FRANZ LISZT’S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE FOR THE HARP IN THE 19TH-CENTURY ORCHESTRA

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As a distinguished performer, conductor, composer, and teacher, Franz Liszt left a lasting legacy of musical compositions, performance practice, and pedagogical tools that has inspired pianists and harpists since the Romantic era. These aspects of Liszt’s musical career have been studied, analyzed, and explored by musical historians and performers during his own lifetime and beyond. However, in-depth study of Liszt’s use of the harp and harp-like effects in his compositions has been neglected.

A clear and thorough understanding of all the musical and historical elements of Liszt’s life and compositions is significant to both the world of scholarly harp research and to accurate historical performance of his original harp parts and transcriptions. Most sources discuss personal connections between Liszt and harpists of the Romantic era, but a broader and more representative approach is needed for a more informed understanding of his harp writing. The notion that Franz Liszt was a talented, experienced, and well-rounded composer who had an appreciation for the harp and its players is well documented. Little or no research/analysis of Liszt’s compositional techniques for the harp currently exist. Therefore, one must investigate available scores in order to understand Liszt’s knowledge and compositional style for the harp.

The body of knowledge concerning Liszt’s career is quite exemplary and stems from personal and professional letters, notes from master classes, his own manuscripts, accounts from acquaintances, and much more. And yet, currently available resources on the life and work of Liszt provide a biographical, chronological, and analytical approach that unfortunately only provide insight into the relationships between Liszt and the harpists of his time. To add more difficulty to the matter of harp research in Liszt resources, the extensive scope of Liszt’s compositional output includes a large number of
transcriptions and original compositions for orchestra, piano, organ, and voice, most of which only contain a few substantial harp parts. The researcher must therefore investigate this subject with an objective and critical eye, keeping in mind the character of the piece and Liszt’s original intentions in regard to tempo, dynamics, and timbre. A thorough understanding of Liszt’s compositions and life is crucial for drawing connections and reading behind the lines of basic Lisztian research. Therefore, this paper will attempt to delve more deeply into Liszt’s compositional style for the harp by comparing it to the harp writing of his colleagues, and will consider the importance of technological innovations to the instrument and commonly held 19th-century stereotypes of the harp and harpists. This study will also take an in-depth look at Liszt’s use of the harp in various orchestral genres.

It is known that during his touring years and after, Liszt came in contact with many harpists, including the virtuosos of the French school of harp playing in Paris. The advent of Sébastien Erard’s double-action harp in both London and Paris, and Liszt’s friendship with Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) were also crucial influences on his compositions, for harp. Liszt was one of the titans of the Romantic era and his teaching, performing, compositions, and transpositions stood in stark contrast to the standards of “absolute music.” He strove to evoke emotions and images through his music. The harp, with its mythical image and characteristic resonance, was arguably an important element in his quest to stir the emotions.

More clarity on this subject is achieved in the article *Dolce Quasi Arpa: Franz Liszt and the Harp* by harpist, transcriber, and musicologist Dominique Piana. The author discusses the personal relationships Franz Liszt maintained with harpists, and makes
somewhat speculative assertions concerning his compositions and performances of his works in the Romantic era. Piana seeks to prove that these specific musical and personal associations were the sole influences of “harp-like” figurations, key usage, and timbre in Liszt’s piano works and in transcription of his works for harp. Within this article, Piana directly cites Liszt’s remarks, mentioned in Zimdar’s *The Piano Master Classes of Franz Liszt*, in regard to *Liebestraum No. 3* and the harpist, Wilhelm Posse.

Piana is deeply rooted in the historical traditions and technical aspects of the harp. Within the harp realm, carefully guarded musical traditions, stories, and teachings are passed down from generation to generation thereby placing extreme importance upon certain aspects of Piana’s perspective on Lisztian research. Her French harp teacher, Pierre Jamet, can trace his studies back to the very harpists who performed, inspired, and transcribed Liszt’s music. Pierre Jamet studied with Alphonse Hasselmans, who in his youth had studied with Gottlieb Krüger, who in turn had studied with Elias Parish Alvars.

The harpist Elias Parish Alvars (1808-1849) was a beloved friend to Liszt and brought the performance, technique, and musical nuances of Sébastien Erard’s newly invented double-action pedal harp to an entirely new level. Through his creative genius and innate talent, Parish Alvars ultimately changed the face of harp composition in the Romantic Era. Captivated by Elias Parish Alvars’s playing, transcriptions, and original compositions, Hector Berlioz was an avid supporter and held him in high regard as “the Liszt of the harp.”¹ The fascination Berlioz felt for Parish Alvars was shared by Liszt, as he, too, would often marvel at the harpist’s skills with enharmonics and his ability to play

pieces which appeared impossible to execute on the harp, such as Beethoven concertos and Chopin sonatas. Berlioz once wrote of Parish Alvars as a magician, for within his “passionate embrace, the harp becomes a siren, lovely neck inclined, and wild hair flowing, [creating] music of another world.”

However, in other respects, Parish Alvars raised the standard for harp playing to a height that not many harpists could reach. The pieces grew harder, the pedaling became more complex, and the single-action harps would no longer suffice. Composers of the Romantic era such as Liszt and Berlioz quickly came face to face with issues of double-action harp availability and the very fact that not all harpists could execute the swift pedal changes and complex fingerings that was required by their music. With efficient thinking and careful orchestration, Liszt soon developed a compositional style for the harp that used elements of his piano writing style yet was completely idiomatic to the harp. Liszt had to be practical, for he realized that capable harps and harpists would not always be available to learn and perform his compositions. The nuances of this interchangeability between harp and piano parts will be discussed shortly. Thus, to challenge Piana’s article, Liszt’s love of the harp was not the only factor that influenced his compositional style.

More compositional influences stemmed from Liszt’s relationships with the Romantic composers of the era. Liszt was not only a friend to them, he was very familiar with the compositions of his colleagues. It is well documented that he maintained close correspondence with Berlioz and Wagner, both of whom extensively incorporated harp into their symphonies and operas.

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Liszt was an enthusiastic admirer and acquaintance of Hector Berlioz during the years when they both lived in Paris. As previously mentioned, Berlioz was a zealous supporter of the new double-action harp and the musical talents of Elias Parish Alvars. It is likely that Berlioz shared this appreciation with Liszt and it is also likely that Liszt studied Berlioz’s harp writing. As tangible evidence of this admiration, Liszt wrote a faithful piano transcription of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* in 1833 and the final movement of *Harold en Italie* in 1836.\(^3\) If one were to take a look at Liszt’s *Transcendental Studies* of 1851 (the full version of the 1837 *Grandes Etudes*) one would see that they too are harmonically and rhythmically similar to Berlioz’s compositional style in the fourth movement of *Symphonie Fantastique* when “recalling the tritones of the ‘March to the Scaffold’ and the rhythmic audacities of the finale.”\(^4\)

The double harp part from the second movement of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* is quite substantial and is a staple of the harp orchestral audition repertoire. The opening of the infamously difficult second movement can be seen in Figure 1 below. Note the triplets in the right hand of the Berlioz part and their similarity to the triplets in Liszt’s *Nightly March* from *Two Episodes from Lenau’s Faust* (1856-1861) in Figure 2. There are distinct differences in the beat placement of the left hand in the Liszt but the overall concept of a gentle accompaniment set against a lyrical melody played with another sustaining instrument is the same.

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\(^4\) Ibid, 72.
Additionally, the second movement of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* has a very distinctive and exposed harp entrance. The swift upward flourish is effective in catching the listener’s attention and is clearly heard. Liszt mimics this effect in many of his compositions, especially in his symphonic poems *Orpheus*, *Les Préludes*, and *Tasso, Lamento e Trionfo*. Liszt also uses this effect in one of his small orchestral works titled *Künstler-Festzug Zur Schiller-Feier 1859 (Artists’ Procession for the Schiller Celebration in 1859)* as can be seen below in Figure 4. The tonalities between the two excerpts are different, including the beat placement, but the similar orchestration is very effective in cutting through a large ensemble, supporting the harmonic structure of the piece, and adding intrigue to the section as a whole. Liszt has taken what Berlioz created in 1830 and added his own character to the effect. By placing the flourish in a flat key (D-flat major) and placing the climax of the arpeggio in the upper register of the harp Liszt is revealing his close understanding of the fine workings of the instrument. When
the harp is set in a flat key the strings have no disc engaged on the mechanism and are therefore open and more resonant. Sharp keys require two discs to be engaged per string and slightly mute the total sound output of each string. This concept will be discussed later in Liszt’s orchestration style.

Figure 3. Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie Fantastique*, Second movement, mm. 9-18

Figure 4. Franz Liszt, *Künstler-Festzug Zur Schiller-Feier 1859*

Another important contemporary of Liszt was Richard Wagner, who gained his fame from such extensive operas as *Lohengrin* (1846-1848), *Das Rheingold* (1854), and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1862-1867). Liszt and Wagner met in Paris in the autumn of 1840 and maintained a close correspondence for 20 years. Author J.S. Shedlock states, "before they had become acquainted, each had dreamt of a new musical era. Though each had independently thought and worked, the same influences had acted
on both; the romantic spirit of the day had cast its spell over the two men.” 5 Liszt and Wagner were very similar in their compositional style and collaborated on many Romantic ideas, however, their harp writing could not have been more different.

Wagner wrote very unidiomatically for the harp and was moderately successful at exploiting all of its tonal and sonorous possibilities. An example from Act III, Scene I of his opera Lohengrin is provided below in Figure 5. There are many repeated notes that require swift pedal movement and accurate timing. To play a string repeatedly and maintain a clean, buzz-free tone is quite difficult. Harpists will normally try to find an enharmonic equivalent to the repeated pitch to avoid playing a string twice in quick succession. Based upon the excerpt below, measure 243 would require the equivalent of a trill on E sharp and F natural to maintain accuracy and speedy pedaling will be required throughout measure 250 to account for the chromatic descent from C sharp to C natural to B natural. This type of treacherous harp writing is very rarely found in Liszt’s orchestration for harp because of his thorough understanding of the instrument’s construction and its limitations and great possibilities.

Another composer who may have influenced Liszt’s harp writing was Robert Schumann (1810-1856). Robert Schumann never specifically wrote for the harp but many of his works, such as Drei Gesänge (Figure 6 below), have often been performed with harp rather than piano. His music is reminiscent of Liszt’s hybrid piano and harp writing that was previously discussed. Observe the similarities in chordal figuration between Schumann’s Drei Gesänge (1840) and Liszt’s symphonic poem Was man auf dem Berge hört (1856). Drei Gesänge, originally written for piano, can be easily transcribed to the harp with only a slight change between hands to accommodate the five-note arpeggio in the third and fourth beats of the excerpt’s second measure. The Liszt excerpt is an actual harp part and is similar with its arching arpeggios and four to three notes per hand.
By delving deeper into Liszt’s harp writing one can discover certain consistencies in notation, tonality, and extra musical associations that recur from orchestral piece to piece. Overall, his harp writing can be generalized as wonderfully idiomatic, very strategically exposed and virtuosic in character, but lacking in melodic support. Liszt routinely incorporates the harp in musical situations where it can be heard above the orchestra at moments of dramatic tonal and dynamic shifts. The harp will often embellish the harmonic structure of the strings with arpeggios and upward rolled chords. Glissandi will always be featured, whether in a solo cadenza or during a soft section where the
orchestra retreats into the background. However, most frequently the harp does not stand on its own but reinforces and/or supports an important change in musical character.

This change of musical character will normally accentuate some sort of mythical, angelic, and/or innocent musical event. These events occur most consistently in Liszt’s symphonic poems. The symphonic poem has a programmatic title and is only one-movement in duration. Liszt wrote a total of 12 symphonic poems during his years at Weimar. These poems were published between 1856-1861 and will characteristically portray mythical and/or legendary characters of heroism and creative genius. His symphonic poems Tasso, Orpheus, Prometheus, and Mazeppa, all follow this design. Ultimately, “the literary, philosophical, and historical background of each work’s topic character or subject provides a lens through which to interpret each work; some connections, however, are more tenuous than others.”

For instance, Liszt states in the preface of his second symphonic poem Tasso, completed in 1854,

Tasso [a revolutionary poet] loved and suffered in Ferrara; he was revenged at Rome; his glory still lives in the popular songs of Venice. These three periods are inseparable from his immortal memory. To render these in music, I felt I must first call up the spirit of the hero as it now appears to us, haunting the lagunes of Venice; next, we must see his proud and sad figure, as it glides among the fêtes of Ferrara—the birth-place of his masterpieces; finally, we must follow him to

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Rome, the Eternal City, which, in holding forth to him his crown, glorified him as a martyr and poet.\footnote{Franz Liszt, \textit{Symphonic Poems}, vol. 1 of \textit{Franz Liszt’s Musikalische Werke}. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1966), 147.}

Liszt incorporates harp writing extensively in his symphonic poems. Within these orchestral works, Liszt will never incorporate the harp in musical moments of angst, intensity, or voracity. As one of the oldest instruments, for thousands of years, from Egyptian times to the present, the harp has been associated with angels, peace, and serenity. Its “feminine” nature cannot be ignored and Liszt avidly exploits this perennial stereotype to its greatest extent. To add to this social convention, during the mid-19th century the harp had not yet gained its acceptance as a solo instrument worthy of the concert hall. The harp predominantly remained in the parlor tradition of upper class and middle class society, mostly played on by amateurs. This social convention can possibly add a new perspective as to why Liszt never provided melodic material to his writing for the harp and kept the main themes and ideas in other instruments of the orchestra. In his orchestral writing, Liszt clearly favored the extra-musical associations and imagery provided by the tone color of the harp over its melodic possibilities.

Despite this lack of melodic reinforcement, the harp still plays a large role in embellishing and supporting the changing tonalities of the orchestra. Liszt made it a habit to write harp entrances in the tonic of the newly introduced key. These keys are generally flat keys when the harp plays but will never have more than four sharps (E major). The
orchestra will often modulate out of some distantly related key into a flat key and the harp will periodically enter in the tonic for tonal stability.

As previously discussed, when there are only a few engaged pedals, the double-action harp (now in C-flat major) is more sonorous due to its open strings. Liszt is purposely writing the harp parts so that they will be clearly heard by the audience. To clarify these previous statements, examine another excerpt of Liszt’s *Künstler-Festzug Zur Schiller-Feie 1859 (Artists’ Procession for the Schiller Celebration of 1859)* in Figure 8 below. Using a solo horn melody Liszt gradually modulates from B major to A-flat major. The orchestra and harp add one more flat and enter in D-flat major with D-flat major arpeggios at the point of modulation to enforce the new key. The harp is very clearly heard over the orchestra and a dramatic change of tonal character is smoothly and successfully reached. This same orchestration technique can be seen in measures 102, 129, and 144 of *Orpheus* (Symphonic Poem No. 4) as well as measure 70 of *Les Préludes* (Symphonic Poem No. 3). Whether Liszt’s desire to modulate the entire orchestra into flats was for the sole benefit of the harp or for the change of harmonic character one will never truly know.
When looking through Liszt’s orchestral scores the harp part is easy to identify because of his consistencies in chordal figuration and notation. Liszt is very meticulous in delineating the use of the right and left hands by way of specific stem notation to facilitate smooth arpeggiations and the rolling of chords. When the stems go up, Liszt intends that the notes be played in the right hand and when down, in the left hand. This practice of specifying hands with stem direction is commonly used in composing for the piano, especially if hand crossing is desired. Observe Figures 9 and 10 below. Liszt notates the harp parts of his small orchestral works *What One Hears on the Mountain* (Symphonic Poem No. 1) and *The Dance in the Village Inn* (the first movement of *Two Episodes from Lenau’s Faust*) in accordance with which hands he desires. Now, in comparison, note this hand alternation and its similarity with Liszt’s solo piano writing in *Totentanz* (see Figure 12). The similarities can be clearly seen in regard to his incorporation of four notes in each hand and the repetition of alternating chords to create a *bisbigliando* or trill-like effect (depending on his desired tempo, of course). Within Liszt’s harp parts the notation for the hands are always placed in two staves but in piano
writing the parts vary from one staff to three. However, it is clearly possible that all parts could have been notated interchangeably due to treble clefs in both staves. Based on this notation, these chord shapes would have easily cut through the orchestra because of their high register in the harp, their ease of execution, and their skillful orchestration in quiet orchestral moments.

Figure 9. Franz Liszt, *What One Hears on the Mountain*, 2 measures after section O

Figure 10. Franz Liszt, *Dance in the Village Inn*, harp Part mm. 575-580

Figure 11. Franz Liszt, *Totentanz*, piano part, mm. 16-19
Liszt was also very skilled in using arpeggios and glissandi that would span the entire range of the harp. As previously discussed, these cadenza-like figures were most often placed at great moments of tonal change in harmonic and melodic character and in intriguing instances where the harp would stand on its own. Liszt alternates the number of notes in each chord sonority and will most often notate three to four pitches in each hand with intervals ranging from a minor second to an octave. With keen sensitivity towards the stretch of a harpists’ fingers and with skillful chord notation, Liszt never created an interval within one hand that employed three to four fingers above a major sixth. When requiring two fingers Liszt never composed an interval large than an octave.

This same notation extends to his arpeggios that would rhythmically range from eighth notes and triplets to sextuplets. There is no consistency as to the specific beat where these arpeggios, chords, and glissandi were placed in a measure. Liszt strategically placed the harp parts on both strong or weak beats depending of the rhythmic attitude or character he was trying to create. To see examples of Liszt’s arpeggios, rolled chords, and glissandi see Figures 4, 7, 10, and 11 above and Figure 12 below.
In sum, based upon the idiomatic, largely exposed, and highly effective harp writing in his orchestral works, Franz Liszt clearly understood the intricate workings of the double-action harp and the technical capabilities of the harpists of the time. His piano writing style was similar and at times interchangeable with his harp writing, which often carried into the arpeggios, chords, and glissandi that were incorporated in the harp parts. He was largely influenced by the Romantic composers of the time such as Schumann, Berlioz, and to certain extent, Wagner, and there are certain similarities in orchestration and compositional style that seem to carry between each composer. Liszt developed his own characteristic harp writing style that can easily be identified within scores and is very effective in conveying the mythical, angelic, and innocent images he attempts to musically convey in his symphonic poems and smaller orchestral works. This writing has been reproduced by such 20\textsuperscript{th}-century composers as Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, and
Giacomo Puccini and continues to serve as an accurate model of successful and highly rewarding harp writing.


