A PERFORMER’S ANALYSIS OF LISZT’S SONETTO 47 DEL PETRARCA

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Liszt was born in the part of western Hungary that became known today as the Burgenland. As one of the leaders of the Romantic movement in music, Liszt developed new methods of piano performance and composition; he anticipated the ideas/procedures of music in the 20th century. He also promoted the method of thematic transformation as part of his revolution in form, made radical experiments in harmony, and invented the symphonic poem for orchestra. He was a composer, teacher and most importantly, a highly accomplished pianist. As one of the greatest piano virtuosos of his time, he had excellent technique and a dazzling performance ability that gained him fame and enabled the spreading of the knowledge of other composers’ music. He was also committed to preserving and promoting the best music from the past, including Bach, Handel, Schubert, Weber and Beethoven. Liszt had a strong religious background, which was contradictory to his love for worldly sensationalism. It is fair, however, to say that he was a great man who had a positive influence on people around him.

From the 1830-1840’s, Liszt developed a new vocabulary for technique and musical expression in the piano world. He was able to do so partly because of the advances in the mechanical construction of the instrument. The piano had greater strength, a bigger sound and a wider dynamic range, which enabled a wealth of coloristic and timbral effects. Liszt expanded the possibilities of promoting symphonic and vocal works by transcribing them for piano. ¹

Besides his contributions to the exploration of the modern piano technique, Liszt was also one of the greatest teachers of his generation. As a conductor and teacher, he

became the most influential figure of the New German School, especially at Weimar, and was dedicated to progress in music. Liszt’s pedagogical activities remain an important part of his musical legacy. Although Liszt himself wrote no piano method books or textbooks, a number of his pupils wrote eyewitness accounts of his teaching. From these accounts, it is possible to deduce something not only of Liszt’s methods of instruction, but also of his approach to keyboard performance in general. He taught from his earliest years in Paris, and was still giving lessons during the last month of his life, nearly 60 years later. More than 400 students studied with him. He was the one who invented the concept of a “masterclass,” which has come to dominate instrumental teaching nowadays. He had the idea of having young masters stimulating one another to perfect their performances to a higher level. As we are familiar with how a masterclass goes, the custom was for one pupil to play, with Liszt and the others observing, after which Liszt would make some comments about the performance and demonstrate portions of the work himself. Liszt was fond of using “poetical imaginations in order to draw an appropriate interpretation from his pupils.”

Liszt also believed in preserving artistic individuality; he did not try to make carbon copies of himself through his teaching, which helped him stand out from his contemporaries.

Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage (Years of Pilgrimage)* is a collection of character pieces reflecting his various journeys and experiences. The first two books, *Suïse (Switzerland)* and *Italie (Italy)*, as well as the supplement to *Italie*, subtitled *Venezia e Napoli (Venice and Naples)* were written from the late 1830’s through 1850. The third book, *Troisième année (Third Year)*, was written between 1866 and 1877. The music of

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this third collection exhibits stylistic characteristics in keeping with Liszt’s late period style.

*Sonneto 47 del Petrarca* comes from the second book *Deuxième année: Italie* (*Second Year: Italy*). In this collection, there are three pieces based upon sonnets by Petrarch that were originally written for voice and piano, then later transcribed by Liszt for solo piano. The transcriptions are very poetic, profound and philosophical. Liszt applied his understanding of Petrarch’s poetic structure to the creative process: the musical language reflects the poetic form and has certain text painting elements. Here is a translation of the poem for *Sonneto 47*:

Blessed be the day, the month, the year,  
the season, the hour, the moment, the lovely scene,  
the spot when I was put in thrall  
by two lovely eyes which bind me fast.

And blessed be the first sweet pang  
I suffered when love overwhelmed me,  
the bows and arrows which stung me,  
and the wounds which pierce to my heart.

Blessed be the many voices which have echoed  
when I have called Laura's name,  
the sighs and tears, the longing;  
and blessed be all those writings  
in which I have spread her fame, and my thought  
which stem from her and center on her alone.³

In the following section of this paper, an examination of various musical elements of the piece will reveal Liszt’s expressive content as well as some of the challenges in performing this work.

Melody

While many Romantic pieces have long continuous melodic lines that consist of equal note values, the melody in this piece is very challenging due to the syncopation and the constant rests and fermatas. In the beginning five measures of the piece, the top notes of the chords form an ascending melodic line. The fact that the melodic line has so many interruptions and is syncopated makes it very hard to form a long and continuous musical line (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Liszt, Sonetto 47 del Petrarca, mm. 1-5

The same challenge is presented in mm. 6-11 as the melody is interrupted by numerous rests and fermatas.

Figure 2: Liszt, Sonetto 47 del Petrarca, mm. 5-11

From measures 52-58, Liszt writes the music on four staves, and clearly separates the melody from the “shimmer” on the top, which makes it easier for the performer to read
and understand. The challenge here is to keep the main phrase going while being interrupted by the inserted notes and fermatas.

Figure 3: Liszt, *Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*, mm.52-58

In measures 12-52, the continuity of the long melody in the right hand is interrupted by the bass line, being on the main beats, which threatens to interfere with the melody. Here is an excerpt of the example:

Figure 4: Liszt, *Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*, mm.14-21
From measures 69-84, the melody switches to the left hand, yet the right hand is in a higher register and has a thicker texture. This requires the performer to be aware of the balance in dynamics between the two hands, making sure to bring out the left hand.

Figure 5: Liszt, *Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*, mm.69-74

To conquer the above obstacles, the performer can start by singing the melodic line to have an aural model of how the melody should sound. Next, the performer should play just the melody without any other parts to work on playing it expressively and to get a sense of the continuity. When the pianist adds back in all of the other parts, the
performer must engage his or her aural sense to stay connected with the lines and to be able to highlight the melody.

**Texture**

The texture of *Sonetto 47* is mostly homophonic. In the *Sempre mosso, con intimo sentiment* section, the texture consists of the rolling quarter-note bass line and the singing melody in the right hand, which is often doubled with other notes. The fact that the right hand has more than one voice presents a challenge of its own; the complexity of the texture here increases the level of difficulty for the performers. It is hard to play more than one part in each hand, plus having to highlight the melody. Voicing among the thick texture is important. In the beginning several measures of the piece, for example, the right-hand large chords bring a grand gesture along with the necessity of outlining the top notes, as they are the main melody. Playing chords and voicing different notes among them can be difficult. It takes a lot of training and emphasis on the sound. The beginning step would be playing out the melody all by itself, so that the ear can be familiar with what’s important, then transferring that in the playing, leaning the weight towards the fifth finger to bring out the top voice.

Because of the rich and thick texture Liszt put into this piece, the performers are also challenged to consider how much time to take for each fermata and rest, enabling the clarity of the sound as well as keeping the continuity of the music. Naturally, the bigger the sound, the longer it takes to die out completely. The pianist needs to pay attention to the sound effect that is created in the process, since it might vary depending on the
specific piano being used, the size of the room, and/or the size of the audience. When the sound has cleared out, the pianist would gently release the pedal as it is appropriate.

Figure 6: Liszt, *Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*, mm.14-21

Harmony

This piece is in the key of D-flat major, but it does not start in the tonic key. Instead it starts with a strong sense of A major, which is a half step away from the dominant of D flat. The main melody does not stay in D flat throughout either; it travels to the key of G major and later is presented in E major. The D-flat major tonality is established in the A section (starting from measure 12) and stays so for a while until measure 28, then it starts to modulate. Instead of a common-chord or pivot-chord modulation, a lot of Liszt’s modulations are accomplished by half- or whole-step movement. In Figure 8, we can see a lot of such examples. In the bass of measures 27 to 29, the E flat goes to E natural and then D sharp, using chromaticism to modulate from the key of D flat to the key of G.
When the G-major key signature appears at measure 32, Liszt has arrived at the tonic chord of G in its second inversion with a D in the bass that is sustained through three measures until the conclusive cadence to the tonic is completed at measure 36. This is somewhat obscure considering the piece starts on A, and then modulates to D flat, neither of which has any obvious relation to the key of G.

The cadenza section is the most chromatic part of the whole piece. There is a descending line going through the voices all of the way from A sharp to F-double sharp.

The right and left hand intervals in this section form a series of descending chromatic
diminished chords throughout. The harmonic progression accelerates in this section as it descends through pairs of chords and then eventually falls into rapid, single chromatic chords.

Figure 9: Liszt, *Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*, m.59

The cadenza ends on a diminished-seventh chord. In the next measure, another transition ends on a G sharp, which is repeated several times, and becomes the third of the new tonic E-major chord. A portion of the A theme is presented now in this key of E major. In the B section, which begins at measure 69, there are a lot of chromatic chord movements by seconds. The alternation between the A flat and B flat, for example, is similar to previous passages in the A section. At measure 85, a fragment of material from the introduction indicates the final approach to the last tonic key of D flat through the same chromatic bass-line movement that has been seen already.

**Form**

Thematic transformation belongs above all to the 19th century, when composers exploited it through the possibilities that arose from giving themes dramatic or human
significance in instrumental or vocal music. Liszt is particularly associated with this practice and applied it as one of his compositional techniques.

Thematic transformation is the alternation of themes for the sake of changing their character while retaining their essential identity. It differs from development in that the resulting theme is likely to be treated with as much independence as the original. The term normally excludes such abstract devices as argumentation and diminution. Although the technique is found early in the history of the suite of dance movements, the term is most often applied to music of the 19th century. Liszt used it extensively in his symphonic poems.\footnote{Don Randel, ed., \textit{The New Harvard Dictionary of Music} (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 866.}

This fits in this sonetto perfectly, as the A section is repeated, but each time with subtle changes.

Figure 10: Liszt, \textit{Sonetto 47 del Petrarca}, mm.12-16

In measure 36, the A section begins again, now in the key of G. This is an example of the thematic transformation, where Liszt took similar material and transposed it to a different key. Twelve measures into the G-major section, the melody gradually expands, both in range dynamically. In measure 48, the D2 of the D-major octave in the bass reaches the lowest pitch in this piece. The B section begins at measure 69, where the piece returns to D-flat major.
Measure 85-95 is the last section of the piece, which again brings back the melody of the main theme in D-flat major.
Expressive Devices

Liszt uses a number of expressive devices in this work through dynamics, pedaling, expressive text, and articulation. This is a very expressive piece with frequent dynamic changes throughout the composition. Starting at a dynamic level of \textit{mf}, Liszt then writes three continuous \textit{crescendo} markings, suggesting the growing passion in the beginning five measures. In measures 6-9, \textit{Accentuato} markings indicate the need for expressive playing of the melody.

Figure 13: Liszt, \textit{Sonetto 47 del Petrarca}, mm. 5-9

The last section of the piece, from measure 69 to the end, is marked \textit{pp} and \textit{dolce cantando} (sweetly singing). This section should be played in a flowing manner, requiring a lot of control of the sound from the performer, since the right hand has a thicker texture (with intervals of sixths) and is in a higher register on the keyboard. However, the main melody is in the left hand, which means the right hand should be playing below the dynamic of the left.

Liszt uses pedal markings for both \textit{una corda} and \textit{tre corda} in this \textit{sonetto}. The \textit{una corda} is a great expressive device that changes the sound and color of the particular section. The first \textit{una corda} marking appears in the 6/4 section beginning at measure 12. It is marked \textit{Sempre mosso, con intimo sentimento} (always moving with deep feeling)
with the description of *l’accompagnamento sempre dolce* (with sweet accompaniment). Another place that the *una corda* is suggested appears in measure 36 when the A theme reappears in the key of G. Liszt clearly indicates through the *una corda* marking that he wants a different color when the same theme is presented the second time. Liszt also uses longer pedaling to create expressive passages, such as in measure 89, where he indicates to hold the pedal through a strong chord then through a series of running eighth notes. This thickens the sound effect and makes the background ring with different layers of harmonies.

Figure 14: Liszt, *Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*, m. 89

In the following example Liszt uses the pedal marking *tre corde*, clearly calling for the most resonant sounds on the keyboard.

Figure 15: Liszt, *Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*, mm. 30-32
Liszt writes a lot of expressive texts to help the performer articulate the sound effect that he had in mind when composing this piece. Two measures into the lyrical section at measure 14, the right hand outlines the melody in an *espressivo e un poco marcato* manner (expressive and a little marked). There is also the sign of *rinfz. ed appassionato* in measure 32, which means “passionate with special emphasis.” At measures 48-49 Liszt uses the indication of *vibrato assai*, which means very reverberating, resounding, or ringing. Perhaps Liszt put the mark here to inspire the performer to think carefully about creating a very expressive sound. As previously mentioned, Liszt also used numerous pauses as expressive devices.

Figure 16: Liszt, *Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*, mm.48-49

**Conclusion**

Studying and performing this piece opened my eyes to Liszt’s expressive devices, especially regarding the rests and syncopations. It was a challenge at first to achieve the best timing in these sections. It takes musical sophistication to appreciate what each symbol means and how it should be interpreted. It was also hard in the memorization process, since the harmony changes frequently in the lyrical section. Highlighting the melodies as was suggested in the previous chapter helped me to hear the lines better and
focusing on the left hand helped solidify the memorization process as well. This is a highly artistic piece that has great musical value, and should be played more often by the pianists.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Appendix

Benedetto sia 'l giorno, e 'l mese, e l'anno,
E la stagione, e 'l tempo, e l'ora, e 'l punto
E 'l bel paese e 'l loco, ov'io fui giunto
Da'duo begli occhi che legato m'anno;

E benedetto il primo dolce affanno
Ch'i' ebbi ad esser con Amor congiunto,
E l'arco e la saette ond' i' fui punto,
E le piaghe, ch'infino al cor mi vanno.

Benedette le voci tante, ch'io
Chiamando il nome di Laura ho sparte,
E i sospiri e le lagrime e 'l desio.

E benedette sian tutte le carte
Ov'io fama le acquisto, e il pensier mio,
Ch'è sol di lei, si ch'altra non v'ha parte.  

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5 Francesco Petrarca, no title, Canzoniere (Rerum vulgarium fragmenta), in 1. Rime In vita di Madonna Laura, no. 61.