

Liszt Harmonies poétiques et religieuses Saskia Giorgini





Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Harmonies poétiques et religieuses (1853)

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10	X. Cantique d'amour	7. 14

Total playing time: 84. 49

Saskia Giorgini, piano

With its sharp apparent contrast between adoration of the divine and embodied human love, expressed in Liszt's most generous and intimate musical language, *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses* is to me a wonder. It is, contrary to the lazy cliché of "Liszt the showman", so deeply humane and sincere; it's true music, true to human nature, with all its extreme compulsions and conflicts.

There is beauty so intense to cry for; tenderness, surrendering to God, but also some of the most sorrowful, violent, painful moments that Liszt ever put into music. It ends in an exalting declaration of love and deep gratitude to God and life.

This is so much more than just a musical journey: it is the constant looking for answers, questioning and investigating who we are, what we believe in, and what we should aim for. Some questions remain open, and some more are born out of the struggle, but, ultimately one can find some peace in this cycle.

- Saskia Giorgini

Lovers and legislators of the world

‘Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,’ declared Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*. However, Shelley’s fellow Romantic, Alphonse de Lamartine, was an acknowledged legislator — if not of the world, then of France. He founded a short-lived Saint-Simonian *Parti social* and served in the National Assembly from 1833 to 1848. After the fall of Louis-Philippe in 1848, Lamartine served as the provisional government’s foreign minister and declared the Second French Republic from the balcony of Paris’s Hôtel de Ville. He proved instrumental in abolition of the death penalty and, finally, ran a wildly unsuccessful campaign for the Presidency, garnering but 0.23% of the vote.

Partly through design, partly through lack of interest, Liszt is difficult to pin down politically, yet he was no reactionary and proved a generous supporter of oppressed causes. In 1848, Liszt supported revolution

in France and soon in Hungary, extolling in a letter to his lover, Countess Marie d’Agoult: ‘Lamartine’s manifesto which so eloquently advocates the fight for peace ... God save France! And Christ will deliver the World through love and liberty!’ Lamartine and Liszt had become friends in 1820s Paris. Liszt would later propose marriage (unsuccessfully) to Lamartine’s ward and niece, Valentine de Cessiat. However, Liszt’s world view seems to have been more influenced, at least until 1845, by Félicité de Lamennais, a crucial figure for modern Catholic social thought and considerably to the left of Lamartine, for whom Lamennais’s *Paroles d’un croyant* represented a ‘gospel of insurrection’.

For Lamartine’s principal inspiration to Liszt was the fervour of his poetry, above all the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. Published ten years after the *Méditations poétiques* that had made Lamartine’s name, in 1830, it resembles a set of Romantic hymnody and psalmody. Always



theistic and at times explicitly Christian, its subject addresses both Creator and Nature, the former sometimes revealed via the latter. In his collection of piano pieces of the same name, Liszt quotes Lamartine's preface: 'There are meditative souls whom solitude and contemplation raise invincibly toward infinite ideas, that is toward religion ... They seek in themselves, and in surrounding Creation, ... expressions and images that He would reveal Himself to them: may I lend some to them! There are hearts broken by grief, inhibited by the world, which take refuge in the ... solitude of their souls ...; may they be visited by a solitary Muse ... and sometimes say with her: We pray with your words, we cry with your tears, we invoke with your songs!'

Many of Liszt's works had complex, protracted geneses. He tended not to chisel away until a final, perfected version emerged, instead moving on swiftly, ensuring that many works co-exist in different — sometimes radically different —

versions. Even in 'finished' works, one often detects a restless, improvisatory tendency. Yet even by Liszt's standards, *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* has a convoluted genesis. An early piece of 1833-4 (S. 154) was published under that name in 1835, Liszt telling Agoutt: 'Our harmony will be dedicated to Lamartine; I shall first publish it alone, and later I shall write half a dozen.' That 'harmony', showing Liszt at his most radical, would later furnish material for the (only relatively) more classical 'Pensées des morts'. Liszt continued to work on further music, mostly during the 1840s and especially during an 1847-8 visit to the Ukrainian estate of Marie's successor in his affections, Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein. A first version, including four pieces subsequently dropped, was completed by 1848, though never published. Almost immediately, Liszt composed three new pieces and continued to revise the others until publication in 1853.

The opening E major 'Invocation' balances majesty with mystery in the Divine Presence. Liszt quotes from Lamartine: 'Rise up, voice of my soul! With the dawn, with the night! ... Rise up in the silence of the hour when, in the evening shadow, night's lamp sways... in those deep moments of solitude when God reveals Himself to faith!' An exultant 'grandioso' second subject in the dominant looks forward in character to the similarly marked theme in Liszt's B minor Sonata. Like much of Liszt's music, it is highly rhetorical yet palpable in Romantic wonder and sincerity. If the tonic is firmly established from the outset in that piece, the introduction to the ensuing 'Ave Maria' must work towards it (now, B-flat major). Rhetorical recitative combines with melody-driven, homophonic writing whose simplicity nevertheless permits sinuous voice-leading. Latin words above the notes have one imagine Liszt, musician-as-priest, singing the *cantus firmus* while accompanying himself at the piano. Indeed

he had, in 1846, played the original choral version on the organ of Fünfkirchen (now Pécs) Cathedral to Bishop János Scitovszky, marking the beginning of a lengthy association with the future Hungarian Primate that would include commission ten years later of the *Graner Mass*.

'Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude' is in Liszt's 'beatific' key, F-sharp major. 'Whence comes, o my God, this peace that inundates me?' reads the Lamartine preface, 'Whence comes this faith with which my heart overflows? ... A new man is reborn within me and begins anew.' A sung, initially tenor melody is surrounded by finely spun accompaniment, 'piano e armonioso'. Modulations as breathtaking as any in Schubert engender a benediction travelling once more toward exultancy. As throughout, 'harmonies' can and should be understood in musical and celestial fashion; one necessitates the other.

'Pensées des morts' inherits much of the radicalism of Liszt's earlier *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. The first 57 bars have no key signature; for music of unstable tonality as wandering as its metre (often 5/4 and 7/4), it would hardly be worth it. Poised between recitative and fantasia, form is essentially 'itself', unclassified and unclassifiable; it takes its own path, as thoughts of mortality tend to, corrosive diminished sevenths doing their Wagnerian work. ('Who influenced whom?' is a perennial, perhaps unanswerable question for the Liszt-Wagner relationship.) Liszt reaches E-flat major for a sepulchral invocation, harmonising plainchant for Psalm 130: 'De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine; Domine, exaudi vocem meam...' ('Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, o Lord; Lord, hear my voice...'). Fittingly, this confessional finds nowhere to rest along the way, ending on rather than in G. There follow two further transcriptions of choral music. Quasi-modal harmonies in the 'Pater

noster' evoke the Renaissance through nineteenth-century ears. The *Hymne de l'enfant à son reveil* had set a Lamartine text for women's chorus, harmonium, and harp. The harp provenance of arpeggios and other figures is obvious when known, yet they transfer beautifully to Liszt's own instrument.

'Funérailles' is not present and could not have been in Liszt's first version. It is a defiant F minor elegy from October 1849 — that date inscribed — in Chopin's wake (his final Polonaise alluded to in torrential left-hand octaves). It salutes the fallen of the Hungarian Revolution ruthlessly crushed by Austria, with Russian backing, earlier that year — and especially the executions of 6 October: the Thirteen Martyrs (Hungarian generals) of Arad and, in Pest, the first Hungarian Prime Minister Lajos Batthyány. Hungary's 1848 settlement, liberal and self-governing, with remarkably wide suffrage, could never have withstood the forces of Habsburg resurgence, deepening

Magyar separatism, and Austrian-stoked dissatisfaction from national minorities such as the Croats and Slovaks. As *de facto* Hungarian head of state, Lajos Kossuth led a valiant yet doomed War of Independence, which met with savage military repression under the 'Hangman of Arad', the Austrian general Julius Jacob von Haynau. Liszt's sympathies lay more with the measured constitutionalism of Batthyány and István Széchenyi, than with what he later called Kossuth's 'glib talk' and 'false path'. Nonetheless Liszt honoured musically all the Hungarian dead while, controversially to some, remaining silent in public words.

Like Chopin in the Second Piano Sonata's Funeral March, Liszt thunders through a principal theme of unremitting grief. It is introduced by a lament of visionary eloquence, muffled bells tolling, soured trumpets calling; and it is followed by a proud, muscular, yet vulnerable, even melting central section in A-flat major (a key Liszt often associates with love,

e.g. in the *Liebestraum* no.3). The tragic trajectory of return to the opening material proves well-nigh Mahlerian. 'Funérailles' ends rawly, nerve-endings exposed, in something that might on paper look a little closer to F major, yet does not sound so. Repeated, bitter clashes of an augmented fifth between A natural and the remaining flattened sixth, D flat, ensure a close no more affirmative and infinitely less restful than the 'Dead March' from Handel's *Saul*.

The 'Miserere' billed as 'd'après Palestrina' is not, Liszt having misattributed a melody heard at the Sistine Chapel. This, again, is to be played 'quasi recitativo,' indicative of the free, semi-improvisatory quality Liszt ascribed to chant. Exquisite in its decoration and full of harmonic surprises, this piece retains essential homophonic simplicity as it (more or less) travels from E minor to major. 'La lampe du temple', in G-sharp minor, is blessed by a tempo marking referring as much to mood as speed: 'Andante lagrimoso'. 'Fall, silent

tears,' reads the third and last of the Lamartine inscriptions, 'on a world without pity. ... Fall like an arid rain ... which no ray of heaven dries.' Here is a piece from the world of a wandering, Romantic wayfarer, replete with quasi-vocal sighs. Its enharmonic turn to A-flat major has one think we might turn *avant la lettre* to Isolde's transfiguration; or, as Liszt but not Wagner called it, her 'Liebestod' — though the inspiration for that most wondrous of Liszt's piano transcriptions lay some years in the future. Liszt's way, unquestionably sung, proves unsurprisingly his own.

With 'Cantique d'amour', Liszt returns to E major in an ardent declaration of love to the collection's dedicatee, 'Jeanne Elisabeth Carolyne'. (It is no coincidence that the first version's 'Litanies de Marie', long, erroneously thought unfinished, is absent.) No more than Messiaen does this fellow mystic of unabashed Catholic eroticism distinguish between sacred and profane. Its closing bars insist as strongly

upon tonic re-consummation as any in the repertoire. This, once more, is music for the piano to sing. Melody, at one point marked 'vibrato' (!), is enveloped by harmonies both 'poétiques et religieuses'. Poets, musical and verbal, are the sacerdotal lovers and legislators of the world.

Mark Berry

Acknowledgements

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