

Liszt in the mirror of Claude Debussy

ABSTRACT

Background

The relations between Liszt's and Debussy's (and often also Ravel's) music is one of the most studied topics of analytical and historical musicology (from Leibowitz, 1951, to Gut, 2008, and later, see Dalmonte, 2012). The analyst's attention has been mainly addressed to the relations between some of Liszt's compositions and the 'impressionistic' production of the French composer(s) in the direction from the older one to the younger (s).

The term 'impressionism', borrowed from the aesthetics of painting (and therefore metaphoric in origin) is used to denote the French music of the end of the XIXth and the beginning of the XXth century marked by imprecise and faint profiles and by light 'colours.' In the Lisztian literature this term is used only with reference to the French music still to be born, as a form of unintentional advance or 'prophecy', but nobody actually defined compositions such as *Années de pèlerinage* or *Harmonies poétique et religieuses* 'impressionist'. Serge Gut writes: 'Le pathos romantique est en lui trop fort pour que l'on puisse le ranger aux cotés de ceux qui ont fait de la nuance et de la discrétion leurs marques distinctives' (Gut 2008, 303). For this reason it seems better to change the direction of the research and to look for the interesting solutions that the impressionists (here Debussy) actually found in Liszt's music.

It is absolutely true that, for instance, the piece *Reflets dans l'eau* by Debussy (1905), and especially bars 20 -24, is very similar to the beginning of *Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* by Liszt (1877), but it would be difficult to maintain that Liszt could envisage some important features of the impressionistic style through his choices of texture, harmony and mood. It seems more probable that on listening to Liszt's music Debussy picked up in a conscious or unconscious way some musical traits of the older master that he later inserted in his own language.

Aims and repertoire studied

This paper aims at detecting traces of Liszt's music in Debussy's music, being aware that it will be difficult to assert if we are dealing with a fortuitous similarity or a voluntary choice, as is very often the case throughout the whole history of music between one age (one composer) and the following ones. Another point to keep in mind is the size of this paper, very much smaller in comparison with the ambit of the research, which would need several articles or even a whole book. Here the aim is just to indicate a new direction and to sketch the main ways to follow it in order to reach the goal in the future.

Very often a composer does not notice that in his own music there are stylistic elements already present in an older Master's production, but it is also possible that some stylistic features of the previous age move the imagination of a composer who decides to insert them in his own vocabulary. It also happens that a composer has a bent towards the aesthetic positions of a 'school' or of a particular 'movement' and deliberately decides to adhere to this group; but we can cancel this hypothesis from this paper. A first chapter of future research will possibly illustrate if Debussy really did choose some traits from Liszt's music, which fitted well with his own artistic projects, that is if he did in fact realize a sort of appropriation.

Methods

The theory of musical appropriation is still far from its aims, especially on the level of the personal elaboration of the listening processes: we have only just begun to study the paradigm of its manifestations. Regarding musical appropriation through listening, it has been proved possible to distinguish among different types (Ruhe, 1987):

a) *absent-minded, inattentive appropriation*: a type of unconscious and subjective appropriation on the elementary level of the perception, without intentional elaboration of the sonic material perceived; b) *appropriation with motor reflections*: an almost unconscious appropriation, when the listener makes contact with the music through its rhythmic-motor components. Even if it is an almost automatic relation, the basis of this type of appropriation is the remembering of previous experiences of the listener, bound to elements perceived from listening (accents, unexpected rests, sudden rhythmic changes); c) the third type of appropriation is when the listener realizes that he is listening to a piece that seems pleasant, agreeable on account of some general moods and because it reminds him of something already encountered in the past. If the appropriation is unconscious (c₁) the listener tries automatically to remember simply the general aspect of the piece that stimulated the pleasant emotional response. If during the listening the appropriation becomes gradually conscious (c₂) the subject directs the attention to single musical components of the piece and tries to infer the levels of their organisation. This is the behaviour of a subject defined by Adorno as the 'expert listener', who reflects on the present experience and imagines how to relate it to his musical language.

Musical appropriation can also happen through the score: a kind of conscious appropriation, differentiated only by the different way of its happening: a) by playing a piece, b) by reading scores for personal interest; c) by teaching a younger musician, etc.

In all these cases ‘conscious appropriation’ does not mean ‘intentional appropriation’: a composer, even when he is occasionally a player or a teacher, can realize that the music with which he came into contact opens up new horizons, or simply offers some hints interesting for his on-going project, without having explicitly looked for them. And it is also possible that the way of elaborating some musical traits by another composer are so closely linked to his personal way of elaboration, that it is difficult to distinguish what is original from what was borrowed. In fact it is a general principle of communication to (possibly) add some personal elements to the components of a known and accepted tradition.

A research project based on the principles of musical appropriation must take into consideration that the its different types must be evaluated as participating in a tight and complex relation with ‘external’ variables, given by biographical details about the time and place where the appropriation may have taken place, or by explicit testimonies of the composer or of some of his relatives, etc. so that a ‘score to score’ comparison through one of the ‘classical’ methods of analysis can itself prove insufficient.

We know, for instance, that Debussy, during his stay in Rome in 1886 (Busoni, 1955, 259) was deeply affected by listening to the old Liszt playing his piece *Jeux d’eau à la Villa d’Este*; but nobody knows

- what he retained in his memory from this experience,
- what captured his fancy (did he connect the music with the sound of the fountains just visited in Villa d’Este, or with something else?),
- if he later heard the piece played by other pianists,
- if he played the piece himself.

Even if Debussy’s biography does not record particular events nor even personal moments of contact between Debussy and Liszt, we can be sure that the Roman episode was not Debussy’s only encounter with Liszt’s music. This statement is based on Debussy’s music itself, and especially on his piano music, where recent pieces of research have in fact discovered Lisztian stylistic traits.

Paul Roberts, for instance, after stating that ‘pianism of the transcendental type is one of the many inspirations of *Poissons d’or*’, and having suggested a link with Liszt, also underlines the need to evaluate the fact that Debussy dedicated the piece to Ricardo Viñes, a pianist famous for a particular way of playing (Robert, 1996, 190-191).

Another interesting research in the direction from Debussy to Liszt passes through the evaluation of the collection for which a piece was written: Etude XI, *Pour les arpèges composés* being an Etude, has a long history behind, but ‘... it is an imaginative and modernized tribute to Liszt’s conception of the Transcendental Studies’ (Robert Schnitz, 1950, 216).

Implications

It seems that till now the direction of the research ‘from Debussy to Liszt’ has highlighted single aspects of Debussy’s piano work, on the basis of external clues that escape the ‘classical’ analytical methods. But there are important themes

that need a ‘score to score’ comparison. Among the principal problems facing the generations of passage from one stylistic age to the next are the questions of form, that is how to substitute the forms known and beloved by generations of listeners with ‘free forms’. Liszt suffered this situation more deeply than the majority of his contemporaries, and even more than his pupils, who often did not understand his struggle. Debussy lived in an epoch and in a social context closer to modernity so he could understand more easily Liszt’s solutions. It seems – but it has not yet been proved – that he could have found in the music of the old Hungarian good hints towards the solution of particular form problems, for instance:

the passage from the opening part and the central part of a piece, or the passage from one ‘episode’ to another inside the same piece;

the dialectic relation between the general form of a piece and its single ‘episodes’, possibly characterized by different harmonic zones;

the presence of pedal-notes or of ‘tonic’ notes coming from the melody, or of long lasting notes above the harmonic texture, that have an important role in the formal architecture.

Such themes must be placed at the centre of future research in order to understand the deepest form of appropriation by Debussy of some formal solutions by Liszt.

Keywords

Claude Debussy, Franz Liszt, Appropriation Theory

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