

# VII Conclusion



## *Mehrdeutigkeit* as the new paradigm<sup>1</sup>

The path followed to trace the present dissertation needs a last recapitulation, granting a last comprehensive view of all the topics analysed in the two parts, which would otherwise seem to be just two separate sections. The first part has the double function to recreate the 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural atmosphere in which Liszt grew up. At the same time, it serves to expose Liszt's pantheon. This pantheon has to be divided into two groups. On one side the musicians and the music theorists; on the other side the men of letters, philosophers, writers, etc. This division is necessary because the former created the basis and the theoretical justifications which were able to support Liszt's innovation in the field of music, while the latter created the conditions in which such musical development was possible. Namely, all the theories on progress, on evolution, on the education of the human race, etc., represent the fertile ground upon which new musical theories and new musical language were possible. The primary condition of the emergence of the first, as well as of the second, is the changing of the paradigm which happened between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the "category" to the "symbol" paradigm, as explained in *Chapter II*. Consequently, it is possible to state that the philosophical atmosphere in which Liszt grew up is the necessary condition without which it would not be possible for him to have developed a progressive thought. And, at least partially, this philosophical pantheon was already formed in Paris during the 1830s. But the dedication of his works to writers and philosophers, and the programmes, and the evocative titles he assigned to his compositions, are deceptive, because one has the impression that the origin of his innovative language is to be found in the literary works he took as "inspiration", rather than in the musical treatises. From this point of view the idea rose that Liszt destroyed the musical form because he was following the literary form. Consequently, the idea rose that the language of the tonal system was useless to him, and that, following the suggestions of the formalists, Liszt had to use a literary text to give his formless works a form, a structure. This idea, which is true for some compositions of

---

1 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 in this case. Nevertheless from it does not emerge the idea of ambiguity, which is an intrinsic feature of what is polysemic. For that reason during the present work it was preferred to use equally the three terms, because each of them describes a different nuance of the same phenomenon, namely the change of paradigm of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which lies at the basis of a symbolical conception, which is in turn the reason of the emergence of the polysemic theories in music.

the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is far from the reality, because Liszt used the programme with another purpose, probably to hide his more radical work of de-construction of the musical forms. This element already emerged in the previous chapter, but it is here useful to state again that the form in the late piano compositions – and, consequently, in the entire production of Liszt – assumes a prominent role. Liszt, with his aesthetic of the content seemed to care more about the form than Hanslick. For example, the first version of the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, briefly discussed above, is dedicated to Lamartine. Those who approach this work naturally tend to read it either as a strange experiment – which apparently leads nowhere since Liszt never again composed a work *Senza tempo* –, or as an attempt to set to music to Lamartine's verses. It is to believe that the programme of Liszt's work is contained in the words he reported as commentary to the first edition:

Il y a des âmes méditatives que la solitude et la contemplation élèvent invinciblement vers les idées infinies, c'est-à-dire vers la religion; toutes leurs pensées se convertissent en enthousiasme et en prière, toute leur existence est un hymne muet à la Divinité et à l'espérance. Elles cherchent en elles-mêmes, et dans la création qui les environne, des degrés pour monter à Dieu, des expressions et des images pour se révéler à elles-mêmes, pour se révéler à lui: puissé-je leur en prêter quelques-unes!<sup>2</sup>.

Especially relevant are the words *puissé-je leur en prêter quelques-unes*. Liszt is speaking here to the contemplative men who seek images and expressions with which to reach the Divine. Liszt did not take the programme *from* the poem of Lamartine, but he created a work with the same intentions; he tried to render this idea in music. That is the reason why he quoted from the *avertissement* and not directly from a poem. But, anyway, this is the poetical and declared intention of the work. Liszt intended his music as a social art, and therefore it had to possess a scope. In this case Liszt tried to provide a meditative means to help people to “ascend to God”. But the musical elements are neither derived from, nor related to Lamartine's poem. Liszt composed this work around 1833–34, namely during the period in which he attended Fétis lessons, as already discussed in *Chapter VI*. That does not mean that the programme is useless to the musical analysis, but it is surely not to be regarded as the primary or unique source. The philosophical and the musical world are interrelated and interdependent. This example served to underline again that the first and the

---

2 Lamartine, Alphonse de, *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, Hachette, Paris, 1918, p. II.

second part of this dissertation are not to be regarded as two separate sections, the first regarding Liszt the intellectual, and the second Liszt the musician. Nevertheless, the two parts are not to be regarded as separate and independent, but as the two faces of the same coin, the unity in the multiplicity. This is the theoretical approach which is to be followed to analyse Liszt's achievements in the field of piano compositions between the *B minor Piano Sonata* and the *Bagatelle sans tonalité*. This dissertation, to better follow this path, is built upon a cyclical structure. From the theoretical background of *Part I* it concludes its second part again with a theoretical background, which is related to the first, since the construction of the late compositions are related to the music theories of the 1830s. Consequently, to understand the late production one has to come back to the beginning. Through this backwards movement the first of Liszt's productions assumes another character; namely, it appears clearer that the entire production of the Hungarian composer – even if at first glance it seems to be fragmented, and sometimes even incoherent – shows that he was following a precise aesthetic ideal. The analysis of the late works, brings us back to the figure of Fétis and to the 1830s to travel the path again, but with a new perspective in mind. Namely, the path from the *Sonata* to the *Bagatelle* is a route toward the future. But once the late piano works are reached, then the first works of Liszt assume another meaning. From the brevity and the simplicity of the form of the *Final Years* emerge the constitutive features of Liszt's music, elements which were already present in his early compositions, even if in other ways. Hence, through the late piano music one reaches a better comprehension of the youth composition, which under this new light make the path followed by Liszt clearer and, consequently, the late works more understandable. From this bidirectional movement Liszt's unity of thought emerges. It is suggested that this is the only solution through which to provide a complete view of Liszt's life and achievements, because his own life could be considered as a cyclical work, or better, a representation of his idea of progress. And his life and his idea of progress can even reply to the accusation of a lack in systematic thought presented against Liszt. Already during the 1830s Heinrich Heine accused him of being a confused mind unable to choose a side<sup>3</sup>. He was just the first of a series of intellectuals and musicologists who accused Liszt of being uncultivated. But a closer analysis returns us a different idea of Liszt. It is surely true that his interests covered many different and sometimes incompatible disciplines and theories, but he used them to support his own ideas. The point of view is

---

3 See the beginning of the paragraph *Different religions: Saint-Simon and Lamennais* in Chapter II of the present work.

hence overturned. Liszt does not appear as a confused mind who quoted from this or that philosopher, poet, or prophet because he had no ideas on this or that topic. Liszt quoted from them because he was fascinated by their ideas, because they were a more worked-out version of his own. Then, the chapter on the idea of progress shows how Liszt was affected by many different theories on progress, but it even shows how he merged them to expose his own views on society, on music, etc. The quotations from some of the writings of the 1830s are the best evidence of this, and they prepare the theoretical ground for the more relevant essay on Berlioz. There the idea of multiplicity clearly emerges, because many different arguments are exposed from different points of view. The formal scheme of the essay is the connection between the theoretical part and the music analysis part, with the *B minor Piano Sonata* as a noted treatise on the idea of multiplicity, multiplicity of interpretations of the form: *Mehrdeutigkeit*. And the symbol, which is used here to explain the “interpretative chaos”, is nothing more than the philosophical justification of the idea of *Mehrdeutigkeit* in music. It is believed that this is evidence of the close relationship between the philosophical and the musical discourse. The reflection on the symbol – which is itself possible thanks to the reflections on the idea of progress, since it is something historical, and it is the result of a sedimentary process, namely a cumulative process oriented towards the future, and, at the same time, open to the past – opens the door to a positive perception of the concept of ambiguity. And then the theories of Fétis and Weitzmann based on the ambiguity (multiplicity) of some harmonies find their theoretical support, their historical and philosophical justification. Liszt found all the material for his *Zukunftsmusik* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the path illustrated by his compositions is perfectly consistent with all these theories. His compositions, and not his writings, are the answer to the accusations of a lack of systematic thought. They can appear as a sequence of different genres and forms, or as a sequence of compositions without any precise direction, but it is exactly this ambiguity that is main feature of these works. And they are ambiguous both because of the philosophical idea of the unity in the multiplicity, and because of Liszt’s attempt through his music to answer the aesthetic questions which arose at the end of the classical period. Liszt, as he told us in his essay *Berlioz und seine Haroldsymphonie*, thought that the artist has to reach the «Ideal ihrer Zeit»<sup>4</sup>. That means that the composer has to use his musical material to answer the questions of his own time. This kind of relationship could not be anything but dialectical, since society is progressing. So, music has to confront itself with a

---

4 Liszt, Franz, *Berlioz und seine Harold-Symphonie*, 1882, p. 51 (s. footnote 141 at page 156).

society which is constantly progressing, and to fulfil its task – namely, to reach the *Ideal der Zeit* – music has to constantly change (progress). This is nothing other than a dialectical process in which music, confronting itself with society, sublates every dichotomy.

The idea of progress is fundamental to the development of the idea of multiplicity. After the Middle Ages, the figure of man was put at the centre of the universe. That means not only that man is the measure of everything, but even that the man of the present is at the centre of history, which is consequently seen as a closed category. This was of course a reaction to the dark years of the Middle Ages. It was a common idea at that time, that the past is to be forgotten because it is synonymous with obscurantism; it is, and it has to stay, in the past. In turn, the present is a re-birth. However, a rebirth is only possible if the past is erased. The ancient civilisations were either primitive or ignorant, and only the man of the present possesses real knowledge and wisdom, the right to rule everything. Therefore, is the future not even a matter of investigation, since the present is, the *hic et nunc*, the stage upon which humanity is acting? With the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the paradigm changed, and the past acquired a new role – it is no coincidence that during this period many philosophers and thinkers of the Middle Ages were rediscovered in addition to those of antiquity, and that something very similar happened in the field of music with the rediscovery of so-called “ancient music”. This change in the paradigm was possible thanks to a new concept of history and time, namely the idea of progress. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century a seemingly infinite number of diverse theories on progress were developed, but the most common ones looked at it as a process which began somewhere in the past and that moved towards the future. Now, the ideas on the beginning and the end of the process are various, some involve the figure of a God, some not; some see no beginning and no end, etc. Aside from that, what is relevant is that the concept of present changes in these views, since it is not a category any more, a static moment, but it is a movement, and a movement which has a precise direction. Consequently, it seems clear that if we are acting in a present which is a movement towards the future, our current actions affect the future. But if this is so, then the actions made by our predecessors affected our present. We are now what our ancestors wanted to be. Furthermore, the ancient civilisations are neither primitive nor ignorant, but they represent the beginning of human knowledge, without which our achievements were not possible. Here the idea of progress arises as a cumulative process. At the same time these new ideas weakened and strengthened the role of the present: on one side the present is the result of the actions of the past. Therefore our condition of wealth derives from what our forebears did, and we have no merit in it. The past assumes then

a more prominent role than the present; but, on the other side, the present was strengthened, because what we do now has the power to influence future generations, and it is therefore the responsibility of the present to create a better world. The current human condition is more understandable through an analysis of what humans have done in the past. To comprehend the past means understanding the present, and this is necessary in order to direct our actions for the future. Under this light the division of the historical time into three categories (past, present, future) loses its significance, since it is an incessant flow. For this reason, it was necessary to find another “formal scheme”, more suitable than that of category, which could explain our perception of reality. The symbol seems to be the most suitable concept, because, exactly as this new conception of time, it is both open to the past and to the present<sup>5</sup>, and it is therefore able to explain the reality between tradition and innovation, heritage and new discoveries. But, as has already been pointed out, the main feature of the symbol is its ambiguity, and it is even the most relevant point in this dissertation, since ambiguity is the basis of the idea of *Mehrdeutigkeit*. Is reality somehow ambiguous, so as to confirm the exactitude of the theory according to which the symbol is the new paradigm of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? The answer is affirmative, and for two reasons: 1) the present, from a historical point of view, is ambiguous; if past and future are clear concepts, present is something undefinable with its fluctuations between past and future. It is neither the first, nor the second, but it is both – actually present is not static, then the present cannot “be”, but it is movement, the present is unfolding; 2) to comprehend the present one has to understand the past; but the past does not have just one explanation. And the same is true for the future. Hence, the present is the result of all these multiple interpretations of the past, but it is not reducible to them, and it is open to an infinite number of future developments.

The ambiguity in music finds its source here. The seventh harmonies, the augmented triads, the tritones, are ambiguous in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because they no longer belong to the category of the “to be resolved dissonances” – the same harmonies were not ambiguous during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, because they perfectly fit this category –, they now exceed this category becoming self-subsistent – and this is the reason why one can speak of a process of liberation of the dissonances. Analysed through a historical point of view, one might say that these harmonies have a past, from which arose multiple interpretations of them, some of which led to the idea of a concatenation of unresolved harmonies, which implies the ambiguity in music. The same process will be the basis of future improvements.

---

5 See Chapter II.



The 19<sup>th</sup> century would remain incomprehensible without the idea of progress and its related concepts of symbol, ambiguity, and multiplicity. And without this theoretical apparatus, the figure of Liszt would be even less comprehensible, since he was not just a perceptive observer of the world – his interests covered science, literature, history, philosophy, etc. – but he was, probably above all, a historical composer, an immersed in history composer – the historical awareness of Liszt has already been discussed in this dissertation. Therefore, to deprive his figure of the socio-cultural context would mean to possess a limited understanding of his works, would mean to comprehend the notes, not the music. Liszt is ambiguous, is multiple, and these are the ideas that one has to keep in mind when one is approaching his compositions. Namely, one does not have to expect to find the answers therein, but rather questions – the œuvre of Wagner affirms “that is, and it can be just like that”; Liszt’s corpus problematise music, and at the same time ask a question of the future “did I create something good?”

It is clear that the three phases analysed in the second part of this dissertation would not be possible without the theoretical apparatus of the first part. Consequently, these three phases (*Sonata – Klavierstücke, Aux cyprès de la Villa d’Este* – the late piano works) are a representation of this progress process. With the *Sonata* the form is under investigation, and it shows major ambiguities, while the tonality, although unusually employed, is still relatively stable. The symbol – as a fundamental element of the progress – is necessary to understand the problem of the form, which, exactly as the concept of “present” previously discussed, fluctuate between the past – preserving some of its aspects –, and the future – namely, what it is yet to become, and anticipating some elements of its evolution. As a consequence of this approach, the form of the *Sonata* does not represent a problem because it does not fit the classic formal scheme any more, but it is problematic because it is ambiguous, because it is moving between what it was, and what it will be. And this poses a matter of interpretation, which is firstly a *terminological* problem. Here the necessity of a “symbolical” analysis arises, since the vocabulary of the sonata form can only partially describe the work, because there is always a “further”, something that this vocabulary cannot describe. But at the same time, here the awareness that every new interpretation brings us a little closer to the comprehension of this ambiguous composition occurs. The middle phase of the *Klavierstücke* and of the *Aux cyprès de la Villa d’Este* show us how the idea of multiplicity moved from the form to the content. This transition is necessary and somehow mandatory, since the idea of a harmonic sequentiality governed by precise rules is lacking. Without the form and without the harmonic concatenations the musical discourse seems to be impossible. It is for this reason that it is necessary to respond to the high tonal

ambiguity (multiplicity) with a simple form, which on one side is able to work as a container for the musical expression, and on the other side does not imprison it in pre-established constructions (formulas). And, if the *Klavierstücke* can be regarded as a first example of musical expressionism – their brevity resembles that of the Schönberg *Sechs Kleine Klavierstücke* –, *Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este*, this shows us how multiplicity can still be used to give birth to large works, still exploiting one of the simplest musical forms (A-B-A). But this middle phase inevitably leads to the final phase of Liszt's productive activity, where multiplicity starts to become impossibility. The composer has at his disposal an infinite number of possible possibilities, and they in turn force him to make a choice, which is in turn the unfreedom of freedom. Hence, if every note, and every chord, can be followed by every other note or chord, the composer has to execute a choice, a choice which is a limitation of the freedom, and which is consequently to be regarded as a violent act, which is furthermore not supported by any theoretical rule. The form, which is reduced to its primordial element, becomes the container for an act of violence, for a choice, hidden behind the concept of the composer's necessity, which confines the multiplicity, the universal, into one peculiar manifestation, where it is nonetheless still possible to find a trace of the universal. *Mehrdeutigkeit* is not only one of the key concepts through which it is possible to analyse the corpus of Liszt, but it is its own limit. Ambiguity lies at the basis of the sense of confusion and disorientation typical of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it was to this development that Liszt contributed greatly, because with his music he undermined the most important principle of music: contrast. The Lisztian process of construction-deconstruction of music, retraces the same centrifugal-centripetal process of more traditional music. However, in his works the whole process is based on even thinner and subtler, almost vanishing, elements (intervals, harmonies). The construction process based on a cumulative development which sustained music for centuries, falls apart here. The opposites flatten; the contrasts between sound and silence, between consonant and dissonant, become even more feeble, till they tend towards uniformity. In this uniformity, where everything has its specific weight, the extreme freedom has silenced the composer. It is the absence of any limit, of any rule that makes the music quiet. This is the beginning of a crisis, which would later emerge during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the clearest examples of which is Schönberg. And it was exactly because he himself experienced this impossibility, that he tried to create a new system, even more rigid than the tonal one, because music needs limitations to find its expression – or better, music needs limitations to fight against in order to find its way to life. Liszt was just lucky enough to live till the period of extreme freedom, just before the fall.