Großes Konzertsolo*, the *B minor Piano Sonata*, to some of his *Symphonische Dichtungen*, during his late years he looked back to the origins, both his own and that of the musical genres³⁴, and he elected the form A-B-A (A') as the most suitable for the expression of his feelings – it is furthermore emphasised that the form is the last support, when all the other structural elements are falling apart. The third *Klavierstück* begins in the area of the tonic (mm. 1–3), moves to the dominant (mm. 4–7), creates what could possibly be called a small development (mm. 8–15), and at the end it creates two codas (mm. 16–24) based on the theme in the area of the tonic on a dominant pedal (see *Annex III* for the formal scheme).

Very similar to the third piece is the subsequent number, *Andantino*. It shares the same tonality of F \sharp , and the absence of any harmonic extravagances. The form itself is, like in the previous number, extremely simple, but it deserves a closer analysis anyway, because it recalls some of the composition rules as they were outlined by Antoine Reicha – who, it is worth noting, was Liszt's counterpoint teacher in Paris for about six months, back in 1826³⁵ – and Marx – who Liszt admired and to whom he dedicated an enthusiastic essay (1855), *Marx und sein Buch: Die Musik des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts und ihre Pflege*. Reicha, in his *Traité de Mélodie* published in 1818, tried to solve the old matter of the definitions of *phrase* and *période*, which had occupied the theorists for a very long time, and he conclusively defined the *période* as a combination of two times four bars.

34 It represents a look at his origin, because, as already pointed out, the A-B-A form was already at the basis of his virtuoso works. But it is also a look at the origin of the musical genres, since the tripartite *Liedform* has its roots in the ancient past.

35 According to Walker the first years of Liszt's stay in France are a half mystery. Aside from his tournée in Europe, nothing else was precisely recorded. Rémy Stricker, for example, said that «le six mois en question ne se situent pas forcément en 1826 [...] Liszt est revenu à Paris avant son départ pour l'Angleterre en avril 1827, et puis en juillet de la même année. Rien n'interdit de penser que les leçons avec Reicha ont pu reprendre pendant ces moments-là, voire plus tard en 1827 et 1828». See, Stricker, Rémy, *Franz Liszt et Antoine Reicha*, p. 12.



Example 11 – Klavierstück No. 4, theme, mm. 1–4

Marx, some years later, in his *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition* (1837–1847), described the *Periode* as the symmetrical construction of an antecedent and a consequent, as well as the correspondence of the two cadences between them. This little piano piece is then a return to the past and to the simplicity of the form. After so many years spent fighting it, Liszt seems to give up the battle. But this is not a victory of “formalism,” namely it does not mean that the form must govern the content; as briefly pointed out at the end of the previous chapter, the simplicity of the form is the last element able to keep the musical ideas together after the Weimar period. Therefore, during these years Liszt needed to come back to these simple constructions in order to understand how to capture in music the impression of a moment. Under this light, the fourth piece of the *Klavierstücke* begins with the repetition of a 2+2 (antecedent + consequent) measures theme (Example 11), followed by an 8 measures development (see Annex IV). The result is then a $[(2+2)+(2+2)]+8$ structure, which is a perfect symmetrical construction which responds to both Marx’s and Reicha’s rules. The development ends with a simple, diatonic, descending F# scale in thirds, which in turn leads to two codas based on the consequent of the theme. These simple constructions employed by Liszt both in number 3 and 4 of the series, are at the basis of his late works, where the tonal harmony and its functional role is dissolved. In its place, very simple forms and themes (or motives) work as the last support of the music. During the Weimar years Liszt worked against the form to express his ideas. Working against the form means simultaneously working against the tonal harmonic concatenations. And this process, combined with an increasing use of chromaticism – which is both cause and consequence of this movement – lead Liszt to the border of tonality. But when tonality, and the fight against it, are no longer possible, the composer discovers that he has no other functional material upon which he can write his music. Consequently, the return to the old and simple forms, as with the variation (as principle), or the *Liedform*, appear to be a last chance to create.

The last piece of this cycle is probably the most famous, and often confused with the étude *Un sospiro* (S. 144/3), and certainly the most articulated with its 86 measures. It is also the only one which has an (explicit) evocative title, *Sospiri*. Indeed, the melodic figure is a musical depiction of the «inspiration and exhalation

of air associated with the act of sighing; furthermore, the gesture is presented in three successive sections, each of which ends with a descending half-step(s) (mm. 10, 22, 48) marked *un poco rallentando*, drawing attention to the rhetorical “sigh” figure used by musicians since the Baroque³⁶. But what is relevant in this work is not the rhetorical language or the depiction of the breathing of a sighing person. The aspects most worthy of focus are two: the variation technique and the seventh chords. Liszt had already proven his ability to build variations starting with only a few materials. Here there is further evidence of his ability. The motivic cell, exposed in the first two bars, consists of a double movement, a descending step and an ascending minor third. This movement is repeated then a half step higher in a progression from A \flat to D \flat , configuring a perfect fourth. This progression is sustained by a few chords in the left hand, which are in any case extremely relevant, because they create, together with the right hand, a harmonic progression based on the diminished seventh chords (*Example 12*).

Andante

espressivo

p

Seventh chords relationship

The musical score for Example 12 is presented in three systems. The first system shows the main melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The second system shows the seventh chords in the left hand. The third system shows the continuation of the melodic line in the right hand. The tempo is marked 'Andante' and the dynamics include 'espressivo' and 'p'.

Example 12 – Klavierstück No. 5, diminished seventh chords progression, mm. 1–10

This ten measures introduction, which at the same time assumes the role of an exposition, exposes the material that Liszt would use: the motivic cell, the intervals, the diminished seventh harmony. The motivic cell enters at m. 11 in A \flat , and is used as an interrupted cadence from the second inversion of the C minor VII⁷. The introduction is not just a chromatic progression of

36 Pesce, Dolores, *Liszt's Final Decade* p. 93.

diminished seventh chords, but it is a clear example of tonal ambiguity. It, as a deliberate act, becomes a fundamental feature of the late music of Liszt. The meanings – as Merrick points out, there are more than one interpretation of the “C major” compositions – of the music written without any key signature is a matter of debate in the introduction of the next Chapter. The first and the last diminished chord (B-D-F-Ab) give us the idea that these first measures are in C minor. The last chord is a VII⁷ in second inversion which does not resolve, but instead leads to the Ab major, which begins the variations. The scheme of this composition is very simple. After the exposition, the theme is exposed twice in Ab; then, through a bridge built on diminished harmonies, it is exposed a second time a step down in Gb. A further progression based on diminished harmonies is brought to the repetition of the measures 11–30, but this time the theme is exposed in octaves, and there are some little variations in the melodic figures. It ends with a progression which leads to the development (mm. 63–77). This section, which again has no key signature, is a modulation from E major to F#. The last 8 measures play with the diminished seventh of the beginning (B-D-F-Ab) in the left hand, while the right hand plays A⁴ and Ab in octave (*Example 13*). So, this finale presents us with the idea of a cyclical work, a form already used with success, and it is tonally ambiguous. These two features are fundamental to understand the beginning, which is not just a harmonic progression on diminished seventh chords, but is a game between Ab and A⁴ harmonies. In this work, it is possible to see all the achievements of the Weimar period, but compressed into a small form instead of being worked out into a large-scale form. Furthermore, here Liszt adds chromaticism and uses it to create harmonic connections – a procedure which was not so well defined during the Weimar years.

molto ritenuto

The musical score for Example 13, Klavierstück No. 5, coda, mm. 79–86, is presented in a grand staff. The tempo marking is "molto ritenuto". The right hand (treble clef) plays a series of chords: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The left hand (bass clef) plays a series of chords: Bb4, C5, D5, Eb5, F5, G5, Ab5, Bb5. The score includes dynamics such as *sf* and *pp*.

Example 13 – Klavierstück No. 5, coda, mm. 79–86

Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este, Threnodie (II) S. 163/3

As has already emerged, the years 1861–1876 (1880) were a period during which Liszt's piano compositions tend to become even shorter. The form crystallises in its simplest application, while all of what remains falls apart and is reduced to its essential elements. Anyway, during this same period, Liszt still composed some works utilising the large form, such as in the case of *Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este, Threnodie (II) S. 163/3*. It is part of the last book of his *Années de pèlerinage*, a work which would deserve more attention, since it covers almost all Liszt's life, from the first love escape with Marie d'Agoult until his retirement in Rome. It is therefore not only a biographical document, but it is also a precious document on the evolution of his compositional style. Liszt conceived this piece in 1877, namely one year after the fourth *Klavierstück*, the shortest of the cycle. This is evidence that at the end of the 1870s Liszt still had the energy to compose a large scale piece – the *Threnodie (II)* is 244 measures – which is, furthermore, entirely based on a two bar motivic cell. Moreover, in this composition the character of the Weimar period still resounds, even if the atmosphere is without a doubt darker. The variation technique is applied here to the achievement of the 1860, namely chromaticism, homophonic melodies, and tonal instability. The complexity of the harmonic and motivic constructions create a contrast with the extreme simplicity of the form, as Arnold points out. The work shows a clear A-B-A' structure (*Annex V*). Nevertheless, this work is proof that Liszt was changing his compositional praxis. If during the 1850s this change was due to an inward necessity – as he explained in his *Berlioz und seine Haroldsymphonie*, and as already pointed out in *Chapters III and IV* –, now the change was due to an outward necessity, namely the music itself asked for a clearer form, because nothing else but form remains to keep the music together. A closer look at this work can explain how deeply Liszt's mind was changing.



Example 14 – *Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este*, mm. 1–3

The exposition begins with a «Tristanesque five-note cell suggesting E minor and characterized by a drop of a perfect fifth followed by a rising chromatic

passage»³⁷ (*Example 14*). The fragment is repeated then a second time starting from G, and, after a pause, begins a homophonic passage, which is often described as composed of «two falling tritones and ascending minor seconds»³⁸, but it is actually something more interesting, and a main feature of Liszt's late music (of the 1880s). Of course, the tritone is a main characteristic, both in this work and in the late compositions, but here it is the result of another “deconstruction process”. Measures 6–10 are not just a simple homophonic passage with a tritone jump, but they are evidence that the late works of Liszt are mainly built upon harmonies and harmonic relationships. Liszt shifted the harmony from the vertical to the horizontal dimension, so the melody is actually the result of the unfolding process of the harmony, as shown in *Example 15a* and *15b*.

E chord

Seventh Harmony

Anacrusis/m.1 m.3/4

Example 15a – Aux cyprès de la Villa d’Este, analysis of the introduction, mm. 1–6

Seventh Harmony

m.6/7 m.8/9

Example 15b – Aux cyprès de la Villa d’Este, analysis of the progression mm. 6–10

37 Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 143. The passage certainly resembles the opening passage of Wagner’s *Tristan*, but, as Searle points out, «Liszt had already anticipated this phrase in the song *Ich möchte hingehn* in the early 1840’s, long before Wagner embarked on *Tristan*» (See Searle, Humphrey, *Liszt’s final period (1869–1886)*, p. 72).

38 Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 143.

In *Example 15a*, it clearly appears that from the cadences of mm. 1–2 and mm. 4–5 the E minor chord emerges. Less evident is the seventh harmony of the passage. The seventh chord C-E-G-B is a key harmony, since it is resolved, in the progression (*Example 15b*) in the C#-E-G-A# diminished seventh chord. Namely, Liszt uses a seventh harmony as resolution of a seventh harmony. The diminished seventh chord emerging from the progression is used as cadence on the V of E, but in the repetition (mm. 16–29) the C# and the A# are enharmonically intended as Db and Bb, and then used to modulate in Db, with which the “exposition” begins. This process is Liszt’s penultimate deconstruction. The harmony then, no longer occupies only the vertical dimension in music, but it becomes the horizontal dimension, too.

The last innovation brought about by Liszt in his late compositions finds its origin in his virtuosity and dramatic character. In many of his transcriptions, Liszt used the tremolo in order to recreate the sound of an orchestra – see, for example, the opening measures of *Isoldes Liebestod* paraphrase. In many of the compositions of the first period he used the tremolo to underscore the dramatic passages, or to recreate orchestral timbre, or to reproduce natural sounds or atmospheres, and he did the same in his works of the period 1861–1876. However, the tremolo has also another meaning and another direction in addition to the one just exposed. In the cycle *Année de pèlerinage, troisième année*, for example, only the first number (*Angelus*) does not have a tremolo passage. It is of course because this cycle «best demonstrates Liszt’s twofold preoccupation with faith and death»³⁹.

Example 16 – Aux cyprès de la Villa d’Este, tremolo, mm. 162–166

The second *Thrénodie* makes no exception, and the tremolo appears in one of the most dark and dramatic moments (mm. 162–175; the theme at m. 168 is marked *dolente*). The tremolo is of course one of the best tools which a composer possesses to emphasise dramatic moments, such as the those outlined

39 See Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 141.

by Arnold. But it is also the best tool to destroy music's last barrier – which is, moreover, related to the problem of death – namely, rhythm. Of course, what falls apart is not the rhythm itself – which is articulated by the *p marcato* of the left hand – but its clear division in measures. Beethoven had already marked the path of this evolution with his last piano sonata. The *Arietta* of the op. 111, for example, opens with an *Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*, and then the theme is varied per diminution until the end, where a trill begins (m. 160). Upon it we again hear the theme, but this time deprived of its metrical division, because the trill transcends the space of the measure. Something very similar happens in Liszt's late works (*Example 16*). The tremolo, alongside its dramatic role, becomes a means through which the rhythm is no longer clearly perceived, creating a sort of a-spatial and a-temporal background sound. Harmony, melody, rhythm, form, everything seems to fall apart. If Liszt was aware of this direction taken by his work, or whether it was simply the natural outcome of his isolation and disappointment, will be the matter at the heart of the next chapter.

