

Poetic Music for the Theatre and the Concert Hall: Where the Creative Paths of Wagner and Liszt Diverge

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The 1850s saw Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner crowned the co-rulers of an aesthetic movement, which was to become one of the two major branches that claimed to inherit the Beethovenian tradition in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹ Neither their supporters, who hailed them as the “New Germans,” nor their opponents, condemning them as the “musicians of the future,” denied them their progressive stance; and according to Hugh Macdonald, in 1853 Wagner “undoubtedly felt that he and Liszt were moving into a new world of music, leaving Schumann and his supporters far behind.”² This aesthetic alliance is surprising when one considers the many differences in their respective lives and characters. The personal relationship between Liszt and Wagner, “a deep and generous love that survived — just about — the vicissitudes of four decades,”³ has frequently been understood as one of dependence and indebtedness on Wagner’s part, financially as well as in the production of his operas during his political exile from Germany. Hueffer described the relationship thus:

It is a well-known French saying that in every love affair there is one person who adores while the other allows himself to be adored.... Petrarch and Boccaccio, Schiller and Goethe, Byron and Shelley immediately occur to the mind in such a connection; but in none of these is the mutual position of giver and receiver of worshipper and worshipped so distinctly marked as in the case [of Liszt and Wagner] under discussion.⁴

¹ The other branch, the “absolute music” camp, was represented by Brahms and Hanslick, among others.

² Hugh Macdonald, *Music in 1853* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 56.

³ Barry Millington, *Richard Wagner: The Sorcerer of Bayreuth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 116.

⁴ Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt, *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt*, trans., with a preface by Francis Hueffer, rev. with an index by W. Ashton Ellis, Vol. 1, 1841–1853 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), xv–xvi.

Susan Bernstein, too, refers to this view of an unbalanced love affair: “[t]he formula ‘Wagner and Liszt’ is in fact a predicate modifying Wagner. It has become commonplace to link Liszt to Wagner in this way, to imply that Liszt is a mere continuation of what Wagner began.”⁵ It is a view which Hanslick was one of the first to express: “Only those who do not know the works of Berlioz or Richard Wagner could mistake Liszt for a musical discoverer or reformer.”⁶

However, by emphasising Liszt’s role as virtuoso (meaning the performer, interpreter and realiser of a composer’s works) and Wagner’s dependence on Liszt in the production of his own works, Bernstein argues that Liszt’s accomplishment was to alter “the paternal relation between composer and performer to one of fraternity,” “standing side by side with, rather than beneath, the composer.”⁷ The hierarchy is lost, but there still remains a gap in role and position between the two: the creative flow still begins with Wagner. Detlef Altenburg presents an almost opposing view involving a reversal of primacy when he describes Liszt’s symphonic poems as having “prepared the way for Richard Wagner’s music drama” (though even here, the model of Liszt as giver and Wagner as receiver is barely escaped).⁸ Altenburg, like Bernstein, echoes Hueffer, in suggesting an analogy in the Liszt-Wagner and Schiller-Goethe pairings, but in the sense that Liszt “legitimised” himself and Wagner as the heirs of the earlier Weimar poets.⁹ Liszt is understood here as composer as well as virtuoso, and the gap between the statuses of the two composers, as shown by Bernstein, is narrowed.¹⁰

On the one hand we see the differing, even contrasting positions of Liszt and Wagner; on the other, the two have been identified as belonging to the same aesthetic camp. This paradox continues into the creative level, where the outputs of Liszt and Wagner arguably present more differences than similarities in genre and subject matter, despite the fact that their views on music and art were strikingly

⁵ Susan Bernstein, *Virtuosity of the Nineteenth Century: Performing Music and Language in Heine, Liszt, and Baudelaire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 82.

⁶ Eduard Hanslick, *Music Criticism: 1846-99*, trans., ed. Henry Pleasants (London: Penguin Books, 1950), 57.

⁷ Bernstein, 92; 90.

⁸ Detlef Altenburg, “Franz Liszt and the Legacy of the Classical Era,” *19th-Century Music* XVIII/1 (Summer 1994), 46–63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰ Although Wagner was an acclaimed conductor, his role as a performer is not as significant as Liszt’s in terms of the biographical relationship between the two.

similar. While Wagner's crowning achievement was the composition of his music dramas, Liszt remained outside the theatre and wrote even his most poetically-inspired works for concert performance, the creation of the symphonic poem being one of his historically significant accomplishments. If the two begin with an almost identical musico-philosophical starting point in their prose works (as will be explored), at some point their paths diverge, for when their theories crystalize in the form of musical composition, their respective works present considerable differences.

But just as Wagner's indebtedness to Liszt's friendship has somewhat eclipsed what Bernstein calls their relationship of "fraternity," this surface disagreement — a difference in genre preference — seems to have kept us from unraveling the similarities and parallels, the analogous and sometimes even identical ideas that become increasingly visible once we begin to look beyond their choices of genre: similarities which actually allow us to view the two as musicians working on remarkably close wavelengths. The divergence in their paths is in fact deeply rooted in their identical starting point: what seems a paradox may only be a superficial puzzlement.

Let us firstly examine this starting point. "As man is to nature, so art is to man" — so wrote Wagner in *The Artwork of the Future* (1850).¹¹ As noted by Oliver Strunk, an almost identical statement can be found in Liszt's essay *Berlioz and His "Harold" Symphony* (1855): "Man stands in inverse relations to art and to nature... art he creates as a second nature, so to speak, making of it, in relation to himself, that which he himself is to nature."¹² In other words, art should be the natural and necessary expression of man, as unforced a creation as man is of nature. Taking this idea of art's organic growth further, both composers describe music as an evolving entity. In the same essays, Wagner and Liszt respectively talk of "music, grown to harmony,"¹³ and the "height to which [music] has grown since the beginning of the modern era."¹⁴ In contrast, music that was crafted according to mathematical rules was not art. Liszt lamented that those who "seek only...the complex workmanship, the *kaleidoscopic*

¹¹ Richard Wagner, "The Artwork of the Future," *Source Readings in Music History*, ed. Oliver Strunk, rev. ed. Leo Treitler (New York: Norton, 1998), 1094–1112.

¹² Franz Liszt and Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, "Berlioz and His 'Harold' Symphony," Strunk, 1158–1174.

¹³ Wagner, "The Artwork of the Future," 1103.

¹⁴ Liszt, 1171.

multiplicity of mathematical calculation and intertwining lines, drive music toward the dead letter”;¹⁵ Wagner scornfully pronounces counterpoint “the artificial play of art with art, the mathematics of feeling, the mechanical rhythm of egoistic harmony.”¹⁶

Their solution to save music from its “curse of contentlessness” (to use Eduard Krüger’s expression) was what brought the two composers into league against the conservative absolute music camp.¹⁷ At the same time, this is the point at which Liszt and Wagner begin to diverge in their paths, as differing manifestations of the solution emerge from the two. The solution, according to Wagner, was to allow the compositional process to be “dictated by the nature of the poetic subject.”¹⁸ Liszt, closely echoing Wagner’s wording, wrote that the “poetic solution of instrumental music” seemed “a necessary result of the development of our time.”¹⁹ For both, music needed to be linked with a definite (though often abstract) idea. But while this poetic source, in Liszt’s case, was “contained in the program,” Wagner interpreted it as the subject matter and libretto for his music dramas.²⁰

In addition to Wagner’s more literal union of poetry and music compared to Liszt’s, there is a disagreement regarding whether to unite music with a poetic source alone, as in the programmatic symphony, or with both poetry and the visual element, as in the music drama. When he wrote *Opera and Drama*, Wagner defined the ideal dramatic art form as all-inclusive, declaring that Goethe, who when creating his *Faust*, “left purposely out of sight the possibility of a scenic representation,” “could neither give us a genuine romance nor a genuine drama.”²¹ In *The Artwork of the Future*, too, Wagner insists on this ideal: “[m]an as artist can be fully satisfied only in the union of all the art varieties in the *collective* artwork;” “[t]he *true* aim of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1167.

¹⁶ Wagner, “The Artwork of the Future,” 1104.

¹⁷ Eduard Krüger, “Hegel’s Philosophie der Musik,” *Neue Zeitschrift der Musik* 17 (1842), 44. Quoted in Berthold Hoeckner, *Programming the Absolute* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press: 2002), 163.

¹⁸ Wagner, “A Communication to my Friends,” *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, trans. W. Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1892) Vol. 1, 269–392.

¹⁹ Liszt, 1166.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Wagner, “Opera and Drama,” *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, trans. W. Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1893) Vol 2, 140–1.

art is accordingly *all-embracing*.”²² While his claim (which would be modified in later years) is in a way all-embracing, it is, at the same time, a constricting definition of the artwork. As Altenburg has pointed out, Wagner “had...made absolute claims for the musical drama that left no room for Liszt’s concept of the symphonic poem.”²³ Liszt, however, “rejected the composer’s absolutist claims”:²⁴ “[w]e for our part are persuaded that not every genius can limit his flight within the narrow confines of the stage.”²⁵

Their respective paths have clearly split, somewhere between the key points represented by the concepts of “poetry” and “drama.” Yet the two artistic paths continue to present us with analogous twists and turns, the distance between them perhaps even highlighting these parallels. Erica Quinn, for instance, has noted that “[o]ne could almost view Liszt’s Weimar as an [sic] model for Wagner’s Bayreuth.”²⁶ Having entered the separate realms of the theatre and the concert hall, Wagner and Liszt nonetheless came up with some very similar ideas.

For one, the poetic content (the program or the libretto) was not to be a mere series of events: Liszt and Wagner were concerned with the expression of a deep philosophical, psychological, or emotional content. In his *Berlioz* essay, Liszt wrote that the “modern epopoeia [epic poem]” (with which he wished to engage in his compositions) expresses “what the hero thinks” more importantly than “how he acts.”²⁷ Wagner takes this to an extreme in *Tristan and Isolde*, which Bryan Magee describes as “a drama not of visible action but of invisible inner states, a drama of what is going on inside people.”²⁸ The role of music was to take on a new sophistication, to be in dialogue with the programmatic content on a level well beyond word painting (Wagner’s conception and use of the leitmotif is one of the methods in which this was realised, as well as Liszt’s process employed in his symphonic poem *Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne*, discussed below); and the two shared a passionate faith in music’s

²² Wagner, “The Artwork of the Future,” 1112.

²³ Altenburg, 55.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Liszt, 1173.

²⁶ Erika J. Quinn, “Composing a German Identity: Franz Liszt and the *Kulturnation*, 1848-1886” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 2001), 145.

²⁷ Liszt, quoted in Paul Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 163.

²⁸ Bryan Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 2000), 211.

ability to achieve this.

Second, music was not an end but a “means of expression,” to quote both composers.²⁹ Wagner’s declaration of “*the error in the art-genre of Opera*” (his italics) is famous: “that a Means of expression (Music) has been made an end...” – written in bold and on a new line.³⁰ Thirdly, and in relation to this idea of the primacy of subject matter, the poetic content would justify harmonic progressions otherwise difficult to make sense of. This is explained in Wagner’s 1879 article “On the Application of Music to the Drama,” where he uses a progression from *Lobengrin* as an example:

The motif...consists almost solely of a web of remote harmonic progressions. In the Andante of a Symphony, this progression would strike us as far-fetched and highly unintelligible; here, in the opera, it does not seem strained, but arising out of itself, and therefore so intelligible that to my knowledge it has never been decried as the contrary. This has its grounds, however, in the scenic action.³¹

An example in Liszt’s works would be the *Faust* theme, consisting of all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Its strange, searching character is best explained by the idea behind it – the obsessive manner in which Faust’s mind operates. Liszt believed that in a “more or less distant future,” there would be an “acceptance of those *violations of certain rules of art and habits of bearing* with which Berlioz is reproached” – violations which arise from (and are explained by) the importance of the idea (the program) over the traditional form.³² As Hoeckner wrote, “[t]ruth was to trump beauty.”³³ Or rather, beauty as defined in Hanslick’s *On the Musically Beautiful*. Wagner, in particular, was redefining “beautiful” in the early 1850s: it was man stripped of all decoration, the raw, pure, naked human being, exemplified by Siegfried. One can find a similar underlying philosophy in Liszt’s fascination with the idea of the free-spirited Gypsies and their energised music. This was a universal type of beauty, relying no longer on stylistic conventions or on fashion, which for Wagner was unnatural and superficial. This ties in with what Liszt had to say about

²⁹ Liszt, 1168.

³⁰ Wagner, “Opera and Drama,” 17.

³¹ Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 10 (Leipzig: E.W. Fritsch, 1887-88), 191-3; *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, Vol. 6: 189-91. Quoted in Hoeckner, 118-9.

³² Liszt, 1160.

³³ Hoeckner, 162.

poetic content and universality:

A work which offers only clever manipulation of its materials... will retain its value only as long as the art remains in a given state... Poetic art works, on the other hand, live for all time and survive all formal revolution, thanks to the indestructible life principle which the human soul has embodied in them.³⁴

Parallels between Wagner and Liszt can also be found in the connection between their programs and technical aspects of composition. In works such as *Tristan and Isolde* and *Ce qu'on entend sur la montagne* (*Bergsymphonie*), the poetic content became the basis for entirely new conceptions of pitch functionality. *Tristan* is the very literal harmonic representation of a basic Schopenhauerian idea – that at no time in one's life is there a moment where every single event, problem or expectation is completely resolved – and, for Magee, could be considered “the starting point of ‘modern music’” on account of its consisting of “almost nothing but what are technically known as discords.”³⁵ In Liszt's *Ce qu'on entend sur la montagne* – a symphonic poem based on Victor Hugo's ode of the same title – the realisation of the program, in which “two voices grope ever closer to each other, crossing and fusing,” is in the form of a “submotivic network.”³⁶ Rather than working with concrete themes and motives, where particular pitches (including harmonies) are associated with set rhythmic features, Liszt instead used “‘elementary structures’ of pitch and rhythm” as parameters “unrelated to each other”: this was, according to Dahlhaus, “one of Liszt's ideas that made music history, if not in the nineteenth century, at least in our own.”³⁷ It was not without reason that, already during their lifetimes, the two were considered the leaders of the avant-gardism of the day, and though they were engaging with different media, underneath there was much in common between their approaches.

Furthermore, both Liszt and Wagner made a definite and conscious move towards a more self-aware, more serious, and arguably, more German compositional attitude. Wagner shifted his focus from the Meyerbeer-oriented Grand Opéra, with its arias, choruses, lavish scenery and ballets, to Music Drama; Liszt gave up

³⁴ Liszt, 1168.

³⁵ Magee, 209.

³⁶ Dahlhaus, 240–1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

his status of touring celebrity to become Kapellmeister in Weimar, “the capital of a small, secluded, and (by mid nineteenth-century standards) sleepy East German duchy where Bach had once played the organ.”³⁸ They were two of the leading figures during the cultural transition in the musical world of the second half of the nineteenth century, when the “picturesque, naïve phase of Romanticism gave way to something more searching, self-conscious and dangerous” (they definitely fulfill these criteria), “dilettantes and amateurs faded into the background,³⁹ and many of the institutions still in place today... took on a new solidity and seriousness.”⁴⁰

In addition, their respective inventions of genre (Liszt’s symphonic poem and Wagner’s music drama) were not so much outlined formulae to be used by themselves or by others in the future, but rather a search, a coming-to-terms with the ways in which they could best give expression to their ideas. Wagner’s creative theories of the early 1850s, when he was beginning his work on the *Ring*, had developed and matured from the experience he had gained from writing his three romantic operas, and crystalized for the time being in the mass of prose works he produced between 1849 and 1853. In these essays he confronted such questions as music’s relation with words and the visual element, the ideal form of drama and choice of subject matter, as well as more technical problems including the functions of melody, harmony and the orchestra. Later, Wagner did not necessarily stick to those answers: they were simply solutions specific to him at that point. Similarly, for Liszt, the form of the symphonic poem was born as an answer to the problems which he was tackling during the composition of the *Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne* (Liszt’s first symphonic poem, the first version of which was performed in 1850): to “adopt the classical ideal of the symphony” while not depending on its outside form; to “elevate program

³⁸ Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Nineteenth Century*

<http://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/view/Volum e3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-008002.xml> (Viewed 2 October 2013).

³⁹ There is, however, much truth in Adorno’s discussion of Wagner’s dilettantism (“The idea of uniting all the arts is itself dilettantish and, in the absence of the supreme effort entailed in subjecting them all to his overwhelming genius for expression, it would have remained at the level of dilettantism.”): see Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1981), 28-30. If Liszt was the “kapellmeister to end all kapellmeisters” (Taruskin), was Wagner the dilettante to end all dilettantes?

⁴⁰ Macdonald, 186.

music...to poetic and philosophical sublimity”; and to “unite the expressive gestures of his earlier piano pieces...with the tradition of thematic and motivic manipulation.”⁴¹ The significance of such searching processes resonates with one of Wagner’s definitions of art – that it is “the fulfillment of a longing to know oneself in the object of one’s love or adoration, to find oneself again in the things of the outer world...”⁴²

Another of Wagner’s statements suggests why Liszt and Wagner went along separate paths, despite all their shared beliefs. Considering his theory that freedom and ease of expression only come from being “at home with” the language one is using, “as with a genuine mother-tongue,” we cannot disregard the musical media with which these men had spent most of their lives.⁴³ Liszt had been the most celebrated piano virtuoso; Wagner’s work had always been linked with the theatre, including his post as Kapellmeister in Dresden.

In fact, Wagner’s fascination and enthusiasm for the theatre had preceded his musical apprenticeship: “[w]ith a view to writing music for *Leubald*” — a five-act play he had written by the age of fifteen — “Wagner borrowed from the library a treatise on composition by Johann Bernhard Logier, and in the autumn of 1828 began also to take harmony lessons (initially in secret) from a local musician, Christian Gottlieb Müller.”⁴⁴ Wagner was a dramatist by temperament and by training.

Liszt, on the other hand, “was more comfortable in the role of rhapsodist (singer of epics) than that of dramatist.”⁴⁵ His temperament as a solo, virtuoso improviser seems to saturate his compositional process as described by Paul Munson:

Liszt liked best to work without a structural plan, to work his way up from the musical details, as though he took literally the maxim that form should be an expression of content. ...The end result was an arresting configuration of interrelated episodes, something altogether different from dramatic or symphonic development.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Dahlhaus, 238.

⁴² Wagner, “Opera and Drama,” 155.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁴⁴ Millington, 15–6.

⁴⁵ Paul Allen Munson, “The Oratorios of Franz Liszt” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1996), 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17–8.

And this is where, even when the focus is on both Wagner and Liszt as *composers*, Susan Bernstein's model of the composer-virtuoso relationship between the two remains persistently relevant. Indeed, not everybody responded so well to Liszt taking on the role of the composer. What Munson describes as "an arresting configuration of interrelated episodes" was, for Hanslick, a series of musical events "assembled, mosaic-like, or jumbled chaotically."⁴⁷ And for Bernstein, this idea extends beyond Liszt's compositions, and is reflected by Liszt himself: "Liszt presents and represents a confusion of distinctions, a constant combining and recombining of contradictory traits that problematize the reliability of predication in general."⁴⁸ Thus, if Wagner's ideal was to be all-embracing by binding three artistic strands to run parallel to and complement each other, even to intertwine, Liszt had achieved an all-inclusiveness through the horizontal juxtaposition of "all musical sensations, from the most commonplace to the most rare. Everything he had ever experienced in music, whether trivial or sublime, left a lasting imprint upon his work."⁴⁹

This is linked with their differing attitudes towards the concept of drama. Liszt's avoidance of opera is, more specifically, an avoidance of drama. (Opera itself was, even to the mature Liszt,⁵⁰ a possible genre to work with: according to Paul Merrick, the *Faust* and *Dante Symphonies* had the potential of becoming operas;⁵¹ and Liszt's interest in the genre "is attested to by the great number of operas he conducted, by his many operatic transcriptions and paraphrases, the series of essays he wrote in 1854... and the numerous librettos he contemplated setting."⁵²) His oratorios, *The Legend of St Elisabeth* and *Christus*, would be two examples where he came close to writing opera.⁵³ But for Liszt, there was an important distinction between the two genres (as there was for Wagner, the opera composer who would

⁴⁷ Hanslick, 55.

⁴⁸ Bernstein, 109.

⁴⁹ Béla Bartók, *Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), quoted in Bernstein, 93.

⁵⁰ Liszt had written one opera in his teens.

⁵¹ Merrick, 161.

⁵² Munson, 17. If Liszt was taking works that were already operas, though, and turning them into piano pieces, one wonders how likely it would have been for him to write an opera himself. Instrumental music was his mother tongue, the salon and concert hall his nursery.

⁵³ Merrick, 161–2.

rather see Liszt writing symphonic poems than oratorios): “conflicts of passions, delineations of characters, unexpected peripetias, and continuous action” are “more noticeably absent than actual representation” in oratorio, compared to drama.⁵⁴ If conflict is “the essential ingredient in drama” (to quote George Bernard Shaw) — in which case the tension during the process is at least as important as the outcome, if not more so — it was the concept of drama that Liszt was staying away from;⁵⁵ and Munson rightly argues that Liszt’s two oratorios are *not* dramatic works, in the original sense of the word.⁵⁶ If, as Merrick claims, Liszt had a “universal preoccupation with the theme of redemption,” then it is the *outcome* in a work such as the *Dante Symphony* — the attainment of redemption with its final *Magnificat* — that is the most important ingredient.⁵⁷ The same can be said for the *Faust Symphony*, which concludes with the chorus singing “das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan (the eternal feminine draws us aloft)”: redemption through womanhood. What Merrick calls Liszt’s “drama of redemption” is entirely different in character from the Wagnerian drama, the latter having a dynamic thrust and sense of inevitability.⁵⁸ Furthermore, while *St Elisabeth* and *Christus* contain depictions of saintly figures, *Lohengrin*, the *Ring* and *Tristan and Isolde* deal with flawed characters whose actions lead to their downfalls. While this reveals a significant material difference in their respective views on choice and treatment of subject matter, what Liszt and Wagner share here is a magnitude of scale in individual works, which stems from the fundamental idea that musical form must be rooted in poetic content.

For Liszt, the literary tradition presented itself as a treasure trove of inspiration. He hoped for a “union” of “music with literary or quasi-literary works,” specifically with such “names as Dante and

⁵⁴ Liszt, 1169.

⁵⁵ George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on The Nibelung's Ring*, 4th ed. (New York: Dover, 1967), 62.

⁵⁶ Munson, 28.

⁵⁷ Merrick, 302.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 307; Theodore W. Adorno, “Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 584–602. For Adorno, the element of fate in the *Ring* denies the work “the freedom...that constitutes drama”; in fact he considers the conception of the tetralogy as being narrative, rather than dramatic. This is interesting when we think that Wagner claimed to have avoided historico-political subject matter because of its narrative function.

Shakespeare.”⁵⁹ But he was in a way engaging purely with the quintessential qualities of its characters, rather than with its concrete dramatic forms. To borrow Dahlhaus’s words, Liszt was dealing with “historically evolving images of mythical figures, such as Orpheus and Prometheus, or Faust and Hamlet, images that cannot be captured definitively in a single text.”⁶⁰ This may have been one of the factors that made the theatrical stage seem “narrow” – too specific – for Liszt. Another factor was the level of concreteness the visual element on the stage would give the music, binding the latter (something metaphysical) to the physical, visible world. Liszt “would not allow” the staging of “The Miracle of the Roses” in *St Elisabeth*; an operatic representation of the scene was, for him, simply too literal.⁶¹ However, Wagner saw the matter in a different light. In program music for the concert stage, the music itself must, to a degree, become pictorial in order to compensate for the lack of the visual element – stage action. The inventor of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would not have music egoistically taking on the roles of another art: his ideal union of the arts instead meant that music, having yielded the pictorial business to the stage action, could now concentrate on its own expressive duties.

But even in this disagreement they share the idea that music has a unique independence. Liszt: “[a]s instrumental music progresses, ...it tends more and more to become...a poetic language, more apt than poetry herself perhaps to express all that transcends within us our customary horizons.”⁶² Wagner could not have agreed more: “[m]usic is surely the medium most suited to communicating perceptions for which speech is inadequate, and one could even identify the innermost nature of all perception as music.”⁶³ The two were, in effect, using the same excuse to do different things.

Earlier on, I quoted Liszt and Wagner where they had virtually agreed on the relationship between nature, man and art; even so, the

⁵⁹ Liszt, 1171.

⁶⁰ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 237.

⁶¹ Merrick, 308.

⁶² Liszt, in his preface to the *Album d'un voyageur, Années de pèlerinage*, bk. 1 (1842), quoted in Peter le Huray and James Day, eds. *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 537.

⁶³ Wagner, “Wagner’s Open Letter to Marie Wittgenstein on Liszt’s Symphonic Poems,” introduced, ed. and trans. by Thomas S. Grey, *The Wagner Journal*, 5, 1 (2011), 71.

two come to a point of divergence. But could it not be that the very essence of the divergence lies in their agreement on this specific idea, that of the definition of art in relation to the artist? To use their terms, diversity in mankind (differences in personality), created by nature, repeats itself in the diversity of art, created by mankind. The respective temperaments of Liszt and Wagner as virtuoso and dramatist penetrate their works to such an extent because they both linked the position of music so closely with human existence.

If we proceed in this line of thought, the idea of paths diverging from a single point of departure (an identical definition of art) may not be the most precise. A more convincing image may be one where two paths, intrinsically different, intersect (or come next to each other) at the point where they agree on a series of significant concepts, including art's relationship with nature and the advantage in uniting music with poetic content – concepts significant enough to place the two composers in the same progressive camp. The approach to this intersection reflects what Bernstein calls Liszt's reversal of dependence in the roles of composer and virtuoso: the virtuoso in Liszt allies himself with Wagner not only in the latter's dependence on the former, but also in the former's introduction of virtuoso qualities into works of such scale as the symphonic poem and oratorio. It is difficult to say whether there exist more similarities or differences between Liszt and Wagner; what is certain is that the amount that they shared is remarkable considering how much they otherwise differed, and that the depth, significance and detail of what they shared is often eclipsed by the conspicuousness of their differences. With both, their flaws are of a magnitude proportional to their achievements; their foes proportional to the number of those who idolised and idolise them. An acknowledgment of what exists underneath the surface brings into view a conversation between their thoughts beyond their relationship as giver and receiver, worshipper and worshipped. Their paths continue in their own ways; out of the paths emerge the portraits of two highly original artists, both of whom were seriously concerned for the future of music.

ABSTRACT

Were Liszt and Wagner as composers and musical thinkers more similar or different? The differences are obvious: Liszt, the piano virtuoso who did not write a single opera in his mature years, was flying in the face of Wagner's belief in the unification of all the arts in the opera — or better still, the music drama. Yet they were together the leading avant-gardists of the day, two pillars supporting the temple of the New Germans; and not without reason, for their respective prose works reveal some strikingly similar thoughts on art and music. The aim of this paper is to focus into this paradox in order to demonstrate that it is in fact not so much of a paradox: that their differences are deeply rooted in their similarities, and that their creative paths separated as a result of similar thought processes rather than differing ones. Once we begin to look beyond the conspicuous differences, such as their conflicting attitudes towards the concept of drama and their respective choices of genre and subject matter, what becomes apparent is a series of parallels between their separate paths, allowing us to view the two as artists who were working on remarkably close wavelengths.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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