

MODIFYING LISZT

Julian Hellaby

1. Modifying Liszt

The presentation focused on pianists' occasional practice of altering a composer's notated score in performance, thus rendering the work more individualised and, in the performer's own view one assumes, more effective. Vladimir Horowitz's lavish version of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 was cited as an example. Furthermore, Liszt was identified as the main target for such personalisation.

Three questions in connection with this practice were addressed: (1.1) Where philosophically does such a musical phenomenon sit in the range of classifications extending from conventional interpretation in performance to alterations such as transcription, variation and paraphrase? (1.2) What does it signify about the performer's relation to the score? And (1.3) why, in particular, Liszt?

1.1 A philosophical space for score alteration

Score alteration was considered inadmissible as a conventional act of interpretation because, where mainstream nineteenth- and twentieth-century piano repertoire is concerned, acts of interpretation do not normally extend to such an invasive practice.

Music philosopher Paul Thom's definitions (2007) of transcription, variation, paraphrase and realisation were examined to ascertain whether these could account for the practice of score alteration.

None of the above was deemed fully pertinent philosophically because score alteration by a pianist does not involve the transfer of musical substance from one medium to another, so it is not transcription; it does not appear as a set or deliberately attempt to highlight shared/unshared features with a theme, so it is not variation; it adheres closely to the original musical narrative so it is not paraphrase; and it is often applied to works that could not be described as 'unsaturated' (i.e. not fully notated as in figured bass) so there is only a partial resemblance to realisation.

The practice of score alteration was therefore seen to occupy its own small philosophical space, which the author calls modification. Examples of the practice demonstrated that modification can be of a minor nature, as in Earl Wild's amplified ending to Liszt's *Mephisto* Waltz No. 1, but may also involve significant tamperings, as heard in John Browning's 1985 recording of Liszt's "Après une lecture du Dante" from *Années de Pèlerinage* Book Two.

1.2 The modifying performer's relation to the score

It was observed that modification does not bespeak a *Texttreue* attitude to the score as has been voiced by, amongst others, pianist Sviatoslav Richter who stated that "you've got how it has to be in front of you and you play exactly what's written" (Monsaingeon, 2001 [1998]: 142).

It was argued that the modifying pianist perceives a work's performance potential to be incompletely encoded in the score; s/he senses a slight lack of work fulfilment in the notation

which prompts a desire to remedy the perceived shortfall. Nattiez's idea (1990) of a composer's *poiesis* ('making') preceding the production of a musical work, and a performer's *esthesis* ('perception') completing the process was considered. It was proposed that, in the case of modification, Nattiez's notion of poietic completion-through-performance becomes completion-through-alteration-and performance.

The suggestion was made that a performer's deeper involvement in a work's formation does not necessarily betoken disrespect, more a free, if unofficial, alliance in which the structural and stylistic parameters of a modified work nevertheless remain intact.

1.3 Why Liszt?

The question as to why the music of Liszt seems to attract modification more than that of any other composer was answered in the following ways:

- The composer himself apparently had quite an open-ended view of his own works and often revised them – take for example the three versions of the *Douze études d'exécution transcendente*. The underlying spirit of modification can thus be seen to derive from Liszt's own practices.
- An improvisatory style is a frequent feature of Liszt's piano music, especially in cadenza-like passages which often feature the composer's trademark technical devices such as octaves, split octaves, grace notes and tremolos. The modifying pianist is thus taking a cue from the seeming replaceability of such passages and is prompted to devise alternatives, often drawing on similar technical strategies.
- Contemporary accounts describe how Liszt himself often tampered with the scores of other composers (including Beethoven's), so modification of Liszt's music could thus be seen to align itself in spirit with the composer's own performance practice.

In sum, it was concluded that modification occupies its own small, work-alteration space which is less far-reaching, as well as less formal and systematic, than other species of alteration such as transcription or paraphrase; that modification affects the nexus of relationships achieved by conventional interpretation, shifting it further in the direction of performer control; and lastly that, whilst to an extent invading Liszt's oeuvre, modification does not necessarily violate the Lisztian spirit.

The presentation ended with the author's performance of Liszt's Polonaise No. 2 in E major which included his own modifications to the central cadenza passage and to the coda.

The above is a précis text of the presentation given by Julian Hellaby at the third Doctors in Performance conference, Vilnius, 4 September 2018. It was drawn from an earlier journal article by Julian Hellaby called Modifying the Score, which was published in Music Performance Research (MPR) Vol 3: 1–21, ISSN 1755–9219

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