Franz Liszt's Writings on Music

Author(s): Ludwig Nohl

Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 20, No. 440 (Oct. 1, 1879), pp. 513-514

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3356773>

Accessed: 23-01-2016 07:47 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

OCTOBER 1, 1879.

FRANZ LISZT'S WRITINGS ON MUSIC

BY LUDWIG NOHL.

WHILE Richard Wagner—according to the remark of Heinrich Laube, who in 1843 published the composer's well-known autobiographical sketch in the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*—had become an author through the stress of his Parisian experiences as operatic composer, the motive power which prompted Liszt in taking up the literary pen proceeded from a source quite different, viz., from an intense desire to labour for the interests of his art irrespective of all party considerations.

"Error and misunderstanding stood in the way of the desired success," writes Wagner, in reference to the production of "Tannhäuser" at Weimar through Liszt's exertions in the year 1849. "What was to be done in order to supply the deficiency, and to facilitate in every way the public appreciation? Liszt promptly discerned it, and acted accordingly. He presented to the public his own estimation and conception of the work in a manner unparalleled alike for convincing eloquence and deep-going effect." It is the article in the *Journal des Débats* of 1849 which is here referred to, and which was republished in 1851 at Leipzig, in conjunction with a second, under the title of "Lohengrin et Tannhäuser de Richard Wagner." Long before that period, however, the extraordinary vivacity of his artistic nature had caused Liszt to have recourse to his pen. Letters by the travelling musician were published in the *Gazette Musicale*, some of them dating as far back as the year 1838, and scarcely a composer of importance could be named—Berlioz, Halévy, Meyerbeer, Rossini, Schubert, Schumann, Moscheles, amongst the rest—who has escaped his critical observation. Add to these his more ambitious writings—"De la Fondation-Goethe à Weimar," "Frédéric Chopin," "Die Zigeuner und ihre Musik in Ungarn," as well as the numerous articles in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and the more elaborate essays on "Der fliegende Holländer" (1854) and "Robert Franz" (1855)—and it will be seen that Liszt's literary activity comprises, like Wagner's, a stately array of volumes yielding in artistic importance to none which have been published concerning musical art.

And what is the position occupied by the musical author in the present day? When, during the last century, the poet Schubart penned his æsthetical observations on music, he had only become acquainted with the first noble utterances of that musical language which the invention of Opera had introduced into our art. But the Italian idiom upon which the new art-work was based already enjoyed the highest degree of development, while the French language of Gluck's operas had materially heightened the *speaking* power of melody. Soon also the entire instrumental music assumed this character of personal speech, representing, like all true lyrical art, as it were, the personified universe. Meanwhile a great literary epoch was rapidly developing the beauties of the German language which, in its fusion with music, could not fail to unfold fresh beauties also in that art. Liszt, writing from Vienna in the year 1838, relates how he had heard there with delight, and frequently moved unto tears, songs by Franz Schubert, adding significantly: "Schubert is the most poetical of all musicians that have ever lived; the German language admirably touches the heart,

and by a German only the childlike purity, the melancholy depth of feeling which are infused into Schubert's compositions, can be to the fullest extent appreciated." It was the language of Goethe and Schiller which had penetrated into music, invigorating and refreshing like heavenly dew, and repaying now a hundredfold the aid which, particularly in the choral, it had previously obtained from musical art. The almost sentimental reverence is well known with which Gluck regarded Klopstock's "Odes," and more especially his "Hermannsschlacht." Mozart had composed "The Violet," and the novel charm of its language extended its influence even upon the "Zauberflöte," so that the sorry verses of Schikaneder, or rather of Giesecke, were deprived of their injurious influence. Beethoven, too, was in his earlier period an enthusiastic admirer of Klopstock, whose ideal flight of thought and grand poetic intentions no doubt powerfully attracted him. But this attraction vanished upon his becoming acquainted with Goethe. "He has killed Klopstock in my estimation," was his expression. And again, Goethe's friend, Bettina Brentano, heard the composer exclaim: "Goethe's poems maintain, not by their poetic meaning alone, but also by their rhythm, a powerful influence over me. I become musically disposed and stimulated by *this language*, which, as if aided by spirits, is built up into a higher ideal order containing in itself already the secret of harmony." As with the perfection of the language music had itself acquired the power of personal speech, so had the art, in its turn, materially increased the capabilities of the words to express musical ideas. Henceforth, indeed, the masters in the art alone may be considered also its true literary exponents; the domain of theory and historical research still pertains to the musical *savant*, but he is fain to relinquish to the artist the task of realising also in words the specifically artistic and poetic significance of the works of genius, since it is almost entirely owing to the creative efforts of the tone-poets themselves that the faculty has been developed of expressing in material language the ideas underlying the most immaterial of all arts.

To support the assertion just made we will, in the first instance, quote the example of Carl Maria von Weber, whose famous though ill-advised *critique* of the "Eroica" (published in the Stuttgart *Morgenblatt* of 1809) exhibits, spite of all its misconceptions, far more appreciation of Beethoven's genius and of musical art generally than the entire body of musical *littérateurs* of the period could have mustered; and the reader need not be told how ably the composer of "Freischütz" used his critical pen in after years. And here we may also mention Bettina Brentano's "Seelenvolle Phantasien über Musik," a series of æsthetic observations which have found a place in Goethe's "Correspondence with a Child," and the stimulating influence of which may be traced among literary musicians of the third decade of the present century. About the year 1812 E. T. A. Hoffmann's reviews of Beethoven's Symphonies appeared (in the music journal edited by Rochlitz), containing observations which in these latter days would have inevitably stamped their author as a confessed "Wagnerian." Marvellous as was the use made of the language by Hoffmann in following the ideal efforts of the composer's genius, he went farther still in his "Kreisleriana," where abstract linguistic expressions are converted into a means of revealing the mysteries of our art, of its very elements and harmonic relations. Whatever other effects this literary innovation may have produced, it could not fail to expand the hitherto recognised limits of the language, to enrich its vocabulary, to give it, in fact, a new character. But in order to achieve such results it

was essential that their author should combine in himself the qualities of musician and imaginative writer, and this Hoffmann did in an unusual degree. Still, in his writings on musical subjects the leading characteristics are brilliancy rather than glowing warmth, sentimental and even fantastic colouring, rather than positive poetic force and high-flown fancy, such as, in a measure, the truly poetic nature of Bettina had already manifested, and to whose glowing effusions even Goethe owed a glimpse into the mighty power of music. But not a poetic nature merely, a true-born poet was needed to adequately represent in words the manifestations of musical genius. It was Robert Schumann who, powerfully impressed and stimulated by the writings of Jean Paul—a poet endowed with an intuitive musical insight of a high order—first began to draw together (in his journal the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*) a select body of reflecting musicians capable of giving verbal utterance to their thoughts upon the art. The benefit accruing to music from the initiative step thus taken by Schumann will be at once apparent if we compare its immediate literary results with the theoretical writings of a T. A. Wendt, in which even Beethoven had discerned “thoughts full of wisdom,” or with a Thibaut’s “Reinheit der Tonkunst,” albeit a work bearing the impress of a mind fully impregnated with the beautiful in music, and remaining to this day a useful compendium to the art-student. About the same period some of Mozart’s observations on music, now fully revealed by the publication of his letters, became known; while Beethoven’s exalted estimation of his own art may be gathered from the above letters of Bettina Brentano to Goethe, which likewise appeared in print about this time (1835). France, too, contributed thoughts replete with artistic earnestness in the literary writings of Hector Berlioz, showing that in this respect also music has no idiomatic limit; nay, it would seem almost as if its very spirit and character were innate in all modern idioms, forming their real life-spring and distinguishing them from the languages of ancient times.

Liszt also—and this leads us to our more immediate subject—Liszt also wrote in French, and in French only, and yet it may be said that he has likewise enriched and expanded the German language. For he wrote in the spirit of the newly emancipated language of the country which may justly claim modern music to be the production of its own genius. In the articles published in the *Gazette Musicale* of 1838 Liszt introduces himself to his readers in these words: “Some fifteen years ago my father quitted his peaceful roof to wander into the world with me. He settled down in France, where he thought would be found the most suitable sphere for the development and maturing of my genius—as, in his silly parental pride, he would call my musical talents. Thus have I early in life forgotten my original home, and have learnt to look upon France as my fatherland.” The first tribute he paid to his adopted country was by mastering its language, which, it may confidently be asserted, no born Frenchman has ever handled with greater freedom, originality, or even creative power; while the neologisms and Germanisms with which he has sometimes been taxed can only have been discovered by the enviers of his unique style. This latter is distinguished by a boldness, pithiness, refinement, and richness of expression which are truly surprising and absolutely enchanting. Even through the mask and mockery of existing translations of these writings, the gleaming eyes of the giant look upon us, and, as one of his translators justly remarks: “Just as unique, unapproached, and unapproachable as is his play, is also Liszt’s style. Both are the peculiar property of his genius; in both we meet with the same genial

nonchalance, which however, even when accompanying the highest flight of his enthusiasm, never offends against the laws of the beautiful.” If fault were to be found at all, it could only be with a superabundance of thought and a luxuriant imagination which knows no limits to the variety and novelty of the images it creates. This, however, is only the natural result of the exuberant wealth inherent to the subject with which he deals; and if he, as well as German writers on music, have frequently been taunted by other nations with a certain haziness and mysteriousness of language, especially where Beethoven’s compositions are concerned, the inference may not unreasonably be drawn that they have not yet approached as closely as ourselves to the full appreciation of this particular phase in the development of our art.

It would lead us too far were we to enlarge upon the different subjects of Liszt’s literary writings. Suffice it to state that so completely has our artist imbibed the spirit of every modern language, that he was able to comprehend the universal spirit pervading them all, and to interpret with its aid, and from this elevated standpoint, the true meaning and import of music. In this sense, then, he has enlarged the sphere of human expression of thought; and a really worthy translation of his literary compositions would undoubtedly tend to assist in the progress of any language in which it may be accomplished. The weaker portions of these writings are, of course, the historical and theoretical, appertaining as they do to science and research rather than to art and the inspiration of genius. There are exceptions, however, also to this, as, for instance, in the above-mentioned essay on Robert Franz, where a definition is given of what is called the “Lied” which is indeed masterly, the essay throughout being moreover the result of calm contemplation rather than of fiery enthusiasm. How promptly and clearly, on the other hand, Liszt is able to indicate the manifestation of an entirely original idea, and how important, for this reason, his expositions are for the history of his art, may be gathered from the following passage taken from his article on “Lohengrin,” and with which, as a fairly representative example of his general mode of treatment, we will conclude these remarks. Referring to the farewell strains with which the Knight of the “Holy Grail” dismisses his faithful swan, Liszt observes: “Music had hitherto been deficient in this type, which poets and painters have so frequently attempted to represent; it had never yet expressed that pure sentiment, that holy grief with which angels, and other beings superior to man, are seized when they are banished from heaven and consigned to this earthly abode of sorrow, in order to fulfil the beneficial objects of their mission. We are of opinion that music has no longer cause to envy the other arts in this respect; rather we are convinced that in not one of them has this feeling been realised in such high, nay heavenly, perfection.”

“He must needs be a poet, consciously or not, willingly or not,” says Goethe of Winkelmann’s prose writings; and the words may be equally applied to Liszt. Winkelmann’s descriptions of the masterpieces of plastic art have already outlived a century, and have enriched the language in which he wrote with new forms of expression. And in like manner will the æsthetic analysis of the psychological figures delineated in modern musical art impart greater depth and freedom to linguistic expression; and in this respect the writings of Franz Liszt, representing as they do the universal spirit of modern culture, will undoubtedly be accorded a prominent place in history.