

## Psychological and Spiritual Crises in Liszt's Earlier Life

One might expect later-life development to have its roots in strengths of character and forms of adaptation that have been built up in earlier life. Few lives run smoothly but earlier problems surmounted can be the source of resilience in dealing with new challenges. By contrast early sorrows and trauma that remain unhealed can lead to chronic unease and distress. An examination of what Liszt's biographers have said about the difficulties he faced in his earlier years and how he coped with them helps to focus on areas for investigation of his correspondence in his later years.

There are three distinct periods of Liszt's earlier life where his biographers have recognised that he faced major challenges. The first is his unusual childhood as a musical prodigy living in cosmopolitan Paris separated in culture from his Hungarian origin. The second and perhaps the most obvious is the sudden and increasingly stormy relationship he began at the age of 22 years with an already married older Parisian countess. This produced three children but also much heartache as the couple came to quarrel bitterly. The third is the disappointing response to his innovative musical initiatives that Liszt received after he gave up his life as a travelling pianist and took on a post as music director at the grand ducal court of Weimar in Germany.

### Psychological Issues in Liszt's Early Life

Liszt grew to adulthood in the period of high Romanticism and his music is often cited as a key example of what Romanticism means, including the removal of restraints to self-expression along with rebellion against

the old order of deference and submission to authority. Like Byron, Liszt is often classed as the romantic artist *par excellence*, and there is no doubt that he lived up to that image in many of the ways in which he presented himself to the outside world. The self-absorption shown in his correspondence, one of its many striking qualities, is characteristic of high Romanticism.

Even so, some biographers have drawn some surprisingly specific conclusions about his inner life. One example is Bryce Morrison's *Franz Liszt*, published in the series, *Illustrated Lives of the Great Composers*.<sup>1</sup> This is a much praised, short introductory book by a well-regarded expert on piano music but it also includes some rather strong inferences about Liszt's personality and motives throughout his life. As early as the Preface, after referring to the contrasting responses that Liszt's music has produced in listeners, Morrison proposes what appears as a major psycho-biographical statement:

[A]t the risk of seeming unfashionably psychological, I would like to suggest that while Liszt undoubtedly created out of a contradictory mixture of religious zeal and vainglorious mastery, he also wrote out of a profound sense of inner uncertainty and disharmony. The facts of his life point inevitably to such a state which can, however, be seen in a positive rather than a negative light.<sup>2</sup>

In this book I shall give particular attention to the relationship, at times conflicting, between, on the one hand, Liszt's evidently strong spiritual beliefs and his expressed wish at times for a life of withdrawal and meditation, and, on the other, his equally clear attachment to continuing to live in a world in which he enjoyed being the centre of attention. However, what are the facts of Liszt's life that might lead one to infer 'inner uncertainty and disharmony'?

We understand better now how parenting is a crucial factor in human development and Liszt was more fortunate than most in this regard. His relationship with both his mother Anna and his father Adam appears to have been very close and there is no evidence to contradict the view that he had a very happy early childhood. He was an only child and that already made him the centre of both parents' attention, but he also became the special focus of Adam's own personal ambitions, both spiritual and musical. The most significant claims of psychological

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1. B. Morrison, *Franz Liszt* (London: Omnibus Press, 2014).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

disturbance in his early life which have been made by biographers relate to the time his father was presenting him as a *wunderkind* pianist in Paris in the 1820s and in the period after Adam's sudden death in 1827.

Adam had himself felt a Christian vocation when young and spent a time as a novice in a Franciscan monastery. Later he had hoped for a successful musical career and played the cello under the direction of the great court musician Joseph Haydn when he worked on the Esterházy estate in Eisenstadt.<sup>3</sup> It was therefore natural that from an early age Adam both recognised and encouraged his son's musical talent and early love for the piano. He was ambitious enough to enrol Franz for studies with the famous piano teacher Carl Czerny in Vienna, the nearest large city to their home in Raiding, in 1822 at the age of ten. Liszt remembered Czerny as a good teacher and took steps to honour him later in his own life. Two years later and more ambitiously still, Adam sought entrance for his son to the Paris Conservatoire. As Hilmes points out, Czerny was critical of this step and concerned that Liszt's father was turning his son into a business, 'Adam Liszt & Son'.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, it removed Franz from his previous environment, confronting him with a new language and culture. Nevertheless, his undoubted ability, aided by his charming appearance, soon came to delight audiences and it was not long before he was even invited to play in London where he twice performed in the presence of King George IV.

Within a short time he had become well known as a child 'prodigy'. One journalist in Paris was convinced from the performance he saw that little Franz had to be the reincarnation of Mozart:

I am convinced that the soul and spirit of Mozart have passed into the body of the young Liszt, and never has an identity revealed itself by plainer signs. The same country, the same wonderful talent in childhood, and in the same art. ... His little arms can scarcely stretch to both ends of the keyboard, his little feet scarcely reach the pedals, and yet this child is beyond compare; he is the first pianist in Europe. ... The features of our little prodigy express spirit and cheerfulness. He comes before his audience with exceeding gracefulness, and the pleasure, the admiration which he awakens in his

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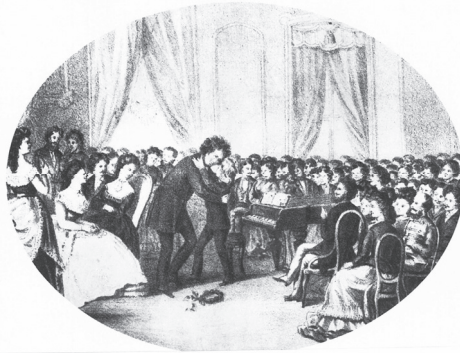
3. Now in Burgenland, Austria, but throughout Liszt's lifetime in the Hungarian part of the Austrian Empire.

4. Hilmes, *Franz Liszt: Musician, Celebrity, Superstar*, p. 14.

hearers as soon as his fingers glide along the keys, seem to him an amusement which diverts him extremely.<sup>5</sup>

The last of these statements already suggests the external attitude of the expressive and responsive public performer that Liszt was to adopt later. But there is no evidence that his success gave the boy an inflated sense of himself at this stage of his life.

We have now become much more aware of the dangers of becoming a 'child prodigy' to subsequent mental health. However, is there any evidence in Liszt's case? It is true, as Walker notes, that we have no indication that Liszt in Paris at the age of fifteen had any real friends of his own age. His only companion seems to have been his father, as his mother remained with her sister in Graz. 'Small wonder', Walker writes, 'that this brilliant boy became withdrawn and introspective.'<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the only major source for this commonly expressed view is an unpublished diary<sup>7</sup> which the fifteen-year-old Liszt wrote in Paris. It contains quotations from St Paul and St Augustine as well as Liszt's



Beethoven's 'kiss of consecration' of the young Liszt. An imaginary depiction in a lithograph published in 1873 to celebrate the 50th year jubilee of Liszt's 'Vienna debut'. (Liszt's own record of the original event indicates that it did not take place in a public concert.)

5. From *Le Drapeau Blanc*, cited in Walker, *The Virtuoso Years*, p. 99.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

7. Held in the National Archives of the Richard Wagner Museum in Bayreuth: [info@wagnermuseum.de](mailto:info@wagnermuseum.de).

own thoughts at the time. Walker gives three examples which stress the importance of 'not wasting time', of 'pleasing God above all' and that 'most things can be achieved with effort'.<sup>8</sup>

Liszt's later testimony indicates that by this age he already knew very well the famous early-fifteenth-century Catholic book of spirituality, the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. What this demonstrates is that young Franz was a highly religious child, not necessarily different from many other well educated, religious young people throughout Catholic Europe at that time. From my own experience of a Jesuit education in the 1950s and early 1960s such intensity of religious engagement with the *Imitation of Christ* would not even then have been unusual. What is striking about Liszt's religiosity is its consistency over time. He remained a devoted Catholic until the end of his life.

Much of previous biographers' discussion of Liszt's 'religious crisis' as a youth comes from his own words as an older man both in his conversations with his first biographer Lina Ramann and his correspondence with close women friends. As later chapters deal with this material in detail it is sufficient to mention here that it shows that he and his father while in Paris talked much about having a religious vocation. One can imagine their discussions alone in their rooms of an evening after a busy day practising and performing. Adam as a young man had been in a religious seminary and so he could speak from his own experience. In the end he seems to have persuaded his son that music should be his vocation and that this was not only compatible with but conducive to serving and loving God. It is also important to note that in this period the young Franz had already begun composing music, variations on popular opera melodies by Mozart and Rossini and even writing an opera for which his father organised a performance. His father encouraged him greatly, writing with pride to Czerny in Vienna about how much his son enjoyed composing and expressing the hope that this would in time become his main profession rather than performance.<sup>9</sup>

The real tragedy of Liszt's early life is that his father died so suddenly while Franz was still only fifteen years old. Adam was taken ill with typhoid fever on the first day of a short holiday they were taking in Boulogne in August 1827, a trip to the seaside which they had enjoyed before in order to rest from their hectic life in Paris. Realising he was

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8. Walker, *The Virtuoso Years*, p. 117.

9. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 121.

very ill, his father asked his son to write to ask his mother to come.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, Adam died before Anna could arrive. Thus, Liszt lost his principal guide and overnight found himself in charge, not only of deciding his own musical future but of supporting both himself and his mother. He and his mother found accommodation in Montmartre and Franz began to earn money as a piano teacher.

Fortunately, it was relatively easy for Liszt to find pupils as his name was already well known in Paris. Nevertheless, it was an arduous life that involved travelling across the city to give lessons from early morning to late in the evening. He had no time for composition. It is significant that Liszt preferred to teach rather than continue performing. He gave an interesting explanation for this decision, written in an essay some ten years later:

When death had robbed me of my father ... and I began to foresee what art *might* be and what the artist *must* be, I felt overwhelmed by all the impossibilities which surrounded me and barred the way which my thoughts indicated as the best. Besides, finding no sympathetic word from anyone harmonizing with me in mind ... there came over me a bitter disgust against art, such as it appeared to me: vilified and degraded to the level of a more or less profitable handicap, branded as a source of amusement for distinguished society.<sup>11</sup>

He did, however, give two public concerts, following the second of which Liszt was heavily criticised for reducing music making to conjuring tricks and 'brilliant frivolities'. Walker attributes this to the emotional upheaval resulting from the sudden end of 'his first love affair' with one of his pupils, Caroline, daughter of Pierre de Saint-Cricq, a minister in Charles X's government. When he realised what was happening, Saint-Cricq, not wanting his daughter to marry someone of a lower station, ended the relationship, much to both his daughter's and Liszt's distress.<sup>12</sup> The whole episode is supposed to have awoken Liszt to the fact that his position in Parisian society was not what he had imagined. Despite this,

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10. His endearing letter to her survives: 'Best of Women, Mother! At the very moment I write to you, I am anxious about my father's health ...'. Cited in *ibid.* p. 123.

11. Cited in *ibid.* p. 130.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-33.

in time his mother's care and attention is said to have helped him to recover from what Walker described as a 'nervous breakdown'.

Lina Ramann gave the first account of this story in her life of Liszt and it has been repeated in most subsequent biographies. There is a danger, however, in taking oft-repeated stories at face value without further critical examination. Gert Nieveld has pursued the matter in considerable detail and published an account of his investigations for the Liszt Society.<sup>13</sup> His conclusions are that biographers have exaggerated the importance of the young Liszt's love for his even younger pupil, and this is supported by his subsequent meetings with her and his comments to others about their relationship.

What does remain clear is that Liszt became depressed for many months after his father's death and that it was only the need to earn money to support himself and his mother that kept him going. It could be that it was in this state that he met and found a sympathetic ear in the young Caroline. Liszt was in search of deeper understanding of life and we know that he was beginning to read widely, especially French literature, including philosophical and religious books, and also the new Romantic literature that was emerging on the tail of Chateaubriand's *René*. He was searching for his way forward. It was in this period that he later told Princess Carolyne that he 'implored' his mother to allow him to enter a seminary for the priesthood. However, Anna, like his father a few years previously, was successful in persuading the young Franz to continue on his musical path.

Nevertheless, Liszt's spiritual searching did not cease. He attended meetings of the Saint-Simonist movement in Paris, an early form of Christian socialism, along with other musical and literary figures closely involved in Paris's developing critical culture such as Hector Berlioz and George Sand. More importantly, in 1834 at the age of 22 he met his first major spiritual mentor, the Abbé Félicité Robert de Lamennais, a charismatic liberal Catholic thinker to whom all of France at the time was paying particular attention. Liszt had been reading his writing, particularly his recent powerful critique of papal authority which argued for a return to a purer Christianity, *Paroles d'un croyant*. He wrote to Lamennais praising the book and its importance to him personally, and Lamennais replied, inviting the young man to his retreat in Brittany. Liszt stayed there for many weeks over the summer and afterwards Lamennais wrote to his friend Montalembert, another liberal Catholic,

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13. G. Nieveld, 'Caroline de Saint-Cricq: Siren with a Heart of Ice', *The Liszt Society Journal*, Bicentenary Edition, Vol. 31 (2011), pp. 28-70.

telling him how much he liked Liszt, calling him 'a young man full of soul'.<sup>14</sup>

Lamennais was clearly an honourable person, also intelligent and brave, who campaigned against social injustice and suffered imprisonment and other penalties from Church and State for his actions right up until his death in 1854. That he was so impressed by Liszt's qualities as a young man is high testimony and cannot easily be dismissed by those critical of Liszt's character. He also tried to intervene to help Liszt in the romantic problems he soon encountered and remained in contact with him for many years afterwards. Alan Walker has argued that Liszt 'discovered himself as a composer' that summer he spent in Brittany with Lamennais.<sup>15</sup> He began composing what would become his *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* and other works influenced by his spiritual mentor's writings and actions. Lamennais had defended the silk-weavers of Lyon, some of whom died in street-fighting while protesting against their desperate living conditions. Liszt wrote an early composition on this subject entitled simply 'Lyon' which showed that he was already developing ideas on the role of artist in society.



Félicité de Lamennais (1782-1854). Lithograph by Delpesch based on a drawing by Belliard c. 1835.

## Liszt's Relationship with Countess Marie d'Agoult

Biographers' repeated interest in the story of his early love for one of his pupils is understandable, given their frequent focus on Liszt's relationships with women throughout his life and, particularly, with the already married Countess Marie d'Agoult who bore Liszt three children. Unfortunately for Liszt, his reputation as a 'womaniser' became established early in his lifetime. Marie d'Agoult's later descriptions of Liszt in her writings after the break-up of their relationship have also been most damaging to him.

However, as Walker insists, there is no evidence that Liszt was a sexual predator at any stage of his life. Nor indeed does he seem to have been sexually reckless. He never encountered venereal disease as some

14. Cited in Williams, *Franz Liszt*, p. 973.

15. Walker, *The Virtuoso Years*, p. 157.