

**Paul MERRICK** (2021). *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key: Essays on Key Character in One Composer's Music* (Budapest: Argumentum Publishing House, ISBN 978-963-446-825-7)

Reviewed by *Adrienne KACZMARCZYK\**

An overview of a creative oeuvre is often the result of several decades of intensive work, during which the scholar comes into close contact with his hero. For this reason, the summaries of comprehensive research deserve attention from the outset. When it comes to Ferenc Liszt, most of us probably think of Alan Walker's three-volume monograph published between 1983–97. But investigations that focus on a single special aspect can also lead to insights into the deeper layers of the oeuvre. Paul Merrick has presented to the public the results of such research, which began nearly forty years ago, in his book *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key*. It became apparent to the Anglo-Hungarian music historian that Liszt typically associated a given tonality with a certain character, and that he indicated tonal deviations within a work more often than his contemporaries by changing signatures. These experiences led him to the book's thesis that Liszt decided on the keys used in his works based on programmatic considerations. To prove his thesis, Merrick examined 390 original compositions – written on Liszt's own themes, as well as on Hungarian or Spanish popular themes – from the Liszt catalogue of approximately seven hundred items.<sup>1</sup> He compared the titles, programmes and texts of the individual works with their basic keys and determined which ideas or themes a certain key is typically associated with in Liszt's oeuvre. In the end, he tried to capture the essence of the ideas or topics connected to the keys with a single – Latin – word. With Latin, he chose the language used by the Catholic Church for over two millennia, the language of the church to which Liszt devotedly adhered throughout his life. In order to emphasize the importance of Liszt's religious worldview, Merrick also looked for the beyond-this-world meaning of keys in pieces with secular themes. While the main part of the book discusses the works according to the basic, opening and closing key, in the postlude, the sample analyses and the list of works, it lists in detail all the keys indicated with a signature in the individual works. It is important to emphasize that the author of this pioneering work concentrates on the succession of the notation, that is, he does not specifically try to describe the tonal structure. He wants to prove that Liszt perceived the pre-notation and the key it indicated as an indication of the programme.

Merrick begins his examination of keys by setting up a specific category. In a letter dated 30 October 1833, Liszt called the piano piece *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* “without key” [*sans ton*]. He also tried to draw attention to the tonally unusual phenomenon by erasing during its publication in 1835 the 2 flats key signature of the first part of the piece, which can still be read in the autograph. Merrick emphasizes that in such movements and pieces, which he calls “zero notation,” there is no C major or A minor, neither is there atonality; we are dealing with visual attention arousal, the purpose of which is to mark the absence of a clear key. From a programmatic point of view, the author perceives such situations as the absence of a theme or subject that can be concretized by the key, i.e. as non-existence, and defines it as “nothing” (*nihilum*). The best-known example of the zero key is probably the movement of *Dante Symphony*'s Inferno: although it ends in D minor, the score does not give the key signature.<sup>2</sup> The basic key is also uncertain this time, but perhaps Liszt's practicality played a role in the omission of the signature: the basic key of the Hell movement

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\*\* Corresponding author. E-mail: [Adrienne.Kaczmarczyk@abtk.hu](mailto:Adrienne.Kaczmarczyk@abtk.hu)

<sup>1</sup> Merrick logically ignored Liszt's revisions based on his own or other composers' works. He concentrated on programmatic works, i.e. he did not examine songs, or secular choral works that were not available to him.

<sup>2</sup> The middle part of the movement, the scene of Paolo and Francesca, is also separated from the main part due to its keys – F sharp minor and F sharp major – specified by reservation.

is D minor and G sharp minor,<sup>3</sup> so it might have seemed appropriate to include only the necessary accidentals. By the way, the double tonality in the symphony movement can also be observed in the first section of the *Poetic and Religious Harmonies*. After the opening bars outlining the G minor, D major and D minor prevail simultaneously (measures 5–13). According to this, the zero key can also refer to a new possibility of tonality discovered by Liszt, bitonality. The question arises whether, in the bitonal examples, the programme of a given work would not be more precisely illuminated by the characterization of the clearly discernible two keys, in addition to the *nihilum* interpretation associated with the zero key. In addition, looking at the list of works with the zero key signature, the reader also wonders whether it would not be worthwhile to distinguish between complete movements or thematic parts lacking a definite key – such as Hell or the beginning of *Poetic and Religious Harmonies* – and sections of a processing or transitional nature between. The latter are exemplified by the modulating section bars 506–530 of the *B minor Sonata*, which is no longer in 5 flats (b flat minor) and not yet in 2 sharps (b minor), or bars 252–271 of *Les Jeux d’eaux à la Villa d’Este*, moving in stable bars of keys. The part of *Les Jeux d’eaux* in question, E flat major, G major, C major and A major in sequential steps, I would not classify in the category of *nihilum* associated with the beginning of the *Harmonies* piano piece or the movement of *Dante’s Inferno*. The interpretation of examples with zero signatures would therefore be worth refining overall, but the presentation of the phenomenon is undoubtedly an important result of the book.

Although there are modal compositions, Liszt, as is known, was interested in exploiting the possibilities of tonality. In his works, we learn from the book, 13 major keys (G, D, A, E, B, F sharp, C sharp, D flat, A flat, E flat, B flat, F, C) and 12 minor keys (g, d, a, e, b, f sharp, c sharp, g sharp, e flat, b flat, f, c) are used.<sup>4</sup> In the book, we first read about the characterization of the major and then the minor keys. Based on the meaning associated with the keys, it is obvious that Liszt took into account the tradition associated with them from the beginning. I was surprised that the content of the individual numbers of *Don Sanche or The Castle of Love*, first performed in 1825, which was later not acknowledged by the mature composer, shows a far-reaching agreement with the adult associations of the keys. Uncovering the role of his teachers (Czerny, Salieri, Paër and Reicha) and his musical experiences in the 1820s in the formation of Liszt’s tonal aesthetics requires further research. Relying on Reicha and Czerny, Merrick asserts, for example, that the meaning of the enharmonic keys, F sharp major and G flat major or C sharp major and D flat major, did not coincide according to the perceptions of the time. Of course, this is self-evident if we start from the natural tuning of orchestral instruments, but not in the case of the piano. In the course of the 18th century, equal temperament began to be preferred for keyboard instruments, which eliminated the difference between the starting point of C major and the keys close to it, as well as the distant members of the cycle of fifths. The literature dealing with tonal characterology typically focuses on baroque and classical music precisely because of the spread of equal and regular tuning in the 19th century.<sup>5</sup> Liszt himself must have started from equal temperament, since for him, according to the book, C major is the world of human existence, while the distant keys of the cycle of fifths – E, B, F sharp, C sharp and D flat major – are representatives of the divine sphere. Earlier tunings would have resulted in the

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Carl Dahlhaus’s short but penetrating analysis: “Franz Liszt und die Vorgeschichte der Neuen Musik: Zum 150. Geburtstag des Komponisten,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 122 (1961), 387–391.

<sup>4</sup> As the book reveals, a G flat-major composition is not to be found among Liszt’s published works. This is certainly true, however, among the drafts put down on paper at the turn of 1845/46 for the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, there is a completed, untitled composition in the key of G-flat major. See *New Liszt Edition*, Supplementary volume 6, ed. by Adrienne Kaczmarczyk (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 2009), 37–47.

<sup>5</sup> An example of this is Rita Steblin’s *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor UMI Research, 1983), also cited by Merrick.

exact opposite listening experience: Liszt's "ethereal" tones on a keyboard or organ – including, for example, B major, *concentus*, i.e. a representative of harmony – would sound the most dissonant. The question arises in the reader, to what extent does Liszt's tonal aesthetics matter to the ear, and to what extent should it be considered a theoretical construction based partly on musical literary experience and partly on an individual esoteric approach. Of course, the answer may have to be sought from the other side, starting from musical practice: since the use of many of the keys with their signatures was a rarity until the Romantic era, Liszt could easily associate C major and keys close to it with the ordinary human world, while the far less frequently heard keys in the cycle of fifths he could imbue with an out-of-this-world aura of specialness.

Paul Merrick's work is unique not only in its method, but also in its conclusion. He concludes that Liszt's use of tonality forms a system covering his entire oeuvre and all tonality. The fundamental characteristic of the system is his interpretation of the tonal relations of *maggiore* and *minore* keys which have a common fundamental tone. According to the author's tradition-based but novel interpretation, for Liszt the minor key corresponds to being the imperfect, damaged, corrupted pair of the major key with the same fundamental note. From this, he concludes that in Liszt's aesthetics, the common major and minor keys are in a symbiotic relationship. Merrick calls the dependence of the minor key on the *maggiore* key "minorization" of the major key. He emphasizes that in the case of works that start in the minor but end in the major of the same name, the composition begins with the choice of the major key. Although the reasoning is logical, it is not easy to prove the character connection of these pairs of keys in the compositions. If, passing from the *minore* section to the *maggiore* section, the minor theme is transformed into an identically based major theme (as, for example, in the case of the *Tasso* melody), then Merrick's hypothesis seems to be confirmed. It is more complicated to prove the existence of such a connection if there is no thematic transformation, and Liszt works with motivically independent themes in minor and major sections with the same tonic. Another difficulty is proving the programmatic connection of the individual *minore*–*maggiore* tonal pairs covering the entire oeuvre. The definitions of minor keys are not always clear to me, at least. However, I find the interpretation of the relationship between F major and F minor, for example, particularly apt. In Merrick's opinion, F major, the traditional key of the pastoral, also represents *natura* or created nature. Its counterpart, F minor, which he names *ardor* or heat, passion, is also a mirror of nature, but it expresses not the peaceful world, but the passionate human soul. This is how it can be the basic key of mourning music – the first movement of the 14th Hungarian rhapsody, *Funérailles*, *Héroïde funèbre*, *La lugubre gondola* – the expulsion of Saint Elizabeth from the Wartburg castle or the *Stabat Mater dolorosa* movement of the oratorio *Christus*. Among the many convincing examples written in relation to these conditions, let me refer here to Rhapsody no. 14 in F minor/F major and the *Hungarian Fantasia*, which is largely based on the same motif, but in F minor/E major, i.e. with an "irregular" tonality, for the explanation of the difference between the two tonal structures.

So, as far as the range of associations of each tonality is concerned, I found the explanations that shed light on the tonal relationships between the parts of multi-part or cyclical works, and that also covered the tonal structure, especially exciting. Explanations – without claiming to be complete – can be read scattered throughout the book about *Don Sanche*, the *Dance of Death*, the *Faust* and *Dante Symphonies*, the *Legend of Saint Elizabeth*, the oratorio *Christus* or *Via Crucis*. The interpretation of the pieces and cyclic structure of the *Years of the Pilgrimage* is also an interesting read. This is why I would have liked to have read a comparison of the final and earlier formulations of the Swiss year (*Album d'un voyageur 1<sup>re</sup> année, Impressions et poésies*), since they differ in terms of both tonal structure and composition of the movements. *Lyon*, which was included in the earlier compilation, in

terms of Liszt's tonal experiments is one of Liszt's most interesting early compositions, dating back to 1832.

While the characterization of the keys seems to be largely accurate, the fact that there are obvious overlaps between the themes associated with each key and that there are works based on common motivic material, but with different keys, makes me think with caution. Such a rare example is provided by the case of Petrarch's sonnet 47 beginning with "Benedetto sia 'l giorno", whose two piano versions in D flat major and the song version in A flat major of the same period from 1843–46 have not only motivic, but also tonal parallels (D flat-G-E-D flat and A flat-D-A flat-B-A flat). The fact that Liszt uses two types of major keys (D flat-A flat, G-D, E-B) for the same motif in the piano piece and in the song does not refute Merrick's theory, but it does allow us to infer the kinship of the neighbouring keys of the cycle of fifths, questioning the *raison d'être* of a strict distinction between individual keys. A similar thing appears in relation to keys that are a semitone apart. Liszt recorded the *Funérailles* theme in his sketchbook in E minor, but composed the piano piece in F minor; he first wrote the 9th movement of the *Poetical and Religious Harmonies* in G minor, but transposed it to G sharp minor and inserted it into the series. These examples indicate that, in the case of keys that are far from each other according to the cycle of fifths, but considered to be neighbours in terms of their physical pitch, Liszt rather considered their proximity.

The results of his key-characteristic observations are tested by Paul Merrick in two chapters dealing with the interpretation of the *B minor Sonata*, which is original in that it does not have a programme stemming from Liszt. Based on information that can be traced back to Liszt's pupils, as well as the author's own motivic analysis, Merrick calls the work the *Devil's Sonata* (*Teufelsonata*) and interprets the work as programme music. The argument of the first chapter is especially convincing, in which the explanation of the choice of key is combined with a motivic analysis. Here, I will only cover the most original and programmatic idea of the work, in Merrick's opinion, namely his analysis of the double main theme. It is about two consecutive motifs or, according to Merrick's interpretation, two themes (bars 8–13 and 13–17), which are in constant conflict with each other and whose struggle ends with the predominance of the first theme, "Man" and the retreat of the second, "Devil" (measures 595–599). This is where the key of B minor gets its name: *separatio* or separation. The work's other themes also play a part in the outcome of the struggle, in the elimination of division, as well as in the restoration of *concentus* or harmony between God and Man, achieved with the key of B major (bar 600). The interpretation of their roles is also an exciting read. Merrick deals with the connections and differences between the Sonata and the *Faust* and *Dante Symphonies*, and tries to prove the existence of an independent programme or narrative that is related to, but not the same as, the two symphonies. In the absence of a programme from Liszt, it is not certain that the reader will agree with the details of the programme described by Merrick, but it is certain that he will think about it.

All in all, the book is an exciting and thought-provoking read, not only regarding the character of the individual keys, but also regarding Liszt's tonal concept. If the reader still has questions, he will probably admit that Paul Merrick has noticed something very important in Liszt's musical thinking. His book will certainly enter the libraries of Liszt scholars and become a starting point for further key character research. This is helped by the high quality execution of the volume, and the professional and dedicated editorial work of Argumentum Publishing House and Balázs Déri.

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