

Reading Franz Liszt: Revealing the Poetry Behind the Piano Music by Paul Roberts

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As an introduction to this excerpt Paul Roberts writes:

One month before his 36th birthday, in late 1847, Liszt gave up his illustrious career as the world's leading virtuoso pianist and within a few months was installed in Weimar as Kapellmeister to Grand Duke Carl Alexander. Here he became obsessed with the work of Germany's greatest poet, Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), and especially his monumental verse drama, *Faust*. The play tells the story of Faust's tragic pact with the devil, Mephistopheles, who promises him endless and extravagant pleasure in exchange for his soul. One of the devil's gifts is the beautiful peasant girl Gretchen. The tragedy that ensued, and the religious, moral and philosophical questions with which it engaged, had an enormous impact on artists - composers, writers, painters - of the nineteenth century and beyond.

In my book I wanted to examine the meaning of the Faust story for Liszt, and the complex web of associations in his mind when he was gestating, almost simultaneously, the B minor Sonata and the Faust Symphony. Sketches for both exist from the 1840s, and even an early version of the sonata from 1849, which Liszt played to his friends. But serious work on the B minor Sonata that we know today was not begun until 1852; the Faust Symphony was completed the following year.

The question is whether there is a plausible relationship between the Sonata and Goethe's play? I devoted two chapters to this enquiry, the first principally about the play and its meaning, and the second focussing on the sonata itself. What is missing from the following excerpt is my discussion of the wonders of the play

(Chapter 4, *The Question of Goethe's Faust*), and a more detailed account of its possible application to Liszt's music (Chapter 5, *Music as Metaphor*). For that, readers will need the whole context of the book. I say 'possible' application because the wellsprings of art are essentially unfathomable. The creative imagination does not respond readily to the rules of science, and talking about the meaning of music can only be speculative. In my Introduction to the book I addressed this question and I ended it with a quotation with which I will end here: "The construction of meaning is always a hypothesis, that is a well meaning guess."¹

Liszt's Sonata in B minor - Goethe's Faust and the Nature of Metaphor

The inclusion of the B minor Sonata in my exploration of Liszt's debt to literature might seem an anomaly. It is a work with no programme, no descriptive title, and no epigraph, with all the hallmarks of an autonomous work in the sonata tradition. After initial neglect and dismissal — the influential critic Eduard Hanslick proclaimed that 'he who has heard it and found it beautiful cannot be helped,' and Clara Schumann found in it 'only blind noise'² — it now holds a central place as one of the greatest works of nineteenth century piano music: for its monumental proportions, its colossal emotional breadth, and for its masterly reconstruction of a classical sonata structure that combines four movements into one.

But a programmatic context for the B minor Sonata has long been fought over, and above all its relation to one of the pinnacles of European literature, Wolfgang von Goethe's verse drama *Faust*. Many pianists have made this connection — among them Alfred Cortot, Louis Kentner, Claudio Arrau and Alfred Brendel; many other commentators have refuted it, notably Liszt's first major biographer Lisa Ramann,

¹ Jens Zimmermann, *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 65. For more on hermeneutics see 'Hermeneutics' in Lawrence Kramer, *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 1-19.

² See the Barenreiter edition of the Sonata in B minor, ed. Michael Kube, vii.

who worked with him closely and devotedly for over a decade at the end of his life, and Liszt's current major biographer Alan Walker.

If Liszt had intended a programme for his sonata, it appears he said nothing about it. But it is also possible that he was not quite so silent as has been believed.

For Claudio Arrau the sonata's Faustian context was self evident, and moreover "was taken for granted among Liszt's pupils."³ This is intriguing, all the more so because Arrau's teacher, Martin Krause, was one of these pupils. The difficulty with the remark is that it is not corroborated anywhere else, least of all in the memoirs of those who took notes during Liszt's famous master classes (notably Lina Ramann's *Pädagogium*, and the diaries of August Göllerich and Carl Lachmund). But then the sonata was barely played in the classes, and there were few public performances during Liszt's lifetime. In Göllerich's diary, which records in meticulous detail all the pieces performed for Liszt over a period of 2 years from 1884 to 1886 in Weimar, Rome and Pest, the sonata is not mentioned once. In Ramann's *Pädagogium* there are a few references, all of which have entered into the literature, but not one mention of *Faust*.

So what are we to make of all this? Arrau is surely remembering information he could only have got from his teacher Krause, who was an important presence in the Liszt entourage during those later years. Krause founded one of the first Liszt Societies in Leipzig, he was a pall bearer at Liszt's funeral and he gave an address by his graveside. He seems a thoroughly credible witness.

There are strong reasons to believe that Liszt himself questioned the need for literary paraphernalia - he was constantly criticised, indeed pilloried, for resorting to "programme" music - and that this was the burning question in his mind during the sonata's composition. When it reached publication in May 1854 he wanted it, he said, to be his final word in the realm of piano composition: "I will finish with the piano, for the time being, in order to occupy myself exclusively with orchestral compositions,

³ Joseph Horowitz, *Conversations with Arrau* (London: Collins, 1982), 137.

and to attempt a number of things in this area that for quite some time have become an inner necessity for me.”⁴ The inner necessity was his desire to explore the union of poetry and music, what would become his great programmatic works, the *Faust* and *Dante Symphonies* and the *Symphonic Poems*. His sonata, then, would be the opposite, a proud demonstration that he could write an extended work of pure music, unadorned by title, epigraph or programme, a perfectly formed sonata structure that could stand comparison with the greatest piano works of Beethoven. The literary context, if there was one, he would keep to himself so as to prove, as he said in a different context, music’s “supreme power of self-sufficiency.”⁵

Liszt suffered from repeated critical denigration of his music, and a widespread ridicule of his intentions. He mostly suffered in silence other than to his closest friends and pupils. But the refusal of his publishers to add literary quotations to his scores angered him (as was the case with the *Faust Symphony*, the *Petrarch Sonnets*, and the *Two Scenes from Faust* — one of which was the ‘Mephisto Waltz’), because, he said “the so-called competent critics do not want it, and because program music is so much despised. The publishers do not dare act against the censor’s veto and allow the poems to be left out again and again.”⁶ Anticipating the reception of his *Harmony poétiques et religieuses*, piano pieces inspired by the religious poetry of Alphonse Lamartine, he was bitterly ironic: “Yes, when nothing comes to mind, then one takes a poem from somewhere and it works; one need understand nothing about music and one produces — program music!”⁷ To his closest confidant of all, Carolyne von Sayne-Wittgenstein, he wrote that the critic, Edward Hanslick, “will soon be taking the trouble to pass on his good advice to me, and I, as befits me, will be told of my total

⁴ See the letter to Louis Köhle, May 1854, quoted in the Barenreiter edition of the Sonata in B minor, ed. Michael Kube, p. vi.

⁵ Franz Liszt, “Berlioz and His ‘Harold’ Symphony,” in Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* (London: Faber, 1982), 107-133. But he also wrote in this same article that music and poetry ‘feel themselves mutually attracted and striving for inner union.’

⁶ August Göllerich, *the Piano Master Classes of Franz Liszt 1884-1886*, ed. Wilhelm Jerger, trans. Richard Louis Zimdars (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1996), 33.

⁷ August Göllerich, *Ibid.* 29.

incompetence in matters of musical composition.”⁸ To another correspondent he wrote, in the spirit of the damned souls of Dante’s hell, of the “learned criticisms... which declare in unison a truth which is truer than true: that LISZT has never been and never will be capable of writing four bars...that he is sentenced without remission to drag around the ball and chain of piano transcription in perpetuity.”⁹ His bitterness, and anger, can be sensed in those upper case letters.

It does seem that the Sonata in B minor and the Faust Symphony were present at some level in Liszt’s mind simultaneously, whatever the precise chronology of setting them down. While he was sensing and planning a full response to Goethe in symphonic form - it is no exaggeration to say he was obsessed by the Faust story during his early years at Weimar - the sonata was taking shape, we can argue, as the antidote to the foreseen programmatic treatment in the symphony. The sonata would be the antithesis. With the Faust Symphony to come, already settled in his mind in a manner which would deal with his inner ‘necessity,’ he was able in the sonata to divest the story of its outer garments so as to distill its poetic core.

The French pianist Alfred Cortot, who was the first to record the B minor Sonata, never concealed his own belief that it was directly related to Faust. In his commentary for his 1934 edition for Salabert, however, he concentrates almost exclusively on issues of pianism and structure: “No program underlies this gigantic composition”, he writes, “in which all the resources of the piano are exploited through writing of prodigious novelty and ingenuity...But the themes confront each other with such dramatic plasticity that one cannot help but attach a symbolic meaning to them.” We experience the themes, he writes, “not as abstract constructs but as purely human sensibility,” and throughout we “glimpse the strife of emotions beneath the clash of musical propositions.”¹⁰

⁸ Letter to Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, 27 December, 1871, in Ernst Burger, *Franz Liszt: A Chronicle of His Life in Pictures and Documents*, trans. Stewart Spencer, forward Alfred Brendel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 286.

⁹ Alan Walker, *Liszt: The Weimar Years, 1848-1861* (London: Faber 1989), 393-4.

¹⁰ Alfred Cortot, *ibid.*

For me this says it all, tying together the intense emotional charge of the music with Liszt's supreme control of his material. We know the themes are "abstract constructs", we can analyse their workings, yet we can effortlessly experience the music in terms of "human sensibility." The manner in which Liszt presents and then transforms his themes is clearly and thrillingly discernible to the ear, creating for the listener an experience analogous to a play or a novel.

Alfred Brendel is also a *Faust* proponent. In his 1981 essay on the sonata he wrote that "the Faust-Mephisto-Gretchen constellation ... remains a working hypothesis and my personal luxury."¹¹ How interesting that forty years on, in a lecture at the Goethe Institute in London (January 2021), his hypothesis becomes certainty. He speaks now of the sonata and symphony as "companions" and of how the sonata "can safely be located in *Faust's* orbit."¹²

Liszt taught "in an allegorical way, or by metaphor," his student August Stradal recalled¹³ (for example, to the pianist Arthur Friedheim, who was playing *Harmonies du soir*, Liszt exclaimed, pointing outside to the sunset, "Play that!"¹⁴). Writing and talking about music, the experience of music rather than its construction, can hardly avoid metaphor. The scholar and pianist Kenneth Hamilton employs a familiar literary metaphor when he comments on the strange presence of the key of E flat in the sonata's tonal scheme — he calls it "a sort of "Banquo's ghost"...turning up in the most unexpected places."¹⁵ Banquo's ghost repeatedly appears in *Macbeth*. It is not only unexpectedness that the metaphor captures, but the palpable sense of something awry in the scheme of things — the key of E flat as Liszt uses it in his tonal structure is 'wrong'. The metaphor is even more appropriate than Hamilton perhaps intended.

¹¹ Alfred Brendel, *Music Sounded Out* (London: Robson Books, 1990), 175.

¹² Alfred Brendel, *Naivety and Irony: Goethe's Musical Needs*, English Goethe Society Wilkinson-Willoughby Lecture, 21 January 2021.

¹³ Carl Lachmund, *Living with Liszt, from the Diary of an American Pupil of Liszt, 1882-1884*, edited, annotated and introduced by Alan Walker (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1995), 14.

¹⁴ Alan Walker, *Liszt: The Weimar Years, 1848-1861* (London: Faber 1989), 247.

¹⁵ Kenneth Hamilton, *Liszt Sonata in B minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 48.

Macbeth on seeing Banquo's ghost dares to "look on that/Which might appall the devil." The odd presence of E flat in the sonata might not be as intense as the effect of Banquo's ghost on Macbeth, but with this image in mind in the context of our Faustian metaphor the performer can possibly make it so.

I suggested in relation to the Petrarch Sonnets, in a previous chapter, that Liszt's music can be seen as a kind of translation of Petrarch. Another way of seeing it is as metaphor. And the Faust Symphony can be understood as a metaphor for Liszt's response to Goethe's play. Liszt clearly saw it this way. As listeners, especially if we know the Goethe, the music becomes a metaphor for our own responses to the play. The colossal experience of Goethe's *Faust* is staged in our heads as the music plays out. The great romantic poet, Lord Byron (whom Liszt revered), wanted his own poetry to be seen as "mental theatre." This can also be said of Liszt's music.

If this is inescapably true of the Faust Symphony, then why not for the B minor Sonata? The usual, and on the surface perfectly understandable, response is "because Liszt said nothing about it." But this ignores so many questions about the nature of music as well as the nature of the creative process; it ignores all the historical and biographical details in the background of the sonata's creation; it ignores what we know about Liszt's responses to literature's "union" with music, and the way he composed it, conducted it, and taught it. Above all it ignores the nature of music as metaphor.

In a similar way to an actor grappling with the enormities of a tragic character in Shakespeare — or Arthur Miller's Joe Keller, or indeed Goethe's Faust — performers of Liszt's Sonata in B minor (the pianist as actor) need to find some correspondence for the vast scale of its emotional landscape, not only in ourselves but outside ourselves. In this way we will have reference points by which to control the intensity and strength of the music, and to enable us not to flinch from it. *Faust* can be this reference point. For some it will be "a private indulgence" (Brendel); for others (as for Arrau) it will be a specific matching of motif to story. Equally there are others who

refer to different stories (the bible, Miltons' *Paradise Lost*), or to none. One would hope that the end results, in performance, will all be essentially the same, a rendering that brings the experience of Liszt's sonata alive, off the page; and essentially different, in as much as all performances of the sonata can only be a personal response from within one's own imagination. As Cortot said, "the field, here, is wide open to the imagination of the performer."¹⁶

My purpose has been to review Goethe's *Faust* and its central place in Liszt's creative imagination; and to suggest ways in which a knowledge of the play and Liszt's reaction to it might lead to a methodology for performing the B minor sonata. I have aimed to show how music can provide a metaphor for the experience of human feeling and interaction, as well as story-telling, and how we can requisition literary texts as a means of "enlivening the terminology," in Brendel's words, when we need to talk about music. But I would suggest that *Faust* does far more for us, as we grapple with the enormity of Liszt's creation, than enable a conversation.

In the summer of 1854 Mary Ann Evans (soon to be known as the novelist George Eliot), and her partner George Henry Lewes, spent several weeks in Weimar with Liszt. She described him as "the first really inspired man I ever saw."¹⁷ Lewes was gathering material for his book *The Life and Works of Goethe*. Of *Faust* he wrote that it "has every element: wit, pathos, wisdom, farce, mystery, melody, reverence, doubt, magic, and irony; not a chord of the lyre is unstrung, not a fibre of the heart untouched."¹⁸ A case can be made for every one of these elements in Liszt's B minor Sonata (stretching a point with farce perhaps, although we might see a flicker of farce in the hair-raising dance of the fugue — Mephistopheles and Faust — and its denouement). A view that takes Goethe's *Faust* as a reference point aligns Liszt's

¹⁶ Alfred Cortot, *Liszt Sonata in B minor* (Paris: Salabert, 1949)

¹⁷ Adrian Williams, *Portrait of Liszt By Himself and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 308.

¹⁸ George Henry Lewes, *The Life of Goethe*, in Osman Duranni, *Faust* (Robertsbridge: Helm Information Ltd., 2004), 192.

greatest piano work with one of the greatest master works of European literature.

That is the sonata's stature. That is justification enough for *Faust*.