

**FRANZ LISZT**

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*Liszt on playing Liszt*

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Should we play Liszt according to the score, or according to the way he himself seemed to perform his own music? If these are indeed genuine alternatives, were Liszt the composer and Liszt the performer therefore two separate personae of the same musician? These questions are hardly unique to this composer-virtuoso. Any pianist studying Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto will be faced with a recorded legacy by the composer that is sometimes hardly compatible with, and occasionally openly contradicts, the letter of the score.<sup>1</sup> A listener to Busoni's piano roll of his famous Bach D-minor Chaconne Transcription will be confronted with several additions and alterations that seem to supercede the last published version of the music.<sup>2</sup> Although we have no recording of Liszt, we do have a wealth of reliable material indicating that his adherence as a performer to the letter of his own scores was variable indeed. The situation is encapsulated cogently by a glance at the finale of Liszt's Fantasy on Paganini's 'La Clochette' from the early 1830s. A rather over-complex passage replete with an awkward chromatic inner part is here given an *ossia* – "as played by the composer". In the *ossia*, the muddled accompaniment is significantly simplified, and the passage is both easier to play and easier for the listener to follow.

We might justifiably ask ourselves what is going on here. The *ossia* represents an eminently practical solution to the rendition of an overladen text. But why print the original text at all? The existence of the alternative – "as

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example Rachmaninoff's treatment of dynamics in the second movement of his recording with Ormandy.

<sup>2</sup> The edition of the Chaconne by Paul Banks (Edition Peters) usefully transcribes the changes found in the piano roll.

played by the composer” – demonstrates that Liszt himself, widely regarded as the pianist with the finest technique of his day, felt that this passage was unplayable, or at least ineffective, as it stood. There seems little need to bother either the engraver or the reader with the earlier draft, unless Liszt is offering his ossia as only one of several possible solutions to his original text. In other words, unless he is advertising his activities as a player as some extent distinct to, and less definitive than his role as a composer. There is certainly biographical evidence to back this up. Liszt became increasingly concerned throughout the 1830s with the contrast between his public acclaim as a virtuoso, and the often personally hurtful critical scepticism about his talents as a creative artist. His compositions were in danger of being regarded simply as an adjunct to his own performance activity, at once too musically flimsy and technically difficult to have general appeal to other players, and destined largely for his personal use alone. The publication of a text other than that “as played by the composer” attempts to deny the identification of the composer with the concert artist, but it does so, in our Urtext-obsessed era, at the cost of complicating our attitudes to the status of the score. It prompts us to ask how much latitude Liszt expected other performers to take in the interpretation of his music.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Liszt, attempts to come to definitive judgments about performance-practice are rendered inherently difficult by the contradictions evident in his own basic attitudes, and the gradual but radical changes in his views over the course of his long artistic life. These changes, too, did not operate in a consistent direction. In 1837 we find him publicly bemoaning his juvenile interpretational sins with what seems like sincere contrition:

During that time [1829-1837], both at public concerts and in private salons (where people never failed to observe that I had selected my pieces very badly), I often performed the works of Beethoven, Weber and Hummel, and let me confess to my shame that in order to wring bravos from the public that is always slow, in its awesome simplicity, to comprehend beautiful things, I had no qualms about changing the tempos of the pieces or the composers' intentions. In my arrogance I even went so far as to add a host of rapid runs and cadenzas, which, by securing ignorant applause for me, sent me off in the wrong direction – one that I fortunately knew enough to abandon quickly. You

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<sup>3</sup> A longer treatment of this topic can be found in the present author's chapter “Performing Liszt's Piano Music” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

cannot believe, dear friend, how much I deplore those concessions to bad taste, those sacrilegious violations of the SPIRIT and the LETTER, because the most profound respect for the masterpieces of great composers has, for me, replaced the need that a young man barely out of childhood once felt for novelty and individuality. Now I no longer divorce a composition from the era in which it was written, and any claim to embellish or modernise the works of earlier periods seems just as absurd for a musician to make as it would be for an architect, for example, to place a Corinthian capital on the columns of an Egyptian temple.<sup>4</sup>

Liszt's remorse, however, did not last long. Numerous reviews of his concerts in the 1840s mention an interpretative license that was vast even by the rather liberal standards of the time. Felix Mendelssohn, one of the few listeners who knew the pieces Liszt was playing well enough to evaluate his approach authoritatively, complained after hearing him in Berlin:

Even Liszt doesn't please me here half as much as he did elsewhere. He has forfeited a large degree of my respect for him through the ridiculous pranks he plays, not only on the public (that didn't do any damage) but rather on the music itself. He has played here works by Beethoven, Bach, Handel and Weber so wretchedly and unsatisfactorily, so impurely and so unknowledgeably, that I would have heard them played by mediocre performers with more pleasure: here six measures added in, there seven omitted; here he plays false harmonies, and then later these are cancelled out by others. Then he makes a horrible fortissimo out of the softest passages, and goodness knows what other kinds of dreadful mischief. That may be all well and good for the public at large, but not for me, and that it was good enough for Liszt himself, that lowers my respect for him by a very great deal. At the same time my respect for him was so great, that there is still enough left.<sup>5</sup>

The necessity of pleasing the crowds and earning a living indubitably accounted for a lot of this, and Mendelssohn was certainly on the "stricter" side of the fence when it came to attitudes to interpretation. There can nevertheless be little doubt that Liszt's later claim to his pupils that his reputation for artistic

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Suttoni: *Franz Liszt: An Artist's Journey. Lettres d'un bachelier es Musique* (Chicago, 1989), pp. 33-4.

<sup>5</sup> William Little: "Mendelssohn and Liszt", in Larry Todd, ed.: *Mendelssohn Studies* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 122.

license was mainly due to his very free interpretation of Weber's *Konzertstück* was hardly the whole story, or indeed even the most important part of it.

In the performance of his own music, Liszt typically and hardly unexpectedly allowed a great degree of freedom in the virtuoso compositions and transcriptions, such as the *Hungarian Rhapsodies*. In an 1877 masterclass in Rome, Liszt attitude to the *Rhapsodies* in particular seemed highly relaxed:

A student played one of Liszt's own Rhapsodies; it had been practised conscientiously, but did not satisfy the master. There were splashy arpeggios and rockets of rapidly ascending chromatic diminished sevenths. 'Why don't you play it this way?' asked Liszt, sitting at the second piano and playing the passage with more careless bravura. 'It was not written so in my copy,' objected the youth. 'Oh, you need not take that so literally' answered the composer.<sup>6</sup>

Also not to be taken literally were the texts of the opera fantasias and transcriptions. Liszt gave his pupil Sophie Menter carte blanche to cut or alter anything she liked in these pieces, adding that they should anyway only be played by the finest virtuosos – presumably such people had earned the right to customise the works to their own tastes. We can get an idea of what alterations Liszt himself habitually made in performance by the Henselt edition of "Reminiscences de Lucia di Lammermoor". Although this was published as Henselt's own "interpretation", it is clear from Liszt's comments in masterclasses that Henselt here fairly faithfully transcribed the alterations that he heard the composer himself make in his concerts. Liszt recommended this edition to his students, adding that he had always played this work "completely freely, not as written". The alterations are extensive indeed, especially in the introduction.

Particularly characteristic are the "Hungarian-style" martellato trill in octaves, the luxuriant arpeggiation, and the profusion of ornamentation added to a text that is hardly ascetic even in the original version. No doubt even this score represents only one possible rendition of the piece, which would be varied anew with each performance.

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<sup>6</sup> Mrs W. Chanler: *Roman Spring* (Boston, 1934), quoted from Adrian Williams: *A Portrait of Liszt by himself and his contemporaries* (Oxford, 1990), p. 552.

Liszt certainly expected performers to take fewer liberties with his “serious” music, such as the *Sonata* in B-minor or the *Benediction de Dieu dans la Solitude*. These two works were among Liszt’s favourites to play to visitors in Weimar in the 1850s, both because he believed them to represent his talents at his best, and because they were entirely based on original musical material. Harried as he was by critics who claimed that he had astonishing skill as an improviser and transcriber, but no gifts as an original creator, Liszt was particularly anxious to use these pieces to stake his claim to be a great composer. Accordingly – as reported by his pupil William Mason – Liszt always used the score when performing them, to such an extent that his copies were soon in an embarrassingly pitiful condition. One might expect that in these cases the letter of the score would be completely sacrosanct. While this is largely true, Liszt apparently still permitted himself some small changes, such as the addition of octave reinforcement in some bass passages and altered pedaling in the *Sonata*, and the restrained improvisation of ornaments in the *Benediction*.

We know of these examples of Liszt’s performance-practice from the 1902 *Liszt-Pädagogium*, a collection assembled and edited by his adoring biographer Lina Ramann, based on contemporary notes taken by pianists present at Liszt’s masterclasses. Supplementing this material are the diaries of his pupils August Göllerich and Carl Lachmund, and the memoirs of his pupils such as Mason, Friedheim, Siloti, Rosenthal, Lamond, Sauer and d’Albert, and second-hand information from books like Tilly Fleishmann’s *Aspects of the Liszt Tradition* (Fleishmann studied with Liszt’s student Stavenhagen). A large amount of valuable information has also been passed down orally from Liszt’s pupils. Although all this material must be evaluated with circumspection, there is a large enough degree of concurrence among the sources to allow us to build up a reliable picture, at least verbally, of Liszt’s playing and teaching in his later years. Finally, the recordings of Liszt’s pupils at least allow us some idea of how Liszt expected his music to *sound*. Although all Liszt’s students had their own individuality, it is impossible to believe that, taken together, they cannot show the stylistic parameters within which his music should be played, and they certainly give us a good idea how he actually heard it played towards the end of his life.

The *Liszt-Pädagogium* appears to have been little consulted by modern performers, although brief excerpts have appeared in the New Liszt Edition, and the whole volume was reprinted in 1986. It covers pieces of varying degrees of importance in varying degrees of depth, but the relation of these two aspects is not what we might think it ought to be, and the criterion for a work's inclusion is random indeed: namely that at some point a pupil brought a certain piece to a masterclass, and Lina Ramann either chanced to be present or happened later to have access to students' notes. (Of these students, her most important sources were August Stradal, Berthold Kellermann, August Göllerich, Heinrich Porges, Ida Volckmann and Auguste Rennebaum.) Although some works now in the standard repertoire, like the *Sonata, Funerailles*, the D<sup>b</sup> Concert Study commonly known as *Un Sospiro* and the *Benediction de Dieu dans la Solitude* are treated in some detail, a far greater number of important pieces are conspicuous by their absence, and we might be forgiven for wishing that we had Liszt's recommendations for the performance of, for example, the *Dante Sonata* or the *First Mephisto Waltz* rather than an extended disquisition on the nuances required for *Slavimo, Slava, Slaveni!* and some other not-too-interesting chips from the floor of the master's studio. As well as performance notes, the *Pädagogium* also contains additions and revisions to certain pieces, for example, a slightly extended ending to *Ricordanza* and major alterations to *Reminiscences of 'Robert le Diable'*, intended to form the basis of a new edition of the piece (a plan thwarted by Liszt's death).

We must use this material with a degree of caution, for it is sometimes unclear what the exact status was of the sources that Ramann relied upon. We cannot know for certain whether her notes, or those of some contributing students, were written up during the masterclasses, soon afterwards, or are simply "reminiscences of a masterclass" recalled – accurately or not – at a later date. Another note of caution is required when considering the value of editions by the several of Liszt's students who were involved in editing his works (most prominently Emil von Sauer, Jose Vianna da Motta, Eugen d'Albert and Rafael Joseffy). It is obvious, especially with the more extensive of these editions, for example Sauer's for Peters, or da Motta's for the *Franz Liszt-Stiftung*, that the editors could hardly have received personal guidance from Liszt on every piece in the publication, and we must be careful lest we imbue their work with too much authority on account of their status as famous Liszt students. To take just one instance: in d'Albert's edition of the *Sonata* in B minor we read that the

opening octaves are to be played “wie Pizzicato”, an interpretation that has been very popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is no surprise to find that d’Albert neither himself studied the Sonata with Liszt, nor appears to have been present at a performance by a pupil who did, for his advice is directly contradicted by the *Pädagogium* (using notes taken by August Stradal after a lesson on the piece) where a sound like “muffled timpani” is recommended. Liszt even gave technical instructions as to how this was to be achieved—namely by striking the keys towards the back in order to lessen the force of the attack. Liszt admired d’Albert’s playing tremendously, and all his annotations make cogent musical sense. They do not, however, necessarily derive from Liszt’s own practice.

Finally, we should beware of some entrenched exaggerations concerning Liszt’s teaching: namely that after his middle years he never gave private lessons, and that he was not interested at all in technical matters, but concentrated idealistically only on “the music” while leaving students to work out for themselves how exactly it should be produced (“Aus dem Geist schaffe sich die Technik, nicht aus der Mechanik”). Specific technical advice is indeed thin on the ground, but it does exist. As for the question of private instruction, it is certainly true that in the final two decades of his life Liszt’s most frequent teaching forum was the masterclass, but even then certain favoured pupils – for example Siloti and Friedheim – were asked to stay after class for extra instruction, and in earlier years many pianists—Mason, Tausig, Stradal, Bache, Rosenthal and more – were fortunate enough to receive individual lessons.

The *Pädagogium* and associated writings show that Liszt’s principal concern was always with musical characterisation and communication. His performance directions have to be interpreted in the context of the piece and its intended musical effect. Unfortunately, a few of his comments are now riddles without the key. We can hardly evaluate instructions as bald as “not too fast” or “not too slow” without hearing the performances to which they related, and these have irrecoverably vanished into the mists of time. We do, however, have an invaluable aural source in Liszt’s pupils recordings, including performances by Rosenthal, von Sauer, Lamond, d’Albert, Friedheim, Siloti and others. While it is certainly true that the individuality of these artists render it unlikely that we can always hear in their performances a slavish rendering of their master’s wishes (and anyway, pianists like Rosenthal were also taught by other major figures of the day), with a performer like Arthur Friedheim we may get fairly

close to this. Liszt famously remarked that Friedheim's performance of the B-minor *Sonata* was "the way I imagined it when I was writing it", and although Friedheim was deeply unhappy with both his acoustic recordings and piano rolls, his idolatry of his teacher was such that we might well expect to find specific aspects of Liszt's performance style copied in his own playing. In fact we do indeed come across features that seem to echo comments in the *Pädagogium* and other memoirs.

In Friedheim's piano roll of *Harmonies du Soir* (the lead-in to the E major section), for example, he inserts a turn similar to that suggested by the *Pädagogium* for inclusion before the recapitulation of *Un sospiro*. In another piano roll we hear a performance of the second *Legend, St Francis Walking on the Waves*, that corresponds closely to Liszt's advice preserved in Göllerich's diaries, with a loud and stately opening that modifies the dynamic and tempo indications in the score, and the extension and repetition of the "waves" figuration into upper and lower octaves. (Suggestions for extensions like these are found throughout the *Pädagogium*, especially in the section on *Reminiscences de Robert le Diable*, where long sections of passagework are treated in a similar fashion). Friedheim also plays an alternative ending similar to one given in the critical notes to da Motta's *Liszt-Stiftung* edition that does not appear in the New Liszt Edition, though it seems more effective and imaginative than the published version. A copy of *St Francis Walking on the Waves* on display in the house in Bayreuth (now a museum) where Liszt died contains this ending written into the score in Liszt's own hand. It should be pointed out that the amplifications of figurations were by no means always prompted by extensions of the piano's range. This *Legend* could easily have been played on a piano of the 1860's as Friedheim recorded it decades later, and Liszt suggested similar additions to his pupils in other pieces, such as his two Polonaises.<sup>7</sup>

Why Liszt had not simply written the original score that way in the first place is an interesting question, and recalls the issues raised by the Clochette Fantasia's "as played by the composer" ossia discussed at the beginning of this paper. Some changes were probably genuine afterthoughts, and some were

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Walker, ed. *Living with Liszt, the diaries of Carl Lachmund* (Stuyvesant) pp. 210 and 271.

made in response to a belated realisation of just how difficult his virtuoso music was. Of *La Campanella* he remarked mischievously: ‘The difficult octave accompaniment in the left hand on the last page may be simplified...When I wrote that I did not teach as much as I do now.’<sup>8</sup> Some were also no doubt the sort of alterations that any accomplished virtuoso might have been expected to consider making, and were not confined to Liszt’s own music. Even in Chopin, about whose music he was often so particular, he advised the occasional alteration (for example repeating the introduction to the A major section of the F# Polonaise)<sup>9</sup>. When telling a pupil to alternate the direction of the spread of certain chords in his transcription of Saint-Saens’s *Danse Macabre*, he added as an aside “I did not write it so – it takes too much time.”<sup>10</sup> He also suggested changes in several other pieces, for example: a repetition of the introduction before playing the second stanza of his transcription of *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, the repeat of the middle part of *Au Lac de Wallenstadt* “to enhance its effect”<sup>11</sup> and for bars 276-8 and 284-6 of *Scherzo* and *March* he recommended increasing the demonic clangour by crossing the right hand over the left to “hit a few low A’s.”<sup>12</sup>

All this is of course in addition to the improvised prelude that any competent pianist could be expected to play before the beginning of many pieces, and to the occasional liberties that could be taken with endings. When a student failed to prelude before a performance of the third *Liebestraum*, Liszt pointed this out and made good the omission himself (he played only three chords).<sup>13</sup> At the close of his *Ave Maria* (written for Lebert and Stark’s *Grosse Klavierschule*) he instructed “At the end, so that the people know that it is over, play the Lohengrin Chord [i.e. a chord of A major in the treble as at the opening of the Prelude to Act 1 of Wagner’s opera].”<sup>14</sup>

Liszt claimed he was not in favour of extreme tempi. The *Pädagogium* gives several specific metronome marks for his works, bedeviled by misprints.

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<sup>8</sup> Walker, *ibid.*: p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Walker, *ibid.*: p. 324.

<sup>10</sup> Walker, *ibid.*: p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> Walker, *ibid.*: p. 214.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Zimdars, ed. *The Diaries of August Göllicherich*, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Zimdars, *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Zimdars, *ibid.*, p. 140.

These errors are luckily so severe as to make it obvious that something is wrong. The marking crotchet = 96 for the central andante of the Sonata seems preposterously rushed until we remember that one of the *Pädagogium*'s favourite faults is to reverse the order of the numerals, and crotchet = 69 does indeed feel about right for this section. In faster passages, however, Liszt often appeared to favour tempi that would be considered on the speedy side by modern standards, if hardly extreme. Minim = 80 for the allegro sections of the *Sonata* is certainly a fairly brisk tempo. When a student once played the transcendental study *Eroica* to the master, he let the tempo be taken "much faster" than August Göllerich, one of the listeners, would have imagined.

The reminiscences of Charles Halle, among others, suggests that as a young man, Liszt's tempi were sometimes very fast indeed, which contributed to his reputation for technical wizardry. The *Pädagogium* tempi for the fantasy on *Robert le Diable*, however, do give us some pause for thought, for Liszt intended the long octave section in the middle to be played at a moderate tempo (no faster than in the ballet at this point!), rather than the sprint it has hitherto become. Liszt claimed that this section constituted "the point of rest" in the fantasy, and criticised Anton Rubinstein for his excessive speed here. Interestingly, another piece that has nowadays become a test of rapid fingerwork – *Feux Follets* – was also described as requiring a "sehr bequem" performance by Göllerich.<sup>15</sup>

Despite his fame as a virtuoso, Liszt felt that he himself was not a good technical model to follow. Apart from the short period with Czerny, he believed that his early training had been mostly haphazard. He had reached his goals mainly through force of character—a path that he did not recommend to his pupil William Mason, because, as he told him honestly, if perhaps too frankly: "you lack my personality". Those students who came to Liszt's 1880s classes certainly did not hear him at his technical best, for old age and ill health had by that time taken its toll. According to Brahms, the playing of Liszt in his prime was quite incomparable, and even as late as his Vienna concerts of 1870s Hanslick was amazed that he had retained such a complete technical command. Friedheim recalled that in Liszt's final years, although his technique was still astonishing, it was not unsurpassable. Godowsky, he claimed, had finer

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<sup>15</sup> Zimdars, *ibid.*, p. 21.

octaves, and Rosenthal was more adept in the handling of complex passagework. He did concede that he had never since heard anyone build up an orchestral climax on the keyboard like Liszt, and it is not surprising that most of the technical advice in the *Pädagogium* and elsewhere concerns the manipulation of piano sonorities, rather than the achievement of accuracy or speed. According to Lamond, the aged Liszt responded to one pupil's technical display (in Chopin's Polonaise op. 53) with the scathing "do you think I care how fast you can play octaves". Rather unfair, perhaps, as he undoubtedly would have cared forty years earlier, and the 3 volumes of exercises composed in the late 1870s show that Liszt had a more than casual interest in the codification of technical difficulties.

Technical comments in the *Pädagogium* and other sources include several remarks on the way one should hold the hand in certain passages (when playing a melody using both thumbs, the wrists should be held higher than normal), and advice towards the achieving of certain sonorous effects akin to tone-clusters in the *Grand Solo de Concert* and *Reminiscences de Robert le Diable*. In the opening of the second piece, and the "funeral march" section of the first, the player is directed to hold on to each note of (and pedal through) the ornament in the bass, creating a threatening, tenebrous fog of sound in the lower register of the keyboard that is hardly implied by the notation and contrary to the modern manner of playing these passages cleanly (when the pieces are played at all). For *Un sospiro*, Liszt made some recommendations on the dividing of octave passages between the hands, and similar advice appears in the Göllicher diaries for the opening of the fantasy on *Rigoletto*, which could no doubt be considered to apply in many other pieces, like the central climax of *Waldesrauschen*. Of as much a visual as an aural nature is the comment in Lachmund's diaries that when playing the opening of the B minor Ballade, Liszt lifted his right hand up to a foot in the air before striking each note, while at the same time sitting upright and looking straight ahead, saying "One should not play for the people who sit in the front row – they are usually 'dead-heads', but play for those up in the gallery that pay ten pfennigs for their tickets; they should not only hear, but they should see."<sup>16</sup> It must have been quite a sight.

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<sup>16</sup> Walker, *ibid*: p. 138.

What are the main points that we can take away from an overview of the *Pädagogium* and related material? Liszt was obviously very concerned with what he described in the preface to his Symphonic Poems as a “Periodischer Vortrag”, in other words the maintenance of a musical “line” in performance, by, among other things, carefully regulating the weight of accents within and between bars. The numerous rhetorical pauses were not to be allowed to break up the flow – rather the music was to “carry on through the silence”. The exact speed of a performance was of much less importance than this fluidity. This is one of the most striking disjunctions with modern practice, where a “sempre tenuto” style of playing is of frequent occurrence. It is illustrative to compare Moriz Rosenthal’s recording of Liszt’s Chopin song transcription *My Joys* with some modern performances. Rosenthal’s limpid and plastic delineation of the melody is evidently inspired by the desire to “sing” on the piano in the same way as Liszt seems to have taught his pupils in lessons on the *Benediction de Dieu* and other pieces. The speed is not particularly fast, but the music moves fluently forward unhindered by over-accentuation, or the desire to impose a weighty profundity often indistinguishable from boredom.

We could do worse than to apply the lessons learned from this and other thought-provoking recordings of Liszt’s pupils to our own playing. We could also allow ourselves to take a more relaxed attitude in general to the musical text, especially in the virtuoso works, and even permit ourselves to improvise preludes before and between pieces. The difficulties involved today are not so much a matter of research and verification but of volition. Do we wish to hear an a-historically pure “Liszt the composer” today, or the highly historical free interpretations and improvisations that constituted a fundamental part of the concert-world that “Liszt the Performer” knew? It may be, as Nietzsche said, not so much a question of how much truth we can discover, but rather of how much truth we can stand.