Franz Liszt as Pedagogue

The Romantic concept of instrumental music as the manifestation of the mystical thoughts of the inner consciousness resulted in an unprecedented wealth of compositions for the piano.\textsuperscript{1} Beethoven led the way, with Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms in the front ranks. The symphony, the sonata, and the quartet were also developed in the highest degree, but only the piano could express perfectly an individual emotion directly from performer to audience. It was a natural consequence that the nineteenth century became the age of great virtuoso pianists, many of whom were Liszt’s pupils.

At the core of all Liszt’s teaching stands his belief in the fusion of music and poetry. He maintained that poetry provided the stimulus, but from there, music could go wherever the interpreter’s creative genius might lead him.\textsuperscript{2} This belief may explain why he took so little interest in technical details and so much in the expressive nuance that made music able to say what words were incapable of conveying. He acknowledged the importance of virtuosity, but in his mature view he did not consider that it should be put on show.\textsuperscript{3}

There is a considerable discrepancy between his teaching methods and principles as a young man in Paris, and those of his later years in Weimar. He always relied a great deal on his own demonstrations, but he does not appear to have had a very analytical approach to the teaching of technique, though he did indicate the colossal amount of work necessary to achieve a virtuosity comparable to his own. Having achieved this through trial and error, he was a great believer in experimentation. However, in the course of a year’s lessons given in Paris to Valérie Boissier, 1831-1832, he did lay down a general guide for the acquisition of technical facility together with some exercises for its achievement.

\textsuperscript{1} This article, which was read to the New York Liszt Society on June 4, 1968, is based on the author’s master’s thesis, “The Liszt Performance Traditions” (Converse College, 1966).


At this time Liszt was still only twenty-one years old. His studies with Czerny were fresh in his mind and the influence of the older classical master can be clearly seen. The young Liszt had been teaching long hours since the age of sixteen, when his father died, supporting himself and his mother in this way while he struggled to establish himself as a performer rather than a prodigy. In a letter to M. de Mancy, 1829, he excuses himself from a luncheon invitation in a quick note, saying, "I am so full of lessons that each day, from half-past eight in the morning till ten at night, I have scarcely breathing time . . . there is a pupil who has been waiting for me for an hour." With a schedule like this, he would not have had much time to think about teaching methods, and his own technique was so instinctive that he may not have been conscious of how he did things himself.

Liszt's lessons usually lasted two hours; frequently, to illustrate his explanations more clearly, he read some passage from a favorite author, pointing out the connection between music and literature. He outlined a method of tackling a new piece, recommending his student to read it through slowly about five times: the first and second times for accuracy of notes and rhythmic values; the third time paying attention to the dynamics, indicated or implied, as well as details of articulation, accentuation, and the like (he wanted the bass and treble studied separately, seeking how to nuance each); the fourth time looking for points of imitation or hidden themes in the inner parts; the fifth time deciding on the correct speed, and planning accelerandos and ritardandos where suitable. He did not require every piece to be finished to perfection as long as the mood was understood, and he encouraged his students to read a lot of music and broaden their experience.

The exercises he recommended for the development of strength and independence of the fingers, flexibility of the wrist, facility and evenness of touch, and so forth, are not much different from those employed today, but they may have been unusual in 1831. Although Liszt himself had gone through every imaginable book of studies by Clementi, Czerny, Kessler, Herz, Moscheles, and others, he was of the opinion that etudes were unnecessary provided the exercises were performed conscientiously for at least two hours daily, in all keys (see Example 1).

He warned against giving a student scale work before he had acquired a good deal of physical strength in his fingers, as he might get into bad habits. To achieve speed, scales must be played slowly at first, striking each note with the help of the wrist, the hand extended rather than rounded, gliding the thumb under and holding the hands tilted inwards, as indicated in Moscheles' Method. Each sound should be loud, full, and weighty. (We are told later by Amy Fay that when Liszt played

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scales "his fingers seemed to lie across the keys in a slanting sort of way, and to execute these rapid passages almost without perceptible motion.")

Liszt recommended that octaves should be repeated twenty to forty times on the same note, traversing the scale, graded from pianissimo to fortissimo. These should be practiced entirely from the wrist, never stiffening nor forcing with the arms. Octaves in chromatic and diatonic scales should also be played from bottom to top of the piano, five to eight times in succession, in all keys and with varying dynamics, every morning; this should also be done in arpeggios, both plain and broken, on common chords and seventh chords. Staccato octaves must be attacked with energy, lifting the hand well on each, in order to acquire a free and supple strength and finally great speed and fortissimo tone. To succeed with repeated chords the student should begin very slowly to avoid stiffness, working always from the wrist with all possible force, and increasing speed as skill and agility improved. Liszt urged the wisdom of making haste slowly.

While working on these exercises attention should be paid to every kind of nuance. He did not encourage mechanical study but wanted the expression of nuances to become a habit, and suggested a plan for practicing this (see Example 2). He recommended students to invent their own combinations, and to practice improvising and modulation as well.

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8 Boissier, pp. 25, 50, 51, 56, 64, 65, 92, 96.
9 Boissier, p. 94 (Ex. 1), p. 82 (Ex. 2).
To analyze a piece with Liszt required a great deal of patience because he demanded such fine degrees of shading and such exactness of expression. He would sometimes make his pupil begin the same fragment again ten times until it approached his conception of it more nearly. His interpretations did not depend entirely on the inspiration of the moment; he worked them out searchingly beforehand, then relied on his genius to breathe life into them in performance. He analyzed a rondo by Czerny, discovering the shape of the phrase by singing it through and then noting it down. He believed in marking everything in the score so as to be ready in advance for all possible nuances. He taught that the measure is to music what the rhythm is to verse, and that the beat should not be overemphasized. Romantic music should be animated or held back according to the mood, but the classics should be performed in a more restrained manner, with more regularity of tempo. His students were encouraged to look beyond the bar line, and to consider a musical phrase as similar to a spoken one.¹⁰

Liszt’s own position at the piano was very erect, with head thrown slightly back. His hand position was neither rounded nor flat, but altered flexibly according to need, his hand not “quiet” but free. He considered that too-rounded fingers produced a dry tone and that flatter fingers would give more facility.¹¹ This view is confirmed by Otto Ortmann in his book, The Physiological Mechanics of Piano Technique (New York, 1962, p. 222). Liszt himself played well into the keys, giving each note its full depth of sound however difficult the passage. He believed in a relaxed hand,¹² allowing the hand to fall flexibly from the wrist on each note. (Presumably this would only be in a slow tempo.) It is surprising to read that Liszt did not recommend theatrical gestures at the piano,¹³ a case of “do as I say, not as I do.”

Liszt’s fingers were said to be abnormally long, the tendons at the base being set very deep, giving his hand an extraordinary spread.¹⁴ His stretch was in no way remarkable, however, and he could barely cover the tenth in each hand at the end of the “Adagio” from the Hammer-

¹⁰ Boissier, passim.
¹¹ Boissier, passim.
¹² Boissier, p. 48.
¹³ Boissier, p. 84.
klavier Sonata without breaking it. This is vouched for by two of his pupils, William Mason and Carl Lachmund. Rudolph Breithaupt said that his overwhelming power stemmed from his use of weight transfer-
ence, “a direct transfer of weight from back and shoulders to fingers, which explained the high position of his hands.” Haraszti mentions his free articulation of elbow and shoulder, and says that by liberating the torso from its rigid position to one of rhythmic freedom, Liszt lent to the arms and fingers the added motive power of the back muscles. He developed unusual agility in his left hand, which formerly had been used mainly for accompaniment purposes. He played with his wrist higher than his fingers, so that a coin placed on the back of his hand would slide down toward the keys. Weitzmann suggests that if the fingers are then raised to the height of the wrist, they gain more strength for the downstroke, but Amy Fay says she never saw Liszt lift his fingers as high as other teachers were in the habit of doing.

Lisz said that when reading music he took in the whole line at once. This was confirmed by one of his later pupils, who said it was difficult to turn pages for him, as he read so far ahead of his fingers and took in “fully five bars at a glance.” He was a master at bringing out the melody wherever it might appear. Where other and lesser pianists had played fugues as massed harmonies, Liszt was able to differentiate each contrapuntal line with clarity, through variety of touch and nuance. In the early nineteenth century, it had not been considered possible to separate the voices except on the organ or in the string quartet, through their variety of timbres.

There are many references to his magical touch, by which he could amplify the tone and prolong the duration of the sound, which, though not necessarily loud, would penetrate to the farthest gallery. He was a master of dynamic nuance; in his youth his climaxes were inclined to be harsh, but a later critic, Charles Hallé, wrote, “The power he drew from his instrument was such that I have never heard since, but never harsh. His daring was as extraordinary as his talent.”

In 1848, he settled down as conductor and musical director at the court of Grand-Duke Karl Friedrich in Weimar. From this time on, he did not earn anything from piano playing, conducting, or teaching, and retired officially from the concert platform in order to compose.

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19 Fay, p. 288.
20 Fay, p. 214.
21 Lina Ramann, Franz Liszt als Künstler und Mensch (Leipzig, 1894), Vol. 1, p. 266.
22 Haraszti, p. 300.
23 Schonberg, p. 159.
Liszt now became more of a legend than ever and was besieged with pupils from all over the world. He resolutely maintained his independence by refusing to accept any money from them. He was the originator of group teaching and was perfectly aware of all its advantages both for himself and for his many students. His master classes were imitated by most of the great teachers at the turn of the century. Liszt was inclined to favoritism among his pupils though he would hear anyone whose choice of music interested him.25 The students who wanted to lay their music on the table, and the Master would select a piece and invite its performance. He never listened to the same piece more than once.26

Borodin visited one of Liszt’s master classes in 1877. He arrived at about four-thirty in the afternoon and found a Dutch pianist in the middle of playing a piece by Tausig. “Liszt was standing by the piano, surrounded by about fifteen pupils. . . . He sometimes interrupted his pupils, sat down and played himself, making various comments, generally full of humor, witty and good-natured. . . . He did not scold or get angry, the pupils did not feel affronted. . . . In all his comments he was . . . gentle and delicate and sparing of his pupils’ vanity.” Vera Timanova then played the Eb Rhapsody by Brahms. After a few brief but practical comments “he sat at the piano and played several passages with his steel fingers. ‘It ought to be like a triumphal procession!’ cried Liszt. He jumped up from the stool, took Timanova by the hand and began to walk majestically across the room, singing the theme of the rhapsody. Everybody burst out laughing again.”27

Borodin states that Liszt never chose the music for his students, but they would always ask beforehand whether they should prepare a particular piece, as if they began to play something he disliked, he would stop them immediately. He was chiefly interested in the interpretation and paid scant attention to technique or fingering. Most of his pupils already had a good technique, although they had all learned it by different methods. Borodin comments on the fact that Liszt never imposed his own personal manner on anyone, and Amy Fay also says that “he leaves you your own conception.”28 Some of those who were less successful complained that he failed to point out wrong methods of practice, that he did not show them how to improve their hard touch, that he did not teach them how to use the pedals properly. It is certain that Liszt expected a fine technique of all who asked to study with him and he had little patience with the slow and obtuse.29

In his master classes, Liszt would talk about the work being performed, discussing its relation with other music by the same composer, and with previous and contemporary works. He would point out the form and

26 Fay, pp. 219-220.
27 Hill, pp. 127-128.
28 Fay, p. 213.
29 Friedheim, p. 46.
proportions of the piece and its moments of climax. All playing was
done from memory, and his pupils practiced six or seven hours a day.30

A good deal of information about Liszt's teaching methods can be
gleaned from his approach to specific works studied by his pupils. With
von Lenz, he was studying Weber's Sonata in A-flat, first movement, and
experimenting with various solutions. "It is marked legato; now would
one not do it better pp and staccato? There is a leggieramente as
well . . . We must not play it staccato, that would be somewhat affected;
but we must also not play it legato, it is too thin for that. We'll do it
spiccato; let us swim between the two waters!"31 Concerning the
"Andante" at the thirty-fifth measure, von Lenz reports that the thirty-
second-note figure in the bass, which too often is played as a "passage"
for the left hand, was expressed caressingly by Liszt: "it should be a
violoncello solo amoroso!"32 Again, describing his pedaling in his
arrangement of the "Ballad" from Wagner's The Flying Dutchman,
Amy Fay says, "It was a long arpeggio. . . . He kept the pedal down
throughout and played the beginning of the passage in a grand, rolling
sort of manner, and then all the rest of it with a very pianissimo touch,
and so lightly that the continuity of the arpeggios was destroyed, and
the notes seemed to be just strewn in, as if you broke a wreath of flowers
and scattered them." She adds that "no matter how fast he plays, you
always feel that there is plenty of time."33 Arpád Szendy, a Liszt pupil
who taught later at the Budapest Academy, says that he played Chopin's
A-flat Etude, Opus 25, No. 1, quite slowly, making the harmony sound
like a delicate vibration, a shimmering wave under the melody, which
rang out clearly even in the forte passages. He played it with a high
wrist, his fingers spread out like the spokes of a wheel, more or less
unmoved. With these almost motionless fingers he gently pressed the
keys, producing the pressure with waving wrist movements, and
distributing the weight of his hand among his fingers as necessary. The
hands circled in opposite directions, dropping toward the thumb and
rising toward the fifth finger.34

Liszt always taught Beethoven with the score, using von Bülow's
dition. He divided Beethoven's works into two categories: those in
which tradition and recognized form govern the thought, and those in
which the thought stretches and remakes the form. He saw it as the
eternal problem of authority versus liberty; but for Liszt, genius was the
only authority.35

Pelham, New York

30 Friedheim, pp. 44, 48.
31 Huneker, p. 208.
32 W. von Lenz, Great Piano Virtuosos of Our Time, tr. Madeleine Baker (New York,
33 Fay, p. 240.
34 Arpád Szendy, ed. Chopin Etudes, Op. 25, No. 1, tr. Elizabeth Buday (Budapest:
35 von Lenz, p. 18.