

MUSIC IN THE WESTERN WORLD

A History in Documents

Selected and Annotated by

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perhaps, but also palms and laurels; we welcome him as a valiant warrior.

In every time there reigns a secret league of kindred spirits. Tighten the circle, you who belong to it, in order that the truth in art may shine forth more and more brightly, everywhere spreading joy and peace.

R. S.

Oliver Strunk (ed.), *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1950), 844-45. Reprinted by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., and Faber and Faber Ltd. Copyright © 1950 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Copyright renewed 1978 by Oliver Strunk.

104

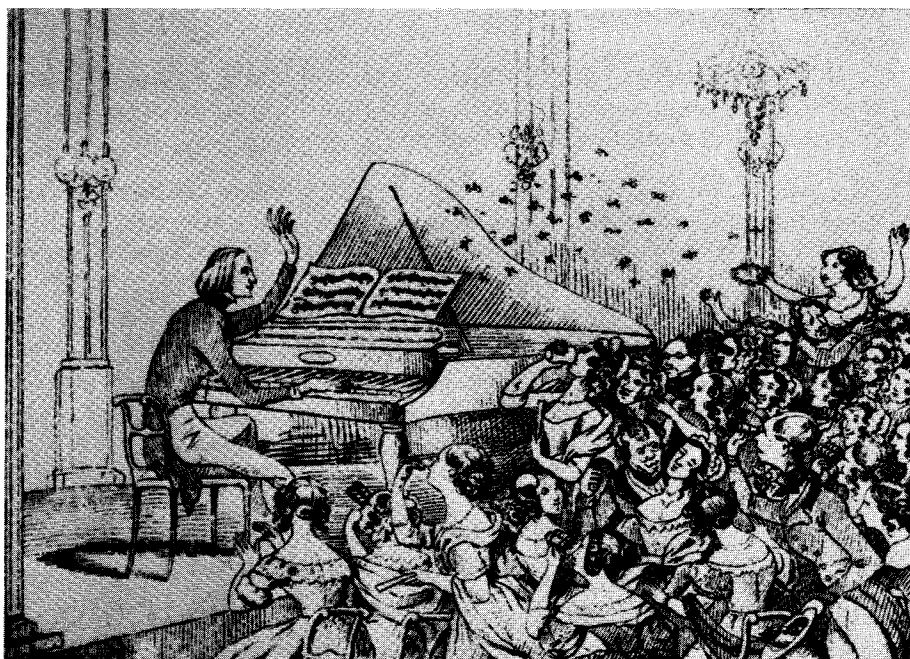
Liszt, the All-Conquering Pianist

Almost exactly ten years after Paganini emerged from obscurity by appearing in a series of concerts in Vienna, Liszt created a similar sensation in the Austrian capital and embarked on an equally memorable career as a traveling virtuoso. Here are excerpts from the report sent in by the Viennese correspondent of Germany's leading musical journal, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, published in May 1838.

Vienna, end of April.—Unusual events require an extraordinary report. The present one is prompted by the wholly unexpected arrival of the famous pianist Franz Liszt, whom Vienna had not seen since his 12th year and who, like a *Deus ex machina* [i.e., an unhoped-for savior], came to us quite suddenly from the slopes of the Apennines [he had spent the winter in Italy].

We have now heard him, the strange wonder, whom the superstition of past ages, possessed by the delusion that such things could never be done without the help of the Evil One, would undoubtedly have condemned without mercy to the stake—we have heard him, and seen him too, which, of course, makes a part of the affair. Just look at the pale, slender youth in his clothes that signal the nonconformist; the long, sleek, drooping hair, the thin arms, the small, delicately formed hands; the almost gloomy and yet childlike pleasant face—those features so strongly stamped and full of meaning, in this respect reminding one of Paganini, who, indeed, has been his model of hitherto undreamt-of virtuosity and technical brilliance from the very first moment he heard him and was swept away.

Liszt introduced himself with Weber's *Konzertstück* in F minor. Karl



Franz Liszt Exerts His Spell on the Ladies in the Audience. A caricature of the 1840s. (From the periodical *Berlin, wie es ist . . . und trinkt*, no. 14.)

Maria [von Weber] himself played us this beautiful and strongly conceived composition about twenty years ago; his hearers were indifferent if not cold. Several pianists of both sexes had ventured on it at different times [with no better success]. This notorious fact was not unknown to our worthy guest; but he wished, as he himself put it, to bring that glorious master's favorite child into honor among the Viennese. And it came to pass! No one imagined he was listening to the oft-heard piece; the notes, to be sure, were the same, perhaps not one more or less—yet how infinitely different! Through a quite personal method of fingering, in which the thumb assumes a wide variety of functions, through a technique cultivated to the point of perfection, through a touch which he is capable of shading through all conceivable degrees, from the softest breath to the most overwhelming thunderstorm, he brings forth the most stupendous effects; yes, even effects of detail which one would not think of expecting of the instrument. The introductory *Largo* was performed with melancholy pathos, with passionate feeling, speaking to the inmost heart; every note a complaint of the oppressed spirit, a sigh of the troubled, anguished soul. The tempo of the first and final allegros he urged on in such a manner that one trembled for the outcome—but how needlessly! For the pining David became a gigantic Goliath; and, to the contrary, his lavishly expended energies seemed steadily to augment,

and the flood of tones poured forth in one stream, yet never at the cost of intelligibility, to the last chord, with which were mingled cheers of acclamation that threatened never to end, and for which the expression "enthusiastic" is only an empty unmeaning sound. When, in the magnificent March, the orchestra gradually swelled to *fortissimo*, and the mighty one thundered in imperiously, penetrating the massed instruments victoriously—a tamer of the waves, to whom the watery element pays obeisance, here already the thunderous applause knew no bounds; and such a tribute of recognition must have affected the virtuoso deeply, accustomed though he was to homage [in France and England], for hot tears rolled down his cheeks.

The arrival of this phenomenon amongst pianists was so unexpected, and his stay is of so short duration, that the longing to hear and admire him is quite pardonable. And so, invitation upon invitation from the highest nobility and most distinguished families press and cross each other daily, nay hourly; and the modest, unassuming artist, doubly amiable by his obliging courtesy, which can refuse no one anything, is quite out of breath; at times, indeed, he would need to divide himself in two.

Who can doubt that this meteor has set in motion all the ready pens of the imperial city? [The painter Josef] Kriehuber has lithographed him to the life. But the most characteristic of his portraits was done by [Moritz] Saphir, who, to be sure, is not a professional musician, but a poet.

"Liszt," said he, "knows no rule, no form, no law; he creates them all himself! He remains an inexplicable phenomenon, a compound of such heterogeneous, strangely mixed materials, that an analysis would inevitably destroy what lends the highest charm, the individual enchantment: namely, the inscrutable secret of this chemical mixture of genial coquetry and childlike simplicity, of whimsy and divine nobleness.

"After the concert, he stands there like a conqueror on the field of battle, like a hero in the lists; vanquished pianos lie about him, broken strings flutter as trophies and flags of truce, frightened instruments flee in their terror into distant corners, the hearers look at each other in mute astonishment as after a storm from a clear sky, as after thunder and lightning mingled with a shower of blossoms and buds and dazzling rainbows; and he the Prometheus, who creates a form from every note, a magnetizer who conjures the electric fluid from every key, a gnome, an amiable monster, who now treats his beloved, the piano, tenderly, then tyrannically; caresses, pouts, scolds, strikes, drags by the hair, and then, all the more fervently, with all the fire and glow of love, throws his arms around her with a shout, and away with her through all space; he stands there, bowing his head, leaning languidly on a chair, with a strange smile, like an exclamation mark after the outburst of universal admiration: this is Franz Liszt!"