Liszt as Pioneer

by Aaron Copland

Everybody thinks he has the right to an opinion about Franz Liszt and his music. I can only recommend my own opinion tentatively because I admit to being dazzled by the man. As a composer, he has for me something of the same glamour he had for his contemporaries as pianist. His wizardry at the piano so overwhelmed audiences in his own day that they were clearly incapable of judging him soundly as a creator. The question is whether anyone can do that even now. To examine his list of compositions, if only superficially, is enough to give one a dizzy feeling. It would be a feat merely to listen consecutively to the prime examples of his production: the symphonies, symphonic poems, concertos, oratorios, the masses, the chamber music, the songs, the piano compositions large and small, not to mention the plethora of fantasies, arrangements, and transcriptions of the works of numerous other major and minor composers. How can anyone be expected to arrive at a balanced, critical estimate of such a man?

Nevertheless I freely confess to being won over, so to speak, in advance. There is something endlessly diverting about a musician who, like Berlioz, was to such a degree the embodiment of his period. After all, the nineteenth century, especially the Lisztian part of it, was the "juiciest" period in music. One needn't be a composer of the greatest ability in order to mirror the times most truthfully. Quite the contrary. Chopin, for example, was perhaps too elegant, Mendelssohn too polite, and Schumann too sweetly honest to reflect the seamier side of their epoch. It's from Liszt that one gets a sense of the fabulous aspect of that era.

His composer friends, Chopin and Schumann, despite their appreciation of the Hungarian's genius, thought Liszt a rather shocking figure; they accused him of cheapening their art and I suppose the accusation is not without justification. (One must remember, however, that he outlived both of them by more than a quarter of a century, and neither of them could have known the compositions that interest us most.) But the point is that what shocked them in Liszt is the very thing that fascinates us. It fascinates us because the qualities that Liszt had in abundancethe spectacular style, the sensuosity, the showmanship, the warmth and passion of his many-sided natureare exactly those qualities that are least evident in contemporary music. No wonder he intrigues us, and in a way that only one or two other musical figures of the nineteenth century can match.

There is another aspect of Liszt's personality that endears him to us. I am thinking, of course, of the enthusiasm expended upon the compositions of other composers, many of them young and obscure when first he came to know their work. Genius, as a rule, is too self-concentrated to waste much time on lesser men. But in Liszt we have the rule's exception. With rare perceptivity he was able to sense the mature composer in the embryonic stage. And this interest in the output of his colleagues, which undoubtedly had its origin in a character trait, in the end took on larger significance than Liszt himself may have realized. The French critic G. Jean-Aubry offers a good case for having us believe that it was Liszt who engendered one

of the most important of recent historical developments: the rise of nationalism as a musical ideal. "If modern Germany had a profound sense of justice" writes Jean-Aubry, "she would nourish a vigorous hatred for Liszt, for the destruction of German musical monopoly is in part his work." In a period when Brahms and Wagner were at the apogee of their careers, and in spite of Liszt's well-known championship of Wagner, Liszt was clearheaded enough to understand that new music could advance only if the hegemony of German music were weakened. To remember that fact makes one keenly aware of the forward-looking character of Liszt's own music.

The most advanced aspect of his own music is its harmonic daring. But, leaving this aside for the moment, I would say that the element that strikes one most forcibly, separating his music from that of all other nineteenthcentury composers, is its sonorous appeal. A keen ear will detect wide divergencies in "sound-pleasure" in the works of different composers. Laymen tend to take these divergencies for granted. But actually the type of sonorous appeal we take so much for granted the sonority chosen instinctively for its sheer beauty of sound is partly the invention of Liszt. No other composer before him understood better how to manipulate tones so as to produce the most satisfying sound texture ranging from the comparative simplicity of a beautifully spaced accompanimental figure to the massive fall of a tumbling cascade of shimmering chords. One might legitimately hold that this emphasis upon the sound-appeal of music weakens its spiritual and ethical qualities. Perhaps; but even so one cannot deny Liszt the role of pioneer in this regard, for without his seriously contrived pieces we would not have had the loveliness of Debussy or Ravel's textures or the langorous poems of Alexander Scriabine.

These essentially new sonorities were first heard at Liszt's piano recitals. The profusion of his works and their variety of attack are without parallel in piano literature. He quite literally transforms the piano, bringing out, not only its own inherent qualities, but its evocative nature as well: the piano as orchestra, the piano as harp (Un Sospiro), the piano as cimbalom (Hungarian Rhapsody No. 11) , the piano as organ, as brass choir, even the percussive piano as we know it (Danse Macabre) may be traced to Liszt's incomparable handling of the instrument. These pieces were born in the piano; they could never have been written at a table. (It is indicative that an intellectual leader of his generation, Ferruccio Busoni, famous composer and pianist in his own right, should have spent many years in preparing the definitive edition of Liszt's piano compositions.) The display, the bravura, the panache of Liszt's piano writing all this has been pointed out many times before, even a hundred years ago; the remarkable thing is that it has remained as true now as it was then.
On an equivalent plane of freshness and originality was Liszt's harmonic thinking. Even professional musicians tend to forget what we owe to Liszt's harmonic daring. His influence on Wagner's harmonic procedures has been sufficiently stressed, but not his uncanny foreshadowing of the French impressionists. One set of twelve piano pieces, rarely if ever performed, L'Arbre de Noel, and especially Cloches du soir from that set, might be mistaken for early Debussy. It is typical that although L'Arbre de Noel was written near the end of a long life it shows no lessening of harmonic invention. The scope of that invention can be grasped if we turn from the lush sonorities of another evening piece, Harmonies du soir, to Liszt's oratorio Christus. Here we enter an utterly opposed harmonic world, related to the bare intervallic feeling of the Middle Ages and the non-harmonic implications of Gregorian chant

startling premonitions of the interests of our own time. Throughout the length and breadth of Liszt's work we are likely to come upon harmonic inspirations: unsuspected modulations and chordal progressions touched upon for the first time. Moreover, his sense of "spacing" a chord is thoroughly contemporary: bell-like open sonorities contrasting sharply with the crowded massing of thunderous bass chords. It is not too much to say that Liszt, through his impact upon Wagner and Franck and Grieg and Debussy and Scriabine and the early Bartok, and especially the nationalist Russians headed by Moussorgsky, is one of the main sources of much of our present-day harmonic freedom.

I have left to the last Liszt's boldest accomplishment: the development of the symphonic poem as a new form in musical literature. The symphonic poem, as such, has had but a puny progeny in recent years. Composers look upon it as old-fashioned, demode. But we mustn't forget that in Liszt's day it was a burning issue. To the defenders of classical symphonic form it appeared that a kind of theatrical conspiracy, spearheaded by Berlioz and seized upon by Liszt and Wagner, was about to seduce pure music from its heritage of abstract beauty. The new hotheads, taking their keynote from Beethoven's Egmont Overture, and Pastoral Symphony, insisted that music became more meaningful only if it were literary in inspiration and descriptive in method. The programmatic approach took hold: from the literal treatment of romantic subject matter in the Liszt-Berlioz manner the idea was both broadened and narrowed to include the poetic transcription of natural scenes as in Debussy's La Mer, or the down-to-earth bickerings of marital life as in Strauss's Domestica. By the early i goo's it looked as if the classical symphony were to be discarded as an old form that had outlived its usefulness.

As it turned out, it is the traditional form of the symphony that is still very much alive, and the symphonic poem that is in the discard. But strange to say, this does not invalidate the importance of Liszt's twelve essays in that form, for their principal claim to historical significance is not in the fact of their being symphonic poems but in their structural novelty.

Here once again we see the Hungarian's freedom from conventional thinking, for he was the first to understand that descriptive music should properly invent its own form, independent of classical models. The problem, as Liszt envisioned it, was whether the poetic idea was able to engender a new form a free form; free, that is, from dependence upon formulas and patterns that were simply not apposite to its programmatic function. Form in music is a continuing preoccupation for composers because they deal in an auditory material that is by its very nature abstract and dangerously close to the amorphous. The development of type forms such as the sonata-allegro or fugue is a slow process at best; because of that, composers are naturally reluctant to abandon them. Liszt was a pioneer in this respect, for he not only relied on the power of his own instinctual formal feeling to give shape to his music, but he also experimented with the use of a single theme and its metamorphoses to give unity to the whole fabric. Both parts of Liszt's idea have deeply influenced contemporary music. The numberless sonatas that are not really sonatas but approaches to a freer form take their origin in Liszt's famous B-minor piano sonata; and the twelve-tone school itself, with its derivation of entire operas from the manipulation of a single "row" owes its debt to the pioneering of Franz Liszt.

Am I being too generous to old Abbe Liszt? If so, it is a generosity that is long overdue. Liszt has been the victim of a special stupidity of our own musical time: the notion that only the best, the highest, the greatest among musical masterworks is worthy of our attention. I have little patience with those who cannot see the vitality of an original mind at work, even when the work contains serious blemishes. For it would be foolish to deny that Liszt's work has more than its share of blemishes. How could he have imagined that we would not notice the tiresome repetitions of phrases and entire sections, long and short; the reckless overuse, at times, of the thematic material; the tasteless rehashing of sentimental indulgences? He was not beyond the striking of an attitude, and then filling out the monumental pose with empty gestures. He seems entirely at his ease only in a comparatively restricted emotional area: the heroic, the idyllic, the erotic, the demonic, the religious. These are the moods he evokes time after time. Moreover, he seemed capable of coping with no more than one mood at a time, juxtaposing them rather than combining and bringing them to fruition.

No, Liszt was not the perfect master. I will go so far as to admit that there are days when he seems quite intolerable. And then? And then one comes upon something like the two movements based on Lenau's Faust and is bowled over once again by the originality, the dramatic force, the orchestral color, the imaginative richness that carries all before it. The world has had greater composers than this man, no doubt, but the fact remains that we do him and ourselves a grave injustice in ignoring the scope of his work and the profound influence it has exerted on the contemporary musical scene.

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