

Liszt's *Les Preludes*

As I searched for an understanding of *Les Preludes* in various sources concerning Liszt, it began to astound me what a great creative force Franz Liszt was. His innovative presence can be tracked all across the musical medium. He brought brilliant new technical innovations to the piano; he invented modern conducting (although he was not remembered for this); he created new dynamic ranges for musical expression, and on and on.

Thus, by the time I got around to his symphonic poems, I already saw Liszt in a new admirable light. Liszt was a bold creator, always asking more from his art than what was already at hand. Despite any of the so-called flaws evident in Liszt's symphonic poems, it can not be denied that he was a powerful creative presence and that any inconsistencies should be seen as a part of the beauty of bravely seeking after creative expression.

Liszt was born in 1811 in Hungary. Liszt was a life-long patriot of Hungary and his music is heavily influenced by these Hungarian roots. By the age of six it was already very apparent that Liszt was a child prodigy. After teaching piano for several years, Liszt began touring as a piano performer. (Walker, 14: 756) Liszt was greatly influenced by the violin virtuoso Paganini to try and perfect his piano playing. The incredible pianistic technical innovations of Liszt were not accomplished without hours and hours of piano exercises. (Sachs, 35) People had never seen someone as technical accomplished on the piano. Thus, Lisztomania ensued. Some people even say that Liszt invented the modern rock star fan frenzy. It's really Liszt (and his long hair) that popularized piano concerts. (Walker, 14: 764)

After Liszt established himself as one of the greatest piano players of his day, he retired from the concert circuit to be the Court Kapellmeister at the Weimar Theatre. He wanted to do more than be a performer, he wanted to concentrate more on creating his own music. Taking the position in the small German town was a great financial step backwards, and popularly disapproved of, which just goes to show Liszt's determination and need to develop his revolutionary ideas in music. Unfortunately, Liszt's vast popularity as a pianist greatly overshadowed the enormous other accomplishments that he would go on to achieve in his 70 some years. Liszt bore the brunt of the musical innovators of his time simply because he had become such a popular figure on the piano. His popularity later proved to be the curse of his composing career as critics tore into the public figure. (Walker, 393)

For much of the 1853-54 season at the Weimar Theatre, Liszt took time away from his duties to complete 4 symphonic poems: Festklänge, Orpheus, Les Preludes, and Tasso. (Walker 227) These pieces developed out of overtures and dissipated sonata pieces. Liszt was totally new to writing for symphonies. Liszt had to rehearse the pieces several times amidst writing them to develop his ear for all the instruments at his command. (Walker, 270) Liszt also employed the help of young composers to help him in developing his symphonic poems. (Watson, 98)

The symphonic poem was an extension in many ways of where 19th century music was already heading. This innovation of Liszt's was on the vanguard of musical composition for the times.

One way in which the symphonic poem was a natural evolution of the contemporary music is evident in the desire of 19th century Romantics to relate music to the world outside, instead of to God or other abstractions. The Romantic sentiments were among the earth, far less

lofty or aloof than the sentiments strived for by Bach or Handel in their absolute music.

(MacDonald, 24: 802)

The symphonic poem was borne from the genre of program music, or “music of a narrative or descriptive kind” (Scruton, 20: 396). This music is supposed to center itself upon depicting some kind of subject, much like a painting. Ideally, in every musical gesture, the subject is to be considered first. Liszt said: “In program music...the return, change, modification, and modulation of the motifs are conditioned by their relation to a poetic idea...All exclusively musical considerations, though they shouldn't be neglected, have to be subordinated to the action of the given subject.” (Scruton, 20: 397)

Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony was an important development and influence for programmatic music. The piece depicted an experience in a rural setting during which a storm comes through. Thus, the piece, much like Les Preludes, is shaped around a metamorphosing emotional story. (Scruton, 20: 398) Berlioz wrote his *Symphonie fantastique* using this similar technique to express the pursuit of a woman. Berlioz's piece also subjected his motive through an emotional journey. Berlioz used a melody or motive to represent the heroine of the story. This melody was called the *idée fixe* and was transformed throughout the movements of the piece. (MacDonald, 24: 802) These pieces were important influences upon Liszt.

Program music not only melded literature with music, but the depiction of paintings and ideas with music as well. Blending literature and music had become a growing trend. This concept of unifying artistic mediums was called *Gesamthunstwerk*. This was an important ideal of the Romantic movement: breaking barriers and uniting the creative spirit of the different arts. (Taylor, 122) Liszt was a prolific reader and drew upon this wealth of literary knowledge for his symphonic poems. Liszt was also a writer himself.

Liszt's symphonic poems opened up the concept of program music to a great degree. The music of the symphonic poems was not so much of a narrative presence as it was a depictive tool. Liszt said: "the programme has no other end than to make some preliminary allusion to the psychological motives that have impelled the composer to create his work and that he has sought to embody in it." (Watson, 266) Liszt's symphonic poems ran the spectrum of general subjects such as Festklänge (Festive Sounds), to very specific literary protagonists like Prometheus.

The form of symphonic poems was seemingly inevitable as well. 19th century composers were beginning to integrate musical movements, like in Schubert's Fourth Symphony or Mendelssohn's Scottish Symphony. Liszt developed this trend entirely and completely integrated the music into one movement. Thus, Liszt's symphonic poems "display the logic of symphonic thought, in one movement." (MacDonald, 24: 803) This gave the composer much greater flexibility in time and form.

While there is a continuous form in symphonic poems, the music also has distinctive sections of their own tempo and presence. For example, Les Préludes changes from common time to 12/8 to 9/8 to 12/8 and so on. The keys change fluidly also, from C to E to C to A, etc. Thus, the piece shifts around an emotional focus using time and harmony fluidly to do so. Throughout the pieces a motive is transformed to express different sentiments inherent in the program of the piece. (Huneker, 107) This thematic metamorphosis is central to what makes the Les Préludes such a successful piece, it provides the backbone for this new symphonic form. (Watson, 98)

Many people consider Liszt to be an important contributor to the use of transformation of a theme. Because of the open structure of a symphonic poem, the manipulation of the motive, or theme, became more integral to the development and meaning of the piece than it would be

otherwise. Besides abandoning organization by movements of symphonies, *Les Preludes* is also too short of a piece to be considered a symphony.

Opera music had traditionally been considered the highest form of music. Instrumental music was beginning to challenge that by expanding its' meaning and abilities. No longer was instrumental music so singular in meaning; the Romantic Movement broke open new doors in musical expression. Instrumental music could depict the subjects of the world that vocal music had been used to depict. The literary connotations of program music helped music access a greater context than it had before

Liszt knew that people liked to attach stories to instrumental music and believed that this could get in the way of their understanding of the piece. For Liszt, keeping the subject in mind was essential to understanding the piece of music, especially since the piece was supposed to be entirely derived from the subject. The context of the music was so important to Liszt that he wrote a preface to all 12 of his symphonic poems. (Walker, 300)

Les Preludes became the most successful piece from the 12 symphonic poems. It was the only one to become a part of the standard classical repertory. Liszt claimed that *Les Preludes* were inspired after the French poet Alfonse-Marie Lamartine's "*Meditations Poetiques*". However, the actual history of the piece raises doubts to Liszt having really based the music on this particular poem. In fact, the preface to the piece doesn't even include the poem, but rather only contains a grandiose paragraph written by Liszt himself. Of all the symphonic poems, *Les Preludes* has the most dubious extra-musical associations. (Watson, 266)

Les Preludes was originally an instrumental introduction to a choral work called *Les quatre elements*, which was based on works of the French poet Joseph Autran. After several years, this introduction developed in to the symphonic poem *Les Preludes*. However, Liszt insisted that *Les*

Preludes had nothing to do with Autran, but rather was entirely inspired by Lamartine. But, the actual piece bears neither Autran's poem or Lamartine's poem in the preface. (Svedja)

"Meditations Poetiques" is not one poem but actually a collection of poems by Lamartine. There are 30 different poems within the piece making the "Meditations Poetiques" very lengthy. The piece consists of "a series of contrasted warlike and pastoral episodes" much like the design of the Les Preludes. (Watson, 265) Some sources greatly discredit the relationship of Les Preludes with Lamartine's poem, suggesting that Liszt attached the relationship as an afterthought. The critics of the time were aware of all this and some of them lambasted Liszt for artificiality. (Watson, 266) Given the history of the piece I sympathize with this perspective. However, it is important to note that this was in fact very characteristic of the way that Liszt worked. He would make an initial sketch and develop it over years, continually remaking it until finally publishing it. For example, the principal theme of his first piano concerto was made in the 1830's, but the concerto wasn't completed until 1849. It was then reworked, performed in 1853, reworked once more, and finally published in 1857! (Taylor, 119)

Some sources analyze the music in terms of the preface written by Liszt himself. I found the preface to be very fitting of the piece in some regards.

The preface heading reads: "Les Preludes/ After Lamartine's 'Meditations Poetiques'". Below the heading is printed Liszt's writing:

"What is life but a series of preludes to that unknown hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death? Love is the enchanted dawn of all existence; but what fate is there whose first delights of happiness are not interrupted by some storm, whose fine illusions are not dissipated by some mortal blast, consuming its altar as though by a stroke of lightning? And what cruelly wounded soul, issuing from one of these tempests,

does not endeavor to solace its memories in the calm serenity of rural life? Nevertheless, man does not resign himself for long to the enjoyment of that beneficent warmth which he first enjoyed in Nature's bosom, and when 'the trumpet sounds the alarm' he takes up his perilous post, no matter what struggle calls him to its ranks, that he may recover in combat the full consciousness of himself and the entire possession of his powers."

(Huneker 120)

The Romantic themes expressed in Lamartine's work echo in Liszt's piece. Lamartine was one of the early Romantic poets. And "Meditations poetiques", published in 1820, was a work that was an important progenitor of the movement. Some of the shared sentiments of Les Preludes and "Meditations Poetiques" are the expansion and empowerment of man's own individual nature, seeing the divine in everything, disquiet in the presence of great problems of human destiny, deep and serious love, intimate communion with nature, and dreamy melancholy. (Svedja) Liszt was, of course, one of the chief proponents of the Romantic Movement in music.

Les Preludes, like other symphonic poems, wraps itself around a principal motive. This motive is almost like the embodiment of some protagonist. The motive is three notes "that has both a rhythmic and melodic shape." (Grout 555) There is this feeling throughout the piece of a protagonist overcoming a lot of minor chords in his/her life. This type of theme is common in Liszt's symphonic poems. He seemed to identify with a character striving against odds and in the end, succeeding.

The piece begins with only two plucked notes in the strings and slowly and quietly builds with emergence. The theme is suggested in a minor key in the double basses. A

passage modulates chromatically several times before reaching major harmony. The beginning climaxes as the horns become prominent and majestic and the strings ascend and descend over and over carrying the music on a triumphant gallop. When the strings begin to ascend and descend the music is in 12/8 helping to give it the rising feel.

The music pauses, and the cellos play through a variation of the theme with a pastoral feeling of warmth and calm. This calm passage modulates several times and goes through different time signature. Eventually, the soft passage fades and again the time signature changes. A descending and ascending pattern emerges in rumbling strings: “but what fate is there whose first delights of happiness are not interrupted by some storm”. The use of a descending and ascending figure is prevalent throughout this piece. It is a very effective way of manipulating moods for the piece. At times the figure can be exciting or soothing or lulling. The “storm” builds and climaxes again with the horns and a repeating descending and ascending figure in the strings.

The music once again becomes somewhat of a pastoral passage as the theme is again transformed. Eventually “when `the trumpet sounds the alarm’ he takes up his perilous post, no matter what struggle calls him to its ranks, that he may recover in combat the full consciousness of himself and the entire possession of his powers”. The horns call out and the final “movement” of the piece ensues in which the principal theme is given full embodiment. Tympanis enter the score and the full orchestra builds to the end. The music has a feeling of great triumph and victory, as though our protagonist indeed finds “full consciousness of himself and the entire possession of his powers” by the end of the piece.

When the symphonic poems were first performed they were greatly attacked by the conservative critics of the time. Liszt even commanded from his students that they not play his works in concert. He knew that any connection to his name that the critics could draw would doom his students to rejection. The symphonic poems were very new and challenging for audiences of the time. The pieces were also demanding of the contemporary orchestras. Liszt wrote a preface to his published symphonic poems that asked composers to “spend time communicating the subtleties of color, tempo, rhythm, accent, balance, contrast, and the art of transition.” (Watson, 93)

Liszt recognized the inaccessibility of the new music. He chastised one conductor for playing *Les Preludes* after Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*. Liszt said that “unless one intends to sacrifice new works, which demand greater attention from audience and players alike, the natural order is to place the symphonies of Beethoven, Mozart, or Haydn at the end of the concert.” (Walker, 270) Critics would simply not recognize Liszt as a valid composer; they seemed bent upon pigeonholing him as a performer.

Les Preludes is the only symphonic poem by Liszt that has survived to date. That could, in part, be blamed on the relentless conservative critics that shaped public opinion of the time. However, the ideas behind the symphonic poem have continued to influence composers throughout the years such as Camille Saint-Saens, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, and Richard Strauss. In Russian, Bohemia and France, the symphonic poem was used to express growing nationalistic ideas. (MacDonald , 24: 804-805)

The symphonic poem was used until the early 20th century after which it was, in essence, abandoned. The composers of 20th century music began to reject Romantic ideals.

Music, and art in general, became more abstract. Also, the matching of literature and music is in some respects, fundamentally very difficult. Literature has a far more linear and forward-moving structure than music. Music is much more cyclical and repetition based.

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