Borodin on Liszt

By David Lloyd-Jones

The association between Liszt and the Russian Nationalist composers arose out of a mutual admiration for each others' compositions. For the Russians Liszt had been, together with Berlioz, Schumann and Chopin, an early model of the free, fresh and individual style to which they turned in order to escape from the academic routine of Teutonic convention. He had made concert tours in Russia in 1842 and 1847, and the deep impression he then created may account for the fact that performances of his works were unusually frequent even during the very first years of public concert-giving in Russia. Liszt, for his part, was not slow to see from the publications which reached him from Russia that here was an originality of outlook and language which offered a striking and welcome contrast to the products of the German conservatoire-trained composers. Reports of his approval and enthusiasm for their music reached the group only at second hand until César Cui met him in person at Bayreuth in 1876 and was able to report the full extent of his admiration for the 'New Russian School'.

In June 1877 Borodin set out for Germany in his capacity of Professor of Chemistry at the Medico-Surgical Academy in St. Petersburg. While there he had occasion to visit Jena, where he chanced to read in a paper of a concert at which Liszt, who was staying not far away at Weimar, would be present. Reminded in this way of the close proximity of the great master, Borodin overcame his first feeling of shyness and set off on the very next day for Weimar. There resulted five memorable meetings with Liszt within three weeks which Borodin recounted in great detail in an absorbingly interesting series of letters to his wife. Four years later in May 1881 he again set out for Germany, ostensibly on business for the Military Medical Academy, but in fact in order to attend the Magdeburg Music Festival and to meet Liszt again. After the Festival he returned with Liszt to Weimar (which he called his Venusberg), where he stayed on until the end of June. This visit also resulted in a fascinating series of letters to his wife, and in addition a long letter to Cui and another to Rimsky-Korsakov's wife.

The letters relating Borodin's meetings with Liszt must have been circulated by his wife among those who would appreciate such
thoroughly well-written and vivid accounts. That they were read and enjoyed by V. V. Stassov is clear from the fact that he urged Borodin on his return from his first visit in 1877 to edit and reduce them to article form for publication in the journal The Bee. Borodin agreed and with the help of his wife and a friend wrote an 8,000-word summary entitled 'My Reminiscences of Liszt'. However, for reasons which are not known this was never published; instead Borodin drew on it for material when he came to write another account of his meetings with Liszt after his second visit at the end of February 1883. This article called 'Liszt at Home in Weimar' was published in the eleventh and twelfth numbers (13 and 20 March) of the journal Art in 1883, and is only a third as long as the former one. The change of title is significant. Borodin here adopts a different approach to his subject; whereas the first article had been composed of highlights from his letters, recording with diary-like precision and chronology the events of each successive visit, verbatim conversations and Liszt's detailed remarks about Borodin's compositions (which merit a separate article), the published article concentrates on giving a more precise picture of Liszt's home, personality, way of life and method of teaching. Other similar accounts of Liszt's ménage in Weimar exist, but none to equal this uniquely compact, understanding and observant description of one great composer by another.

It is also an important document for the student of Borodin since it affords further insights into, and knowledge of, what is already known about him as a man and as a composer. To begin with, three of his greatest qualities are clearly revealed: the meticulous, penetrating, in fact scientific, attention to detail so noticeable throughout his writings and music; his innate modesty; and above all his magnanimity. Then in commenting on Liszt's attitude towards opera and preference for instrumental music Borodin echoes his own pronouncements on opera in his letter of 1 June 1876 and reveals their similarity of outlook on these matters. Again it is only natural that as a professor himself he should be interested in and impressed by Liszt's fatherly attitude towards his pupils, and it is astonishing how much his description of Liszt as a teacher resembles those given by his adoring pupils of himself after his death. Lastly the article affords one of the most illuminating accounts we have of Borodin's philosophy of life and religious convictions. In spite of the four volumes of letters and testimonies of many friends, it is surprisingly difficult to arrive at any positive conclusion about this deeper side of his nature; but his eulogy of Liszt confirms what the other sources have led us to believe—that for him the highest virtues were those of human
sympathy, charity and toleration, virtues which he himself possessed to the full.  
In the following translation, which is the first to appear in English, I have made two minor cuts in the almost photographic description of Liszt's house which I considered to be of no immediate relevance or interest.

**Liszt at Home in Weimar**
(from the personal recollections of A. P. Borodin)

For many years Liszt has made it his custom to spend the summer in Weimar, where he usually arrives for 8 April—the birthday of the Grand Duchess. Here at the same time come from all corners of the earth the birds of spring and the *Liszttianer* and the *Liszttianerinnen*, as Liszt's young pupils are called. At this time and throughout the summer trains bring and carry away flocks of guests, admirers, and friends of Liszt and various celebrities of the musical and artistic world in general. Weimar, the little Athens of Germany, comes to life. In the streets instead of the usual stiff courtiers aimlessly parading in their gloves and toppers appear young faces of every sort and student and artistic types. Instead of the deadly boredom and sepulchral silence of winter you hear gay, sometimes even reckless laughter, talking and singing in various languages—German, French, English, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Czech, etc. Streams of piano music pour out of the open windows; it is the *Liszttianer* and *Liszttianerinnen* who, regardless of the wonderful weather and overpowering heat, are mastering with enthusiasm and persistence the various virtuoso problems of the 'High School' piano technique. One comes upon these windows and streams of sound increasingly as one approaches the Wieland Platz. In this square stands the great Wieland with his fat calves and heavy bronze face. The bronze poet's left hand points towards the Amalienstrasse, the right one to the Marienstrasse. Both streets lead to musical celebrities: the first towards the cemetery and to Hummel, in every respect dead, the second to Liszt, very much alive.

Liszt lives at the very end of the street and town near the Park in a house in the gift of the Court, the bottom half of which is occupied it appears by the Grand Duke's head gardener, and the upper half by Liszt . . . The drawing-room is divided off from the study by a large curtain only so that it can be made into one room if necessary. To the left on entering the drawing-room from the dining-room is a curtained door which leads into the hall and is opened only for the
Grand Duke. Beyond it is an upright piano, which is already rather the worse for wear, and a soft sofa. The wall opposite the main door has three windows which look out on to the garden, and near by stands a Bechstein grand which has suffered considerably at the hands of Liszt’s zealous pupils. Behind it are the curtain which divides the drawing-room from the study, a table and some chairs. In a corner of the room stands a little table with papers and photographs, etc. Along the left wall are a mantelpiece with a clock, the curtain which divides the drawing-room from the study, a small couch with a round table in front of it, a bookcase with books and the bedroom door. Along the right wall are a large cheval glass and another window with a view of the park and the road to the so-called ‘Belvedere’—the out-of-town residence of the Grand Duke. Almost in the centre of the study, at an angle, are an armchair and a very small, almost feminine writing-table on which Liszt writes his music. The delicate lines and the miniature proportions of the table somehow do not fit in with the grandiose scale of the compositions written on it, which resemble the tall massive figure of the maestro himself. Near this table is another of even smaller proportions on which are usually a tray with glasses, a flask of cognac and a bottle of excellent red wine. . . .

Such are the details of the great master’s house. Now for his dress. As a lay abbé Liszt wears only black—a black, long hemmed coat, a black flat hat with broad rims, black gloves, and a high black cravat. Liszt’s way of life is reasonably regular. He gets up very early, in winter at 6.0, and in summer at 5.0; at 7.0 he goes to Mass, finds some solitary corner, kneels on a stool and prays fervently. Free from all sanctimoniousness and distinguished by a remarkable breadth of toleration—he has recently composed a second ‘Mephisto Waltz’—Liszt is at once not only a deeply religious man but a Catholic by conviction. Returning from Mass Liszt drinks coffee at 8.0, receives his secretary, the organist Gottshalk, discusses affairs with him and likewise receives other business visitors. When he has finished with them Liszt sits down to work and composes from 9 to 1.0. Liszt does not lunch at 1.0 like a bourgeois German but at 2.0 like all the Weimar aristocracy.

His lunch is always very simple but good. In spite of his age Liszt is able to eat and drink a lot and with impunity thanks to his iron constitution. I would mention in this connection that his way of life is studious and sedentary, and he never goes out for walks in spite of the fact that he is a stone’s throw only from a beautiful garden and the Grand Duke’s park. After lunch he always sleeps for two hours as a matter of course, and then receives pupils and other visitors, gives
music lessons, or even just chats on various subjects. Usually he does not spend the evening at home, but with his close and intimate friends, the chief of whom are the Baroness Meyendorf, née Princess Gortschakov, the widow of the former Russian Ambassador at the Weimar Court, and the family of Prince Wittgenstein. If there are no special reasons for sitting up longer Liszt goes to bed at eleven o’clock.

While commenting in some detail on the outer facts of Liszt’s way of life, one should not fail to mention his servants. The only woman among them is a certain Pauline, a worthy woman who deals with the running of the house but who is in no way remarkable. On the other hand Liszt has one servant who is well worth mentioning. He is a sort of Leporello, Sancho Panza, or the like, i.e. a valet factotum who is deeply devoted to his old master, accompanies him on all journeys and is trusted implicitly. And here the extreme cosmopolitanism and tolerance of the venerable master are seen, for the Hungarian abbé has chosen as his Leporello a zealous Montenegrin, a schismatic and orthodox Slavophile—Spiridon Knyazhevich or Spiridon as he is called throughout Weimar. All Weimar knows his expressive swarthy countenance with its thick black moustache and sideboards, and he is highly respected and popular. To everybody he speaks respectfully but fearlessly with no lackey-like servility—even to the Grand Duke himself. Not only Liszt’s pupils but even various councillors and courtiers shake hands with him when they meet him. He can be seen in coffee shops and restaurants drinking coffee in the company of Liszt’s pupils and various other ‘gentlemen’. To tip him would be to offend him mortally, but he accepts with gratitude some little souvenir, such as a cigar-holder or a photograph, etc., and in such an event is even ready to give you his own photograph in return and to sign it as well. Like a true Montenegrin he is particularly fond of Russians. He is a fervent patriot, a Slavophile and an Orthodox Believer: at the time of the Russo-Turkish War he attended the Russian Church in Weimar very frequently, zealously prostrated himself for the ‘White Tzar’ and prayed fervently for the success of Russian arms. The Catholic Liszt with his Orthodox Leporello serve as a particularly original example of the possibility of concord between the Western and Eastern Churches.

Though stubborn and at times even capricious Liszt nevertheless often listens patiently to the advice of his Leporello. Leporello literally worships his master and whenever possible shows reverentially to everybody the large portrait of Liszt given to him by the venerable master himself and inscribed in his own hand in touching terms. Leporello has hung this portrait in the most conspicuous
place in the hall. By and large the proud Montenegrin clearly values his position with Liszt and considers 'his' master to be superior to everybody else; he looks down on 'other people' condescendingly.

Like his master Leporello speaks several languages fluently, but when alone the Hungarian master and Montenegrin servant usually speak in a neutral language—Italian. When speaking to anyone else Liszt prefers French if possible; he speaks German or Italian only if it is necessary, although he speaks all three languages perfectly. On the whole he speaks very well—freely, charmingly, picturesquely, enthusiastically, pointedly and intelligently. When speaking his mouth opens widely and closes tightly, loudly stressing each syllable and reminding me somewhat of the late A. N. Serov's manner of speaking. Having said all he wants to, Liszt finally closes his mouth, tilts his grey head back, stops and fixes his companion with an eagle eye as if to ask: "Now let's see what you can say to that". Incidentally he has yet another way of speaking, scarcely moving his lips in a sort of aged and aristocratic mumbling reminding me of the diction of another person now dead—N. M. Panovsky, the former well-known journalist of the Moscow News.

As one who has experienced, seen and read much, who is well educated, of great sagacity, keenly observant and of an independent critical outlook on any matters that are being discussed, Liszt is always a particularly interesting person to talk to. Of special interest are his frank talks on musical matters, which, however, it is not always possible to induce him to enter upon. Unlike Wagner, Liszt's musical sympathies are clearly drawn more to concert and symphonic music, etc., than to opera; and in opera he is first and foremost interested in the purely musical side rather than the dramatic. Except for Wagner he has no sympathy with the new German school. In his opinion the majority of its compositions are pale, colourless and lacking in freshness, interest or vitality. His sympathies lie with the new French, and in particular new Russian, schools whose works he rates highly, studies and knows thoroughly. They are always to be found on his piano and he and his pupils play them continually. He likes to play through any four-hand piece which attracts or interests him with almost every pupil or pianist who is available. In the course of playing he subjects the music to a strict musical analysis and points out all that is remarkable or original. His enthusiasm for a piece is apt to last for quite some time.

Liszt's great interest in the new Russian school, his sympathy with it and his influence on the musical life of Germany show themselves by the fact that, for instance, pieces strange to the German ear such as
my first symphony and Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Antar' have not only been performed at the Festivals of Baden-Baden and Magdeburg but were very successful there and extremely well received by the German Press. As a further proof of Liszt's interest in the new Russian school I can quote a certain unusually sympathetic letter of his and his printed opinion about the now notorious 'Paraphrases' which caused a small storm in a tea-cup amongst our critics; also the fact that on hearing of this storm Liszt expressed his desire "to ally himself with us" and for his contribution wrote a little variation to be inserted as an introduction to one of the pieces in the second edition of the 'Paraphrases', which was done by the publisher in accordance with Liszt's desire. Liszt is very fond of these 'Paraphrases' and even took them with him from Weimar to Magdeburg at the time of the Festival, insisting that everybody, whether they were pianists or singers, should play them with him. Further proof: he is very fond of and admires greatly Balakirev's 'Islamey' and gives it to his pupils to play. It was played superbly by one of his very favourite pupils, our talented compatriot V. V. Timanova; another of his pupils, Friedheim, plays this piece in his concerts even outside Europe. Finally this interest is shown by his own arrangements, for instance of pieces by Tchaikovsky, and also by his performances of them at his concerts.

This brings me to his playing; in spite of all that I had heard about it I was struck by the extreme simplicity, sobriety and discipline of his playing and the complete absence of pretentiousness, affectation and any striving for extraneous effect. He adopts moderate tempi, never rushes or gets carried away, and yet in spite of his age the power, energy, passion, enthusiasm and fire are boundless. His tone is round, full and firm; the clarity, richness and variety of nuance are amazing. Generally he is reluctant to play. He has not played in public for some time but only at private gatherings and even then only at a few select ones. Now even his famous matinées at home have ended. In order to make him sit down at the piano it is often necessary to resort to small subterfuges; for example by asking him to recall some passage from a certain piece, asking him to show how a certain piece should be played, showing an interest in some musical novelty, sometimes even by just playing something badly. Then he will become angry, protest that one should not play like that, sit himself at the piano and show how it should be played. Nowadays he can sometimes be heard while working with his pupils, when having begun to illustrate how a certain passage in a piece should be played he will be kindled and play the whole piece. In playing duets
with somebody he will usually take the secondo. His sight-reading and score-reading are, naturally, wonderful but his eyesight is now poor and sometimes, having failed to see some sign, he will get cross and out of annoyance will mark the music in pencil with a monstrous natural or sharp. Having played some piece he will sometimes begin to add things of his own and gradually under his hands will emerge not the same piece but an improvisation on it—one of those brilliant transcriptions which have established his fame as a pianist-composer.

He usually gives lessons twice a week after a lunch; they begin at 4.30 and last an hour and a half, two hours, or even more. It is difficult for strangers to attend these lessons unless they have received special permission from Liszt himself. The Montenegrin Leporello usually refuses categorically even to announce to Liszt anybody who arrives at lesson times. At each lesson there are about ten to fifteen, sometimes even twenty, pupils, of whom pianists form the majority. Usually it is only a few who play and even so not according to any pre-arranged order. The lessons take the form of the pupils playing to Liszt what they have prepared; he listens, stops them, makes observations and himself shows how this or that should be played. By the way, the pupils always make a point of finding out directly or indirectly whether or not they should prepare this or that piece for him, for if it should happen that they should begin to play something which Liszt does not like he will without any ceremony stop them and say: "Leave it, fancy wanting to play such rubbish", or will crack some joke about the chosen piece. He pays very little attention to technique itself in the strict sense, but concentrates in the main on the true exposition of the character of the piece and on expression. It is in this that the explanation is to be found of the fact that with very few exceptions all his pupils have completely perfected techniques although they have learned and perform according to varying systems. Liszt moreover never imposes his own mannerisms on anybody and never dictates his own views regarding finger technique, since he fully understands that individuality is of great importance in these matters. On the other hand he never refuses to show and explain his method when he sees that a pupil experiences difficulty in execution.

The relationship between Liszt and his pupils is easy and cordial and in no way resembles the usual formal relationship between a professor and his pupils. It is rather the relationship of children to a kindly father, or of grandchildren to their grandfather. For instance both the young men and the girls kiss Liszt's hand without any ceremony; he kisses them on the forehead, pats them on the check
and sometimes slaps them on the shoulder—even quite sharply when particularly anxious to attract their attention to something. The pupils ask him all sorts of questions politely but with complete freedom, laugh wholeheartedly at his jokes and his keen and sometimes mordant wit, which for all his good nature creeps into his comments—which although light in form are always of a serious and constructive nature. Being the very well-bred and tactful person that he is Liszt has managed to see to it that no unpleasantness, awkwardness or bitterness results from the fact that his pupils come from differing social backgrounds. I should further mention that Liszt never accepts any payment from anybody for his lessons.

Usually he is reluctant to take on new pupils and it is difficult to be accepted by him. To ensure this it is essential that he should become interested in you personally or that people for whom Liszt has real respect should intercede on your behalf. But having once admitted somebody he seldom restricts himself to the limits of an exclusively teacher-pupil relationship but soon adopts the pupil as a person whose private life concerns him deeply. Sometimes he will enter into his most intimate interests and needs, both material and spiritual; he becomes joyful, excited, sorrowful, and is sometimes considerably put out on account of the domestic and even emotional affairs of his pupils. It goes without saying that with such a relationship he is always ready to help his pupils in any way, both spiritually and materially, and to all this he adds such warmth, tenderness, softness, humanity, simplicity and good nature. I myself witnessed several instances of such relationships which make one rate Liszt so highly as a man.

I remember how on one occasion Liszt, having led his pupils into the hall after their lesson and bidden them farewell as was his custom, watched them going intently and then turning to me said: “You can’t believe what fine people they are and what vitality they have!” “Yes, but this vitality springs from you, you dear person”, I wanted to say to him. At this moment he seemed to be an exceptionally noble person. As will have appeared from what I have said, neither the years nor the long feverish activity nor the rich passions and impressions of his artistic and private life could exhaust the vast store of vital energy with which this mighty nature has been endowed.

These are the qualities which account so plainly for that constant fascination which Liszt still holds not only for the youth around him but for every unprejudiced person. At any rate his complete freedom, both as an artist and a man, from anything narrow, materialistic, or bourgeois is immediately manifest. But on the other
hand the antipathy which Liszt arouses in people of a wholly different disposition to his is no less pronounced than the sympathy and admiration which he commands. At all events I have happened to meet, both at home and in Germany, quite a number of people, often quite unmusical and sometimes even ignorant of who or what Liszt is, who almost foam at the mouth at the mention of his name and assiduously relate all sorts of fictitious stories about him with particular relish, which they themselves often do not believe.

These impressions which I am recording date from my first meetings with Liszt in 1877 when I met him by chance while journeying through Jena and Weimar. The reason for our meeting was my first symphony, which it transpired he had known thoroughly for some time from a piano transcription. In fact it quickly led to a friendship with the venerable master, from whom I was to hear more pleasant things about this piece than I have ever heard from any other person. The warm, sincere and friendly reception which Liszt gave me and those few days which I spent in his company will always remain for me one of the outstanding memories of my life. On leaving Weimar, however, I was not to lose connection with Liszt entirely, for I went to Marburg. Here lived, died and was buried St. Elizabeth, whose poetic image inspired the great master. On the ground where she is buried stands one of the most graceful of Gothic cathedrals. I had seen this monument before but then it spoke to me only of this one Elizabeth. This time my memories of her were interfused with those of the artist who had sung of her. The serene feminine image of Elizabeth blended for me indissolubly with the majestic figure of the white-haired master. This is to be readily understood, for they have much in common. It happens that both came from Hungary, were sent by fate to the Germans, and gave themselves to the Catholic Church; but the affection which they inspire is not to be attributed to the fact that they were Hungarian, German or Catholic, but to one thing only—their great humanity.