

Modernities in Liszt's Works

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It is by no means my intention to give in this essay a summary of the style and texture of Liszt's great and voluminous production. In the following study I have in mind to uncover stylistic peculiarities predominant in Liszt's pianomusic from his early years of production, and thereafter to follow the melodic and harmonic-tonal experiments all the way to his last works. An analysis of the latter makes it quite evident that on decisive points Liszt anticipated the development and improvement within the art of music that took place at the beginning of our century. Liszt looked upon himself as a forerunner, and he was always receptive and able to take in currents and fluctuations within the spheres of art as well as politics; indeed he may justly be described as the avant-garde par excellence of the nineteenth century. Already as a young, popular piano-virtuoso he placed himself outside the ranks of the other piano-giants not only by reason of his skill of performance, but also by his manners and his choice of repertoire. It is quite interesting to read in this connection what a Danish music critic wrote about Liszt's first concert in The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen on July 17, 1841. In the daily "Fædrelandet" the critic said: "He [Liszt] is a rebel against the good, old, orthodox system".¹ And further in the same review: "A pupil of the romantic school in France, a friend of Lammenais' and George Sand's, the legitimate child of the revolution with its glowing fantasy, its world-weary misery, its bold but aimless anxiety. He is the prototype of our time, his fingers are all steam-engines and railways,—a mastery of form, a vivacity and a vigor in the material evolution of which no antecedent time has ever dreamt."² The esthetic visions of the Danish critic—actually it is no music-review proper—emanate not only from Liszt's virtuoso-performances, but also from the style of his transcriptions (e.g. the paraphrase of Schubert's *Erkönig*, which he played at the concert in Copenhagen). It was quite obvious that here was something

¹ "Han er en Oprørere mod hele det gode, gamle, orthodoxe System." — In: Fædrelandet 19.7.1841.

² "En Elev af den romantiske Skole i Frankrig, en Ven af Lammenais og George Sand, Revolutionens ætbaarne Barn, med dens glødende Phantasie, dens livstrætte Jammer, dens dristige, maalløse Længsel. Han er Tidens udtrykte Billede, hans Fingre er lutter Dampmaskiner og Jernbaner, — et Herredømme over Formen, en Hurtighed og Energi i den materielle Udvikling, hvorom ingen tidligere har drømt."

new, something extravagant reaching far beyond what other contemporary virtuosos had to offer.

An exchange of letters between Siegfried Langgaard, the Danish composer and pianist, and his fiancée gives a very interesting idea of Liszt's affinity with musical matter. Langgaard was a pupil of Liszt's in Weimar in 1878-79 and again in 1880. In a letter dated July 20, 1879,³ Siegfried Langgaard wrote: "I am not ready to join him to all intents in his opinions of music, he does not either like everything in my Tarantelle as soon as it is too commonplace and moves too much in one or two keys or has a resemblance to the old forms, then he considers it naive. When something is really passionate, running from key to key in each bar, preferably without fashion or form, then he likes it best."⁴ And in another letter from Langgaard dated July 24, 1879: "Quite a few things out of Mozart's might also seem naive to him as there are so few modulations or oddities—but thus it does not appear to him at all, for he makes proper allowance for the period of time during which the composer lived, which patterns they had or have, he thinks that art must be on the move constantly, a present-day composer must not write anything in the style already utilized earlier, what has been created once remains, remains unshakably, sometimes as a guide for the successors."⁵ These utterances from a pupil of Liszt's, who had evidently been involved in profound arguments with him on problems of composition, show that so to speak the maestro in Weimar was a connoisseur of the history of style, and at the same time an artist on the forward move, an experimentalist.

It is from these view-points that the following study has been made. In this connection it may be expedient to draw up two main groups of stylistic features which, as a matter of course, overlap:

- I. Stylistic innovations, primarily arising out of the piano-texture
 - a. with emphasis on the manner of playing

³ Given to me by Mrs. Constance Rued Langgaard, widow of professor Rued Langgaard.

⁴ "Anskuelse om Musik kan jeg ikke i enhver Henseende dele med ham, han synes heller ikke om alting i min 'Tarantelle', saa snart det gaar for lige ud ad Landevejen og det bevæger sig for meget i en eller to Tonearter og det ligner de gamle Former, kalder han det naivt. Naar noget er rigtig pebret, og det i hver Takt løber fra den ene Toneart til den anden, helst uden Facon eller Form, synes han bedst om det."

⁵ "Af al Mozarts Musik maatte ogsaa flere Ting forekomme ham naivt, da der jo heller ikke forekommer mange Modulationer eller Bizarrerier, — men det forekommer ham aldeles ikke, thi han tager Hensyn til paa hvilken Tid en Componist lever, hvilke Forbilleder de have haft eller have, han mener, at Kunsten stadig skal gaa frem, en nuværende Componist maa ikke skrive noget i samme Art, som der allerede paa et tidligere Standpunkt er præsteret, det der er præsteret engang staar fast, urokkeligt fast, undertiden som Vejviser for det efterfølgende."

The image displays three staves of musical notation for the Mazeppa Etude. The first staff is marked 'Allegretto' and 'p' (piano), showing a melodic line with a long slur. The second staff is marked 'Allegro Patetico' and 'sempre ff e staccatissimo', featuring a more rhythmic and accented texture. The third staff is marked 'Allegro' and 'sempre ff e con strepito', showing a highly rhythmic and percussive texture with many slurs and accents.

Ex. 1. Three versions of the Mazeppa Etude.

- b. with predominant emphasis on the musical sound
- II. Stylistic innovations, primarily developed within the musical structure
 - a. theme-structures
 - b. rhythmic,
 - c. harmonic, and
 - d. tonal and modulatory innovations.

I.

As I have already intimated above it is now the first task to trace the "modernistic" elements in Liszt's earlier production which may be considered as "forerunners" for the experiments in the works of his old age. In this study I have concentrated on the piano-works, which of course present so many textural and stylistic peculiarities, that a systematical coordination can be made only with difficulty. Consequently systematization has been attempted in the following only as already outlined above. Setting out as he did at the piano Liszt was absorbed already as a young man in experimenting and discovering new possibilities of the piano-technique as



Ex. 2 a. From the Mazeppa Etude.

Ex. 2 b. Etude: Wilde Jagd.

can be seen by a comparison of the opening of the three versions of the *Mazeppa*-etude from 1826, 1838–39 and 1851 respectively. (Ex. 1, p. 85.)

In the last version Liszt used three staves, a notational solution often appearing in his transcriptions. In addition to the expansion of the pianistic apparatus as clearly seen from the three quotations from the said etude, there is an appendage of accessory notes in the last one causing a refined veiling of the basic chord progression.

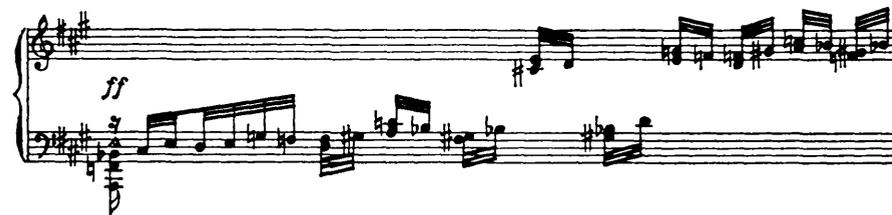
An examination of the piano-technical texture as basis for the experiments of the composer makes it evident how greatly chromatic figurations and forms of passages dominate the note-picture. Also in Chopin's piano-texture the chromatic figurations are an often prominent element of style. No doubt this is due to the fact that to the piano-genius the "finger-play" with the black and white keys is something fundamental, something incentive to the apparently impromptu ideas later committed to musicpaper. It is a matter of general knowledge that Chopin and Liszt both worked on the impulses and discoveries they made at the piano. Melodic phrases, formation of motives absorb these primarily keyboard creations where the chromatic style of performance is fundamental. The fact that the romantic style in itself was sustained by a desire to turn away from diatonics, only supports the process of tonal development which was to reach its termination, not least due to Liszt's bold experiments in his last works, in the very destruction of the traditional major-minor tonality.

With Liszt the chromatic element can be found in a great number of ways, the extremes being

- a. chromaticism plus chord notes (Ex. 2 a);
- b. chromaticism as an isolated phenomenon of sound, in this case applied as a poetic symbol (*Wilde Jagd*, Ex. 2 b).



Ex. 3. Bartók: From Piano Sonata, 3rd movement.



Ex. 4. Mefisto-Walz No. 1.

The overwhelming richness of figurations and forms of passages are instrumental in the creation of new aspects of the element of sound and harmony. In Chopin's F sharp minor prelude for instance it is a matter of pianistic-figurative embellishment of the harmonic structure which at the same time causes a veiling of the pure triads. Instead of scale- or triad-passages as in the classical and part of the early romantic piano-music such figurations now become prominent where accessory notes, often altered, creep round the harmony-tones and force them into the background. The use of such tones of embellishment with Liszt approaches the borderline to clear conception of the harmonic basis (as in *Feux follets*), one arrives at a synchronous sounding of all tones, embellishing as well as proper to the chord (as in *Unstern*), an evolution brought to completion with Bartok amongst others. (Example 3, p. 87.)

The many virtuoso cadenzas in Liszt's piano-works appear not only as pianistic effects and culminations when rounding off formal sections or as improvisatorial introductions, but they also constitute an element of tension often of a shocking character, where the tonal development comes to a sudden standstill. In the cadenza from the conclusion of the *Mefisto-Waltz* no. 1, the accessory notes *g#-a-c* are combined with the triad tones *b-b-d-f*. (Ex. 4, p. 87.)

It is impossible to draw a line between the effects primarily inspired from the keyboard, and those primarily conceived as part of the composition. Very often the pianistic effects are nothing but the means of expressing