

Liszt's germinal motive in his Les Preludes.

1. Introduction

Franz Liszt used in his orchestral works (most important: the "Faust" and "Dante" symphonies and the thirteen Symphonic Poems), Berlioz's idea of connecting a leading theme with a character of his drama. In the "Faust Symphony," for example, the first movement presents in four themes a picture of Faust: his despair and loneliness (Lento), his strivings and hopes (Allegro agitato), his ideals (Andante), and his pride and energy (Grandioso). In the third, the devil's representative Mephistopheles appears and makes fun of Faust, an idea suggested by using in a distorted form the theme of Faust's ideals from the first movement.

Liszt thus makes the musical treatment of these themes follow the course of the story and secures a "thematic development". This we see clearly in such a work as his symphonic poem, "Les Preludes" (1856). The program here is from a poem of Lamartine beginning "What is our life but a series of Preludes to that unknown song of which death strikes the first solemn note? "Love," the poet goes on, "is the enchanted dawn of every life" but later, he says, comes some storm, some misfortune, which drives us to seek comfort in the peace of country life. From this we are roused by a call to war, to struggle and strife, and in this fight with the world we regain a feeling of our own power. Following the plan thus suggested, the composer divides his "poem" into six sections, thus:

- I. Introduction
- II. Love
- III. Storm
- IV. Country life
- V. War
- VI. Conclusion

2. Germinal motive

The most remarkable thing about the music itself is the way in which Liszt makes it all out of one musical idea, so called germinal motive. That is, this motive leads to several themes, which are moulded in such way that they get just the expression he needs. In fact we have several themes which can be explained in terms of one motive: themes of one family!

The germinal motive is a three note motive, to be seen as an interval progression of a descending second (which seems to function as a motive itself: see chapter 3, example f and chapter 4, example c) and an ascending fourth. This motive can be easily varied (permutation, retrograde, inversion and changing the intervals).

Germinal motive (and permutation B and some variants)

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The staff contains six measures of music, each starting with a different permutation of the germinal motive. Above the notes are numbers 1, 2, 3 indicating fingerings. Below the staff, the permutations are labeled B, B', and B''.

1 2 3 3 2 '1' 2 1 3 3 1 2 2 1 3 1 2 '3'

B B' B''

3. Relationship between the germinal motive and the themes in Liszt's Les Preludes

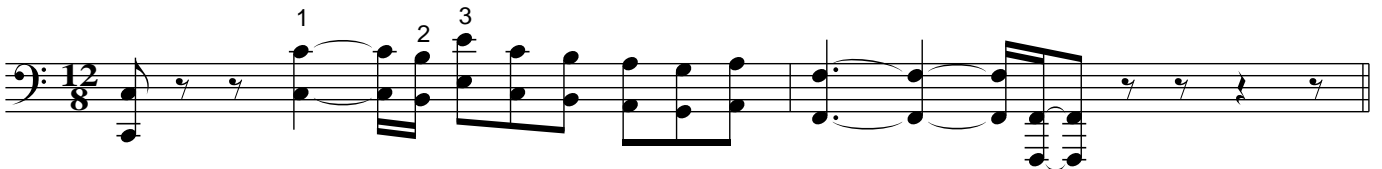
In the figures below I have set down the chief forms of these themes, noting the sections in which they occur. Let us run through them, admiring the skill with which they are adapted to all uses.

- I. (a). This passage, which opens the work, strikes at once the right mood of solemnity.
 - (b). The same motive forms the basis of a pompous, triumphant, majestic passage in the low strings and brass.
 - (c). The cellos sing a new theme, the second root-idea of the piece. In the fourth measure you will notice echoes of the germinal motive in the bass.
- II. (d). The "Love"-theme, richly orchestrated with horns, strings, and harp.
- III. (e). The germinal motive is so changed as to suggest the approaching storm (note the chromatic passages and sound-effect tricks (like a cinema experience)).
- IV. (f). A new melody, hinting at the peacefulness and charm of the country, associated with the freshness of spring. This is later combined with the "love"-theme (g).
- V. (h). Warlike trumpets and horns play another form of variant (c) and later variant (b).

(a) Andante



(b) Andante maestoso



(c)



(d)



The germinal motive is above used as melodic long distance structure

(e)

Musical notation for exercise (e) in bass clef, 6/8 time. It consists of a single line with four measures. The first measure has a whole rest. The second measure contains a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) with fingerings 1, 2, 3. The third measure contains a triplet of eighth notes (B4, C5, D5) with fingerings 1, 2, 3. The fourth measure contains a triplet of eighth notes (C5, B4, A4) with fingerings 3, 2, 1. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

(f)

Musical notation for exercise (f) in treble clef, 6/8 time. It consists of a single line with four measures. The first measure has a whole rest. The second measure contains a quarter note (G4) with a fermata. The third measure contains a triplet of eighth notes (A4, B4, C5) with fingerings 1, 2, 3. The fourth measure contains a quarter note (D5). The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#).

(g)

Musical notation for exercise (g) in treble and bass clefs, 6/8 time. It consists of two staves with four measures. The treble staff has chords: [G4, B4] in measure 1, [G4, B4, D5] in measure 2, [G4, B4, D5] in measure 3, and [G4, B4, D5] in measure 4. The bass staff has eighth notes: G4, A4, B4 in measure 1; G4, A4, B4 in measure 2; G4, A4, B4 in measure 3; G4, A4, B4 in measure 4. A dynamic marking 'f' is placed below the bass staff in the third measure. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#).

(h)

Musical notation for exercise (h) in treble clef, 4/4 time. It consists of a single line with four measures. The first measure has a whole note chord [G4, B4] with fingering 1. The second measure has a whole note chord [G4, B4, D5] with fingering 2. The third measure has a whole note chord [G4, B4, D5] with fingering 3. The fourth measure has a quarter note (G4) with fingerings 1, 2, 3. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#).

4. Other melodic forms of the germinal motive in Liszt's Les Preludes

Below some examples of the relation between the germinal motive and melodic material, that has no thematic quality.

a. modifying the interval structure (note the different rhythmic forms)

Example a shows three variations of the germinal motive in different rhythmic forms:

- m. 21: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. The motive is a quarter note followed by an eighth note, then a quarter note, and finally a quarter note. Fingerings 1, 2, 3 are indicated above the notes.
- m. 26: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. The motive is a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Fingerings 1, 2, 3 are indicated above the notes.
- m. 31: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. The motive is a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Fingerings 1, 2, 3 are indicated above the notes.
- m. 29: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. The motive is a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Fingerings 1, 2, 3 are indicated above the notes.
- m. 38-40: Bass clef, 12/8 time signature. The motive is a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Fingerings 1, 2, 3 are indicated above the notes.

b. germinal motive as accompaniment figure

Example b shows the germinal motive used as an accompaniment figure in three different contexts:

- m. 63: Bass clef, 12/8 time signature. The motive is a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Fingerings 1, 2, 3 are indicated above the notes.
- m. 60: Treble clef, 4/4 time signature. The motive is a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Fingerings 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 1, 1, 3, 2, 1, 2, 3, 2, 3, 2 are indicated above the notes.
- m. 131: Bass clef, 12/8 time signature. The motive is a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Fingerings 1, 2, 3, 3, 3, 1, 2, 3 are indicated above the notes.

c. germinal motive in reduced form

m. 91 147 m. 170

1 2 2 1

d. permutations of the germinal motive

m. 96 3? 3? 2 1

m. 140 3 2 2 1

m. 140 3 2 1 3 2 1 3 2 1

m. 118 1 2 3 1 2 3

e. simultaneous permutations of the germinal motive

m. 131 1? 2 1?

1 2 3 3 3

5. Conclusion

It can be stated that form and scale are by-products of Liszt's method. The use of technique of thematic change and interchange (in other words: the technique of melodic invention and development) is in the interest of both formal cohesion and programmatic symbolism.

Although form and program are well connected, from a historically and technically point of view, form features of the concertouverture with his sonataform can be found in "Les Preludes", in a with interpolated sections, modified way: introduction-exposition-development (m. 109-315 with an interpolated pastoral episode, m. 200)-reprise.

Studying the melodic derivations of Liszt, one might say that some transformations seem more "thought out" than natural. Nevertheless, such a method results in far greater musical interest than Berlioz's mere repetitions of his idée fixe, and in the hands of a Liszt and later Richard Strauss, it has produced some really fine works.

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