

An Annotated Translation of Moriz Rosenthal's Franz Liszt, Memories and Reflections

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Introduction

Otto Deri often used to discuss programs for piano recitals with me. More than once he expressed surprise that the late piano compositions of Liszt were performed only rarely. He recommended their serious study since, as he pointed out, in these pieces Liszt's conception of melody, rhythm, and harmony are quite novel and anticipate Debussy, Ravel, and Bartók.

These discussions came to mind when a friend of mine, Mrs. Oscar Kanner, a relative of Moriz Rosenthal,¹ showed me an article by the pianist entitled "Franz Liszt, Memories and Reflections," which had appeared in a 1911 issue of the journal *Die Musik*,² and also a handwritten, unpublished autobiography written in New York during the last years of Rosenthal's life, 1940 to 1946.

Rosenthal's concerts in Europe and America are still remembered by the older generation. His musical conceptions, emotions projected on the piano with an amazing technique, remain an unforgettable experience. He is also remembered as having been highly cultivated, witty, and sometimes sarcastic. His skill in writing is less known, but his autobiography and essays reveal a most refined, fluent, and vivid German style. He is able to conjure up the "golden days," when unity of form and content was appreciated.

It is my hope that the following annotated translation of Rosenthal's article will provide a worthy tribute to the memory of Otto Deri.

Translation

In October of 1876, as a youngster of thirteen, I played for Franz Liszt during one of his frequent visits to the Schottenhof in Vienna,³ and I was admitted to his much envied entourage as perhaps the youngest of his disciples. At that time his highly promising evaluation sounded like words of magic which seemed to open wide the gates of the future and art, and I followed him, the great magician, to Weimar, Rome, and Tivoli, where he stayed at the Villa d'Este as a guest of Cardinal Hohenlohe.

I usually found Liszt surrounded by his flock of faithful students and admirers. He moved in their midst with the benevolence and grandezza of a ruling sovereign. His gentlemanly, brilliant appearance always produced a fascinating effect, whether he was engagingly amiable or, occasionally, critical and witty.

He appeared to me totally different, in a warmer, highly artistic light in Tivoli near Rome, where I was fortunate to be his only student and to receive daily instruction in the fall of 1878. Every afternoon I appeared at the Villa d'Este, where I found the Master composing either in his study or

sometimes on the terrace, where he was gazing forlornly into the blue. The glowing Roman autumn, the picturesque beauty of the area, the Master's noble instruction—all these things blended into an ecstasy which I still feel today.

What was especially interesting in his teaching was his clarification of musical structure, his emphasis on hidden subtleties, and his explanation of the historical relation of each work to the evolution of art, for he looked at everything with the eye of a creator. When I played for him the first Etude from Opus 10 by Chopin, he remarked: "Gounod has composed a 'Meditation' to the first Prelude of Bach's Well Tempered Clavier. One day I would like to write a countermelody to this study, but it would be a 'Jubilate' and not a 'Meditation.'" He had boundless admiration for Chopin, and once when we were talking about the Dioscuri of the Romantic era, he commented in his quick-witted way: "Schumann is more broad-shouldered, but Chopin is taller." With respect to contemporary music, the Russians interested him because of their modern orientation in harmony and instrumentation.

He thought very highly of Camille Saint-Saëns and told of his marvels as an organist.⁴ Rubinstein, in spite of his great inventive faculties, seemed to Liszt to be too unconcerned and casual. "We are no geniuses, we have to work," he often remarked humorously when the compositions of the Russian master were played to him.⁵ Brahms he described as "not exciting and very hygienic."⁶ Nevertheless, when I brought the Paganini variations to him soon afterwards, he praised their polyrhythm and said: "They are better than my Paganini etudes; however, they were written much later and after knowing mine."⁷

Some months later, shortly before I concertized in Paris and St. Petersburg, he asked me to play for him Rafael Joseffy's second *Danse-Arabesque*,⁸ which he liked very much because of its graceful melody and harmonic delicacy. He improvised on the main theme in an ingenious way and then performed compositions by Schubert, as well as the Etude in C# minor of Op. 25 and several preludes of Chopin, with such tenderness and boldness of feeling and expression that even six years later I mentioned to the Master the unforgettable impression which his playing had made upon me. With a modesty that only a Liszt could permit himself, he said with a smile: "One always exaggerated the quality of my playing a little."

My memories take me to the year 1884. I had not seen Liszt for years. I had heard from many musicians and critics that his compositions were to be considered mere farces and that the best one could attribute to him was a certain talent for brilliant piano transcriptions, *vide* the Second Hungarian Rhapsody! These vehement attacks produced in me the opposite effect. I thought with enthusiasm of Mazeppa's Death Ride, of Tasso's Triumph, of the Transcendental Etudes, of the Bacchic passion of the *Mephisto Waltz*, that Lisztian Mephisto who appears in the piece as the ever-affirming spirit. Soon the old Pied Piper had brought me under his magic spell again. I was seized

with an irresistible longing to see and hear him again before it was too late. I traveled to Weimar but met him already in Leipzig, where he had come to hear the opera *Helianthus* by Goldschmidt.⁹ The Master received me with his old affection and love and suggested that I play the six-pronged monster called *Hexameron*¹⁰ as an 'hors d'oeuvre' for the beginning of the Lucullian music dinners which his host of students prepared for him twice a week. The number of great talents who assembled under his banner (some of whom were to achieve great fame in Europe) had increased considerably since 1878. I mention here the names of Ansorge, Friedheim, Lutter, Reisenauer, Sauer, Siloti, van de Sandt, Weingartner. They were joined later by Lamond, Stavenhagen, and Thoman.¹¹ The crowd of mediocre students had also grown alarmingly, especially the *feminini generis*; they surrounded the Master like a swarm of mosquitoes, and he tolerated them with an inexplicable gentleness.¹² The names of some of those for whom he did not care had slipped his memory completely, and he called them by their native country. "Now play your sonata, Norway," he would say, for instance. Sometimes he waved me into the adjoining room and asked: "What is the name of the lady who is playing just now?" And after I told him her name, he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously or cried out, "Holy smoke!" Frequently he asked us to play new pieces *prima vista*.¹³ On such occasions many students carefully stayed near the door from whence they could retreat, if necessary, a retreat which was not exactly brave, but one that was as ingenious as that of General Moreau. . . .¹⁴ When one of the more "important" students performed the "Ride of the Valkyries" in the arrangement by Tausig,¹⁵ he said to me in a low voice: "When Tausig played this piece for me the first time, I was afraid that he would break the piano strings. In the case of this gentleman, that fear seems unfounded." It was the pride of a superior, stronger individuality which brought forth these words. He imagined himself in passionate youthfulness, tossing the "Ride of the Valkyries" and the "Magic Fire Spell" down to his audience from the concert podium. . . .

What were the effects which the young Liszt produced in his audiences, and how did he achieve them? When Cortez was conquering Mexico, he aimed his firearms at the Indians. They took off in wild flight, because they believed that the white men were gods, since they evidently could command lightning and thunder. It did not occur to any of these children of nature to examine and calculate the caliber and strength of the firearms. In the beginning they submitted in awe to the superior culture of old Europe. When Liszt, after an interval of several years, stepped before the Parisian public in 1834, the technical and artistic abilities which he commanded were so superior that the audience could not help surrendering without reservation to his phenomenal appearance. Hardly anyone at that time was able to judge how technically perfect his playing was, a technique which was handed down to us through his transcriptions. There were no points of comparison, and most of the compositions he performed were published only later.

Were Liszt's innovations really stimulated by Paganini? I realize that all

biographies share this point of view, and that Liszt did not contradict it. However, if one considers the effects with which Paganini fascinated his audiences, one finds that they cannot be transferred to the piano. Indeed, they have no relation to the nature of this instrument. The rapid raising and lowering of the pitch of the strings, the sound effects of the pizzicatos, and the passages consisting of alternating coll'arco and pizzicato tones (as they occur, for instance, in the "Non più mesta" variations),¹⁶ the flute-like tones in double stops, etc., have no counterpart in piano playing. They could only intensify the pianist's ambition greatly but were not able to open up new vistas for his creativity. These effects were more dazzling and exciting on the violin but, at the same time, of a more superficial nature. Under these circumstances, should Liszt, who, in his spiritual and musical importance towered high above the Genoese, owe so much to him and to no one else? I will answer this question without reservation. In the year 1830, at the age of twenty, Chopin had come to Paris, ignorant of the ways of the world, amiable and modest, but as the creator of an irresistible phalanx of etudes, two concertos, his *Don Giovanni* variations, the Polish Fantasy, and other works which broke all the limits of traditional technique and which, through their spiritual content, were to found a new era in art. In the first of his etudes, dedicated to Liszt, we find for the first time harmonies and passages in widely-stretched finger positions in strict legato; in his Op. 25, No. 6, for the first time, double thirds played with a most original, revolutionary fingering; and a previously quite unheard-of "con bravura" technique of skips in his *Don Giovanni* variations (which Schumann later used in the "Paganini" section of the *Carnaval*). And, moreover, there are new possibilities for the left hand in the same work, as well as in both of his C minor etudes, and grandiose climaxes which are full of volcanic passion, although they are fashioned with iron logic.

At this point, one needs only to compare the great Transcendental Etude No. 10 in F minor and the arpeggiated chords of the magnificent *Harmonies du soir* by Liszt with the previously published etudes in F minor and E \flat major of Op. 10 by Chopin to see the many stimuli Liszt had received from the genius of Chopin, in spite of the former's originality. Liszt, however, appears as an innovator and pioneer in the orchestral effects of his transcriptions for the piano, a progeny which was not to find any epigone. A native instrument, the cimbalom, probably gave him the idea to distribute whole octave passages and runs in both hands in such a way that each hand plays alternate notes. This offered the performer possibilities of enormous strength and explosions of speed. Liszt matchlessly builds up tonal climaxes to their utmost brilliance and, in a splendid manner, thunderously projects the entire orchestral mass onto the keyboard. "The piano glows and sparkles under its master," wrote Schumann. This wonderful musician and poet did not report only about the boldness and power of Liszt's playing but also about the enchanting delicacy, which Schumann appreciated even more.

And it was just this delicacy which the Master retained in his ripe old age.

Pieces such as his *Liebstraum* and *Consolations* still exuded a fascinating charm. They seemed like a sublime sacrificial haze which rises, then drifts away. . . . Yet sometimes he presented one or more works from his very last period of composition in which the heartfelt sounds, expressing his deepest beliefs and convictions, now and then lapsed into the falsetto of an almost childish naïveté. I heard him in public only once, as a matter of fact in 1880 in Vienna. If I am not mistaken, it was an evening put on by the Wagner Society, and the Bösendorfer Saal was filled to capacity with the most elegant Viennese audience. The platform was decorated with flowers; everywhere one saw the dazzling sparkle of precious jewels and the eyes of beautiful women—these were the surroundings which Liszt, as a man of thirty, had loved for his then still very worldly art. All this disappeared completely as the Master stepped onto the stage and sounded the first measures of his *Au lac de Wallenstadt!* Over the moonlit, silvery lake of magic glided the boat, escaping the troubled waters of this world and pressing toward purer springs.¹⁷ The Master appeared like a high priest of music as, in a reverent trance, he let the last measures fade away. He responded to the enraptured pleadings of his listeners with an improvisation of the Chopin-Liszt *Chant Polonais in G♯ Major*, whose printed edition he embellished, moreover, with the most delicate fiorituras that glistened like a rain of pearls.

There is a big step from the poet and singer of *Au lac de Wallenstadt* to the sharp, ironic Franz Liszt. Nevertheless, before I touch on the excellent features and minor weaknesses of his compositional style, allow me to mention an episode which shows the Master as a man of the world, a man possessing an ingenious superiority. The scene is the Tonkünstlerverein in Vienna, in the year 1885, I believe. Rarely had a small salon seen a meeting of a triumvirate of such significance: Brahms, Liszt, and Rubinstein at one table. And since they were sitting near one another, a stimulating and interesting conversation could have developed easily, but for reasons unknown to me it did not. When in the course of the evening a neighbor of Rubinstein's asked him for an autograph, the titan of the piano drew from his pocket a calling card and handed it to her. The peculiar "autograph" was passed on to Liszt, who wrote below the printed name of Rubinstein: "et son admirateur F. Liszt." This was only a *lever de rideau*. A very pretty and well-known pianist, whose ambitions were higher-reaching still, and who was eager to cut a lock from each of the three "world-famous" men as a souvenir, approached Anton Rubinstein, clanked her scissors, and uttered her request persuasively in the most tender sounds of their mutual native country. Rubinstein, who in his opera *Nero*¹⁸ had already proved his aversion to any cruel emotion and the extreme kindness of his character, bent his head to the beautiful petitioner. With the sails of hope billowed by fresh breezes, she turned to Liszt, who said with an indulgent bow and a sardonic smile: "Samson and Dalila! But do not fear, Madame; I shall not knock down the pillars of your conjugal happiness." Somewhat derailed but still not quite crushed, Dalila intruded vehemently on Master Brahms. But he wholeheartedly declined

such antiquated homage of faded clichés and tried to keep her off with words and gesticulations—and hurt his finger on the curl-guillotine. Embarrassed silence followed, and a chilly breeze blew over the assembly. Presently the music publisher Albert Gutmann hastened along with a glass of water, caught a few drops of blood, and exclaimed with pathos: “Whoever tastes of this blood will understand Hanslick’s language!” The situation was saved. On the way home I overheard a great musician say to a young pianist, since he evidently thought that the homage of the evening was misdirected: “I always have the feeling that those old composers like Lachner¹⁹ and Liszt will all die about the same time.” The speaker was, as I said, a great musician, Johannes Brahms—but the parallel sounded worse than parallel fifths, and the double stop was wrong. Lachner is dead, but it seems to me that Liszt becomes more and more alive and that the flock of his followers grows daily.

I confess candidly that his favorite problem, namely to condense the multimovement symphony into a one-movement form, does not seem to me to be successfully solved at all times. The basic theme may lend wings to Liszt’s imagination, but it hinders him when he works out a composition, and (as with the big *Mazeppa* etudes) paralyzing the musical effect, it causes the composer to take a desperate step: to give the poetic program a new meaning or sometimes even to overthrow it, as Liszt did in the *Ideals*, taken from Schiller.²⁰ Liszt’s imagination, also, does not always flow in a free and proud current, as with the heroes of the Classical and Romantic periods, and his astounding harmonic experiments do not always make the grade. But in many of his works one can hear the winged spirit of a genius and, above all, one feels the spell of an individual and magnetic personality.

How remarkable and full of contrasts are the life and work of that ingenious man! The most ambitious virtuoso, he abdicated at the zenith of his fame.²¹ The most illustrious, worldly artist of his time, he knelt down at the feet of the Catholic Church.²² He wrote Masses and oratorios which, according to his own words, he created by praying rather than composing. But he also seduced and enticed with his sensual *Mephisto Waltz*, with his sinful transcriptions, and with the blinding fireworks of his ungodly genius. However, he always served faithfully the progress of true art, furthered newcomers, and thought of himself least. With his mastery he intoxicated others and gave happiness to the world. We, his disciples, who were permitted to ripen the fruits of our diligence under the rays of his genius, who were deeply sensitive to his lofty mind, preserve his memory as an indestructible possession.

NOTES

¹ Moriz Rosenthal was born in Lwow (Lemberg), Poland, in 1862 and died in New York in 1946. He studied piano with Karol Mikuli from 1872 to 1874 in Lwow, with Rafael Joseffy from 1874 to 1876 in Vienna, and with Liszt from 1876 to 1878 in Vienna, Rome, and Weimar. He undertook concert tours all over Europe, including Russia. His first American tour was in 1888, and he settled in the States permanently in 1937. He taught piano at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, and his pupils include Robert Goldsand and Charles Rosen.

² Moriz Rosenthal, "Franz Liszt, Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen," *Die Musik* (1911) Band 57, 11: 46-51.

³ Rosenthal had seen Liszt before playing for him in 1876. He describes the event in his autobiography:

And finally the day, or rather, the evening arrived when I saw him, the great, the magnificent, the invincible Franz Liszt! Frau Toni Rab, one of his students from Graz, was making her debut in the Bösendorfer Saal. Shortly before the official beginning, which was set for 7:30, there arose a whispering, a murmuring, a rustling. Ludwig Bösendorfer, the piano maker, as he liked to be called, appears at the entrance of the hall, makes his way through the surging, curious audience, and leads a tall, slim, white-haired man with an aquiline profile and Jovian glance to his seat of honor bedecked with wreaths. A storm of applause wells up, Liszt declines it amiably, points to his pupil. His mere presence lends magical splendor to her debut. But the ovations of the audience are brought under control only after the Master has appeared four times on the platform to acknowledge the applause.

According to Professor P. Cölestin Rapf, O.S.B., archivist and librarian of the Schottenstift, Liszt lived in one of the buildings of the Schottenhof, in the apartment of relatives. He never stayed in the Schottenhof convent, however.

⁴ In 1876 Liszt transcribed Saint-Saëns's *Danse Macabre*, Op. 40, for the piano. The latter had composed it originally as a song and, in 1874, as a symphonic poem. Liszt also conducted the first performance of *Samson et Dalila* at Weimar in 1877.

⁵ Speaking about Liszt, Rubinstein described their reunion in 1871 as follows: "We met as old friends sincerely attached to each other. I knew his faults (a certain pomposity of manner for one thing) but always esteemed him as a great performer—a performer-virtuoso, indeed, but no composer." See Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists* (New York, 1963), p. 255.

⁶ The first meeting of Liszt and Brahms took place in Weimar in 1853. Brahms visited Liszt, who was surrounded by musicians, pupils, and admirers. The former felt himself to be out of place, though Liszt seems to have been very kind to him. In 1860 Brahms was one of the organizers and signers of a publication which, in strong words, denounced the musical tendencies of the so-called "Neudeutsche Schule" and was obviously attacking Wagner and Liszt.

⁷ The same theme by Paganini in A minor is used by Liszt and Brahms for variations. Hanslick described Rosenthal's playing of the Brahms set as follows:

The Paganini Variations (on the last of the twenty-four Capriccios) suggest a bold campaign of discovery and conquest in the field of piano virtuosity, an experiment in the capacities and possibilities of the instrument. To report that Rosenthal mastered them faultlessly, and with utter security and freedom, is to rank him automatically among the first pianists of the time. . . . Rosenthal's modest bearing and his quiet and unaffected manner at the piano merit special praise.

See Eduard Hanslick, *Vienna's Golden Years of Music 1850-1900*, trans. and ed. Henry Pleasants III (New York, 1950), pp. 276-77.

⁸ Rafael Joseffy was born in Hunfalu, Hungary, in 1852. He died in New York in 1915. A pianist, teacher, editor, and arranger, he composed many pieces for the piano. He spent the summers of 1870 and 1871 with Liszt in Weimar.

⁹ Adalbert von Goldschmidt was born in Vienna and died there in 1906. He composed *Helianthus* to his own libretto. The work was performed for the first time in Leipzig in 1884.

¹⁰ The *Hexameron* was a collective piano work written in 1837 for a charity concert and based on the march from Bellini's *I Puritani*. The participating composers were Chopin, Pixis, Thalberg, Czerny, Herz, and Liszt; each contributed a variation. Liszt also wrote the introduction, the piano arrangement of the theme, the bridge passages between the variations, and the finale.

¹¹ Konrad Ansoerge was born in Berlin in 1862 and died there in 1930. A pianist, composer, and teacher, he studied with Liszt from 1885 to 1886. Arthur Friedheim was born in St.

Petersburg in 1859 and died in New York in 1932. He was a pianist, composer, teacher, and editor, and studied with Liszt in Rome from 1880 to 1882 and then in Weimar for six years. Heinrich Lutter, born in Hannover in 1858, died there in 1937. A pianist, composer of chamber music, and teacher, he studied with Liszt in Weimar and Budapest. Alfred Reisenauer was born in Königsberg in 1863 and died in Liebau in 1907. He was a pianist and composer and studied with Liszt beginning in 1874. He made his debut under Liszt about 1880 in Rome. Emil Sauer, born in Hamburg in 1862, died in Vienna in 1942. A pianist, composer, and teacher, he is believed to have studied with Liszt for only a few months. Alexander Siloti was born in Kharkov, Russia, in 1863 and died in New York in 1945. A pianist, composer, and teacher, he studied with Liszt in Weimar from 1883 to 1886. Maximilian van de Sandt was born in Rotterdam in 1863 and died in Cologne in 1934. A composer and pianist, he studied with Liszt during the last three years of the latter's life. Paul Felix Weingartner was born in Zara, Dalmatia, in 1863. He died in Winterthur in 1942. A conductor, composer, and editor, he was with Liszt in 1883 in Weimar. Frederic Lamond was born in Glasgow in 1868 and died in Sterling in 1948. He was a pianist, violinist, and organist, and studied with Liszt in Weimar and Rome from 1885 to 1886. Bernard Stavenhagen was born in Greiz, Germany, in 1862. He died in 1914 in Geneva and was one of Liszt's last pupils. He was also present when Liszt died. Stefan Thoman was born in Hommona, Hungary, and died in Budapest in 1940. He studied piano with Liszt and counted Bartók, Dohnányi, and Fritz Reiner among his students.

¹² August Göllerich, a Liszt pupil and biographer, once counted 225 male and 184 female students in Liszt's entourage.

¹³ One participant in the Weimar master class, around 1880, described Liszt's sight-reading ability as follows:

His sight-reading of difficult manuscript compositions, which were brought to him on different occasions, was simply marvelous. He would listen to the player for a minute or two with a smile which betrayed a sort of scornful sense of absolute mastery, and then he would sit down and execute the most intricate passages with as much ease as if they were the A B C of a language, every syllable, every word of which was familiar to him. What astonished and impressed me most was not so much that his fingers were responsive to every motion of his mind; I wondered at the *mind*, which one felt instinctively was gifted with the power of taking in at a rapid glance every possible variety of passage which has ever been written for the pianoforte. His glance seemed to be at once penetrative and all-embracing. He thought it out at once with clearness and rapidity.

See Bettina Walker, *My Musical Experiences* (New York, 1893), p. 108.

¹⁴ Jean Victor Marie Moreau was a Republican general during the French Revolutionary Wars. His skillful retreat before Archduke Charles was considered a model for such operations.

¹⁵ Carl Tausig was born in Warsaw in 1841 and died in Leipzig in 1871. A pianist, composer, and arranger, he was with Liszt in Weimar in 1855.

¹⁶ Paganini's variations are based on "Non più mesta" from Rossini's opera *La Cenerentola*.

¹⁷ *Au lac de Wallenstadt* bears a quotation from Byron's *Childe Harold*:

... thy contrasted lake,
 With the wild world I dwell in, is a thing
 Which warms me, with its stillness, to forsake
 Earth's troubled waters for a purer spring.

Countess d'Algout wrote in her memoirs: "The shores of Lake Wallenstadt kept us for a long time. There Franz wrote for me a melancholy harmony, imitative of the sigh of the waves and the cadence of the oars, which I have never been able to hear without weeping." See Humphrey Searle, *The Music of Liszt*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1966), pp. 23-26.

¹⁸ *Nero* is an opera in four acts on a libretto by Jules Barbier. It was written for the Paris opera in 1876 but was not performed there, to Rubinstein's disappointment. The premiere took place in Hamburg in 1879. Later the work was performed in most of the European opera houses but has not been kept in the repertoire.

¹⁹ Franz Lachner was born in Rain, Germany, in 1803 and died in Munich in 1890. A conductor and composer, he was highly esteemed during his lifetime.

²⁰ The work, inspired by a poem of Schiller, was written in 1859 for the consecration of the Goethe-Schiller monument in Weimar. Parts of Schiller's poem are inserted in the score. Before the last slow movement Liszt writes: "The firm adhesion to and therewith the ceaseless cooperation with the Ideal is the highest aim of life on earth. It was in this sense that I took the liberty to supplement Schiller's poem by adding as closing apotheosis the jubilant confirmatory resumption of the motive which had gone before the first part."

²¹ Liszt's last public concert as a piano virtuoso was given in Elisabetgrad, now Stalingrad, in October 1847.

²² The wish to become a priest can be traced in Liszt's life from his early youth. In 1827, before the death of his father, he intended to join the Church, but during the following years his mother discouraged him from taking this step. He had religious instruction from 1833 to 1834, when he stayed with the Abbé Lamennais. In 1863 Liszt entered the Oratory of the Madonna del Rosario in Monte Mario. Two years later he received the tonsure and took three minor orders. In 1868 Don Antonio Solfanelli instructed Liszt in religion, and in 1879 the latter became an honorary canon of St. Albano in Rome.