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Ever so slightly off-key

Jonathan Gaisman October 14, 2021 at 2:23 pm



Of the first-rank composers within the generally accepted pantheon, three took holy orders in the Roman Catholic Church: Monteverdi, Vivaldi and – more incongruously perhaps – Franz Liszt, the 210th anniversary of whose birth falls this October. Celebrated as a young man for his brilliant technique and showmanship at piano recitals (a form of concert which he invented) and for forming relationships with other men's wives, he retired from both pursuits at the age of 35. The second half of his life was markedly more creative and contemplative than the first. Although he had joined the third order of St Francis in 1858, it was eight years later (after the death of two of his children) that he received the tonsure and the four minor orders of porter, lector, exorcist and acolyte. Thereafter, he was often called Abbé Liszt.

He wrote reams of religious music – the authoritative Searle catalogue identifies no fewer than 65 sacred works – almost none of which are performed nowadays. The religious theme spills over into some of the piano compositions on which his fame largely rests. It would therefore be agreeable to record that Liszt's sacred music is permeated by his undoubted commitment to the divine. Regrettably, however, it is hard to discern any such thing. Nor is it the case that the Romantic idiom was inherently incapable of expressing the numinous, as compared with music of the Baroque or Classical eras: the requiems of Brahms and Fauré prove the opposite, and whole acts of Wagner's operas are suffused with the profoundest religious feeling.

Two reasons in particular prevented Liszt from convincingly drawing this form of musical expression out from himself. The first derives from the fact that not only was he fascinated by the diabolical – specifically the Mephistophelean (he had a life-long obsession with the Faust legend) – but he was also compositionally far more comfortable depicting the infernal than the heavenly. This is literally so in his two works inspired by Dante, one of which omits the *Paradiso* altogether and the second of which relegates its representation to a few trivial *tremolandi*.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, there is a broader (if ultimately subjective) question of taste. Religious music in bad taste is bound to miss the mark. The case against Liszt at its highest is that he was an irredeemable vulgarian – incapable of writing music in good taste just as Chopin (who called him “a clever craftsman without a vestige of talent”) was incapable of writing anything else.

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It is true that Chopin died before Liszt's finest compositions were written, but even so it is striking how the latter continues viscerally to divide informed opinion. Among our most thoughtful pianists, Alfred Brendel considers Liszt's works worthy of the closest attention; András Schiff, a fellow Hungarian, has not touched him for decades, referring (among more extreme remarks) to "a total lack of self-control and economy". The amount of noise and the sheer number of notes are often in inverse proportion to the musical content.

Even Liszt's greatest work, the piano sonata in B minor, has moments of windy rhetoricism; what other composer would have marked a main theme with the instruction *grandioso*? Among lesser piano works, the purportedly religious *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses* occasionally approach the musical level of a Chopin nocturne; however, they are marred by saccharine and predictable harmonies and repetitive displays of irrelevant bravura. Moreover, they remain entirely earthbound. It is also instructive to compare his transcriptions of Schubert songs, whose music Liszt did much to popularise, with the economical but less well-known *Lieder* arrangements by his contemporary and fellow virtuoso Sigismund Thalberg. Whereas Liszt's reinterpretations are often vitiated by what Graham Johnson calls "the vanity of the virtuoso", Thalberg's come far closer to the spirit of the original.

Liszt was an exceptionally important composer, occupying an impregnable place at the heart of 19th-century music. He helped countless musical and charitable causes and championed many neglected works. His energy and fecundity are remarkable. He supported fellow composers, especially Berlioz and Wagner, who went on to become his son-in-law. His later works contain an exploratory modernism which anticipates 20th-century atonality – one of his last and most interesting pieces is actually called *Bagatelle sans Tonalité*. His long-term mistress Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein rightly said that "he hurled his lance far further into the future than Wagner". Today, as in his life, Liszt has many enthusiastic admirers. But if it is music as an aid to spiritual contemplation that you seek, look elsewhere.

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