
Liszt as a Pianist

It is difficult to appreciate the enormous impact Liszt had on the development of piano playing. His expansion of the then technical demands made on the performer still challenges the best virtuosos of today. Even now, certain works of his composed during his years of touring contain passages that border on the unplayable. Liszt developed new standards for the recital as such, and forced piano manufacturers to model their instruments so as to keep pace with his technical demands. He was the first piano virtuoso to perform in profile to his audience, for until then it had been customary for players to face the audience. His concerts, especially during his touring years, generated hysteria similar to that of a modern rock concert.

Leading musicians of his day were uniform in their praises. Even Chopin, who was often caustically critical of other pianists, wrote, “Liszt is playing my *études*, and transporting me outside my respectable thoughts. I should like to steal from him the way to play my own *études!*”⁵ Clara Wieck (1819–1896), who was later to become the foremost woman pianist of her time and the wife of Robert Schumann (1810–1856), wrote, “Liszt played at sight what we toil over and at the end get nowhere with... Besides Liszt, other virtuosos appear so small!”⁶ Sir Charles Hallé (1819–1895), an English pianist and conductor, wrote, “For him there were no difficulties of execution, the most incredible seeming child’s play under his fingers... The power he drew from his instrument was such as I have never heard since, but never harsh, never suggesting ‘thumping.’”⁷ Although there are differing accounts of the size of Liszt’s hands, Carl Lachmund (1853–1928), a pupil of Liszt’s from 1882–84, stated that Liszt commented at a lesson, “The public credits me with having a very large hand, but you see I can just stretch this 10th to play it quietly.”⁸ On this topic, the American pianist Amy Fay commented, “His hands are very narrow, with long and slender fingers that look as if they have twice as many joints as other people’s. They are so flexible and supple that it makes you nervous to look at them.”⁹

About the Transcriptions

The transcription was enormously popular during the 19th century. Liszt, in addition to being one of that century’s most original composers, was a transcriber of genius, not only of the music of others, but of his own compositions as well. He later wrote that he was the first to describe and differentiate between such compositions as transcriptions and paraphrases. For Liszt, a transcription had to remain very close to the original source, whereas a paraphrase could display much more freedom, with the arranger being allowed a far greater range of modifications to the original.

Unfortunately, during the early years of the 20th century, with an increasing concern among musicologists for unedited Urtext original scores, the transcription as an art form became something of a dirty word among musical purists. Any musical composition that altered the composer’s original text was considered inferior and crude. Yet, as the eminent Liszt scholar Alan Walker (b. 1930) has pointed out, “There is a purely musical defense of arrangements that is so simple nobody ever thinks of it. You cannot tell, simply by listening, which is the arrangement and which is the original... If the arrangements really were a lower form of musical activity, why do they not reveal themselves for what they are from the moment they start to sound?”¹⁰ It is also conveniently forgotten that Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) himself made a significant number of transcriptions of music by his contemporaries. Fortunately, the ill-informed, narrow-minded hatred of the purists for transcriptions has strongly eroded, so that today transcriptions by such figures as Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924), Ignacy Friedman (1882–1948), Leopold Godowsky (1870–1938), Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953), Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943), and, of course, Liszt, are once more extremely valued by both performers and the public.

A significant number of Liszt’s compositions included in the present anthology are either transcriptions or else served as the bases for later transcriptions by him. Transcribing was in integral part of Liszt’s creative activity, and demonstrated a vital and unique part of his musical genius. Perhaps no other composer after Liszt has displayed such mastery over the art of transcription!

⁵ Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁹ *Music-Study in Germany*, pp. 205–206.

¹⁰ Alan Walker, “Liszt and the Schubert Song Transcriptions,” *Franz Liszt: The Schubert Song Transcriptions for Solo Piano. Series III: The Complete Schwanengesang*. (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), p. xiii.

About the Pieces in This Collection

Ehemals, from *Weihnachtsbaum*, S. 186/10 15

Ehemals (Old Times) is one of a set of 12 pieces under the title “Christmas Tree: 12 piano pieces—for the most part easy to play.” Liszt wrote two versions, one for solo piano and the other for one piano, four hands. He began composing them in 1874 during the time he was staying at the Villa d’Este at Tivoli, just outside Rome. After further revisions, the two versions were published in 1882 by Adolph Fürstner in Berlin. The set is dedicated to Daniela von Bülow, the daughter of Hans von Bülow, Liszt’s favorite pupil, and Liszt’s daughter Cosima. Some of the set contains arrangements of Christmas carols. *Ehemals*, however, is thought by many to evoke the memory of Liszt’s first meeting with Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, who had been Liszt’s lover since their meeting in the Ukraine in 1847.

Étude, Op. 6, No. 7; S. 136/7 20

According to Liszt, the 12 *Études*, Op. 6, were written in 1826, when he was age 13, then printed a year later by the French publisher Boisselot in Marseille as his first opus. A subsequent edition appeared around 1838, which was printed in Leipzig by Hofmeister, this time as Liszt’s Op. 6. Liszt dedicated the entire set to Lydie Garella. Little is known of Garella except that she played duets on the piano with him, gave him candy, and was a hunchback. In 1837 and 1851, Liszt wrote two huge extended versions of 11 of the 12 *Études* in the Op. 6 set. No. 7 became the 11th *Transcendental Étude* entitled *Harmonies du soir* (Evening Harmonies). This incredible growth from the youthful works of Op. 6 to the later *Transcendental Études* is one of the most remarkable musical transformations in the history of music.

Ich liebe dich, S. 542a (posth.) 24

Ich liebe dich (I Love Thee) is another of Liszt’s many transcriptions. It originally was a song by Liszt, which was written in 1857 and set to words by Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866). Liszt included the words in the piano score. The translation is as follows:

*I love thee, because I must;
I love thee, because I cannot do otherwise;
I love thee, following Heaven’s command;
I love thee, bound by a magic spell.*

*I love thee, as the rose her leafy bush;
I love thee, as the sun his bright beam;
I love thee, because thou art my life’s breath;
I love thee, because to love thee is my life.*

Étude

Franz Liszt (1811–1886)
Op. 6, No. 7; S. 136/7

Allegretto con molto espressione ♩ = 96 (a)

(p) dolce (sempre legato)

3

6

rit.

(a) The metronome indication is by Liszt. All indications for slurs and phrases are as in the original.

Marche de Rákóczy

Édition populaire pour piano
(Rákóczy March–Popular Edition for Piano)

Franz Liszt (1811–1886)

S. 244/15

Allegro deciso ed energico assai (♩ = 160–168)

1 3 1 3 2 4

ff *sf*

5

2 2 1 3 4 3 4

ff sempre

10

2 4 3 1 2 1 5 4 2 5 4 1 3 3

14

1 2 3 4 5 4 5

Six Consolations

No. 1 in E Major

Franz Liszt (1811–1886)
S. 172/1

Andante con moto (♩ = 92–96)

(p) dolce

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a measure number in a box at the beginning of the first staff. The key signature is E major (three sharps) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is 'Andante con moto' with a quarter note equal to 92-96 beats per minute. The dynamics are marked as *(p) dolce*. The score includes various musical notations such as chords, arpeggios, and fingerings.

System 1: Measures 1-3. The first staff has a 4-measure chord and a 3-measure chord. The second staff has a 1-5 fingering.

System 2: Measures 4-6. The first staff has a 5-4-1 fingering and a 2-3-1-4-5-4 fingering. The second staff has a 1-4 fingering.

System 3: Measures 7-9. The first staff has a 1-2 fingering. The second staff has a 2-5 fingering and a *p.* dynamic. The third staff has a 1-2-4 fingering.

System 4: Measures 10-12. The first staff has a 3-measure chord and a 3-measure chord. The second staff has a 1-3-2-5 fingering.

Ständchen

(Serenade)

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)
 Transcribed by Franz Liszt (1811–1886)
 S. 560/7

Tempo rubato (♩ = 69–72)

a (Pedale à chaque mesure)

6 **b** gli accompagnamenti sempre staccato e *pp*

pp *espressivo* *mp*

una corda

11 *(mp)* *pp*

tre corde *una corda*

16 *mf* *pp*

tre corde *una corde*

a Pedal at each measure.

b The accompaniment always staccato and pianissimo.