

1 Liszt: the Romantic artist

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It is one of the ironies of French history that the revolution which brought with it the bourgeois king, Louis-Philippe, and a 'middle-of-the-road' official attitude to both culture and government policy should also have marked the beginning of the headiest decade of French Romanticism: the 1830s. Extremism and compromise coexisted in the form of several philosophies – artistic, religious and social – competing for attention. Added to which, the nature of Romanticism itself as a self-conscious movement defined as much by internal contradiction as anything else meant that living in Paris during the 1830s offered unparalleled intellectual and artistic stimulation.¹ For a young man of Liszt's intellectual curiosity such bounties were not to be scorned. The city was effectively his university.²

Salon culture was buoyant, populated by the major figures of French Romanticism: Delacroix, Sand, Vigny, Hugo, Musset, Lamartine, Berlioz, Chopin, Heine and Balzac. To this constellation of friends and acquaintances, Liszt could add his connections with Maurice Schlesinger's *Revue et Gazette musicale* (a mouthpiece for German Romantic ideas in France), his enthusiasm for the Saint-Simonians and for the Liberal Catholic philosophies of the Abbé Robert Félicité Lamennais and the writer and social philosopher Pierre-Simon Ballanche. Voracious reading extended from the Bible and the writings of St Augustine and Thomas à Kempis to Goethe, Byron, Montaigne, Voltaire, Hugo, Chateaubriand and the work of historians such as Michelet and Quinet. Liszt's experiences of the 1830s largely defined both his outlook and his behaviour, and, consequently, the manner in which he was perceived as an artist. His openness to different ways of thinking – not all of them compatible – caused Heine to remark: 'Heaven only knows in what philosophical stable he will find his next hobbyhorse.'³ Yet even the usually acerbic Heine tempered his comment by acknowledging the breadth of Liszt's humanism and his 'indefatigable thirst for enlightenment and divinity'.⁴ That quest had its roots in Liszt's religious soul-searching following his father's death in 1827, and the depression occasioned by his first major romantic disappointment – the abrupt and class-driven termination of his relationship with Caroline de Saint-Cricq by her father, Count Pierre de Saint-Cricq, in 1828. Such experiences – sometimes dismissed simply as a case of *mal de René*⁵ – were

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nevertheless the bedrock on which a lifelong spirituality and sense of social justice were formed.

Liszt's identification with the Romantic movement was intimately linked with his aspiration to be accepted as an artist rather than as a mere virtuoso. Acutely aware of new fracture lines within artistic criticism which led to the denigration of instrumental technique as an end rather than a means, he had to negotiate a fine line between maintaining public popularity (and thus ensuring material success) and securing the respect of those elite artists whom he admired. In the wake of Schlesinger's excoriating attacks on the operatic fantasies and concertos of Heinrich Herz in the *Revue et Gazette musicale* of 1834–6, mirrored in Schumann's *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, he suffered the 'guilty conscience' of a man whose overwhelming technical skill became a burden because it was too easily allied to ignoble music demanded by an indiscriminating public. In addition, he found himself trapped in the middle of a debate, sparked by enthusiasm for the notion of what we would now call musical canonicity and the Romantic cult of genius, about the ownership of great musical 'works' (increasingly defined as their texts), and the extent of interpreters' freedom to adapt them for their own purposes.⁶ Terminology was important: as the concept of the Romantic virtuoso slid further into self-contradiction (predicated as it was on an uneasy relationship between poetry and effect, between artist and entertainer), so Liszt aspired to be a Romantic artist. This chapter, then, concentrates on the elements of that journey as they appear in Liszt's life (and representations thereof) before his move to Weimar, with a brief coda on his continuing fidelity, even after the disillusion of failed liberal revolutions in 1848/9, to Romantic ideals of the artist's duty to society.

The artist as alienated wanderer

The brand of musical Romanticism with which Liszt had closest contact during the 1830s was that expounded in the *Revue et Gazette musicale*, a specialist weekly journal to which he contributed articles during his years of travel, from 1835 to 1841. Maurice Schlesinger's journal, which included Berlioz, Wagner, Sand, Dumas and Balzac among its contributors, was intended to provide a beacon of Romantic idealism in a world tarnished by materialist concerns and the politics of compromise (though its ultimate rationale was, of course, advertisement). From the outset its contents were imbued with the spirit of E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose eccentric and undervalued kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler⁷ formed the prototype for several portrayals of instrumentalists and composers in short stories which Schlesinger commissioned. The theme of misunderstood genius as the precariously close neighbour of

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insanity was almost ubiquitous. Balzac developed it in his short story *Gambara* of 1837, in which the composer of the title explained his predicament as a victim of his own superiority: ‘My misfortune comes from having heard the concerts of angels and having believed that men could understand them.’⁸ His words found a counterpart in Liszt’s open letter (published in the *Revue et Gazette*) from Lake Como, written in September of that year:

How wretched, how truly wretched we artists are! We experience momentary flashes when we seem to have an intuitive grasp of the divine, when we can sense its presence within us, like a mystical insight, a supernatural understanding of the harmony of the universe; but as soon as we want to flesh out our sensations, to capture these evanescent flights of the soul, the vision vanishes, the god disappears, and a man is left alone with a lifeless work, one that the crowd’s gaze will quickly strip of any last illusions it held for him.⁹

The previous January, Liszt had written in similar terms to George Sand, the ‘poet-voyager’, calling artists ‘men who have no brothers among men, . . . children of God, . . . exiles from heaven who suffer and sing and whom the world calls “poets”’.¹⁰ A second *Lettre d’un bachelier* to Sand, dated 30 April 1837, linked the idea of alienation from the world with that of the Wanderer, an image of themselves which both Liszt and Marie d’Agoult cultivated in their writings and travels: ‘It behooves an artist more than anyone else to pitch a tent only for an hour and not to build anything like a permanent residence. Isn’t he always a stranger among men? Whatever he does, wherever he goes, he always feels himself an exile.’¹¹ In September of the same year Liszt reiterated the point by quoting lines from Goethe’s *Letters from Italy*, providing a self-portrait of a man ‘exiled by his own decision, wandering on purpose, knowingly imprudent, everywhere a stranger and everywhere at home’.¹² In Italy and Switzerland the couple acted out a personal drama in the spirit of a Caspar David Friedrich painting, retaining the isolation of anonymity, avoiding the crowd and seeking meaning in the mystery and grandeur of the natural world.

That journey helped fix many aspects of Liszt’s Romantic persona, detectable in the series of *Lettres d’un bachelier* which were themselves inspired by George Sand’s series of *Lettres d’un voyageur*. The very act of preparing essays for publication further encouraged Liszt’s propensity to reflection on matters artistic, cultural and spiritual. Moreover, whether or not we view the final texts of these letters as the work of d’Agoult, rather than Liszt, the enterprise was itself a manifestation of the metaphysical fusion of the arts which the Romantics prized so highly. Travels to Italy had a similar effect on Liszt as they did on Berlioz, inducing depression at the decadence of the contemporary operatic school and the lack of ‘serious’

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instrumental music, and thereby intensifying his allegiance to German music and German modes of thought. Equally, though, Liszt's travels in Italy heightened his awareness of the country's rich cultural heritage, especially in the graphic arts, which he now viewed in Romantic vein as more important for the underlying principles they shared with music than for the technical differences that separated them from it:

Day by day my feelings and thoughts gave me a better insight into the hidden relationship that unites all works of genius. Raphael and Michelangelo increased my understanding of Mozart and Beethoven; Giovanni Pisano, Fra Beato, and Il Francia explained Allegri, Marcello, and Palestrina to me. Titian and Rossini appeared to me like twin stars shining with the same light. The Colosseum and the *Campo Santo* are not as foreign as one thinks to the Eroica Symphony and the Requiem [Mozart's]. Dante has found his pictorial expression in Orcagna and Michelangelo, and someday perhaps he will find his musical expression in the Beethoven of the future.¹³

It was in this same spirit that French critics wrote appreciatively of Liszt's playing: the fact that he so obviously understood the greatness of Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, Byron, Hugo and Hoffmann set him apart from other, unidimensional and therefore less Romantic, musicians. He was becoming that which he aspired to be: a 'poet'.¹⁴ In this celebrated passage from the *Lettre* to Berlioz, he displayed a second Romantic tendency: reverence for a distant, idealised, past which collapses into the present just as different art forms collapse into one another.

Liszt and Hoffmann: the divided self

For all his idealisation of painting, though, it was literature that inspired Liszt most. His request to stop at Newstead Abbey, Byron's ancestral home, while on a British tour in 1840 is unsurprising when we read his letters of the period, in which he stresses his feelings of affinity with the poet.¹⁵ But the importance of his literary enthusiasms of the 1830s and 40s to his musical personality seems to have been all but invisible to onlookers seduced by surface impressions, not least a public demeanour and mode of behaviour which encouraged interpretations of Liszt's own life as novelistic. Comparisons with Hoffmann's Kreisler became inevitable; the only wonder is that they did not appear earlier.

It was entirely fitting that Liszt's debut as a literary creation should have been in a *conte fantastique* in which he was evoked variously as Hoffmann's son, as Kreisler's brother, and as a 'tale' of Hoffmann.¹⁶ Théophile de Ferrière's *Brand-Sachs* was published in the *Revue et Gazette* in April and May 1836. The story centres around the idea of the *Doppelgänger*. Hoffmann

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and a learned friend decide to create twin images: Hoffmann creates Kreisler; his friend has a son whom he brings up as a Romantic artist steeped in the reading of Hoffmann's tales – the pianist-composer Wilhelm Brand-Sachs. In a clear reference to the death of Adam Liszt, Hoffmann's friend dies when Brand-Sachs is aged 16, in Paris, and already the 'finest pianist in the world'.¹⁷ Introduced as a figment of their imaginations, this phantom – 'blond, thin, agile, [who] uttered other-worldly things about music' – comes to embody Romanticism itself.¹⁸ De Ferrière portrays Brand-Sachs as an 'extravagant' character – 'one of those men whose intellect and feeling have acquired immense proportions, to the detriment of common sense'.¹⁹ In a move which implicitly links this Lisztian character with Berlioz, Brand-Sachs is a fervent admirer of Beethoven, Weber and Gluck: at the mention of Beethoven while playing to friends, 'his face took on a sublime expression, his eyes shot darts of lightning, and his inspired forehead seemed encircled with a halo'.²⁰ However, where Hoffmann's portrayal of Kreisler suggested an element of poetic madness, de Ferrière's of Brand-Sachs/Liszt treated him as an incurable case: the story ends with a graphic scene in which the hero raves incoherently on his deathbed.²¹ A few years later, Liszt came to recognise some of the weaknesses of Romanticism which de Ferrière's story lampooned as comprising an unhealthy concentration on the morbid, the sickly and the hyper-sensitive, combined with an extravagant degree of self-belief:

You know this sickness of our time; it disturbs even the finest minds and damages even the best natures. It is a kind of solemn, moral vanity, a religion of the self that fills the hearts of these poor children with a host of silly and foolish desires. They intoxicate themselves with these notions, sometimes even to the point of death when the realization of their own uselessness, which they disguise as the injustice of fate, succeeds in becoming the mistress of their misguided imagination.²²

Alongside clear references to Liszt's early touring career and his Parisian lifestyle, it is the contradictions and ambiguities in Brand-Sachs's personality which mark him out as the pianist's literary counterpart. As Jacqueline Bellas notes, 'The characteristic of Brand-Sachs is to find definition only in ambiguity. He is never exactly what he appears to be'.²³ And Liszt did indeed contain within himself all the contradictory extremes that helped defy convenient categorisation: the artist who immersed himself in Beethoven's piano music in the company of friends was also the showman determined not to be outdone by a pianistic rival such as Sigismund Thalberg; the man who prized religious devotion and attached himself to the Abbé Lamennais was at the same time engaging in a spectacular adulterous relationship in which he was also openly unfaithful; the Hungarian nationalist who set

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such store by the jewelled sword of honour presented to him in Pest in 1840 was a non-Hungarian-speaking cosmopolitan who shared most of his life between Paris and Weimar; the anonymous and unrecognised Wanderer of the late 1830s was also the most fêted of all travelling virtuosi. That Liszt recognised his divided self is not in doubt. In a lighter (and unusually ironic) moment he was able to refer to the problem as that of ‘very cleverly steering a course between the Ideal and the Real’.²⁴ It was not a *juste milieu* in respect of which he was conspicuously successful; he remained a man of extremes. As Eva Hanska wrote in her journal in 1843: ‘He is an extraordinary mixture . . . There are sublime things in him, but also deplorable ones; he is the human reflection of what is grandiose in nature – but also, alas, of what is abhorrent. There are sublime heights, the mountains with dazzling peaks, but also bottomless gulfs and abysses.’²⁵

The rhetoric of the sublime

Like so many other writers, Hanska used the imagery of the Romantic sublime to describe Liszt, just as Liszt and d’Agoult found ways of writing it into their musico-literary travelogues, including the *Années de Pèlerinage* and their joint journal. Germanic writers brought up on Kant and Schlegel, and through Kant’s discussion of his writings, Edmund Burke, found such references unavoidable, thereby creating a critical rhetoric in which Liszt was defined as an awesome and irresistible power. Burke’s discussions of the sublime and its effects in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) were of long-lasting influence, and are of central importance to our understanding not only of Liszt’s reception as a performer, but also of Romantic criticism in general. Ironically, only the British, during his tours of the 1840s, seemed largely impervious to a tradition of associating Liszt’s pianism with this intellectual and artistic concept. The English critic Henry Chorley’s comment that Liszt was incomprehensible except in the context of ‘newer schools of European imagination’²⁶ reveals much about his sense of distance from a movement in which his own countrymen had nevertheless played an inaugural part. Burke’s definition centred on the distinction between the sublime as evidenced by feelings of pain, terror and awe in the face of the rugged, vast and elemental, as opposed to the pleasurable serenity of appreciation which characterised perception of the beautiful – all grace and polish but also diminutive weakness. Perception, in both Burke and Schlegel, was paramount: the sublime was perceived in external phenomena but then internalised as an emotional experience which in turn craved expression in the form of ‘enthusiasm’ (Schlegel’s word, later taken up by Berlioz, as we shall see).²⁷ In addition,

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in a move which Hoffmann was to emulate in his famous comparison of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven of 1810, Burke characterised the beautiful as light, the sublime as dark and gloomy.²⁸

The phenomenon is best revealed in three famous accounts (two closely related versions by Berlioz, one by the playwright Ernest Legouvé) of Liszt's impromptu playing of the opening Adagio of the 'Moonlight' Sonata in the darkness of Legouvé's salon in 1837. In these accounts the opposition of dark and light, and the elements of pathos, emotion of religious intensity, and physical paralysis induced by the artistic experience, parallel Burke's definition of sublimity to an uncanny degree.²⁹ Berlioz and Legouvé disagree as to whether Liszt was involved in having the lights turned down and putting out the dying fire, thereby plunging the already dark room into near-blackness; in other respects, the accounts are similar. As Legouvé told it:

There were no lights, and the fire in the grate had burned very low. Goubaux brought the lamp from my study, while Liszt went to the piano and the rest of us sought seats. 'Turn up the wick,' I told Goubaux: 'we can't see clearly enough'. But instead, he turned it down, plunging us into blackness, or, rather, into full shadow; and this sudden transition from light to dark, coming together with the first notes of the piano, had a moving effect on every one of us . . . [We] remained rooted to the spot where we happened to be, no one attempting to move . . . I had dropped into an armchair, and above my head heard stifled sobs and moans. It was Berlioz.

According to Berlioz, who was writing much closer to the event, it was he himself who prevented the lamps being brightened, and Liszt who insisted that they be extinguished, along with the fire. And while such a gesture has its own flamboyance, it is equally plausibly related to the ideas of the interpreter disappearing anonymously behind the greatness of the composer's artwork (Berlioz assures us that Liszt added no extra notes, as had been his wont – indeed, this purification of his playing is the rationale for the anecdote), and of the new value of music as an abstract, disembodied art free not only from fixed semantics but also, in idealised form, from the distractions of visible performers and machines.³⁰

Liszt's associations with the Romantic sublime took two primary forms in Liszt reception: the presentation of the pianist as its embodiment, evidenced by his facial expressions, gestures at the piano and a musical interpretation of overwhelming expressive power; and descriptions of a sublime effect of 'enthusiasm' on the listener or writer, in the manner of the paralysis which Legouvé depicted and which Berlioz described graphically as an uncontrollable tensing of the nerves leading to a half-faint. And while Berlioz's story *Le suicide par enthousiasme* (1834) has his hero 'nearly fainting with emotion'

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during *La vestale* and finally committing suicide because he has experienced the ultimate,³¹ there are no accounts of Berlioz the conductor falling victim to his own sublimity in the manner of Liszt's onstage fainting fit at a Paris concert of April 1835, when he had to be carried from the platform, thereby bringing a concert involving over seventy musicians to a premature end. Presentations of Liszt as the embodiment of the sublime frequently emphasised a demonic character combined with an ecstatic religiosity, providing another set of defining contradictions. In his *A Poet's Bazaar*, Hans Christian Andersen described Liszt's countenance as moving from demonic possession to angelic nobility within a single piece; Schumann, writing for his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1840, compared his demonic power with Paganini after a concert in Dresden in which he had held his public in thrall; for Théophile Gautier, writing in 1844, Liszt's demonic aspect was Hoffmannesque;³² for Heine, the pianist appeared 'possessed, tempestuous, volcanic, and as fiery as a titan'.³³

In the reports of those who described their own reactions to Liszt's playing, we glimpse another side of the demonic: the ability to control the listener by inducing psychological and physiological symptoms of suffering mixed with pleasure – the agony of ecstasy portrayed in Berlioz's reaction to the 'Moonlight' Sonata. Caroline Boissier's response of January 1832 (before she became scandalised at Liszt's lifestyle in Geneva) also fits the paradigm: 'When listening to Liszt, I feel what no other artist has made me feel; it is not only admiration, it is ecstasy and fatigue together, which at one and the same time consume and enchant me.'³⁴ She, too, called Liszt 'sublime . . . a musical demon'.³⁵ That competitive element of control, the polar opposite of the sublime faint, is most strikingly characterised in a diary entry of 9 August 1836, in which Albertine de la Rive-Necker linked Liszt's playing to the eruption of a sudden storm, the ferocity of which he proceeded to challenge via the family piano:

No one notices that the storm has grown more violent; the sounds that he draws from the piano muffle those of the thunder, and, frail though they look, his fingers possess a strength capable of stifling the noise of the tempest. He 'plays a storm'. On hearing a roll of thunder, he murmurs to Albertine: 'I shall hold my own.' And indeed he confounds and enraptures us, putting us into a state of ecstasy such as we have never known before. 'I win, I am the master', he seems to say.³⁶

Whether or not the storm occurred as de la Rive-Necker described it, the ploy of placing Liszt in competitive alliance with the tempestuous and elemental was common. One of the most famous images of the pianist, Josef Danhauser's *Liszt am Flügel* (1840), features him playing to a collection of rapt artist-listeners, in a room (supposedly his own) containing a portrait of

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Plate 1.1 Josef Danhauser, *Liszt am Flügel* (1840), oil. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie/F.V. 42. Photo: Jürgen Liepe

Byron but dominated by a bust of Beethoven (in whose general direction he gazes upwards, completing the dramatic diagonal that extends right across the picture). Through a seemingly glassless window a distinctly stormy sunset is visible. But there is more. The grand piano itself appears to be half inside the room and half outside, collapsing the distance between the here-and-now and infinity; likewise, the outsize bust of Beethoven, which seems at first sight to be placed on top of the piano, actually inhabits an ambiguous space above it – a floating vision for the viewer, framed by, and existing beyond, the window opening.³⁷ If Beethoven exists in this painting at all, it is in the mind's eye. Hence, perhaps, the composer's out-of-scale portrayal. Moreover, in the context of a twilight scene, the startling whiteness of his marble form draws attention to the pool of light in which the right-hand side of the canvas is bathed and which touches the faces of Liszt, Berlioz and Sand especially. The narrative description of Beethoven's symphonies by Hoffmann and Berlioz, especially those of the Fifth Symphony as a progression from symbolic darkness to light, are close cousins of this picture. Danhauser's composition invites us to 'read' the image as an upward progression from the predominantly dark browns, russets and reds of the left-hand side to the tans, golds and creams on the right, where the piano and its cascades

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of sheet music lead us to Beethoven's world of the infinite. In this fusion of meticulous detail and visionary symbolism Danhauser encapsulated the ideal of the Romantic sublime towards which Liszt strove, and placed him at its epicentre.

Religiosity and social vision: the artist as priest

With very few exceptions, contemporary accounts of Liszt's playing cast him as a hero, demon, god or magician. However, Liszt's own aspirations, inspired by early exposure to Saint-Simonism and the teachings of Lamennais, centred on the idea of the artist as priest: a regenerative force leading his community away from decadence. Balzac lampooned what he considered to be Liszt's self-delusion in a notorious passage of his *Béatrice*: 'He affects to be an artist whose inspiration comes from on high. To hear him talk, art is something holy, sacred . . . The artist, he declares, is a missionary; art is a religion with its priests and must have its martyrs.'³⁸

Such ideas were not only rooted in the French religious philosophies of the 1830s, but were also implicit in Romantic writings, where the idea of the sanctity of art brought with it a clear division between the initiated and the philistine, resulting in a modernist elitism which characterised avant-gardism well into the twentieth century.³⁹ It was in France alone, however, that it formed the basis of a socio-political movement. That such elitism was pursued in music journals whose ostensible aim was to educate the public was just one of the many paradoxes of Romanticism. Liszt, however, subscribed to it in only diluted form, emphasising instead the democratising and morally uplifting potential of music. In so doing he allied himself with a diverse subculture within the French Romantic movement – that of the Catholic and socialist reformers; he also joined the ranks of European artist-reformers, Wagner included, whose socially engaged Romanticism in the years before 1848 still predominated over a sense of art for art's sake, which was to be a driving force in artistic movements of the next half century, but which Liszt studiously ignored.

Liszt's first taste of such revolutionary social ideologies came through the aesthete Emile Barrault, who introduced him to a vision of Saint-Simonism shared by Prosper Enfantin, one of the movement's *Pères Suprêmes*, in which the arts – with music at their apex – were to act as humanity's guiding light. Barrault and Enfantin's musical preferences accorded closely with those of Liszt in his idealist mode: they disdained the trivialities of the modern Italian school, and with it the cult of virtuosity in general, instead elevating the seriousness of German sacred and instrumental music from Handel onwards.⁴⁰ Like Hoffmann, Barrault viewed