

*poco rit.*  
*dimin.*

Ein wenig langsamer... sehr ruhig und gebunden  
Die Luft ist kühl und es dun - kelt,  
*sempre una corda*  
und ra - hig fließt der Rhein;  
der Gip - fel des Ber - ges fun - kelt

The simple tonic cadence at the end of the first phrase has an unexpected pathos. In addition, it later serves, after the melody is immediately repeated, to make the cadence on the mediant of C sharp major all the more voluptuous, and the sudden swerve to B flat minor / major more moving as well as more dramatic.

These are all mediant relationships, and Liszt's most successful harmonic surprises are largely restricted to such mediant shifts. (He is, in fact, much less daring than, say, Schubert in his large-scale harmonic planning.) He handled these mediant relationships with great mastery, never more so than in the last page of *Die Lorelei*, where the introduction returns in the original key of E minor but the principal melody reappears no longer in E but in G major. This is one example among many of a composer of the 1830s treating a minor key and its relative major as more or less the same key, but Liszt is here more subtle than most of his contemporaries and, indeed, more sophisticated than he generally showed himself; in an exquisite prolongation of the final phrase of the melody in the concluding G major section, the key of E, now major, reappears suddenly and quietly, only to dissolve back into G major:

*sempre legato*

*dolcissimo*  
*pp*  
*smorzando rit.*  
*a tempo*  
*dolce*

This brief recall of the initial tonality is a coloristic device here, one which suspends the musical motion for a few seconds before allowing a resolution. *Die Lorelei* is one of Liszt's finest conceptions, but it is only by considering it on its own terms, not by comparing it to Wagner, that we will learn to appreciate its quality and its depth.

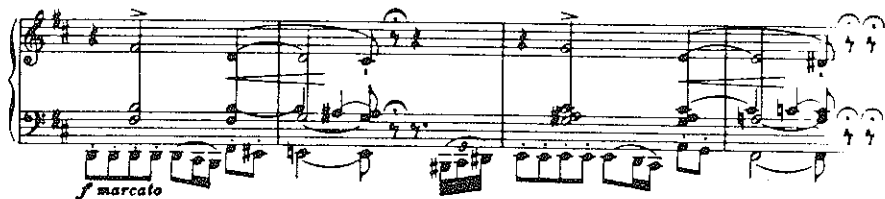
### *The Sonata: the distraction of respectability*

The Sonata for Piano in B Minor is perhaps the only work of Liszt to win almost unchallenged critical admiration, and it has seemed to the majority of critics to provide the touchstone for an evaluation of Liszt's genius. I hesitate

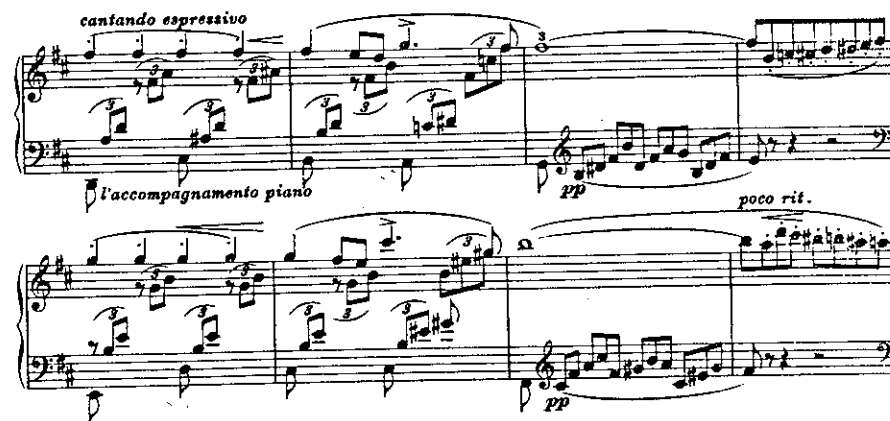
to disturb this near-unanimity, but the work—while an undoubted masterpiece—is neither flawless nor a truly representative achievement. Written in 1852, the Sonata in B Minor is a pivotal work between Liszt's early and late style. With the first "Mephisto" Waltz, it is the only piece to be conceived entirely after 1850 to remain a basic part of the piano repertory (although at least two beautiful late works merit equal respect: the Variations on Bach's "Weinen, Klagen," and the "Jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este"). Because of its seriousness and originality of form the Sonata is often considered Liszt's greatest achievement; in both respects it seems to me slightly overvalued. It contains a certain amount of bombast and sentimental posturing mixed with its finest passages. Both the formal structure (four movements—allegro, adagio, scherzo, and finale—compressed into a single sonata movement with exposition, development, and recapitulation) and the technique of thematic transformation that holds it together were worked out with equal elegance some years before by Schumann in the Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra (later to become, with very little alteration, the first movement of his Piano Concerto). In fact, the transformation of themes to create successive movements of different emotional character was used by many composers between 1825 and 1850, including very minor figures like Moscheles.

The variation finale of Beethoven's Symphony no. 9 was a model for both Schumann and Liszt, as Beethoven here combined four-movement and single-movement sonata forms: an allegro exposition, a scherzo as a second theme with fugal development, an adagio slow movement, and a finale as recapitulation or return to the opening key and tempo. An equally influential model was Schubert's *Wanderer* Fantasy, in which the four connected movements make no pretense to a single form, although the final fugue returns both to the tonality of the opening pages and to a similar rhythm and character: the themes of Schubert's initial Allegro reappear transformed as slow movement, scherzo, and final fugue. The B Minor Sonata clearly pays homage to Schubert's Fantasy, but the example of Beethoven enabled Liszt to create a form tighter and more coherent than Schubert's.

The art by which Liszt and Schubert were able to transform a melody from its allegro character into the main theme of a slow movement and then of a scherzo has been much admired. A dramatic phrase towards the beginning of the B Minor Sonata



turns up later with an entirely different character as a lyrical theme of a "second group":



It does not, in fact, take much imagination to use a theme this way—essentially it is a less rigorous version of the traditional variation technique in which the main theme reappears with the same contour and even the same pitches, but with a different rhythm and a much altered expressive character. The skill does not lie in the transformation but in the dramatic effectiveness of the change of character. It is not a very subtle technique and must be distinguished both from the sophistication with which Schumann can at once hide and reveal the opening motto of the *Dauidsbündlertänze* throughout all eighteen pieces, and from the profound working out of a motif that enables Beethoven to make all of the movements of a long work appear as if they were developed from the same material—for example, to permute the opening of the Quartet in C sharp Minor, op. 131



into the beginning of the finale:



In Liszt, we hear a melody played two different ways: in Beethoven, the generative energy of tonal material is revealed and exploited. The greatness of Liszt's achievement lies in the dramatic transformation of character.

Other aspects of the thematic structure of the sonata are, however, more remarkable and original: the admiration for Liszt's thematic transformations

may be misplaced, but it is not unmerited. The combination of them is extraordinarily subtle. The opening of the Allegro, for example,

Allegro energico.

The image shows the first system of the Allegro movement. It consists of two staves: a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate bass staff. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. The tempo is marked 'Allegro energico.' The notation includes various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

is intricately entwined a page later with the dramatic phrase quoted earlier

sempre *f* ed agitato

marcato

The image shows a musical phrase in a grand staff. The tempo is marked 'sempre f ed agitato' and the articulation is 'marcato'. The music features a prominent descending scale in the right hand and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand.

Even more profound is the tendency of all of the themes of the sonata to turn into one another. This fluidity of thematic identity is perhaps the greatest sign of Liszt's mastery. The dramatic phrase, for example,

The image shows a short musical motif in a single staff, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes with a descending contour.

is hidden—deformed and truncated—within the melody of the slow movement which acts as a development section:

The image shows a musical score for a slow movement. The melody in the right hand of the grand staff contains a hidden motif that is a deformed and truncated version of the dramatic phrase shown in the previous block. The tempo is slower and the dynamics are softer.

At the end of the slow movement Liszt makes the relation manifest, and then reveals the kinship of this phrase with still another theme of the work, the descending scale of the opening bars:

espress.

dolcissimo

pp

ppp

ppp

The image shows a musical score for the end of the slow movement. It consists of two staves: a grand staff and a separate bass staff. The tempo is slower and the dynamics are softer. The music features a prominent descending scale in the right hand and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The tempo is marked 'espress.' and the dynamics are marked 'dolcissimo', 'pp', and 'ppp'.

Three different themes are shown here as springing clearly from a common source: one motif slips easily into the others.

This fluidity suggests a radical difference between a work of Beethoven and even the most formally structured work of Liszt like the B Minor Sonata, in terms of motivic development and thematic transformation. In Beethoven's technique of development, a motif is made stable or unstable by exploiting its harmonic and rhythmic functions according to its place within the large-scale form. Liszt's thematic transformations, on the other hand, are most often radically different ways of playing the same theme, changes of performance style that impose dramatic changes of character. In Beethoven's Quartet in A Minor, op. 132, for example, the first appearance of this motif of the main theme



firmly defines the tonality of A minor; the second appearance



destabilizes the harmony to suggest a movement towards F, which is confirmed seventeen bars later by an expansion of the original motif and an augmentation of its rhythm:



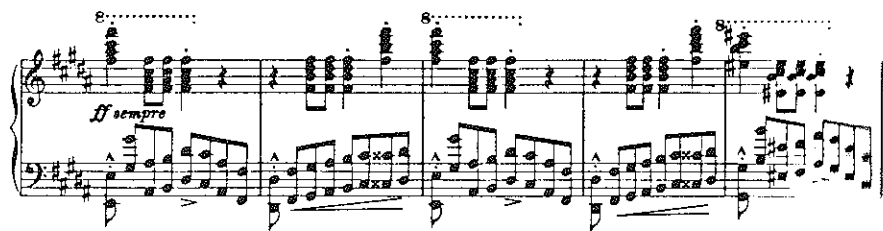
This is less unstable than the second version, but without the simple firmness of the first. The changes enforce the large harmonic form and the traditional ideals of a sonata movement.

In the various appearances of the main theme of the Liszt sonata, however, the heroic Allegro opening quoted above is transformed into the sweetly expressive:

the scherzando, marked *non legato* to achieve the light tone color:

the dramatic:

and the triumphant:



The functions of the large structure, while present, are not as significant as the changes of character and style; and the themes are transformed less in response to the demands of harmonic form than as a way of following a dramatic scenario, requiring dramatic contrasts of style.

The Sonata in B Minor is not program music, but by its manipulation of clearly defined early nineteenth-century genres, it constructs something like a narrative (the fluid relations among the themes display their effectiveness here). The mysterious and sinister opening and the satanic statement of the main theme quoted above lead, after a powerful stretto, to the hero as Lucifer; the satanic theme then turns into a brilliant demonstration of virtuosity:

and the section is concluded with a climax of religious exaltation:

This chorale may appear to be a totally new theme, but in a later development its second half is identified with the opening bars of the Allegro:

The musical score on page 488 consists of three systems of piano and bass staves. The first system is marked 'crescendo molto' and features dense, complex harmonic textures with many repeated notes. The second system continues this texture with some melodic lines in the upper register. The third system shows a continuation of the complex harmonic language.

In this transformation, the religious security of the original chorale is endowed with a sense of despair. Liszt was always a deeply and sincerely religious man, but the religion of the mid-nineteenth century was less that of the Gothic cathedral than of the Gothic novel.

The first appearance of the religious mode is followed by a deeply felt recitative, and then given a sentimental turn derived from Italian opera, and even a somewhat erotic cast that was by no means foreign to the religious yearnings of the time:

The musical score on page 488 consists of two systems of piano and bass staves. The first system is marked 'dolce' and features a more melodic and lyrical line. The second system is marked 'poco rall.' and features a more complex harmonic texture with some melodic lines in the upper register.

The repeated notes are an operatic trait imported from Italy, but the alternation of the harmonies of E minor and B flat major (a diabolical tritone apart) is a pure invention of Liszt's. He uses it for its exotic color (the B flat major chord is clearly a substitute for the more obvious B minor), and for this reason can only repeat it. The motif here



recalls the main theme,



and is another example of Liszt's ability to deform a sharply defined motif into a less determinate contour, so that each theme can suggest earlier and later ones.

The combination of brimstone and incense is a heady perfume, and, as we have seen, there is more than a whiff of it in the exposition of the B Minor Sonata. The different characters of the diabolical, the heroic, the religious, and the erotic are as necessary to an understanding of this work without a program as they are to Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. The fugue—part scherzo, part opening of a recapitulation and finale—turns the main theme into an exercise in the macabre:

The musical score on page 488 consists of three systems of piano and bass staves. The first system is marked 'Allegro energico.' and features a more complex harmonic texture with some melodic lines in the upper register. The second system continues this texture with some melodic lines in the upper register. The third system shows a continuation of the complex harmonic language.

The sonata was originally intended to end with a statement of triumph. In a magnificent revision Liszt returned to the religious mode with its erotic over-



tones. The most remarkable inspiration is a surprise cadential movement into a mournful gray despair with no brilliance:

*poco a poco rit.*

*Allegro moderato.*

*p sotto voce*

This is a parallel to the end of Nicholas Lenau's *Don Juan*, the inspiration for Richard Strauss's tone poem, which has a similar effect at the end. Liszt, however, follows it with an effect of religious absolution and a brief glimpse of heaven:

*Lento assai.*

*un poco marcato*

*pp*

*ppp*

The last statements of the theme, a final effort at life, are resolved by the celestial harmonies and then the single octave in the deepest register, a laconic sign of death.

A literal and naive interpretation is inescapable. The source of Liszt's Sonata is not only Beethoven and Schubert but Byron (above all the Byron of *Manfred* and *Childe Harold*), the popular Gothic novel, and the sentimental religious poetry of Lamartine. Even the saccharine religious art of the style known as Sainte-Sulpice plays a role in some of the most remarkable pages of the Sonata. If the musical content is sometimes undistinguished, reflecting a poetic content either inflated or all too commonplace, the treatment is always masterly and deeply imaginative. Liszt could not avoid an occasional vulgarity of style, and he was unable to exploit this by irony as Schumann did; he succumbed to its attractions partly because he understood and appreciated them, but it is clear that he was trying in the Sonata to avoid the flashier elements of vulgarity, to attain the sublime. Unfortunately we are, like Liszt, still saddled with an aesthetic that admits works in sonata form as sublime, but not etudes or "characteristic" pieces—short, idiosyncratic works like the fragments in Schumann's *Carnaval* or the landscape pieces which are among Liszt's most distinctive creations.

#### *The invention of Romantic piano sound: the Etudes*

It was with the etude and the characteristic piece that Liszt in the 1830s achieved one of the greatest revolutions of keyboard style in history. Most of Liszt's compositions for piano during that time were collected in five great sets, which changed considerably in format and character over the years in various editions: the Transcendental Etudes, the Paganini Etudes, and the three parts of the *Album d'un voyageur*—Switzerland, Italy, and Hungary. The Hungarian section later became the Hungarian Rhapsodies, and the first two parts of *Album d'un voyageur* became the two books of the *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage); the Italian section acquired an appendix, called *Venice and Naples*, and many years later a third book (mostly Roman) was added.

The least respectable side of Liszt is to be found in the Hungarian Rhapsodies: even more than the opera fantasies, this is what has given him a bad reputation, and it is from the fame of these works that his most earnest admirers feel that he must be rescued. Let us choose a passage from the central part of the tenth Rhapsody in which one cannot speak of thematic mastery or of daring harmonic innovation. The harmonics are banal, the melodies almost nonexistent: