

# *Restoring the Future in the Works of the Past, or Re-thinking Virtuosity*

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How is it that our current Classical music scene, which largely exists as separate from the “contemporary music” scene, idolizes and even romanticizes “musicians of the future” like Liszt and Wagner for whom “contemporary” was the basic minimum that music should be? From the listening habits of most of the people who enjoy Wagner and Liszt today, it doesn’t seem like the future, in an aesthetic sense at least, is something with which they are very preoccupied. And yet, Wagner and Liszt were obsessed with it. It well and truly was their *raison d’être* as artists. How does that work?

Would Liszt and Wagner even like us as an audience if they knew of our aversion to experimental music and today’s “future thinking” composers? To be sure, Liszt and Wagner had many differences both as people and as composers, but one thing united them: they wanted to push music to new frontiers by explicitly rejecting the trends of the day that they deemed frivolous or artless. This mission distinguishes itself slightly from the Italian Futurists of the early 20th century like Luigi Russolo or Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. These artists often tried to imagine what the future would be like and created from that perspective. In a sense, it was more hypothetical. If the Futurists were trying to pull the present into the future from the front, Liszt and Wagner in a sense were pushing the present from behind. They saw themselves within a historical continuity that they tracked back to Beethoven, Goethe, and eventually to the Greeks. The

Futurists on the other hand were looking to break from History. It is perhaps for this reason that posterity has kept Liszt and Wagner much more in the spot light than the Italian, often overtly fascist by the way, Futurists. Regardless, in 2022 the question stands: do we better serve the spirit of this music by playing and consuming it or by letting go of it in our quest towards future expressions?

As with any discussion over aesthetics and ideals, the wise answer usually contains a bit of both. That being said, I feel that especially in the case of Liszt, the present-day appreciation of his music is often founded on the more material aspects of his music, remarkable as they are, rather than their politico-aesthetic message (here, I mean the politics of aesthetics as seen in and evidenced through the act of composition). The extreme intangibility of Liszt's life and music have fallen victim to the banal finality with which we consider the past as something concrete that has happened. We see the past as something backwards but forget that people lived it forwards. We talk about Liszt and others from the past like closed books but it should be obvious that they themselves lived with just as much uncertainty and striving as we ourselves do. The jaw dropping variety of style and genre across Liszt's oeuvre, to say nothing of his personal life, is a testament to his constant questing.

In 2022, we must remind ourselves that the vocation of "interpreter" is an incredibly new one in the history of western music and it is often decked in distinctly post-modern garb (see Richard Taruskin's seminal, if polemic, *Text and Act* for an introduction to this topic). In addressing a subject as volatile as Liszt, performers and musical thinkers are too often preoccupied with what historical figures did rather than what they were *trying* to do. The latter, for my money, provides a much nobler, and accurate, cause to the role of "interpreter." Here, I will draw on the concept

that is perhaps the most associated with Liszt in an effort to reframe it and orient today's classical music lovers towards a way of engaging with this music that gets away from the surface appreciation that predominates our view of Liszt. That subject, of course, is virtuosity.

We can start the question of what a work of art even is. What qualities does it share with other objects? Does it have inherent meaning or is its meaning mutable depending on who is interacting with it? If a work of art is taken out of its context, does it still have the same meaning? This essay will by no means provide answers to these questions but they are here raised to highlight the fact that as far as Liszt's music is concerned, the composer would likely have very different answers to these questions than our 2022 disposition.

With Liszt, there is a basic "chicken or the egg" situation regarding his life and music. Since his youth, Liszt always had a clear idea of where he saw himself in the next 5-10 years. Whether or not that materialized is another question but the fact is that in his early days, the music he composed served the purpose of establishing him as *the* leading European pianist. Starting in the mid-1840's, the music he composed served the purpose of distancing himself from accusations of being a "mere virtuoso," and he began writing more orchestral music. Later in life, his music reflected his decision to become an abbot. All of this to say, Liszt's oeuvre is made up not so much of works as objects but rather as tools. Whatever their individual aesthetic merits, all of Liszt's works were born with the purpose of manifesting Liszt's trajectory as a person. With each work, he was always trying, always searching. This perhaps, is the quality that makes him the quintessential Romantic.

Understood like this, we see that the perfection and sense of physical accomplishment that we have come to associate with virtuosity have very little to do with the aesthetic tool that it represented for Liszt. More than control, virtuosity was about abandon: using art to go beyond your present self. The challenge that a virtuoso piece represents is not one of technique but of spiritual courage in the moment to go past the limits of the real or reasonable. In fact, it is the piece that should always be the winner in the confrontation that is the performance of a virtuoso piece. If the performer is in the same state at the end as they were at the beginning, then the aesthetic message was never there to even be communicated. If however, the performer gives themselves permission in a sense to be a victim to the work, the performance becomes one of transformation and human conflict that will forever stay contemporary.

Liszt's music, if seen in the context of this conflict, is of every day. In his *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Franz Liszt*, Paul Merrick says that redemption was perhaps *the* overarching theme of Liszt's oeuvre. If this is the case, then human imperfection comes part and parcel with this theme. Virtuosity then could be rethought as the abandonment of the self to one's own imperfections. If redemption is to be the arc, imperfection must be the journey.

This argument does not address itself to performers but rather to listeners and their expectations. The appreciation of virtuosity today, it seems to me, is on instrumental and physical terms rather than human or spiritual. Of course, the physical accomplishment of performing virtuosic music is awe inspiring. As impressive as it is however, the number of pianists who have the physical capacity to play the notes will only grow as instruments, teachers, and techniques develop. In that way, the performance of this music becomes increasingly *de facto* and loses merit.

The one thing that will remain constant, however, is the need for a generous and transportive way for individuals to embrace their vulnerability and revel in the abandonment that comes with it. At its worst, engagement with virtuoso music does the complete opposite of this with pretensions to complete control and mastery. At its best, virtuosity can elevate even the most daring and ambitious musicians to the highest levels of humility. If rethought in this way, it will always be contemporary; it will always be music of what is in store for us.