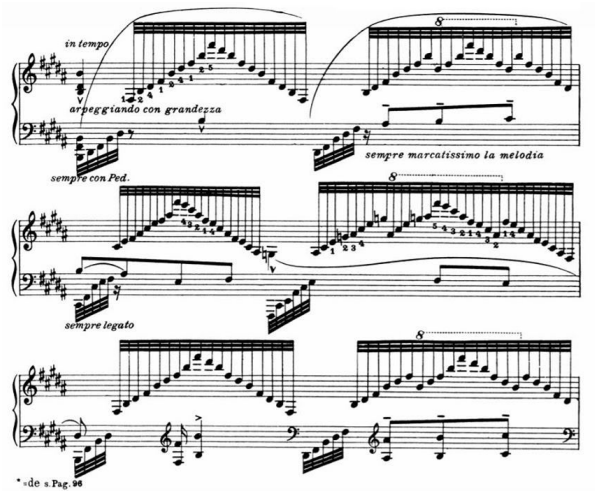
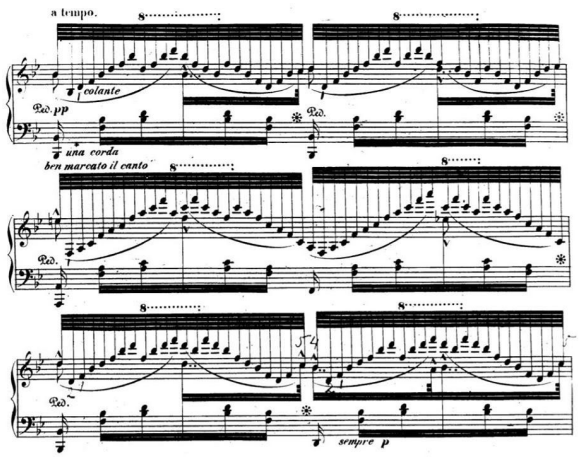
LISZT, THALBERG, AND THUMBS

Near the climactic ending of Sigismond Thalberg *Moïse Fantasy*, and around twelve minutes into Franz Liszt's *Norma Fantasy*, two passages occur which sound, even on an initial listen, distinctly similar; when combined with a copy of the score, it seems almost humorously egregious the degree to which Liszt lifted an exact passage's technical makeup (Thalberg's *Moïse* predates Liszt's composition by two years), and simply swapped out the original Rossini melody for one by Bellini.



Ex. 1 | Franz Liszt, *Réminiscences de Norma, S.394,* mm.



Ex. 2 | Sigismond Thalberg, *Fantasia on Rossini's "Moses," Op.33*

Liszt's: https://youtu.be/XEkDsUrmFC4?t=11m47s

Thalberg's: https://youtu.be/JlpBmEhUyLI?t=12m2s

In tandem, we can identify a rough set of guidelines, or a blueprint, used to achieve this effect: (1) an arpeggiated *upper* harmonic layer, played mostly with the **right hand**, (2) a melodic *middle* singing layer, played mostly with **alternating thumbs** of both hands, and (3), a low bass

strike, played on downbeats, denoting the start of each proceeding arpeggiated pattern, played with the **left hand**.

It has been written ad nauseum the degree (or lack thereof) to which this "effect" shaped the treatment of the piano as an instrument, as well as the degree this "effect" seems to have chagrined Liszt himself; Carl Friedrich Weitzmann, a German music theorist, wrote in his *Geschichte des Klavierspiels* of this "three-hand effect," stating that Thalberg's "bravura pieces, fantasies on melodies from Rossini's Mosè and La donna del lago, on motifs from Bellini's Norma and on Russian folk-songs, became extraordinarily popular through his own, brilliant execution; however, they treat their subjects always in one and the same way, [namely] ... to let the tones of a melody be played in the medium octave of the keyboard now by the thumb of the right, now of the left hand, while the rest of the fingers are executing arpeggios filling the whole range of the keyboard."[1] Liszt, in response to claims that Thalberg created a new style of piano playing, opined, "Posing M. Thalberg as representative of a new school! Apparently the school of arpeggios and thumb-melodies? Who would admit that this was a school, and even a new school? Arpeggios and thumbs-melodies have been played before M. Thalberg, and they will be played after M. Thalberg again."[2]

Perhaps on a cursory impression, neither Liszt nor Weitzmann are incorrect; the technique itself relies on a simple trick. While audiences at the time may have been astounded by the mysterious appearance of a melody line while both right and left hands are kept busy with arpeggios and bass harmonies, the audiences of today are familiar enough with this technique that it no longer

[1] Weitzmann, *Geschichte des Klavierspiels,* 138.
[2] Liszt, *Revue et Gazette musicale,* May 14, 1837.

bears the same novelty nor excitement as before. Why then, if in Liszt's views, the technique is neither original nor innovative, does he do such a shoddy job of replicating it?

Liszt's shortcomings are evident immediately: as seen in **ex. 1**, he fails to introduce a harmonic motif to back up the arpeggio and melody lines. Thalberg instead keeps the left hand busy in **ex. 2** by having it play broken chords in-between each bass hit, where Liszt simply lets the hand waver without a task. Thalberg also ingeniously infuses part of the melody line into the fourth and fifth fingers of the right hand in harmony shifts, as seen in the middle of the last line of **ex. 2**, where, for Liszt, the melody must wait for the arpeggios to "get going" before continuing; in effect, Thalberg's passage truly sounds like a passage played with three hands, where Liszt's sounds very clearly as a passage with one arpeggio line, and one vocal line, and it is in this failure to truly replicate Thalberg's effect that we may analyze and comprehend two main contributions Thalberg gave to the realm of piano composition, and to the world of music as a whole.

The almost universal obscurity of Thalberg is at once *understandable* and *peculiar*. It is *understandable* in that modern musicologists such as Kathleen Richards and Konrad Wolff fail to mention him at all, while many more like Walter Georgii say very little; even when a brief biography is present, it is often negative, as when Willi Apel describes him as a "conventional drawing-room composer of the early 19th Century."[3] It is *peculiar* in that just about every musical correspondence and personal memoir from the 19th century mentions Thalberg. How then did he fall so out-of-favour, and what made him so popular?

Sigismond Thalberg was born in Pâquis, near Geneva, Switzerland, on the 8th of January, 1812. Though his birth certificate testifies that his parents were Joseph Thalberg and Fortunée Stein,

[3] Apel, *Masters of the Keyboard,* 252.

new evidence suggests that Thalberg might have been the illegitimate son of Prince Franz Josef Johann Dietrichstein-Proskau-Leslie, and the Baroness Julie d'Eyb Bidescuty von Wetzlar.[4] Unfortunately, as with his parentage, very little is known of Thalberg's upbringing; between the ages of six and fourteen, Thalberg received tutoring in musical rudiments from a professor at the Vienna Conservatory, as well as tutoring in theory and composition with Simon Sechter, a Viennese composer who went on to instruct Anton Bruckner. As for his piano instructions, his primary teacher was none other than Johann Nepomuk Hummel, though he did study with Ignaz Moscheles in London in 1826 (in a letter to Mendelssohn, Moscheles confessed that he felt he had nothing left to teach Thalberg, then only fourteen years old.)[5]

What is of particular interest is his childhood, which stands in stark contrast to those of Mozart and Liszt; although Thalberg was demonstrably a child prodigy, he refrained from touring aside from occasional performances at soirées in various homes of members of the Viennese elite. While studying with Moscheles in London, he made his first public appearance on the 17th of May, 1826,[6] and conducted a formal tour of Germany and England at age eighteen, in 1830. The period between this tour and Thalberg's arrival in Paris in 1835 was relatively quiet, though this was to drastically change with his Parisian debut in January, 1826. Little more needs to be said than a review published of his astonishing performance:

> Moscheles, Kalkbrenner, Chopin, Liszt and Herz are and will always be for me great artists, but Thalberg is the creator of a new art which I do not know how to compare to anything that existed before him …Thalberg is not only the premier pianist of the world, he is also an extremely distinguished composer.[7]

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[4] Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years,* 232.
[5] Mendelssohn, *Briefe an Moscheles,* 139.
[6] Hitchcock, *The Sigismund Thalberg Society Newsletter,* Vol. 2, No. 2 (1991): 8.
[7] Hominick, *Thalberg*, 9.

It is here that we part ways for a time from Thalberg's historical background and begin an analysis into the first of Thalberg's largest achievements in the realm of piano: that of technical innovation within the formation of the early 19th century virtuoso.

The influences of any composer's pieces is perhaps best observed in its influence on compositions proceeding their own, in the same way that an influential novel can be seen as clear inspiration for the creation of similar proceeding texts. Mendelssohn was a champion and admirer of Thalberg since they met, evidenced by a letter he sent Fanny immediately after hearing him in concert.[8] In an account from one of Mendelssohn's students, we can see the profound and instantaneous influence Thalberg had on Mendelssohn:

> We were a trio, and after dinner Mendelssohn asked Thalberg if he had written anything new, whereupon Thalberg sat down to the piano and played his Fantasia from the "Sonnambula" … At the close there are several runs of Chromatique Octaves, which at that time had not previously heard, and of which peculiar passages Thalberg was undoubtedly the inventor. Mendelssohn was much struck with the novel effect produced, and greatly admired its ingenuity … he told me to be with him the next afternoon at 2 o'clock. When I arrived at his study door I heard him playing to himself, and practising continually this passage which had so struck him the previous day. I waited for at least half an hour listening in wonderment to the facility with which he applied his own thoughts to the cleverness of Thalberg's mechanism, and then went into the room. He laughed and said: "Listen to this, is it not almost like Thalberg?"[9]

We can see Mendelssohn employing a similar three-hand effect as Thalberg in his *Prelude in E Minor*, as well as some *Songs Without Words* (note the placement of the melody at the start of each phrase, which Hitchcock describes as "Mendelssohn attempt[ing] Thalberg's style in more restrained fashion")[10]:

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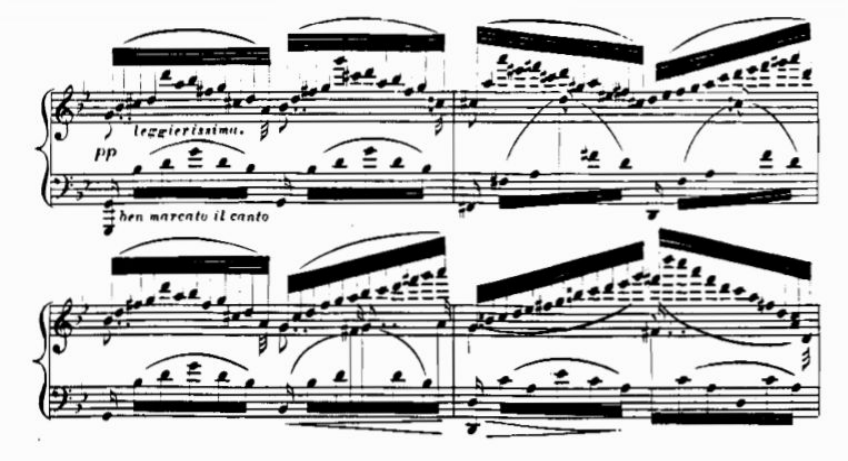
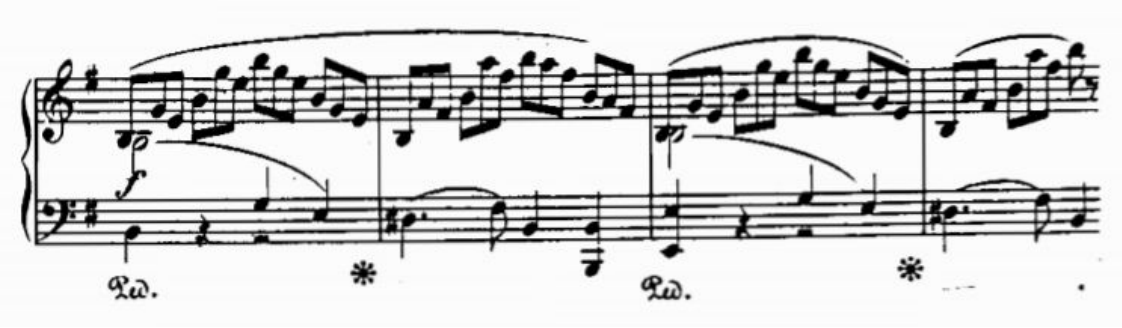
[8] Mendelssohn, *Briefwechsel mit Fanny*, 294.
[9] Horsley, *Reminiscences of Mendelssohn*, 355.
[10] Hitchcock, "Sigismund Thalberg," *Piano Quarterly* No. 77 (1971): 13.

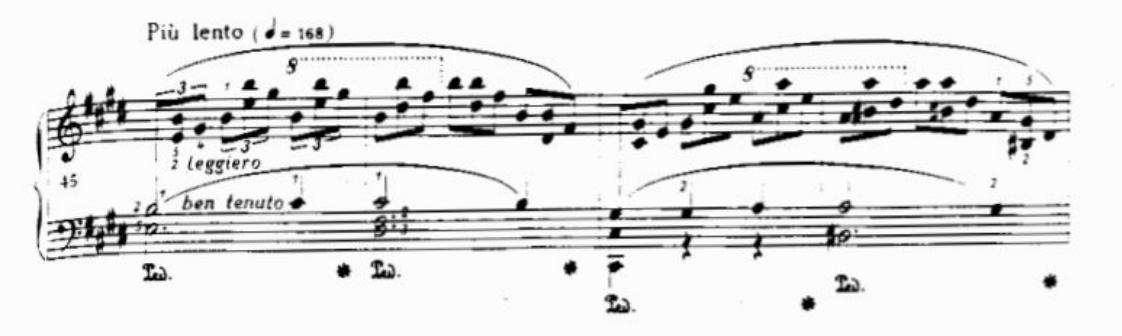


Ex. 3 | S. Thalberg, *Moses Fantasy,* mm. 262-26.

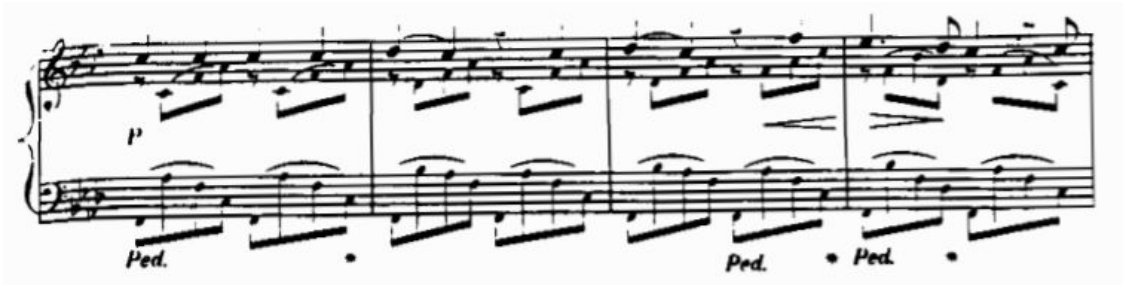


Ex. 4 | F. Mendelssohn, *Prelude in E minor, WoO,* mm. 9-12.

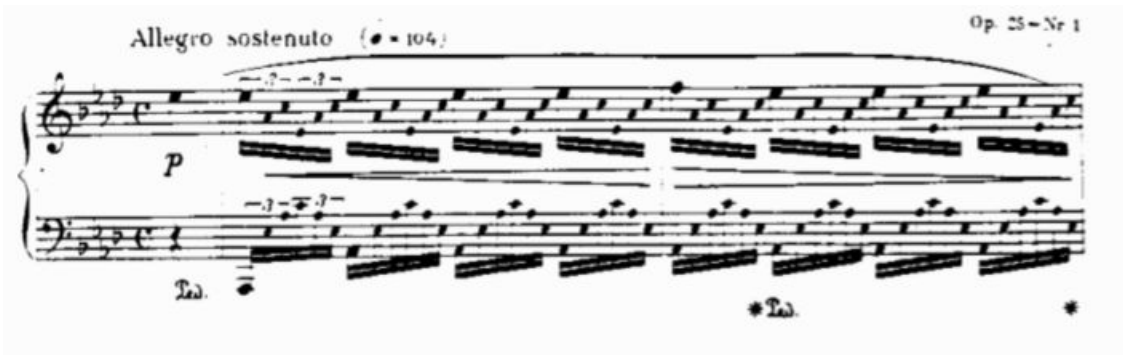
Chopin too exhibits many instances of Thalberg-like piano writing:



Ex. 5 | F. Chopin, *Etude in E minor, Op. 25 No. 5,* mm. 45-48.



Ex. 6 | S. Thalberg, "Tre Giorni: Air de Pergolesi" from *The Art of Singing on the Pianoforte*, *Op. 70,* mm. 18-21.



Ex. 7 | F. Chopin, *Etude n A-Flat Major, Op. 25 No. 1,* mm. 1-2.

Here presents a fortuitous time to highlight an oversight of Liszt's claim, quoted earlier, concerning the implementation of Thalberg's "three-hand technique," and why exactly his claim misses the larger picture. Lowenthal breaks down a set of "Thalberg Principles"[11] which precipitate the "three-hand effect," this term itself really describing a way of harmonically and technically shaping a passage, in the same way Alberti bass precipitates Mozart's innovations in its usage:

1. Thalberg's piano writing is consistently contrapuntal in nature
2. Each contrapuntal component is isolated within its own dynamic terrace
3. The leading melody is almost always internal

[11] Lowenthal, *The Duel Between Liszt and Thalberg.*

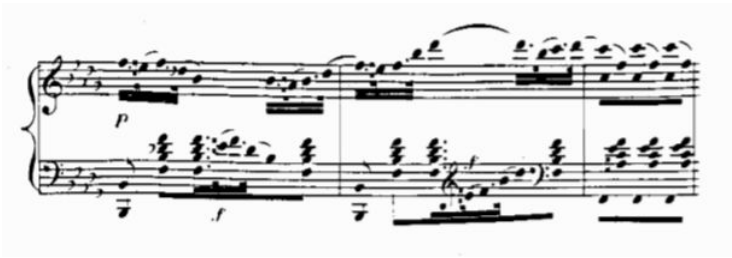
a. It is sometimes divided between the hands

b. It is often in the middle of the keyboard, the piano's richest cantabile register

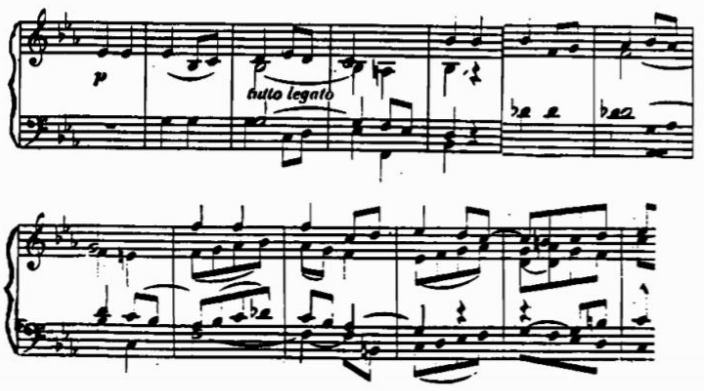
c. It is often played with the strongest fingers of each hand: the thumbs

4. The pedal is often required to connect and sustain melodic tones so that the hands are liberated to dash elsewhere to play counterpoints or figurations

The following examples exhibit these "Thalberg Principles" in various mind-boggling passages, all of them unique, and none of them predicated on Liszt's concept of Thalberg relying solely on never-ending arpeggios[12]:

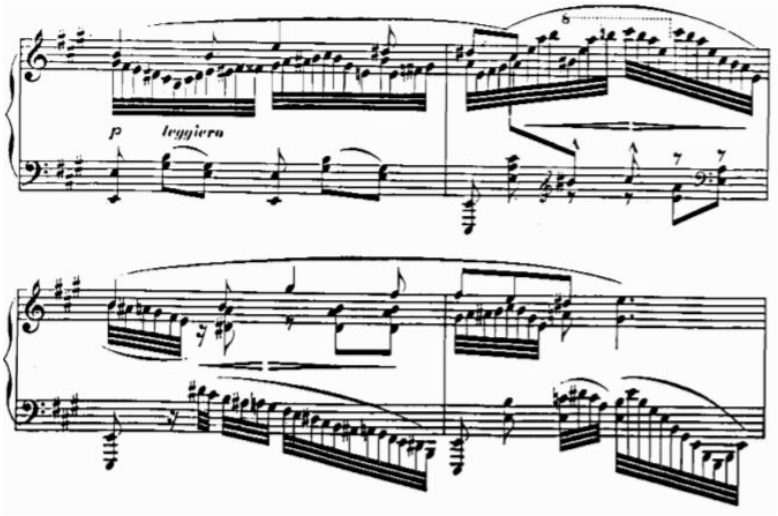


Ex. 8 | S. Thalberg, *Moses Fantasy,* mm. 190-192. (Fugato).



Ex. 9 | S. Thalberg, *Fantasy on Meyerbeer's "Les Huguenots," Op. 20,* mm. 24-36. (Fugato).

[12] Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt*, 24.



Ex. 10 | S. Thalberg, *Fantasy on Donizetti's "Don Pasquale," Op. 67,* mm. 170-171. (Scale passages with soprano melody).

Ex. 11 | S. Thalberg, *Fantasy on Donizetti's "Don Pasquale,"* mm. 179-185. (Extended trills).

It can therefore be stated with objective authority that Thalberg definitively shaped certain piano techniques now ubiquitous in repertoire. This is plainly seen in the development of prominent composer's styles, such as Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Liszt, who, prior to Thalberg, did not employ these textures and effects. The influence does not end there— Raymond Lowenthal argues that Thalberg's influence is clearly seen in Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 3* in the lyrical E-Major theme of its first movement, and in the slow movement of Samuel Barber's *Concerto.*[13] Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy both utilized the Thalberg's "three-hand technique," as it was made a staple of the

[13] Lowenthal, *The Duel Between Liszt and Thalberg.*

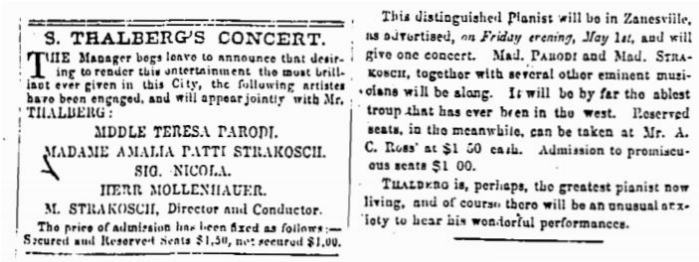
Impressionist School and permeated much of its piano output. It would therefore be far less than as stretch to say that "the piano playing of the present day, to tell the truth, consists only of Thalberg simple, Thalberg amended, and Thalberg exaggerated; scratch what is written for the piano, and you will find Thalberg."[14]

We now return to the more historical side to examine the second of Thalberg's largest achievements in the realm of piano: his historic touring after 1850, and how it shaped the public's appreciation for classical music. Though the first half of this decade remained relatively quiet (he premiered his first opera which was greeted with little enthusiasm, and continued his usual slew of touring, without expansion nor increase in frequency), it was his plan to turn to North America in late 1856 that truly cemented his influence in the world of piano, and the world of music as a whole. It is true that other prominent virtuosos toured North America and were immensely successful; de Meyer in 1845, Herz in 1846, and Richard Hoffmann in 1847 all left impressions on the American public, though these impressions were all but wiped out with Thalberg's arrival.

It is difficult to imagine the kind of celebrity Thalberg became after his North American debut. As an introductory "wow-factor" fact, he made an average of $500 a concert,[15] which, calculated with inflation is around $13,000. Coupled with the fact that he played five or six concerts a week over a span of eight months, sometimes even giving three concerts *a day,* one can begin to conceive of the superhuman-esque image close to what Thalberg was at his apex. His 1856-57 season commenced with concerts, matinees, and school recitals throughout Boston and New York City, before heading west for eleven weeks, totalling thirty cities in ten states in both the United States and Canada; 52 evening concerts, five matinees, and two concerts for schools were

[14] Suttoni, "Piano and Opera," (PhD diss., New York University, 1973): 207.
[15] Lott, *From Paris to Peoria*, 159.

documented.[16] Of particular interest is that many smaller hubs universally ignored by previous touring artists, such as cities in West Virginia and Iowa, were, in fact, visited by Thalberg.



S. THALBERG'S CONCERT.

THE Manager begs leave to announce that desiring to render this entertainment the most brilliant ever given in this City, the following artistes have been engaged, and will appear jointly with Mr. THALBERG:

MDDLE TERESA PARODI.
MADAME AMALIA PATTI STRAKOSCH.
SIG. NICOLA.
HERR MOLLENHAUER.
M. STRAKOSCH, Director and Conductor.

The price of admission has been fixed as follows:—Secured and Reserved Seats $1,50, not secured $1,00.

This distinguished Pianist will be in Zanesville, as advertised, *on Friday evening, May 1st*, and will give one concert. Mad. PARODI and Mad. STRAKOSCH, together with several other eminent musicians will be along. It will be by far the ablest troup that has ever been in the west. Reserved seats, in the meanwhile, can be taken at Mr. A. C. Ross' at $1 50 each. Admission to promiscuous seats $1 00.

THALBERG is, perhaps, the greatest pianist now living, and of course there will be an unusual anxiety to hear his wonderful performances.

Ex. 12 | Advertisement for Thalberg's concert in Zanesville, Ohio. Zanesville City Times, April 25, 1857.

The subsequent tour of 1857-58 saw even further travel, with even more concerts. It covered 24 cities total, with 18 new cities, with Thalberg performing 53 concerts from January 1858 to March 1858. In total, over the course of his two seasons through 1858, he made at least 340 appearances throughout the United States and Canada, only bested later on by Ignace Paderewski.

The palpable memory he left on the American public is, too, evidenced by later arrivals of other virtuosos; it is clear the public appeal he captured when we recall that Thalberg earned $500 per concert (in addition to a guaranteed sum of $10,000 a month), and compare it to Rubinstein's arrival to the continent, receiving only $200 a concert, and Bülow even less, at barely $125. More significant than sheer numerical figures, or that Thalberg was undoubtedly the finest pianist to then visit the United States, or Canada, was that while in North America, he made "significant step[s] toward[s] performing the music of other composers."[17] The following is a partial list of works by other composers that Thalberg performed while on this concert circuit:

1. J.S. Bach:
    a. Preludes and Fugues in Cm and D

[16] Lott, "American Tours of Thalberg," (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1986): 340.
[17] Lott, *From Paris to Peoria,* 160.

2. Beethoven:
    a. Sonata in C, Op. 2, No. 3
    b. Sonata in C-sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 2
    c. Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37
    d. Concerto No. 4 in G, Op. 58
    e. Concerto No. 5 in E-flat, Op. 73
3. Chopin:
    a. Concerto in E minor, Op. 11
    b. Selected Mazurkas
    c. Scherzo in B minor, Op. 20
    d. Sonata in B-flat minor, Op. 35
    e. Polonaise in F-sharp minor, Op. 44
    f. Prelude in E-flat, Op. 28
    g. Waltz in C-sharp minor, Op. 64, No. 2
4. Mendelssohn:
    a. Selections from "Songs Without Words"
5. Mozart:
    a. Rondo in A minor, K. 511
    b. Concerto in D minor, K. 466

This is especially surprising when considering it was extremely uncommon for piano virtuosos of the day to perform anything other than works they wrote; when other works were programmed, they usually only made up a very small portion of the program. Even when Paderewski and Rachmaninov toured the United States, they played their music almost exclusively. For Thalberg, this was not the case.

Coupling this information with the state of the North American public remaining ignorant of what we now refer to as "standard repertoire," and we see that Thalberg made a conscious and important decision to introduce and usher in European musical traditions into North America. Thalberg even went so far as to ask Dr. Lowell Mason, father of musical training in American public schools, to allow him to "afford the pupils of the public schools … an opportunity to attend some of [his] concerts,"[18] so as to play for the youth, whose musical knowledge was undoubtedly scarce.

[18] Mikol, "The Influence of Sigismund Thalberg," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society,* Vol. 102, No. 5 (1958): 467.

The effects of this touring were manifold. Thalberg both showed the American public what spectacular feats were able to be achieved on the piano, as well as expanded the market for classical performances to enormous possibilities. He exposed the American public to the staples of European music, especially that of Mozart and Beethoven, and helped sow seeds for their inevitable place within the musical canon in North America. Perhaps most importantly, he seemed to have a genuine care for his popularity and status, and used this popularity—precipitated by his formidable technique and new technical innovations in piano part writing—to not self-aggrandize his image and seek a faux-indomitable position within the world of piano virtuosos, but to attempt to share and spread the music which he knew was paramountly important. We must remember that even for the titans Paderewski and Rachmaninov, "performing the Baroque and Classical literature [while touring America] did not suit their purpose and it was usually not expected of them,"[19] that Thalberg deliberately programmed these other works for a purpose unrelated to increasing his fame.

And now, we return again to the initiating question posed: if Liszt thought Thalberg's "three-hand effect" easy to replicate, why was he, one of the greatest composers for the keyboard, unable to do so? The answer, of course, is that the effect is not so simple, that it remains one of the many technical innovations Thalberg pioneered for the instrument, that it is not a simple effect unto itself but an implementation of a Thalbergian way of composing for the keyboard. It is through these innovations that Thalberg was able to create such a platform for himself, and through this platform he not only shared his own music, but important music still relatively unknown to a new audience. Even Liszt, in his later years, admitted to Thalberg's uncontestable significance to the world of piano: "'I have cribbed everything from you,'" he said, to Thalberg, after performing his

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[19] Hominick, "Thalberg, Forgotten Piano Virtuoso," (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1991): 40-41.

Norma Fantasy (**ex. 1**), to which Thalberg responded, "'Yes, there are Thalberg-passages included, which are indeed indecent.'"[20]

[20] Göllerich, *Liszt*, 184.

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