

The Fantastic Liszt: Reading Character

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He is here, the modern Homer, whom Germany, Hungary and France, the three greatest nations, claim as their native child... he is here, the mad, beautiful, ugly, enigmatic, terrible, and often very childish child of his time, the gigantic dwarf.

Heinrich Heine, 1844¹

Liszt is an error that answers to no correction.

Susan Bernstein, 1998²

The idea of applying the characteristics and tropes of fantastic literature to the analysis of musical works has recently emerged as a new stream of musicology. As in literature, the musical fantastic provides a context in which to interpret “something which seems to stand outside the laws of our rational world,”³ and gives meaning to moments of disunity or uncertainty within a text, or as experienced by the reader/listener. Bearing this in mind then, regardless of its medium, the fantastic allows for a commentary on and subversion of the status quo. In addition to its function as this linguistic tool – giving critics a vocabulary with which to respond to and analyse breaks from rationality within a text – the fantastic also serves as a rhetorical framework. Borrowing and expanding upon the established critical discourse of fantastic literature, the musical fantastic ultimately provides a structure in which revolutionary, even “irrational” works can find acceptance, understanding, and praise. The fantastic therefore is a significant part both of the design and reception of Romantic art.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, as artists, authors, and musicians moved away from

¹ Quoted in Susan Bernstein, *Virtuosity of the Nineteenth Century: Performing Music and Language in Heine, Liszt, and Baudelaire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 66.

² *Ibid*, 109.

³ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25.

Enlightenment values and placed greater emphasis on imagination and the emotions, the status quo began to experience a destabilisation that would continue throughout much of the following century. In music, the “rational laws” accepted and upheld to that point (such as the tonic/dominant primacy, sonata form opening movements, and expected standards of instrumental ability) were supplanted by several new developments: harmonic ambiguity, formal disruption (and the emergence of new forms such as the symphonic poem), and spectacular new levels of instrumental prowess. Contrasted with the aesthetics of the Classical period, it is easy to imagine how audiences would have experienced feelings of Todorov’s “hesitation” when faced with these developments.⁴ And yet, far from the traditional negative connotations of such an action, hesitation itself is highly valued – necessary even – by the fantastic.⁵ It has become a positive response, and a reflection of how the fantastic provides the means to undermine traditional, rational principles. This semantic reversal is another distinct ability of the fantastic, and its power to flip the meanings of certain signifiers will be returned to later.⁶

Analysis conducted in the vein of the musical fantastic will either focus on the pertinent elements of the work’s program (if an explicit program is present), or upon fantastic aspects of the music itself, which are conveyed by a series of signifiers: certain intervals, chords and harmonic progressions, particular orchestrations, quotations, forms (or lack thereof), and so forth. A combination of these two modes is also possible, as they often work in tandem to clarify each other. However, this fantastic lens has thus far been largely focused upon the interpretation of texts, first literary and

⁴ See Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 25. “The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. . . The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.”

⁵ See Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 33. Here Todorov lists hesitation on the part of the reader, hesitation as experienced by a character, and thirdly, the text being neither allegorical nor poetic as the three criteria of the fantastic. However, he clarifies that “these three requirements do not have equal value. The first and the third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled.”

⁶ Not all music belonging to the Romantic period can be conceived of as fantastic, although both movements share much in common and a majority of fantastic music was written within this timeframe.

now musical. With the exception of the “demonic” Paganini, around whom some fantastic discourse already exists, there is yet to develop a sustained exploration of the real-world fantastic figures who embody the fantastic. In other words, whilst we greatly understand the concept of fantastic texts, there is still a distinct lack of framework in which to place people such as Hector Berlioz, Lord Byron, Robert Schumann and Franz Liszt.

Franz Liszt’s compositions are commonly discussed in the context of the musical fantastic, owing largely to their wild virtuosity and the high incidence of extramusical programs among them. Yet, despite the ample opportunity that Liszt’s music provides for readings of a fantastic nature, the fantastic aspects of his character, personality and performances are rarely discussed. Liszt has variously been attached epithets ranging from divine to diabolical, violent to tender, sublime to vulgar, and undoubtedly supernatural, while the fantastic itself has never been specifically designated to him. Susan Bernstein in *Virtuosity of the Nineteenth Century: Performing Music and Language in Heine, Liszt, and Baudelaire* skirts closest in enlisting “Romanticism” to explain Liszt’s personal incoherence, although this is far too broad a definition.⁷ Just as Todorov dismisses the *supernatural* as a substitute for the fantastic,⁸ Romanticism, stretching from Beethoven to Berg, whilst undeniably a part of Liszt, is insufficient alone to fully rationalise his lacunae. Building upon and refining Bernstein’s designation, this paper therefore proposes a close study of Liszt’s life, concentrating primarily on his virtuoso years (1835–

⁷ See Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 116. “Traditionally, Liszt’s personal incoherence is rendered comprehensible as it is enlisted to elucidate the general incoherence between whole and part, general and particular, popularised as ‘Romanticism.’ Indeed, Romanticism is the unity constantly called in the explain Liszt, the unity that refigures Liszt the deviant as Liszt the originary exemplar.”

⁸ See Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 34. “in the fantastic texts, the author describes events which are not likely to occur in everyday life. We might indeed characterise such events as *supernatural*, but the supernatural, though a literary category, of course, is not relevant here. We cannot conceive a genre which would regroup all works in which the supernatural intervenes and which would thereby have to accommodate Homer as well as Shakespeare, Cervantes as well as Goethe. The supernatural does not characterise works closely enough, its extension is much too great.” [italics in original]

47),⁹ through the fantastic lens, applying the central fantastic tropes of subversion and liminality to a reading of his biography and reception metanarratives during this time period. The abilities of the fantastic to invert the connotations of certain eighteenth century signifiers will also be explored, as they reveal how Liszt was able to break down previous notions of taste and aesthetic in his rise to fame. Assessing and analysing this key phase of Liszt's career against these core fantastic themes reveals a more subtly nuanced picture of the artist than previously thought, gives insight into the factors of his unprecedented success, and provides us with new tools in understanding his complex character. In addition, it proves the further viability of inter-disciplinary borrowing of interpretive methods, as well as broadening the media through which the fantastic discourse can occur.

Liszt and the Fantastic

The fantastic as a concept is notoriously difficult to pin down. Beyond the basic tenets set out by Tzvetan Todorov in his seminal interpretive work *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*,¹⁰ nearly every addition to the literature provides a new, custom built definition of the fantastic. For Rosemary Jackson, the allure of the fantastic lies in its ambiguity, and in turn the freedoms it offers. Writing in her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Jackson states:

Its association with imagination and with desire has made it an area difficult to articulate or to define, and indeed the 'value' of fantasy has seemed to reside in precisely this resistance to definition, in its 'free-floating' and escapist qualities.¹¹

She then goes on to explore the links between desire, escapism and subversion:

⁹ Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14.

¹⁰ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 25–44.

¹¹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1.

Fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent.'¹²

Jackson thus considers the fantastic to be an expression of subversion, in the sense that it struggles against its social context, challenges and undermines the established order, and gives voice to the Other.¹³

A combination of Todorov's and Jackson's conceptions of the fantastic is most useful in application against Liszt, and is more successful in unlocking his identity than either definition alone. It is clear in reading reports of his concerts that audiences experienced Todorov's hesitation and even apprehension upon first encountering the pianist.¹⁴ Indeed, it often seemed that he presented a supernatural aura, with caricatures variously depicting him with bestial (or celestial) undertones, as a conjuror or wizard, and sometimes even with more than 10 fingers.¹⁵ Liszt's seemingly effortless magnetism and allure to women can also be included within this group. From Jackson, we are given two further clarifications of the fantastic: value can be derived from our

¹² Jackson, *Fantasy*, 4.

¹³ José Monleón provides a contradictory reading: "the fantastic played exactly the opposite role [to that of subversion]: that is, the defense of the status quo and the preservation of economic order. If anything, it served precisely to help modify hegemonic discourse in order to justify the survival of bourgeois society, a fact that also explains why the fantastic appeared only after the bourgeois had consolidated its power." See José Monleón, *A Specter is Haunting Europe: A Sociohistoric Approach to the Fantastic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 14.

¹⁴ Gooley writes of "audiences who can't make heads or tails of Weber's *Konzerstück*," a centrepiece of many of Liszt's recitals (p. 3), and elsewhere of his struggles with Parisian audiences: Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 18-77. For detailed descriptions of Liszt's lukewarm reception (and financial losses) on the tours to England, see David Allsobrook, *Liszt: My Travelling Circus Life* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1991).

¹⁵ For some examples of depictions of Liszt, see Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 38-45, and Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: Volume I: The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 229.

inability to conclusively define it; and that it is a fetishisation of that which is “absent.” Here the fantastic also functions to some extent as a negative definition, elucidating and assessing the perimeter of a culture by highlighting everything on its fringes. Jackson’s understanding of the fantastic as fundamentally subversive links finally to what I have termed a “semantic reversal” – the power of the fantastic to invert the connotations of previously held ideals, such as those dominant in the eighteenth century, and effectively turn what was once bad into good. Turning this lens upon Liszt, we see that he is an ample candidate for a reading of the fantastic nature.

Writing in 1983 in the first volume of his monumental triptych on Liszt’s life, Alan Walker provides an estimation of the Liszt bibliography, placing it at over ten thousand items.¹⁶ Thirty years on, following the passing of two Liszt anniversary years (1986 and 2011) and the flurry of scholarly interest which traditionally accompanies such events, this number has surely grown significantly.¹⁷ The biographical tradition of Liszt is a curious phenomenon in that before the second half of the twentieth century, the method used by authors to construct his life story was largely back-to-front. Walker laments:

The normal way biography is written is to allow the basic materials – letters, diaries, manuscripts – to disclose the life. . . That did not happen with Liszt. Because of the unparalleled fame, even notoriety, enjoyed by Liszt during his lifetime (eclipsing by far that of all his musical contemporaries), a complete reversal of the ‘normal’ process took place. Everywhere he went Liszt lived out his life in a blaze of publicity. People clamoured for literature about him. And so the biographies came first; the hard evidence turned up later. Most of the energy expended by the modern Liszt researcher has to do with correcting the former in the light of the latter.¹⁸

¹⁶ Walker, *Liszt*, 27.

¹⁷ Michael Saffle, “The ‘Liszt Year’ 2011: Recent, Emerging, and Future Liszt Research,” *Music Library Association. Notes* 67 (2011): 665.

¹⁸ Walker, *Liszt*, 3.

Half-truth, misinformation and pure myth were thus reported as facts even during Liszt's lifetime, and then duly passed down through generations of biographies and biographers.

Some examples of these falsehoods still exist in the literature today, although many have been dismissed by the careful fieldwork of scholars such as Walker, and before him Emile Haraszti. Notable cases of known fictions include Beethoven's *Weiheskuss* of the young prodigy at a concert in Vienna, Liszt's descent from Hungarian nobility, and the hordes of his illegitimate offspring supposedly strewn across Europe.¹⁹ The reasons for this snowballing of the Liszt legend are beyond the scope of this paper, although they are closely related to an issue that will be returned to: Liszt signified vastly different things to different sociocultural groups. His appeal often transcended class and border restrictions, and while this was a great factor of his success, it also invariably led to the conflicting accounts still surrounding him today. In *The Virtuoso Liszt* Dana Gooley writes:

[Liszt] explored the resources for gaining the public's approval, and because the audiences were so varied from place to place, he developed multiple strategies. Aristocrats and intellectuals, men and women, wealthy bourgeois and poor beggars, learned connoisseurs and humble amateurs, Frenchmen and Germans all looked to him for something different, and he rarely failed to deliver.²⁰

Liszt consciously wore many different and sometimes contradictory "hats" throughout his career, and this multiplicity will be discussed in further detail below.

Liszt's own hand in the manufacture and promulgation of his mythology is not to be overlooked, as it also tellingly signifies the symbiotic relationship between the press and the virtuoso in the

¹⁹ Alan Walker, who does extremely well to disprove these myths and several more in *Franz Liszt: Vol I* (see 80–85; 30–33; and 23–27), is however not above reproach himself. There are some minor errors in his reportage of Liszt's English tours of 1840–41, which are rectified by David Allsobrook in *Liszt: My Travelling Circus Life* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1991), 100.

²⁰ Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 2.

nineteenth century.²¹ It is this interplay, transference, and reciprocity that forms the fundamental difference between the Romantic virtuosi and those of the past.²² Whilst Mozart, Bach, and Haydn were undeniably “virtuosic” in the sense of their devotion to and mastery over musical composition and performance, they never reached – and never could have – the dazzling popularity of the Romantic virtuosi without the immense social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The emergence of a large, wealthy middle class, coupled with audiences’ expanded musical appreciation and the consolidation of public media created a climate opportune for virtuosity that was unthinkable in the eighteenth century. These developments set in place the structures necessary to support what essentially had become a new position available to musicians in society: that of the professional, travelling virtuoso.

Bernstein singles out the importance of press to the virtuoso not for its sheer communicative reach, but instead for what she calls the “erosion of reliable and effective expression,” brought about by the “massive developments of journalistic discourse following the invention and refinement of print.” She continues:

By the nineteenth century, journalism was deplored as the source of corruption while music was heralded as a place of escape from its powers. Yet journalistic technology and musical magic are not opposed... The virtuosi provide the cultural reporter with subject matter, while the virtuoso’s success is a function of journalistic advertising and good press coverage.²³

²¹ For a detailed exploration of Liszt the strategist, see Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 117–200. Across two chapters Gooley recounts several instances of Liszt altering his dress, gestures, touring strategies and performing style, as well as making certain requests of journalists and publishers in order to shape his reception.

²² Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is of course the most notable earlier example of a virtuoso, though his narrative is largely framed as that of a *child prodigy*, a public spectacle with a very different trajectory of reception than those of Liszt or Paganini. For an exploration of Mozart’s reception as a child prodigy and as a virtuosic genius after his death see Mark Everist’s *Mozart’s Ghosts: Haunting the Halls of Musical Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²³ Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 10–11.

Thus for Bernstein the transcendent, ineffable qualities of music are able to fill the gaps in expression left by this “erosion” of language, a motion which leads to “the virtuoso emerg[ing] as a counterpart to the journalist” as the two become linked.²⁴ The fantastic is often employed in journalistic accounts of virtuosity, as evidenced by the reports of Liszt’s playing below, and so the three become a chain, with the fantastic at the junction between journalist and virtuoso. This relationship is a two-way process. The fantastic gives the journalist the language with which to respond to the virtuoso’s spectacle, and in turn commercially profit from the tabloid sales; the journalist’s use of the fantastic legitimises the irrationality of the virtuoso, and paves the way for their wider acceptance.

When Liszt took an active role in the formation of his reception, for instance through the constant manipulation of the public identity he projected of himself, he tacitly acknowledged this relationship between virtuoso and journalist. A healthy relationship between both parties is mutually beneficial, and the fantastic serves as their intermediary. Take for example the highly valuable copies of various Liszt biographies which have been corrected and annotated by the man himself, frequently with evidence of significant correspondence between author and subject.²⁵ The first volume of Lina Ramann’s *Franz Liszt als Künstler und Mensch* (1880) was the product of numerous interviews, followed up with a lengthy written exchange. Over this period Ramann asked more than one hundred questions of Liszt, often receiving lengthy and detailed responses in return.²⁶ There is also some evidence that Liszt hired claqueurs to “applaud his performance and shower the stage with flowers in order to instigate further applause.”²⁷ The results of Liszt’s tight control of his image are acknowledged by Heinrich Heine in the following quote. Note how “witchery” is used positively, an example of the fantastic’s ability to realign connotations:

²⁴ Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 11.

²⁵ Though a familiar concept today, the “authorised biography” was somewhat uncommon at the time, with subjects either dead or impractically far away.

²⁶ Walker, *Liszt*, 4–10.

²⁷ Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 67.

It seems to me that the whole spell-binding witchery can be explained by the fact that no one in this world knows how to organise his successes so well, or much more, their *mise-en-scène*, than our Franz Liszt.²⁸

Liszt could however only dictate so much of his public reception, and there were also several factors outside of his control which generated the rumours and apocryphal anecdotes which have persisted over the years. For one, there was his scandalous private life. A series of liaisons outside of marriage – usually with women with a high social standing – as well as the inevitable fall-out from several of these relationships, were often troublesome for Liszt’s image. Speculation and gossip was rife, and where it was lacking it was supplemented by the vitriol of past lovers.²⁹ Similarly, there is the questionable authorship of his writings and publications. We know today that a large portion was in fact only partially written by him, and sometimes even not at all. Walker suggests that the authorship of Liszt’s writings must be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and there are notable instances of his ghost-written articles causing him public embarrassment.³⁰ It emerges then that Liszt the virtuoso had to contend with the power of journalism and press in a number of ways, and he presented, both voluntarily and involuntarily, ample substance for the creation of his own mythology. In the following section, the subversive qualities of Liszt will be explored, particularly in relation to his unique brand of performance virtuosity.

Subversive Intentions

Liszt easily relates to Jackson’s reading of the fantastic, and there are numerous examples of Liszt “open[ing] up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law,

²⁸ Heinrich Heine quoted in Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 67.

²⁹ The most famous is Countess Marie d’Agoult’s *Nélida*. Published under her pseudonym “Daniel Stern,” it is a thinly veiled account of the affair between Liszt and herself, and caused great problems professionally for Liszt. See Walker, *Liszt*, 5.

³⁰ Walker, *Liszt*, 23.

[and] that which is outside dominant value systems.”³¹ For one, Liszt’s phenomenal technique at the keyboard irked many in the older generation of pianists, and his unorthodox approach, particularly in regards to fingering, drew much criticism from the establishment. Walker writes:

It is easy to understand why Liszt was accused of ‘destroying the true art of piano playing.’ Old [Antoine François] Marmontel, the doyen of piano teachers at the Paris Conservatoire, charged Liszt with ‘striving too much after eccentric effects.’ In general, teachers were always Liszt’s enemies. He disturbed their fixed ideas, and his free, creative approach to the keyboard terrified them.³²

Already, Liszt’s subversive character becomes apparent, and though still far from supernatural or otherworldly, his revolutionary and fantastic undertones become clear. Heine was right when he proclaimed in 1844: “He is here! Our Liszt, who, despite all perversions, inversions and sharp edges remains our cherished Liszt and at this very moment has once again aroused the beau monde of Paris. Yes, he is here, the *great agitator* [my emphasis].”³³ Furthermore, Liszt was the first artist since Beethoven to challenge the social position of the musician, and actively raise their standing in society.³⁴ This is a significant subversion of the status quo, as Liszt was usurping the eighteenth century notions of the place of musicians in the social hierarchy – long since gone were the days when Haydn entered through the back door of nobles’ homes. Whilst Beethoven’s temper had forced the Viennese aristocracy to consider him at least an equal, Liszt actively cultivated the image of the “artist as a superior being,” and one who was “divinely gifted,” today an enduring Romantic cliché.³⁵ We see then that Liszt was able to break down social conventions by embracing his reception as fantastic. Liszt also had many opportunities to exercise his scathing

³¹ Jackson, *Fantasy*, 1.

³² Walker, *Liszt*, 300.

³³ Heine, quoted in Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 66.

³⁴ Walker, *Liszt*, 287–288.

³⁵ Walker, *Liszt*, 287

wit amongst the aristocracy, sometimes bordering on contempt when he felt he had been slighted.³⁶

Undoubtedly though, the most significant subversive challenge embodied in Liszt is the threat that the virtuoso poses to the composer, and to the fidelity of the musical work – another destabilisation of the status quo. The Romantic period saw the first steps towards the establishment of the Western Art Music canon, and codified the emerging tradition of the performance of dead composers' works. Liszt himself was a key figure in this movement, and “was the first to play the whole keyboard repertory (as it then existed), from Bach to Chopin.”³⁷ Yet despite this, the rise of the virtuoso saw an intense focus upon the performer, and the musical text was often used merely as a vehicle for their instrumental prowess. Although Liszt acutely understood the pitfalls of “mere virtuosity,” he was also notorious for the freedom with which he interpreted the music of others. This lay in part with his understanding of the complex relationships and tensions between composer and performer, and *especially* the virtuoso. Liszt writes: “The virtuoso definitively has the right of life and death over the works whose thoughts, feelings and excitement the composer has momentarily entrusted to him.”³⁸ What is most problematic, however, is his shrewd self-awareness in such issues of fidelity and ownership, and his ability to vary his interpretive style to suit his performing context.

The Liszt performing in Paris would be very different to the one in Pest, the one in a salon different to one in a concert hall. As Gooley writes, “[Liszt] successfully carved out identities specific to the different worlds he entered. His relationship to the social world was not one of mastery, but of dynamic, responsive contact.”³⁹ We

³⁶ See Walker, *Liszt*, 289. Walker recounts several such anecdotes: “Into this category falls his chilling reply to Tsar Nicholas I of Russia, who arrived late and then started talking during one of Liszt’s recitals in St. Petersburg. He stopped playing and sat at the keyboard with bowed head. When Nicholas inquired the cause of the hushed silence, Liszt replied, ‘Music herself should be silent when Nicholas speaks.’”

³⁷ Walker, *Liszt*, 285.

³⁸ Franz Liszt quoted in Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 90.

³⁹ Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 2.

are thus presented with multiple Liszts, presenting multiple interpretations to multiple ends. The following are two accounts by Hector Berlioz of two separate performances by Liszt of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*:

Following the custom he had adopted to win the applause of the fashionable public, he distorted the music: instead of playing those long sustained notes in the bass, instead of maintaining the severe uniformity of rhythm and tempo... he added trills and tremolos; he accelerated and slowed the tempo, thus making passion intrude into the sad tranquillity. He made thunder growl in a cloudless sky, where the only source of darkness consists in the sun's vanishing. I suffered cruelly.⁴⁰

Compare this with Berlioz's description of a later performance:

Then, after a pause to collect his thoughts, out of the darkness emerged the noble elegy that he had once so perversely distorted. It was now heard in its sublime simplicity; not a single note, not an accent, was added to the composer's notes and accents. It was the shade of Beethoven himself, his great voice that we heard, called forth by the virtuoso. Each of us felt the characteristic frisson in silence and, after the last chord died away, we were silent - we were weeping.⁴¹

There are numerous other accounts of Liszt "perversely distorting" pieces, altering the directions on the score to suit his own means. More interesting however are the accounts, perhaps slightly less numerous, of Liszt's faithful reproductions of the musical text.⁴²

Liszt's acumen in the alteration of his performing style was one of the contributing factors to his success; however the numerous identities he took on make it difficult to pin down the "true" Liszt.⁴³ As Gooley writes "a variety of possible roles offered

⁴⁰ Hector Berlioz quoted in Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 113.

⁴¹ Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 114.

⁴² See Walker, *Liszt*, 317.

⁴³ It is of course always debatable as to whether the pursuit of such an essentialist notion is useful or even constructive. However, Bernstein writes: "Liszt, it would seem, is simply an artificial subject. The spectacle of such a person is dangerous and troubling, for he cannot be included in any canon." See Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 125.

themselves: interpreter of ‘classical’ works, German patriot, Hungarian patriot, man of letters, the composer-pianist, the artist as aristocrat, as prophet, as humanitarian, or as revolutionary.”⁴⁴ Since Liszt died before the advent of audio recording, we have no accounts of his playing other than in writing. Unlike his compositions, which have existed in a consistent form since their conception⁴⁵ and therefore have experienced reception on a continuum reaching right up to the present date, Liszt’s performances occupied a temporal space, and were received only until the last note of a given recital. A second tier of reception, the reviews of performances never seen and lazy second-hand accounts, further complicate the matter, though they too are indispensable to the Liszt Myth. As Walker reminds us, “the biographies came first.” Written, contemporary accounts are problematic for two reasons: firstly, because we are therefore forced to rely on the testimonies of nineteenth century witnesses – critics and writers who are embedded within a nineteenth century aesthetic discourse far removed from our own;⁴⁶ and secondly, because of Liszt’s previously mentioned ability, and even *disposition* towards varying his performing persona. If the Liszt on Monday could be different to the Liszt on Friday depending on the demands made of him by audiences, is it therefore possible to construct any notion of unity and cohesion within his character? The fact that he was able to consciously flit

⁴⁴ Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 14.

⁴⁵ Liszt’s works have been compiled and catalogued by Humphrey Searle, and are most commonly identified using Searle’s numbering system, S.1–S.999.

However, no full Urtext edition exists of his compositional output.

Furthermore, Liszt’s compositions are not without their own problems with regards to authorship and authenticity since a majority of his oeuvre (roughly S.351–S.999) are transcriptions, arrangements, paraphrases and fantasias, and are based to varying degrees on the compositions of others. Some of these issues are discussed in Mária Eckhardt, “The Liszt Thematic Catalogue in Preparation: Results and Problems,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 34 (1992): 221–230, and Kara Lynn Van Dine, “Musical Arrangements and Questions of Genre: A Study of Liszt’s Interpretive Approaches,” (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2010).

⁴⁶ Mark Everist considers this press as “just another site of reception, one that can be read according to the ideology of the journalist, the political *tinta* of the publication, the musical leanings of the proprietors, all of which will change with time and circumstance.” [italics in original] Everist, *Mozart’s Ghosts*, 4–5.

between these various identities lies at the crux of the Fantastic Liszt. Each persona he inhabited was as valid as any other, each as essential as the next; all of them genuine in their disingenuity, consistent in their inconsistency. In interpreting Liszt we are faced with uncertainty and hesitation, and indeed this in itself is his unity: his non-unity. Just as the fantastic is defined by its flexibility and its “resistance to definition,” Liszt’s fantastic qualities arise through his subversion of the musical work as well as his own flexibility and willful resistance to definition. The fantastic is the key to unlocking this puzzle in Liszt, as we instead gain value from his irrationality, and he is empowered to break down the previous ideals of authenticity, fidelity, and coherence. As Bernstein writes:

[Liszt’s] consistent inconsistency forms the very consistency of the virtuoso – an inconsistency determined by the oscillation between egotistic protrusion and transmissive self-effacement. Liszt’s most disturbing trait is probably his ability to simulate the genuine with the same ease as he produces the hyperbolically artificial, that is, to manipulate both sides of the virtuoso’s character.⁴⁷

Liminal Zones

Bernstein raises a crucial point regarding “both sides of the virtuoso’s character.” Balancing Liszt between these two poles recalls the liminal zone of Todorov’s fantastic, and just as the virtuoso occupies the juncture between genuine and artificial, egotism and self-effacement, so too does the fantastic occupy the dividing line (frontier) between the uncanny and the marvellous. Simultaneously both, yet wholly neither, the subject in question is involved in the constant dialogue between two opposing extremes. Liszt abounds with examples of liminality, and seems to have lived much of his life balancing on a tightrope. Some of the dichotomies which Liszt tread between in his life (aside from the already mentioned authentic/inauthentic), include composer/performer, natural/supernatural, Hungarian/French (and later German), cosmopolitan/provincial, high/low art, and objective/subjective; the “Liszt” goes on. Such multiplicity and the genuine investment by Liszt in the numerous binary opposites presented here reinforce the

⁴⁷ Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 112.

idea of Jackson's fantastic embodying a "resistance to definition," and the instability of meaning in the designation of labels, although in this case from an overwhelming abundance of descriptors, rather than a paucity. Furthermore, the alternation between these extremes suggests the Jacksonian preoccupation with the Other and the exploration of absence. Also modified however, here it is expressed to the highest possible degree: Liszt explores the Other to such an extent that balance is threatened, and the division blurs between Presence and Absence. Liszt places us in a revolving door of signification, constantly subverting subversion until the difference is equalised (or even removed), and the dichotomies become inseparable. I will now briefly explore two of these oppositions present in Liszt – light/dark and the three-way issue of his nationality – and their formation in his hands of an indivisible whole.

Unlike Paganini, whose image and reception was largely informed by demonic signifiers, Liszt presents a more balanced impression of light and dark. Many testimonies describe moments of sublime lyricism (light) interspersed amongst his wildest bravura passages (darkness).⁴⁸ The following is an account from a Berlin journalist, written in 1842:

But this force is not quite diabolic, as people have tended to call it, for it suppresses in us all other feeling and ideas and sets itself up as the centre-point or idol thereof; it dominates us, but it can also transfigure us through its own astonishing dimensions and through its intermittent flashes of sweetness.⁴⁹

In this description, the exchange between the two extremes in Liszt's playing is explicit. Even though it is an unequal dialogue, the "intermittent flashes of sweetness" serve to temper and even "transfigure" Liszt's bravura. He is clearly engaged in both sides, and any attempt to separate the two would be useless. A report by Hans

⁴⁸ Gooley terms these moments "celestial blues," from a diary entry by "C. Boissier" recounting a Liszt performance: "Sometimes, at the height of the torment, a ray of sunshine appears, one of those "celestial blue" cracks your sometimes see among the dark clouds." Quoted in Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 241.

⁴⁹ Anonymous reviewer, quoted in Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 243.

Christian Andersen in 1846 is also telling in its depiction of Liszt's fluctuation:

[H]e seemed to me a demon who was nailed fast to the instrument whence the tones streamed forth – they came from his blood, from his thoughts; he was a demon who would liberate his soul from thralldom; he was on the rack, the blood flowed, and the nerves trembled; but as he continued to play, the demon disappeared. I saw that pale face assume a nobler and brighter expression: the divine soul shone from his eyes and from every feature; he became as beautiful as spirit and enthusiasm can make their worshippers.⁵⁰

Liszt's physical communication of his semantic alternation similarly recalls the divine in another reviewer, though this time he is unequivocally identified with the image of Christ:

As the closing strains began, I saw Liszt's countenance assume that agony of expression, mingled with radiant smiles of joy, which I never saw in any other human face, except in the paintings of our Saviour by some of the early masters.⁵¹

Once again we see a continuous discontinuity in Liszt, yet the interaction of two opposing qualities forms a single discreet whole. Liszt is forever working within a liminal zone, balancing on the knife's edge of the fantastic, and is prevented from falling to either side by the counterbalancing weight of the other. Furthermore, these brief accounts (Andersen's in particular), also demonstrate how the notion of the fantastic can be co-opted as a linguistic tool to give currency to Liszt's diabolical side, a spectacle sitting firmly outside of traditional value systems.

Liszt's nationality is a highly complicated issue, and the ground for much contention. Whilst Liszt maintained that he was a Hungarian,⁵² there are several arguments for and against this identification. It emerges that Liszt was caught between the pull of his native Hungary, France, and Germany, and ultimately remained on the fringes of all. Writing in a 1936 essay titled "Liszt Problems,"

⁵⁰ Quoted in Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 248.

⁵¹ Henry Reeve, writing in 1835, quoted in Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 248.

⁵² Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 125.

composer Bela Bartók proposes an inquiry into Liszt's nationality, citing especially the indeterminacy of Liszt's relationship with national languages and the nationalistic tropes present in his compositions. Liszt was born in Doborján, Hungary in 1811 (now called Raiding in German and part of Austria), to a Hungarian father and German mother. Though a Hungarian citizen, he never had a strong relationship with the Magyar language. Bartók writes:

He went to Paris, and French became more or less his second mother tongue [after German]; moreover – and this is very important and characteristic – he knew French better than German, and preferred to speak French. He also wrote his books in French. Therefore, on the basis of language, we should consider him French, but nobody would think of doing so, for apart from the early years spent in Paris, he had no great cultural connection or affinity with France. His mature years were spent mostly in Germany, at Weimar.⁵³

Complicating things further is the fact that Bartók considers that Liszt's music shares more in common with the French aesthetic than the German;⁵⁴ and Liszt's attempts at Hungarian identification through works such as the *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, and public episodes like the "Sword of Honour" presentation in Pest. His national identity is therefore liminal and remains unstable. It is simultaneously invested in three directions, and sometimes altered for commercial reasons in a manner similar to the other characteristics previously described. Bartók reaches the conclusion that we are "forced to call him a homeless cosmopolitan,"⁵⁵ the very embodiment of the fantastic's union of binaries.

Linking in subversion, liminality, and virtuosity, we finally arrive at the fantastic's "semantic reversal." Liszt's success and widespread popularity can be read as a combination of his skilled variation of persona to suit different audiences – changing his content to match his context – and the way in which he was able, using the fantastic, to turn the "bad" into "good." Through use of the fantastic's

⁵³ Bela Bartók, *Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 509.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Bartók, *Essays*, 509.

semantic reversal, Liszt inverted the connotations of certain qualities coded “bad” by the Classical generation, instead transforming them into favourable, even desirable characteristics. The power of the fantastic to invert the aesthetic designations of these qualities is an important tool for the revolutionary virtuoso as it facilitated the acceptance and esteem by the wider public of qualities outside of traditional value systems, and is highly relevant in reading Liszt. First however, I must briefly address how this unique power is embedded within the fantastic discourse. It has strong ties in particular to the Jacksonian conception of the fantastic, and can thus be understood as the arm by which her fantastic operates. It is the see-saw balancing Presence and Absence, Value and Worthlessness. By giving value to that *without* value, the fantastic is able to serve as an expression of subversion as the previously valueless usurps the valued. By placing emphasis on the Other, giving worth to what was Worthless, the fantastic is effectively inverting traditional hierarchies of sociocultural capital, which, in turn, undermines the status quo.

This by-product of the fantastic manifests itself clearly in music in a number of ways. Compare for instance the immense interest in diminished, augmented, and chromatic sonorities characteristic of fantastic music with the major/minor tonal centres in the Classical era. The value of these harmonic colours and their importance as chordal areas is greatly expanded at the expense of the major/minor system. Similar too are the vast extensions, elisions, and sometimes obfuscations of form next to the eighteenth century’s clear, precise, four-square phrasing. Ambiguity and emotional arabesque became highly sought after, as restraint and dignity were replaced by excess, passion, and *innig*. In fantastic literature, too, atmospheres of confusion and hesitation are actively cultivated, along with other negatively coded emotions such as horror, terror, and dread. As Enlightenment values waned, many aesthetic signifiers turned 180 degrees as the fantastic facilitated the inversion of what was (and wasn’t) in good taste.

Returning now to Liszt, Charles Rosen presents a succinct account of this reversal in action. When analysing a passage from Liszt’s tenth *Hungarian Rhapsody* (S.244/10) in his book *The Romantic Generation*, Rosen writes:

This is, I imagine, the kind of writing that earned Liszt the contempt of his most distinguished colleagues, Schumann and Chopin. It is the *zero degree of musical invention* [my emphasis] if we insist that invention must consist of melody, rhythm, harmony, and counterpoint. Nevertheless, played with a certain elegance, these pages are both dazzling and enchanting. The real invention concerns texture, density, tone, colour, and intensity – the various noises that can be made with a piano – and it is startlingly original. The piano was taught to make new sounds.⁵⁶

In this case, certainly not an isolated example, Liszt uses his fantastic virtuosity to negate the traditional markers of “good” composition. Revolutionary pianistic technique, combined with a foregrounding of secondary musical characteristics resulted in the uniquely expanded compositional possibilities that Liszt offered. Liszt’s “bad style”⁵⁷ is present elsewhere, for example in the first quote by Berlioz included above, where it is distortion, not fidelity that earns “the applause of the fashionable public.” According to Gooley, Liszt, entrenched as he was in the rise of the Romantic Virtuoso, “came of age during the most intense period of anti-virtuosity backlash in the history of instrumental music.”⁵⁸ Gooley cites several articles (many of which were published in Schumann’s *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, culminating in Carl Gollmick’s “Virtuosity Today” [*Das heutige Virtuosenwesen*] from December 2, 1842)⁵⁹ which openly attack the entire profession of the travelling virtuoso. The fact that Liszt was able to reach his unprecedented success amidst this milieu of condemnation was in part due to a skilled manipulation of his fantastic reception, and the embrace of its semantic reversal.

⁵⁶ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 492.

⁵⁷ In *Virtuosity*, Bernstein consigns a chapter to Liszt titled “Liszt’s Bad Style.” As well as exploring some of the issues of consistency in Liszt, it dominated by an examination of “the tenuous link between the bad taste of Liszt’s lifestyle and the problems of style in Liszt’s text, *F. Chopin*.” (118) See Bernstein, *Virtuosity*, 109–130.

⁵⁸ Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 13.

⁵⁹ Gooley, *Virtuoso Liszt*, 13.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by reading Liszt through the fantastic lens we are given new tools to interpret the inconsistencies of his character and reconcile the conflicting metanarratives of his reception. Through its tropes of subversion and liminality, as well as its power to invert certain eighteenth century connotations, the fantastic also carved out the space for his phenomenal success despite his jarring departure from previously held principles. Liszt was a revolutionary – confronting, subverting and ultimately overcoming the status quo, yet more than that, he embodied the turmoil, passion and dislocation of nineteenth century Europe. He was above all a reflection of his times, and thus this image is as fractured as the mirror which produced it. Just as the fantastic transforms the incoherent into the coherent, so too are Liszt's numerous discontinuities rendered irrelevant and even valued, instead gaining new meaning and cohesion through this reading. The fantastic is simultaneously complete yet fragmented, fleeting yet eternal, contradictory yet comprehensible. The notion of the true Liszt – pianist, composer, conductor, pedagogue, Hungarian, Frenchman, German, charlatan, Abbé, radical, hero, or dandy, clearly delineated and defined – is thus replaced by the Fantastic Liszt, the Whole Liszt, who is all of these things, yet also none of them.

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ABSTRACT

As the sites of reception of an artist change with time, location, class and language, any number of metanarratives emerge within their respective discourse. Franz Liszt is of course no exception, a figure who experienced (and continues to experience) a broad range of receptions, both positive and negative. What sets Liszt apart, however, are the remarkable interrelationships between these resultant metanarratives. Significantly, several are in continual conflict with each other, yet they remain undeniably essential to his character. One only has to look for example at the problems in representing the pianist-Liszt against the composer-Liszt, and their very different trajectories of reception to realise the scope of the issue. This troublesome nature of Liszt still resonates within the literature today, and it poses great difficulty to our understanding of his internal unity. This paper proposes a solution to this issue by reading Liszt through the lens of the fantastic, a literary mode of analysis consisting of a loose collection of tropes centred on hesitation, multiplicity, subversion and liminality. By placing Liszt in the realm of the fantastic, his inconsistency becomes one of the keys to reinterpreting his *romantic* character, and allows us to reconcile with the discord within him.