

Susan Wollenberg

University of Oxford, UK  
susan.wollenberg@music.ox.ac.uk**Extended Abstract Template: Reading Liszt's 'Sospiri!' (1887): 'Lateness', memory, nostalgia and place in the nineteenth-century piano miniature****ABSTRACT****Background**

A serendipitous find, leading me, when looking for a quite different item, to R.C. Lee's edition of three late piano pieces by Liszt, evoked in me a strong sense of the expressive qualities possessed by the third of these, 'Sospiri!', A 233/5, dating from 1879 (no. 5 of the *Fünf kleine Klavierstücke*, not to be confused with 'Un sospiro', no. 3 of the *Trois études de concert*, A 118, dating from 1849). 'Sospiri!', in belonging among the products of the composer's 'late style', relates (as I show) in a particular way to the image of Liszt in his last years as both retreating from his earlier pianistic style and forging new paths.

This piece presents a distinctive case of 'much in a small space', as put forward by Elmar Budde for Brahms's Intermezzo Op. 117 no. 2 (Budde 1984), and by Susan Wollenberg on Fanny Hensel's Allegro, Op. 8 no. 1 (Wollenberg 2007). Such 'miniatures' as these invite a multi-layered analysis responding to the richly-packed content within their small frame.

While in the case of both the Brahms and the Hensel pieces the composer's creative approach to absorbing the influence of sonata form is evident, in Liszt's case, 'Sospiri!' requires an interpretation of its alternative formal frame. And whereas the Brahms and Hensel examples bear no specific programmatic titles other than the indication of their generic category or tempo (the Hensel piece is implicitly a Song without Words), the evocative title of Liszt's piece invites us to unpack its significance as part of the analysis.

**Aims and repertoire studied**

In my paper I am concerned to draw out the layers of meaning and referential aspects embedded in the musical fabric of Liszt's 'Sospiri!', and implied by its title. With this aim in mind I explore its intricate motivic and harmonic network as well as its topical and generic frames of reference. In response to the piece's sectional construction I offer a formal interpretation of the structure, together with an investigation of the processes and effects of memory and nostalgia conveyed by the content, and its treatment, enshrined within this tiny, somewhat neglected, gem of a piano 'fragment'. In regard to these latter two areas, reference to the literature on 'fragment' (Rosen 1995) and on memory (Taylor 2014) is pertinent to my project. Also of particular relevance is the topic of 'Liszt and the Piano': here a starting-point is Alan Walker's outline in *Grove* (Walker 2001), to be supplemented by more detailed literature.

**Methods**

My analytical approach involves interpreting the findings collected along the lines proposed above, in relation to the following four main areas of enquiry: Liszt's life and career; his pianistic style; ideas of 'late Liszt' such as were explored by Cannata (1997); and ideas of place – in this case, Venice, with its particular associations for Liszt and his contemporaries as documented, for instance, by Searle (1966). Far from these various analytical and interpretative angles constituting the proverbial 'sledgehammer to crack a nut', this piano miniature from Liszt's late period proves to be heavily loaded with possibilities of hermeneutic interpretation. We might recall Leopold Mozart's words of advice to his son in 1778 on composing: 'What is slight can still be great' (Anderson 1997).

**Implications**

Ultimately I would ask of what (and of whom, and where) is it that this piece 'speaks' – or sings? – to us; and in conclusion I draw together the answers to this question that have emerged in the light of my analytical and contextual exploration. (It turns out that the answers involve matters of life, and death.)

In aiming to shine a revealing light on a piece hardly discussed in the literature, but deserving of close analysis, I hope with this paper to contribute to developments in rethinking genre, and ways of analysing the musical miniature.

**Keywords**

Liszt; genre; piano miniature; pianism; Venice; late style.

**REFERENCES**

- Anderson, Emily, ed., 1997. *The Letters of Mozart and his Family*, 3rd edition, revised by Stanley Sadie and Fiona Smart. London: Macmillan, 599.
- Budde, Elmar, 1984. 'Johannes Brahms' Intermezzo op. 117, Nr. 2' in Beihefte zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft, no. XXIII, *Analysen: Beiträge zu einer Problemgeschichte des Komponierens, Festschrift für Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Werner Breig, Reinhold Brinkmann and Elmar Budde. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH: 324–37.
- D. B. Cannata, 1997. 'Perception & Apperception in Liszt's Late Piano Music', *Journal of Musicology* 15/2: 178–207.

- Rosen, Charles, 1995. *The Romantic Generation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Humphrey Searle, 1966. *The Music of Liszt*, 2nd rev. edition. New York: Dover, Chapter IV ('The Final Period'), esp. 108–115.
- Taylor, Benedict, 2014. 'Schubert and the Construction of Memory: The String Quartet in A minor, D.804 ('Rosamunde')', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 139/1: 41–88.
- Walker, Alan, 2001. 'Liszt, Franz (Ferenc)', in Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online.
- Wollenberg, Susan, 2007. 'Fanny Hensel's Op. 8, No. 1: A Special Case of "multum in parvo"?' in: 'Fanny Hensel (née Mendelssohn Bartholdy) and her Circle': Proceedings of the Bicentenary Conference, Oxford, July 2005. *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 4/2: 101–117.