



Wagner Describes Liszt's Symphonic Poems

The publication of Franz Liszt's symphonic poems in 1856 threw fuel on the smoldering resentments that separated advocates of "absolute music" from the devotees of programmaticism, whose leader Liszt had become by virtue of these works. Richard Wagner—then banished from German lands and living in Switzerland—rushed in to fan the flames in defense of his friend Liszt. In the article that is excerpted here, "On Franz Liszt's Symphonic Poems" (1857), Wagner first takes exception to the ideas of Eduard Hanslick, the great advocate of "absolute music" (see *In Their Own Words* for Chapter 58). In communicating dramatic ideas, says Wagner, the great geniuses of the present day alter the traditional formal patterns of music. These evolve in a secret way which we may not understand but can accept out of admiration and love for these exceptional musical figures.

Wagner's article was published in the form of an open letter addressed to Marie Pauline Sayn-Wittgenstein, the daughter of Liszt's companion, Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein.

. . . Nothing is less absolute (as to its appearance in life, of course) than music, and the champions of an absolute music evidently don't know what they're talking about. To utterly confound them, one would only have to ask them to show us a music without a form borrowed from either bodily motion or spoken verse. Now, we have recognized the march and dance form as the solid foundations of pure instrumental music, and we have seen these forms lay down the rules of construction for even the most complex instrumental works of every kind—so rigorously so that any departure from them, such as the non-repetition of the first period [e.g., the exposition of a movement in sonata form], was considered a transgression into formlessness that had to be avoided even by the daring Beethoven himself—to his otherwise great detriment. . . .

Everyone endowed with head and heart will understand me when he hears Franz Liszt's "symphonic poems," his *Faust*, his *Dante* [Symphonies]; for it is these that were the first to clear my notions of the issue [of programmaticism] itself. I pardon everybody who has hitherto doubted the benefit of a new art form for instrumental music, for I must admit to having so fully shared that doubt as to join with those who saw in our programme music a most unedifying spectacle. I felt all the more odd since I myself was classed among just these programme musicians, and cast into one pot with them. While listening to the best of this sort, nay, often even works of genius, it had always happened that I so completely lost the musical thread that by no manner of exertion could I re-find and knit it up again. This occurred to me quite recently with the love scene, so entrancing in its principal motives, of our friend Berlioz's *Romeo and Juliet* Symphony. The great fascination which had come over me during the development of the chief motive was dispelled in the further course of the movement, and from there declined to an undeniable malaise. I discovered at once that, while I had lost the musical thread (i.e., the logical and lucid play of definite motives), I now had to hold on to scenic motives not present before my eye, nor even so much as indicated in the programme. Indisputably these motives existed in the famous balcony scene of Shakespeare's; but in that they had all been faithfully retained, and in the exact order given them by the dramatist, lay the great mistake of the composer. The latter, if he wished to use this scene as the motive of a symphonic poem, ought to have felt that, for expressing pretty much the same idea, the dramatist must lay hands on quite other means than the musician. The dramatist stands much nearer to the life of everyday, and is intelligible solely when the idea with which he presents us is clothed in an action whose various component "moments" so closely resemble some incident of that life

that each spectator fancies he is also living through it. The musician, on the contrary, looks quite away from the incidents of ordinary life, entirely ignores its details and its accidentals, and sublimates whatever lies within it to its quintessence of emotional content, to which alone music and only music can give voice. A true musical poet, therefore, would have presented Berlioz with this scene in a thoroughly compact *ideal* form. In any case, a Shakespeare, had he meant to hand it over to a Berlioz for musical reproduction, would have written it just as differently as Berlioz's composition should now be different, to make it understandable per se. We have been speaking of one of the gifted musician's [Berlioz's] happiest inspirations, however, and my opinion of his less happy ones might easily set me dead against this line of work if, on the other hand, it had not brought to light such perfect things as the smaller pictures of his "Scene aux champs," [from *Symphonie fantastique*] his "Marche des pèlerins" [from *Harold in Italy*] etc., which show us to our amazement what may be accomplished in this mode. . . .

I will merely conclude by telling you something about the formal side of the message of [Liszt's] symphonic poems. In this regard I was above all struck by the great and explicit plainness with which the subject proclaimed itself to me. Naturally this was no longer the subject as described by the poet in words, but that quite other aspect of it, unreachable by any manner of description, whose intangible and vaporous quality makes us wonder how it can display itself so uniquely clear, distinct, compact and unmistakable to our feelings. With Liszt, this masterly grip in the musical conception speaks out with such a power at the very outset of the piece, that after the first sixteen bars I often could not restrain the astonished cry: "Enough, I have it all!" This I deem so prominent a feature in the works of Liszt that, despite the aversion shown by a certain party to recognize Liszt's prowess in this field [Hanslick], I haven't the slightest fear as to their finding a very speedy entrance to the affections of the public proper. The difficulties which stand in the way of dramatic compositions, due to the far greater complexity of their media of expression, are smaller in the case of more purely orchestral works. Our orchestras are mostly good, and where Liszt himself—or one of his more familiar pupils—can conduct the performances, the same success will always follow as Liszt found, for instance, with our simple-hearted people of St. Gall [in Switzerland], who so touchingly expressed their astonishment that compositions which they had been warned against as formless and chaotic should have struck them as so swift and easy of understanding. As you know, this confirmed my good opinion of the public—although only a sudden shock can lift it above its customary viewpoint, and the effect cannot be lasting nor change the customary opinion for the very reason of the exceptional nature of this shock.

Nevertheless the evidence of such an uplifting remains the artist's sole reward from without, and in any case he must guard against expecting it from every person, after the event, for he might find the individual sullen and only too prone to criticize. Thus on the next day, even after being carried away by the performance, it perhaps will occur to many a musician to pounce upon this or that "peculiarity," "harshness," or "abruptness"; and particularly the rare, unusual harmonic progressions may then give many people ground for hesitation. One might inquire how it came to pass then, that they found nothing to offend them during the performance itself, but simply abandoned themselves to the fascination of a new and unusual impression, which we may well opine could not have been produced without the aid of those "peculiarities" and so forth? As a matter of fact, it is the characteristic of every new, unusual and shaping impression, that it has about it something strange to us, something which rouses our mistrust; and this, again, must reside in that secret of the individuality. In respect of what we are surely all alike, and the race may be the only true thing here; but in respect of how we look at things we are so unlike that, taken strictly, we remain forever strangers to each other. But in this consists individuality, and however objective may have been its path of evolution—i.e. however wide-embracing our field of vision may

have grown, however filled by nothing but the object—there will always cleave to that vision something which remains peculiar to the special individuality. Yet only through this one thing of its own, does the personal vision impart itself to others; whosoever would make the one his own can do so only by taking up the other to see what another individual sees, we must see it with his eyes—and this takes place through love alone. By our very love for a great artist we as good as say that, in taking his creation to our heart, we adopt with it those individual peculiarities of view which made that creation possible to him.—Now, as I have nowhere more distinctly felt this love's enriching and informing power than in my love for Liszt, in consciousness thereof I wish to ask those doubters: Only trust, and ye shall marvel at the gain your trust will bring you! Should you falter, should you fear betrayal, then look a little closer who he is for whom I ask your trust. Know ye a musician more musical than Liszt? One who holds within his breast the powers of music in richer, deeper store than he? One who feels more finely and more delicately, who greater knowledge or ability, whom Nature has more highly gifted and who has cultivated more untiringly those gifts, than he? Can ye name to me no second? Then trust ye this one alone (who, moreover, is far too noble a man to dupe you) and rest assured that through that trust ye will be the most enriched where now, for lack of trust, ye fear contamination! . . . But above all greet my Franz for me, and tell him the old, old story, that I love him!

Your
Richard Wagner.

Source: Richard Wagner, "Über Franz Liszt's symphonische Dichtungen," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 10 April 1857, trans. William Ashton Ellis in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 3 (London: Keegan Paul, 1894), edited by Bryan R. Simms.