Romantic Anatomies of Performance

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Franz Liszt, Metapianism, and the Cultural History of the Hand

O, handle not the theme, to talk of hands,
Lest we remember still that we have none.
SHAKESPEARE, *TITUS ANDRONICUS*

THE CRIMINAL HAND

On 30 August 1832, Nicolas Theodore Frédéric Benoît became the first convicted parricide in Paris to be spared the *poing coupé:* amputation of the right hand immediately before execution by guillotine. Nineteen years of age, this son of a respected magistrate in the Ardennes had his *toilette* performed at the central asylum-prison at Bicêtre. The accoutrements of the old regime remained for this shy, mild-mannered, slightly built double murderer and pederast. His head was shaved, his clothes and shoes removed, his feet clamped in irons, a large white shroud placed over him, his head hooded in black. At 7 A.M., earlier than usual, a closed carriage left for the newly erected scaffold in a distant faubourg to the south of the city. There, half an hour later, the executioner and his assistants wrestled Benoît onto the platform—he refused to go quietly—and strapped him to the weigh-plank. The presiding officer read his sentence according to the provisions laid out in the not-yet-four-month-old penal code. The blade fell. As executions go, Benoît's was noisy but unspectacular.

However, for liberal commentators who had gathered there, a correspondent for *Gazette des tribunaux* among them, such haste betrayed the newly mythologized "dark side" of Paris: the dens of male prostitution, orgies, and vice that had come to light during Benoît's trial. The scene probably brought to mind less fortunate parricides, such as Angélique-Catherine Darcy, who had her hand and then head struck off in October 1828 by the same executioner on duty that morning, Henri Sanson. Victor Hugo, for one, was unimpressed by the new style of execution adopted in February 1832 for the sixty-four-year-old assassin Philippe-Marie

Desandrieux, the first person to be guillotined since the 1830 revolution. "They no longer dare after July to behead on the place de Grève," Hugo complained in his May preface to *Dernier Jour d'un condamné,* "because they are afraid, because they are cowardly, this is what they do. . . . [They] put him in a basket on two wheels, shuttered on all sides, padlocked and bolted; then, with a gendarme before and a gendarme behind, with hardly a sound and with no crowd in attendance, they delivered this parcel to the deserted barrière Saint-Jacques. It was . . . barely daylight. . . . Swiftly they drew the man from the basket, and, giving him no time to draw breath, furtively, slyly, shamefacedly they took off his head. This is what they call a public and solemn act of high justice."[1]

. . .

Less than a month later, on 24 September 1832, a short story under the title "La Main de gloire (histoire macaronique)" appeared in the Parisian biweekly *Le Cabinet de lecture.* Its author was a close acquaintance of Hugo, Gérard de Nerval, a medical student who, instead of attending classes, fostered a reputation as the most ill-behaved poet in the city. Rumor had it that he could be found walking his pet lobster through the gardens of the Palais Royal on a blue silk ribbon. "Why is a pet lobster any more absurd than a cat, dog, gazelle, lion or any other creature," Théophile Gautier had Nerval explain in a later survey of the period. "Lobsters are quiet and serious; they neither bark nor bite, and they know the deepest secrets of the sea."[2]

"La Main de gloire" revels in such bourgeois disobedience. It recounts the tale of Eustache Bouteroue, a seventeenth-century Parisian clothier-apprentice, in a historical narrative Nerval concocted from a hodgepodge of early manuscript sources. Set in 1609, the story concerns what modern neuroscience would call "anarchic hand syndrome" (to my knowledge, it is the first example of the now-familiar genre of hand-gone-mad stories). In an ill-advised dispute over his bride-to-be, Eustache engages her jealous nephew, a soldier and expert swordsman, to a duel at dusk on the Pré-aux-Clercs. Knowing he has no chance to win by natural means, Eustache resorts to the occult: he consults a "skilful rogue" and fortune-teller at a stall on the Pont Neuf. The wily chiromancer, exploiting the situation, engages him in an impossible contract. In exchange for a potion to smear on his right hand that will guarantee victory, the desperate Eustache promises the gypsy-alchemist use of this same hand once he has been executed (as will surely happen once the duel is over). The title of the piece, "La Main de gloire," derives from this exchange. Nerval explains it by quoting the alchemical writings of the thirteenth-century Dominican and writer on music, Albertus Magnus:

> You take the severed hand of an executed man, purchased before his death; you submerge it meticulously, taking care to have it almost enclosed in a copper receptacle that contains cyma and saltpeter with *spondillis* grease. You place the receptacle in a

> fire made of ferns and completely dry verbena until the hand, after a quarter of an hour, is completely dry and ready to be preserved. Later you make a candle with seal grease and Lapland sesame and you cause the hand to take hold of the candle as if it were a candlestick. Wherever you go, carrying it before you, all barriers will fall, all locks will open, and the people who come before you will remain motionless.[3]

The gypsy's intention, in other words, is to harvest Eustache's hand, prepare it in the old ways, and use it as a "criminal hand," that is, one that will continue to act, in death as in life, against the prevailing social and somatic order.

As the magic mixture is rubbed into Eustache's hand, he feels it twitch in disobedience: "At that, Eustache felt a kind of electric thrill that ran through his entire arm, and this frightened him a great deal. It seemed to him that his hand was swelling, and yet—strange to tell!—it clenched and stretched several times, cracking its joints, as when an animal awakens. Then he felt nothing more."[4] At first light the following morning, the hand once again thrills to life. On cue, as Eustache faces his rival on the Pré-aux-Clercs, his arm galvanizes into action, "dragging him forward, violently resisting any attempt to control it." The soldier—who had always intended to take pity on his dull, hapless opponent—is poignarded savagely to the floor by the previously weak, limp-wristed couturier. In the ensuing chaos, bewildered victor and both seconds grab what they can and scatter.

Several days later, Eustache decides to come out of hiding, master his morbid fear of capture and calm his nightmares. He reasons—wisely—that his best chance is to seek the help of a corrupt magistrate, Monsieur Chevassut, an acquaintance and long-time customer of the tailor's apprentice. To Eustache's relief, the corpulent official wastes little time in assuring him that nothing will come of that case, that the evidence against him will be buried in red tape and bureaucracy. But just as the relieved Eustache is being shown the door, the right hand's rebellious strength and elasticity returns. Once more, the "Hand of Glory" lashes out, slapping the magistrate hard across the face, rocking him back and streaking blue fingermarks across his flustered cheeks.

At this, Nerval's prose rushes quickly to Eustache's last moments on the scaffold and the final paragraphs, our hero having been arrested and locked in the Châtelet on the double accusation of homicide and assault of a magistrate. As with Benoît, the executioner on the scaffold summarily dispenses with his work, although this time more to satisfy the demands of Parisian spectacle than because of the shame such exhibitions might occasion. Seventeenth-century crowds, Nerval explains, did not like to wait.

The story would end here, but that Nerval's hand writes on. In an afterword, his writing describes Eustache's lifeless body, twisting limply on the hangman's noose, and the astonishment of the crowd as his right hand wistfully moves again. As anarchic fingers grow bolder and lift skyward, so the panicked master executioner starts cutting arteries and, when this fails, he severs the anarchic hand from the

arm completely in two deft strokes. Nerval's pen, fired by the pandemonium of the scene, becomes agitated as events conclude: "[The hand] made a prodigious leap and fell, bloody, amid the crowd, which divided in shock. Then, making several more leaps, thanks to the elasticity of its fingers, and since everyone gave it a wide berth, it quickly found its way to the foot of the little tower of the Château-Gaillard. Then, scrambling with its fingers like a crab along the salients and the rough spots in the wall, it climbed to the little window where the gypsy was waiting for it."[5]

. . .

On 17 February 1832, eight months before Eustache's hand leapt free, Franz Liszt arrived at Paris's Hôtel d'Artois, on the rue Laffitte. Climbing the marble staircase to the first floor, he was received at the apartment of Caroline Boissier, a Swiss noblewoman visiting the city for the season.[6] The twenty-year-old pianist was there to continue the musical education of Caroline's nineteen-year-old daughter (she had received fifteen lessons already). The dedicatee of Liszt's *Fantaisie romantique sur deux mélodies suisses* (1835) was a good student: Valérie would soon acquire accomplishments enough to become a prolific writer, Christian moralist, and founder of the first ever school for nursing.[7] Liszt's lessons were intense: they took place every three or four days and usually lasted two hours. Her mother would sit in, both to chaperone and take notes for a now-famous lesson diary. Valérie's pianistic problem, identified in mid-January, was that her hands needed to be more "flexible and energetic."[8] Liszt prescribed octaves, at least three hours a day, for months—in scales modulating through every key and in all permutations, first "going from a *pianissimo* to a great *forte* and vice versa," then staccato filled in with diminished chords, then in broken patterns, repeated strokes, and so on. Whatever the variation, Liszt counseled, "the tones" should be "equal at all times, broadly stroked, and the wrist supple and flexible, the hand soft and falling." The key should never be struck with the extremity or nail of the finger, but "with the ball of the finger, which flattens the finger, of course, and allows it freedom." Liszt charged that the sound of the octaves be kept "pure, full, round, and complete." "He does this for hours on end," Caroline reported, "while at the same time reading to avoid boredom." "He wants one to play, without exception," she summed up on 17 February, "entirely with wrist action—playing with what is called 'la main morte.'"[9]

Liszt spent most of 1832 pursuing "dead hands." His ideal would anticipate several later developments in keyboard pedagogy: Sigismund Thalberg's rival notion of "la main désossée" (boneless hand);[10] Liszt acolyte Marie Jaëll's late-century technique of "la main dissociée"; or Mason, Deppe, and Leschetizky's concept of freeing or "emancipating" the playing hand by working toward its "devitalization."[11] When Liszt seemed in a bad mood during Valérie's 24 February lesson, her mother ascribed it to frustration with his hands: "It is astonishing to hear Liszt say

that his fingers are heavy and clumsy," Valérie's mother wrote. In the ensuing month Liszt regularly railed against his pianistic rivals: their "rounded fingers" and "all the little musical affectations"—"enlevés," "plongés," the "showy contrasts" that characterized their playing. Instead he advocated "suffering" and "oppression" to give expression to his hands. Hans von Bülow, Liszt's most famous pupil, said of his practice, "I crucify, like a good Christ, the flesh of my fingers in order to make them obedient."[12] This was Liszt's idea: to seize living nature, unlock the gates of the material self, and transubstantiate flesh. His purpose was to attain levels where "one does not perceive the fingers, or the nails, or the instrument," levels only achievable (it would seem) by a maniacal devotion to octaves.[13]

On 6 March 1832 Valérie was presented with a "mahogany brace" or "hand guide" of the type that we have seen advocated by the celebrated Kalkbrenner.[14] This piece of machinery, which Liszt probably devised and constructed himself, forced Valérie to play octaves from the wrist (and not from the arm, as is generally assumed of Lisztian technique). And play them she did (plugged into her machine): short passages of octave crescendos and diminuendos "twenty, thirty, forty times," broken octave runs following the same pattern, full octave scales, "five, six, seven, eight times running through all twenty-four keys," and octave arpeggios in major, minor, and diminished sevenths. By the time of Valérie's final lessons, Liszt—now engaged in a similar octave regime—had pounded his fingers into such submission that he was finally on good terms with them. On 23 March Valérie's mother marveled at how pliable they were: "His fingers have neither a definite position nor form. They bend soft and pliant in all directions; the fingers, extended and recumbent, move in a weighty manner from one key to the next."[15] Indeed, they hardly resembled hands at all.

THE MAKEOVER EPISODE

The day after Caroline described Liszt's formless appendages, on 24 March, cholera officially broke out in Paris and the Boissiers returned to their residence in Geneva. Sweeping in from the East, the pandemic lingered until late September, causing eighteen thousand deaths in the city alone. Paganini's second tour famously coincided with its coming, the first display of his freakish or misshapen left hand occurring on the evening following the announcement of the first official death (25 March). By 19 April (three days before Liszt first heard the violinist at an Easter Sunday concert for the victims of the outbreak) Heine could moan at the inconvenience of it all: "I have been much disturbed in my work by the horrible screams of my neighbour, who died of cholera." There was everywhere a strong stench of chlorine, sloshed out in front of public buildings, mixed with that of camphor stuffed in pockets.[16] On 27 April, Liszt wrote to the Boissiers in Geneva, saying how he had been bedridden for ten days (in low spirits), how deeply he felt

about having been "in the family" those past two months, and lamenting the "tristes et affligeantes raisons qui me retiennent et m'emprisonnent dans Paris," which had prevented him from traveling with them to Switzerland.[17]

Biographers record that Liszt plunged into an irregular lifestyle around this time, keeping dissolute hours and experimenting with emerging left-wing political theory. Exposing his mind to all it might crave, the virtuoso-in-training began to visit prisons to observe the habits of condemned men (Benoît perhaps?). He grew obsessed with death and dying. Not that he was in favor of capital punishment: "[It] is an abominable social crime. It is obvious we are all more or less guilty, deranged, or crazy, but it does not follow that we ought to be guillotined, hanged, or, as an act of mercy, shot."[18] As part of his newly chaotic routine, Liszt would pay impromptu visits to gambling dens, or to Salpêtrière hospital to play music to the insane.[19]

If the diary of Antoine Fontaney, a minor poet, is anything to go by, Liszt appeared regularly at Hugo's salon in these months, invariably to perform the funeral march from Beethoven's A♭ sonata (on 16 April, 18 April, and 19 June).[20] The Bibliothèque nationale de France holds Liszt's unpublished manuscript diary for 1832, a small leather-bound purple silk moiré pocketbook, the oblique ink jottings of which confirm at least the first of these appointments. Liszt's mostly illegible pencil scrawl—much of it emotional venting or quotations from Balzac, the Vulgate, Buffon, Hugo, Shakespeare, even Napoleon—might read as yet more evidence of his turbulent state. It seems likely that Liszt kept this sumptuous diary—a luxury item bought from Alphonse Giroux on the rue du Coq-St-Honoré, seller of miniatures, exotic objects, cabinets, and other items of fancy and fantasy—not so much for practical purposes as to incite in himself the volatile emotions proper to his developing notion of "the artist."[21] Almost every other evening in mid-1832, according to another source, Liszt would frequent Alexandre Dumas's intimate gatherings with his phalanstery: Henri Fourcade (writer), Victorine Collin (essayist), Louis Boulanger (painter), Étienne Cordelier-Delanoue (writer and poet), Auguste de Châtillon (poet and painter), Hugo, and often Nerval.[22] (Liszt had now become a devotee of Nerval's 1828 translation of Goethe's *Faust:* much later he planned an opera on the subject, in collaboration with Nerval and Dumas.)[23] Chez Dumas, Liszt might pound away on his host's out-of-tune upright; Hugo might recite verse; Dumas might show off his ambidexterity—he could write with both hands at the same time.[24] From there Liszt would generally return home, where, according to the memoirs of Gabrielle Anne de Courtiras, he would enrage the tenants in his building on the rue de Provence by playing the Dies Irae over and over, in countless variations, until dawn. (Eventually the tenants banded together to force his eviction.)[25]

By late April, though, Liszt was neglecting his diary, except for extreme outbursts such as the one on 25 May, in which he described himself as "in prison . . . burning

. . . crying . . . without knowing why."[26] Pauline Pocknell argues, on the basis of this neglect and four ripped-out diary pages from 1–4 May, that "something else, mysterious but radical happened to Liszt's mindset towards the end of April 1832."[27] Whatever this "something else" may have been, Switzerland never left his thoughts, as evinced by a May letter to Valérie Boissier intimating plans to visit there with Dumas.[28] An earlier letter, also to Geneva, this time addressed to fellow pianist Pierre-Étienne Wolff, is more important still. Written on 2 May 1832, it would become the great musicological marker for this chaotic turning point in his artistic career:

> Here is a whole fortnight that my mind and fingers have been working like two lost spirits, = Homer, the Bible, Plato, Locke, Byron, Hugo, Lamartine, Chateaubriand, Beethoven, Bach, Hummel, Mozart, Weber, are all around me. I study them, meditate on them, devour them with fury; besides this I practice four to five hours of exercises (3rds, 6ths, 8ths, tremolos, repetition of notes, cadences, etc., etc.). Ah! Provided I don't go mad, you will find an artist in me! Yes, an artist such as you desire, such as is required nowadays![29]

Musicologists tend to agree that in these dark Parisian days Liszt reached deep inside himself, redoubled the struggle with his hands, rebuilt his technique from scratch, and staged the first of his trademark "makeovers." Apparently breaking from tradition, he submitted his hand to untold labors, thus embodying "the transition," as his first official biographer Lina Ramann would put it, "to a modern style of playing."[30] The études and characteristic pieces of the 1830s in view, Charles Rosen calls it "one of the greatest revolutions of keyboard style in history."[31] Others have referred no less effusively to the birth of "transcendental execution."

NEW BODIES

The talk of "reincarnation" has not been mythologized without cause, although it is debatable whether the familiar story I have rehearsed above (which was also Liszt's) stands much scrutiny. His words in that letter to Wolff have nevertheless seemed important because they suggest a novel, irrational "antimethod" in keyboard practice, an approach governed only by apparently superhuman acts of will. This is, after all, a paradigmatic example of the now-familiar "woodshed" experience (a quasi-monastic state that the player induces by isolating him- or herself in order to reemerge in transfigured form). Such "method" is, of course, anything but unmethodical. The trips to prisons, asylums, casinos, the "involuntary" submission to history and literature, the fearful embrace of criminality were just that: part of a self-consciously spontaneous attempt, not so much to reeducate fingers as to "transfigure" the self.

Liszt worked to cancel work. This chapter once again documents the material effort behind "transfiguration," less in order to demystify it (since ecstasy was pal-

pable!) than to expose the historical conditions by which it took place. What I want to register here is the manual labor attendant on romantic conceits of musical mystification, and the terms by which it became possible to speak of "music" without the bodies and instruments that facilitated it. This will require revisiting debates reviewed in an earlier chapter over whether Thalberg's multihandedness betrayed crass athletic display or sleight of hand. The inspirited sense of handedness necessary to Lisztian realms of musical purity was extreme; it was cultivated by an elite group of pianists and pedagogues across Europe. Having reviewed philosophical and scientific debates about hand function and free will, the chapter returns to stories of Liszt's spectral hands, anecdotes to rival the tales of Benoît's unspectacular death and the horror of Eustache's disobedient appendage. The emergence of wayward hands bore out the shameful truth of doing. These were body parts, after all, that (by their very existence) both mocked human contingency in the world and conditioned engagement with it. At Liszt's piano, I argue, manual estrangement was cultivated in order to incarnate a newly untouchable kind of music, a "music" realized only by the denial of the fact of handedness itself.

Liszt's "making-over" involved both a new politics of the body and a new politics of performance. I say "politics" because the rebirthing practices he pioneered involved a remapping of the hand in relation to the rest of the performing body, a redrawing of mind-body-soul-hand relations in the name of higher and holier conceptions of artful performance. His students, though chained to keyboards, were induced to think and work in purer, "antisystematic," and less digital ways: beyond instruments, scores, their own fingers, and even music. In this didactic regime, there would no longer be a place for detailed methodical work, for small educative steps, the slow acquisition of skill, sensible knowledge, or sensitive fingers at the pianoforte. Rather, pupil and teacher would now seek transformative experiences. The end game was nothing less than to be born again—to be rewired as a new physiology, or at least to seek deeply instinctual modes of self-transformation. In this quest for perpetual conversion and reconversion, practice and pedagogy became newly invested in abstruse conceptions of body (or, to put this in emerging scientific terms, in ever-dynamic brain and nerve function). Invisible outcomes were targeted: desires, drives, instincts, intentions, volition. Higher forms of musical expression (read: Hungaro-German), in other words, could be sacralized by reconfiguring them in relation to higher or deeper cognitive functions. Lower-level efforts (read: Italo-French music making) could be construed oppositionally, as a mode of performance grounded in handed activities.[32] This was at least one of the effects of Liszt's "dead hand" technique. It was a practice that drew attention away from the player's fingers, reinforcing in her—through hours and hours at the piano—a persistent sense of personal alienation from the shameful work of her hands.

A radical conception of keyboard performance, in other words, was consecrated under the banner of a new physiology, a new body, and a higher set of forces or antagonisms within the human form. This is not to say that, in this "born-again" mythology, hands would be denied, disavowed, or disclaimed (how could they be?). Rather, they were subsumed into a full-bodied and internally divided morphology in which, as we shall see, the old pianistic tradition of celebrating them in neo-Aristotlean terms as the "instrument of instruments" became intensely problematic.[33]

TALK TO THE HAND

The emergence of an anticlassical sense of handedness was borne out not only in the experience of Liszt but in that of nearly every European pianist of the period. The example that most readily comes to mind, of course, is Schumann's in far-off Leipzig. At around the time Chopin was publishing his Op. 10 Études in Paris, when Adolph von Henselt was resident in Vienna playing Bach ten hours a day on a dummy keyboard (while reading the Bible) and when Alexander Dreyschock settled down in Prague to perfect his octaves (he practiced around sixteen hours a day), Schumann famously declared war on his hands. On the day before Liszt apologized to Wolff, 7 May, Schumann penned what became one of the most celebrated diary entries in Western music. His *Tagebuch* reported that he had begun to apply a *Cigarrenmechanik* to the third finger of his right hand, a finger that he found by turns "tolerable," "broken," "weak," "incorrigible," or "completely stiff." (He had invented this gadget with his friend and fellow pianist Anton Töpken; his diary entries in this period, mostly "notes to myself about my hand," document the extent of his ongoing struggle with the manual companion.)[34] Two years previously, in Heidelberg, Schumann had developed hand tremors, although his 1830 diary seemed less concerned with his third finger than with the "lameness" of his "numb" ring finger on the same hand.[35] His wife, Clara, later blamed Robert's right index finger for the failure of his concert career, the third or fourth having little to do with it![36] Schumann tried several therapies to regalvanize his hand: he turned his whole house into "an apothecary shop" and experimented, for example, by inserting the disobedient member into the carcass of freshly slaughtered animals *(Thierbäder),* or by having a doctor electrocute the muscles of his right arm, or by grasping the metal rod of an electromagnetic bath machine. Nothing helped. Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski, Schumann's first biographer, registered how anarchic things had become: "The sinews of his third finger had lost their natural elasticity from excessive stretching; and the result was, that, instead of striking down, as desired, it moved upwards. Conceive the terror of the bold experimenter when he saw this."[37]

The anarchic hand has confounded explanation ever since. Musicologists have long argued over Schumann's enforced turn from performance to composition,

from extroversion to creative introspection. John Daverio and more recently Eric Frederick Jensen lay blame for the musician's pianistic failure (and compositional ascent) with the "barbaric" hand strengthener; Eric Sams thought the hand injury was caused by mercury poisoning after treatments for syphilis; Alfred Meyer speculated that Schumann had cut the webbing between his fingers to supply them with more independence; Henson and Urich thought the problem was connected to damage of the "osterior interosseous nerve"; Peter Ostwald agreed but doubted whether the affliction was due to Schumann's "hypochondriachal neurosis," speculating that his hand might have been injured after he passed out on his right arm after a bout of heavy drinking; and Gerd Nauhaus thought the debility the result of a rupture of the *frenulum praeputii* caused by obsessive-compulsive masturbation.[38]

All these theories serve a basic misapprehension. Schumann's hand injury was far more than a medical or even psychosomatic condition. His affliction had only partially to do with the intimate mental details so beloved of recent, biographically fixated Schumann scholarship. To look for tiny neurotic tics or more biomedical evidence of a warped, introspective, asocial, internal, splintered fantasy life seems shortsighted in this context. Schumann's struggle was not merely his own. Rather, he was caught up in a large cultural shift, a pan-European change that involved nothing less than the social experience or somatic regulation of handedness.

This is not to say that Schumann merely decided to do without hands, although it is difficult to argue that he did not imagine outsourcing them. In a love letter to Clara in December of 1838, he wrote that his bond was strong enough to experience her as though she were a part of his body. And not just any part. She was his faithful right hand, a replacement or prosthetic member to which he would delegate manual activity: "I sometimes feel unhappy here [in Vienna], especially because I have an ailing hand. . . . I often complain to heaven and ask God, why did you do just this to me? It would be of such great value for me here. So much music is ready and alive inside of me, that I ought to be able to exhale it. And now I can bring it forth only with great difficulty, stumbling with one finger over the next. But now, of course, you are my right hand, and you must take good care of yourself so that nothing happens to you."[39] The extent of Schumann's dependence on his right hand was nowhere more evident than in his famous final moments at the sanatorium in Endenich. Incapacitated after his neurological meltdown, swimming in dementia and psychosis, weakened by pneumonia, unable to speak and barely conscious, he still apparently recognized "his" fingers. Brahms recorded how, for those final two days in late July 1856, Clara watched over her husband:

> I am sure I will never experience anything more moving than Robert and Clara's reunion. He lay there for some time with his eyes closed, and she kneeled before him, more quietly than one would have thought possible. He recognized her later, and also

> the following day. At one point he clearly wished to embrace her, threw one arm towards her. Of course he had not been able to speak for some time, one could only understand (or one thought one could understand) the occasional word.
>
> He often refused the wine offered to him, then sometimes he would suck it from her finger so greedily and long and fervently, that one was convinced he knew the finger.[40]

These words leave us with a touching image of intimacy, a final picture of the myth of Robert-and-Clara. The widening rift between nineteenth-century composer and performer is beautifully encapsulated here in the increasingly distinct and heavily gendered set of values applied to each by midcentury: the mad composer-genius lost in hallucination and delirium on one hand, the marginalized editor-perfomer and faithful midwife to his creative fantasies on the other.

THE SCIENCE OF THE HAND

Pianistic contemporaries were not alone in their struggle against problematic hands. At least one nineteenth-century source recalls the comparable experience of no less a personage than Georges Cuvier, who succumbed to cholera on 13 May 1832 (in the same week as the crises of both Schumann and Liszt). Two nights before his death in rooms attached to the Jardin des Plantes, the great French naturalist—true scientist to the end—calmly observed the fingers on his right hand, which had begun to twitch involuntarily on his bed sheets. The ministrations of his doctors, who prescribed extensive leeching and cupping, failed to relieve his discomfort. The numbness and finally paralysis had spread to his left arm, respiratory system, and legs, having afflicted his right arm only days before. The founder of comparative anatomy and paleontology spoke slowly to his minders this night, indicating that "the nerves of the will are sick." These words were often recited in Cuvier's obituaries; they were his dying endorsement of recent work on the physiology of the nervous system, work that had distinguished so carefully between the nerves of sensibility and those of volition. Now, finally, the experimental findings of Charles Bell in London, François Magendie in Paris, and Antonio Scarpa in Pavia could be accepted.[41] The assumption that the physical size, fineness, coarseness, or shape of nerves accounted for the incredible range of nervous response could at last be laid to rest. Two nights before his death, in other words, Cuvier verified for posterity that every nerve obeyed function rather than form. There were tactile nerves, aural nerves, optical nerves, sensible nerves, motor nerves, and so on. The proof was there before him: he could feel his hand but could not move it.[42]

In these same years, Bell in London borrowed Cuvier's methods as he worked through his own obsession with handedness. Since August 1830 the Scottish

surgeon, anatomist, and artist had been writing a treatise commissioned by the Royal Society. Issued as *The Hand, Its Mechanism and Vital Endowments, as Evincing Design* in 1833, the book was so popular that it would reach its fourth edition as early as 1837. This extraordinary text was written at the intersection of taxonomy, zoology, theology, physiology, fine art, comparative anatomy, and medicine. Bell preferred not to extol the hand as the visible sign of man's exaltedness, or as his privileged instrument. Rather, the nerve scientist "physiologized" this body part (in protoevolutionary terms) in less formative ways: as a complex structure, yes, but also one that had adapted itself to human function in the service of will and environment. The hand, in other words, was reconstrued to seem *incidental to* rather than *the cause of* mankind's superiority. Its actions were accessory to authentic human articulations of self. Thus Bell's monograph urged its readers to laud this member less for its miraculous visible endowments than for its equally miraculous "hidden" physiology:

> With the possession of an instrument like the hand there must be a great part of the organization, which strictly belongs to it, concealed. The hand is not a thing appended, or put on, like an additional movement in a watch; but a thousand intricate relations must be established throughout the body in connection with it—such as nerves of motion and nerves of sensation: and there must be an original part of the composition of the brain, which shall have relation to these new parts, before they can be put into activity. But ever with all this superadded organization the hand would lie inactive, unless there were created a propensity to put it into operation.[43]

The hand, in this view, functioned in the service of two larger and more fundamental organic systems. First, its merely visible activities were adapted to the dark inner workings of the body's nervous system. Second, its special capabilities were only the peripheral effect of its adaptation to the outer environment: it was little more than a by-product of the profound beauty of the two worlds to which it was subject. (The predominance of right-handedness could thus be explained in terms of the influence of such everyday human functions as opening parlor doors or unfolding penknives.) For Bell, hands merely exemplified the advanced extent to which man had adapted to inner and outer nature.

The sobriety of this hypothesis, appearing as it does toward the end of Bell's monograph, belies the strange reflexivity of his opening paragraphs, which struggle against Aristotle's dictum in *De anima* that "the soul is as the hand." "The human hand is so beautifully formed," Bell admits, "it has so fine a sensibility, that sensibility governs its motions so correctly, every effort of the will is answered so instantly, as if the hand itself were the seat of the will."[44] His central claim accounted for this difficult hypothesis by appealing to God. This is not to suggest that Bell was uncomfortable about strong theological arguments, but rather to argue that his treatise was hardly clothed in incorruptable righteousness. The illustrations, drawn

by Bell himself, betray this moral ambiguity, as Ludmilla Jordanova has noticed.[45] Instead of depicting hands—not a single nonskeletal picture of a human hand appears—Bell sketched a child bouncing on a satyr's knee, an ape eating out of a bowl, a bear standing on its hind legs. These irreverent images are curious, Jordanova notes, as if Bell's hand—Nerval-like—were going its own playful way. If anything, they reinforce his insinuation that hands function independently of mind, that the seen might operate in opposition to the unseen, along with the activities of intending and doing, volition and action. Rather than belonging to man, and far from being expressive of his moral life, Bell concluded that the hand was the property of nature, or—more comfortingly—of God. "The complexity of [the hand's] structure," he repeated, "belongs to external nature and not to the mind." Myriad examples from the Cuvierian science of comparative anatomy buttressed this at once seditious and devoutly religious observance. Placing human hands alongside the paws, claws, hooves, and fins of vertebrates, mammals, and amphibians of every shape and size, Bell demonstrated how each animal instrument was beautifully molded, adapted, or designed—not to some inner personality, soul, intellect, or character, but to primitive necessity. "As for our hand," he wrote, "it is no more the freedom of its action which constitutes its perfection, than the knowledge which we have of these motions, and our consequent ability to direct it with the utmost precision."[46] The only reason we are able to control its actions, in other words, is because we possess knowledge of its current position, its movements being controlled—apparently—in retrospect. We might watch it go its own way. The rest was left to God.

LISZT'S FINGERPRINTS

Liszt was not primed to read such natural theology, although at least one of the books into which he threw himself while practicing octaves in 1832 suggested similar claims. At the time of the famous "makeover" letter to Wolff that year, Liszt was immersed in the *St. Petersburg Dialogues* (1821), by Catholic apologist Joseph de Maistre. On 8 May Liszt apologized to Wolff for the tone of his previous letter (quoted earlier) and drew on concepts from de Maistre's second dialogue to explain the balance of the spiritual and animal in him, ascribing his "delirium" and "madness" to recent overwork and "violent desire." Liszt's fascination with right-wing Catholicism, one imagines, extended to de Maistre's famous discussions of liberty in the sixth dialogue, in which the author lashed out at materialism, "those bothersome Ideologues" (who construed life as the by-product of physical sensation), and such "immoral" eighteenth-century predecessors as John Locke and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac. For sensationalist writers such as these, de Maistre observed, liberty had involved "the absence of obstacles," "the power of doing what one has not done or of not doing what one has done," a "pretty

antithesis" that "dazzled the mind" and achieved nothing more. Liberty is not "the power to do," de Maistre countered, it is "the power to will." Rather than being about the action of hands, in other words, liberty was conceived as "unimpeded volition," an innate faculty anterior to sensuality or mere doing. To possess free will, de Maistre suggested, was not necessarily to possess free use of one's hands.[47]

Whatever Liszt's reading, his "crisis" certainly confirmed the gist of Bell's and de Maistre's intuitions: that virtuosi would no longer seek perfect control, that the old masterful display of hands before the keyboard would seem increasingly boring or unnecessary. Liszt's experience, in any event, was of a disengaged hand—one belonging less to himself than nature. Joseph d'Ortigue, influential anti-Rossini proselytizer, emphathized strongly with such theistic manual encounters in his pioneering, opinion-forming biography of Liszt in the *Gazette musicale* of June 1835. Lauding fleshly renunciations in the name of higher artistic, social, and religious missions, the critic exalted Liszt's hands:

> One has to see him, with his windblown hair, hurling his fingers from one end of the keyboard to the other to land on a note that explodes with a clamorous or silvery sound, like a bell struck by a bullet; his fingers seem to grow longer, like springs being released, as if at times freeing themselves from his hands. One has to see him raise his sublime eyes to the sky to search for insipration, then, gloomily, fix them on the ground; or see his radiant and inspired features, like those of a martyr, radiating in the joy of his tortures.[48]

After the mythic "makeover moment," Liszt's were not "feeling hands". They were hands that seemed to *have* feelings. Inwardly emotional, they were less instruments of intention than potential friends, aids, ambassadors, confidants, or imposters. (One is reminded of Sergei Rachmaninoff's words on his deathbed in 1943; racked with cancer, he lifted his fingers to his face and choked, "My dear hands; farewell my hands.")[49]

To sum up: around May 1832 it became newly possible in Europe to conduct a relationship with one's hands. This hand would not so much *learn* by doing as *become* by doing; a hand supplemental or "in addition to" self, a hand with identity, it would be a mobile, ever-shifting personality. Hands are construed in quite uncomfortable ways in these new contexts: as agents in likely opposition to self, as body parts to be acted against and disavowed if not entirely disclaimed. The encounter, in other words, was with a hand external to self, a rogue part or shard, at once agonizingly proximate to and set apart from its possessor, but also a member that he or she might command to play music or engender experiences as yet unknown.

This emerging sense of what we might call the criminal hand was nowhere more powerfully felt than in the extraordinary late-century work of one of Liszt's

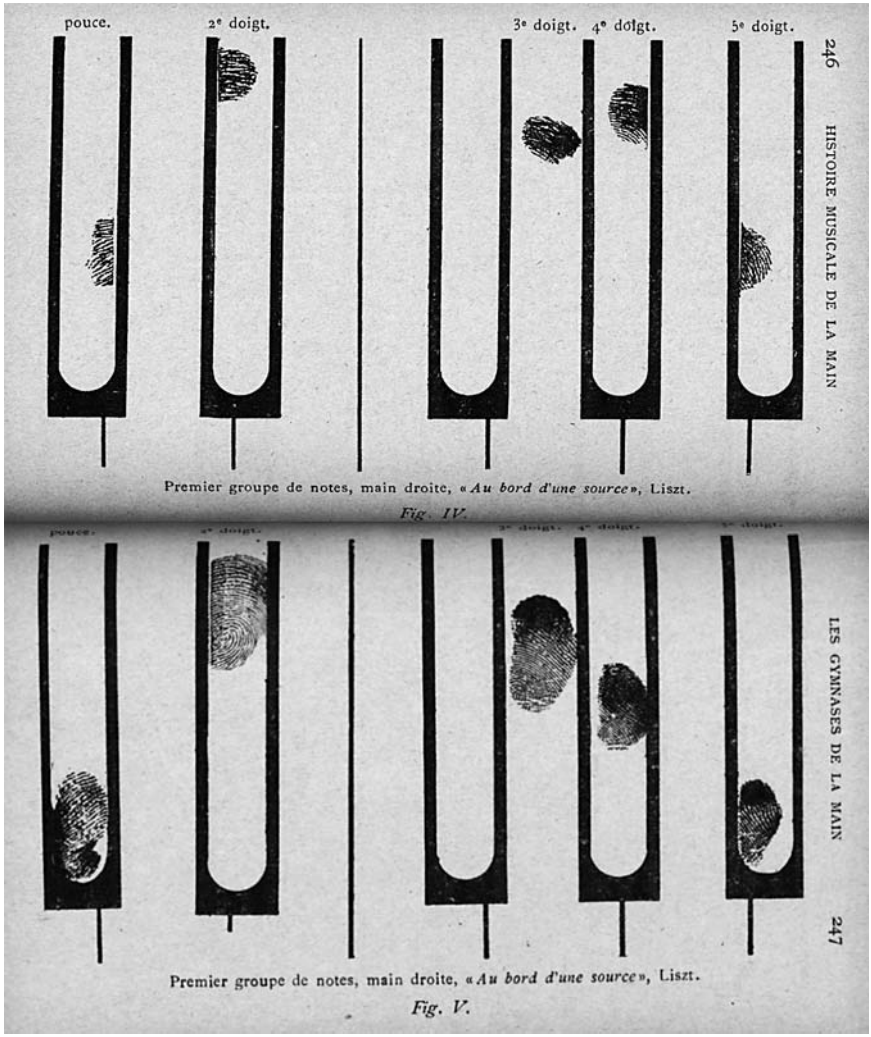

FIGURE 22. Jaëll-Liszt's *Au bord d'une source,* reprinted in Émile Gouget, *Histoire musicale de la main: son rôle dans la notation, la tonalité, le rythme et l'exécution instrumentale; la main des musiciens devant les sciences occultes,* 246–47. Image reproduced by permission of the Stanford Music Library, Stanford, California.

most zealous pupils, Marie Jaëll. The images of figure 22 represents her interpretation of how to play (and not to play) Liszt's *Au bord d'une source,* her identity here imprinted on the piano keys. This nineteenth-century association of the hand with criminality would of course be confirmed later in such new disciplines as forensic pathology, graphology, and biometric methods of criminal fingerprinting, where, as in Liszt's keyboard method, the open ball of the finger encoded identity. Jaëll's proposition was that pieces such as *Au bord d'une source* provided the opportunity for a detailed record of the pianist's individualized personality.[50]

Hands here obey no authorial or willful law other than, as we shall see, the God-given laws of nature and natural function. They are increasingly disobedient—having to be wrestled against, rehabilitated, coaxed into action, or addressed. And since no two hands were ever "identical," methodological systems began to seem useless. Every pupil, every physiology, every day, every mood, as we shall see, required special, unpredictable, individual treatment.[51]

AGAINST METHOD

Liszt never wrote a method. The closest he came to it was in 1835, when the Geneva Conservatoire of Music was founded with Wolff (whom we have met before) heading the piano department. Having eloped with Marie d'Agoult across the French border, Liszt was "ambushed," as he put it, by the administration and dragooned into teaching, an ironic occurence in light of the antiestablishment credentials he had garnered since he last encountered the Boissiers in 1832. (In May 1835, the *Gazette musicale* published Liszt's literary debut, "On the Position of Artists and Their Condition in Society," in which he exposed the *subalternité* of artist-musicians everywhere, encouraging them to unite in the name of their prophetic social responsibility to "the people.") Once more in right-wing circles, he was touted across the city by his faithful patron, Caroline Boissier, who introduced him at her salon at Rivage, a stately home on the banks of Lake Geneva.[52] Newly embroiled in the d'Agoult scandal—according to another Swiss admirer, Albertine de la Rive-Necker—Liszt now wore a ring with a silver skull set against a gold background on one of his index fingers, as if to advertise its "disobedience." Not that he wished to show his fingers off: Rive-Necker's account follows d'Ortigue in making one of the earliest descriptions of Liszt ignoring his hands in performance, apparently reading "invisible literature" in ways familiar to us from those ubiquitous nineteenth-century prints of the pianist staring into space. "While playing, he takes no notice of his hands, which he never looks at," Rive-Necker wrote in her diary. "His eyes wander upwards," she continued. "He seems to be reading invisible pages, or rather to be composing and playing according to the inspiration of the moment."[53]

Madame Boissier was not impressed by the newly "made-over" Liszt. The noble soul of the "poor young man," she wrote in her unpublished diary, had been

"seduced" by Saint-Simonists on one hand and "perverted" by George Sand on the other. She lamented his rejection of "accepted beliefs and principles; I'm not too sure what he puts in their place."[54] Success had changed him: "He has surrendered himself to the left, but with a forthrightness, a credulousness, that is saddening and touching. It is distressing to see such a beautiful soul so abused, so misled."[55]

Whatever the truth of her characterization, Liszt did not thrive in Geneva. At the conservatory he frequently failed to turn up for work, preferring instead to take Alpine tours. Weeks after his appointment, he announced to the faculty that he lacked energy for male pupils, though he still found time for female ones. In a letter to Baron d'Eckstein, he complained of the administration's expectations, forced as he was "to regiment, discipline and *métronimiser* a legion of little ladies and young men, most of whom are still today of goodwill (peace be with them) and who make me—almost—regret the lack of mine."[56] He had already caused a stir early in his tenure by making his offer to teach conditional on his services being free of charge, a condition that the committee feared would harm the local music-teaching industry. (The news of Liszt's involvement with the conservatory was publicly announced in a local newspaper, *Le Fédéral,* on 13 October.) An equally "generous" gesture involved a proposal to write a tutor for the institution "at personal expense," although inevitably the bill for engraving would be sent to the institution. Evidence (or the lack of it) suggests that his "gift" came to nothing. (It is significant that, at around the same time, Chopin would also fail to complete a keyboard method. All that remains of his efforts is a tortured manuscript that struggles to formulate even the most basic of outlines.)[57]

Not that "nothing" prevented the Myth of the Absent Method from installing itself in the emerging music-historical imagination.[58] Absence has, of course, always been a keyword for Liszt. While pianist-pedagogues fantasize about these supposedly lost pages, they remain in one sense appropriately invisible, a goad to the seemingly endless stream of modern What-Would-Liszt-Do scholarship. Surely the best question is whether he had much of methodological substance to divulge. In his mature pedagogy platitudes such as "Technique should create itself from spirit, not mechanics" did the job. Whenever students asked for concrete advice, he would tell them, "Go to the conservatory!" Back in the mid-1830s, his position appeared no less abstract or evangelical, as perhaps best evinced by the musical supplement to the 7 June 1835 issue of the *Gazette musicale de Paris.* In this house publication, Liszt's publisher and chief publicist of the time, Maurice Schlesinger, took the bold step of reprinting the month-old plates of *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (S154) a week before releasing d'Ortigue's issue-length first biography of the performer-composer (see figure 23). The *Gazette,* moreover, was already between the third and fourth installments of "On the Position of Artists and Their Condition in Society."

This supplement was the first example of what a writer for *Le Pianiste* called "le

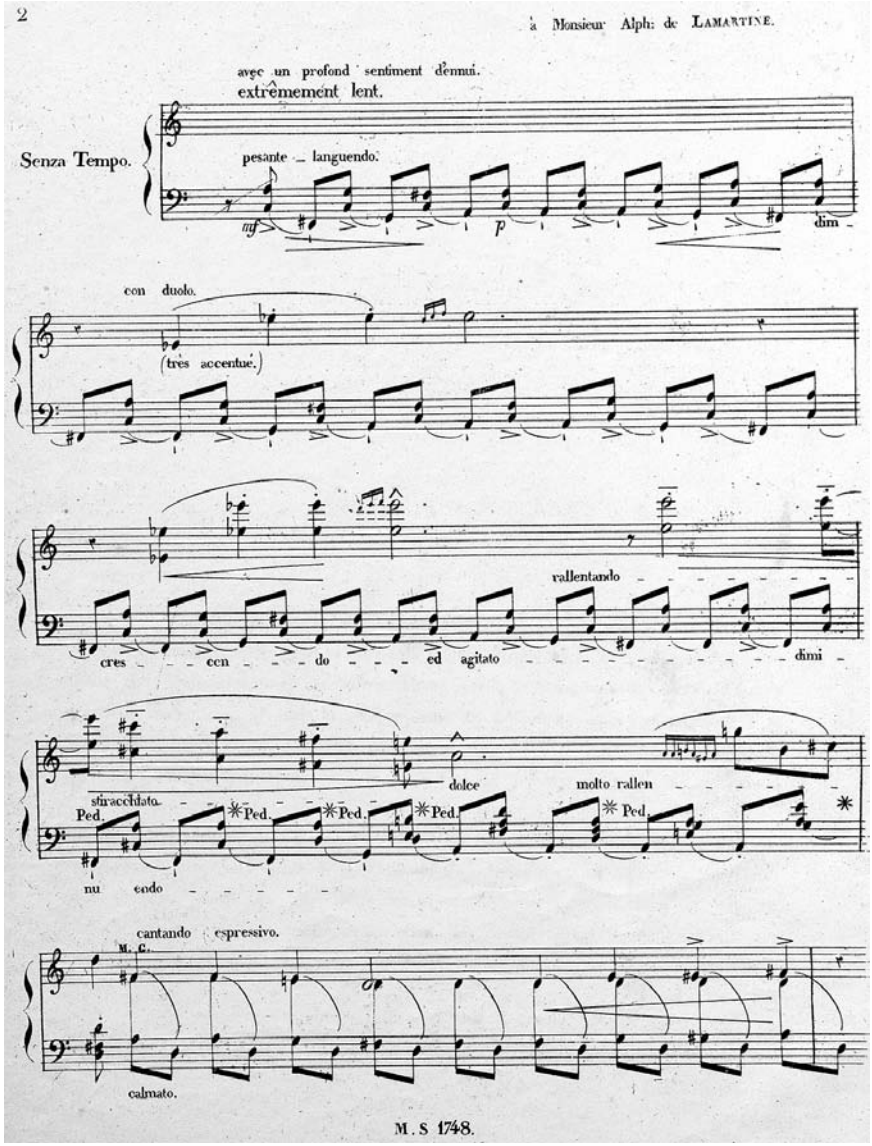

FIGURE 23. The opening of *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (Paris, 1835), 2, as printed by Schlesinger. This particular copy was once owned by Ferruccio Busoni. Reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

genre *spiritualiste,*" a metanotational score for a methodless and manualless music.[59] For d'Ortigue and the musician himself, this earliest version of the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* represented a compositional début, since Liszt's output had so far consisted only of piano arrangements—Berlioz's *Grande symphonie fantastique* (S470), for example, and such "derivative" works as *Grande fantaisie sur la tyrolienne de l'opéra La Fiancée de Auber* (S385) or *Grande fantaisie di bravura sur La Clochette de Paganini* (S420). Instead of cobbling together preexisting music, the *Harmonies* borrowed name and character from a literary work and a literary style: the recently published collection of religious poems by *poète-législateur* Alphonse de Lamartine (1830) and his famously anticlassical or "styleless" verse. Writing to Marie d'Agoult on 30 October 1833, Liszt called it "my small Lamartian harmony without key or time" (ma petite harmonie lamartinienne sans ton ni mesure).[60] In the sketchbook he was working with from 16 May, Liszt—initially thinking in G minor—scribbled a passage from Schiller's unfinished *Der Geisterseher* (1789) over the opening stave, including these words: "Everything has been abandoned [such that] nothing remained, but the sad and piercing stare of a man consumed by the knowledge of man."[61]

By the time of Schlesinger's publication, two years later, the time signature and key signature of the sketch had indeed been abandoned. The printed score of *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* was not so much "sans ton"—without sharps, flats, or barring—as without music. Paul Merrick interprets Liszt's first use of his trademark signatureless notation here as an attempt at "an impossible idea," a "visible invisibility"—"a vision of something he could not compose."[62] The words "senza tempo" (without tempo) and "avec un profound sentiment d'ennui" (perhaps best translated here as "with a deep sense of emptiness") only darken the veil. The opening off-kilter left-hand oscillations into and away from the C–F♯ tritone over ponderous offbeat accents further rebel against system. Liszt's iconoclastic notational style involves a strange, painstaking attention to every note, every sonority being represented by a welter of articulation, dynamic, pedaling, and verbal cues. The score's focus on detail extends to the barrage of textual instructions: "extremely slow," "heavy," "languid," "with sadness," "highly accented." The first bar line appears mysteriously at the bottom right-hand corner of the first page. What could be the function of this inexplicable line an eighth note before the end of the final system? These—and experiments in marking beats by number later in the piece—evince a highly methodical approach to the avant-garde task of being unmethodical. The purpose is apparently to depict Schiller's mood of abjection and world-weariness by being as incomprehensible as possible—by breaking the rules.

PLAYING AGAINST LAW

Liszt styled himself as the poet-prophet of this antiestablishment pianism, pioneering an experimental approach to hand position, pianistic register, texture, and

sonority. Faced with the problem of locating the composer-performer's "position" at the keyboard, François-Joseph Fétis commented on the extent to which the pianist defied classification in 1841:

> Liszt, who allows himself to be guided by the impulse of the moment, and who possessed great powers of execution, is the only pianist who has no fixed position, and who according to the nature of the composition he is performing, places himself, sometimes more to the left, sometimes more to the right. Besides which his body is perpetually in motion.[63]

In an entry dated 15 January 1832, Valérie's lesson book remarked that not only did his hands observe "no fixed position," but also

> he has no touch at all, and, at the same time, he has all possible touches. His fingers are very long, and his hands are small and pointed. He does not keep them in a rounded position. He maintains that this position lends a feeling of dryness to one's playing and this horrifies him. Neither are they altogether flat.[64]

A month later, in February, Caroline expanded on this by remarking that she had been a privileged witness not only of "no method" and "no touch" but of "no piano":

> His small hands are at once delicate and tapering, and so flexible that they carry out whatever is demanded of them. With all that, they are powerful enough to break the keys at will. His touch is absolutely his own, and it transforms the sound of the instrument, which under hidden fingers becomes glittering or velvety as required. He coaxes it, possesses it, makes it resound to his heart. It is no longer a piano—but storms, prayers, songs of triumph, transports of joy, heart-rending despair.[65]

This metapianism, familiar to every critic who has ever followed d'Ortigue in praising Liszt for the "orchestrality" of his perfoming manner, achieved ultimate expression under the pen of pianophile Wilhelm von Lenz, who sought lessons in 1828:

> It is an accidental circumstance, of no importance, that Liszt happens to play the piano at all. Perhaps in a higher sense, this is not the case, . . . the piano being merely visible. . . . [Yet] it is altogether uncritical to say that Liszt does this or that differently from somebody else. Do not imagine that Liszt does anything—he "does" nothing at all; he "thinks," and what he thinks takes on this form. That is the process. Can it really be called piano-playing?[66]

The effects of dematerialization were as much a feature of his teaching as his playing. Liszt, in fact, anticipated several later-century pedagogical schemes, where, if fingerings or hand positions were chosen, they were not selected with the visible conformation of the five-digit hand in question. Instead, decisions were made on the basis of hidden functions: either in view of the external purpose of "the work" or the expressive potential of the student. Intangibles like the invisible

weight of the arm, its transference from finger to finger, real legato (which, of course, can only be approximated on the pianoforte), and such unquantifiables as "energy" or "spirit" became new fascinations. Those familiar (and, on reflection, Byzantine) modern notions that the pupil play "from the arm," "toes," "back," or "stomach" emerged for similar reasons. Underscoring his turn from method, Liszt pioneered the practice of reading literature to his pupils, though for different reasons than Kalkbrenner, who was apparently the first to recommend enjoying a good novel while exercizing the fingers. In January 1832 Valérie Boissier, for one, had Victor Hugo's *Ode to Jenny* recited to her in an apparent attempt to improve her performance of a Moscheles étude.[67]

Liszt began to treat not so much the hands of his students as their souls, another reason why, particularly later in life, the master began to seem so messianic. In 1882 Carl Lachmund recalled, "Liszt's teaching cannot be codified; he strove for the spirit of the work; and music, like religion, has no language; he taught as Christ taught religion, in an allegorical way, or by metaphor. But magical was the effect of his influence. Those sufficiently advanced to undertand, acquired from the great master what they could not have found anywhere else in the world, then or now, at whatever price. Of plain technic he said little or nothing. Why should he have done?"[68] Liszt was merely chief witness to a new covenant that would supersede the old Hebraic law. (Kalkbrenner's father, after all, was Jewish.) His was a Catholic style of pedagogy, based not on rules, dictums, or orderings of the hand but on an intimate knowledge, indeed love, of each of his students.

If not priests, pianist-pedagogues might imagine themselves as doctors, such was their concern for the health of each of their students. Liszt's teacher Carl Czerny wrote in his *Letters to a Young Lady on the Art of Playing the Pianoforte* (1838) that "the fingers are little disobedient creatures, if they are not kept well-reined in; and they are apt to run off like an unbroken colt as soon as they have gained some degree of fluency."[69] Such afflictions, he clarified in his *Vollständige theoretisch-practische Pianoforte-Schule* of a year later, were best remedied in terms of the individual pathology of each patient:

> The Teacher who will honestly and assiduously apply himself to his calling, has quite as much occasion to reflect and to study, as the Pupil. He will find himself at the commencement of his career in the situation of a young Physician, who, after long study will still often be embarrassed at the bed-side of the sick. He must observe the character and capabilities of his Pupils, and act with them accordingly. He must by diligent practice cultivate more and more his [the Pupil's] own style of playing.[70]

These requirements demonstrated the extent to which teaching had moved from the goal of skills acquisition to such antimethods as would "normalize" students in the mode of the new health sciences. Another first-rate pupil of Czerny, Theodor Leschetizky famously toed the Lisztian line when he replied to a query from a friend

in the United States in the following terms: "I have no technical method. . . . How is it possible one should have them? One pupil needs this, another that; the hand of each differs; the brain of each differs. There can be no rule. I am a doctor to whom my pupils come as patients to be cured of their musical ailments, and the remedy must vary in each case."[71] The duty of piano teachers, in other words, was to care for body and soul in ways that went beyond petty questions of material contingency.

BEYOND HANDS

Liszt's ideological triumph was sealed on 16 April 1832, when, at the height of his "makeover" struggles, he somehow managed to get through an important private performance of Carl Maria von Weber's *Konzertstück,* op. 79, despite a severely dislocated finger.[72] The story goes that his right thumb had been so badly injured while practicing that Liszt initially believed it broken. The whole event was a triumph of the will: "La divine Thérèse," indefatigable hostess for the occasion, refused to discontinue concert giving because of such trifling matters as cholera or revolution. Hers, indeed, was a premier salon in Paris, located within the high walls of the Austro-Hungarian embassy, on rue Saint-Dominique in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. This elite venue guarded its political conservatism jealously; the Count and Countess Antoine Apponyi (in defiance of circumstance) still refused to recognize titles bestowed during the Empire.

Liszt was no less defiant in his 1832 performance: the journal of Thérèse's son recorded how, in the section where he would have felt the most pain, at the climactic cadenza before the return of the theme, the pianist replaced Weber's glissando with a rapid double-octave run up the keyboard. "He is especially amazing in a passage, written entirely in octaves, which he plays with such rapidity and such force that the hands seem to multiply. It was impossible to follow with my eyes their rapid, inconceivable motions; they flew from one end of the piano to the other."[73] Dana Gooley interprets Apponyi's words to mean that Liszt improvised a chromatic scale at this point of thematic reentry, with "hands in alternating octaves" in patented style, "the constant repositioning of the hand between white and black keys, combin[ing] with the high velocity [to] create a dizzying visual effect." The audience, in other words, would have seen fingers disappearing in a blur.[74]

Many years later, in 1875, Count Apponyi's great-nephew Albert—before he became a Hungarian nationalist politician—reported a similar instance in which Liszt's hands vanished into insignificance. In this case the virtuoso was obliged to get through Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto, op. 73, in Budapest, Hans Richter conducting, without the use of the third finger on his right hand.

> On the morning [of the concert] . . . to our dismay, we found [Liszt] with the third finger of his right hand bound up. "Yes," he said smiling, "as you see, I have cut myself."

> We thought there would be no concert now, and asked the Master's opinion. "Why," he answered, "of course I shall play tonight!" "And your bad finger?" "Oh, I shall have to do without it" was all his reply.
>
> That evening, he actually played the E-flat Major Concerto without using the third finger of his right hand, and not a soul detected it! Such was Liszt, the pianist. He played no less wonderfully than on the previous day.[75]

Such "beyond the hand" anecdotes were commonly told, lest we be tempted to think that they were only the effect of some strange quirk in the Apponyi family.

On 12 June 1841, to cite an English report, Liszt appeared for one of his marathon self-styled "recitals" in front of a packed audience at London's Willis's Rooms. Less than two weeks earlier, as everyone knew, he had suffered a serious coach accident while returning from dinner with German soprano Sophie Loewe and Austro-Hungarian diplomat Philipp von Neumann.[76] The horses bolted; the cab overturned; Liszt was dashed to the ground. The incident caused a "contusion" on his head, put his arm in a sling, and—most seriously—sprained his left wrist. Leeches were applied. "In spite of a weakness in the left hand, which, with anyone else would have amounted to disqualification," the *Athenaeum* reported of the recital, "his performance left all other pianoforte performance far behind it."[77] According to the *Times,* the "laurelled conqueror" might have been impressive in the three-stave "il canto espressivo ed appassionata assai" of *Fantaisie sur des motifs favoris de l'opéra La sonnambula* (S393), the left-hand thumb singing Elvino's despairing "Tutto è sciolto." But he truly shone at the appearance of the final joyous melody of the opera, "Ah! non giunge." Here Liszt trumped Thalberg's three-hand trick—sprained wrist and all—by mashing up two operatic themes, the celebratory finale and the viciously twisted cabaletta following Elvino's previous cantabile (where he confronts Amina for wrecking his life). "The most extraordinary [tour de force] was a variation, in which the theme and an accompaniment were distinctly heard in the middle octaves of the instrument while a brilliant trill *[sic]* in the treble and a powerful bass were kept up, thus producing all the effect of four hands."[78]

Three years later, still in metadigital mode, Liszt played his own piano version of Bach's A-minor Prelude and Fugue for organ, BWV 543 (S462/1) for the Montpellier artist, geologist, archaeologist, early music collector, organist, and Bach fanatic Jean-Joseph-Bonaventure Laurens. The difficulty of the transcription failed to prevent the enjoyment of a good cigar, apparently in the nonchalant keyboard-playing style of *opéra-comique* composer André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry.[79] Laurens's younger brother, Jules, remembered the conversation thus:

> "How do you want me to play it?"
> "How? But . . . the way it ought to be played."

> "Here it is, to start with, as the author must have understood it, played it himself, or intended it to be played."
>
> And Liszt played. And it was admirable, the perfection itself of the classical style exactly in conformity with the original.
>
> "Here it is a second time, as I feel it, with a slightly more picturesque movement, a more modern style and the effects demanded by an improved instrument." And it was, with these nuances, different . . . but no less admirable.
>
> "Finally, a third time, here it is the way I would play it for the public—to astonish, as a charlatan." And, lighting a cigar which passed at moments between his lips to his fingers, executing with his ten fingers the part written for the organ pedals, and indulging in other *tours de force* and prestidigitation, he was prodigious, incredible, fabulous, and received gratefully with enthusiasm.[80]

Such "cigar" or "missing finger" stunts became ubiquitous. Berthold Kellermann, one of Liszt's latter-day acolytes (a pupil from 1873 to 1878), recalled how they had once attended an organ recital together. His master's favorite Bach Fugue for organ in G minor, BWV 542/2 (which Liszt published in piano transcription along with BWV 543 in 1852) was heard: "An organist who lacked the third finger of his right hand once gave a recital in a church, the chief item being Bach's great Fugue in G Minor. Liszt, the greatest player and connoisseur of Bach, said to me when the church was emptied: 'Kellermann, that missing middle finger trick I can do too. Look!' And before my eyes he played this difficult fugue while in *both* hands stretching out and avoiding the use of the middle finger."[81]

Liszt apparently cared little for playing Bach fugues and the "Emperor" Concerto with less than the full complement of fingers. His official biographer, Lina Ramann, remembered a conversation in October 1876 in which she dropped the name of Louis Böhner, E. T. A. Hoffmann's model for Kapellmeister Kreisler, the otherwise forgettable German composer-organist who had performed a fugue for her despite two lame fingers: "[Liszt] answered nothing; but with a certain tension of the muscles of the face, he seated himself at the piano and began to play a difficult fugue by Bach, with *three fingers* of each hand. The tension soon yielded to an evident satisfaction: he had tried if he could do anything similar, and having succeeded, he left off playing."[82] Another anecdote involved a charity concert for the Beethoven monument in Vienna on 16 March 1877. On the morning of the composer's half-century commemoration, Liszt apparently cut a finger while shaving. (The composer asserted the truth of this incident later in a letter to August Göllerich.) Ramann wrote:

> A short time after this [three-finger] incident, Liszt had to learn that he could help himself with four fingers, even in long pieces of music, and that without the slightest prejudice to his execution. He had hurt the second finger of the left hand just at the time that he performed in public, at Vienna, Beethoven's Concerto in E Flat major, and his fantasia for choir, for the benefit of the Vienna Beethoven fund. This was in

> March 1877, and though an old man of sixty-six, he played with a power and beauty that left everything behind, and no one perceived that all the parts for the left hand were executed without the second finger.[83]

Here again was proof of how little Liszt's hands mattered, how he lived beyond them, and how much they served art.

TOUCH, DON'T LOOK!

It seems disappointing to end this chapter by concluding that piano music cannot be played without hands, though this banal point seems to need iteration. The story of Liszt's long-suffering hands would be only mildly amusing, of course, were it not that twenty-first-century keyboard pedagogy and practice *tout court* is still so in thrall to the fiction, originally promulgated in relation to Liszt, that pianists must work beyond their hands. A whole raft of institutions, conservatories, music teachers, and even academic scholarship has long been devoted to this faintly ridiculous idea: that hands have little to do with pianistic expression, interpretation, or "the music itself."

Alan Walker perpetuates the old metapianism when he writes that "the last thing the supreme master of the keyboard was concerned with was the physical problems associated with the instrument."[84] The master would have been even more delighted with true believer Pauline Pocknell, who wrote, "Liszt well knew the source of exceptional musical performance on a keyboard instrument: it lay in the brain; it had nothing to do with lucky inheritance of a particular hand type. . . . He knew that hand dimensions were immaterial: true musically sensitive natures would adapt their technique to their own unique bodily structure in order to produce, somehow or another, beautiful sound as conceived in the mind."[85] Proclamations like this come dangerously close to implying that hands play no part in music making. Recall the words of the Viennese critic Heinrich Adami, in the *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung* of 5 May 1838, reviewing a 2 May midweek concert in Vienna's Vereinssaale: "Just as Lessing declared that Raphael would have become the greatest painter even had he come into the world without hands, so equally might this be said of Liszt as a pianist."[86]

The impulse to disavow handedness is, to be blunt, pure romantic mystification, just as any attempt to sanctify or deny the partisanship, possession, bias, or worldliness of one's actions is always already political. At a key moment in the emergence of the familiar idealist conceit of Art-Religion or Music-as-Literature, Liszt (and others) began to experience hands less as instruments of action than as creatures belonging to nature—relational, uncanny, occult, corrupting, even criminal. Operating at the threshold of the absolute, their very presence threatened not only the purity of the music but the truth of expression itself. Thus the shame of making a

spectacle of one's hands; thus the Liszt-inspired practice of looking away from hands—reading "invisible literature" at the keyboard; thus the new, secretive, machine-operated mode of criminal execution adopted for parricides in Paris.

The plaster casts or molds of Liszt's hands now littering music museums in Europe (at least ten impressions were made during his lifetime) are eerie for these reasons, not because we have always been squeamish about the fact of our own handedness. The sight of a pianist's hands was just as nerve-racking for Liszt's contemporaries as it is for his disciples today. Amy Fay, one of the maestro's groupies in the 1870s, could observe that "[Liszt's] whole appearance and manner have a sort of Jesuitical elegance and ease." But then, with some unease, she continued, "His hands are very narrow, with long and slender fingers that look as if they had twice as many joints as other people's. They are so flexible and supple that it makes you nervous to look at them."[87] Camille Saint-Saëns was no less unsettled: "The fingers of Liszt were not human fingers."[88] American journalist Anne Hampton Brewster shone light into the gloom in 1878 when she performed a reading (in devilish detail) of one of his formless hands:

> It is a mixed [hand]; that is, the fingers are varied, some are round, some square and some flat or spatula; this is the true hand of an artist, for it betokens form and idea. The palm is covered with rays, betraying that his life has been an agitated, eventful one, full of passion and emotion—but the philosophic and material noeuds, or knots, on the Apollo and Mercury fingers, the logic and will on that wonderful long thumb, which extends beyond the middle joint of the forefinger shows how this remarkable man has been able to conquer instincts and govern temperament. . . . The Jupiter [forefinger] and Saturn [middle finger] are square; the ring, or Apollo, and little or Mercury fingers are spatula, flat and broad. The second phalange of the Jupiter finger is longer than the first. . . . The Saturn finger is full of knots. There is a wart on the Apollo finger of the right hand. The force of the little finger on both hands is tremendous; the knuckle seems as if made of iron.[89]

Liszt's hands were, in other words, diabolical. You could look, particularly if you had gained access to his inner circle, but it was better—or more righteous—to pretend you had not.

THE HAND WRITES ON

All this squeamishness has been lost in the recent musicological obsession with looking and spectacle in Liszt. The model for this style of scholarship traces back to Robert Schumann, who penned these all-too-famous words after an 1840 concert in Dresden:

> I had heard him before; but an artist is a different person in the presence of the public compared with what he appears in the presence of a few. The fine open space, the

> glitter of light, the elegantly-dressed audience—all this elevates the frame of mind in giver and receiver. And now the demon's power began to awake; he first played with the public as if to try it, then gave it something more profound, until every single member was enveloped in his art; and then the whole mass began to rise and fall precisely as he willed it. . . . He must be heard—and also seen; for if Liszt played behind the scenes, a great deal of the poetry of his playing would be lost.[90]

Recent musicology has enjoyed rehearsing Schumann's backhanded compliment, this idea that the showman-virtuoso needed to be seen in order to be understood, as if Liszt were somehow special in this regard, as if looking had not been important to all music since time immemorial. At issue here are the supposedly hyperbolic body movements that Liszt brought to keyboard performance in the 1830s: his swaying, extravagant gestures before the instrument, his "expressive" facial features, and his "musical" stage persona.

Liszt scholarship seems unusually concerned with coding the visual as somehow abnormal. The very detail with which his life story has been wrenched from the past in recent biographical writings (my depiction of 1832 included) seems to derive in part from this compulsion to recover a sense of liveness, to reconstruct not only his aural but also his visual presence. As such, armed with not-altogether-unexaggerated nineteenth-century caricatures of the performer, recent scholarship has unmasked the virtuoso's supposedly excessive bodily movements as part of some kind of entrepreneurial strategy to manipulate "mass" markets, advertise "the Liszt brand," make money, and mastermind his unfolding career. The campaign of self-advertising, in other words, has been exposed as the product of emerging cultural phenomena with loose labels such as "modernity," consumer culture, or celebrity culture. Ever the social chameleon, ever the commodity, Liszt might be anything you wanted: sex god, strategist, entrepreneur, careerist, Catholic priest, fake.

There are, however, other ways to read Liszt's choreographic bodily gestures. In their best sense, as even Schumann begrudgingly implied, they were poetic, conceived less in service of spectacle or visual display than as a way of managing the body—of elevating, idealizing, purifying, or spiritualizing keyboard performance. Whether calculated or not, the artist-prophet performed a reborn conception of human physiology, one that would accord with his newly evangelical vision of artistic purity and high-minded concepts of human function. This he achieved, apparently, by extending expressiveness to parts of the body that literally do not "do" anything in performance. Deflecting attention from the hands, he pioneered social practices that placed expression in what were considered higher or more expressive physiological areas, in the process opening the way to what we now call "modern" pianism.

In his last days Liszt's fingers belonged so little to their possessor—they had become so much a function of their environment, so formless, malleable, and

insignificant—that they took on the substance to which they had become best attuned. The old digits had apparently lost their natural coloring, or so, at least, was the observation of Mary King Waddington, wife of the prime minister of France. "It was very curious," she wrote after watching them "wander over the keys," break into a nocturne, and play a Hungarian march in 1879: "His fingers looked as if they were made of yellow ivory."[91]