VI *Sint, ut sunt, aut non sint!* The late piano works and the *Music for the Future*

Der Schwer gefasste Entschluss
Muss es sein? Es muss sein! es muss sein![1]

«Ich habe gefunden», sagte er, «*es soll nicht sein.*»
«Was, Adrian, soll nicht sein?»
«Das Gute und Edle» […] «was man das Menschliche nennt, obwohl es gut ist und edel. Um was die Menschen gekämpft, wofür sie Zwingburgen gestürmt, und was die Erfüllten jubelnd verkündigt haben, das soll nicht sein. Es wird zurückgenommen. Ich will es zurücknehmen»
«Ich verstehe dich, Lieber, nicht ganz. Was willst du zurücknehmen?»
«Die Neunte Symphonie», erwiderte er. Und dann kam nichts mehr, wie ich auch wartete.[2]

1 Beethoven, Ludwig van, String quartet No. 16 op. 135,
2 Mann, Thomas, *Doktor Faustus*, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, 2007, pp. 692–693.

Introduction

> […] la fatigue de l'age et je ne sais quelle tristesse intérieure, fruit d'une trop longue expérience, augmentent et me rendent les exhibitions de ma personne en public fort pénibles. […] Mon petit bout de célébrité me pèse singulièrement – mais c'est une impasse tyrannique! Je ne voudrais plus que travailler, et prier dans mon coin – introuvable, parait-il![3].
>
> Dans le mouvement perpétuel de mon existence, il entre beaucoup de monotonie, même la musique ne m'offre quelque variété qu'à de rare intervalles. Sans être blasé, je ressens une extrême fatigue de vivre encore![4].

The last years of Liszt's life surely were not his happiest, but neither were they a waste of time[5]. The penultimate decade of the century opened with an accident: Liszt fell down a flight of stairs in his home in Weimar. This «traumatic entry into old age»[6], as Walker described the episode, was inserted into music by Liszt in his composition *Unstern!* An autobiographical work, again. Actually, the compositions of the post-Weimar period were (almost) all autobiographical. Basically, everything Liszt composed after 1860 is considered by researchers as a commentary on or of his life and situation. The events of his life are then looked at as the reason why he composed, and they are therefore regarded as if they were the programme, the content of his compositions. But this is certainly not a novel idea for Liszt. Almost all his compositions sprung forth from the events of his life; when he met Lamennais he worked on his *Harmonies poétique et religieuse*; his travel impressions gave rise to the *Années de pèlerinage* – which are a gauge of his changing feelings and thoughts, since they accompanied the composer throughout his entire life – and so on. Furthermore, as Hamilton writes and as has already emerged in the previous chapters, to state that a composition is "biographical" obviously infers that it

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3 Liszt, Franz, *Briefe an die Fürstin Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein*, letter dated 14 February 1880, Vol. IV, p. 275.

4 Liszt, Franz, *Briefe an die Fürstin Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein*, letter dated 8 March 1881, Vol. IV, pp. 311–312.

5 See Raabe, Peter, *Franz Liszt*, Cotta, Stuttgart und Berlin, 1931, Vol. 1 p. 210–211, where he wrote: «Er hat auch in dieser Zeit noch manches bedeutende Werk geschaffen, aber dem letzten großen Abschnitt fehlt doch das, was sonst gerade das Kennzeichen seines Wirkens gewesen war: der Schwung. Die Schwungkraft hatte Liszt in den Stand gesetzt, planmäßig seine gewaltigen Reformarbeiten durchzuführen: die Umgestaltung der Klaviertechnik, das Zeigen der Virtuosenkunst, das Beleben der Programmmusik, das Freilegen des Weges, den Wagner ging. Jetzt fehlte ihm die große Aufgabe, und sein Leben zerflatterte».

6 Walker, Alan, *Liszt, The Final Years 1861–1886*, p. 403.

was written by a human being and not by a computer. In any case, undeniably the late compositions are strictly related to the events of Liszt's life. However, the point is, as was asked at the end of the previous chapter, how extensive was the influence of personal circumstances on his works? Namely, is there a direct correlation between his disappointment, his frustration, and the increasing use of chromaticism, augmented triads, and seventh, diminished seventh, and fourth harmonies? To which point, are the events of his life the programme of his music? It is certainly possible that Liszt, who was living in a state of depression, was searching for new dark timbre to express his grief, but it is not possible to reduce his achievements to a peculiar, and furthermore temporary, psychological condition. This is even less plausible when one traces these compositional procedures back to the 1830s and 1840s, namely when Liszt was at the peak of his virtuoso career and of his fame, a period during which, even if he sometimes complained about his situation, his life was quiet and successful. Hence, Liszt's works are inseparable from his biography, but on the other hand, one has to be cautious not to excessively stress this relationship. The so-called "experimental idiom"[7] of his late works is definitely related to Lisztian biography, but not because they are the musical outcome of these catastrophic events, but because they are the outcome of a precise theoretical thought, the result of a choice Liszt made at the beginning of his career in France, when he came into contact with the 19th century cultural world: «all experiences which shaped Liszt's emerging beliefs in the proselytizing mission of the modern artist, and, in turn, influenced the distinctive forward-directed thrust of his late music»[8]. For that reason one has to consider most of his works composed between 1860 and 1886 as autobiographical in their intention (programme); but the form, the structure, the harmonies Liszt used are the result of a precise aesthetic thought, which reached its extreme during his later years. Though, these compositions had to appear as they do, not because of the programme, but because of the necessity. And this necessity follows the same programmatic intent stated in the previously quoted letter to Luis Köhler in 1856: «[…] bitte ich nur um die Erlaubnis, die Formen durch den Inhalt bestimmen zu dürfen, und sollte mir diese Erlaubnis auch von Seiten der hochlöblichen Kritik versagt werden, so werde ich nichtsdestoweniger getrost meinen bescheidenen Weg weiter gehen»[9]. And Liszt, after the Weimar period, did not distance himself

7 The expression was coined by Allan Forte in his essay *Liszt's Experimental Idiom and Music of the Early Twentieth Century.*

8 Todd, Larry R., *The "unwelcome guest" regaled*, p. 94.

9 Liszt, Franz, *Franz Liszt's Briefe, Vom Paris bis Rom*, letter dated 9 July 1856, Vol. I, p. 225.

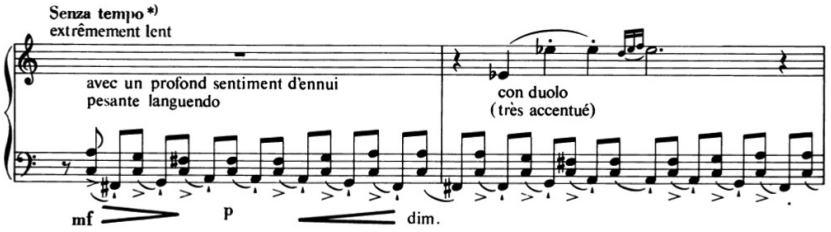
from this statement, quite the opposite: he radicalised his position. The motto *Sint, ut sunt, aut non sint!* becomes a totalizing *Weltanschauung*, and it does not matter whether this life rule creates a personal desert around him, because Liszt *kann warten!* So, the point of view is now inverted. It is not Liszt's isolation that produced these strange works, which according to this view are to be regarded as the outcome of a lonely person, who lost contact with reality. Quite the opposite, the condition of loneliness and isolation in which Liszt found himself is the consequence of his radicalisation of thought, of his belief in progress. The word "isolation" does not imply that Liszt lived as a monk in a monastery – neither did he live like a monk when he actually was in a monastery – and that he was not aware of the productions of his contemporaries. Quite the opposite. As already noted, Liszt was one of the most aware composers of his time and of his historical position, so it is impossible to think of Liszt as separate from society and from its influences. Furthermore, as Kregor reminds us, he was a «very public figure during his late years», again itinerant and «offering master classes for no fee in Weimar, Rome, Budapest, serving as honorary president of the annual *Tonkünstler Versammlung*, and remaining the go-to person when funds needed to be raised for a cultural works project». At any rate, he was probably stuck in this situation and he «could not avoid such influences»[10]. During his entire life Liszt lived only two moments of complete isolation: as a young man as the result of a nervous breakdown, following the forced separation from Caroline de Saint-Cricq; and during the years he spent at Madonna del Rosario, as a consequence of his personal grief and frustration – though he was not completely isolated, as several times he visited Rome and Carolyne, and he sometimes received visitors.

It is worth remembering that Liszt did not only experiment with new musical solutions and combinations in his later years, but throughout the entirety of his life. Consequently, the expression "experimental idiom" could be used to describe his works outright. The source of his late language can be found in the compositions of his youth, and from his interest in sacred music of the 16th century[11], in Gregorian chant, and in Bach, interests that grew stronger during the 1860s. For Liszt, the past is an inestimable source of new advancements, and he analysed the heritage of the ancient masters in order to «lancer mon javelot

10 Kregor, Jonathan, *Stylistic Reconstructions in Liszt's Late Arrangements*, p. 204.

11 S. Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt: The Final Years, 1861–1886*, pp. 35–36 «On Sundays he regularly visited the Sistine Chapel "to bathe and steep my mind in the dark waves of the *Jordan* of Palestrina," an indication of his increasing interest in the church music of the sixteenth century».

dans les espaces indéfinis de l'avenir»[12]. By 1833, in a letter to Marie d'Agoult, he had already defined his *Harmonies poétique et religieuse* S. 154 «ma petite harmonie lamartinienne sans ton ni mesure»[13] (*Example 1*). Liszt removed the two flats from the key signature, in this way creating the *sans ton*, just before the publication in 1835, and he even removed the «time signature and regular barring»[14], thus creating a «*sans mesure*» work.



Example 1 – Harmonie poétique et religieuse, mm. 1–2

This is a clear sign that his research toward the dissolution of the tonal system, intended as a system of rules, had already begun. However, according to Merrik, one need not to label this gesture, of erasing the key and time signatures, simply as an act of rebellion, as it has a profound aesthetic meaning. Liszt erased «the signature *per se* […] in other words, he left an empty space. In this way he created an additional meaning for the blank signature. Whereas a signature normally has two meanings […] the blank signature in Liszt came to have three meanings. The first […] signifies C major; the second […] signifies A minor; the third is the one at the beginning of the *Faust Symphony*, where the music is not in either C major or A minor, and as such, bears no relationship to the traditional meaning of the signature»[15]. Namely, Liszt's research from the very beginning was oriented towards non-tonal methods of composing.

Before entering into an analysis of the piano works composed between 1881 and 1885, two more general aspects of Liszt's music have to be considered. The idea of music *sans ton* emerged during Liszt's youth, and was refined throughout

12 Listz, Franz, *Franz Liszt's Briefe, Briefe an die Fürstin Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein*, letter dated 9 February 1874, Vol. VII, p. 58.

13 Liszt, Franz, *Correspondence de Liszt et de Madame d'Agoult*, Vol. I, Paris, 1933, letter dated 30 October 1833, quoted in Merrik, Paul, *Liszt's sans ton Key Signature*, p. 283.

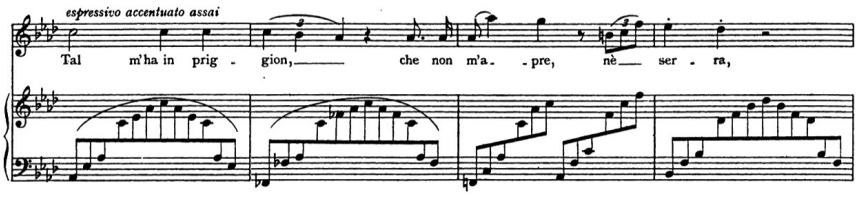
14 Merrik, Paul, *Liszt's sans ton Key Signature*, p. 283.

15 Merrik, Paul, *Liszt's sans ton Key Signature*, p. 285.

his entire life right up until his final work, the *Bagatelle sans tonalité*. As already seen, his music can also be considered *sans mesure*, because of his extensive use of the *recitativo* and *recitativo*-like sections, and of trills. These innovations, which Liszt brought about in his late compositions, are often looked at as the starting point of early 20th century "atonal" music. This is a historical and undeniable fact: no one can refute the relationship between Schönberg, Bartók, Debussy, Scriabin and many other modern composers, and Liszt. But the fact that their language is based on some of the Lisztian innovations, from which they started to create their own styles, does not mean that we can «work backwards historically and label Liszt's creations from the last quarter-century of his life in terms of their ability to intimate the movements of impressionism, minimalism, and especially atonality»[16]. And the reason is historically explicable: where the composers of the 20th century resemble that inspiration found in Liszt's music, and not vice versa. For that reason, an analysis of Liszt's late piano compositions is particularly challenging, because one tends to approach them using analysis techniques which were developed for atonal music. However, one is not dealing with atonal music here – not in a 20th century sense, at least – but with music that was still conceived within the tonal system, that was at the same time fighting against it, and that was moving towards something that was as yet undefined (not tonal, but also not a-tonal). During this period, music was experimenting with its highest degree of freedom, because it was free from the rule of the tonal system and, at the same time, it was still free from the rules of a new system yet to be. Hence, this freedom, this absence of any precise definition or musical category, in one word: its ambiguity, represents the highest value of this music. Of course, Liszt's path does not represent the directions taken by the entire Romantic Generation, but it is one possible direction, one possible answer to the questions of the time. The chromaticism, the whole tone scales, the diminished harmonies, the fourth harmonies, the augmented triads, and the "emancipation of the dissonances" – namely, that dissonance no longer represents a moment, a passing harmony, but becomes a fundamental moment, until it assumes what could possibly be called the "tonic role", i.e. it becomes a functional element – all this is brought about by Liszt, beyond the limit of tonality. Again, this material did not suddenly appear in Liszt's hands, but came from the past. It is the result of a long sedimentation process. For example, the augmented triad had already been used by Liszt in several of the works of his youth, but it started to assume a new role in his *Petrarch Sonnet 104* (*Example 2*), composed in 1841. Here «the augmented

16 Kregor, Jonathan, *Stylistic Reconstructions in Liszt's Late Arrangements*, p. 203.

triad enjoys a new independence: here it functions as an expressive substitute for the secondary dominant, C major, or V/vi»[17]. Göllerich tells us that when one of Liszt's scholars played the *Sonnet*, the master himself emphasised the relevance of the augmented triad saying that «Wagner hat diese Akkorde in seinem Venusberg angewendet – also etwa 1845 – zum ersten Male aber sind sie hier geschrieben von mir im Jahre 1841»[18]. Aside from the rivalry between Wagner and himself, from this quotation the awareness with which Liszt used this material arises. Furthermore, it creates a link between the young virtuoso and the old monk, and, on the one hand, it erases the idea of an "experimental idiom" in his late compositions, and, on the other, it erases the idea that Liszt's production lacks for coherence and cohesion once and for all.



Example 2 – Petrarch Sonnet S. 270/1, mm. 45–48

Es muss sein! The late piano works

As Alan Walker expressed, 1881 represents a major turning point in Liszt's life. Firstly, his fall at the Hofgärtnerei, and then a series of further health complications and an annoying controversy with the European Jewish community – engendered by the "revision" Carolyne made of his book *Des Bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie* – caused a deterioration of the relationship between Liszt and the exoteric world. This is then further indication that the man Liszt was misunderstood, and, as a consequence, he further increased his isolation: «je m'entêtais à rester tranquille dans mon coin, sauf à y travailler de devenir de plus en plus incompris»[19]. The frustration of his later years is described by the composer himself in a letter to Lina Ramann dated 9 February 1883, in

17 Todd, Larry R., *The "unwelcome guest" regaled*, p. 98.
18 Göllerich, August, *Franz Liszt*, p. 21.
19 Liszt, Franz, *Briefe an eine Freundin*, letter dated 6 December 1863, Vol. 3, p. 170.

which he wrote: «Wie Sie wissen, trage ich eine tiefe Trauer im Herzen; sie muß hie und da in Noten ertönend ausbrechen»[20]. So, to conclude the subject of the previous paragraph, the compositions of the late years are unquestionably autobiographical. However, if the events of his life are doubtless the reason for the dark content and atmosphere if these works, they are not the foundation of Liszt's choice of musical material.

The methodological question

Before entering into the investigation of some of the late piano compositions, it is necessary to open a brief parenthesis concerning the methodological question. It has already emerged, that Liszt's late works are perfectly consistent with some of the late 19th century theories, and that they can therefore be used to analyse his music. But exactly because these compositions are often described as atonal, it is also possible to analyse them with theories which are usually applied to 20th century music. This approach can be regarded as anachronistic, and actually it is, but it also brings to light at least two new elements: 1) it shows that a continuity exists between 19th and the 20th century music, and above all that atonalism did not appear out of nowhere, but that it was the outcome of some theories and musical practices, Liszt's among them; 2) it can illustrate some features that would otherwise remain undiscovered with the 19th century approach alone.

One of the pioneers of the 20th century approach in terms of what concerns Liszt's music is Allen Forte who, in his article *Liszt's Experimental Idiom and Music of the Early Twentieth Century*[21], analyses Liszt's *Nuages gris* using his pitch-class theory, an approach, which by his own admission «was developed with a specific musical repertoire in mind, the atonal (non 12-tone) music of the first part of the twentieth century»[22]. However, the aim of his article is not merely to show that it is possible to apply his pitch-class theory to Liszt's later music (*Unstern!* is also briefly analysed), but that it is also possible to apply it to the compositions of the pre Weimar period – Forte provides an analysis of the piano piece *Valle d'Obermann* (1855), the symphonic poem *Hamlet* (1858), the *Faust-Symphonie* (1854–57), and other works. Against this approach it could

20 Ramann, Lina, *Franz Liszt als Künstler und Mensch,* footnote No. 8, p. 470.

21 Forte, Allen, *Liszt's Experimental Idiom and Music of the Early Twentieth Century,* pp. 209–228 (s. bibliography).

22 Forte, Allen, *Pitch-Class Set Analysis Today*, p. 33.

be said that in reading Forte's analysis of these works one has the impression that Liszt composed these pieces using series and pitch-classes. Liszt's language is of course highly innovative, though it is still moving within the boundaries of the tonal system, even as he challenges its rules. It is true that some kind of serialism is already involved in his early compositions – as previously observed in the analysis of the *B minor Piano Sonata* – but one need to call this process serialism, because this is something that would only be theorised some decades later. For this reason, and for the purposes of this dissertation, an approach which still uses the old vocabulary of tonal music is preferred. Certainly, this language was already too old for Liszt himself, but it was this vocabulary that he had at his disposal, and which constituted his horizons. Possibly, an analysis of Liszt's music through the 20th century techniques means to admit that he composed *music of (from) the future*, and not *music for the future*[23]. However, it is exactly here, where tonal vocabulary is insufficient to explain the music, that the pitch-class theory can be useful: «[…] informal designations such as "diminished triad" and "augmented triad" […] may imply certain tonal functions, whereas pitch-class set names are neutral. In addiction […] there are many harmonic formations in the composer's experimental music that lack any such familiar traditional names. in such cases the use of pitch-class set names is not only a convenience, but perhaps also a necessity»[24]. For example, during the analysis of *Nuages gris* which follows, it will emerge that the entire piece is based on the I-V (tonic-dominant) relationship. Since in *Nuages gris* there is neither a clear tonality nor cadences which could confirm it, it could be confusing to speak of a tonic-dominant relationship, as they have specific tonal meanings. In conclusion, the pitch-class set theory is useful to fill what the tonal vocabulary lacks, to have more neutral terms at one's disposal, and to bring to light sonorous relationships that would otherwise remain undetected. For the reasons previously explained, the musical analysis of Liszt's late works does not imply the pitch-class set theory in this dissertation, as Liszt's work «represents a systematic *expansion* of the *traditional* voice-leading and harmonic models, an expansion that incorporates, as basic harmonies, sonorities (pitch-class sets) that are not part of the *central* syntax of tonal music, but that *derive*, in the most extreme instances, from a process of accretion to the augmented

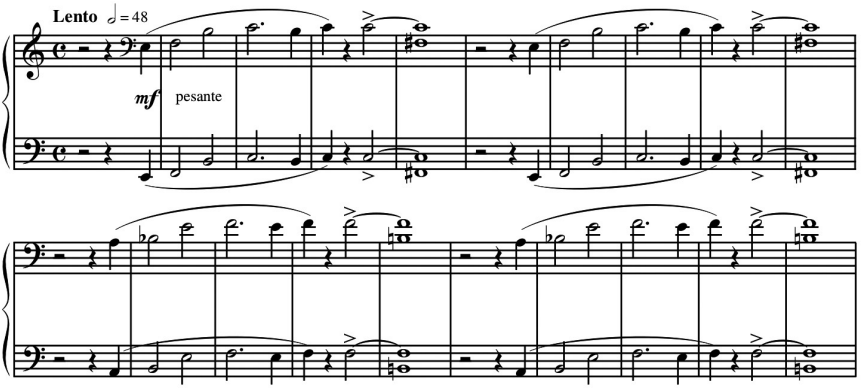
23 Aside from the war between progress and reaction, aside from the propaganda, Liszt's aim was to launch his «javelot dans les espaces indéfinis de l'avenir» (see footnote 11), namely to give material to future innovations.

24 Forte, Allen, *Liszt's Experimental Idiom*, pp. 211–212.

triad and the diminished triad, […]»[25] and for this very same reason an analysis which uses the old tonal vocabulary is still possible, and perhaps philologically more appropriate.

Unstern! – Sinistre S. 208

The first work here analysed is *Unstern!* (*Annex I*). The title «indicates misfortune – an evil or unlucky star – and Liszt portrays this sentiment graphically in the first eighty-two measures»[26]. With its 146 measures, it is one of the largest among the elegiac compositions of the late period, and it is based on tritones and augmented harmonies. Of course, here the tritone is used as a symbol of evil, in addition to the dotted rhythm which begins at m. 21. In this case Liszt's music is highly symbolic. The form of this piece is quite simple. However, as has previously emerged from the analysis of the *Fünf Klavierstücke*, even if this work can be described as a musical impression, it does not lack in internal coherence. The shortness and the formal simplicity, actually hide an extremely complex process of composition, in which nothing is left to chance. The work is formed from four different segments plus a coda: mm. 1–20 exposition (A); mm. 21–52 first variation (B); mm. 58–83 second variation (C); mm. 84–116 chorale; 117–146 coda (D).



Example 3 – Unstern!, exposition, mm. 1–20

25 Forte, Allen, *Liszt's Experimental Idiom*, pp. 227. Italics are mine.
26 Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 168.

The exposition (*Example 3*), common to Liszt's works, already contains all the material used throughout the piece, which is built upon the variation of its rhythmical, melodic, and harmonic profile (and their combinations). Arnold states that «the music has difficulty starting with its frequent silences in mm. 6, 11, 16, and 21»[27]. It is true that the music is often interrupted by rests, but these silent moments do not just appear, as Arnold points out, at mm. 6, 11, 16, and 21, but already from the beginning of the piece. Furthermore, these moments are not evidence that the music "has difficulty starting". Arnold seems not to have noticed that the piece already contains a "silence" in m. 1. Consequently, the piece begins with the structure 𝄽 𝄽 ♩ | ♩ and not with the structure ♩ | ♩. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain why Liszt did not directly begin with the anacrusis (♩ | ♩). The rests are a functional part of the musical discourse, and they have a dramatic role. Furthermore, this beginning suggests that the pair of opposites silence and sound are falling apart. During the 18th century this dichotomy was a certitude; during the 19th century the two concepts began to have a dialectical relationship. Composers realised that music and silence are not opposing ideas, but that they are two sides of the same coin: one does not exist without the other. It is exactly this process that, brought by some composers of the 20th century to its extreme consequences, would lead them to a sort of musical mutism.

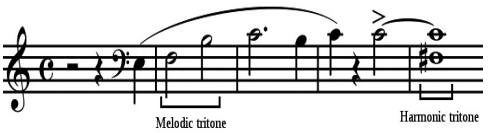
In this specific case Liszt used silence to increase the tension, and to let the tritone resonate (*Example 3*, m. 1 and m. 6) in listener's ears. But they also represent the silence of the abyss from which the tritone emerges as a cry of pain[28]. Aside from the programmatic interpretation, which assumes a prominent function here anyway, it is relevant that here every new section of this piece begins with a pause in both hands (m. 21 and m. 83–84), or in the right hand (m. 58 and m. 126). Under this light, the division exposed at the beginning of the paragraph has to be adjusted in favour of a tripartite one: A, exposition (mm. 1–20); B, development (mm. 21–83); C, chorale and coda (mm. 84–146). Under this new scheme, which seems to be more familiar to Liszt's late works, the B section is divided into two subsections, as well as the C section, whose coda could be identified as an A' section because of the harmonic correspond-

27 Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 168.

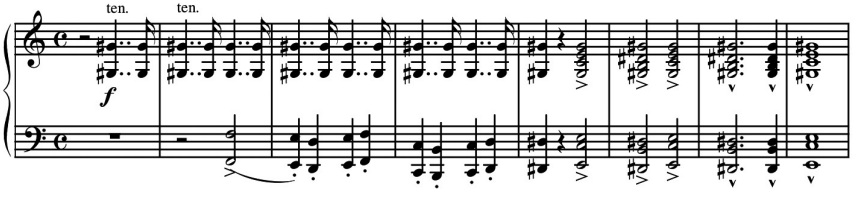
28 Kabisch identified a «rhythmisches Modell 𝄽 𝄽 ♩ | ♩ ♩ | ♩. ♩ | ♩ 𝄽 ♩ | 𝅗𝅥 | 𝅗𝅥 (T.1–5, Hauptsatz), das – in mehrfacher Wiederholung – die Exposition bildet. Sämtliche anderen rhythmischen Gestalten des Stücks leiten sich von diesem Modell her». Kabisch, Thomas, *Struktur und Form im Spätwerk Franz Liszts*, p. 183.

ence with the beginning. After this general introduction it is now necessary to delve deeper into some of the elements of this composition.

The work begins with a rest, during which the tension is (in the first measure at least graphically) accumulated, and from which a *mf pesante*, the motive which constitute the harmonic material, arises (*Example 4*): a melodic tritone in m. 2, and a harmonic tritone in m. 5. The first five measures are then repeated once again starting from E, and then restated twice starting from A, videlicet a fourth higher. The first variation (*Example 5*), which opens section B, begins at m. 21 with a dotted rhythm ♩.. 𝅘𝅥𝅯 which is nothing else but a contraction of the original 𝅗𝅥.. ♩ (m. 3). Further evidence that everything in this work is a direct result of calculation is given by the left hand, which begins at m. 22 (with a rest) in what seems to be a new melodic figure. Closer analysis reveals that it is actually a «rhythmisch […] „ausgefüllte", nivellierte Variante des Einleitungsmodells, mit dem es den „Umriß" teilt»[29].



Example 4 – Unstern!, Melodic and Harmonic tritones, mm. 1–5

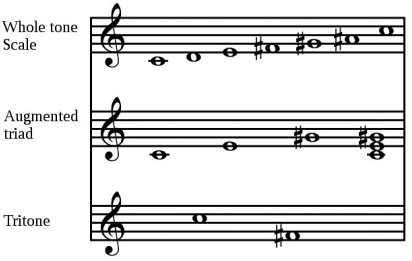


Example 5 – Unstern!, development I, mm. 21–28

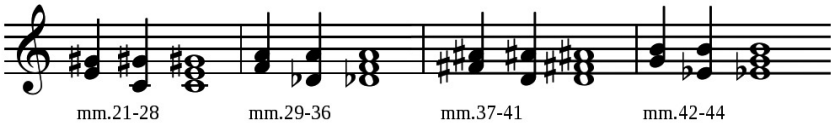
So, the first variation is then rhythmical. But there is a further link to the *Ur-motive*, less evident than the rhythm. The movement of the left hand with the G♯ of the right hand creates a "melodic" augmented triad (m. 23 E-G♯; m. 24 C-G♯), which ends at m. 25 with the harmonic augment triad in its first inversion (E-C-G♯). Now, this augmented triad is related to the tritone of the beginning. Firstly, it follows the same scheme: melodic exposition, and then harmonic realisation; and secondly, both the tritone and the augmented triad have a common source: the whole tone scale (*Example 6*).

29 Kabisch, Thomas, *Struktur und Form im Spätwerk Franz Liszts*, p. 183.

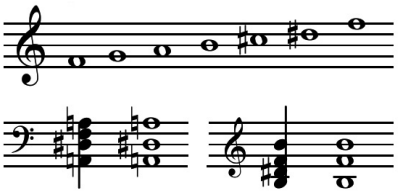
From this construction how Liszt used an *Ur-motive* emerges, already containing all the material, to build the piece. This is a technique he had already used in the past. But here there is something more and, if one looks closer, one notes that this original motive is in turn based on an original source (*Ur-gestalt*)[30]: the whole tone scale. It constitutes the background of the entire work – and it is no coincidence that the last measures emphasise both the tritone and the whole tone scale. The figure of mm. 21–28 is then repeated a half step higher. At m. 37 a new repetition, another half step higher, does not end with the chords passage, but instead moves another half step higher closing this chromatic progression of augmented triads: C-E-G♯; C♯/D♭-F-A; D-F♯-A♯; E♭-G-B (*Example 7*).



Example 6 – Unstern! Wohle tone scale material



Example 7 – Unstern!, development I, augmented triad progression

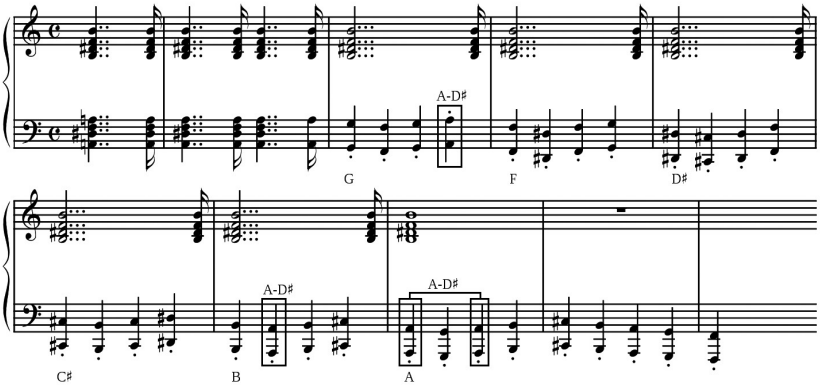


Example 8 – Unstern! Climax I, derivation from the whole tone scale mm. 45–46

The progression leads to the first climax of the work – as there is a development section which consists of two subsections, there are two climatic moments – at m. 45. The extreme dissonant chord is a result of the superimposition of the A-D♯-F-A and B-D♯-F-B chords, in which what is relevant is neither the second interval A-B, nor the diminished third D♯-F, but the fact that these chords are the super-

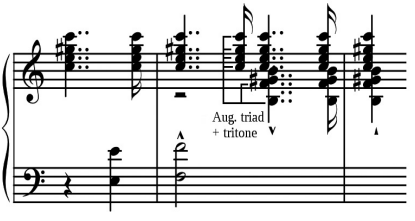
30 The Words *Ur-motive* and *Ur-gestalt* are to be taken for their literary value, that of original motive – which consists of melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, profiles, and that is varied during the work –, and that of original figure – from which the material of the original motive derives, in this case the whole tone scale.

imposition of two tritones, A-D♯ and B-F, both based on the whole tone scale (*Example 8*) that follows in the left hand, and in which this tritone relationship is repeatedly stressed (*Example 8a*).



Example 8a – Unstern! Climax I, tritone relationship (A-D♯) and whole tone scale, mm. 46

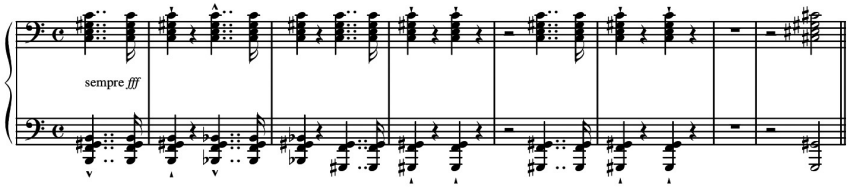
The whole tone scale leads to the second variation, where an F dramatic tremolo pedal sustains another augmented triads progression covering two octaves (C_3-C_5), and, starting at *p* and *poco a poco crescendo*, it reaches the second terrible climax of the work, which is a synthesis of the material used in the first variation. There, an augmented triads progression leads to a tritone climax, here the augmented triads progression leads to an eight measure *fff* climax which is the result of the superimposition of the augmented triad C-E-G♯ – which is the augmented triad with which Liszt begins the first variation – with the B-F tritone (*Example 9*).



Example 9 – Unstern! Climax II, m. 71

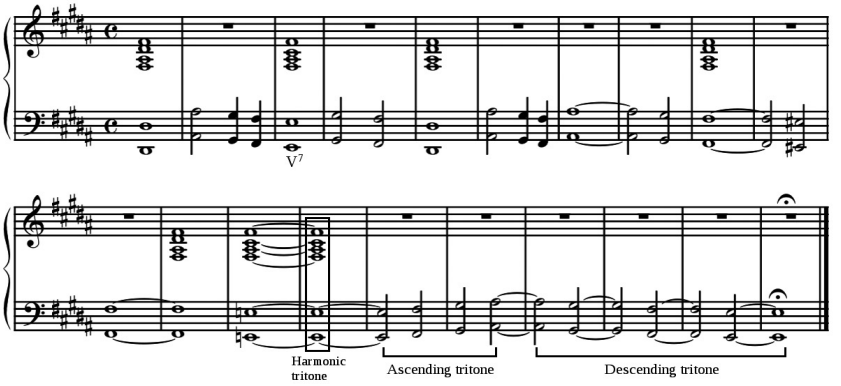
Until this second climax, Liszt had literally assembled the music from the first humble harmonic elements, to the complex tritones construction. After this moment he begins to disassemble it, in order to bring it back to its source, the silence. From this point of view it is possible to suggest that one of the most important principles of tonal music is still fully operative, the centrifugal and centripetal forces. Liszt built this piece starting from silence and then using what could be called a sedimentation process, he creates an fff climax summa-

rising all the previous elements, then from there he returns to the silence. The extremely dissonant climax is disassembled by Liszt moving just one voice at a time and at just a half step, and through the removal of the dissonant material (Example 10). First the left hand removes the tritone descending from B to B♭ (m. 78); consequently just the augmented triad harmony remains (m. 79–82), with an added F, which is then enharmonically intended as an E♯, and used as the link between this dissonant augmented harmony and the perfectly tonal C♯ chord (V of the V) of m. 84, of the quasi organo chorale in B major.



Example 10 – Unstern!, climax and disassembling process, mm. 77–84

The chorale (*Annex II*) is preceded by a long rest, which occupies the entire m. 83. This measure has a double role. On the one hand, it is clearly a division between the evil atmosphere of what preceded, and the religious and perfectly tonal climate of the chorale. On the other hand it creates a surprise effect. After the development section with its two variations, and after so many collected dissonances, one expects the return of the original motive and a conclusion, as a normal cyclical work would. Liszt postpones this conclusion adding a chorale, whose role is to reduce the tension – it is in fact the only passage with tonal chords and that is written with a precise tonality, B major. However, his purpose of a stable tonal section is invalidated after a few measures. First of all because the chorale is still related to the rhythm of the *Ur-motive*: it repeats the structure 𝅗𝅥 | 𝅝 | 𝅗𝅥. 𝅘𝅥 | 𝅝 four times, which is a variation of the rhythmical model 𝅗𝅥 𝅘𝅥 | 𝅗𝅥 𝅘𝅥 | 𝅗𝅥. 𝅘𝅥 | 𝅘𝅥 𝅀 𝅘𝅥 | 𝅝 from the beginning. Furthermore, the rhythm 𝅗𝅥. 𝅘𝅥 is associated with the demoniac movement of m. 21 𝅘𝅥.. 𝅘𝅥𝅯. Secondly, because the chorale is interrupted by a monodic chromatic scale at m. 104, which is repeated a second time at m. 113.



Example 11 – Unstern!, coda, mm. 127–146

The chorale begins again (m. 117) with what seems to be a cadence, hidden in the middle of a chromaticism, which remains unresolved anyway. At m. 127 the coda begins in the area of the subdominant. At this point, Liszt plays in the right hand with the III and V grade chord, and in the left hand with a whole tone scale. Even if he does not change the key signature, the five sharps are more related to the whole tone scale (*Example 6*) than to the tonality of B major. Or better, in the left hand the sharps are related to the whole tone scale, while in the right hand to the B major key. In this battle between the two, the tonal chords of the right hand sound like old memories, gradually leaving all the space to the hexatonic scale (*Example 11*).

The superimposition of these two elements create something interesting. What seems to be a V^7, the chord F♯-A♯-C♯-E, after which one would be right to expect its resolution on the I, is instead used to create a tritone cadence. What it is relevant in the V^7 chord, is the fact that the seventh (E), is used in the bass to harmonise the chord, and it has a tritone relationship with the third of the V chord (A♯). The last six measures are occupied by a monody in the left hand – which, rhythmically is derived from mm. 22–25 –, which stresses this relationship, stating twice the tritone, once ascending E-A♯, and once descending A♯-E. Concluding, it could be stated that this is a cyclical work: it opens with a tritone, first melodic, then harmonic, and it returns to a tritone, which appears here with inverted relations: first a descending melodic tritone, then a harmonic one. The complex formal construction which emerged from this analysis, should be enough to answer the accusations of *Formlosigkeit* posed against Liszt by his opponents. It is self-evident that in Liszt, even in these pieces of but a few minutes playing, form governs everything. The main problem is that Liszt did not use an immediately recognisable form, and that he used a

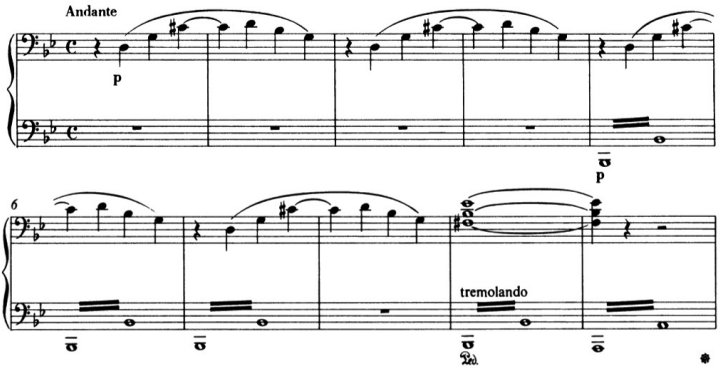
high dissonant and non-tonal language. Therefore, the form and the motivic relationship are not immediately identifiable just by listening, but they require multi-level analysis.

The programmatic interpretation of this work deserves but a few words. *Unstern!* is the representation of sorrow and grief in its first part, and, in its second part, it represents the religious explanation for, and the recognition of this grief (chorale). But the fight between the tritone and the tonal chords of the last measures seem to tells us that the grief (tritone) cannot be erased from our lives, but can only be relieved – by religion, according to his view. The result is a tritone which sounds less demonic, after its passage through the light of the chorale.

Nuages gris S. 199

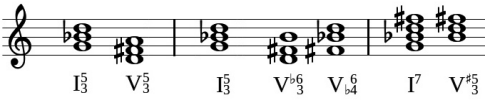
Unstern! is of course a work that evokes an extremely dark atmosphere, and it is strictly related, both from a musical and programmatic point of view, to another work of 1881, *Nauges gris* S. 199 (*Annex III*). This brief piano piece was composed soon after the aforementioned fall down the stairs at the Hofgärtnerei, which caused Liszt's subsequent depression due to a very long and painful recovery. The work is a 48 dissonant measures work, but one in which the relationship to a more conventional use of the classical tonality is still perceptible. Kramer states that this work «consists of alternating passages in the two paradigms, first Classical, then Romanitc, creating a structural dissonance […]. Here, […] the Classical tonality is severely attenuated, at times barely recognizable, while the Romantic tonality is equally extreme, utterly bare of presentational elements with Classical affinities»[31]. *Nuages Gris* has a key signature (2 flats), and already from the first measures it clearly shows its relationship to the tonality of G minor, whose triad is prepared through a melodic passage based on a series of fourth intervals (*Example 12*).

31 Kramer, Lawrence, *The Mirror of Tonality*, p. 203.



Example 12 – Nuages gris, mm. 1–10

Kramer identifies the tritonal dissonance of the first half of the theme (m. 1) as the reason for the tonal ambiguity, which is solved in the «second half» (m. 2), where «a falling phrase spells out the chord of G minor, […]»[32]. The tritonal dissonance is of course destabilising, but its C♯ it's even more of the upper note of the triton. It is an implicit dominant in the horizon[33] of G minor. As already emerged, during his late years Liszt was trying to reduce the music to its simplest terms. Under this light the passage G-C♯-D can be read as a condensed, but ambiguous cadence I-V-I. Its ambiguity lies on the fact that the C♯ can be regarded both as a VII^7 of D, as a $V^7\sharp$ of G, or even as a hint to the A major triad, namely the dominant of D. As often happens in Liszt's compositions, the beginning already exposes the musical material of the entire piece, in this case the relationship between the I and V grade. But this relation, which lies at the basis of most of the tonal music, cannot be used by Liszt in its traditional application, namely to build the perfect cadence V-I. Instead, in order to create tonal ambiguity – which is to be intended as a compositional technique –, he uses the augmented triad on the V, creating in this way a dominant chord which has two sounds in common with the I grade of the scale: D-F♯-B♭; G-B♭-D. It is clear that the harmonic concatenations that arise from this use of the V-I relationship are highly ambiguous, because one cannot be sure if the chord is actually a



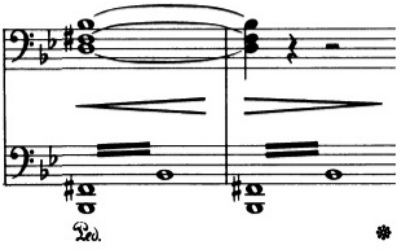
Example 13 – Nuages gris, I-Vaug relationship

32 Kramer, Lawrence, *The Mirror of Tonality*, p. 203.

33 See the previously quoted article from Lawrence Kramer for an explanation of the term.

I or a V grade. The tonal power of the perfect cadence, and consequently its meaning, is here abolished (*Example 13*). Both the I and the V grade are no longer recognisable. This is a perfect example of what a-tonical means.

The pedal (mm. 5–20) is then evidence of this relationship/ambiguity, touching both the note B♭ – the common note of the I and of the augmented V – and the note A – the fifth of the V triad. Upon this pedal Liszt creates an augmented triad progression descending from C to G, a process already used in *Unstern!*, but which here is shorter and less distressing. This progression ends on the augmented triad, on the V (*Example 14*).



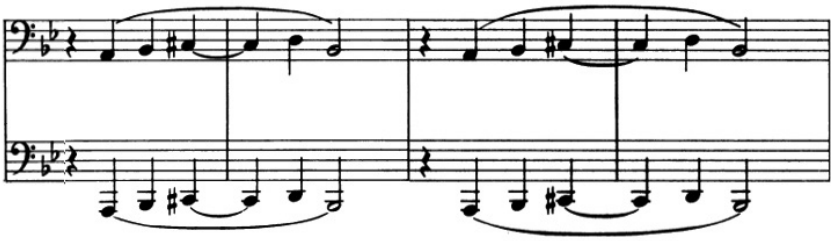
Example 14 – Nuages gris, Augmented triad, mm. 19–20

The mm. 25–44 are almost identical to mm. 1–20. In this A' section Liszt exposes the motive in the left hand, but at the same pitch as the beginning, while the right hand plays a new motive based on the ambiguous cadence V-I. In mm. 33–43, the pedal of mm. 9–20 is replaced by an arpeggio of the augmented V, while above it he builds a whole chromatic scale from F♯4 to F♯5. This F♯ works as a leading note and, after a rest, it rises to the tonic chord with the Picardy third. In these last two bars, the left hand plays a chord (A-E♭-G-B♮) leaving its dissonances unresolved, and giving an atmosphere of ambiguity and suspension to the tonal conclusion. According to Zdenek, Liszt ends the piece in this way because «the high level of dissonance at the specified Andante tempo engenders a banal, almost ridiculous effect in a resolution to a simple triad. The Picardy third only accentuates the problem. However, since the crucial leading-note resolution does end the piece, Liszt is free to retain other dissonances. His solution is ingenious in that it provides the necessary tonal closure and yet retains the aura of mystery that pervades the entire piece»[34]. On the other hand, Kramer read this conclusion as an imitation of «the tonal maneuver, presenting an atonal analogue to stepwise resolution and situating that presentation in an atonal horizon […] thus forming a new mirror on the "other side" of Romantic tonality. Reading the problematic chord as an unresolved *atonal* formation, Liszt resolves its F♯s to G, just as if he were moving from leading tone to tonic, but he keeps the E♭ and the A in place. The

34 Zdenek, Skoumal, *Liszt's Androgynous Harmony*, p. 64.

result, of course, is that celebrated whole-tone chord which closes the piece, a *nuages gris* spread over the horizon of tonality»[35]

What is most interesting in this work is its form, which is a simple A-B-A'. The sections A and A' have already been analysed. The B section – which works as a sort of development, because of its morphological and syntactical affinity with the A section – is reduced to four measures. It is possible that in this work Liszt is dealing with simplifications: the evergreen relationship V-I is simplified and it is consequently reduced to its basic elements, and the B section – usually a relevant part in the A-B-A' form because of its contrasting character – is reduced to a simple (and ambiguous) modulation. The simplification of this section is easy to explain: there is no need for a section which moves away from the tonic, since there is no tonic, and there is no longer a reason to build a tonally unstable or contrasting section. Outside the tonal system there are no necessities, except for those of the composer.



Example 15 – Nuages gris, B section, mm. 21–24

The measures 21–24 (*Example 15*) are composed of the repetition of a two measures motive (2+2). This is rhythmically related to the beginning. The rhythm 𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯 of mm. 21–21 is directly derived from the rhythm 𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯𝅘𝅥𝅯 of mm. 1–2. Furthermore, the section is not only rhythmically related to what precedes, but also melodically and harmonically, as it contains both the fourth interval, and the third B♭-G, which is the basis of the opening motives. Harmonically, it is again a game between the V and the I of G minor, but, as with every contrasting section, it contains even a centrifugal force. The passage B♭-C♯-D, clearly evokes the area of D minor, which is the minor V of G – this modulation to the V is another link to the classical paradigm. For their brevity, the late piano pieces are strictly related to the *Fünf Klavierstücke*, and they share with them

35 Kramer, Lawrence, *The Mirror of Tonality*, p. 205.

the simplicity of the form, too. But, if there Liszt was still working with the tonal system, here he stretched its boarders – deriving functional connections from intervals, harmonies, melodies, rhythmic profiles, etc. – until it sounded unrecognisable.

La lugubre gondola S. 200/1

The year 1881 was certainly not one of the happiest of Liszt's life, and the two works analysed above are clear evidence of that. Nevertheless, even during these hard times, Liszt showed his double personality, and he gave birth to more positive compositions, such as his last symphonic poem *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe*, which with its evocative subtitles underlines his view on the phases of human life: *Die Wiege*, *Der Kampf ums Dasein*, *Zum Grabe: die Wiege des zukünftigen Lebens.* Although the programme of this work is the dichotomy of life/death, and although from it Liszt's distrust of human beings clearly emerges, those who have to fight for their right to be, the overall atmosphere of this symphonic poem is relatively bright. The finale, although it is related to the two previous parts, can be regarded as a hymn to the future, an act of faith in future life, which is not only to be intended in a religious way – we will find eternal peace in heaven – but also in a secular way – the artist will find recognition of their value after their death. In the same years Liszt gave birth to his last piano paraphrase from Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*. Arnold, states that Liszt might have chosen this work because of a certain «affinity with Doge Simon – both men had been acclaimed heroes in their own day and way, and each had had serious problems with his daughter. What better identification, then, than Liszt would shape his piece around the opera's closing scene in which the dying Boccanegra blesses his daughter's marriage»[36]. Anyway, concludes the musicologist, it is a «modest, sober, and subdued piece with no hint of the former virtuoso in its writing»[37]. It is true that there one finds no trace of said former virtuoso, neither in the last paraphrase, nor in the last symphonic poem – even if the middle section, *Der Kampf ums Dasein*, resemble the old gritty Weimar period. But it would be a mistake to search for the old virtuoso in these works. The last paraphrase, for example, is an intimate work, which was probably conceived more for him and his inner circle than for the concert halls. Nevertheless, it still has some virtuoso passages which recall the early

36 Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 188.
37 Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 189.

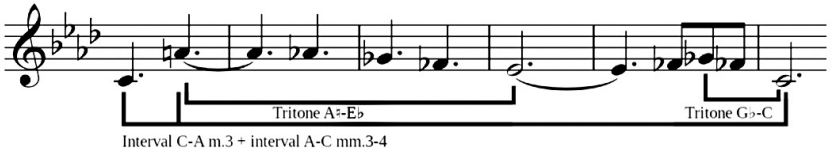
career of Liszt, exactly as other piano works of the late period do, such as the *Csárdás macabre* S. 224, the two *Csárdás* S. 225, or the *Mephisto Waltz No. 3* or the *Bagatelle sans tonalité*. Consequently, it could possibly be stated that it is not completely true that there is no virtuosity in Liszt's late music. It would be better perhaps to state that there is a different idea of it. During the so-called *Virtuoso Years*, the virtuosity was what the concert halls demanded; it was the birth of the solo performer and of the modern recital (begun with Paganini and Liszt). But already around the middle of the century, namely when Liszt was in Weimar, the public's tastes had started to change. Virtuosity for virtuosity's sake is something peculiar to the beginning of the 19th century, something which was annoying the more cultivated listener of the late century. Therefore, this kind of virtuosity was abolished in Liszt's late music; not just because it was no longer the composer's aim to amaze the public, but above all because it was no longer requested (by the public and by the musical material itself). The brilliant pianism of the 1830s would have been anachronistic in the 1880s. Anyway, the lonely and meditative composer lives side by side with the public and virtuoso Liszt, whose social life brought him everywhere in Europe. However, even if some "cheerful" compositions saw the light during these last years of activity, it is also true that Liszt reached higher peaks with his mourning or elegiac compositions, such us *La lugubre gondola* (*Annex IV*).

Liszt composed this work in Venice in 1882, and, as he himself confessed, it was a sort of presage: «wie aus Vorahnung schrieb ich diese Elegie in Venedig, 6 Wochen vor Wagner's Tod»[38]. The title of this work is not a premonition, but the funeral processions of gondola Liszt saw from the windows of his room at Palazzo Vendramin, along the Canal Grande. In the background, the city of Venice, which was once the source of magnificent thoughts, and was now a dark scenario of death. The structure is again tripartite and very simple, even if, a closer analysis reveals the emergence of an alternative interpretation, due to the harmonic ambiguity. The first tripartite structure divides the piece as follows: section A, mm. 1–38; section B, mm. 39–76; section C, mm. 77–120. This is valid if one analyses it starting from the harmonic construction: section A is in D♭ minor; section B is in B minor; section C is in A minor[39]. This tonalities progression descending of a second major creates the beginning of a whole tone scale. As already seen, the whole tone scale can be regarded as

38 Liszt, Franz, *Franz Liszt's Briefe, Von Rom bis an's Ende*, letter dated 8 June 1885, Vol. II, p. 381.

39 The explanation furnished by Skoumal Zdenek in his analysis of the work seems to be more exact than the interpretations which see F minor as the main key of the work. See Zdenek, Skoumal, *Liszt's Androgynous Harmony*, pp. 64–67.

the theoretical background of both the tritone and the augmented harmonies, and the subsequent morphological analysis of the piece will show that the augmented harmonies and the tritones are at the basis of its structure. Consequently, if one assumes that the work is a sequence of three tonalities, D♭-B-A, then it emerges that the work is based on a «large-scale use of V»[40] with the augmented fifth. Hence, this work can be analysed as a tripartite piece based on three augmented triads: C-E-A♭; D-F♯-A♯; C-E-G♯/A♭. This analysis not only confirms the division into three sections, but it also explains the section B as a minimalistic development between the two augmented triads built on C. Nevertheless, a closer analysis of the last section and of the G♯ (C-E-G♯) which comes back to the initial A♭ (C-E-A♭), shows an alternative tripartite structure: mm. 1–38 section A; mm. 39–76 section A'; mm. 77–94 section B; mm. 95–120 section A''. Section A' is the exact copy of A, transposed just a step lower. Section A begins with the augmented triad E♮-C-A♭ used as an augmented V of D♭. On this arpeggio Liszt inserts a melody based on an ascending sixth jump (C-A♭; C-A♮), that descends again to C, following the D♭ scale, but avoiding the tonic in favour of the leading note C. But the descending scale is in turn divided into two moments, each covering a tritone (A♮-E♭; G♭-C). Furthermore, it begins with a sixth jump (C-A), as in measure 3, and the descending scale covers the interval A-C, which is the same interval of mm. 3–4 (*Example 16*). To this double fall – which is to be considered more as a symbol of grief (*chromatische Quartfall*), than a symbol of the demonic – answers an ascending minor forth (B-E♭), which falls again to the leading note through a tritone descending jump (see *Annex IV*).

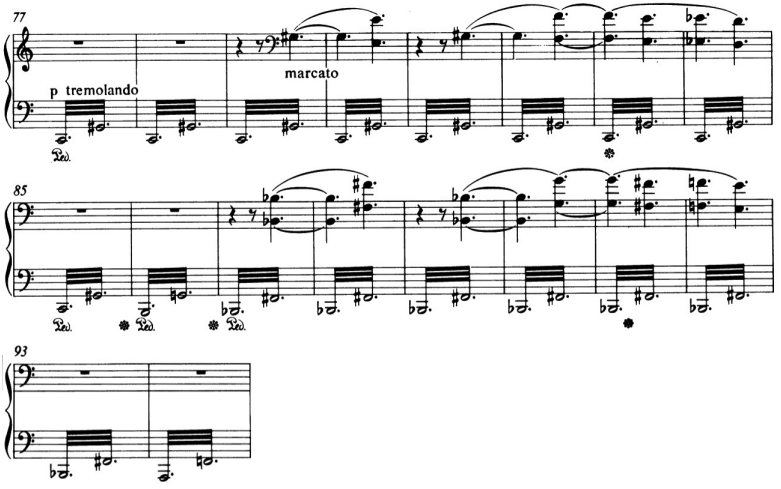


Example 16 – La lugubre gondola, mm. 6–11

At m. 19 the tonic upon which the treble plays a chromatic scale appears, which erases the tonic atmosphere. A bridge (mm. 30–37) leads to the leading note of B minor. A fermata creates a clear division between section A and its repetition in a new tonality (A'). The interesting features of this work are all in the last

40 Zdenek, Skoumal, *Liszt's Androgynous Harmony*, pp. 64.

section, which is, as already said, divided into two different parts. Section B begins with a tremolo in the left hand (C-G♯). As the two preceding sections, this beginning underlines the leading note G♯ too, namely the augmented fifth of the C triad. Afterwards a very short development section begins which is a recapitulation of the material of A and A' (*Example 17*).



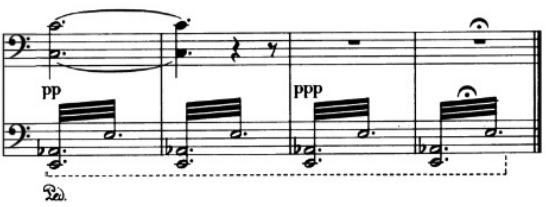
Example 17 – La lugubre gondola, development, mm. 77–94

The left hand plays a tremolo, which descends chromatically from C to A♭ – recalling the C-E-A♭ augmented triad – while the right hand plays a variation of the motive from the beginning. The result is a progression based on the augmented triad of the A section C-E-A♭, which is written here as the augmented dominant of A minor, with G♯ instead of A♭, which through the augment triad B-[D♯]-G, reaches the B♭-[D♮]-F♯ of the A' section, and through a last chromatic movement (A-[C♯]-F), comes back to the first augment triad (C-E-A♭). So, the development works both as the end of the key progression (D♭-B-A), and as the recapitulation of the A and A' sections.

Section	A	A'	B (development)	A''
Aug. triad harmony	C-E-A♭	D-F♯-A♯	C-E-G♯ + B♭-[D♮]-F♯ + C-E-A♭	C-E-A♭ + E-A♭
Bass movement	E	D	C-B-B♭-A-A♭	A♭-E

Table 1 – La lugubre Gondola, formal scheme

The interpretation of mm. 77–94 as a development which brings us back from A minor to the D♭ is supported by what happens in the last 26 measures. First, at m. 95 the left hand begins a tremolo with an A♭, hardly explicable as the leading note of A minor. Secondly, the right hand repeats in octave the mm. 3–18 of the beginning, but instead of ending on the tonic, this time Liszt preserves the tonal ambiguity, and the piece ends on the augmented triad C-E-A♭, which is deprived, in the last three measures, of the tonic, in this way increasing the ambiguity (*Example 18*).



Example 18 – La lugubre gondola, finale, mm. 117–120

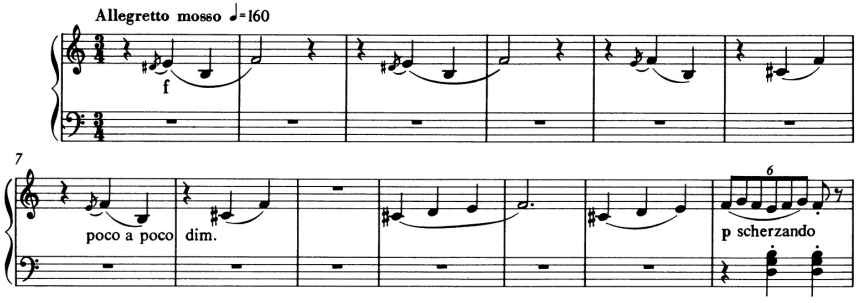
Until this point, in the works analysed here, the tremolo only had a dramatic role. In *La lugubre Gondola*, it is used to create an ambiguous harmonic background on the one side, and then, from m. 109, to cancel the rigid bars division. The last four bars are to be played *pp* first and then *ppp* in the lowest octave of the piano. This creates a grumbling effect in which the rhythm becomes something vague. Furthermore, it reminds us of the functional use of silence, a typical feature of the Liszt's late piano works. The augmented triad, the dissonance, is left unresolved, and it vanishes into the silence, the last musical tool able to solve the contradictions of a system based on dissonances.

Bagatelle sans tonalité S. 216a

Most of the work composed in the years 1881–1885 are of the same elegiac substance: *Schlaflos*, *En rêve*, *Trauervorspiel und Trauermarsch*, all share an expression of grief and anguish. But Liszt exhibits his double nature until the end and, alongside with his elegiac compositions, one finds several works which present the «diabolical farces of the vieillard terrible Liszt»[41]. Among them the previously quoted *czárdás*, the *Bagatelle sans tonalité*, the *Mephisto Waltzes Nos.* 2, 3, and 4. These works, even if purified of the excesses of the *Virtuoso Years*, are a link to the "demoniac" compositions of his youth, creating a curious contrast with his cassock. Even his life shows a cyclical structure. However, the *Bagatelle* occupies a special place among them, because it marks Liszt's last achievement,

41 Arnold, Ben, *The Liszt Companion*, p. 26.

namely the aesthetic recognition of the possibility of a music without (a specific) tonality. Many scholars emphasise that this work need not be intended as atonal in a Schönbergian sense. These kind of assertions state the obvious, for at least a simple reason: Liszt is not Schönberg, and the two lived in two different centuries. Nevertheless, it is not redundant to remember that, due to the tendency of many musicologists to approach the late works of Liszt using 20th century analysis techniques, as already pointed out in the previous paragraphs of this chapter. Furthermore, these kinds of analyses in which Liszt appears as a sort of time traveller, miss a fundamental point, namely that the kind of atonalism involved in Liszt's works does not just concern the late compositions, and that it is a manifestation of the 19th century theories about new harmonic possibilities. From this point of view, the *Bagatelle* is extremely relevant since it is the last and most natural result of an experimentation process which had already begun in 1833 with the previously quoted letter to Marie d'Agoult (see footnote 13). But, if in his first version of the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* the absence of any key and time signature could be ascribed to the category of experimentation or labelled as an attempt to better follow the poetical intentions – it is a recitativo-like piece. Furthermore, its revisited version of the Weimar period (S. 173) possesses time signatures, even if they often change and swing between 5/4, 7/4, 4/4, and a *sans mesure* section. In the *Bagatelle*, the idea of atonal music is supported by several compositions which work as a theoretical background. Furthermore, they are all based on 19th century theories which were well known to Liszt. In 1833, the mountebank character of Liszt created a deep spiritual work involving an experimental technique, and in 1885 he created an extremely cogent work and hid it behind the title *Bagatelle*[42].



Example 19 – Bagatelle sans tonalité, mm. 1–13

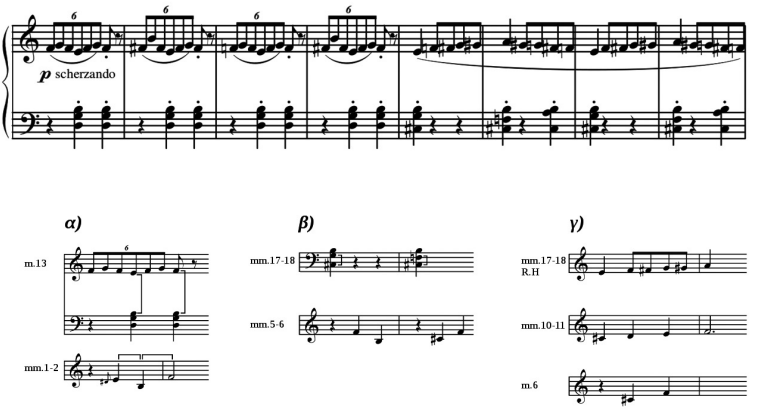
42 Which means a trifle, thus a short unpretentious instrumental composition (Oxford Dictionary of Music)

From its beginning, the *Bagatelle (*Annex *V*) shows a relationship to both the *Second Mephisto Waltz* and the *Mephisto Polka.* This relationship is analysed in Berry's article *The Meaning(s) of "Without": An Exploration of Liszt's Bagatelle ohne Tonart*[43], and here it is just relevant to note that the musical material with which Liszt composed his *Bagatelle* comes from these two works, probably as a result of an improvisation on the two motives[44]. Its structure is therefore very simple, and largely based upon a few variations on the material of the exposition. This feature supports the idea of this work as an improvisation, since it lacks any elaborated motivic and harmonic construction, which were key elements in the elegiac pieces previously analysed.

The work is clearly bipartite: the first part (mm. 1–85) consists of an exposition (mm. 1–8), followed by the elaboration of its material (11–56), and which ends with a coda (mm. 57–85), followed by a free passage marked *quasi cadenza* (m. 86). This bridge introduces the second part (mm. 87–183), which consists of a repetition of the first part enriched with some new elaborations (mm. 87–176), followed by a coda (mm. 177–183). Since it is a highly repetitive work, the analysis of the first part will be sufficient to illustrate the relevance of the theoretical elements working in the background of this piece. The introduction covers 8 measures ([2+2]+[2+2]; *Example 19*), and they are based on the fourth interval: a perfect fourth and an augmented fourth in mm. 1–4 (antecedent); an augmented fourth and a diminished fourth in mm. 4–8 (consequent). The two sections are related by the tritone interval B-F of the antecedent, which appears in its retrograde at the beginning of the consequent. Measure 9 clearly divides the exposition from the variations, which are anyway related to the exposition by the interval C♯-F, melodically enriched with the notes D-E. This derivation technique is the same at the basis of more elaborated works, such as the *Sonata*. The first elaboration of m. 13–20 is related to the exposition, too: 1) mm. 13–16: the right and the left hand harmonically recreate the melodic interval of the beginning (E-B; B-F[♯]); 2) mm. 17–20: the left hand plays first the C♯-G, and then C♯-F♮, which is the harmonic translation of the melodic movement of the consequent; 3) in the same measures the right hand, covering the interval E-A, creates chromatic variations of m. 10, which is in turn based on the last part of the consequent (*Example 20*).

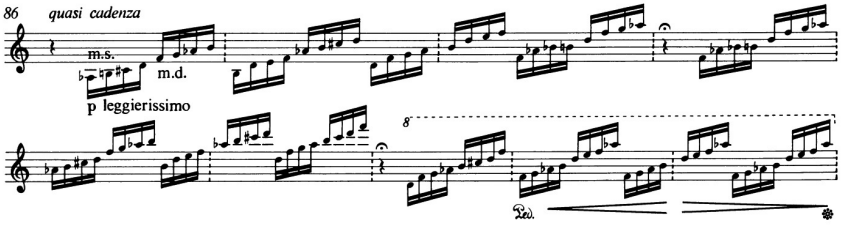
43 Berry, David Carson, *The Meaning(s) of "Without": An Exploration of Liszt's Bagatelle ohne Tonart,* in *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2004, pp. 230–262.

44 Berry, David Carson, *The Meaning(s) of "Without"*, p. 234. «One might imagine that Liszt largely improvised the piece, while sitting at the piano and recalling the openings of the Second Mephisto Waltz and the Mephisto Polka».



Example 20 – Bagatelle sans tonilité, motivic relations, mm. 13–20

The second elaboration of the exposition material begins at m. 25, and it follows the same scheme of the previous measures. Measures 37–56 are a further elaboration based on α and γ of *Example 20*. The coda (mm. 57–85) is a progression which moves chromatically from C♯ to F, underlining again the unity of the motivic material. The cadenza itself is related to the beginning of the work, since every quadruplet covers an augmented fourth (*Example 21*). The motivic analysis is of course useful, but it cannot say anything else about the relationship between the different sections. And since this work is the result of an improvisation, it is not surprising that it shows motivic unity. What such an operation does not bring to light is the theoretical background which makes the emergence of this work possible.



Example 21 – Bagatelle sans tonalité, quasi cadenza section, m. 86

During the analysis of *Unstern!* first, and then of *La lugubre gondola*, two works in which the tonality is anything but clear, it emerged how Liszt used alternative functional elements as substitutes for tonal harmony (whole tone scales, augmented fourths, diminished sevenths, tritones). So, it seems strange that the

Bagatelle seems to be missing any kind of functional element – as previously noted, the motivic relations are not strong enough to be considered functional elements. The work appears as a sequence of diatonic and chromatic dissonant passages. Neither the tritone, nor the augmented triad, nor the diminished harmony, govern the work. Apparently, Liszt wrote a meaningless work, to which he gave the title of *Bagatelle* because, in the end, it was nothing more than a joke. Of course, it is quite the opposite. The *Bagatelle* represents a culmination of Lisztian research, and at the same time it is an explanation of the expression *sans tonalité*, which does not mean that the works without a key signature have to be analysed using the pitch-class set theory, or any other 20th century method of analysis, but that they have to be analysed using the tonal system itself, and the 19th century theories. The analysis of Berry is enlightening:

> In the monophonic intro […], observe the prominence of the tritone notated as B-F, a token component of Weber's dominant-seventh chord. Interpreted as B-F, the interval implies G^7, or V^7 of C; interpreted as B-E♯, the interval implies $C♯^7$, or V^7 of F♯. The other note in the initial measures is E♮, which belongs to C major but not F♯ major; thus, implications of tonic C are strengthened initially. But when C♯ is added, beginning in m. 6, it intensifies the implication of V^7 of F♯ by suggesting its fifth scale degree. Although there is some shift in the tonal-implication continuum from C to F♯, both are evoked due to the *Mehrdeutigkeit* of the tritone, and the passage remains equivocal as to key»; «*In m. 13*, G^7 is formed by the harmony-melody combination, suggesting V^7 of C. But if the tritone is reinterpreted as B-E♯, we have an altered $C♯^7$, or V^7 of F♯. […] Note that two of these interpretations, V^7 of either C or F♯, correspond to the implications of intro1 and so might be considered more contextually reasonable. Nonetheless, the main point is that there is still no confirmation of these keys. Measure 14 problematizes matters by inflecting F to F♯ […]. Now we have a major-seventh tetrad, which suggests ^{IM7} of G or IV^{M7} of D. G is the key most closely related to the prior C implications. Neither G nor D, however, offers one of the resolutions expected of the harmonies in the prior measures, which since the beginning seem to have been insinuating the keys C and/or F♯[45].

For that reason, it is possible to analyse this work using chords and chord relationships taken directly from the tonal system. Nonetheless, even this kind of approach seems to be unsuccessful, as the result of Berry's efforts is that «it remains uncertain which of the competing three key orientations – D, B, or

45 Berry, David Carson, *The Meaning(s) of "Without"*, pp. 242–243.

F♯ – is the most reasonable. Confirmation is not forthcoming in mm. 23–25, in which the ambiguous B-F tritone is stripped of other harmonic indicators and filled with passing tones»[46]. But the coda (mm. 57–85) and the cadenza (m. 86), represent what seems to be the catastrophe of this theory:

> Here [mm. 79–85] Liszt projected a G♯ diminished-seventh chord, which can represent V 7 in four keys: A, C, E♯ , or F♯ […] An enharmonic form of the G♯ diminished-seventh chord is then stated melodically in cadenza1 (m. 86). But this cadenza […] is embellished in a way that produces a complete octatonic collection. […] the octatonic collection undermines the prior key insinuation, because each of the four potential keys (A, C, E♯, and F♯) intersect with the octatonic in exactly five of their seven notes. In this passage there is "true" *Mehrdeutigkeit*: all four keys seem to be implied with equal weight[47].

Here lies the theoretical relevance of the *Bagatelle sans tonalité*. The title of the work suggests that it is written "without tonality", but it does not mean that it is a-tonal, but that it does not show any *precise* tonality, and at the same time it also shows many hypothetical dominants, which in turn remain unresolved. That is the reason why Liszt avoided any key signature, not to erase the tonality, but to involve the idea of a poly-tonality (*ordre omnitonique*). For that very reason, this music is not a-tonal at all – in the sense that it does not possess any tonality and, therefore any comparison with 20th century atonalism is to be excluded. As already expressed, it possesses (potentially) all tonalities. Consequently, instead of the word atonal one should prefer the term poly-tonal. However, this latter definition itself is related to Schönbergian world. There is a word that is either more precise or more appropriate to describe the atonal music of the 19th century, he term *a-tonical*, because in the concatenation of chords, Liszt always avoided any (perfect) cadence on any I grade. Furthermore, it is *a-tonical* in the sense that there are no centrifugal and centripetal forces, which push away from and lead back to the tonic. Of course, that does not mean that there are no consonant tonic chords. For example, mm. 37–44 show a clear V-I cadence in D, but there the V is expressed as $V^{\flat 9}$, and the I is actually a $I^{\sharp 5}$. Consequently, even the most traditional V-I cadence is filled with ambiguity. Of course, the ambiguity is the result of the multiple interpretations intrinsic in the symmetrical structures (tritones, augmented triads, diminished sevenths) used by Liszt. From this last statement a question arises: if Liszt's atonal music

46 Berry, David Carson, *The Meaning(s) of "Without"*, p. 244.
47 Berry, David Carson, *The Meaning(s) of "Without"*, p. 245.

should not to be regarded as an anticipation of the 20th century, then, is there any 19th century theory that could be used to justify Liszt's use of these new structures, which led him to avoid the old and safe rules of the tonal system, and to create compositions in which the principle of *Mehrdeutigkeit* is clearly involved?

The theoretical background

From the analysis of some of the late piano works, it has clearly emerged how ambiguity was a sort of creative principle for the late Liszt. The ambiguity of the harmonies he used, which is at the basis of multiple interpretations of them, created many troubles for the musicologists who tried to solve the problem of the origin of this new compositional style from many different points of view, including the application of the 20th century categories to these strange compositions. As previously stated, trying to approach Liszt's late works using the 20th century techniques gives rise to two problems: 1) the 19th century theories risk being ignored, creating in this way a sort of historical gap between the tonal theories and the emergence of the atonality, which therefore seems to appear out of nowhere; 2) Liszt's production appears as be bipartite: with the works of the youth and of the Weimar period on the one side – tonal and virtuosic – and with the late works on the other – atonal and meditative[48]. As already explored, the idea of a music *sans ton ni mesure* had already occupied Liszt's mind in the 1830s, precisely in 1834, the year in which he composed his first version of the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. If the philosophical atmosphere in which the work came to life is clear – it was finished during his stay at La Chênaie, a period of intense reading and discussion with his mentor Lamennais, and is dedicated to Lamartine – less clear is the musical background which gave Liszt the idea for such a composition. It is remarkable how so many scholars focused on the "programme" of this work, ignoring the theories which support the piece. Too often the relevance Liszt gave to the content, to the poetic inspiration of his music, redirects attention towards the programme. For

48 That does not mean that this anachronistic approach is useless. It could be helpful to look at Liszt's compositions from another point of view, and consequently, to grasp some new details. Anyway a 20th century approach to Liszt's work is more useful to the 20th century works themselves, than to Liszt's compositions. In this case, the approach is to be numbered among the attempts to identify the prodromes of atonalism.

that reason, the "strange language" used by Liszt becomes understandable as a consequence of a compositional technique that ignores both the forms and the rules of the tonal system in favour of the poetical intent, assigning to the words much more power than they actually had. All too often it is forgotten that Liszt attended the public lectures that François-Joseph Fétis gave in the summer of 1832, at the University of Paris. The content of these lectures was reported weekly in the *Revue Musicale*. Furthermore, Liszt and Fétis exchanged a lot of correspondence about musical theory over the years. Ignoring these facts, Fétis is often regarded as a conservative by many musicologists because of his endorsement of Thalberg in the Thalberg-Liszt battle – that means that he was «an intrepid critic of all innovative music»[49] – but he was actually one of the most relevant innovators in the field of music theory. Walker wrote that it is «ironical that these modern-sounding pieces [Alkan's *Douze Études dans tous les tons mineurs* op. 39] are dedicated to the arch-conservative Fétis!»[50]. On the one side, it impossible to deny that the critic had conservative musical tastes, but, on the other, that he was also the father of an innovative musical theory, the so-called theory of the *four orders* – a theory of musical development, in which the last stage of the process is represented by the extensive use of dissonances. Under this light, Alkan's dedication to Fétis appears much more understandable. Furthermore, Liszt himself was perfectly aware of the double attitude of the critic[51], and still in 1867 stated that «De tous les théoriciens qui me sont connus Mr Fétis est celui qui a le mieux pressenti et défini *le progrès de l'harmonie et du rythme en musique*; […]. Selon sa théorie l'art doit progresser, se développer, s'enrichir, revêtir des formes nouvelles; mais en pratique il hésite, regimbe, – et à tout le moins exigerait que la "transformation" s'opérât sans guère déranger les habitudes prises et de manière à *charmer* d'emblée toutes gens»[52]. Fétis divided the history of music into four periods: 1) the first one, which is called *ordre unitonique*, is the period of the «harmonie consonnante d'un seul ton»; 2) the second, or *ordre transitonique*, began with «la découverte

49 Móricz, Klára, *The Ambivalent Connection between Theory and Practice in the Relationship of F. Liszt & F.-J. Fétis*, p. 399.

50 Walker, Alan, *The Virtuoso Years, 1811*–1847, p. 186.

51 It is to worth remembering that if Fétis and Liszt were enemies during the 1830s – because of the harsh criticism with which the first described the public performances of the latter –, during the '1840s the relationship between the musician and the critic began to become more friendly. This change can easily be explained: Liszt's aim was to become a composer, and he needed therefore both the support of the critic and the ideas of the theorist.

52 Liszt, Franz, *Franz Liszt's Briefe, Von Rom bis an's Ende*, letter dated 8 November 1867, Vol. II, p. 112 (italic is mine).

de l'harmonie dissonante naturelle par Monteverde [*sic*], parce que le rapport de la septième note de la gamme avec la quatrième […] donna naissance à la note sensible»; 3) the third is the *ordre pluritonique*, in which «les deux harmonie consonnante et dissonante, donna naissance à un autre ordre d'idées», giving to a «même accord *plusieurs modes d'affinités*; des lors, mélanger de plusieurs tons»[53]. According to Fétis, this is the order of 19th century music; which means that ambiguity – intended as multiplicity – is an intrinsic feature of the music of that century; 4) the last *ordre*, the *omnitonique*, is that one of the *enharmonie transcendante*[54] – which is what Liszt tried to realise in his late piano works piano works:

> «La multiplicité des altérations résultant d'un accord modifié par des altérations collectives permet, […] de le mettre en relation tonale avec toutes les gammes, dans leurs deux modes. Alors il est évidente que la musique est entrée par l'harmonie dans un ordre final de tonalité qu j'appelle *omnitonique*. […] Enfin, s'il doit remuer des passions ardentes, ou exprimer des sentiments d'une profonde mélancolie, l'ordre omnitonique lui ouvre l'infini de ses ressources»[55].

There is evidence that Liszt was interested in these theories, evidence of a musical kind. He composed a little piece around 1844 with the title *Prélude omnitonique* S. 166e, which, far from being an articulated composition is «rather a short, quasi-improvised flourish of indeterminate tonality […], which has the resulting advantage that it can be used as a prelude or transition to a piece in any key»[56]. Even if it is not an extended or a fully worked-out composition, Liszt used the theories of Fétis in a most useful manner for his purposes. In 1844, Liszt was still living his virtuoso period, and then he applied the *omnitonque* theory to his recitals, creating a prelude which was able to connect pieces written in any tonality. This little work is then a sort of improvisation scheme. But his interests in the theories of Fétis are also proven by other, more worked-out compositions, such as the previously mentioned *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. As Fétis wrote, the *ordre omnitonqiue* can be used to express the

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53 Fétis, François-Joseph, *Cours de Philosophie musicale et d'Histoire de la Musique, Septième leçon*, in *Revue Musicale*, No. 24, 14 July 1832 (italic is mine).

54 Fétis, François-Joseph, *Traité complet de la théorie et de la pratique de l'harmonie*, p. 183.

55 Fétis, François-Joseph, *Traité complet de la théorie et de la pratique de l'harmonie*, p. xlix-l.

56 Hamilton, Kenneth, *After the Golden Age, Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, p. 121. The *Prelude omnitonique* was published in Short, Michael, Michael Saffle, *Compiling Lis(z)ts: Cataloging the Composer's Works and the 'New Grove 2' Works List*, in *Journal of Musicological Research*, No. 21, 2002.

sentiment of profound melancholy. But the *enharmonie transcendante* is not the only innovative element of Liszt's music, and Fétis while perhaps the oldest is not the only theoretical source. However, his theory is surely extremely relevant to the 19th century, because of the prominent role assigned to the leading note and to the diminished seventh harmonies. Unsurprisingly, Liszt used the diminished seventh extensively in his *Sonata*. As already seen, it was published in 1854, but drafts date its foundation back to 1849. Then, in the same years one of the most active supporters of the *Neudeutsche Schule* published two treatises: *Der* übermässige *Dreiklang* (1853), and *Der verminderte Septimenakkord* (1854). Carl Friedrich Weitzmann «sent a copy of his augmented triad monograph and requested that Liszt accept the dedication of his forthcoming tract on the diminished seventh chord»[57]. Because of the simultaneity of these publications and of Liszt's *Sonata*, it is unclear who influenced who. Móricz states that «Liszt's harmonic innovations were the basis of Carl Friedrich Weitzmann's harmonic concept, which was elaborated in his book *"Der verminderte Septimenakkord"*, dedicated to Liszt»[58]. That could be possible, but it is also true that the extensive use of the augmented triad in Liszt's *Faust-Symphonie* could be a derivation of Weitzmann's theories. Even more relevant were Weitzmann's new theories for Liszt's late compositions. On 1 January, 1859 the *NZfM* published the fiftieth volume of the journal and the publishers decided to celebrate the event by proposing a contest entitled: *Erklärende Erläuterung und musikalisch-theoretische Begründung der durch die neuesten Kunstschöpfungen bewirkten Umgestaltung und Weiterbildung der Harmonik*[59]. Weitzmann won the contest[60] and «although the essay was relatively wide-ranging in its musical topics, central themes regarding the newer harmonic practices included how enharmonic relations enable a composer to "bring the most distant tone relations together into connection"; how diatonic and chromatic displacements of chord members have fomented "an unendingly large number of new chords and simultaneities"; and how chords […] were now relatively liberated in terms of the other chords to which they could progress»[61].

57 Berry, David Carson, *The Meaning(s) of "Without"*, p. 250.

58 Móricz, Klára, *The Ambivalent Connection between Theory and Practice in the Relationship of F. Liszt & F.-J. Fétis*, p. 420.

59 Brendel, Franz, *Zur Eröffnung des 50. Bandes*, in *Neue Zeitschrift für Muisk*, C.F. Kahnt, Leipzig, 1859, Vol. 50, Nr. 1, pp. 1–4.

60 Weitzsmann's essay was published with the same title as the contest in the 52nd volume of *NZfM* in 1860.

61 Berry, David Carson, *The Meaning(s) of "Without"*, p. 252.

The theories elaborated by Fètis and Weitzmann are surely diverse – at least because the first saw his *ordre omnitonique* as «the final stage of music's potential», beyond which «there is nothing more for these combinations»[62], where the second saw his theories just as the «Möglichkeit der Bildung einer unendlich großen Anzahl neuer Accorde und Zusammenklänge»[63] – though they both deeply influenced Liszt. Both theories point out how the diminished and the augmented harmonies, the enharmonic interpretations of the chords, and the extensive use of chromaticism can give birth to a music which can no longer be described as tonal (as a system), and in which the ears of the listener are no longer able to clearly identify the tonality. The analysis of some of the works in which these new compositional techniques were applied, reveals that the music had acquired a new feature: ambiguity. But this ambiguity is the consequence of multiple possible interpretations of every single chord and note. It is what Fétis described as «La tendance vers la multiplicité, ou même l'universalité des tons dans une pièce de musique»[64]. Weitzmann was aware of this multiplicity too when he wrote that «Aus der ganz gleichen Konstruktion der Grundlage und der Umkehrungen des verminderten Septimenakkordes entsteht, wie gesagt, die eigenthümliche *Mehrdeutigkeit* desselben»[65]. The relationship between Liszt and the two theorists is undeniable, as well as Liszt's interest in the musical means to circumvent tonality – which was in any case an *Ideal der Zeit* for a portion of his contemporaries – and, more in general, his interest in the application of the concept of *Mehrdeutigkeit* to all musical elements.

62 Berry, David Carson, *The Meaning(s) of "Without"*, p. 255.

63 Weitzmann, Carl Friedrich, *Erklärende Erläuterung und musikalisch-theoretische Begründung der durch die neuesten Kunstschöpfungen bewirkten Umgestaltung und Weiterbildung der Harmonik*, in *Neue Zeitschrift für Muisk*, C. F. Kahnt, Leipzig, 1860, Vol. 52, No. 9, p. 75.

64 Fétis, François-Joseph, *Traité complet de la théorie et de la pratique de l'harmonie*, p. 195. «La tendance vers la multiplicité, ou même l'universalité des tons dans une pièce de musique, est le terme final du développement des combinaisons de l'harmonie; au-delà, il n'y a plus rien pour ces combinaison».

65 Weitzmann, Carl Friedrich, *Der Verminderte Septimenakkord*, p. 14. Italic is mine.