

## REVIEW

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### THOUGHT ETUDES IN ALMOST EVERY KEY

Paul Merrick: *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key. Essays on key character in one composer's music*. Budapest: Argumentum, 2021

Paul Merrick has been researching Liszt's use of keys since the early 1990s, dealing with the composer's individual approach to key symbolism in musicological lectures and studies (some of which he has published in Hungarian).<sup>1</sup> This volume is the sum total of his interest and research in this regard, and seeks to convince the reader that the key signature should be regarded not merely as part of the notation, but as part of the composition in the context of all related textual information.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, when analysing a Liszt composition, we can decide to concentrate on only the sound impressions and the musical elements that trigger them, and then by way of checking, we can focus on the musical notation of these elements. But we can also decide otherwise: we will focus on the written form of the work, i.e. the musical notation and other texts assigned to the piece: title, motto(s), quotations written between the lines of the score or composer's programme statements. Paul Merrick has chosen the latter: his preoccupation is thus based on textual information related to the composition and not the sounding reality of the composition context. Thus, keys are not primarily some particular acoustic phenomenon, not a topos/intonation with a special character, which can be examined historically, neither is it (more or less) a carrier of well-defined affective contents. Rather, it is a kind of interpretive framework, code, which is related to the meaning and programme of the given piece, so in this context the choice of key is an essential element of the conceptual framework of the composition,

1 „Liszt 'kereszt'- motívuma és a *h- moll szonáta*”, *Magyar Zene* XLIX/1. (2011), 39–56.; „'Teufelsonate'. Mephistopheles Liszt *h- moll zongoraszonátájában*”, *Magyar Egyházzene* XIX/4. (2011–2012), 367–382. „A tonalitás szerepe az *Années de Pèlerinage* svájci kötetében”, *Magyar Zene* XXXVII/2. (1999), 127–142.

2 Paul Merrick writes in the preface: "My aim was to find whether Liszt had a concept of a particular key's 'character'. My method was to look at the titles, programmes and texts of pieces in the key to see if they coagulated around a definite idea or theme." (x).

Thus, it precedes the sounding piece itself not only typographically, but also ontologically. At the same time, it is easy to see that although Liszt relied on the practice he learned from important composers when choosing the key and its signature, what is much more exciting is how much he deviated from it. For example, I was intrigued by the 3 flats key signature (in this case, the key of E flat major) as an instructive example. At one point, as an obvious reference to Beethoven, Liszt titled one of the pieces of the *Transcendental Etudes* “Eroica”.

The reader may be surprised, however, that neither the heroic character nor the figure of the struggling hero play a decisive role in the interpretation of 3 flats key signature works listed by Paul Merrick (61-65). Exploring the Lisztian universe of key signatures, Merrick draws our attention to a place in the youthful opera *Don Sanche* (1825) and to the *Hungarian Coronation Mass*. In the former, the analogy between the key moment in Elvire’s aria “Non! Aux volontés des dieux” – namely “Je vais porter une couronne, est il un soit plus glorieux?” – and the symbolism of the *Hungarian Coronation Mass* is obvious. Merrick also links to this a scene from *The Legend of St. Elizabeth* and the fresco that inspired it, the creator of which depicted Elizabeth as a princess with a crown on her head (62). The concept of the crown is, of course, not present in all twenty-two works in E-flat major listed by Merrick. At the same time, it is possible to arrive (albeit in a complicated, but logical process) from the initial concept to other aspects of the content of the key (62). The crux of the matter is to link the idea of the crown with justice. For example, Charles de Montalembert, in his biography (*La Vie de sainte Élisabeth de Hongrie, duchesse de Thuringe*), published in 1836, was an important source for the libretto, which included quotations from Scripture in which the symbol of power and the concept of justice were related. In one of Paul’s letters (2 Timothy 4:8), he speaks of the crown of truth.<sup>3</sup> Psalm 71 prays for the just government of the king, and from crown to justice we then move to social issues. From the latter point of view, Liszt’s 1848 chorus *Arbeiterchor* can be of interest to us, which received 3 flats in its original form, the same music in the symphonic poem *Mazeppa* being put into D major (thus related to the concept of *regnum*, i.e. kingdom according to Merrick’s classification); the music illustrates the end of Victor Hugo’s poem “Il s’élève roi!” (He rises as king!) The thread of E flat major leads from justice, work and kingship to the glorification of the Lord through work, then to the house of the Lord, and finally to the Mountain. The train of thought illustrated with biblical texts and related works by Liszt (*Mihi autem adhaerere*, 1868; *In domum Domini ibimus*, 1884) leads to a central composition by Liszt. Merrick describes the symphonic poem *Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne* in a new context. The mountain is the mountain of the Lord, which the prophet Isaiah said (Isaiah 11, 9) was surrounded by the waves of the sea: ‘They shall not hurt, nor shall they kill in all my holy mountain, for the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the covering waters of the sea.’ – graphically illustrated by the beginning of the composition (64).

3 Ibid.

This E flat major thought experiment would not be complete if Merrick did not also account for its Beethovenian implications. According to him, Liszt revered Beethoven as a saint,<sup>4</sup> that is, if I understand correctly, certain appearances in E flat major refer not so much to Beethoven's intonation of the key, but to Beethoven himself. The beginning of Liszt's *Piano Concerto in E flat major* (Allegro maestoso) can, of course, be related to Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5 in E flat major (Emperor)*, but through it can also refer to the idea of a "sacred mountain" and to Elzire's "crown".<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the chapters serving the framing of the principle, the closing remarks, the workshop study on the *Sonata in B minor*, given as appendices, the body of the volume consists of a case study of 25 keys (13 major and 12 minor), similar to the "methodology" and approach of the chapter on E flat major, and Merrick discusses the presence, meaning and significance of *sans ton*, i.e. pieces without key, or more correctly, without key signature. In the chapter entitled Postlude (127-129), the author himself calls the case studies essays, and the concept of the key signature (tonality) is clarified and described in many ways. Within one paragraph, he writes about narrative content related to key, programmatic use, key symbolism and key character, and even the "personality" of a key (127). In connection with all this, the choice of key alone seems sufficient to suspect the presence of some kind of programme even in the case of Liszt's works without an explicit programme. And that it is worth assuming a programme for each piece is made clear by Merrick in the book's motto<sup>6</sup> as well as, for example, in his analysis of the *Sonata in B minor*: "there is a connection in Liszt's music between key and content... the beginning of any consideration of the evidence for there being a programme behind the Sonata must be its key."<sup>7</sup>

4 "To this religious symbolism of E flat should be added the figure of Beethoven – who for Liszt, aside from his central role as the greatest German symphonic composer, played a role in his biography when in Vienna in 1823 he 'consecrated' the twelve year- old boy prodigy with a kiss. Liszt himself told others that this event took place, whatever modern musicologists may claim to the contrary. The point is that in his mind, Liszt held Beethoven to be sacred." (65.)

5 Ibid.

6 "Programme- music is a legitimate genre of the art." (Liszt's letter to his English pupil Walter Bache dated Budapest, March 19th, 1878)

7 "As my researches have led me to conclude that there is a connection in Liszt's music between key and content, and that this informs his concept of 'programme music' as such, then the beginning of any consideration of the evidence for there being a programme behind the Sonata must be its key" (136).

Overall, the basic premise of the volume is striking, even startling, but also thought-provoking. Merrick's essays on the individual keys not only try to convince the reader that all of Liszt's pieces examined are programme music, the "key" to which in the strictest sense of the word is indeed its key, but also that the background of these works is always some religious idea, belief, or creative intention to convey all this. When he asks whether Liszt was consistent in his choice of keys, Merrick replies with a resounding yes in the case of works with a specific, fixed programme. It can be seen that similar contexts evoked the same notational reflexes in Liszt. The interpretation of works without a programme or even the assumption of the meta-programme of cyclical works can be based on this. Merrick gives a name to the programme content associated with a particular key (and its signature) suggesting Latin terms as a "label". For example, for E flat major, *maiestas* (majesty). The 25+1 keys therefore have a dictionary of twenty-six terms/concepts, such as *mors* (death), *nubilum* (gloom), *miratio* (miracle), *amor* (love), *separatio* (duality) and *sanctitas* (holiness) – D minor, G minor, D major, A flat major, B minor and E major. Through the keywords he suggests, Merrick defines the narrative layout of large-scale and complex works with multiple key changes, such as the *Dante Sonata*, the first movement of the *Faust Symphony*, the *Totentanz* or the first volume of *The Years of Pilgrimage* (Switzerland).

Many of us have experience of Liszt's habits related to different keys, and it is also certain that reflexes inevitably develop in the practising musician in connection with them, which eventually become decisive for interpretation and orientation in the material. Three decades ago, Paul Merrick also noticed – as if by accident – the typical use of certain keys, and as more and more keys and signatures turned out to be typical in Liszt's practice, it seemed necessary to extend the investigation to every key used by Liszt – from piano music through orchestral pieces to choral compositions (ix). As the cases multiplied, philological questions such as the authorship of *Don Sanche* seemed to be clarified: the typification of the choice of key, in Merrick's opinion, precludes the possibility that others had contributed to the adolescent Liszt's opera.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, of course, such insights have repercussions on the method itself and on the conviction of the correctness of the method.

Like the author of the book, the reader is confronted with the problem of keylessness. This time we are not talking about the late Liszt's departure from tonality (*Bagatelle sans tonalité*, 1885), but about a compositional process that very much planned tonality and its indication as a starting point, but due to adaptation to the programme, Liszt later cancelled the signature or did not take it into account from the outset.

<sup>8</sup> As an independent study, "Original or Doubtful? Liszt's Use of Key in Support of His Authorship of *Don Sanche*", *Studia Musicologica* XXXIV/3-- 4 (1992), 427-- 434.

An early version of the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, and later its revised version *Pensée des morts*, pieces and fragments such as the beginning of the *Faust Symphony*, the important parts of the Inferno of the *Dante Symphony* or sections of *Via Crucis* are related to a symbolic use of keylessness – *nihilum* (nothingness, non-existence).<sup>9</sup> There are many exciting examples of absence of key in the functional and tonal sense in Liszt's later works, but in the Lisztian logic of key signatures, the notation of the signature itself seems particularly important for the programme. One of the much-cited representatives of the later pieces, *Nuages gris*, becomes a particularly interesting composition in Merrick's system precisely because it *does* have a key signature: the work was written by Liszt in 2 flats G minor. *Grey Clouds* is the most radical portrait of the key denoted by the term *nubilum* (gloomy) (23).

*Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key* is an unusual musicological experiment. The horizons of the examination are wide, its methodology is undefined. Statistical positivism is excitingly mixed with intuition, a philologist-historian bent with an analytical view. Regardless of or in spite of all this, the volume is a very useful collection of examples: a scholar interested in the issues surrounding Liszt's use of key – and the lay music lover – can embark on an adventurous journey of discovery from here. Of course, Paul Merrick himself is aware that his associations, his bold leaps and bounds, lead to questionable conclusions. He also admits that, due to the nature of the object under consideration, his claims are unprovable (x.) But what makes this book a fascinating read is precisely that it seeks to introduce the reader to the most mysterious corner of Liszt's spirit, his methodology of composition, a world that is still a source of controversy more than two hundred years after the composer's birth.

9 As an independent study (Hungarian): "... sans ton ni mesure. Egy halálszimbólum Liszt zenéjében?", *Magyar Zene* XLI/1-- 4. (2003), 219—236.; (English): "Liszt's sans ton Key Signature", *Studia Musicologica*, 45/3-- 4. (2004), 281-- 302.

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