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The *Thirteenth Station* Paul Merrick

In Liszt's music (programme music) there are two deaths: one with resurrection, one without. The death with no resurrection has no key signature. The death with resurrection is in D minor (with the key signature of one flat). The "no signature" death can occur at any time in music in any key. Liszt simply omits the key signature ("erases" it). This can occur at the beginning of a piece, at the end of a piece, or in the middle of a piece. I refer to this practice as Liszt's "sans ton" music after a letter the composer wrote to Marie d'Agoult in 1833. In the search for clear programmatic examples I examine *Via Crucis* and look at how Liszt portrays the death of Christ. In particular the figure of Mary is considered, and her role compared to that of Gretchen in the *Faust Symphony*, especially with regard to Mephistopheles. In both the symphony and the "passion" music the *sans ton* signature is used. Is there a message for today in Liszt's programmatic association of non-tonality and death?

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In 2004 I published an article entitled "Liszt's *sans ton* Key Signature"¹. It also appeared in Hungarian² with the title "‘...*sans ton ni mesure*’". Egy halálszimbólum Liszt zenéjében?' which translates as "‘...without key or time.’ A death symbol in Liszt's music?' The topic treated in these articles was a discovery I made while examining 390 works by Liszt to establish whether there is a connection in his music between programme and choice of key or tonality. As I pointed out in the 2004 article:

During the course of my work on this question, I was forced to invent a sign for a 'blank' key signature which was not C major or A minor, but which figures not infrequently in Liszt's music.³

The article forms the basis of the first chapter of my book *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key*⁴ in which I say:

His first 'programme' for the piano—taken from French poetry—led him to try an experiment. He first sketched the music in G minor, then revised it by crossing out the key signature of 2 flats. That is, he thought of putting the music not IN a key, but OUT of a key. He wanted to have 'no key'.

The programme in question was a quotation from Lamartine attached as a preface to the piano piece *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* S154 begun in 1833. The sketch has a key signature, but in the score published in 1835 the signature has been erased.⁵ This gesture matches what he wrote in a letter to Madame d'Agoult in October 1833: 'S'il vous est possible de me renvoyer par occasion...ma petite harmonie lamartinienne sans ton ni mesure, je vous en serai fort reconnaissant. Je tiens beaucoup à ce peu de pages.'⁶ (If some time you could send me...my little Lamartine harmony without key or time, I would very much appreciate it. Those few pages mean a lot to me.)⁷

It became clear to me that in Liszt this "zero" key signature is associated with death. In the article and the book I give 86 examples of its use, including works where the signature is removed in the middle of a piece. I conclude by saying:

1 'Liszt's *sans ton* Key Signature', *Studia musicologica* XLV (2004) fasc. 3/4, 281-302. The article may also be accessed at <http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/bibliography>

2 "‘...*sans ton ni mesure*’". Egy halálszimbólum Liszt zenéjében?', *Magyar Zene* XLI (2003) no.2, 219-236

3 op.cit., 284

4 Paul Merrick, *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key*, Argumentum Publishing House Budapest, 2021

5 v. Kaczmarczyk, Adrienne, 'Az *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*-től (1835) a *Pensée des morts*-ig (Liszt Ferenc zeneszerzői indulása)' [From *Harmónies poétiques et religieuses* (1835) to *Pensée des morts* (Liszt's commencement as a composer)], *Magyar Zene* XXXVI (1996) no.2, 171-208

6 Correspondance de Liszt et de Madame d'Agoult (Paris 1933-4) vol. 1. 47. 30 octobre 1833.

7 English translation in: Bache, Constance trans., *Letters of Franz Liszt*, London, 1894, vol. 1. 47.

The percentage of cases listed where his use of a zero signature goes hand in hand with the subject of death is too high to be fortuitous. If therefore we take it to be deliberate, then we can reasonably conclude that [...] as a composer of programme music he can be seen [...] to have given consideration to the connection between key and content—and to convey this by investing the key signature *per se* with a new expressive content. In so doing he rooted the question of ‘programme’ firmly into the task of choosing the music’s tonality....⁸

In general I refer to instances where Liszt omits the key signature as his *sans ton* music. These instances are characterized by a clear programmatic context – which includes simply having a descriptive title – and by music which normally would be notated with a key signature. It does *not* mean examples of music with no clear tonality – although there are examples where the tonality is adventurous. I use the term *sans ton* to denote a practice in Liszt’s score notation, independent of his musical language.

The longest example I have found is the *Inferno* movement of the *Dante Symphony*, which is clearly in D minor, but does not make use of the signature of one flat, the space for the signature being left blank. Another example is the *Mephistopheles* movement of the *Faust Symphony* which, although it repeats themes from the first movement including their key signatures, begins and ends without a signature. Mephistopheles mocks Faust by disfiguring his music. At the end of the movement [letter Ww in the score] he disappears in a *sans ton* passage whose harmony really is keyless. This departure into nothingness is followed by a bar of silence. Goethe in his poem identifies Mephistopheles as the devil, but the devil cannot harm Gretchen. Liszt ends his symphony in the tonic major key with Gretchen’s theme sung by a tenor soloist and men’s choir to words from the *Chorus Mysticus* that concludes the Second Part of *Faust*:

*Das Ewigweibliche
Zieht uns hinan.*

The programmes of these two symphonies were of course made public by Liszt, and both are related to the question of death, or more precisely to the danger death poses to the fate of the soul. Thus we know what the content of the works in question was intended to be. Even so, it is of course not possible to prove conclusively that Liszt used the *sans ton* signature as a programmatic symbol. The evidence in the end remains circumstantial. For it to be convincing depends entirely on its having a clear programmatic context.

Here I would like to present an example that figures in a religious work, namely *Via Crucis* S53/LWJ33, Liszt’s late musical setting of the Stations of the Cross. Composed in Budapest in 1878, a performance was planned for 1879 in the Inner City Parish Church, the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but was cancelled when the cantor Mátyás Engeszer fell ill. Liszt never heard his music performed in the liturgical context for which it was composed. Only after his death was it given its première in the same church in 1929, conducted by Artúr Harmat, who founded the faculty of Church Music at the Liszt Academy in 1926. Although liturgical, the work can be seen as belonging to Liszt’s programme music because it describes fourteen scenes from the journey of Christ carrying the Cross, in English known as the Way of the Cross. In Jerusalem the original journey of Christ from the House of Pilate to Calvary is marked in the streets with statues and reliefs. These so-called “stations” are places where pilgrims stop to pray, walking on from one to the other to follow Christ’s journey. In the Middle Ages the Franciscans began to build models of them in their churches, a practice which today has spread to every Catholic church, and to some Protestant ones as well. During Lent the Way of the Cross is re-enacted liturgically, the priest and sometimes the congregation walking round the interior of the church, stopping at each station to hear a meditation and say appropriate prayers. Music is also performed, which is where Liszt intended his own music to be heard.

The *Twelfth Station* is where Jesus dies on the Cross. The *Thirteenth Station* is known as The Deposition. It is also called The Descent from the Cross. This moment has its own cultural tradition

⁸ op.cit. 16,17

whereby the body of Jesus is placed in His Mother's arms, as we read for example in the meditations on the *Stations* written by St Alphonsus Liguori in the 18th century.⁹

Station 13: Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross

Consider that, our Lord having expired, two of His disciples, Joseph and Nicodemus, took Him down from the Cross, and placed him in the arms of his afflicted Mother, who received him with unutterable tenderness, and pressed him to her bosom.

In art this tradition produced the so-called *Pietà*, a perfect specimen of which is the painting by Annibale Carracci dating from the sixteenth century.



Pietà. Painted by Annibale Carracci, 1599-1600
Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples
[Web Gallery of Art www.wga.hu/Carracci,Annibale]

The most famous *Pietà* is of course Michelangelo's statue in Rome in St Peter's Basilica. Clearly behind the genre hovers the ghost of the Madonna and Child. For *Station XIII* Liszt composed an organ solo in D minor, which we can regard as a kind of musical *Pietà*.

Music example 1. (*Via Crucis*. Station XIII bars 18-58)

⁹ St Alphonsus de Liguori: Centenary Edition. The Complete Works, ed. Rev. Eugene Grimm. The Ascetical Works. Vol.V. *The Passion and the Death of Jesus Christ. Way of the Cross*. New York 1887, 479-491

18 STATION XIII

Lento (come prima)

perdendo

mf

sf

Ped. *

sf

p

Ped. *

sf

Ped. *

dolcissimo espr.

pp

Ped. *

simile

pp

Ped. *

p

Ped. *

Both Liszt's programme symphonies have choral endings which are connected to Mary. The *Dante Symphony* ends with a female choir singing the Magnificat, the canticle of Mary, and the figure of Gretchen in the *Faust Symphony* has been brought into connection with Mary by cultural historians, for example in Germany by Oswald Spengler in the first volume of his famous book *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* published in 1918, translated into English as *The Decline of the West*:

The Mother with the Child - the future - at her breast, the Mary-cult in the new Faustian form, began to flourish only in the centuries of the Gothic and found its highest expression in Raphael's Sistine Madonna. [] most certainly Faust's Gretchen, with the deep spell of unconscious motherhood on her, is nearer to the Gothic Madonna than all the Marys of Byzantine and Ravennate mosaics. [] The meaning of the child to the mother is the future, the continuation, namely, of her own life, and mother-love is, as it were, a welding of two discontinuous individual existences; [] The Woman as Mother is History, and the Man as Warrior and Politician *makes* History.¹⁰

In both programme symphonies the choral ending serves to represent salvation from the kind of death Liszt associated with his *sans ton* key signature – we can call it *mors aeterna*. In one symphony it is hell, in the other it is the devil. In both programmes the victim is the soul, which is created immortal, but subject to dangers. *Via Crucis* belongs to this programme because the death that Jesus died on the Cross is *mors aeterna*. It can only happen once, which is why the consequence of it – namely salvation – is *salus aeterna*. Liszt faces the two eternities in his music. It is also the case that the Cross itself is ambiguous in its symbolism – it cannot just be *salus aeterna*. It is not a talisman, not simply Constantine's "In hoc signo vinces". Crucifixion as a way of executing criminals meant the cross as such had had a grisly history preceding Christianity, and the mere sight of one was more than enough to deter would-be miscreants. Death was its primary message. The religious ingredient – namely the cross as a sacrifice bringing salvation from death which is the result of sin – is a cultural embellishment. For Liszt the two-edged sword the cross represents is why he used it so much as a musical symbol – usually called his "Cross motive". Naturally this three-note motive figures strongly in *Via Crucis*, but no study of his music has yet been made to trace all its appearances in other works. It can be found in both the symphonies for example. Not infrequently works which contain the Cross-motive also have passages of *sans ton* music. In *Via Crucis* ten of the fourteen stations have *sans ton* music – namely musical passages or entire movements where the key signature is omitted. Even so the basic tonality of the work is D minor with its signature of one flat, thus bringing it into line with other similar works, like the *Marche funèbre* from *Don Sanche* S1/LW01, the early piano concerto entitled *De profundis*. *Psaume instrumental* S121a/LWH3, the *Totentanz* S126/LWH8, for piano and orchestra, the piano sonata entitled *Après une lecture du Dante* S158c/LWA55/7, the *Agnus Dei* from the *Missa choralis* S10/LWJ18, and also from the *Requiem* S12/LWJ22, the motet *Ave verum corpus* S44/LWJ31, and the choral movement *Poenitentia* from *Septem sacramenta* S52/LWJ35. In other words, Liszt regards the fourteen stations of the Cross as musical material incorporating BOTH aspects of death in his *mors aeterna* programme – namely music which has the key signature, and music which does not have the key signature. In this way he can express the two kinds of death Jesus represents, one of which has no resurrection. The point being that the Cross is one, but the death is two.

Via Crucis begins in D minor with the medieval Latin hymn *Vexilla Regis*, whose Gregorian melody begins with the 3-note Cross motive. Important for the programme he had in mind are lines 3 and 4 of the first verse, referring to the Cross:

Abroad the regal banners fly,
Now shines the Cross's mystery:
Upon it Life did death endure,
And yet by death did life procure.

¹⁰ Oswald Spengler: *The Decline of the West* trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (re-issue of the 1926 edition by Cosimo Classics New York 2020) Volume One, Chapter IV, Destiny and Causality 137

Hail Cross, of hopes the most sublime!
On this triumphant day.

The *Thirteenth Station*, the Descent from the Cross, takes place after the mystery has happened. But Mary first appears before the death of Jesus, at Station IV, which is entitled *Jesus Meets his Blessed Mother*.



Station IV
The Religious Sisters of Mercy of *Alma Michigan*
www.almamercy.org/stations-of-the-cross

If we look at Station XIII as the moment where the Cross carries the dead body of Christ – which is removed and given to his Mother – then the reverse is this meeting where the living Jesus carries the Cross. Quite logically Liszt used the same music for the two Stations which portray Jesus with his Mother – at Station IV and Station XIII. The difference however is that the *Fourth Station* omits the D minor key signature of one flat.

Music example 2. (*Via Crucis*. Station IV)

STATION IV

Jésus rencontre sa très sainte mère

Lento

mf

sf

dim.

p

ms.

pp dolcissimo

perdendo

Rev.

1

2

3

4

5

11

17

23

29

This is the only example I have found where the composer *states the same music twice in a single work, once without the key signature, once with it.*

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The tempo marking at Station IV, the first appearance of this music, is *Lento*, and there is no key signature (Music example 2. bar 1). But at Station XIII, which is the second appearance, the marking is *Lento (come prima)*, and there is a key signature (Music example 1. bar 25). In other words Liszt tells us that Station XIII is to be performed as a musical repeat of Station IV. The two stations sound the same. But they do not look the same. Why notate them differently if there is no difference in their sound? Clearly Liszt regards the act of looking at the score as part of his artistic communication – communication from one musician to another. Here he is not concerned with the listener as such. In that sense his message is an intellectual one for the initiated.

In the context of the fourteen stations, Liszt uses this notational differentiation to point to the theological significance of the two occasions – the two meetings of Jesus and His Mother. At Station IV Mary sees her son going to his execution, carrying his own gibbet – his death. But as the Theotokos she knows in advance what kind of death her Son will die, it is the Redemption. Jesus will die once and once only the *sans ton* death – *mors aeterna*. Hence there is no key signature, the absent signature representing this death. Later, at Station XIII, after Jesus's death, *mors aeterna* has gone for ever, and Liszt therefore gives the same Mary music its missing D minor key signature. By this means the sorrow of Mary at Station IV becomes a *Pietá* at Station XIII. Mary's role as *Co-Redemptrix* is reflected by Liszt not in how the music sounds – but how it looks. The salvation is conveyed in the notation.

Here we should consider that in both the symphony and the liturgical work the enemy is the devil. Liszt's only composition with "sans ton" in the title is the late piano piece *Bagatelle sans tonalité* S216a/LWA338 which in the autograph bears an alternative title as the fourth *Mephisto Waltz*. In the symphony Liszt's Faust is saved from the clutches of Mephistopheles, who is portrayed by him as being *sans ton*, while in *Via Crucis* mankind is saved from death. These two programmatic ingredients – the devil and death – are connected, as we learn from the New Testament and theological tradition:

This is why Jesus became one of us. He died to destroy the devil, who had power over death. *Hebrews 2:14*
(Contemporary English Version, American Bible Society)

It was to undo all that the devil has done that the Son of God appeared. *I John 3.8*
(Jerusalem Bible)

As I have already stated, in *Via Crucis* the *Thirteenth Station* recapitulates the music of the *Fourth Station*. Similarly in the *Faust Symphony* the third movement recapitulates the music of the first movement. This unusual feature links Mary to Gretchen in a programmatic context. However, the recapitulated music in the symphony involves parody, by which Mephistopheles is identified as the devil, but there is no parody in *Via Crucis*. If Christ destroyed the devil, where is he in *Via Crucis*? The answer is that he is under Mary's feet, which is the conventional wisdom of Catholic teaching. Saint Louis de Montfort states:

Mary must be terrible to the devil and his crew, as an army ranged in battle...because the devil, knowing that he has but little time...to destroy souls, will every day redouble his efforts and his combats. He will presently raise up new persecutions.... It is principally of these last and cruel persecutions... that we ought to understand that first and celebrated prediction and curse of God, pronounced in the terrestrial Paradise against the serpent. It is to our purpose to explain this here, for the glory of the most holy Virgin, for the salvation of her children, and for the confusion of the devil.

Inimicitias ponam inter te et mulierem, et semen tuum et semen illius; ipsa conteret caput tuum, et tu insidiaberis calcaneo ejus (Gen. 3:15),—"I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed; she shall

crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel.¹¹

Mary crushed the serpent's head in a unique way, namely through Jesus. Her immaculate conception and her "yes" at the Annunciation (Luke 1.38: *...dixit autem Maria ecce ancilla Domini fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*) form part of the victory won by her Son. When the devil was defeated on the Cross, Mary became the first of the redeemed. It is this that brings her close to the figure of Gretchen.

The recapitulation of the *sans ton* music of *Station IV* at *Station XIII* with the missing key signature added, is the reverse procedure of Faust and Mephistopheles in the symphony – in *Via Crucis* the *Mephisto* musical equivalent is heard first. Liszt's deliberate removal of the D minor signature at *Station IV* makes its appearance at *Station XIII* simply a *restitution*. At the *Fourth Station* the Devil is present just as the key signature is absent. At the *Thirteenth Station* the key signature is present, and the Devil has gone. In the *Pietà* he is under Mary's feet.

A consequence of this is that in *Via Crucis* Mary figures as the representative of a tonality which acts as a musical *praesentia realis*. When she receives the body of her Son, the Devil has been overcome. Thus in both the symphony and the liturgical work key and tonality persist against *sans ton* through *das Ewigweibliche*.

Both *Station IV* (bar 18) and *Station XIII* (bar 42) include a theme in the major mode marked *dolcissimo espressivo* which re-appears at the end of *Via Crucis* in the tonic key of D, sung to the words "Ave crux". The whole work ends with the Cross motive in D major played on the organ. This change of Mary's music to the tonic major in conjunction with the appearance of the Cross motive confirms her role as the Life referred to in the medieval hymn -

Upon it Life did death endure,
And yet by death did life procure

Here we are brought back to Spengler's words quoted above about "the Mary-cult in the new Faustian form". The guarantee of the future, he says – of duration through time – is the Mother herself:

The meaning of the child to the mother is the future, the continuation, namely, of her own life. The Woman as Mother is History.

In both *Via Crucis* and the *Faust Symphony* the Woman represents tonality versus the devil, who is its enemy. Clearly Liszt was thinking of all music, not just his own. If the restoration of the D minor key signature at the *Thirteenth Station* is Liszt's way of showing what Christ bought for us by His death on the Cross, then in *Via Crucis* the removal of *sans ton* by means of the dual statement of one piece of music represents the composer telling us what salvation in music actually is. The Passion, he is saying, is why there is any music at all.

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During the hundred and fifty years or so that have elapsed since *Via Crucis* was written the entire history of Music has resurrected. It has turned out not to be obsolete. Its notation, which was invented nearly a thousand years before Liszt's birth by monks in the medieval monasteries, grew slowly over the centuries into an enormous edifice built on tonality. We cannot now demolish this edifice. Neither can its connected parts – its musical compositions – be destroyed or superseded. In this sense *Via Crucis* highlights Liszt's historical significance from a different perspective. Here it lies not in his relationship to what came after him, but rather to what came before. The message of Liszt's *sans ton* musical programme is that the tonality in Western art music – in all of it – is its *salus aeterna*, the triumph over death.

11 Saint Louis de Montfort: *True Devotion to Mary* trans. Frederick William Faber, London 1863, Excellence and Necessity of Devotion to Our Blessed Lady, 39