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FRANZ LISZT.

OCTOBER 22, 1811—JULY 31, 1886.

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

(Continued from p. 639.)

IV.

The more one knows of Liszt's work, the more clearly one realises the number of lines on which he was a pioneer. 'Liszt,' said the Countess Sayn-Wittgenstein, 'has thrown his spear further into the future than Wagner.' That dictum seems perfectly true to-day, half-a-century or so after it was uttered. Wagner, of course, was by far the greater musician of the two; but his work has practically ended with him. Like Bach, he is a magnificent terminal post. He had numberless imitators in the generation preceding this; but he has had no real followers, no one who has carried his principles—the principles that were specifically his—a stage further. To-day he is an emotional stimulus rather than a formal model. Liszt, with much less imaginative power and musical scope than Wagner, has nevertheless had a greater influence upon modern developments. Many a new form or spirit that is unthinkingly called Wagnerian is in reality Lisztian; we have only to play, for example, through the volume of his collected songs to see how much of the very essence of Hugo Wolf derives from them. He is not so much 'the Wagner of the song' as Liszt to the *nth*. Like most pioneers, Liszt could do little more than take men to the frontiers of the new land, leaving them to occupy and develop it. The great innovator in music, as I have elsewhere urged, is seldom the great master of achievement. To build firmly for all time the musician needs to have his foundations well laid for him by his predecessors. Hence the work of the really epoch-marking men quickly comes to have a thoroughly conservative, 'classical' look. Bach, to the generation that immediately succeeded him, was a cautious old fogey, with his eyes turned to the past rather than to the future. Wagner, to those who have followed the most recent developments of music, is already a classic, symmetrical almost to the point of formality, with a touch of Greek restraint and temperance even in his moments of wildest passion. 'Tristan' is as 'classical' now as the 'Œdipus Rex.' The very great men so soon become classics because, with all their ardour and their haste, they never lose sight of the generalities of human feeling and experience. There is always something common about them, in the best sense of the word; all kinds of men can go to their art and see themselves mirrored in it. Hence the universality and permanence of their appeal. The artist of disturbing originality, on the other hand, always carries about with him an individual flavour, a personal atmosphere, that is a fascination to people of one kind of nose and palate and an abomination to those of another kind. To like Shakespeare or Bach we need to have only the ordinary elements of humanity in us; to like Debussy or Mallarmé we need to be ourselves something of Debussy or Mallarmé. It is this that

accounts for the honest inability of a number of good musicians to see anything likeable in the work of men like Liszt. Unless we can see life and art at something like the same angle as he, his picture is bound to look awry. And the very freshness of eye of this type of artist, and the necessity he is under of discovering new formulæ of expression for the new things he sees, make it almost impossible for him to build enduringly. There is an inevitable stiffness in his movements that a later day will see clearly to be the result of an imperfect articulation of the joints.

But the fact that the pioneers in music do not live as long as the settlers must not blind us to the value of the work they have done. A Monteverde—and perhaps we may say the same of Debussy—is great to the fourth or fifth generation after him not so much for what he himself has done as for what he has made possible. Those who are interested in Liszt to-day can cheerfully admit that he has written much less music of the greatest kind than the leaders—such as Schumann and Brahms—of the school that swore by the antithesis of almost everything for which he strove. Liszt has realised himself in others,—in the song, as I have said, in Hugo Wolf, in the symphonic poem in Richard Strauss, and in Strauss again to a large extent in the opera, though Liszt himself was not an operatic composer. In the previous portion of this article I have tried to show that he brought into modern music a new conception of melody. In this, as in other respects, he 'threw his spear further into the future than Wagner,'—which, let me repeat, to avoid misunderstanding, is not to say that he wrote more beautiful melodies than Wagner. The latter's melody, as Dr. Albert Schweitzer has acutely pointed out in his book on Bach, is a kind of 'emanation from a chord.' He is essentially a harmonic melodist. Liszt is to a great extent a melodic melodist, so to speak: in the work of no other composer do we find so many melodies pure and simple flung out to tell their own emotional or pictorial story without the slightest help from harmony. It goes without saying that it is incomparably harder to get at once to the heart of things with an unaccompanied than with a harmonized melody, and harder still to cast it in such a form that the hearer shall at once perceive the poetic meaning of it. It is small wonder that some of Liszt's themes of this type fail to strike home to us at a first hearing. But he showed the possibility of the form, and from him has come a great deal of the poetic suggestiveness and metrical freedom of modern melody,—the melody that aims at running fluidly, contour by contour, fold by fold, close to the very body of the idea, instead of being content to balance itself symmetrically this side and that of a purely musical pivot.

As a harmonist, again, his influence on modern music is unmistakable. Wagner himself came under this influence, as he confesses in a letter to Hans von Bülow,—'Between ourselves we may freely admit that since I became acquainted with Liszt's compositions I have become quite a different fellow as regards harmony from what I

was before,'—though characteristically enough he objected to Richard Pohl making public reference to 'this secret' in an article on the 'Tristan' prelude. Liszt's originality is patent to every one who knows his work as a whole; not only does he anticipate some of the most familiar harmonic progressions of Wagner and of modern music generally, but he even throws out suggestions of the new lines that harmony was later to take in the hands of Debussy. (I do not imply, of course, that the French composer derived at all directly from Liszt.) The 'Invocation,' for example (from the 'Harmonies poétiques et religieuses') is full of passages of this kind:

In the 'Bénédiction de Dieu dans la Solitude' we find similar anticipations of a characteristically Debussyan device: for instance:

In the 'Angelus' ('Années de Pèlerinage') we have a passage suggesting a whole-tone scale:

and a similar one in the 'Sursum Corda' from the same collection:

Other instances of a harmonization bolder than anything that was being attempted in the Europe of that day will recur to every student of Liszt's orchestral works.

V.

That he was an innovator in the matter of form scarcely needs to be said, but the nature and results of his innovations here deserve discussion. The symphonic poem as we have it now is Liszt's invention; and a form of art that has been so assiduously cultivated, either under this or other titles, by almost every composer of note during the past half-century, plainly answers to some deeply-rooted æsthetic necessity. The opponents of programme music of any kind would do well to remember that,—to say nothing of the past—a good deal more than half of the instrumental music now written is of this order; and commonsense decides that it is less likely that nearly all the composers in the world should suddenly have taken leave of their senses than that a few æstheticians of

FRANZ LISZT.

From a drawing from life by W. Bahr, Bordeaux, 1844
(in the possession of Mr. Alfred Littleton).

restricted imagination should be guilty of bad reasoning from imperfect premises. One of the queerest things in connection with musical æsthetics is that so many good souls should be apparently quite unconscious of the simple fact that a composer, like the rest of us, is a man with five senses, living in a world that acts upon all of them. It has never struck them that a composer has eyes, and that he sees interesting things with his eyes—people in joy or grief, objects in movement, and so on—that he is naturally anxious to express in his music; nay, it does not even seem to occur to them that the composer has ears, that bring him a number of impressions that again he is impelled to reproduce in tone! These æstheticians are positively surprised when they meet with a composer of this kind. In the latest edition of Grove's Dictionary, for example (art. 'Liszt'), we are told that 'it is remarkable (*sic!*) that he [Liszt] nearly always required a poetic idea to illustrate in his compositions'—as if composers had not been illustrating

poetic ideas in music since the days of Tubal Cain. Appalled by the depravity this suggests, and willing to save Liszt's character if possible, the writer hopes—almost, it is true, against hope—that 'the process' may have been 'similar to that employed by Schumann, *i.e.*, the music may have been composed first, and the fancy title for it found afterwards'; but 'taking all the compositions into consideration, it would seem more likely that in the great majority of instances the music was deliberately (*sic!*) written up to an impression produced by some other art, or by some natural scene. It was not that the imagination was defective, but it required to be kindled from without.'

How the imagination *can* be kindled except 'from without,' as the very etymology of the word implies, is not explained. Here we have the crude old musical æsthetic in its crudest form. It is fitting that this moribund theory of the nature of the musical imagination should find its last resting-place in Grove's Dictionary,—the place of departed æsthetics. Need it be said that every song and every opera and every oratorio is the illustration of a poetic idea? And if a composer's brain can thus be legitimately 'kindled from without' when he writes underneath his notes the words indicating the moods or the pictures that have suggested them, why should he not give us the notes by themselves and a mere hint or summary of the words at the beginning of his score? What is the difference between Schumann telling us that his subject is 'Faust' by the device of making Faust and Marguerite sing definite words, and Liszt telling us that *his* subject is 'Faust' by the device of printing that word on his title-page and labelling the various sections 'Faust,' 'Gretchen,' and 'Mephistopheles'?

Many composers have set the words of the 'Ave Maria' for a solo voice with a pianoforte accompaniment. In the 'Harmonies poétiques et religieuses' Liszt writes a meditation—a little 'tone-poem'—for the pianoforte alone upon the same poetic theme, printing the words here and there to make the poetic basis quite clear to the player. What difference is there between the musical 'imagination' in the one case and in the other? Why should the one be right and the other wrong? And if Liszt's procedure in the case of the 'Ave Maria' be not wrong, then programme music, poetic music,—call it what you will,—cannot be wrong, for step by step, if space permitted, we could establish the same parallelism between the imagination of the song composer,—whose right to exist no æsthetician has yet questioned!—and that of the composer of the most extended symphonic poem. No dividing line can logically be drawn anywhere. Is not the plain fact simply this,—that the æstheticians who cannot think musically along the lines of the symphonic poem are people to whom nature has denied a certain kind of musical imagination that composers of the 'poetic' order possess—the faculty of taking

up impressions from the outer world, converting them into music, and giving them a tonal form and substance in which those of us who *have* that kind of imagination can perceive their congruity with their originals? The outcry against the Lisztian conception of programme music is thus a mere attempt on the part of those to whom nature has been parsimonious to set limits to those to whom nature has been more bountiful. It is the censure of the old maid upon marriage, of the blind upon seeing, of the deaf upon hearing, of the man with one leg upon those who go about upon two.

Once we see that the question of absolute music and programme music is simply a question of different orders of the musical imagination we must recognise that neither of these forms can claim that it, and it alone, is 'true' music. If one composer's mind is set working by a vision of the potentialities of a theme for variation, and another's by the contemplation of two lovers, or the idea of death, or the beauty of a forest, there is no reason why each should not follow his own bent. But it needs to be insisted on that programme music is neither an interloper nor a pariah. As Wagner put it in his essay 'On Franz Liszt's Symphonic Poems,' are not the deeds and sufferings of an Orpheus or a Prometheus at least as worthy subjects for music as the march and dance and the connotations of these? And given the autonomy of the musico-poetic imagination in its own sphere, its right to choose its own forms can no longer be questioned. As Liszt so pertinently urged both in his book on Chopin and in that on 'Berlioz and his Harold Symphony,' in music as elsewhere the idea must be allowed to make its own form. There is no such thing as 'form' in the sense in which that term is used in the average text-book; there are merely 'forms.' What the text-books call form is simply an analysis, *after the event*, of the lines of balance and design upon which a certain composition, or a number of compositions designed upon the same principle and dealing with the same order of ideas, can be seen to be constructed. This 'form' is no more valid for compositions based upon other principles and other ideas than the form of a man is valid for a dog, or the form of an oak for a birch. Form is not a *cause* of articulation in any organism—man, building, political constitution, or tree; it is merely our name for an observed system of articulation. Each organism, if left alone, will instinctively make for the form that best suits its own forces. Neither sonata nor any other 'form' can claim any absolute rights in music. A good cradle song, or the Prelude to 'Tristan,' is as perfect in form—its own form—as the C minor Symphony. All condemnation, then, of works like Liszt's symphonic poems, or his pianoforte sonata, because they are not 'developed' on the lines that suit works of a more abstract character, such as the third Symphony of Brahms, is quite beside the mark.

In the Liszt article in 'Grove' it is alleged that 'the system of transformation of themes, as [Liszt] called it, is beyond question an easier thing to

handle than the logical development which the older masters preferred.' Passing over the unwarranted implication that the Lisztian system of 'transformation' cannot be as logical as the classical system of development, some of us would maintain that the whole statement is an error. It seems to us that good development of the musico-poetic kind is much harder, and therefore rarer, than good development of the older kind. In the latter the problem is fairly simple; you have only to evolve new and interesting shapes out of a given piece of material. The Lisztian problem is as much more difficult than this as driving a team of horses is harder than driving one; you have both to evolve new material out of the old and to advance your story or extend your picture at the same pace; if the one outstrips or fails to work with the other,—if the music develops purely on its own account, without regard to the poetic subject, or if it merely illustrates 'moments' in that subject without weaving a continuous and logical musical tissue,—it is bad art. Roughly speaking, the one kind of music is based on decorative principles, the other on psychological; and while the rules of procedure for a decorative and for a psychological art can never be the same throughout, the practice of the latter must surely be the harder of the two. In absolute music, contrast, repetition, evolution and so on are used for their own sake; in psychological or suggestive music they have to be motivated by the vicissitudes of the poetic theme and yet have a nonchalant air of following no compulsion but their own. Hence the difficulty the symphonic-poem writer has of finding themes capable of a purely musical development that shall be at the same time invariably apposite to the various stages of the poetic idea. Critics of Liszt's 'form' would do well to remember that perfect form is extremely rare even in the great classical writers. All really good form has the air of an improvisation, like a flower or a crystal; the moment you can detect the joins in a piece of music, or see the reflective, deliberate processes by which a given section of it has been built up, all illusion as to its being an organic growth necessarily vanishes. The opponents of Liszt and of the school of programme writers that has developed from him have hitherto had too unquestioned a say on these matters. No impartial student of Liszt will deny that he is often in serious difficulties with his building. But if some one, instead of accepting blindly all that is said about 'classical form' and its practitioners, were to play the devil's advocate and subject it and them to a searching and unsympathetic examination, what havoc he could play with them! Wagner long ago showed how Beethoven's repetition of the first part of the great 'Leonora No. 3' overture after the middle section—out of thoughtless loyalty to the current 'form'—takes much of the dramatic point out of the work. A quite unprejudiced eye can detect numberless instances of unmechanical jointing in Beethoven, due to his working, at a certain stage of a sonata or symphony, on a plan settled by tradition, instead of letting his imagination run without constraint. Look, for

instance, in the first movement of the 'Les adieux, l'absence, et le retour' sonata, at the clumsy and meaningless beating about the bush just after the repeat. The thought or the mood of the work is not being advanced one whit by all this twiddling; Beethoven is simply marking time until he can get into his swing again. So with Brahms, the 'faultless master of form.' Take the first movement of his second Symphony, and look at the passage commencing with the horns in the fifth measure after the double bar, and extending for some forty measures, to the fortissimo in the full orchestra. What is this but a mere text-book exercise in the variation of a given thematic fragment, a thing as easy to do as twisting a Panama hat into one shape after another? Like Beethoven in the case I have cited, Brahms is here a mere mechanician; he is simply treading water until he can find courage to plunge and swim again, simply 'talking through his hat,' as the proletariat would put it, to keep our attention occupied until he can think of something really vital to say.*

Two blacks, of course, do not make a white, and any number of examples of bad building in Beethoven or Brahms would not turn some of Liszt's obvious faults into virtues; but before we condemn him for often failing as a movement-builder we need to remember that the law by which he is tried is itself imperfect, and the judges who administer it are often very fallible even where they are not wilfully blind.

(To be continued.)

LISZTIANA.

It is a matter for regret that the entourage of Liszt did not include a Boswell. A veritable and unvarnished record of the great and small talk of such a man would have been of absorbing interest. We have, it is true, a good deal recorded of Liszt's views of many of his contemporaries, and these views reveal a generosity and appreciation probably unparalleled in musical history; for as a general rule musicians even of the first rank are apt to be severe upon one another. But of Liszt's familiar unbuttoned small-talk very little is known. This being so, we hope we may venture to offer a small contribution to the fund apropos the distinguished musician's last sojourn in London in 1886, the year of his death. All that is set down is derived at first hand from one who was in constant contact with him during his memorable visit.

In 1884 Messrs. Novello & Co. were asked by an American society to publish an English edition of Liszt's 'St. Elisabeth.' There was then no International copyright agreement to stand in the

* Experience has taught me that one has only to offer a word of criticism of Brahms to be called an anti-Brahmsian in some quarters. May I therefore say that I am a Brahmsian, but in the sense that I am a Wagnerian, a Beethovenian, or a Shakespearian—that is, I think them all very great men, but no more immune to an occasional disrespectful word—when they deserve it—than the equator.