

LISZT'S SONATA IN B MINOR^{*}

เพลง “โซนาต้า อิน บี ไมเนอร์” ของลิสต์

Maykin Lerttamrab (เมฆินทร์ เลิศดำหรับ)^{**}

Abstract

Everyone knows Franz Liszt and agrees that he is a genius. In order to understand the composer's ingenuity, one has to study his works. This article is a part of the research paper. The purpose of this article, Liszt's Sonata in B minor, is to help audiences and pianists understand the history of one of his most well-known piano works, Piano Sonata in B minor, S.178. This article covers the brief biography of the composer, the purpose of the composition, the history of the time he composed the Sonata, how other works have influences on Liszt's Sonata, and the impact of the piece to subsequent composers. The research paper will include the analysis of The Sonata, and how to execute some of the technically difficult passages in the piece based on the author's experience and teaching from several famous pianists such as Dr. Dean Kramer and Dr. Claire Wachter.

Keywords: Liszt, Sonata

^{*}บทความนี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของงานวิจัย

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^{**}อาจารย์ประจำ ดร. ประจำคณะดุริยศิลป์ มหาวิทยาลัยพายัพ

Lecturer, Dr., Duriyasilp College of Music, Payap University. Contact: maykin.lerttamrab@gmail.com

Introduction

Dr. Maykin Lerttamrab has performed Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor, S.178 since the age of 18. The piece is one of the most important works in the piano literature, yet only few people are able to understand in-depth and perform well. The reason is that the piece is constructed with the complex idea in the composer's mind, and performers require to have transcending piano technique in order to play this piece. Moreover, the Sonata has tremendous impact to the later generation composers, because it shows many innovative ideas for others to develop further. Dr. Lerttamrab has written this article, which is a part of the research paper, to help audiences and pianists understand why and how he came up with the complex idea for the piece, and how innovative this Sonata is. The research paper will include the in-depth analysis of the piece, and how to execute some of the technically difficult passages in the piece based on the author's experience of 29 years of piano playing career and teaching from several famous pianists such as Dr. Dean Kramer, and Dr. Claire Wachter. Most of the technique tips involve in the understanding of weight shifting, hands relaxation, and hands distribution, fingerings, body posture, hands position preparation, and voicing.

Biography – Franz Liszt

Franz Liszt, the Hungarian pianist, was well-known not only for his good look but also being a great virtuoso. Later, he became everything else: a composer, a teacher, an arranger, a conductor, and a symbol. He was born on October 22nd, 1811 in Raiding, Hungary, and he outlived everyone else from his generation. Other composers from his generation were Felix Mendelssohn, born in 1809 and died in 1847, Frédéric Chopin, born in 1810 and died in 1849, Robert Schumann, born in 1810 and died in 1856, and Hector Berlioz born in 1803 and died in 1869 (Schonberg, 1997: 197).

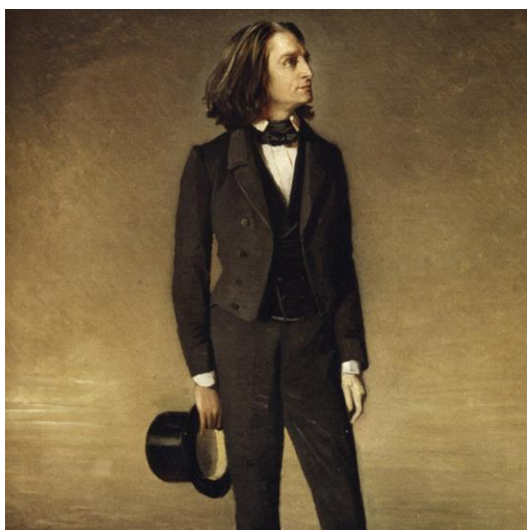


Image 1



Image 2

Image 1: Franz Liszt

Source: Wikimedias Common. Image by unknown

Image 2: Princess Carolyne – Wittgenstein

Source: Wikimedias Common. Image by unknown

The legend said that when Liszt was a child, he happened to meet Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven asked the young Liszt to play one of Bach’s Fugues, and he impressed Beethoven with the performance by transposing the fugue to any keys Beethoven asked on the spot. Beethoven then gave a kiss on Liszt’s forehead as a gesture of adoration (Liszt Meet Beethoven, 2018).

Liszt could play piano very well since the age of seven. He started to compose when he was eight, and then gave concerts when he turned nine. He studied with Carl Czerny, one of Beethoven’s pupils, and Antonio Salieri in Vienna when he was ten. The father, Adam Liszt, who worked as a steward in the service of the Esterházy family, realized his son’s talent, decided to accompany the young Liszt to Vienna in order for his child to have an opportunity to study with the famous teachers.

There were three musicians who influenced Liszt’s musicality: Hector Berlioz, Nicolò Paganini, and Frédéric Chopin. Liszt discovered the meaning of “Thinking Big” from Berlioz, such as achieving dynamic extremes, maximum color, and orchestral sonorities. Whatever Berlioz did with the orchestra, Liszt tried to do on the piano. Liszt even transcribed many orchestral works of Berlioz to solo piano (Schonberg, 1997: 199). Liszt was inspired by Paganini’s performance, and lead him to explore more on transcendental techniques and showmanship. He liked Paganini’s music so much that he turned Paganini’s *Caprices* for solo

violin to six music pieces for solo piano. The album of those six solo pieces is called *Paganini Études*. Liszt had learnt from Chopin that there could also be poetry as well as bravura to piano playing. The instrument could produce big harsh sound as well as delicate tender tone. The decoration could be functional rather than purely show-off passages.

In 1839, Liszt stopped following the format of the concert. The traditional form of the concert was that, there were many different musicians performing in a program. Liszt invented the “solo recital” as it is known today, so he did not have to share the program with anybody else.

Liszt turned matured as a pianist very early, but he was somewhat late in his development as a composer. Most of his early works have been forgotten. From 1829 to 1834, he was busy transcribing various materials. After 1835, he started to produce some piano works that were to remain in the repertory.

In 1834, Liszt met Countess d’Agoult. She then left her husband and ran off with Liszt to Switzerland. They bore three children, two died young, but Cosima, born in 1837, who later married Liszt’s first great pupil, Hans von Bülow, and left him for the composer, Richard Wagner. Liszt later separated from the Countess in 1844.

In 1847, Liszt met the Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein when he performed in Kiev, Russia. The princess had been married to Prince Nicolas of Sayn-Wittgenstein. After a few years, they separated, and she lived alone on the estate in Kiev. She persuaded Liszt to concentrate on composition, which meant giving up his career as a travelling virtuoso. The following year, Liszt settled in Weimar, and the Princess joined in 1849.

Pianists from all over Europe came to Weimar to study with Liszt. Karl Tausig was the most promising one, but died in 1871, at the age of thirty. He was the pianist who could do anything Liszt could do. During the time in Weimar, too, that Liszt started conducting. He did free conducting rather than traditional conducting by the first beat of a bar. The way he conducted was by giving the outline of the rise and fall of a phrase. There was no one tempo when Liszt conducted; there was a series of fluctuating tempos linked by an overall conception (Schonberg, 1997: 203).



Image 3

Image 3: Liszt in Weimar

Source: Wikimedias Common. Image by unknown

During Weimar period, with an orchestra at his disposal, he started to do his own orchestration. He produced twelve symphonic poems, a new musical form invented by Liszt. They are orchestral program music in one movement. He also composed large-scale works such as *Faust Symphony*, *Dante Symphony*, and *Totentanz* for piano and orchestra (Dubal 2001: 251).

Another of Liszt's contribution from Weimar period is the concept of thematic transformation, in which a theme is made to do multiple tasks, but always remains recognizably the same theme throughout. Such concept is used in the massive one-movement B Minor Sonata, and E-flat Piano Concerto (Hamilton, 1996: 34).

In 1881, Liszt fell down the stairs of a hotel in Weimar. He had been healthy up to that point. The accident immobilized him for eight weeks and he never fully recovered from it. Other sicknesses also occurred to him, such as dropsy, asthma, insomnia, a cataract of the left eye and heart disease.

In 1886, Liszt died in Bayreuth, Germany, at the age of 74, because of pneumonia, which he might have received during the Bayreuth Festival hosted by his daughter, Cosima. He was buried in the municipal cemetery of Bayreuth against his wishes (Schonberg, 1997: 209).

Liszt was one of the greatest composers, because he had contributed many great ideas for the world of music. He developed the transcending techniques for piano; he established the “solo recital” as a new form of concert; he showed the new way of conducting; he invented new genres of orchestral music; and last but not least, he composed many masterpieces for us to study.

Purpose – A Reciprocal Gesture

Robert Schumann, the German composer during the same generation as Liszt, composed a piece called *Ruines*, to express his sadness of being parted away from his beloved Clara Wieck, who later became his wife. The piece later became the first movement of the *Fantasie in C Major, Op. 17*. Then, he wrote two additional movements to create the work intended to appeal for funds to erect a monument of Beethoven in his birthplace, Bonn. Other contributions to Beethoven’s monument fund included Mendelssohn’s *Variation Sérieuses*. (Marston, 1992: 2)

Schumann offered the work to the publisher *Breitkopf & Härtel* in 1837. The movements’ subtitles were Ruins, Triumphal Arch, and Constellation. The subtitles were removed altogether before *Breitkopf & Härtel* issued the *Fantasie* in 1839. It was printed with a dedication to Franz Liszt. The piece is considered one of the greatest works from the nineteenth century alongside Liszt’s *Sonata in B minor*. Liszt also described Schumann’s *Fantasie in C major* as “sublime and glorious”. Schumann also intended the piece to be very expressive, complicated, and innovative in term of the structure of the piece (Dubal, 2001: 238).

The Beethoven’s monument was eventually completed because Liszt helped with the funding as the largest single contributor. It was unveiled in 1845, and the important attendees were Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and many other composers, but not Schumann, who at that time, was very ill.

Liszt’s piano sonata was completed in 1853 and published in 1854. The piece is one of the greatest piano sonatas ever written, and similar to Schumann’s idea, Liszt intended the piece to be complicated and innovative. It was dedicated to Robert Schumann as a reciprocal gesture for Schumann’s *Fantasie in C Major, Op. 17*. Sadly, Schumann at that time was already institutionalized in the asylum in Enderich (Marston, 1992: 4).

Composed Time – The Weimar Year 1852

According to Liszt's own inscription on the manuscript, the sonata was finished on February 2nd, 1853. The evidence shows that Liszt must have worked on the piece at least four or five months before. It was during the period when Liszt had a busy and troubled life.

In the summer of 1852, Liszt was invited to conduct in the festival called Ballenstedt-am-Harz music festival. It was also the first important out-of-town engagement since he had arrived in Weimar. He directed two concerts at Ballenstedt, and the programs include Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*. In September, he conducted Verdi's *Ernani*. In November, *Romeo and Juliet* Symphony, the *Damnation of Faust* and *Benvenuto Cellini* were performed.

Furthermore, Liszt had other struggles. Liszt's mother also visited Weimar in the summer of 1852. She accidentally broke her ankle and took several months to heal, and Liszt had to take care of her. Princess Carolyne who was having an affair with Liszt, had been attempting to divorce Prince Nicholas Wittgenstein. It became complicated when the division of property was involved in the annulment of her marriage. The Wittgenstein tried to bargain her fortune for her divorce. In September 12th, 1852, Prince Nicholas journeyed to Weimar in person, and he brought a proposal for a property settlement with him. It was also the first time that Nicholas and Carolyne had met one another since she left Russia. Liszt must have felt miserable because he always felt that Carolyne was being used by the Wittgenstein, and he was also a part of the reason why Princess Carolyne tried to divorce.

Besides all the vast works, the care for his mother's injury, and the issue of the annulment of Princess Carolyne marriage, Liszt still managed to produce the Sonata. The piece shows no signs of any distraction. This composition also serves as one more proof that for Liszt, music might be a refuge from the stressful everyday life (Walker, 1997: 150).



Image 4

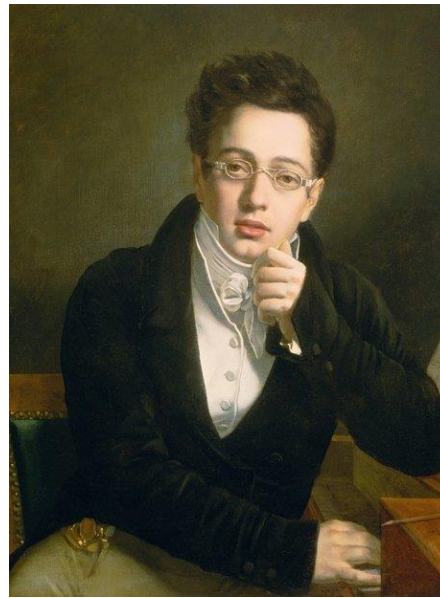


Image 5

Image 4: Robert Schumann

Source: Wikimedias Common. Image by unknown

Image 5: Franz Schubert

Source: Wikimedias Common. Image by unknown

Influence – Wanderer Fantasie

Liszt was inspired by one of Franz Schubert piece, Fantasie in C major, Op. 15 (D. 760), also known as the Wanderer Fantasie. It is a four-movement fantasie for solo piano, composed in 1822. It is considered to be Schubert’s most technically demanding composition for the piano. Schubert himself seemed to be unable to play it properly. The piece was written for and dedicated to Carl Emanuel Liebenberg von Zsittin, who had studied piano with Johann Nepomuk Hummel. This piece was one of Liszt’s favorite concert pieces. He even made an arrangement of the piece into the work for piano and orchestra in 1851 (Einstein, 1951: 325).

Wanderer Fantasie is a four-movement piece without a break, in which each movement transitions into the next instead of ending with a final definitive cadence. Each movement starts with a variation of the opening phrase of Schubert’s lied “Der Wanderer” (D. 489), except the second movement, which starts with the pure form of the melody of the lied. The first movement is in the key of C major and is marked *Allegro con fuoco ma non troppo*. The second movement is in the key of C sharp minor and is marked *Adagio*. The third movement is in A-flat major and is marked *Scherzo presto*. The last movement is written in fugue and returns to the key of C major. The movement becomes more virtuosic toward the

end. Liszt took the concept of playing without a break between movements, the concept of uniting the whole piece with a single theme, the use of a fugue section in the piece from Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasie*, and improved these ideas in his sonata.

A sonata during that time generally meant a large-scale instrumental piece with multiple movements, usually three to four movements with a sonata scheme – exposition section, development section, and recapitulation section – in the first movement. Liszt composed a sonata within a sonata. It means that the whole piece can be divided into four movements without a break, and not only the first movement, but the entire work fits into a sonata scheme (exposition section, development section, and recapitulation section). Not only that, he also used the compositional technique of thematic transformation in this piece. The five motivic ideas provide the basis for almost everything else that follows, with the ideas being transformed throughout.

During that time, placing a fugue section in a sonata was very rare. However, Beethoven was an expert on that. Schubert did put a fugue section in the *Wanderer Fantasie*, but not his sonata. It is difficult to introduce a fugue section into a sonata without harming both forms; fugue and sonata. However, Liszt had done it beautifully.

Liszt named his masterpiece simply by the generic term “sonata”. It was very rare for him considering most of his works have descriptive names. Thus, there are many theories to the meaning of the piece. According to Alan Walker, the author of the book *Franz Liszt*, there are five acceptable interpretation of the meaning of the work (Walker, 1993: 150):



Image 6

Image 6: Legend of Faust

Source: CVL tination. Image by unknown

1. The sonata is a musical portrait of the Faust legend, with “Faust,” “Gretchen,” and “Mephistopheles” themes symbolizing the main characters.
2. The sonata is autobiographical; its musical contrasts spring from the conflicts within Liszt’s own personality.
3. The sonata is about the divine and the diabolical; it is based on the Bible and on Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.
4. The sonata is an allegory set in the Garden of Eden; it deals with the Fall of Man and contains “God,” “Lucifer,” “Serpent,” “Adam,” and “Eve” themes.
5. The sonata has no programmatic allusions; it is a piece of “expressive form” with no meaning beyond itself – a meaning that probably runs all the deeper because of that fact.



Image 7

Image 7: Garden of Eden

Source: Concordia Lutheran Conference. Image by unknown

Impact - Conclusion

Sonata in B minor is one of the most renowned pieces from Liszt. From this article, we have learnt how influential the composer was to the world of music. We also have learnt that the piece was dedicated to Robert Schumann as a reciprocal gesture. We know background of how the composer's life was like during the time he composed, and how Wanderer Fantasie by Franz Schubert has tremendous impact on Liszt's own composition. However, this article can only answer a portion of the reason why this sonata is important. To be able to fully understand the significance of the sonata, one needs to study in great detail, which such aspect will be included in the research paper.

Unfortunately, even though the Sonata in B minor is a masterpiece worth of studying, it was not well received during that time. Liszt had performed the piece in front of Johannes Brahms, a German composer, but Brahms fell asleep during the performance. Eduard Hanslick, the enormously influential Viennese critic, heard the piece for the first time, and he said, "Whoever has heard that, and finds it beautiful, is beyond help". Liszt also failed to impress Schumann's wife, Clara, who wrote in her diary on May 25th, 1854:

Liszt sent Robert today a sonata dedicated to him and several other things with a friendly letter to me. But the things are dreadful! Johannes Brahms played them for me, but they made me utterly wretched... This is nothing but sheer racket – not a single healthy idea, everything confused, no longer a clear harmonic sequence to be detected there! And now I still have to thank him – it's really awful (Walker, 1993: 156).

However, The Sonata shows that Liszt was not only a mere performer, but a guide on the direction of contemporary music. Even though the piece was too ahead of its time and most people were not appreciated, there were also few composers who were fascinated by it. When Wagner heard Liszt's pupil, Karl Klindworth play it for him privately in London, he wrote to Liszt, "The sonata is beautiful beyond compare; great, lovable, deep and noble, just as you are". Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 1 also had tremendously influenced by Liszt's Sonata, and it was composed fifty years later. The approach of musical form, harmony and structure, and the use of thematic transformation from The Sonata inspired later generation composers to explore the paths that Liszt already established.

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