

The problem Liszt³

About Liszt's biography and the state of research

Franz Liszt, as a topic of debate, has generated a huge amount of literature, even when he was still alive. Among them, the richest category is that of biographies. In 1835, when Liszt was twenty-four, Joseph d'Ortigue wrote the first work of this genre, which was published on the *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* in the same year. Many biographies are very precious, because on one side they give us an account of the perception that the early biographers had of Liszt when he was still alive, and conversely, they provide us with many anecdotes about his life and personality, even if they are not completely true or trustworthy. The most famous work in this field is doubtless that of Lina Ramann⁴. The writer tried to give us the most objective account of Liszt's life and achievements. She even tried to follow scientific method to collect information, however she had to deal with a great deal of interference. Firstly, Liszt himself, whose mountebank character could not be taken as a fully trustworthy source and who had some interest in preserving this aura of mystery around his figure; secondly Ramann had to deal with a lot of legends, tales, and anecdotes which were not easy to prove. Thirdly, the princess Sayn-Wittgenstein, who tried to protect Liszt from the attacks of his opponents and in doing that, censored some aspects of his life. Nevertheless, the work of Ramann still remains a priceless source, at least for the vivid image of Liszt's real life that she provides. After this first biographical work and with the discovery of Liszt's diaries, sketchbooks, letters and other literary and musical material, a great number of musicologists tried to dissipate the mists which surrounded the figure of the Hungarian composer. After more than one hundred years the aura of mystery is still there, but it is now recognised as a peculiar aspect of Liszt's character. All the biographers and scholars, from Emile Haraszti to Alan Walker, from Detlef Altenburg to Serge Gut, they all have to refer to Ramann's work and they all give us some account of several of "Liszt's legends". Nevertheless, it is not an aim of this

3 The title is a clear reference to the essay *Le problème Liszt* of Emile Haraszti (Haraszti, Emile, *Le problème Liszt*, in *Acta Musicologica*, Vol. 9, Fasc. 3/4, 1937, pp. 123–136). But if Haraszti sees Liszt as the *genie de l'instinct*, the present work tries to overturn this view in favour of an interpretation of the figure of Liszt as a composer with a very specific aesthetic programme.

4 Ramann, Lina, *Franz Liszt als Künstler und Mensch*, Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1880–1894.

dissertation to make further inquiries into Liszt's life. The main biographical source of information is Alan Walker's fundamental work published in three volumes⁵. The truthfulness of this information is not a matter of debate here; furthermore, the aura of mystery that surround Liszt has the right to survive, because it is inseparable from his figure as a musician, and consequently, ignoring this aspect makes it impossible to provide a complete account of the Romantic composer *par excellence*. The aim of this dissertation is to give an account of the works, both musical and literary, from the beginning of the so called *Weimar Period* to the end of Liszt's life, in order to create a chronological sequence of achievements, from which clearly appears a precise aesthetic thought, which is strictly related to the idea of progress – an idea which lies at the basis of what will be defined as a change of paradigm in the 19th century (the symbol), and which creates the possibility of the emergence of the idea of *Mehrdeutigkeit*⁶. The focus here is primarily placed on the piano works – of course just a selection of compositions, probably the most representative –, as the piano was Liszt's favourite means of expression and a sort of filter through which he re-elaborated his life and his whole experience, both as man and as musician. It is completely useless to reiterate how wide and deep Liszt's contribution was to the development of both piano technique and the figure of the performer, and how deep his relationship was with this instrument.

It is exactly for this reason, that it is necessary to make brief digressions on some biographical aspects. A first problem arises when one looks to the division of Liszt's life into three periods. This division is widely accepted, and it is clearly based on the three stages of Beethoven's life. From a distance, this approach appears practical, efficacious, and above all clear:

5 Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1987–1997.

6 The term *Mehrdeutigkeit* has more than just one translation, and that is the reason why during the present dissertation it was translated sometimes with ambiguity, and other times with multiplicity, or polysemy. This last term seems to be the most appropriate for the present work, but through it does not emerge the idea of ambiguity, which is an intrinsic feature of what is polysemic. The German word *Mehrdeutigkeit* is even preferred to almost synonymous *Vieldeutigkeit*, since the first term involves the possibility of misunderstandings, which are again at the basis of something ambiguous. For this reason the three terms *Mehrdeutigkeit* (and his adjective *mehrdeutig*), ambiguity, and multiplicity are during the present work preferred to other expressions and used (quite) as synonymous. It could be said that the three English concepts of ambiguity, multiplicity, and polysemy, with their differences of significance, are condensed in the German *Mehrdeutigkeit*. The relationship between this concept and the emergence of a “symbol paradigm” will be clarified during the following chapters.

- 1811–1847 *The Virtuoso Years*
- 1848–1861 *The Weimar Years*
- 1861–1886 *The Final Years*⁷

This division has the advantage of being very clear-cut. However, this structure is only possible thanks to the transparency of the middle period, where the beginning and end are proved by unquestionable facts: the move to, and the departure from Weimar. Yet, if the latter is a clear moment in Liszt's life – in fact «On Saturday, August 17, 1861, Liszt checked out of the Erbprinz Hotel and set out on foot for the Weimar railway station»⁷ –, the former has a less clear boarder – even if the year 1848, when Liszt settled down in Weimar, is generally taken as the beginning of this middle phase. What makes the definition of this second period more complicated is the agreement between Liszt and the Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach Carl Friederich, which could even be considered as the beginning of a new era:

Wir Carl Friedrich etc.

Urkunden hiermit. Nachdem Wir die gnädigste EntschlieÙung gefasst haben, den Virtuosen Dr. Franz Liszt in Anerkennung seiner Uns zu besonderem Wohlgefallen gereichenden Kunstleistungen zu Unserm Kapellmeister zu ernenn; als ist demselben zu seiner Beglaubigung Gegenwärtiges, von Uns höchst eigenhändig unterzeichnetes, mit Unserm Ramensiegel versehenes Dekret ausgefertigt und zugestellt worden.

(L.S.) Weimar, 2. November 1842.

Carl Friedrich⁸

The letter, dated 1842, marks the beginning of the negotiation between Liszt and the Grand Duke, of the role of the composer at the Weimar Court. It seems that Liszt accepted the role of Kapellmeister in Extraordinary (*Hofkapellmeister im außerordentlichen Dienst*) already in that year⁹, still, it is even true that he

⁷ Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years, 1861–1886*, p. 21.

⁸ Ramann, Lina, *Franz Liszt als Künstler und Mensch*, Vol. 2, p. 198.

⁹ Liszt's nomination as director of the Weimar theatre was regarded as an insult to the heritage of the classical era. Detlef Altenburg reported that a correspondent of the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* commented the event with these words: «Jetzt beim Virtuosen-Hagelwetter ist diese Wurzel plötzlich aus der Erde gesprungen, und zum Nachtheile Weimar's, zum Nach-

waited till 1848 to settle down in Weimar. The first contract «[...] required him to spend three months of each year in Weimar as court conductor, a promise which he honoured in 1844 and 1846 only, [...]»¹⁰. Actually it seems that Liszt even ignored a couple of letters that the Grand Duke (Carl Alexander)¹¹ wrote to him. In 1845 Liszt was still trying to escape from his duties:

Lorsque je me décidai, l'automne dernier, à entreprendre le voyage d'Espagne, j'étais loin de prévoir qu'il devrait forcément ajourner mon retour à Weimar. Selon toute probabilité, deux mois me suffisaient pour Madrid et Lisbonne. La difficulté des communications, les exigences de la publicité impossibles à déterminer à l'avance dans ce pays, où, jusqu'à ce jour, aucun artiste de quelque valeur ne s'était aventuré – et par-dessus tout cela, l'imprescriptible puissance de l'imprévu qui règne et gouverne ici plus qu'ailleurs m'ont retardé au-delà de toute mesure [...].

Et en cela, ne croyez point, Monseigneur, qu'il y ait de ma part beaucoup de négligence, de laisser aller ou de caprice d'artiste. Assurément les merveilles de la nature et de l'art amoncelées sur ce sol exercent sur mon esprit une grande séduction ; mais en définitive trois semaines ou un mois suffiraient pour satisfaire ma conscience de voyageur, si le *pundonoroso* [...] de ma carrière n'était avant tout ma boussole aussi bien à Madrid qu'à Weymar, Paris ou Pétersbourg¹².

In his letter, Liszt told the Grand Duke that he was following the artist's nature, that he had to give concerts, that he had money troubles, and other excuses not to express a clear “not yet” to his benefactor. He simply attempted to delay, as much as possible, his arrival in the city that he would try to transform into a *New Weimar*¹³. In 1846 Carl Alexander received a letter from Liszt:

theile des Virtuosen, zu großer Heiterkeit Deutschlands, welches so eben zur Besinnung kommt über den künstlerischen Unfug bloßer Virtuosität, heißt diese Wurzel Franz Lißt! Der fertigste, aber dem guten musikalischen Geschmack nachtheiligste Virtuoso ist als endlich unmittelbarer Nachfolger Schiller's und Goethe's geworden, [...]». Altenburg, Detlef, *Franz Liszt and the Legacy of the Classical Era*, in *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 18, No. 1, University of California Press, 1994, pp. 47–48, footnote 7.

- 10 Keiler, Allan, *Liszt and the Weimar Hoftheater*, in *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, T. 28, Fasc. 1/4, 1986, p. 432.
- 11 From now on the term “Grand Duke” is referred to Carl Alexander, whose reign begun in 1853, but who starts to manage the court affairs before his official coronation.
- 12 Liszt, Franz, *Briefwechsel zwischen Franz Liszt und Carl Alexander Grossherzog von Sachsen*, pp. 1–2.
- 13 Liszt, Franz, d'Agoult, Marie, *Correspondence*, Ed. Serge Gut and Jacqueline Bellas, Paris, 2001. Quoted as footnote 8 in Altenburg, Detlef, *Franz Liszt and the Legacy of the Classical Era*, p. 48. «Non pas *Delendo* [sic] *Carthago*, mais *Aedificanda Vimaria*. Weymar était sous le feu Grand

Monseigneur,

Une excursion en Hongrie et plusieurs journées d'indisposition ont retardé ces lignes. Veuillez donc bien me pardonner le semblant de négligence dont je me trouve coupable vis-à-vis de V.a.R.; [...]

Pour répondre aujourd'hui aux quelques questions bienveillantes que vous voulez bien m'adresser sur le développement de ma carrière, permettez-moi, Monseigneur, d'entrer sommairement dans plusieurs détails à cet égard.

Ainsi que j'ai eu l'honneur de le dire à V.a.R. en quittant Weimar, mon programme est parfaitement fixé; reste seulement à le faire accepter et sanctionner par le public, ce qui n'est pas le plus aisé de l'affaire. Le moment vient pour moi (*Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita*) – 35 ans! de briser ma chrysalide de virtuosité et de laisser plein vol à ma pensée, [...]. Le but qui m'importe avant et par-dessus tout à cette heure, c'est de conquérir le théâtre pour ma pensée, comme je l'ai conquis pendant ces six dernières années pour ma personnalité d'artiste ; et j'espère que l'année prochaine ne se passera pas sans que je sois arrivé à un résultat quasi décisif dans cette nouvelle carrière. [...]¹⁴.

From these excerpts, it already emerges that Liszt raised a lot of excuses not to go to Weimar. Fortunately, the Grand Duke was really well disposed towards him. Furthermore, Liszt tried to obtain, or maybe was offered, the place of Donizetti as *Kammer-Kapellmeister* in Vienna.

J'ignore si M. Genast aura jugé à propos d'entretenir V. a. R. des bruits qui circulent à Vienne et auxquels plusieurs feuilles allemandes ont donné de l'écho, relativement à ma prochaine nomination *als K.K. Kammer-Kapellmeister* (que de K!), en remplacement de M. Donizetti. Avant le printemps prochain, rien ne peut être décidé à ce sujet; [...] à ce propos, il me paraît superflu de protester vis-à-vis de V. a. R. contre une certaine inconvenance de forme qu'ont affectée plusieurs journaux en annonçant cette grande nouvelle, *daß Liszt sich um den Platz von Donizetti bewirbt!* – Tout Vienne sait parfaitement, *daß ich mich um nichts bewerbe, was einem Platz ähnlich sehen könnte, sondern daß ganz natürlich und einfach Liszt ein besprochener Candidat in Österreich sein muß, mit der angenommenen Vorausset-*

Duc Charles Auguste, une nouvelle Athènes, songeons aujourd'hui à construire la nouvelle Weimar. Renouons franchement et hautement les traditions de Charles Auguste – Laissons les talents agir librement dans leur sphère – *colonisons* le plus possible».

14 Liszt, Franz, *Briefwechsel zwischen Franz Liszt und Carl Alexander Grossherzog von Sachsen*, pp. 7–9.

zung, daß er für solch einen Posten mehr Capacität und Talent anschaulich an den Tag gelegt hat als andere ...¹⁵.

Liszt did not want to admit that he had applied, or that at least he aspired to the role of Donizetti, but he did not deny the possibility of accepting the position. The letter is a clear sign that Liszt was keeping a foot in both camps. Nevertheless, there are further explanations for his behaviour. Perhaps he wanted to satisfy his thirst for fame as a piano virtuoso; or perchance he wanted to improve upon his skills as a composer in order to better fulfil his duties at the Weimar theatre; or, conceivably, he did not want to relate his name to any king or duke, and above all to a German one, during a period of political turmoil. Or quite possibly, as many scholars have pointed out¹⁶, he did not want to settle down with his lover Marie d'Agoult. In 1842 their relationship was still alive, but it was very close to having run its course. Be that as it may, the solution to this puzzle is irrelevant here. What is however relevant is that it is not possible to create a precise cut in Liszt's life. He had already started to think about a career as *Kapellmeister* in 1842, but officially he began in 1848. Therefore, it is plausible to surmise that here there is a six year transition period, and somewhat of a grey area. But, if the events of his life cannot really help in the definition of the beginning of this second period, his compositions can, to some degree, solve the matter. Liszt started to compose his first symphonic poem in 1847, but, as it is possible to evince from his letters and biographies, he was already thinking about orchestral music and a career as *Kapellmeister* during the 1830s: «Er sah daher, was er ursprünglich beabsichtigt hatte, nach Hummels Tod (1837) von der Bewerbung um die Kapellmeisterstelle in Weimar, für das er als die Stätte Schillers und Goethes von jeher Sympathie hegte, [...]»¹⁷. A precise date is necessary for historical reasons, though what is relevant and of note here is that when Liszt accepted the position in Weimar in 1842 he was already thinking differently from the virtuoso. Consequently, 1848 is regarded

15 Liszt, Franz, *Briefwechsel zwischen Franz Liszt und Carl Alexander Grossherzog von Sachsen*, letter dated 8 October 1846, pp. 9–10.

16 See for example Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Weimar Years 1848–1861*, pp. 98–99, footnote

17 Kapp, Julius, *Franz Liszt*, Schuster & Loeffler, Berlin, 1911, p. 67. Liszt confronted with orchestral composition few times before Weimar and the Symphonic Poems. Noteworthy is just his *Symphonie révolutionnaire* (1830), composed under the excitement of the July Revolution, and that will constitute the basis upon which he composed the Symphonic Poem *Héroïde funèbre*. Even if Liszt didn't compose orchestral works before the end of the 1840's, during the decade before Weimar his interest in conducting was increasing.

as the culmination point of this process rather than as the beginning, as he was already working on some of his orchestral works.

The aim here is not to deny the separation of periods in Liszt's life, above all due to the useful nature of these structures for theoretical purposes. In any case, if it is possible to identify a clear cut between the *Virtuoso Years* and the *Weimar Years*, i.e., between the years Liszt spent around Europe to show his mastery in the art of playing the piano and the years in which he conducted a more quiet life at the court of Weimar, then the cut between the *Weimar Years* and the so-called *Final Years* is less clear. Liszt had trouble with the Weimar Court since the very beginning of his stay, in the beginning because of his illegitimate relationship with the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein, and later because of his musical ideas, his support of Wagner, Berlioz, and in general to all the so called "new music". This behaviour was in opposition to the more conservative spirit of the city.

According to Walker, Liszt left Weimar on Saturday, August 17, 1861¹⁸ in order to reach Rome and Carolyne, even though the trip lasted two months. Walker gives us a complete account of the long journey, and it is therefore completely unnecessary to linger here on this topic. What is necessary to point out is that the so called *Vie trifurquée*, that is the main aspect of Liszt's last period, only begins in 1869. Again, we have a transition period of seven years. This is not insignificant. These observations are made in order to clarify that the division into three periods is useful if the aim is to create a scheme of Liszt's life, but that it can be dangerous if the aim is to create a scheme of Liszt's musical language and compositional technique. Above all, this division is basically based upon a travel period, a stay period, and again a travel period. However, as it emerges from a lot of different biographies, that of Walker too, Liszt never stopped to travel across Europe. It is surely true that during the Weimar period he travelled less than before or after. This was because of his duties at Court, because of the Princess's desire to have a normal life, and lastly because of the political turmoil that crossed Europe beginning in 1848. A period of reflection was needed. Consequently, a division based on the travel-stay-travel periods is not completely true. Furthermore, Liszt avoided traveling at one more time in his life, namely in 1870, when the Franco-Prussian war began. At that time, he was in Hungary and following the advice of Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein, he decided to wait for quieter times. Of course, he avoided traveling to France, because of the movements of German troops. He avoided traveling to Germany, because he could not accept the violence Otto von Bismarck was perpetrating

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

against his beloved country. Liszt thought of himself as a European and a man of peace, and when the war broke out he was sincerely disappointed with both the French and the German (Prussian) governments, even if his heart was on the side of his adoptive fatherland, France – whose Prime Minister was his son in law *Émile Ollivier*.

From this brief introduction a quite spontaneous question arises. If the historical events prevent the division of Liszt's life into three phases, can it be possible that this tripartite scheme is supported by his musical production, among which some works are to be intended as landmarks? The answer is both to the affirmative and the negative. It is possible to state that some compositions indeed work as landmarks among Liszt's production. For example, the *B minor Piano Sonata* – which is taken as the starting point of this dissertation, and which represents therefore an extremely relevant landmark –, the *Symphonic Poems*, and the sacred music, which characterized his last period. Consequently, this division creates a first phase, the *Virtuoso Years*, during which Liszt wrote music for his own concerts, the purpose of which was to amaze the public. This phase ends with the composition of the *Piano Sonata*, which somehow closes the period of the music “for the others”, and opens the period of “music for music's sake”. During this second phase, which anyway begins before the completion of the *Sonata*, Liszt abandoned the piano to devote his energies to orchestral compositions. The last period is devoted to sacred and religious music, both for piano and for orchestra. On April 25, 1865, Liszt received the tonsure and on «July 30 he entered the four minor orders of the priesthood—doorkeeper, lector, exorcist, and acolyte»¹⁹. The two Oratorios, *Christus* and *Die Legende von der Heiligen Elisabeth* are related to this period, even if both works have their roots in the Weimar period. Following this scheme, it is somehow possible to divide Liszt's production into three periods, but, as already suggested, these landmarks are not strong enough. Or better, they are suitable only if one looks at Liszt's corpus from a distance and in its entirety. If one follows the piano production these landmarks lose most of their relevance. It is exactly for this reason, since the aim of this dissertation is to follow Liszt's path through the piano works, that the division into three periods must be partially discarded. Therefore, a different solution is proposed, a solution where the confines are more ambiguous, and which is in turn more consistent with the idea of multiplicity (*Mehrdeutigkeit*) and of progress, and with general aim of the present work, namely to demonstrate the unity of thought of Liszt, and that the different phases are actually part of the same teleological process towards the future.

19 Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt, The Final Years 1861–1886*, p. 88.