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'Teufelsonate': Mephistopheles in Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor

Does Liszt's piano sonata have a programme? Debate still surrounds a question which has never been settled. My own opinion, given in my book *Revolution and religion in the music of Liszt* (Cambridge University Press, 1987; paperback reissue, 2008), is that it does. In chapter 14 of the book, together with the preceding chapter on Liszt's programmatic use of fugue, I try to show the logic of the programme being religious in character. This has been dismissed in some quarters, for example by Alan Walker, who says in his biography of Liszt with regard to the Sonata: 'Not the least fascinating thing about the piece is the number of divergent theories it has produced from those of its admirers who feel constrained to search for hidden meanings.' He then lists five 'programmatic' interpretations of the work, of which mine – inaccurately summarised – is the fourth. He continues:

> Needless to say, Liszt himself did not sanction any of these. Apart from some scattered references in his correspondence and conversations with friends, he was generally silent about the work and offered no words of any kind on the question of its programme – or lack of it. He was content simply to describe his masterpiece by the generic term 'sonata' – an inscrutable title that seems to close the door on further discussion.[1]

Kenneth Hamilton says: 'Merrick constructs an amusing fantasy from which we learn, among other things, that "the 'slow movement' can represent only one thing: the redemption of Man after the Fall".'[2]

This may be Hamilton's opinion of my suggested programme, but the redemption of Man after the Fall is neither amusing nor a fantasy. The date Liszt wrote on the manuscript of his Sonata is 2 February 1853. In English this is called Candlemas. Other names are the Presentation of the Lord and the Purification of the Virgin – 40 days after Christmas. The child Jesus is taken to the Temple, and recognised by two old people, Anna and Simeon, as the redeemer of Israel. The Sonata was composed at the time when Liszt was reported by a visitor to the Altenburg in 1851 to have returned strongly to the Catholicism of his youth after the upheavals of the 1848 revolutions in Europe: 'Liszt joins in. He undertakes the apology for strict canonical Catholicism, which forbids any individual opinion or conviction [...] he has decided to *se rejeter fortement dans le système catholique*'.[3]

1853 was the year Liszt began the idea of composing an oratorio on the life of Christ, a project that took until 1868, when he finished *Christus* in

1. Alan Walker: *Franz Liszt: the Weimar years 1848–1861* (New York, 1989), pp.150–51.

2. Kenneth Hamilton: *Liszt: Sonata in B minor* (Cambridge, 1996), p.29.

3. Theodor von Bernhardi: *Aus dem Leben Theodor von Bernhardis*, 9 vols (Leipzig, 1893–96); English translation in Ernest Newman: *The man Liszt* (London,1934, rev.1969), p.179.

Rome. The Piano Sonata is a summation of his entire musical life to date, on the instrument that gave him his historic career as a travelling pianist throughout Europe in the decade 1838–48. It was characteristic of Liszt to conceive of great works – of large-scale works – as programmatic. It was entirely uncharacteristic to produce something that lasts half-an-hour without having a programmatic idea. Liszt would say why write it if it is just notes, if it has no 'story'? Much has been made of the unusual form of the work, but Liszt himself wrote to a fellow musician: 'Certainly you very rightly observe that the forms First Subject, Middle Subject, After Subject, etc., may very much grow into a habit, because they must be so thoroughly natural, primitive, and very intelligible. Without making the slightest objection to this opinion, I only beg for permission to be allowed to decide upon the forms by the contents.'[4]

WHAT I am now going to say must be considered as an appendage to what I have written in my book. It is prompted by a letter I received in September 1991. My comments should be read with a copy of the score at hand – I refer to bar numbers instead of larding the text with music examples. The work is readily available and should be in the possession of anyone who considers himself an educated musician – this extends well beyond the world of pianists.

The letter was written to me by the editor of the *American Journal of Film Music*, William Rosar, with whose permission I quote the relevant section:

> PS Further to the Sonata, it might be of interest to you to know that somewhere along the way it acquired the nickname *Teufelsonate* ('Devil Sonata'). The man who told me that was Heinz Roemheld [Heinz Eric Roemheld (1901–85); born Wisconsin; child prodigy; in 1920 studied with Busoni in Berlin], a German-American pianist-composer who studied in the 1920s with Egon Petri who, as you may know, was a disciple of Busoni [...] Petri groomed Roemheld to become a Liszt interpreter which, however, Roemheld did not pursue.

At this point let us pretend to wipe the slate clean and start from scratch. If there is a theme in the Sonata which can be called 'Teufel', then we all know which one it is. What evidence do we have for thinking it represents the devil? None. At least, not from Liszt, who left us no programme for the work, and without such a document, say many musicians and musicologists, we are not entitled to say that the work might be programmatic. Anything else is a guess, and guesses are not scientific. End of story.

I would contradict this view by saying that the score is itself a document from Liszt – it is written on paper. We should scan it for clues – or evidence. Obviously anything we find has to be interpreted, but that is part of a musician's job – it is what musicology is for, or should be. Understanding

4. Extract from a letter of Liszt to Louis Köhler, 9 July 1856; English translation in *Letters of Franz Liszt*, trans. Constance Bache (London, 1894; Westport, 1969), vol.1, p.273.

art – the 'content' of music – can certainly never be an exact science, like mathematics or physics. But any findings can be presented logically, and weighed up as evidence. The question is which way the scales tip.

Science, we are told by scientists, is fundamentally measurement. So let us begin with a number. The devil theme first appears at bar 13. Is this coincidence? Did Liszt count the bars? Certainly he had negative associations with the number 13. In her editor's preface to the Fernando Laires *Festschrift* Rena Charnin Mueller says 'Liszt suffered from triskaidekaphobia and was known to have removed himself from any company in which the number 13 was obvious.'[5] This phobia is fear of the number 13, and certainly we can find instances where Liszt took steps to avoid the number. There is no 13th transcendental study, no 13th symphonic poem, these piano and orchestral works both being published in the Weimar period (1848–61) in sets of 12. The late symphonic poem *From the cradle to the grave* – in actuality the '13th' – is not numbered by Liszt. The oratorio *Christus* in its first version in 1866 had 12 items, but in 1867 Liszt added the 'Tu es Petrus' as no.8, which made the final 'Resurrexit' no.13. To avoid this in 1868 he added the Easter Hymn 'O filii et filiae' for invisible offstage women's choir to precede the 'Resurrexit', thus making the total number of items 14. Other examples of Liszt's conscious treatment of the number 13 can be found in his music, his aim being to avoid it, or overcome it. This last aim I think is part of the Sonata's programme, and we should assume that the entry of the theme at bar 13 is deliberate. What does the theme tell us about itself?

The theme we are talking about has a double identity – it appears in two forms, or with two characters. The other character is marked 'cantando espressivo' (bar 153) – the opposite of the 'marcato' marking of the 'devil' version. Actually, Liszt displays duality here by employing the two basic styles of playing the piano – the lyrical and the percussive. The piano, as we know, can be classed as a percussion instrument because it has hammers. The 'devil' theme makes use of this percussive identity of the piano. Indeed Liszt himself referred to these two characters in a letter he wrote to Louis Köhler from Weimar in June 1854, saying Köhler had made a 'very perspicuous discovery of my intention in the second motive of the Sonata [Liszt quotes the music of the 'cantando espressivo' theme] in contrast with the previous hammer-blows [Liszt quotes the music of the bar 13 theme].'[6] We thus have the composer's authority for characterising the theme as 'hammer-blows'. This characterisation (which incidentally goes some way to contradicting Walker's assertion quoted above that Liszt 'offered no words of any kind on the question of its programme'), taken in conjunction with the theme's entry at bar 13, certainly suggests that in Liszt's mind the theme is not

5. See *Journal of the American Liszt Society* vols.55–56 (2003–05).

6. Extract from a letter of Liszt to Louis Köhler, 8 June 1854; English translation in *Letters of Franz Liszt*, vol.1, p.190.

intended to be anything but antithetical. It is not an illogical step on our part, knowing Liszt's superstitious attitude to the number 13, to think that the theme was associated by him with the devil.

If the theme we are talking about has two identities, then this double identity is itself a musical clue towards defining Liszt's portrait of the devil in the Sonata. The devil undergoes thematic transformation. That is to say, both themes are connected to the devil – Liszt makes the act of transformation itself a feature of the devil. Yet it is still the case that in the Sonata these are two separate tunes, each independent of the other in terms of its musical character. The question is, which of them for Liszt constituted the 'first'? Which one is the alteration, which is the original?

The answer to this problem lies in the concept of distortion or corruption, found for example in the *Faust symphony*. In the symphony it is Faust whose themes are subjected to distortion in the Mephistopheles movement. The one theme that is not distorted is the Gretchen, or love theme. This is a basic distinction between the *Faust symphony* and the Piano Sonata: in the sonata it is precisely the lyrical theme which is distorted, the 'cantando' theme which, if the Piano Sonata were a Faust work, we would have to call the Gretchen theme. Here we have the main reason for saying that the Piano Sonata is not a Faust work – the devil does distort the theme which in a 'Faust' work would not be subjected to such treatment. Thus we can say that part of the identity of the devil in Liszt's Piano Sonata is precisely his corruption of the 'love' theme. If you like, we can say he appropriates it – in a word steals it. More accurately the devil, as a spirit whose 'incarnation' can only be 'possession' of an already existing 'body', in fact occupies the melody. Liszt's transformation process here matches traditional centuries-old Christian theology quite literally.

At this point it is precisely theology to which we must turn in order to gain a clearer picture of who we are talking about. The devil in Liszt's Sonata is not a medieval gargoyle. At least, not in the sense of being one of many – he is *the* devil. Certainly this is how Goethe's character Mephistopheles was accepted in the 19th century, for example by Gounod in his opera *Faust*. When in the 'poodle' scene of Part One of the poem, Faust asks Mephistopheles his name, Goethe writes a reply including the words:

> In sprang the dog, indeed, observing naught;
> Things now assume another shape,
> The devil's in the house and can't escape.

The context of Goethe's Faust drama is Christianity. The Prologue in Heaven has words spoken by the three archangels – Raphael, Gabriel and Michael – as well as the Lord. In the 'First part of the tragedy: night', a Chorus of Angels sings 'Christ is arisen!'

Even in the *Faust symphony* Liszt's character portrait of Mephistopheles is drawn from the traditional Christian portrait of the devil. Liszt called his symphony 'Drei Karakterbildern', each of the three characters – Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles – having a separate movement to themselves. The third movement, entitled Mephistopheles, is not based on new themes: instead Mephistopheles distorts Faust's themes, thus reflecting his character as the Spirit of Negation. However, Liszt does introduce one new theme, which he took from his youthful, unperformed piano concerto entitled *Malédiction* (S.121, LW.H1). This theme first appears at letter A in the published score. (The work is of course known today, but it was not published in Liszt's lifetime – thus his use of the theme was a private self-quotation.) In the manuscript Liszt wrote over the theme the word 'orgueil' or pride. Transferred to the symphony [letter D] , this theme became in fact the motivating force of the whole Mephistopheles movement, appearing many times. At letter Tt in the score it is stated as a full orchestral tutti marked *fff*. As far as I know this is the single loudest orchestral tutti in all Liszt's music.

This musical emphasis on pride as being the chief characteristic of Mephistopheles links him directly to the Christian tradition according to which pride was the sin of the devil that led to his rebellion against God and the fall of the angels. The many names given to this figure – Satan, Lucifer, the Prince of this world, the Devil – cannot disguise the one idea that lies behind them all. Liszt simply added the name of Mephistopheles to the list, a name whose etymology derives probably from the Greek *me* (not), *phos*, *photos* (light), *philos* (loving) – thus 'not loving light'. The idea is from John 3:20: 'For every one that doth evil hateth the light'. Hence we can say that as music – or rather as programme music – Liszt's Mephistopheles and the Christian devil are one and the same. For Liszt to extend the portrait he made in the symphony to another in the Sonata was a logical step, and a small one. The big step was to abandon Gretchen. The devil in the Sonata is not companionable, as he is for Faust in Goethe's poem,or Gounod's opera. He is what St Ignatius Loyola called the Enemy.

The point here is that in both works it is the devil that causes thematic distortion. Therefore in both works the question of which version of a theme is the first – in the sense of the original idea – is answered by saying that it must be the one made subject to corruption (in the symphony the Faust themes, in the Sonata the 'cantando' theme). The devil's versions are subsequent to these, hence they represent a second version. In the symphony this sequence of first and second is the sequence in which the original and the corrupted versions actually appear in the work. But in the Sonata this sequence is reversed: the version we hear first at bar 13 is the corruption. In that sense the devil has already acted before the work begins

– and misleads us into thinking his appearance is the 'real' theme. It is only as the work gradually unfolds that we begin to sense the drama that is taking place before our eyes and ears – when we hear for the first time (bar 153) the beauty of the 'cantando' theme.

Where was the devil when he grabbed this beautiful theme to use it as his own? That is to say, where was the devil before the Sonata began/begins? I think we can say that since he appears at bar 13 in B minor, he must have been where the 'cantando' theme is in B major (bar 616). His corruption consists largely in putting it into the minor mode. He 'minorised' it.

The B major at the end of the work is of course what we would analyse formally as the 'recapitulation'. This tradition of tonal 'return' Liszt made basic to the programme as well as to the form. He makes the 'Teufel' begin the whole dramaturgy by having him steal his theme from the end. This makes the end a real return, since to return is to have earlier begun. By acting 'off-stage' before the music begins, the devil simply causes the work to happen. The ending, as the 'home', was always the home. Where is it?

At this point we must accept the reality of key association in the programme music of Liszt. When Liszt chose the key of B minor for his Sonata, he was in part extrapolating from a programmatic identity of B major – a rare key in Liszt, but with a clear character. Let us consider works by Liszt in the key. After examining 500 of Liszt's works I have found nine works in B major (catalogues of Liszt's works do not give the key).[7] Here they are in chronological order:

1825 'Brillant asile doux et tranquille' (aria and chorus from opera *Don Sanche*) S1
1840 *Hymn du matin* S173a [piano]
1848 *Kling leise, mein Lied* [song] S301
1854 'Les cloches de Genève' (no.9 from *Années de pèlerinage*, book I) [piano] S160
1855 Gloria (from *Gran mass*) [choir and orchestra] S9
1855 Magnificat (from *Dante symphony*) [orchestra with choir] S109
1857 *Künstlerfestzug* [orchestra] S114
1885 *En rêve* [piano] S207
1885 'Eötvös' (no.2 from *Hungarian historical portraits*) [piano] S205

The young Liszt notated the 1825 aria and chorus 'Brillant asile doux et tranquille' in B major, but the conductor Rodolphe Kreutzer instructed the orchestra at the first performance to play it in B♭ major – an instruction 'en si ♭' is written into the parts used by the players, who simply read the same notes as though they were in that key.[8] This serves to highlight an area of disagreement between the youthful composer and the seasoned

7. See my article 'Liszt's music in C major', in *The Musical Times* vol.149 no.1903 (Summer 2008), pp.70–80.

8. See my article 'Doubtful or authentic? Liszt's use of key in *Don Sanche*', in *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* (1992), pp.427–34.

musician – B major is a difficult, probably in Kreutzer's view unnecessarily difficult, key to play in. Its signature of five sharps stands out in the opera; it is preceded by the key of A♭ and followed by the key of G. Liszt's task was to illustrate the words sung by the Page – 'Brillant asile doux et tranquille/ pour les amants toujours constants' ('A splendid refuge, sweet and peaceful,/ For faithful and constant lovers') – which describe the 'Castle of love' of the opera's subtitle – *Don Sanche ou Le Château d'amour*.

The second verse says 'De douces flammes brûlent les âmes,/dans se séjour tout n'est qu'amour' ('Each heart burns with a sweet flame,/All is but love in this place'). The castle of love here is clearly for the immortals – there is no question of temporary residence. The story of the miniature opera is a series of trials that beset true love – a kind of Magic Flute idea, except that the Sarastro figure, here the wizard Alidor who rules the castle of love, is also the Queen of the Night in that he causes the events that threaten danger (a thunderstorm and a duel with an evil knight), his purpose being to make Princess Elzire requite the love of Don Sanche. As a kind of reverse Prospero, he 'brings Miranda to Ferdinand' instead of the other way round, as in Shakespeare's *The tempest*. In other words Alidor, as the bringer of true love, acts as a kind of divine providence – Don Sanche's 'death' in the duel with the evil knight (who is Alidor in disguise) becomes not only a 'resurrection' (he turns out to be only wounded) but an 'assumption' (he enters paradise – the castle of love). For this journey Liszt utilises the keys of D minor for the death, A♭ for the love, and B major for the paradise – as he did the same keys later in life, but with a more evidently theological colouring. An obvious example of this theological usage is the 1855 Magnificat that ends the *Dante symphony*. Although the famous story of Wagner trying to dissuade Liszt from setting the *Paradiso* is supposed to have affected how the composer treated the topic, it is evident that the ending of the symphony is in fact a vision of the ending of Dante's poem. The tonal journey from Hell to Heaven in the work is also D minor to B major. A similar journey towards B major – as regards the ending if not the beginning (which is in C major) – is found in the nine pieces of the Swiss book of *Années de pèlerinage*, the last of which is the 1854 'Les cloches de Genève'. The cycle begins in a church (William Tell's Chapel) and ends with a reference to church bells – a symbolism that reflects a (religious) journey from earth to heaven. Voices from heaven may be the pictorial idea behind the B major key of the 1855 Gloria from the *Gran mass*, a work whose main tonality is D major. The move from D major to the distant tonality of B major immediately after the Kyrie seems best explained by a tonal dramaturgy based on the character of the chosen distant key. The first 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' was of course sung by the angels (from heaven) at Christmas to the shepherds.

The remaining B major pieces are thus perhaps best understood if we accept that the key character of B major is celestial – we might say celestial harmony. Immediately we can see this in the 1848 *Kling leise, mein Lied* (*Sound softly, my song*), a song whose subject is itself. Verse one in English begins 'Sound softly, my song, through the silent night,/sound softly, so that my beloved does not awake! But I think it was verse three that decided the key for Liszt (my italics): 'Do not wake her with a greeting too passionate,/tread gently, *like a pilgrim walking through the holy temple*,/let your greeting sound as *quietly as a soft prayer*.' This key association would make the choice of key for the 1840 *Hymn du matin* and the 1885 *En rêve* far from arbitrary. And if the same holds true for its use in the 1885 *Eötvös*, then perhaps it is revealing of Liszt's view of knowledge as having a divine source (as light, or illumination) since the piece is a portrait of the 19th-century Hungarian minister for religion and education. Similarly, therefore, the B major of the 1857 *Künstlerfestzug* (*Ceremonial march of the artists*) may be a reference to the divine source of Art, with artists as 'priests' or 'ministers'.

I THEREFORE SUGGEST that the key of B major that ends the Sonata was chosen by Liszt as part of the programme. It is/was in heaven that the devil steals/stole the B major love theme before he first appears with it at bar 13 in B minor as 'hammer-blows' – and it is to heaven that the stolen theme must return.

When the devil took the B major 'cantando'' theme from its home in B major, he left behind the theme that immediately precedes it (bar 600). There are actually two themes in B major – forming what traditional analysis would call the second subject group. Of these two the devil appropriated only one. In other words, he separated them – leaving the first of the two remaining alone.

Liszt's programmatic idea I think is that these two themes form/formed a symbiosis – the one should always have the other. This is how they appear at the end of the work, where they 'return' to how they were meant to be. But in the exposition, these two themes are separated – and their separation, as I have said, has been caused by the devil.

This 'separation' of two themes from each other represents an idea very basic to the Sonata – the idea of two as one (or one as two). Liszt is not thinking of these numbers as digits – rather of one as 'whole' and two as 'divided'. In other words, what we mean by 'harmony' in its non-musical sense, expressed by him as the 'heaven' of B major. Disharmony, or duality, is where this 'harmony' is disrupted. After the disruption the two joined together become two in conflict. This is what we see in the first subject theme in B minor, where the 'devil' theme is in the LH, and a different theme in the RH. These two, still joined in conflict, reappear as the first subject in the

recapitulation. Clearly Liszt portrays here dual as 'duel'. Significantly, the devil is in the left hand (sinister in Latin). Here Liszt extends the concept of two even to characterising the two hands on the keyboard. Liszt makes the idea of 'the separated two' the whole basis of the exposition section of the Sonata. His programmatic plan for the work is to 're-unite' what has been divided – in Latin 'religare' (to tie up, make fast) from which comes the English word 'religion'.

Let me add at this point that just as B major first appeared in 1825 in *Don Sanche*, so too did B minor and, furthermore, in a context which I think can be directly linked to this dual/duel main theme of the Sonata. The key appears as the tonality of the duet 'Tremble, tremble', which in the action of the story is a duel. The idea is a clever one, a ruse on the part of the Lord of the Castle, the wizard Alidor, to make the Princess Elzire declare her love. He disguises himself as the evil knight Romualde, fights Don Sanche, and makes him fall to the ground. A *Marche funèbre* in D minor follows. At the sight of his body Elzire reveals the love in her heart. When he turns out to be only wounded, and not dead, she is overjoyed, and the road to a happy ending now lies open. The couple can enter the Castle of Love.

The duel therefore shows the two sides of Don Sanche's destiny brought into conflict. Either he will win Elzire, or he will lose her. On this depends his being able to enter the Castle of Love – the B major 'Brillant asile doux et tranquille pour les amants toujours constants'. Thus the B minor of the duet relates to Liszt's choice of key for the place of eternal happiness, where the lovers are united. In other words they enter the place of 'oneness' – a concept whose name both musical and non-musical is simply 'harmony'. Alidor's action in disguising himself is done to bring this about – to create a 'two' (combat) that will resolve as 'one' (love). Liszt makes him be musically both, by 'creating' B minor, the key that represents 'two'. It only appears once in the opera, and significantly after he had written music in B major, a key which also appears just the once. Thus the minor refers back to the major – a literal 'minorization' – and Alidor is responsible for both keys in the work. In this context the B minor of the duet/duel is clearly the obverse of the B major of the 'celestial' chorus. Its character reflects what in everyday parlance is meant when we say discord leads to harmony. B minor is division.

This idea – of a split, or *separatio* (severing) – can be expressed in another way as *duplex animo* (division in the mind). This is what we find in no.10 of the 12 symphonic poems, *Hamlet* (1858, S104), as far as I know Liszt's only orchestral work in B minor. The Latin Vulgate uses the phrase in James 1:8 'vir duplex animo inconstans in omnibus viis suis' (he is double-

minded, and never can keep a steady course). This matches Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Liszt's symphonic poem on the subject. The composer said of his musical portrait: 'he remains still the same, pale, feverish, suspended between heaven and earth, the prisoner of his doubt and indecisiveness!'[9] The idea of 'two' that lies behind the word 'doubt' is obscured in English; it is more obvious in the Latin 'dubitum' and the German 'Zweifel'. Even the Biblical doubting Thomas has a name in Greek expressive of one split into two – Didymus or twin[s].

Of the many striking features of the Sonata it is perhaps this dual theme as its main one, or first subject, that is the most original, and at the same time the most programmatic. Liszt is again Alidor, his aim as a composer 30 years later being to create once more the 'two' (combat) that will resolve as 'one' (love). And to use the same keys for the same reason. Today we can now, like Liszt when he was composing the Sonata, compare the main 'double' (two simultaneous but contrasted hands) theme of the piano work with his youthful thinking in *Don Sanche*. (The opera was staged in Paris in 1825, the score then being lost in a fire and only in 1912 was the work published, after the orchestral parts were discovered to have survived. A modern revival took place in 1977 in London.[10]) Clearly the role of the evil knight is given to the left hand.

THE THEME that was 'left alone' when the B major love theme was stolen by the devil is in my opinion a version of *Crux fidelis* (bar 600).[11] Liszt used this medieval latin hymn, sung in the Good Friday liturgy at the veneration of the Cross, in the symphonic poem *Hunnenschlacht*, where he added to it some characteristic harmony – the same harmony appears in the Sonata version.[12] This theme, the most imposing in the whole work, appears in the exposition section as the first of the two themes in D major in the second subject group (bar 105, marked *ff Grandioso*). It is at this point that Liszt illustrates before our eyes how the devil has separated it from the 'cantando' theme: he places the devil between the two themes. Furthermore, he shows us that the devil theme and the love theme are versions of each other – by letting the devil 'transform' himself gradually into the love theme (bars 141–54].[13] It is at this point that the relationship of the devil theme to the love theme becomes the focus of our attention. How can something so ugly turn into something so beautiful? And more importantly, why?

The space between the D major *Crux fidelis* theme and the D major 'cantando' theme is omitted at the end of the Sonata when the two themes are recapitulated in B major. It is also in this space that the RH theme of the first subject dual theme is heard by itself (bar 125), without the devil's LH accompaniment. The devil is also heard by himself (bar 141) – so he can transform into the 'cantando' theme. In other words, another separation

9. Extract from a letter of Liszt to Agnes Klindworth, 26 June 1858 in *Franz Liszt's Briefe*, ed. La Mara, 8 volumes (Leipzig, 1893–1902), vol.3, p.111.

10. The opera *Don Sanche* is recorded on Hungaroton Classic HCD 12744-45.

11. See Paul Merrick: *Revolution and religion in the music of Liszt* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 284–87.

12. See ibid., p.285, ex.179.

13. See ibid., p.289, ex.188.

occurs. We hear four themes: the Grandioso *Crux fidelis* (bar 105), the RH theme (bar 125), the devil theme (bar 141) and the 'cantando espressivo' theme (bar 153), each separate. And so far one of them has not been identified, namely the RH first subject theme – the one in conflict with the devil.

Returning to the *Faust symphony* we would have to say that the parallel there is the relationship between Mephistopheles and Faust in the third movement – the devil attacks Faust's themes. As we have already identified what would be the Gretchen theme in the Sonata, it is logical to conclude that the theme now in question would be the Faust theme. Except as we have established there is no Gretchen in the Sonata, so we must say there is no Faust as such. The 'Gretchen' theme I have called the love theme. We have to discover the identity of the devil's adversary in the Sonata. This is simple – on earth the devil has only one adversary, humankind. The 'Faust' theme in the Sonata is all men – Everyman.

Here we arrive at the point of the whole work. The separation Liszt is talking to us about is the separation of Man and God. That is why the Devil is the chief character. It is also why the slow movement section in F♯ major (bars 330–459) is the greatest music Liszt composed for the piano. A new theme marked 'Andante sostenuto' begins this section – the only time in the work a new theme appears – and in this section the devil theme does not figure. Here is the turning point of the work's programme, in Christian language the Saviour. In *Revolution and religion in the music of Liszt* I describe this slow movement, and I refer readers/listeners to that description.[14] Suffice it to say that in my opinion the F♯ section is the Redemption – the Passion. The result of which is that Man has the power to overcome the Devil.

This process of conquering the devil begins with the fugue that follows (bars 460–522), which is part of the programme (see my chapter 13, 'Liszt's programmatic use of fugue', and chapter 14, p.294). Liszt notates the first note as G♭, having ended the slow movement with an F♯ – a change of notation that indicates the reappearance of the devil and his theme.[15] Liszt cleverly constructs a fugue subject in which the Man theme and the Devil theme are joined together to form a line.[16] This is the first stage of removing the conflict. Then half way through the fugue he drops the devil theme, leaving the Man theme alone (bar 509) – a foretaste of the triumph to come.

In the recapitulation the Man/Devil conflict returns – it is the matter in hand, which can return both as programme and as sonata form. The Man theme now after the slow movement's Passion scene appears with fantastic energy (bar 582) leading to what is clearly the collapse of the devil (bars 595–99). The devil disappears, though as in real life he is not destroyed. The

14. See my description of the 'slow movement' section of the Sonata in ibid., pp.291–92.

15. See my articles on Liszt and the key of Gb major: 'G flat or F sharp? the cycle of keys in Liszt's music', in *Liszt 2000: selected lectures given at the International Liszt Conference in Budapest, May 18–20, 1999* (Budapest, 2000), p.188; and ' "nach Ges dur": Liszt's inscription in the score of Handel's opera *Almira*', in Studia Musicologica (2001), pp.349–72.

16. For the fugue subject see Merrick: *Revolution and religion in the music of Liszt*, p.287, ex.185.

difference now for the Sonata is that the *Crux fidelis* theme and the beautiful 'cantando' love theme can follow upon one another without interruption, and in B major, having been re-united ('religare'). As a result the B minor Man theme makes a final appearance in B major (bar 682) and in both hands, first the RH then the LH, thus showing that the devil's left has now become the domain of Man. To all this Liszt adds a 'dance'-like accompaniment. Man can now enter heaven, and 'return' to his true home.

As usual with this programme – remember the *Dante symphony* also ends in heaven in B major – the question arises what kind of ending is more suitable, a loud triumph or a quiet transfiguration. The beautiful quiet ending of the symphony is the latter of course. In the Sonata Liszt cleverly combines the two by first stating *fff* the *Crux fidelis* theme in B major at bar 700. I suggest the bar number 700 is not coincidence – as the counterpart to the devil's bar 13, it marks the end of a human life by referring to its 70-year span. After the loud music Liszt quietly recapitulates in B major the beautiful Andante sostenuto theme of the slow movement, followed by a coda with the devil theme in the LH marked piano *sotto voce* – as it were 'down below' as meanwhile simple sustained chords rise in the RH, the whole passage evoking vividly the distance between earth and heaven, and reminding us that on earth the devil never sleeps. The final chord of B major is *ppp*, held for what feels like an eternity until cut off by the staccato octave B in the bass.

Is this the programme of Liszt's Sonata in B minor? Does the work have a programme? Are we entitled to speculate that it might have one without documented authority from Liszt? All these questions have answers – it is our job to look for them.

If the Sonata has no programme then it is unusual, if not unique, in the output of Liszt – which otherwise consists of over 1000 compositions of which the instrumental works, whether for piano or for orchestra, are as a general rule 'illustrative' in some way, either of a programme or just their title. Part of the reluctance of musicians to consider that the work might be programmatic is the feeling that the greatness of the work derives precisely from its not being programme music – from its being absolute music. To say Liszt had in mind a programme would in their eyes somehow diminish its stature. Such thinking is ideological, and has nothing to do with historical reality. We may ask whether Liszt ever considered the possibility of there being 'absolute' music – in the sense of music that has no perceived narrative content that the performer grasps and attempts to convey to the listeners. To link narrative content to words became common practice in the 19th century, and for Liszt 'programme' was virtually a habit of mind, whereby he began with an idea which he was inspired to 'put into music'. In

this sense for Liszt a programme was the raison d'être of the work he was composing – particularly an 'important' work.

As for the absence of documented evidence, we might turn our attention to programme music by him for which he provided no 'programme' as such – for example the symphonic poem *Hamlet*, which has only its title. This alone is the programme – everybody is expected to know the story of Shakespeare's play. What title would Liszt have given his Sonata? The Redemption? Christianity? The *Crux fidelis* Sonata? Indeed – 'Teufelsonate'? We should be grateful that if indeed he was thinking of such a programme, he did not say so – and grateful for two reasons. The first is that nobody today would pay any attention to its title when performing the work. The modern approach is to begin and end with the 'form' – as though form can be actually played. The second is that it would confirm the view of Liszt as a poseur vis à vis religion and the Church, instead of pointing to the reality, which is that as Liszt matured 'programme' and 'religion' in his music became virtually synonymous concepts. 1853 was the year when the two came together. Which is why Liszt was silent about it.

To perform Liszt's Sonata in B minor involves taking all these things into consideration. It is a tragedy for Liszt that his music has survived into an age in which both 'programme' in the concert hall and 'religion' outside it are to an extent being relegated, dumped into a waste-bin of 'outmoded' human behaviour. They are seen as irrelevant to 'science' – including the science of musical understanding. But this was not the case for Liszt. To deny this fact is to remove ourselves, not Liszt, from the podium – from the culture that produced both him and his music. I would claim that without knowing what is meant by the Fall, and the Passion, it is impossible to play properly even the first hesitant notes that begin the work. Its greatness lies in its narrative, not its form. It is largely because the genius of Liszt captured this narrative so perfectly that the Sonata is such a great work. And as Liszt would have himself protested, the greatness was first not in him. It was in the story he elected to tell.

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