

Paul Merrick: Liszt's programmatic use of key

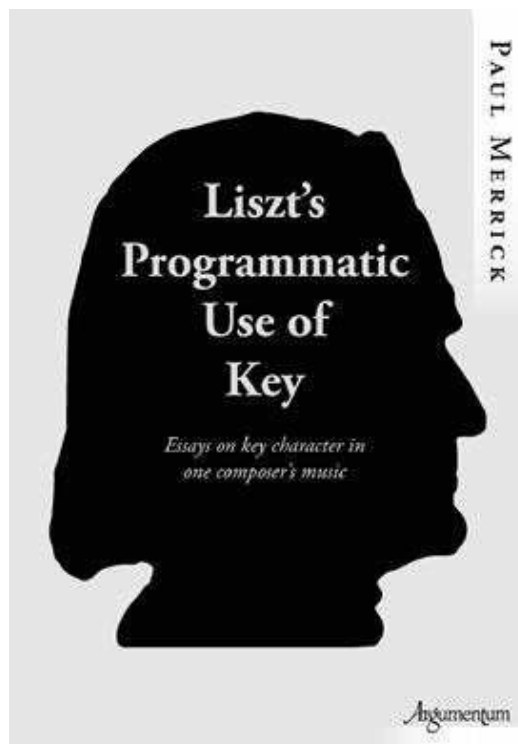
Essays on key character in one composer's music



Ilona Kovács

It is not an exaggeration to say that books about the life and work of Ferenc Liszt could already fill the Danube. These works examine the art of our great compatriot from many different perspectives, and we can rightly believe that there is nothing new under the sun in Liszt research. However, the recently published book by Paul Merrick proves that there are still undiscovered areas in Liszt's work that have so far escaped the attention of music historians.

Musicologist Paul Merrick's research area is the music of Ferenc Liszt, and within this he primarily examines the relationship between various keys and the programs and narratives inherent in Liszt's works.



In the library of the Academy of Music in Budapest he found everything he was looking for, so there was no question that he would continue his research work in Budapest. (Today's children may not even understand why the research work in Budapest was important to Merrick. At that time, we are still talking about the times before the Internet, when people didn't go to the library with a laptop, but with a notebook, and they looked for scores and books in card boxes, not with the help of computer databases or directly downloaded from the Internet.) The dedication of the book also allows us to guess who and what encouraged Merrick to come to Hungary and settle in Budapest long before the regime change. The volume

Another significant piece of his work Liszt is the scientific study and familiarisation of Liszt's church music.

In some respects, the author is a "curiosity": usually, our compatriots from our small country go to England for a longer period of time, or even for the rest of their lives, in the hope of better job opportunities and better living conditions. The other way round is not very common, but it happened in the case of Paul Merrick: he has been living in Hungary since 1982. The reason is simple: his respect and love for the "infamous musician of the world" and his admiration for his music brought him to Budapest. He completed his university studies at Wadham College, Oxford, and then obtained his doctorate as a student at the University of Sheffield. Already as a young researcher, he noticed Liszt's work. He examined Liszt's works with interest, that is, he would have examined them, but in England at that time access to the scores of Liszt's music was fairly limited. But

remembers with respect in a few lines at the beginning about the former doyen of national Liszt research, Dezső Legány (1916–2006), at whose suggestion the young English musicologist came to research Liszt's oeuvre, and it was actually thanks to him that Hungary was finally chosen as his homeland. And from the blurb we learn that Paul Merrick started teaching at the Academy of Music at the invitation of professor György Kroó (he also taught English to our musicology year). He taught at the Liszt Academy from 1982 to 2011, and from the following year for nearly a decade at the Kodály Institute. Few people know that, in addition to research and teaching, he has also composed music, including an *Oboe concerto* (1974).

Paul Merrick came to some very interesting and unique findings through his systematic examination of Liszt's works, and it is fortunate that he has published his "discoveries". Though Liszt was relatively free in how he composed, he chose the keys carefully, consistently associating the different keys with defined characters, a composing attitude observable right from his youth.

Fortunately for him (and for us) XXX. grade number 1

Book

In the book's *Initium* chapter Merrick emphasizes that, in fact, even the fourteen-year-old Liszt was already aware of the choice of key. When he completed the last two etudes in his series of twelve etudes (*Etude en douze exercices*, S. 136) - one in the key of D flat and one in B flat minor, the continuation would logically have followed in the two keys of 6 flats - in G flat major and E flat minor, which he never wrote in the end. He did not arrive at the two five-flat keys in the usual way: the major and relative minor pairs of the twelve etudes did not start in the direction of the circle of fifths in sharps, but - in Merrick's words - in the direction of a 'circle of fourths', i.e. a circle of flats (2.), thus etudes in C major / a minor, F major / d minor, B flat major / g minor (and so on) follow each other, which thereby creates a dominant - tonic relationship between the preceding and following keys. To tell the truth, the point of view of the circle of fourths is questionable, since this direction can also be considered according to the circle of fifths if we start in the direction of the flats. (And if we really want to argue: it is unlikely that the young composer planned a 13th and 14th etude in this series, as the composition of series consisting of a dozen or half a dozen works goes back to a centuries-old tradition.) In the succeeding chapter entitled *six flats or six sharps* Merrick is right that if you play the only triad in a major key on the piano, all three notes of which have black keys, then it can be written in both G flat and F sharp (both have six accidentals and neither is easier to read than the other, moreover both keys sound the same on the piano). Even so, it is not the same for a composer whether he composes a piece in G flat or F sharp major.¹ According to Paul Merrick, the only explanation for this is surely that keys have their own character.

In the second chapter of the book entitled *Prelude - among other things*

the author goes on to tell the story of the etűdök mentioned above, not incidentally highlighting their close relationship with the keys. Liszt thoroughly revised and expanded the dozen etudes from his youth published in 1826 (*12 Grandes études*, 1839). It is important to note that these pieces still do not have a title at this point. (With the exception of the fourth one, selected from the series in 1847 and published independently, which was given the title *Mazeppa*.) The story is completed by 1852, when the *Études d'exécution transcendante* - except for two - were given titles specific to the key (here, too, the same tonal order remains as in the etudes from his youth). It is eloquent, and it is obviously no coincidence that it is, for example, Etude E flat major is titled *Eroica* (Liszt was certainly paying homage to Beethoven's 3rd Symphony). According to Merrick, there is also an explanation for the fact that, for example, the greater part of the 6th etude entitled *Vision*, starting in G minor

why it is composed in the major of the same name. According to Merrick's research, G major symbolizes light in Liszt's keys, so this minore/maggiore piece points towards light, not into darkness. Returning to the G flat / F sharp major question, Liszt preferred F sharp to G flat. (This can be guessed from the fact that, to Merrick's knowledge, Liszt never wrote a composition in G flat, but he did write a key in F sharp major; on the other hand, a fragment composed in F sharp major survives among the drafts of the transcendental etudes, planned - but, like the series from his youth, also unwritten - for Etude 13.²

After leafing through hundreds of Liszt works, Paul Merrick convincingly draws lessons regarding the symbolism of the keys used in the composer's life. He came to the following conclusions regarding the ideological content of the individual tonal characteristics (in the order discussed by the author): D minor: *mors* (death); G minor: *nubilum* (gloom); G major: *lux* (light); D Major: *regnum* (kingdom); A major: *fides* (faith, loyalty); E major: *sanctitas* (sanctity); B major: *concentus* (accord, heaven); F sharp major: *divinitas* (divinity); C sharp major: *aeternitas* (eternity); D flat major: *miratio* (wonderment); A flat major: *amor* (love); E flat major: *maiestas* (majesty); B flat major: *voluntas* ([divine] will); F major: *natura* (nature); C major: *essentia* (essence); A minor: *confessio* (confession); E minor: *precatio* (prayer); B minor: *separatio* (separation); F sharp minor: *manes* (spirits of the dead); C sharp minor: *tenebrae* (darkness); G sharp minor: *restitutio* (restoration); E flat minor: *dolor* (sorrow) B flat minor: *pertinacio* (persistence); F minor: *ardor* (zeal, passion); C minor: *scelus* (sin). (In the chapters discussing individual keys, the author provides ample examples to support the names.)

It is also an extremely exciting observation what happens when the composition does not have a key signature.

Anyone who hasn't gone through the research journey that Merrick did, could quickly conclude that the tonality of the piece is either C major or A minor. But no... Merrick argues with examples that these works are *sans ton*, i.e. keyless.³ The idea and practice of keylessness can be observed from Liszt's youth, in his first programme music written for piano, *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (S. 154) in the later series version called *Pensée des morts* (Remembrance of the dead). Liszt first sketched the piece in G minor, then revised this idea and deleted the two flats signature. As Merrick puts it: "Liszt put the music not in a key, but out of a key" (6.). The *sans ton* "signature" is itself a programme, which is the musical symbol of death for Liszt. In this specific example, the desperation radiating from the whole work is manifested in the tonal uncertainty as well as in the unstable pulsation of the piece: the initial 5/4 later alternates with 7/4 and 4/4 (then it calms down and becomes stable only in the second part where 3/4 is the time signature), while

the end of the first half of the composition Psalm 130 *De profundis clamavit ad Domine...* (From the depths I cry to You, Lord!) is closed by the instrumental equivalent of a sung choir. After the darkness, the tonality of the second part is G major, which – as we already know – symbolizes light in Liszt. The name given by Merrick to *sans ton* The *nihilum* (nothing).

A remarkable chapter of the volume is *The piano sonata and the key of B minor* section, in which we can read an analysis of one of Liszt's most grandiose piano compositions, the B minor sonata. Here, too, the author examines the interaction of key and programme in detail. The series of essays closes with a tonal "map" of Liszt's works listed in ABC order, as well as – a little outside the scope of the book – the correction of the compositional date of the oratorio *Christus* (this could have been a footnote), as well as a brief description of the life of a Liszt pupil, Vilma Varga (1865–1950), and a photograph of a handiwork made by her, which Liszt may have held in high esteem, since he wore it sewn into the lining of his overcoat for a decade.

With its pioneering, unique approach, Paul Merrick's book is unique in the Liszt literature to date, and it can be useful reading for music historians, performing artists and a wider audience interested in the music of Ferenc Liszt.

(Paul Merrick: *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key. Essays on key character in one composer's music*. Budapest: Argumentum, 2021. – 181 pages, ISBN 9789634468257)

How important they considered certain sounds or sound

I can cite countless examples from my own field of research, the oeuvre of Ernő Dohnányi. It is puzzling, for example, why Dohnányi felt it was more appropriate to *Suite en valse* (Op. 39) in the definitive of the 1st movement in the 44th measure, the second crotchet B flat", as it plays a role in the sketches as A sharp" (draft: p. 2/line 6/bar 2, which he already corrected in p. 3/line 1/ bar 2, British Library, Add. MS. 50,798A). We also find an example in the same work where the composer modifies the previous enharmonic change back to his first idea. For more information, see Ilona Kovács: *Creative process in the composer's workshop of Ernő Dohnányi. Examination of chamber music sketches*. PhD dissertation, Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, Budapest, 2009, 238.

http://fze.hu/netfolder/public/PublicNet/Doktori%20dolgozatok/kovacs_ilona/disszertacio.pdf

THE *Transcendent etude* the earliest version of which was then sixteen years old Liszt - maybe JS Bach *Well-tempered Klavier* modeled on his series - he originally planned it to consist of forty-eight pieces (twelve were finally completed), similarly to the 1839 *12 Grandes études* to which was announced as twenty-four pieces, but only a dozen of them were completed (3.).

THE *sans ton* not to be confused with atonality, although a late one, a The title of his 20th-century forward-looking work is precisely this: *Bagatelle sans tonalité* (A keyless bagatelle, S. 170).

80-YEAR-OLD DANIEL BARENBOIM, who was diagnosed with a serious neurological disease last year, is resigning from his position as chief music director after three years citing his poor health. His resignation is effective from January 31.



photo: Bloomberg.com

As general music director of the Berlin State Opera over the past three decades, he has built an artistic empire unrivaled and helped define German culture after reunification. Barenboim, one of classical music's biggest stars, had hoped to return to all of his programs this year. But the ongoing uncertainty related to his condition burdened the State Opera - the company was unable to find a replacement, thus jeopardizing the new production of Wagner's "Ring" cycle expected last fall - and this made it difficult to move forward.

(The New York Times)

It arrived after closing

THE NATIONAL PHILHARMONIC FACULTY OF MUSIC between January 12th and January 23rd, he will be on tour in Japan, where he will give a total of six concerts in Tokyo, Fukuoka, Nagoya, Kamakura and Osaka. The program of the tour includes Beethoven's *Egmont Overture*, Bruch's *Violin Concerto I* (G minor), Beethoven's *Piano Concerto V* (*Eszúr*), Dvořák's IX. "From the New World" symphony and Tchaikovsky's V. symphony. The soloists of the performances are the violinist Mariko Senju, who is very popular in Japan, and the pianists Ikuyo Nakamichi and Mao Fujita. All concerts are conducted by Kenichiro Kobayashi, who has many ties to the National Philharmonic.