



THE
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Liszt and the Art of Remembering

As any Liszt devotee will know, Liszt's oeuvre comprises an enormous range of music, and the solo piano music reveals a diversity of aims. It can therefore be difficult to isolate the identity of the composer in this spate of ideas, some of which can seem contradictory. In publishing such a large quantity of music, much of which was quite ambitious in scope, it is perhaps inevitable that Liszt did not consider it a priority to publish only that which he considered utterly perfect and complete, and indeed, he later re-composed many of his works, including significant cycles like the *Années de pèlerinages* and the *Transcendental* and *Paganini Etudes*. It can be argued that this was because Liszt's musical identity had its foundations in his early career as a nineteenth-century virtuoso performer. The performance practices of such virtuosi in the period were based on improvisation and fantasy, so that Liszt was accustomed to modifying music in his performances – and in his compositions. Liszt did this when performing music by other composers, either as they were written (although often with great alterations), or by composing free transcriptions.

Liszt's 're-interpretations' of his own music is most obvious in the re-compositions, some of which assumed a drastically different guise. This can be attributed to a changing sense of pianism and more developed musical vocabulary, but also aligns strikingly with Liszt's changing context and biographical circumstances. The latter can offer a new, quite poetic dimension to the listening experience if the two versions are heard side by side. The sense that Liszt's 'remembering' of earlier ideas – of specific pieces or simply new approaches to broader musical genres – furnished him with fresh creative impetus, makes the determination of what actually is the final, most authentic version ambiguous. As scholar Jim Samson has written: "The idea is inaccessible... it emanates from... the space between both, from the play of echoes."¹

My new recording* looks at how remembering becomes an 'art'; it is a creative process for Liszt, but also used here to present a new artwork that shifts the focus from the individual piece to the potential poetic links between different parts of his output and periods of his life, and which only makes sense if an awareness is developed. The programme is structured loosely around two sets of re-compositions. The first is the metamorphosis of an early juvenile study in A flat major (1826) into one of Liszt's mature *Transcendental Etudes*, 'Ricordanza' (1851), the very title of which is 'remembering'. Here, a charming tune is reiterated in a more distant fashion, interspersed with passages of lush fantasy. The second

¹ Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work: The Transcendental Studies of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 115.

offers perhaps the reverse process, by paring back the *Liebesträume* No.2 (1843-50) into the first of Liszt's *Fünf kleine Klavierstücke* (1865) that dates from the beginning of his late period. The later version is sparse, austere and resigned – the earlier passion restrained, or lost.

Alongside these, the programme is centred on particular generic ideas that recur in Liszt's music, namely, that of the waltz and the march, and the notion of dreams. The fairly straightforward waltzes of earlier years are 'forgotten' in his set of *Valses oubliées* and in the *Bagatelle ohne Tonart*. Meanwhile, the march features in a virtuosic transcription of Berlioz's macabre 'March to the Scaffold', in the defiant triumph of the *Eroica* etude, and the implacably grim horror of the *Trauervorspiel und Trauermarsch*.

Many of the pieces on this recording are miniatures and fragments – pieces that might seem unresolved or insignificant, or difficult to make full sense of in a usual recital setting. Thus, the CD has been designed as a loose narrative that uses remembering as a way of tracing a coherent thread through the different fragments: the listener is invited to 'remember', to put themselves in the composer's shoes. This suggests that the somewhat fragmentary aspect to Liszt's music, most salient in more introverted pieces, in fact reflected a way of thinking – wherein the mind drifted from one thought to another to weave connections, from one memory to another, and from past to present. The pieces in the programme tie intricately to one another, for I used Liszt's musical language to find connecting points, be it short musical motifs or an affinity for certain chords or keys, to make for a 'complete' musical experience.

It is important not to forget that there are other factors aside from the poetic to Liszt's changing musical language. One very important reason, which I have been researching by playing on various historical pianos like those Liszt would have played on during his long life, is the change in his instrument: the piano of the nineteenth-century was continually evolving. Most historical studies focus on developments that took place at the beginning of the century, e.g., Érard's innovative double escapement action. However, the ramifications of this unfolded more gradually over many years, forever pushing the limits of volume and power in a way that transformed the character of the instrument entirely and forced a constant revolution of the pianist's technique. Although shortly before his death, Liszt was endorsing Steinways not so removed from the modern piano today, as a boy he had played on what were essentially light Viennese fortepianos. As a virtuoso performer *par excellence*, Liszt was finely attuned to what the instrument he had at his disposal was capable of, and aware of all subtle technological modifications. He wrote for the best effect on his instrument at the time, so that although he pushed the piano's developments with his inventive virtuosity, he was also aware of the boundaries, in order to give the most impressive performance (live, or in composition). It is because of this that I recorded the programme on three different pianos – an 1840 Érard at the Royal Academy of Music Museum for the earlier period, an 1845 Érard at the Cobbe Collection in Hatchlands Park for the middle period, and on a modern concert Steinway for the late pieces. In selecting instruments appropriate (or not, as the case may be) for the repertoire, the sense of remembering – the sense of distance between the different periods of his life – is emphasised in the listening experience. This is something that is also only feasible as a 'performance' in the recording format – a format that, appropriately, allows the ephemeral 'liveness' of a performance to be remembered.

Dr Olivia Sham

*Dr Olivia Sham's debut recording of Liszt's solo piano music on historical and modern pianos, *Liszt: The Art of Remembering*, is due to be released by Avie Records on 6th November 2015. For further information, please visit www.avie-records.com/releases/liszt-the-art-of-remembering or www.oliviasham.com.

The Musical Instruments of Franz Liszt at the Budapest Liszt Ferenc Museum

About eight years ago I had the pleasure of visiting the Liszt Ferenc Museum in Budapest. The museum houses a fascinating collection of instruments owned by Liszt, some of great rarity. I bought from the museum shop a CD produced by Hungaroton (HCD 31176) which provides an excellent survey of these instruments – played by the splendid pianist Jenő Jandó.

The instruments comprise two grand pianos made by the American firm of Chickering dating from 1867 and 1879/1880 respectively; an upright Bösendorfer piano; a Bösendorfer 'composing desk'; a glass harmonica (piano-harmonica); a pianino-harmonium; and a Mason and Hamlin harmonium.

The recital opens with Jandó playing Mephisto Waltz No. 1, *Funérailles* and the Romance oubliée (S527) on the 1867 Chickering piano. This piano won a gold medal at the world exposition in Paris in 1867. Chickering himself thereafter presented the piano to Liszt in Rome at Christmas 1867. It appears that the piano was so large that Liszt – a confirmed nomad – had some difficulty in finding a home for it. The sound of the piano is very close to the modern grand piano. It is not, however, quite so reverberant nor does it have the sustaining power of the modern grand. This is all to the good as it gives a very welcome clarity and lightness of touch to the performances (I shall say nothing about Jandó's own performances throughout this CD other than to say that they are uniformly excellent).

The Chickering piano dating from 1879/1880 is, as one might expect, even closer to the modern grand in style. It was specially made for Liszt and Liszt requested that it be shipped to the Budapest Academy of Music where it was often played by him and his students. Jandó plays four pieces: *En rêve*, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6, *Liebesträume* no. 3 and the First Elegy, all of which are well-suited to this piano.

The Bösendorfer piano (date of manufacture unknown) is an upright piano which used to stand in Liszt's drawing room at the Old Academy of Music and was much used for teaching. Unsurprisingly for an upright piano of that age it has a light, rather thin sound but the tone is charming. Jandó plays only one work on this instrument, the lilting *Wiegenlied* (S198).

We now come to some of the really rare instruments that survive from Liszt's day. Firstly – and rarest of all – the Bösendorfer 'composing desk'. This is an extraordinary piece of furniture. I say piece of furniture as it can scarcely be termed a musical instrument. Bösendorfer was a personal friend of Liszt and he designed and built this 'composing desk' for Liszt (whether at Liszt's request I am not entirely sure although I suspect not). It comprises a walnut writing desk with three drawers, the middle one of which has been replaced with a small three-octave instrument with a pull-out keyboard. The sound is produced by miniature hammers striking small metal plates. It makes a *tiny* noise, strangely suggestive of plucked strings. It also makes a good deal of clatter! I suppose it may have been of some use in trying out a few chords but I rather suspect that Liszt would have made little use of it as a composing aid. Here Jandó gamely does his best to get something out of it by playing *Carousel de Madame PN* (S214a).

The glass piano is another curiosity. It was made by Georges Bachmann, has a range of four octaves, and uses tuned plates of glass instead of strings. Apparently Bachmann himself wrote a piece entitled *Fête des Nymphes* for the combination of this instrument and piano. It is hard to imagine what this can have sounded like as the glass instrument produces an incredibly small, delicate sound which would have been swamped by the piano. Jandó plays two delightful pieces upon this – *Die Hirten an der Krippe* (S186/3) and *Scherzoso* (S186/5).

The pianino-harmonium was made by the firm Erard-Alexandre in 1866. It has a curious construction – two keyboards – one producing normal piano sound and the other harmonium. Liszt appears to have been particularly fond of this instrument as, in his later years, he carried it about with him in his many peregrinations and changes of abode. Jandó's choice of *Adeste fideles* (S186/4) is a happy one for this instrument.

Finally, Jandó plays Consolation No. 4 in D flat on the Mason and Hamlin instrument. This harmonium dates from 1877. One can understand why the sound would have appealed to Liszt in his later years. It has a contemplative, devotional character which is very beautiful – despite an awful lot of clatter and squeaks from the old mechanism!

It is probably fair to say that only the pieces played on the two Chickering pianos have substantial musical value and that the examples given of the other instruments are more fascinating from a historical perspective and from the light that they shed on Liszt. But I can thoroughly recommend this excellent CD and also Jenő Jandó's superb playing.

Jim Vincent

CONCERT REVIEW

Vincent van Gelder at Goldsmiths College – Deptford Town Hall

The distinguished Dutch pianist Vincent van Gelder gave a memorable piano recital on 12th June 2015, presented by Goldsmiths in conjunction with The Liszt Society.

Van Gelder is essentially a poetic artist rather than a barnstormer, and his programme, whilst it by no means avoided the technically challenging, was notable for the range of beautiful sounds it allowed him to extract from the Steinway D.

He began with four of the splendid piano pieces that Prokofiev made from his balletic masterpiece *Romeo and Juliet*: 'The Street Awakens', 'Montagues and Capulets', 'Dance of the Girls with Lilies' and 'Mercutio', all played with acute sensibility to the characterisation and with fastidious attention to detail.

Gaspard de la nuit is Ravel's piano masterpiece, and one of the pinnacles of the repertoire. Vincent van Gelder's performance made light of all the extraordinary difficulties, and got straight to the nub of the work in three musical portraits of deep imagination, with the ability to tell three stories, conjure three scenes to perfection, and even manage, amid its legendary complexities, to find a great deal of wit in 'Scarbo'.

The music of John Corigliano is less often heard in Britain than it merits to be, and it was revelatory to hear his *Fantasia on an Ostinato* in concert. It is a well-crafted work, and very easy for an audience perhaps wary of the unknown, helped by the very familiarity of the theme – from the Allegretto of Beethoven's 7th Symphony. Van Gelder proved a very convincing ambassador for the piece.

The recital ended with three Liszt rarities, played with obvious affection: the *Feuille d'album no. 2* (S167) – the third fantastic reworking by Liszt of his song 'Die Zelle in Nonnenwerth'; Liszt's only left-hand work: a transcription of his noble song 'Hungary's God' (S543*bis*); and the extravagant and intricate outpourings of the early version of *Vallée d'Obermann*, as found in the 'Album d'un voyageur' (S156/4). Despite the severe demands on the stamina of the performer, Vincent van Gelder remained a proudly sensitive performer to the end, and even found the energy to add his own thrilling and original *Fantasy on the Miller's Dance from Falla's 'The Three-Cornered Hat'* as an envoi.

Leslie Howard

THEATRE REVIEW

In Liszt Society Newsletter No. 118 (March 2015), member Robert Mansell wrote about the forthcoming production of his play *Cosima*. The play was performed on the 5th June 2015 at the RADA Studio Theatre, London, and a review of the play follows:

Cosima - Wagner's Widow – RADA Studio Theatre

Liszt took to the London stage in Robert Mansell's new play, *Cosima - Wagner's Widow*. The play, directed by no less a personage than Tony Palmer, and with a starry cast including Anne Reid (Cosima), Steven Berkoff (Wagner), Sylvia Syms (their housekeeper, Anna Mrazek) and Vernon Dobtcheff (Adolf von Gross, Cosima's right-hand man), concentrates largely upon Cosima's life following Wagner's death, including her struggles to continue the Bayreuth Festival, her bitter battles with her daughter, Isolde, when the latter seeks to include her husband and son in the Wagner family's inheritance, and her growing infatuation with anti-Semitism. But the play also suggests how her upbringing formed her character and helped to make her the ruthless, bitter, uncompromising monster she became, and the four scenes involving Liszt are crucial to this theme.

He is first seen visiting Wagner and Cosima in Venice, shortly before Wagner's death, and in one of the play's most fascinating scenes the two composers discuss their views on music, with Liszt extravagantly praising *Parsifal* as Wagner's crowning achievement and urging him to "continue to write the music of the future" while Wagner condemns Liszt's latest music as "all sombre and lugubrious, seemingly with no sense of tonality". Significantly, Liszt cautions Wagner against airing his inflammatory ideas against the Jews. In his second scene, he visits Bayreuth after Wagner's death to pay his respects, but Cosima bitterly rejects him, and in his third scene, shortly before his death, she shows an almost Goneril-like lack of concern for his failing health and abandons him to meet and greet important visitors to the Festival. After his death, she is shown at his graveside, raging against his cruelty in separating her from both her mother and paternal grandmother and abandoning her to "dreadful governesses". But their relationship is shown at its darkest in an astonishing dream sequence shortly before the end of the play, in which his ghost enters her dreams, gently defending his own conduct with women (including her mother and "the Princess") as "true love", which he furiously contrasts with the "dissolute" nature of the characters in the *Ring* and Cosima's own adulterous relationship with Wagner. Most shockingly, this scene closes with a direct accusation from Liszt's shade that she fatally poisoned him with morphine because his presence at the Festival was inconvenient to her. Historically this is debatable: his pupil Lina von Schmalhausen stated in her unpublished diary that "...the Master received two morphine injections in the region of his heart. The odour penetrated all the way to my window". However, as morphine has no recognisable smell, commentators have suggested that what she smelt was camphor, injected to warm Liszt's body. Still, it makes a very theatrical ending to the scene. Sam Dastor gave a most beautiful and gentle performance as Liszt, and his wonderful speaking voice was like music.

It will be interesting to see where the play goes from here. Its very fluid structure suggests that it could have a future as either a stage play or a screenplay. Whichever, and however it develops on the way, I look forward to seeing it in its future incarnations.

Katie Barnes

CD REVIEW

Members may recall a letter published in Newsletter No. 119 (June 2015), written by Liszt Society member Dr. Conor Farrington, in which he informed fellow-members that he had been commissioned to write the booklet notes for the CD which is reviewed below (incidentally, the notes are absolutely excellent). The recording company has sent me two free copies of the disc to distribute to members. If any member would like to receive a free copy please contact me (contact details given at the end of this newsletter) and I will gladly post one to you.

Jim Vincent

Stephen Cleobury plays Organ works by Liszt, Reubke & Mendelssohn Kings College Cambridge CDKGS0010/I SACD

Stephen Cleobury is the Director of Music at King's College and here he plays the organ in the chapel of King's College, Cambridge. This is a monster of a 19th century organ and has undergone several renovations to reach its current state (although it is due for refurbishment in 2016). The disc contains three works, Liszt's *Fantasie und Fuge über den Choral Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*, Mendelssohn's Sonata No. 6, and Reubke's Sonata on the 94th Psalm. The recording is released on the King's College label and is a Super Audio CD (SACD).

Sadly, Liszt's organ works are not often recorded or performed. There are two complete sets that I know of – by Stefan Bleicher and Martin Haselböck (whose excellent work, in the capacity as conductor of the complete symphonic poems, I reviewed for a previous newsletter). In total there are sixty odd pieces for organ many of which are never heard. Perhaps the most often recorded work of Liszt's output for organ is the *Fantasie und Fuge über den Choral Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*, (S259) which is based on the Anabaptist's theme from Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*. The work starts with a powerful statement of the theme in C minor before undergoing various transformations. Mr. Cleobury copes with the myriad difficulties present in this section – especially with regard to the pedalling (which according to the notes is particularly difficult). The overall effect is really rather exciting! The second section of the work is an Adagio in F sharp major. This is extremely peaceful and comes, after the storm and anxiety in the first part, as a welcome relief. This is serene and lovely, and wonderfully played. The finale catapults the listener back into C minor but, after various key changes, the work ends optimistically in C major. The finale, for me, is an amazing work and the final statement of the theme sounds radiant, like the sun coming out after a storm. Overall, the performance is slightly longer than other recordings I have and this is down to the tempo in the Adagio. I warmly recommend this recording as it is played brilliantly throughout.

The next piece on this disc is Mendelssohn's Organ Sonata No. 6 in D minor (from opus 65). I am not very familiar with Mendelssohn's works for organ so won't pass too much comment. This sonata is based on Lutheran Bach chorale 'Vater unser im Himmelreich' and comprises of a theme and variations on this chorale. The Andante sostenuto first movement has some very interesting counterpoint to the main tune. The work is actually more complex appears on first hearing. I called up the score from an online source and was able to follow it easily despite there being an awful lot of notes! The second movement is a fugue which is extremely well played. This is followed by an Andante finale which is also excellently played. This piece seems to sit very well with the particular instrument used in this recording. I shall be making an effort to acquaint myself better with this piece and the other sonatas in opus 65.

The last piece, Reubke's Sonata on the 94th Psalm, is fairly well known. The composer's other works remain almost ignored apart from the Piano Sonata in B flat minor (much influenced by Liszt's Sonata) which has been recorded a number of times. I am fairly familiar with this complex work and found this to be the most persuasive account that I have heard. The first movement (full of accidentals and changes in tempo) is very well played and holds together

very well. Mr. Cleobury also gets the atmosphere right, with the music varying between peaceful to disturbing (in some places). The middle movement contains some very strange music which meanders around through various keys without ever really settling down. The finale, a complex fugue, is full of difficulties, and is played particularly well. The clarity of the recording helps a great deal in this regard. I find that sometimes with organ music, especially in contrapuntal material, it can become difficult to follow the different themes when they are interwoven. This does not happen here. Some of the writing for just the manuals (ignoring the pedalling, I am not an organist!) is incredibly complex but this does not phase Mr. Cleobury. This is a magnificent recording and I shall certainly be listening to it often. Interestingly, Liszt disciple August Stradal arranged the work for solo piano. This has been recorded on the Hyperion label (and is due for release in November) by pianist Markus Becker (whose Reger complete piano music recordings are excellent).

I would like to make a special mention of the exceptional sound quality on this disc. Often with organ music it is very difficult to hear the finer details. This is not the case on this CD (perhaps because it is a SACD). Full marks to the recording engineers! In addition, the cover notes are very interesting and informative, and the disc is a generous length – running almost seventy minutes. For those that are interested in accessing music online, the disc is available on Spotify (and probably other streaming services).

Jonathan Welsh

MEMBERS' LETTERS

Members may possibly remember that I wrote a short article for the Liszt Society Newsletter last year about my completions of two Album-Leaves by Liszt. I plan to record myself playing the first of these and post it on YouTube in the next few weeks. The second Album-Leaf (based on *Cantique d'Amour*) isn't finished yet but that should follow fairly soon. That will then be performed and recorded. Once I've done this, and am happy with both recordings, I will write another article for a future newsletter giving the YouTube links. I hope these will be of interest to fellow-members.

My next composing project is to recompose Busoni's arrangement of Liszt's *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*, so that it follows more closely what Liszt originally wrote for organ. That really will take a while!

Jonathan Welsh

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