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Author(s): Otis B. Boise

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AN AMERICAN COMPOSER VISITS LISZT

By OTIS B. BOISE

Otis Bardwell Boise (1844-1912), a native of Ohio, belongs to that generation of Americans who sought professional training at the famous conservatory in Leipzig, and returned to start the great development of music in the United States that was to ensue in the following generations. Boise was the teacher of a number of excellent musicians, and he himself enjoyed Liszt's guidance and advice. This little autobiographical sketch, a real period piece unearthed by the composer's daughter, throws light on Liszt's generosity as well as on the quaint ways of an American musician of the Victorian period. The footnotes are editorial additions.

Editor.

THE early summer of 1876 found a new and untried score in my portfolio. Now music is so intangible, that our most carefully drawn tone-pictures seldom have the same shade of significance to an outside intelligence as to the composer himself. He starts or is supposed to start with a purpose for the fulfillment of which he chooses such material and such treatment of the same as seems adequate; whereas except in cases of so-called program music, his critics listen to details, weigh adjustments, and in this wise become acquainted with his motive ideal from its portrayal in his handiwork. They are liable to arrive at conclusions at variance with his conceptions.

The creator and the critic look upon finished art works from opposite standpoints, and besides, the impressions made by music differ with elements of the intelligence to which it appeals. For these reasons no composer feels at ease until he has tested a new work upon some unprejudiced, erudite susceptibility.

I had just seen Liszt at the Altenburg meeting of the Tonkünstler Verein, had observed his gracious manner towards those who approached him, whether friends or strangers, but they were so numerous and left him so little quiet, that I had not seen the propriety of presenting myself, although I much regretted leaving his presence without the memory of a hand pressure and a greeting meant for me personally. There was something so intellectually regal in his personality, that the man independent of the artist would have been irresistible. The impression he made upon me was so ever present in my mind and his reputation as a critic was so high, that my consideration for his comfort gave place to an impulse to secure his judgment upon my manuscript.

Liszt had by that time taken up his summer residence in Weimar, so thitherward I journeyed, with my score under my arm, misgivings as to the outcome of the venture in my mind and no introductory letter in my pocket. Dr. Paul had offered to give me a commendatory document, but as it had not arrived at the time set for my departure, I resolved to rely upon the meager diplomatic ability that I possessed to bridge over those awkward moments of presentation, which are often so momentous in their influence upon subsequent intercourse.

Arriving in Weimar about midday, I wasted no time but within a half hour had interviewed the master's valet and had ascertained that dinner was the next number on the day's program, after which the *Doktor* would sleep and that barring engagements of which his servitor was not cognizant, he might receive me at four o'clock. While conversing with this man I began to feel that his disposition towards my plans would exert a deciding influence on their initial stage. I therefore took great care to reinforce the favorable impression that my broken German had seemingly made upon him from the first and left quite assured of his good offices when I should return.

When I returned at the appointed time, the valet expressed doubts as to my being received, but said he would present my card and see. He stopped when halfway up the stairs and beckoned me to follow, evidently resolved that I should have an opportunity to advocate my own case. As he knocked on what I found was the music-room door, he motioned me to stand directly in front of it. After a moment's waiting, Liszt appeared, glanced at the card and then at me, and seemed a little disturbed by our simultaneous appearance. Now came my one feeble diplomatic act, but it sufficed. I had heard that Liszt spoke but little

English and it occurred to me, in that crucial moment, that a somewhat sustained explanation of my desires in that language might prevent hasty action on his part. It did, and when I stopped to catch my breath, he smiled, extended his hand, and then stepping aside, said in English which came distrustfully to his lips, "Please come in." After closing the door he turned to two gentlemen who were standing near the piano, read my name from the card, and waving his hand towards them said, Herr Kapellmeister R. and Herr Konzertmeister M. The names mentioned had for years been associated in my mind with distinguished service to the newer school of music. The introduction over and the host having seen us seated, those three resumed their conversation, which had been interrupted by my entrance.

For the next half hour I listened to a flow of original thought, interlarded with spontaneous wit and apposite illustration. Liszt was the principal spokesman, but his visitors were evidently congenial spirits and understood how to incite him to intellectual flights. My interest in what was transpiring, which probably manifested itself in ways common to civilized beings, evidently attracted Liszt's attention, for as my eyes wandered about trying to impress the features of that historic room upon my memory, I several times felt that he was looking at me questioningly and it made me feel quite uncomfortable. He might be thinking, "Here is a man for whom no one would vouch; he approached me in the guise of lingual helplessness and is now drinking in German like a leech. We will carefully consider his case."

The room was not at all luxuriantly furnished but an air of sufficiency and comfort pervaded its fittings. It had windows on two sides, which since the house stood by itself, flooded it with light. There was a writing table at one end, upon which a candle burned (the practical purpose of this illumination I learned later), two pianos, a grand and an upright, plain but substantial furniture, a few pictures, and stacks of music. The music lay in piles on and under the piano, on chairs, its appearance not remotely suggesting methodical arrangement, but Liszt could immediately exhume any desired piece. After bowing his friends out, he turned to me and said less questioningly than assertively, "You speak German." I answered, "A little." "Then please tell me of your desire in that language for my English is insufficient." I told him how much I needed his advice and that I had expected to bring a letter of introduction. He said quite pleasantly, "That is of no importance." This inspired me with a much needed grain of confidence. In answer to his

inquiries I told him of my years with Hauptmann and Wenzel¹ and of my later experiences. He was especially interested in what I told him of Asgar Hamerik's attempts to make the American public estimate justly the efforts of home composers.²

Liszt soon became genial and expressed a willingness to be helpful but with the most unaffected modesty remarked, "My advice may be of little value to you. I think you overestimate my capacity to serve you." Then turning towards the table upon which stood the lighted candle, he asked whether I smoked. Upon my answering affirmatively, he arose and as he advanced towards the table said, "Bechstein furnishes me with cigars and pianos. The pianos are excellent." Then indicating the two sorts displayed, the ordinary shaped and the long "Hungarian" and taking one of the latter, he said, "I prefer these. Please help yourself." I naturally took a "Hungarian," pulled out the straw around which they are constructed and the withdrawal of which leaves a flue for the passage of air and smoke. I was entirely unacquainted with that genus of cigar and had so far followed Liszt's movements. It would have been well for me had I not been forced into the lead by his politeness. He insisted upon my making first use of the candle. I drew, little realizing what misery would come to me because of my nervous deference. He insisted that I should take a better light, but I could not endure to keep a Liszt waiting, so protested that my cigar was burning finely. He lighted his by holding it in the blaze until the whole end was a coal of fire, and then put it between his lips and smoked with the greatest satisfaction. As we turned from the table Liszt asked me what I had brought with me. I hastened to produce my score. Upon seeing that it was a large work, he said that he feared the time at his disposal that afternoon would not suffice for its careful perusal. Could I come the following morning. I assented most promptly, for my faculties were becoming sadly mixed. My head was spinning in an awe-inspiring way and I absolutely felt myself growing pale. After having arranged the time for my coming, I hurried out, perhaps a trifle unceremoniously, to a long night of sleepless sleep; from which I awoke to find myself comparatively sound in body and mind and profoundly thankful that the "Hungarian" cyclone had passed without fatally shattering my anatomy.

¹ Moritz Hauptmann (1792-1868), eminent theorist, taught counterpoint and composition at the Leipzig Conservatory. Ernst Ferdinand Wenzel (1808-1880), friend of Schumann and Mendelssohn and teacher of piano playing at the Leipzig Conservatory.

² Hamerik (1843-1923), a Danish pianist and composer, was director of the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore from 1871 to 1898.

When I presented myself at the Liszt house the next morning the valet escorted me upstairs in a welcoming way which was comforting. He asked me into the music room and the master entered a moment later. The greetings over and I having politely but firmly declined to smoke, Liszt produced my MS which had been left in his keeping and asked me if I would play it. There has never been an occasion in my career when my pianistic calibre seemed to me so small, as when I for that moment contemplated exhibiting it to that great master and I also felt that my innocent composition would suffer in his esteem through its shortcomings. He evidently noticed my worry and relieved me at once, by saying, "I think after all that I should obtain a better idea of details if I play it myself." Accordingly he seated himself, glanced at the instrumental scheme, turned the successive pages to the end, tracing my themes and procedures and then, with this flash negative in his mind, began the most astoundingly coherent piano rendering of an orchestral score that I had heard and such as I have never since heard from any other musician. Those who have attempted such tasks know that the ten fingers being inadequate to the performance of all details, it is necessary to cull such essentials from the mass of voices as will clear the line of development. Liszt did this instantaneously. No features of the workmanship, contrapuntal or instrumental, escaped his notice and he made running comments without interrupting his progress.

After the closing chords, he expressed himself pleasantly impressed and then turning back said, "Now we will go through the Overture critically." And he did. I have never encountered such convincing criticism as I heard during the next hour. Liszt's analysis was exhaustive, but he viewed technical tradition from an esthetic standpoint. He was no quibbler but he looked for compensation when exceptional means were employed. In his judgment logical stridency justified much that pedants condemn but he abhorred eccentricities that were not the outgrowth of thematic development. He made deep cuts and gave his dissecting knife disturbing turns, but there was nothing needlessly lacerating in his treatment. He assumed that I desired and therefore took pains to make his opinions unmistakable and his premise clear. His insight was so quick, his ideals so pure and noble and his intellectual power so magnetic that my musical sense accepted his suggestions without protest.

The opening periods of the Overture satisfied him; indeed he pronounced the first fifty measures original and strong. Then came a connecting phrase which had cost me an immense amount of work. His

keen perception however at once detected its lack of spontaneity, that it was artificial inasmuch as it did not grow out of what had preceded it nor forecast that which was to follow. I had constructed an ornate patch, in the outward appearance of which I took pride, but my inexperience failed to feel the rift its superficiality bridged, until the great master had exposed it to my view. It would not interest the reader to trace further Liszt's comment on or suggestions concerning the work.

Young composers are prone to paint with a whitewash brush when they should use the most delicate camel's hair variety. They are dazed in the presence of such ample material and determined to avoid thinness. In order to assert their knowledge of capacities, they resort to duplication which robs their scores of that delicious clearness of diction, and endless variety of tone quality, with which ripe inventive talent endows its orchestral settings.

As Liszt arose from the piano, he spoke kindly of my creative capacity and advised that I revise the Overture, adopting such suggestions as appealed to my reason. He also expressed a desire to see it after the changes had been made and also asked me to arrange it for pianoforte (four hands) so that we might play it in tempo. Upon my thanking him for his kindness, he said I should always be welcome; and his manner was so paternal that something warmer than admiration for the great musician came into my heart; it was reverence and love for the gracious and noble qualities of the great man.

I left his presence in a state of exaltation quite foreign to my habitual moods. This was not the result of the master's approval of my efforts, for although he had found good he had also found weakness that to a great degree neutralized his commendation. But he had clarified my view, had enabled me to catch a glimpse of art from his vantage ground of genius and routine, which towered above the mists and clouds of technical tenets and pedantry.

For the following fortnight I worked like a Trojan and at the end of that time I made my second trip to Weimar with my overture revised and arranged. But agreeable anticipation had taken the place of the misgivings that filled my mind on the first visit. I had in compliance with Liszt's suggestion notified him that my task was finished and asked the privilege of visiting him on a certain day. Since he was to have written if my choice of time interfered with his plans and since I had heard nothing, I marched up to his door with a pleasant measure of

assurance. The valet smiled a welcome and said that the master was expecting me and ushered me upstairs without delay.

When I entered, Liszt was in the music room with Court Organist Gottschalk, Silas A. Pratt, and two titled personages, whose names have passed out of my memory. The master received me cordially and I joined the party in smoking but took one of Bechstein's less demonstrative brand of cigars. After fifteen minutes Liszt became restless and changed the resting place of several packages of music and took less and less active part in the conversation. His mood finally became so obvious that one of the visitors said, "Master, you would like to be alone with this gentleman," indicating me with my roll. Liszt answered, "If you please." As they made their adieux my compatriot said, "You are a very lucky man."

As soon as we were by ourselves, Liszt expressed lively curiosity as to the fruit of my remodeling process. He first looked through the score and was evidently pleased that I had to some degree recognized and applied the principles gauged by which my work had been so full of shortcomings on the previous occasion. We afterwards played the thing twice from the four-hand arrangement. I had made it with the utmost care but having had no experience in such a condensation, it was not a complete success. There were several collisions between his left hand and my right and I once in attempting to take possession of a key that he was holding, clipped the occupying digit with my finger nail. He raised that hand from the keyboard quickly and I almost collapsed but he went on to the end. This was during the first playing. Arriving at that point in the second, both of us avoided that key.

During those two summers, I went to Liszt with each of my compositions as it was completed. I found him uniformly kind and helpful. I have given the details of my first knowledge of his acute discernment and broad generosity, thinking in this way best to convey my estimate of the man and the artist. But having as I hope accomplished this, my personality as a factor can serve no purpose in this chronicle. I will therefore retire my ego to a passive capacity, relate two or three characteristic incidents of which I was an interested observer, and close my Weimar reminiscences.

Not being a piano student, I did not meet his class during the first year but I did so in 1877. There were perhaps twenty young people, to which number the gentler sex contributed its full quota. His favorite at



Otis B. Boise

Gechter Herr

Sehr gerne werde ich ihr
Concert mit Ihren Schülern.
Kommen Sie also übermorgen
oder Sonntag, weil in der nächsten
Woche ich von hier abgehe.

Freundlichkeit

F. Liszt
Weimar, 20^{ten} Juli 76.

A Letter from Liszt to Boise, July 20, 1876

that time was evidently Timanoff,³ for when she came in he welcomed her with "Ah, la crème de la crème."

Liszt's teaching method, as exhibited on that occasion, was unique. He would ask someone to play a certain piece, but substitute another player as soon as anything occurred that did not suit him. If several in succession failed to produce the desired effect, he took the matter into his own hands. Timanoff and Max Pinner were the only ones who were allowed to complete their task without interruption.

One day a rather assertive young lady called with an introductory card and said she had come to ask the master's advice. She claimed to desire his verdict as to whether she should dedicate herself to music, but obviously wanted and expected an invitation to join his class. Liszt was blind to her charms, although she was a slightly creature, and he was displeased with her manner. He did not respond promptly and the situation became painful for me as a spectator, for she evidently did not feel more than could and did pass away in a momentary blush. She renewed the attack with, "Will you permit me to play for you?" He having reservedly signified his willingness to hear, she began the F major étude (No. 8) of Chopin, Opus 10. Her lackadaisical playing was startling, if anything so mild could be, when contrasted with her appearance and manner. It lacked every quality that could have made it adequate to her chosen task. Liszt could endure but a half-dozen measures and then shouted "No! No!" rushed to the piano, nudged her off the chair, and seating himself gave vent to his feelings in the most impetuous performance of this piece that I have ever heard. It relieved the master and did no violence to Chopin. As he turned from the piano, he said, "It should be something like that. Now go home, forget your dawdling and come again later if you see fit."

A former pupil once came to the door, introduced a companion who was a violinist, and asked the privilege of playing a duo at Liszt's next soirée. He treated them with a charming affability, but when he heard that they wanted to play Beethoven's Sonata Opus 24, he said, "No! No! No! We know that. Come again and bring something new," and bowed them out.

From these two and several other somewhat similar occurrences, I concluded that Liszt had but one art gauge. This he applied to both

³ Vera Victorovna Timanova, born in 1855. After studying with Liszt she returned to Russia, where she became a much esteemed piano teacher. In 1919 she was living in Petrograd.

trousers and petticoats without chivalric allowances to the latter. He appreciated the gentle loveliness of a refined woman, but it did not contribute to her artistic stature in his esteem.

One day while speaking of Bülow, the master said, "His memory is astounding. It is a never ending cause for wonderment." Then he added that Saint-Saëns was almost equally phenomenal in this capacity. Liszt admired many of Raff's compositions and said that he was a contrapuntal virtuoso, whose routine in the use of technical means was unparalleled. The master expressed no opinion of Brahms in my hearing. He heard Joseffy in Vienna just before the latter's departure for America and pronounced his playing delicious. Liszt regarded himself as out of the field but there was the subtle magic in his playing even at that late day which we hear to a lesser degree in Paderewski's performance but in his only. This quality is a thing quite apart from digital skill, although the latter is necessary to its realization. It arises from an intuitive sense for tone and color and logical sequence and manifests itself in dynamic adjustments and significant phrasing.

In the autumn of 1876 we migrated to Wiesbaden and my next summer's pilgrimages to Weimar were made from that lovely town. When informed of our move, Liszt asked me whether I knew Raff. Upon my answering in the negative he said, "You must know him" and at once wrote a few lines of introduction. Had they been written by any other hand I doubt whether I should have presented them, for Raff's Wiesbaden reputation was emphatically forbidding. He was looked upon as an unsociable bear. I had heard so much, that his affable manner in receiving me was a great surprise. His fellow citizens evidently misconceived his earnest, retiring nature. Liszt's endorsement may have somewhat influenced his treatment of me, but his kindness was too hearty to have been superficial or assumed.

During one of my later interviews with Raff, he told me of his composition methods and if my reader find my imperfect recital of them one half as interesting as I did his statement, it will amply repay the reading. I will endeavor to give it in his words. "Before beginning consecutive writing, I note my first, auxiliary, and second themes and special trumpet and horn motifs on bits of paper, consider well the roles they are to assume in my scheme, and then adapt my choice of instrumental forces to the character of my proposed work, always avoiding the use of extra instruments when possible. It is practical to score for such forces as are to be found in common orchestras. Works that require extra

instruments are seriously handicapped. They come to performance comparatively seldom. Having prepared my material, I do not get up from my writing table until the sketch of a complete movement has been finished. Uninterrupted work can produce an immeasurably smoother musical work than will result when the threads of thought are repeatedly dropped. The contour of a piece once established, my filling and coloring may occupy weeks."

No wonder that Raff's works, written in this way, are sustained songs! Few men have lived who could invent with such facility. Raff had his periods of absolute greatness, as in his *Im Walde*, *Leonora*, and *Spring* symphonies, but he was not always inspired. He seems to have been impelled by mechanical rather than by spiritual forces. He was a tireless worker. He told me that since he liked to hear his compositions before they were printed, he was in the habit of copying out all the wind parts and each of the strings for his scores. He preferred doing this to correcting the mistakes of copyists. During my year in Wiesbaden, Raff received his appointment as director of the Conservatory at Frankfurt.