

Preface

I have known and loved Liszt's music since I was very young. My grandmother taught me as a boy to play on the piano an adapted version of the lively theme from his Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2. Although Liszt was not my first musical love – that was Chopin – by the time of my late teenage years he had become particularly special to me. By then I had attempted to play many of his pieces, most well beyond my limited expertise, but, more importantly, I had joined the Liszt Society and even become acquainted with some of his later works. Throughout my life his music has accompanied me and been a solace in some of my most difficult moments. Comments I notice online about recordings of Liszt's piano music capture similar feelings of wonder and gratitude: 'Is it possible to live without Liszt?'; 'Without Liszt the world would be a mistake'; 'Only Liszt could have possibly conceived of this music'.

Early in my career as a gerontologist I began appreciating the value of studying individual lives in detail and of understanding the particular pathway taken by a person in its own right rather than as an example of a general rule or pattern. I have written much about how growing older involves adapting to the losses, physical and social, that usually accompany ageing. Most research of this kind involves detailed interviewing of particular living persons over time as they respond to the challenges they face. However, it is also possible to learn from the complete lives of people in the past where sufficient evidence survives on their experience of ageing, for example, in diaries, interviews and other records. Although Liszt did not keep a personal diary, he was a prolific correspondent and kept up a regular exchange with the important people in his life. Fortunately, most of these letters survive. However, relatively little survives of letters sent to him apart from those of Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein, his partner, principal supporter and friend from mid-life onwards. For others' perceptions of Liszt, such as those of his first partner Marie d'Agoult and their second daughter Cosima, we have to rely on their surviving personal diaries and other writings.

Many biographies of Liszt have been written starting in his own lifetime, some highly critical of Liszt, others much more sympathetic, but none as far as I know which employ psychological theory to provide deeper understanding of the course his life took. Although I am confident that it would be possible to compose a psychobiography of Liszt's life, no one has yet attempted this. Liszt's personality and behaviour have been both praised and maligned but only rarely examined in depth. This book does not claim to be a psychobiography of Liszt – for that a much more detailed examination of Liszt's early years and the influences acting upon him throughout his life would be necessary – but it does attempt to understand the latter part of his life in psychological terms. Most importantly, it focusses on Liszt's spiritual development. Throughout the successes and failures of his life Liszt remained deeply religious, but it was in his later years that his spiritual life was most evident in his music, his writings and his actions. For purposes both of psychological and spiritual analysis this study draws principally on what Liszt tells his correspondents about himself and life in general.

This book has been a long time in preparation. I have been reading about Liszt for many years and I conceived the idea of writing about his difficult later years when I was still middle-aged. Now I have reached the age at which Liszt died and like him have been looking back at my own life. I thank those who have encouraged me to complete this task and commented on draft material, particularly my wife Maria Calcagno and our son Leonardo, but including also Frank Capocci, Nicholas Dakin, Francis Davis, Audrey Ellison, Leslie Howard, Craig Lawson, Jamie Moran, Alexei Nesteruk, Timothy Tims, Jim Vincent and Ros Williams. I thank also Samuel Fitzgerald at The Lutterworth Press for his encouragement and prompt assistance in answering my queries, and those at the University of Southampton who have helped me produce illustrations for this book, especially Paul Reynolds and Lynn Campbell. Alan Walker, Liszt's principal biographer, has been exceptionally kind throughout my journey by answering my many queries and reinforcing my interest in Liszt's religious life and compositions. I owe especial thanks to Patrick Rabbitt, my psychology tutor at Oxford University in the 1960s, who read a first draft of the whole manuscript and provided valuable critical comment. I am also very grateful to my music teacher of thirty years, Carol Bishop, who has listened to my stories about Liszt, and also read all the material I produced, and strengthened my belief that such a book as this could also be valuable for those who enjoy playing and listening to Liszt's music, especially the diverse and extraordinary music of his later life. Certainly, getting to know Liszt better has led me to appreciate his music even more. I hope my readers will have the same experience.

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