

Research perspectives

Here, one of the most underestimated topics about the Hungarian composer: the idea of progress enters the scene. This idea was of course extensively analysed in relation to the idea of the *Music of the future*, but completely ignored with regard to the cultural context in which this aesthetic tendency arose. It is therefore even more astonishing that a composer who is considered one of the most prominent innovators of the musical language of the 19th century, a composer who spent his entire life spreading the *new music* of the *Neudeutsche Schule* (though not only theirs), whose music was often defined as *Zukunfts-musik*, someone whose political side in the war between progressives and conservatives was the *Fortschrittspartei*, and who was so curious about the theories of social evolution and science in general, who was never related to the idea of *progress* (intended as a comprehensive social phenomenon), which is a primary, if not the most relevant philosophical concept of the entire century. The *idea of progress* will be outlined in the next chapter. This concept has an immediate advantage, since it prevents thinking of Liszt's phases as three sealed boxes. Instead, it is possible to find a path, a leading idea in his works and this idea is future oriented, teleological. It is not only his letters, his theoretical works, and his evocative words «Ich kann warten»²⁰, which express his intentions, but his piano works are an uninterrupted chain sustained by an idea, an aesthetic thought based both on his religious and his secular beliefs. According to this view it would be impossible to create separate stages in his life and throughout his production. Starting point of this dissertation is then the concept of progress as it emerged from the first strong philosophical idea which deeply influenced Liszt: Christianity. Afterwards, once he settled in Paris, Liszt developed his culture on the more laical and revolutionary ideas which were common in the Parisian salons. These ideas, which were anyway often related to religion, were imbued with the culture of the late 18th century, and inevitably influenced Liszt's thoughts. Herder, Schelling, Schiller, Lessing, Kant and Hegel; and then Rousseau, Diderot, and Voltaire; and the contemporaries Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Lamartine, and many others. The majority of the aforementioned authors tried to define or dealt with the idea of progress either with a philosophical approach or in a more practical, socio-political way. Liszt, who did not receive any academic education, reacted to these incentives combining all these theo-

20 It is often reported that Liszt used this words already in response to the negative reception of his *Sonata*. See Pesce, Dolores, *Liszt's final decades*, p. 244, footnote 78, and Lachmund, Carl, *Living with Liszt. From The Diary of Carl Lachmund: An American Pupil of Liszt, 1882–1884*, p. 300.

ries with his personal views. Around 1834 his ideas were influenced through reading the works of his future friend, the abbé de Lamennais, whose religious socialism represented the perfect union between Liszt's and Saint-Simonian's ideas. The so-called great man theory – derived from the lecture of Thomas Carlyle's book *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) – did the rest. Liszt perceived himself as the saviour of the humanity, and his mission was to redeem the mankind through his music. He was the prophet, the only man who could guide the people through the suffering of this world and show them the way to their eternal salvation. This was not just his personal view on the world, but this forms an all-comprehensive *Weltanschauung* upon which Liszt based his entire life. This teleological-theological view lies at the basis of Liszt's aesthetics. Of course, since his aesthetic is based on a teleological view, this means that it is based on a linear conception of time. There is the "now", *Der Kampf um's Dasein*, and there is the "later", *Das zukünftige Leben*²¹. From this point of view, the words «Ich kann warten» become clearer. If his idea of time is linear, it quite automatically involves the idea of progress. It is undeniable that Liszt's vision was oriented towards the future. Hence, *Un continuo progresso*²², is a title that perfectly summarise Liszt's life. It is for this reason that the first chapter of this dissertation is devoted to the idea of progress, as it was developed during the 19th century, and its implication in Liszt's life and writings. This future-oriented vision of life, that is directly derived from the theories on progress, brought Liszt to take a side in a war between conservatives and progressives. A real war fought on the newspaper's battlefields, that involved the vast majority of the musicians of the German speaking countries at the time. As previously stated, this chapter will clarify Liszt's role in this war and his contribution – through the analysis of some passages of his writings – to the *Neudeutsche Schule*, the *Fortschrittspartei*, and the *Zukunftsmusik*.

This is the background that led Liszt to write his most famous article in defence of his music: *[Hector] Berlioz und seine Haroldsymphonie*. It appeared on the columns of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (NZfM) in 1855. It is relevant to point out that at that time, as Liszt wrote to Luis Köhler, «7 von den symphonischen Dichtungen sind gänzlich fertig und abgeschrieben»²³. The title seems to clarify

21 Both these titles are from Liszt's last symphonic poem *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe* S. 107 (1881–1882), and precisely from the second and the third movement.

22 *A continue progress* is the title of a publication edited by György Kroó for the Italian publisher Ricordi (1987), which contains some of the theoretical writings of Liszt.

23 Franz Liszt, *Franz Liszt's Briefe, Von Paris bis Rom*, Letter dated April or May 1854, Vol. I p. 154. It is relevant to note that Liszt uses the term Symphonic Poems first in a letter dated 2 March, 1854 to the same Luis Köhler, in which the Hungarian composer writes: «Mit Ende des

the content of the essay, i.e. the Berlioz's Symphony. However, in the article the music of the French composer, who is curiously mentioned among the group of the *Neudeutsche Schule*, is only marginally discussed. Of the five chapters which compose the writing, only the last two are actually devoted to the analysis of Berlioz's symphony, while in the others Liszt discusses many themes: from the role of the critics and of the public, to the evolution of music, etc. This essay, with the declared intention is of celebrating the genius of the French composer, turns into a sort of manifesto in defence of the programme music. However during the analysis of the essay an issue of interpretation emerges. Once it is established that the focus of Liszt's writing is the programme music, not all of said issues are resolved, as other questions arise, and namely: is Liszt speaking in defence of the programme music in general, or is he defending his own music? Is he perhaps defending Berlioz's works through his music? Closer analysis reveals that aside from these key questions, there are other coexistent matters. The programme music itself – which is of course a highly relevant topic for Liszt during the Weimar Years – is actually used by Liszt as an example to defend his poetics, namely his aesthetic view. Consequently, in order to identify Liszt's overall conception of music, it will be necessary to define the cultural background from which it arises, and to contextualise the writing into the aforementioned "war between the progressives and the conservatives". From this critical apparatus an idea will emerge: this essay must be handled with care. Liszt was of course a great composer, but his lack of a systematic thought creates countless problems when one approaches his theoretical writings – even if one of the aims of this dissertation is to overturn the common opinion according to which Liszt lacked a systematic thought; it is anyway undeniable that his literary production has more a political than a theoretical value²⁴. He surely lacks a systematic theoretical production, but everything he wrote, and everything he composed is perfectly consistent with his thoughts, which are strictly related to the idea of progress. That is the theoretical link with the second part of this dissertation, in which the music of Liszt is analysed through the concept of progress, to show on one

Jahres sollen Sie von mir noch gröberes Geschütz bekommen, denn ich denke, dass bis dahin mehrere meiner Orchester-Werke (unter dem Collectiv-Titel „Symphonische Dichtungen“) erscheinen». In Liszt, Franz, *Franz Liszt's Briefe, Von Paris bis Rom*, Vol. I, p. 150. Before this date Liszt referred to them simply as *orchestral works* or as a *collection of nine ouvertures*. It is relevant to underline that his first symphonic poem *Ce qu'on entend sur la montagne* was entitled *Ouverture* (and later *Méditation-Symphonie*). See Altenburg, Detlef, *Franz Liszt and the Legacy of the Classical Era*, pp. 54–55.

24 See footnote 30, p. 108.

side how it acts in his music, and, on the other, how his intellectual curiosity led him to fully appreciate some innovative musical theories of the 19th century.

This leads to the *B minor Piano Sonata*, a composition which was chosen as the starting point for this path, precisely because it is simultaneously both an arrival point and a beginning – during the analysis of the work, all the nuances of the so-called *double function* and how this idea could be expanded in order to explain other musical and extra-musical elements will emerge. Furthermore, the *Sonata* represents a *unicum* in Liszt's production. The genesis of the composition is briefly discussed in the chapter, as, even if it does not represent the main topic, it brings to light some essential elements. From this point of view the research of Winklhofer²⁵ is enlightening. However, the main focus, or rather, the background from which the analysis begins, is the fact that the *Sonata* is surrounded by a great deal of different interpretations, which create a sort of aura of confusion around it. Is it a multi-movement sonata constricted to just one movement? Is it just a sonata form? Is it both at the same time? And again, which is the best way to divide it into sections and movements? Also, where does the disagreement about it come from? After an analysis of these matters, a possible solution will be provided, naturally with the awareness that no one can speak a final word about the *Sonata*. Quite the contrary. The suggested solution can shed new light on this trouble-making composition, but at the same time it is a call for new interpretations. The *B minor Piano Sonata* was published in 1854. Nowadays the reaction of the public and of the critics to this work are well known. Clara Schumann said that it was just noise without any good musical idea²⁶, Eduard Hanslick described it as a *Genialitäts-Dampfmühle*²⁷, and Johannes Brahms, who arguably heard a première of the work in advance during a visit to the Altenburg, fell asleep²⁸. Today, no one would react so rudely to a performance of this work. However, this is not just because our ears are more evolved, or simply more used to this kind of music. It is because between us and the *Sonata* there is a temporal distance, and it is this distance that gives us the chance to analyse the work not just as a masterpiece of the Romanticism, but as a product of an epoch. This means that the artwork cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which it was conceived – especially when one speaks of Liszt, probably the most social composer of the entire Romantic Generation. Consequently, after this

25 Winklhofer, Sharon, *The Genesis and Evolution of Liszt's Sonata in B Minor: Studies in Autograph Sources and Documents*, Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1978.

26 Diary entry by Clara Schumann dated 25 May 1854. See footnote 14 at p. 174.

27 Hanslick, Eduard, *Concerfe, Componisten und Virtuose der letzten fünfzehn Jahre. 1870–1885*, Allgemeiner Verein für Deutsche Literatur, Berlin, 1886, p. 317.

28 Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Weimar Years 1848–1861*, p. 229.

operation the view on the *Sonata* is reversed, and it, from the bizarre invention of an instinctive genius, becomes the embodiment of a very precise aesthetic principle, it becomes a treatise written in notes instead of words.

Some objections may have arisen from the title *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*²⁹. Why use these words to speak about the period *after* Weimar, when Liszt himself used the same expression in the aforementioned letter to the Grand Duke Carl Alexander to describe his situation *before* Weimar? To answer this question, it is necessary to briefly reconsider Walker's division of Liszt's life. After the *Virtuoso Years*, in which Liszt's compositions are concert-oriented – it is of course a generalisation because, as it will emerge, it was already during the 1830s that Liszt laid the theoretical foundations of his late music –, Liszt moved to Weimar to begin his career as a composer, a career which had, anyway, already begun during the 1840s. Hence, the years around 1860 are the middle of his life as a composer, because this represents the middle segment between his "first attempts" to compose and his late works. It is possible to state that the *B minor Piano Sonata* summarises his previous experiences as a performer, and with it began his experience as a composer who wanted to leave behind the concert halls, which were filled with masses of praising people. For that reason, Liszt's life should be reconsidered. The traditional division into three periods of his life (before Weimar; Weimar; after Weimar) is turned into a two periods division: before Weimar; from Weimar to the end. This last one should be divided into three sub-periods, which, for their relevance are in this dissertation considered as per se:

1. Weimar, the symphonic poems and the *B minor Piano Sonata*;
2. Leaving Weimar, the failed marriage with Carolyne, the subsequent depression and his isolation at the Madonna del Rosario, his coming back to the piano; at the same time the Oratorio emerges as the genre of the future. The vie trifurquée, symbol of a troubled soul, which will find expression in his late music;
3. The last years of his life – as Walker divided it cover the year 1861–1886. The intellectual loneliness contrasts with the hyperactivity of his public life. His musical language reaches its final stage where everything is reduced to its basic elements, but at the same time he develops a formal intricacy which projects his work into the 20th century. His elegiac compositions sound like the music of a defeated and resigned man, who no longer believes in his own motto «Ich kann warten»; by that stage his expectations were nothing more than a pile of ashes.

29 Liszt, Franz, *Briefwechsel zwischen Franz Liszt und Carl Alexander Grossherzog von Sachsen*, letter dated 8 October 1846, p. 8. The motto comes from the first verse of the first tercet from Dante's Divine Comedy.

As a consequence of this quadripartition, the years which immediately follow the Weimar experience are indeed the middle of the second part of his life, and they even represent a bridge between his hopeful and his hopeless phase. It is necessary to recall that between 1859 and 1862 Liszt not only saw his marriage to Carolyne vanish, but he even lost his son Daniel, and shortly thereafter his daughter Blandine. Additionally, a series of troubles contributed to an increase in his desire for isolation. In 1863, as a consequence of this stressful situation, Liszt settled down at the monastery in Monte Mario, and there he composed religion inspired works, such as the *Deux Légendes*, which find a brief mention in *Chapter V*, since they represent an interesting step in the field of timbre research. During these sorrowful years, Liszt composed several religious and spiritual works. Among them, the *Variationen über das Motiv von Bach S. 180* representing one of the most insightful examples of the application of the variation technique in a large-form work. For that reason, it is possible to consider this work as still related to the *Sonata*. However, if in the latter the *Glanzzeit*, or the heroic Romanticism, is fully recognisable, in the *Variationen* it wanders through the work like a ghost. This work, together with *Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este (Thrénodie II) S. 163,3* (1877), ideally represents the link between the *Sonata* and the late works, since they are both quite large and elaborate pieces, and they both present some virtuoso passages, but their form and structure are already projected toward the simplification of the compositional process typical of the late period. Furthermore, the tonal system – intended as a complex set of rules based on the key role of the tonic and of the cadences to it – is here considerably weakened; a clear sign that Liszt's compositional process was shifting towards other functional elements which were no longer tonic-oriented. His music, which was already playing on the border of tonality – as a consequence of the extensive use of chromaticism and of the diminished and augmented harmonies –, begins to acquire new features here, which would lead to the late *a-tonal* compositions of the late period³⁰. A considerable contribution comes from the church music. During the years Liszt spent in Rome his interests in 16th century church music and for the Gregorian chant increased considerably. Palestrina has a prominent role in this process. This is relevant for both the development of a conception of a non-tonal harmony, and the return to more elementary musical structures. Modal music, united with the newer harmonic

30 The late compositions of Liszt are often defined *a-tonal*, but since the word is used to describe some music of the 20th century, it is better to prefer the word *a-tonal*, concept from which clearly emerges the idea of the refusal of the tonal system intended as the “dictatorship of the tonic”. Further clarifications are to be found in *Chapter V*.

theories (augmented triads, diminished seventh), represents the basis upon which Liszt built his innovative language, which is, as it will emerge, nothing more than an attempt to realise some 19th century ideas (Fétis, Weitzmann). The French critic, who elaborated the *ordres* theory³¹, believed in a cumulative idea of progress, in which the highest development of music is represented by the combination of all the *ordres*. Liszt, in his late works realised this view. But before reaching this last step, he had to simplify the form too, in a process that seems to proceed backwards. Under this light, the *Sonata* and the other Weimar compositions, symphonic poems included, represent the highest point of Liszt's research on form. Once he mastered the form, he was finally able to reduce it to its basic elements. The *Fünf Klavierstücke* S. 192 (1865–1879) are highly representative of this direction, and quite a treatise on the topic. Most of them show an A-B-A form, or very simple variations of it, and they cover the space of a few bars (only the last one, *Sospiri*, is moderately more worked-out and covers the space of 86 measures). Nevertheless, they represent a necessary step towards the late compositions, because of their use of non-tonal material, tritones and augmented triads above all. Consequently, the bonds with the tonal system are completely broken, and Liszt was finally free to take a further step. The last chapter *Sint ut sunt aut non sint* is completely devoted to Liszt's late music, namely the works composed between 1881 and 1885, the darkest years of Liszt's life. The title recalls the words already used by Liszt in his *Berlioz und seine Harold-Symphony*, and they underline the theoretical continuity between the two periods (Weimar and after Weimar). The aesthetics of these last compositions does not deny the aesthetics of the 1850s, but it is a perfectly consistent continuation of it. It would therefore be a mistake to analyse and to understand these works as the result of a depressed and disturbed mind – Alan Walker reports that «in the midst of this sea of troubles, those nearest to Liszt noticed a marked increase in his drinking. [...] his consumption of wine and liquor in the course of a single day had become considerable»³² –, or as the bizarre experiments of an old and solitary man. They represent the last, and the most advanced and perfect result of Liszt's path. His belief in progress radicalised during the last period. His musical isolation – it is worth remembering that his public life, in turn extremely active – was a choice: *sint ut sunt*

31 The *ordres* are four: *unitonique*, *transitonique*, *pluritonique*, *omnitonique*, and they represent the four stages of western music evolution: from the ancient modes (*unitonique*), through the discovery of the leading note (*transitonique*), it finally reaches the ambiguity of the diminished harmonies (*pluritonique*). The last stage (*omnitonique*) is the radicalisation of this process, namely the realm of the *enharmonie transcendance*.

32 Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years 1861–1886*, pp. 411–412.

aut non sint, or, as Schönberg would write some decades after, «if it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art»³³. It is often said that a genius writes music for the listener of the future, because his ability of imagination goes beyond the boundaries of that of his contemporaries. However, this represents a problem for Liszt. The fact that it is possible to use the words of Schönberg to describe Liszt's late phase, means the failure of his idea of social art – as it emerged from his writings of the 1830s. So strong was his belief in progress, that he preferred to sacrifice his role of prophet and his social convictions rather than to renounce the advancement of his music, because that was an *innerliche Notwendigkeit* (intrinsic necessity). He could wait for his recognition as a prophet. But of course, this was a source of disappointment and it was, together with the other events of his life – from the departure from Weimar to the troubles of the revised edition of his *Des Bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie* (1881) – the main reasons for the dark and elegiac atmosphere of his late compositions. However, to identify his disappointment with the source of his late language makes works such as the *Bagatelle sans tonalité*, or the last *Mephisto Waltz No. 2* and *3*, inexplicable. The events that happened to Liszt as a person are the reason for the dark atmosphere of these works – and can possibly explain their shortness –, but the harmonic innovations, as well as the brevity, are the result of a precise aesthetic process already begun in the 1830s. An analysis of his darkest composition (*Unstern!*), and some of the other elegiac pieces (*Nuages gris*, *La lugubre gondola*), point out the relationship between them and Liszt's previous achievements, and between them and some musical theories of the 19th century. Hence, as previously stated, if Liszt's late works can be understood as the application of the theories of François-Joseph Fétis and Carl Friedrich Weitzmann, the late works are then able to shed new light on the early works. Consequently, from this point of view the entire production of Liszt appears as a *continuous progress*, which begins with the classical era and with the lessons of the “ancient masters” Czerny and Salieri. From their teaching Liszt developed his own piano technique, and started to rework the old forms – including the harmonic rules and all the musical patterns of the past –, from which he slowly developed new forms. Driven by his philosophical masters (Lamennais, Saint-Simon, Herder, etc.), and by the innovative musical theorists

33 Schönberg, Arnold, *Modern Music*, in *Style and Idea*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984, p. 124. «[...] no artist, no poet, no philosopher and no musician whose thinking occurs in the highest sphere would degenerate into vulgarity in order to comply with as slogan such as “Art for All”. Because if it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art».

(Fétis, Weitzmann), he brought the music to the border of expressionism. The 19th century is the century of progress, and Liszt, who was the embodiment of the *Zeitgeist*, with his œuvre covered the entirety of the “*Long 19th century*”, ideally creating a bridge between Beethoven and Schönberg. Of course, the path described here is just one among many. Liszt’s production possesses the quality of being *mehrdeutig* – because, as it will emerge, Liszt’s corpus can be approached in many different ways (and each way leads to an alternate conclusion), for example as a unity, or as an amalgamation or as a sum of many small pieces, which are anyway interconnected. The same *Mehrdeutigkeit* is the reason why Liszt’s music influenced many different composers, who gave his music many different interpretations –, and it can therefore be efficaciously used to historically justify both Schönberg, Debussy, Scriabin, Bartók, etc. He was not a juggler, as Marie d’Agoult said³⁴, but an I anus Bifrons.

34 Haraszti, Émile, *Franz Liszt, écrivain et penseur. Histoire d'une mystification*, p. 19. «De même, la comtesse d’Agoult écrivait à Georg Herwegh (28 mai 1844) qu’il était “moitié saltimbanque, moitié escamoteur qui fait disparaître dans sa manche les idées et les sentiments”».

