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Liszt at the Piano: The Impact of Iconography on mid-Nineteenth Century Musicology

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Abstract: By the time of his death in 1827, the image of Beethoven as we recognise him today was firmly fixed in the minds of his contemporaries, and the career of Liszt was beginning to flower into that of the virtuosic performer he would be recognised as by the end of the 1830s. By analysing the seminal artwork *Liszt at the Piano* of 1840 by Josef Danhauser, we can see how a seemingly unremarkable head-and-shoulders bust of Beethoven in fact holds the key to unlocking the layers of commentary on both Liszt and Beethoven beneath the surface of the image. Taking the analysis by Alessandra Comini as a starting point, this paper will look deeper into the subtle connections discernible between the protagonists of the picture. These reveal how the collective identities of the artist and his painted assembly contribute directly to Beethoven's already iconic status within music history around 1840 and reflect the reception of Liszt at this time. Set against the background of Romanticism predominant in the social and cultural contexts of the mid 1800s, it becomes apparent that it is no longer enough to look at a picture of a composer or performer in isolation to understand its impact on the construction of an overall identity. Each image must be viewed in relation to those that preceded and came after it to gain the maximum benefit from what it can tell us.

Keywords: Beethoven, Liszt, Danhauser, iconography, Comini, Romanticism

Throughout the annals of musicology, the discipline of iconography represents an often under-utilised feature of the overall understanding a composer's living or posthumous reception. The study of Beethoven iconography within the context of historical revisionism, specifically the transformation of Beethoven's visual identity from mere mortal to eternal deity within Music and Art, is one such area that deserves further consideration. At the time of his death in 1827 Beethoven's image as we recognise it today was firmly fixed in the minds of his contempo-

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raries, and as his musical language continued to inspire composers, so too did artists respond to the challenge of maintaining the "heroic" image firmly established during his lifetime. Yet the study of posthumous Beethoven iconography becomes more than just an issue of whether he is portrayed accurately. The composer's own role changed within visual art after the 1830s, as he was no longer depicted only in singular portraits, but also integrated into larger ensemble paintings comprising iconic figures of the time – hence the introduction of Liszt into this area of research.

The relationships between visual representations of Beethoven and their cultural context have remained largely unexplored since *The Changing Image of Beethoven: A Study in Mythmaking* by Alessandra Comini, published in 1987.[1] In this seminal work Comini examines Beethoven iconography in conjunction with contemporary verbal accounts to construct the composer's image via the process of mythmaking that can be associated with Beethoven art from during and beyond his lifetime. Whilst references to Beethoven depictions have not been absent from subsequent studies of his life and music, Comini's extensive analysis of the 'myth-makers' of Beethoven's legacy is the most thorough account of this subject to date. Although I do not approach the study of iconography from the same viewpoint as Comini, her work has formed a crucial basis for my own arguments on the construction of Beethoven's identity by examining specific images from our present-day perspective.

Early Beethoven images after 1827 reveal the progressive nature of the way in which his figure was represented, but 1840 proved to be the turning point with the composer's visual legacy beginning a more marked evolution as the diversity of depictions increased within the cultural ethos of the Romantic era. It is also the year in which Liszt quite literally enters the picture of Beethoven iconography, as one of the virtuoso's most recognised portraits places him in the company of Beethoven himself. Josef Danhauser's oil painting *Liszt at the Piano (Plate 1),* originally entitled *Ein Weihemoment Liszts* (Liszt's Moment of Consecration) in the *Wiener Zeitung* of 13 May 1840,[2] is described by Comini as 'one of the most fascinating images of Beethovenian Romanticism – à la Liszt.'[3] In this artwork the seemingly unremarkable Beethoven bust in fact holds the key to unlocking the subtle connections discernible between Liszt and Beethoven embedded in the picture; these in turn reveal how the collective identities of the artist and his painted assembly contribute directly to Beethoven's already iconic status and reflect Liszt's own reception at this time. Thus I will demonstrate the continued importance of such nineteenth-century artistic commemoration to our reception of figures such as Liszt and Beethoven in modern academia.

1. Alessandra Comini, *The Changing Image of Beethoven. A Study in Mythmaking* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1987).

2. The reviewer was I. F. Castelli, ibid., 207.

3. Ibid.

PLATE 1 Josef Danhauser, *Liszt at the Piano* (oil on wood, 1840)
Beethoven-Haus Bonn, B1838*

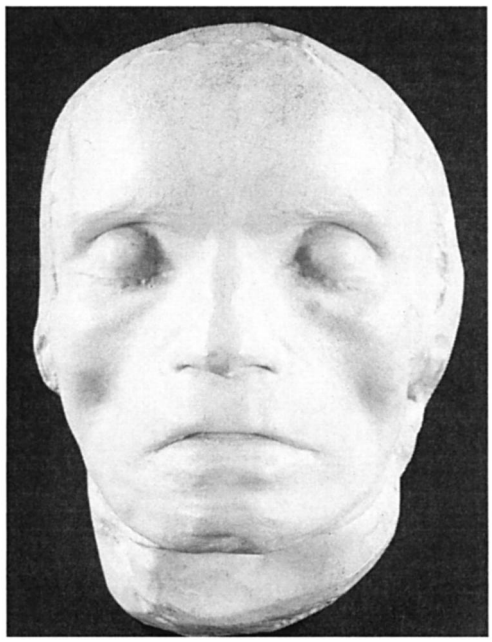
The painting *Liszt at the Piano* was produced by Josef Danhauser in response to a commission from piano-maker Conrad Graf after a successful concert series performed by Liszt between 19 November and 14 December 1839 in Vienna. Thus the theme of this painting is particularly apt as the virtuoso is literally 'consecrating' his moments at the piano, for the proceeds of all six of these gala concerts would be donated to the physical realisation of a permanent Beethoven memorial – which would eventually be unveiled in Bonn in 1845.[4]

In the lower left-hand corner of the painting is written a seemingly bland description, 'Im Auftrage Conr. Graf's zur Erinnerung an Liszt gemalt v. Danhauser 1840' (Commissioned by Conr. Graf in remembrance of Liszt painted by Danhauser 1840),[5] that apparently explains the nature and sentiments of the whole painting. Yet in reality, as with all works of art depicting Beethoven, many layers of meaning reside beneath the elegant surface vision of the picture.

To begin with, the base of the image is not canvas, but a panel of Conrad Graf's best and hardest sounding board wood presented by the piano-maker to Danhauser for the project.[6] This highlights immediately the symbolic atmosphere

* All images reproduced with kind permission from the Digital Archives of the Beethoven-Haus Bonn, Germany.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 208–209.
6. Ibid., 209.

PLATE 2 Josef Danhauser, Death Mask of Ludwig van Beethoven (1827)
Beethoven-Haus Bonn, P7

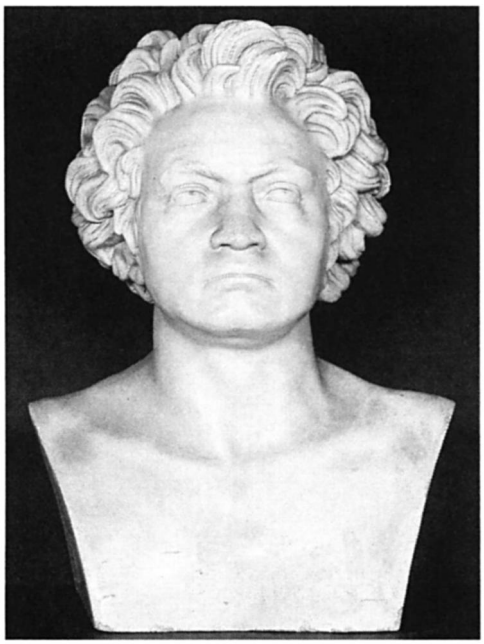


surrounding the entire image, as before we even begin to unravel the elements within, we learn that Liszt's art is not only being 'consecrated' at the piano in the depiction, but that this action is being presented on a material that could in fact have become part of a physical musical instrument itself. That Liszt and his virtuosic talent are a decisive driving force in the painting is therefore immediately confirmed, but Danhauser's own status must also be considered before Liszt can be established as the absolute figure in the image, as is suggested by the words in the left-hand corner.

Josef Danhauser's name is already recognisable within the overall context of Beethoven iconography, his most notable piece of work being the death mask taken from the composer's face in March 1827 *(Plate 2)*. Thus Danhauser was inextricably linked to the development of Beethoven's image after his lifetime, for from this mask he fashioned a life-sized plaster bust of Beethoven *(Plate 3)* that, according to Beethoven's brother Karl, was extremely accurate and from which several copies were made.[7] More importantly, in *Liszt at the Piano* it is a precise copy of Danhauser's bust which, quoting Comini, 'crowns the Graf piano and looks benevolently across at the assembled group of communicants.'[8]

7. Ibid., 208.
8. Ibid.

PLATE 3 Josef Danhauser, Bust after the Death Mask of Ludwig van Beethoven (gypsum, 1827)
Beethoven-Haus Bonn, P6



Comini discusses this bust in detail, confirming that for modern scholars at least, whilst the title of the painting may read *Liszt at the Piano,* it is Beethoven's inclusion in the picture that adds a crucial dimension to the contrived gathering. I don't intend to follow Comini's lead, yet aspects of the bust's illustration cannot be overlooked; namely the fact that its eyes have been 'drilled' to ensure Beethoven looks upwards, unlike those in earlier examples such as Franz Klein's bronze bust from 1812 *(Plate 4).*[9] Thus the effect is that they 'rove upwards in true Beethovenian fashion,' as can be seen in portraits from the composer's lifetime.[10] This leads directly to the point that as the reputation of much of what we now regard as Beethoven's greatest music grew after 1827, so too did many portraits and other iconography created during his life come to be regarded as some of the most recognisable images of the composer through to our present day. I contend therefore that to gain the best knowledge from what we would regard as a 'painting of the past,' i.e. a work from before our own lifetimes, we often have to delve deeper into the history and impact of each image to reap the greatest reward from what it is telling us. This is especially important in relation to the inevitable 'crossover' period during the mid-nineteenth century when Beethoven himself

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

PLATE 4 Franz Klein, Bust of Ludwig van Beethoven,
based on the life mask of 1812 (bronze) Beethoven-Haus Bonn, P2a

was dead, but many of the artists who had produced images of him from life were still painting or sculpting.

Once aware of the prior 'association' between Danhauser and Beethoven, we can address the issue of Romanticism versus implied premeditated Beethoven adoration within the painting, and can ask the question of who is really being revered by the artist here, Beethoven or Liszt? Richard Leppert's view that 'however idealised, the painting captures in aestheticized form the flavour of Liszt's impact on audiences,'[11] is in one sense absolutely the case, as at first sight the ensemble appear to be focused on Liszt and Liszt alone. Yet a closer inspection of *Liszt at the Piano* reveals several symbolic layers beneath the painting's smooth veneer that suggests the 'worship' of Beethoven to be just as important, if not the most significant aspect of this image.

11. Richard Leppert, "Cultural Contradictions, Idolatry and the Piano Virtuoso: Franz Liszt," in James Parakilas, *Piano Roles. Three Hundred Years of Life with the Piano* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1999), 256.

The ensemble in *Liszt at the Piano* can be roughly divided into 3 categories:

1. full figure of Franz Liszt
2. bust of Beethoven
3. audience

I shall first address the two most prominent 'people' in the work, Liszt and Beethoven – because they form the focus around which the assembled gathering revolves, and it is only with knowledge of their place in the picture that we can understand that of the listeners around them.

Comini describes the placement of Liszt's fingers upon the piano keys in detail, but her comment that 'his elegantly drooping right hand is ambiguously placed,'[12] opens another dimension of the thought in relation to the pianist's figure – that we are in fact seeing a fairly sedate virtuoso in this image. Perhaps it is due to the small scale bourgeois setting of the gathering, or possibly Danhauser felt the picture's perspective would be unfavourably altered by Liszt's hands not actually being on the piano itself. Whatever the reason, the pianist's demeanour and posture are not what we would expect given the association of dramatic physical gestures with virtuosic performance during this period. Yet a passage by Liszt's first biographer Joseph d'Ortigue, regarding Liszt at the piano, offers an insight into the nature of Danhauser's portrayal of Liszt. He states,

> Beethoven is for Liszt a god, before whom he bows his head. He considered him as a deliverer whose arrival in the musical realm has been illustrated through the liberty of poetical thought, and through the abolishing of old dominating habits. Oh, one must be present when he begins with one of those melodies, one of those posies which have long been called symphonies. … One must see his eyes when he opens them as if receiving an inspiration from above. … One must see him, hear him and be silent.[13]

D'Ortigue's words from the year 1835 in fact describe exactly Liszt's actions within Danhauser's image painted five years later. The pianist's gaze is focused on the bust that stares down on him from above, and he is far more engaged in this moment of semi-divine interaction with Beethoven than he is concentrating on the piano at which he sits. The music in front of him, the *Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe par L. v. Beethoven,* referring to the slow movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in A-flat major, Op. 26, from 1800–1801 and the *Phantasie von*

12. Comini, *Changing Image,* 208.

13. "Beethoven est pour Listz [Liszt] un Dieu devant lequel il incline le front; il le considère comme une sorte de rédempteur dont l'avénement est déjà marqué dans le monde musical par l'affranchissement de la pensée poétique et par l'abolition du règne des prescriptions conventionnelles. Oh! il faut le voir entonner un de ces chants, un de ces poèmes désignés sous le nom jadis si vulgaire de sonate ! […] Il faut voir ses yeux sublimes se lever au ciel pour y chercher une inspiration, […] il faut le voir ; il faut l'entendre, et nous taire […]." Joseph d'Ortigue, "Études biographiques: I. Frantz Litz *[sic],*" Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris, No. 24, 14 June 1835, col. 202, quoted from Comini, *Changing Image,* 214.

F. Liszt, both of which Comini describes as Liszt 'specialities,'[14] do return us briefly to the question of who is the truly 'exalted' one within this portrait, but ultimately the written music on the piano stand is superfluous to the deeper spiritualism of the image.

Instead it is of greater benefit to consider the perceived role of the virtuoso in relation to that of the composer when set against the background of early Romantic thought. In the early 1840s Carl Czerny, Liszt's own former teacher, wrote,

> In the performance of [Beethoven's] works (and generally those for all Classical composers) the performer should throughout allow no alteration of the composition, no addition and no abbreviation. ... For one wants to hear the artwork in its original form, as the Master thought and wrote it.[15]

Czerny significantly chooses to address Beethoven as 'Master' in this passage, giving the impression that any performer of Beethoven's music sits subordinate to the genius of its composer, as Liszt does within Danhauser's 1840 painting. Furthering this idea in retrospect, Mary Hunter introduces the notion that 'the idea of listening... is... a metaphor for idealised spiritual communion, the idea of harmony applying to both the individual soul and to a community of souls.'[16] Although Hunter herself does not link this interpretation directly to *Liszt at the Piano,* it is in fact a near perfect description of the relationship between the characters in the painting. Hunter goes on to outline the paradoxical view of the roles of composer and performer that evolved in the early Romantic era and the resulting complexities thereof. Czerny's stance from the composer's viewpoint reveals one approach; Hunter unveils the other in her argument that

> Once the new aesthetics of music at the turn of the century are considered from the perspective of performance... it emerges that there was another kind of discourse about the act of bringing works to life, one in which the performer's role was considered to demand genius and which the performer – even, or especially, the interpretative (as opposed to improvising virtuoso) player – was regarded as a fully-fledged artist on a par with the composer.[17]

Thus we can ask: is this what we see in *Liszt at the Piano*? Is Danhauser consciously trying to place Liszt the performer on a par with Beethoven the com-

14. Comini, *Changing Image,* 208.

15. "Beim Vortrage seiner Werke, (und überhaupt bei allen klassischen Autoren) darf der Spieler sich durchaus keine Änderung der Composition, keinen Zusatz, keine Abkürzung erlauben. [...] Denn man will das Kunstwerk in seiner ursprünglichen Gestalt hören, wie der Meister es sich dachte und schrieb." Carl Czerny, *Die Kunst des Vortrags der älteren und neuen Claviercompositionen oder: Die Fortschritte bis zur neuesten Zeit. Supplement (oder 4ter Theil) zur grossen Pianoforte-Schule* (Wien: Ant. Diabelli, n.d.), 34, quoted from Mary Hunter, "'To Play as if from the Soul of the Composer': The Idea of the Performer in Early Aesthetics," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 58/2 (Summer 2005), 357–358.

16. Hunter, "Soul of the Composer," 360.

17. Ibid., 361.

poser according to his knowledge of the changing nature of both roles within society around 1840? Again we can only suggest that this is possible due to the artist's cultural background and that such aesthetic concerns lie beneath the surface of Danhauser's painting; ultimately no evidence exists to prove or discredit such an assumption.

But what of Beethoven himself in *Liszt at the Piano*? His presence forms the very core of this image, in spite of its title, and it is to Danhauser's 'sculpture' that our eye is almost immediately drawn. This is significant because in terms of physical dimension Beethoven is depicted only as a head and shoulders bust, as opposed to the full-figure portrayals of the living ensemble, yet he is literally head and shoulders above the rest. Aside from 'standing' higher than anybody else in the room, appropriately upon a pedestal of music and books, as already discussed, the eyes of the other main protagonist Liszt are fixed firmly upon him. Thus Beethoven is crucial to the image in both a physical and spiritual sense, for if he were not there, then the impact of the scene would be considerably weakened.

The aforementioned idea of Liszt receiving inspiration directly from the composer before him is given more credence by the fact that the scene outside the window Beethoven sits against is not that of the Parisian suburb around Liszt's apartment but one much more directly related to Beethoven. I quote from Comini that

> the romantically clouded sky opens to reveal a vast expanse of greatly sloping land with a distant forest far beyond. This is a well-known Viennese panorama – the vista over the glacis to the Wiener Wald as seen from the city's southern Wieden suburb.[18]

That the 'Wieden on the glacis' was one of Beethoven's favourite walking areas provides a direct link between Danhauser's Beethoven and what feels like his own personal background scene. Yet this panoramic view of fields and hills, not to mention the atmospheric hues of the domineering clouds above, allude not only to the link between Beethoven and nature but also a past portrait of the composer, as significant parallels can be drawn between Beethoven's deliberate upward gaze towards the sky in *Liszt at the Piano* and the composer's semi-deification by the painter Ferdinand Schimon in a portrait from 1819 *(Plate 5)*. In both, Beethoven is placed directly in front of the clouded heavens, with Schimon's depiction implying that the composer is receiving his musical genius straight from the gods themselves. Danhauser, who we can assume must have been aware of this portrait, has taken the sequence one step further by suggesting that it is the posthumous Beethoven who surely must be one of the gods himself, who now in turn bestows his gifts upon Liszt. The parallels between the two portraits are impossible to ignore;[19] once again as with so many images of Beethoven, almost

18. Comini, *Changing Image,* 207.

19. In the case of the Danhauser image I refer to the depiction of Beethoven himself, not that of the surrounding ensemble.

PLATE 5 Ferdinand Schimon, Portrait of Ludwig van Beethoven (1818–1819)
Beethoven-Haus Bonn, B1

the only difference between them is that one was rendered during the composer's lifetime and the other after it.

If it is becoming clearer, then, where the emphasis in the almost misleadingly titled *Liszt at the Piano* really lies, we can subsequently pose the question as to what part the convened audience of Romantics play within the assembly. At Liszt's feet sits the pianist's long-time companion Marie d'Agoult with her back to the viewer. From left to right across the painting are the seated Alexandre Dumas père, better known in 1840 as a playwright than for his later novels,[20] then the standing Victor Hugo, whose literary occupation, like Dumas', is suggested by the open book in his left hand. Seated next to Dumas is the female novelist George Sand; behind her stand Nicolò Paganini and Gioacchino Rossini in a

20. Comini, *Changing Image,* 212.

'brotherly-clutch,'[21] with Paganini looking unfeasibly healthy in the year of his death.[22] Richard Leppert writes that with his tightly folded arms, Paganini seems 'absented from his violin as though he were silenced by a greater master'[23] – but the question of whether this 'greater master' is Liszt or Beethoven remains subjectively ambiguous. Comini favours the latter, for in her view,

> That Danhauser coupled the exquisitely urbane Rossini, whose rapier wit had made him one of the untamed social lions of Paris, with the spectral Paganini, whose deteriorating tubercular larynx made it impossible for him to speak above a murmur in society, is not so much the historical acknowledgment of a friendship as it is symbolic affirmation of mutual membership in the clique of Beethoven Venerators.[24]

Therefore the force of Comini's words combined with the symbolism inherent in the painting leads us steadily towards the conclusion that Beethoven is actually the key feature of *Liszt at the Piano.* It is the presence of the ensemble surrounding Liszt and his "master" who add impetus to this idea not only through their connection to Liszt and his position as a figurehead of cultured Romantic society at this time, but also in their own association with the trio of Liszt, Marie d'Agoult, and Beethoven.

That George Sand is the other female to feature here aside from Marie d'Agoult reflects the importance of her role in the painting. Visually the two women appear in complete contrast to each other, with d'Agoult's feminine attire in distinct opposition to Sand's male clothing, yet they were both intellectually notable figures of their time. The lavish apartment which forms the background of the Danhauser painting is thought to be based upon a Paris residence periodically occupied by d'Agoult and Liszt around this time; Comini intriguingly describes this abode as 'the setting for her [Marie's] own literary aspirations and collecting of luminaries.'[25] Thus the painting suggests both the notion of the home life supporting Liszt's Romantic reputation outside of his concerts, and an intellectual atmosphere that stimulated Marie d'Agoult during her partner's absences.

One of the luminaries 'collected' by d'Agoult and Liszt was George Sand; the trio became especially intimate during 1836 when all three took rooms at the Hôtel de France at 23 rue Lafitte and shared a common sitting room to receive their mutual friends.[26] Comini describes how at this venue, 'the animated gatherings that attracted the capital's cultural elite took place, and among the articulate

21. Ibid., 210.
22. Leppert, "Cultural Contradictions," 256.
23. Ibid., 257.
24. Comini, *Changing Image,* 211.
25. Ibid., 207.
26. Ibid., 211, cf. Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt, vol. I: The Virtuoso Years, 1811–1847* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), 226.

guests were Hugo, Dumas and Rossini.'[27] Here then lies the core explanation for the ensemble portrayed in Danhauser's image, for although by 1840 the artist was Professor of Painting at the Vienna Academy, as a former violin student he was still a keen appreciator of the musical and thus by extension cultural climate of the Romantic era. News of the presence of such personalities in the circle surrounding Liszt, the spell of whose musicianship Danhauser had already fallen under,[28] would no doubt have reached his ears and inspired the eventual assembly of *Liszt at the Piano.*

Aside from George Sand's fame as a Romantic novelist, her impact on the painting is further strengthened by knowing that she frequently integrated her perceptions and notions of music into the content of her novels and held the view that 'musicians exist within a world where they are venerated and adored';[29] an apt explanation for the presence of Liszt and Beethoven within the portrait and one which reflects the ever altering status of musicians within the constantly shifting cultural boundaries of the nineteenth century. As David Powell observes, it was only after she became acquainted with Liszt, Chopin and other artists during the 1830s that a new theme of 'the problem of art and of the role of the artist in society, establishes an important coherence in Sand's writing on art and artists.'[30] This also acknowledges the likelihood that performers and composers had as much of an influence on the direction of other arts during this period as the paths chosen by these associated cultures affected their own roles.

A further detail of Danhauser's image in relation to George Sand is that within her writing she frequently evokes the role of memory in the presentation and effect of music, often highlighting this trait, espoused by the prodigious memory of Chopin, Liszt and other artists, as an important quality for a musician.[31] In Danhauser's portrait it is clear that Liszt is playing from memory as his head is raised to look up at the Beethoven bust before him and the music on the piano is unopened. Having already seen Liszt in concert, Danhauser would have been aware of his virtuosic piano style; therefore it is unsurprising that he transfers elements of this vision to his depiction, although as I noted earlier, Liszt's countenance is nowhere as wild as Danhauser could have created.

Broadly speaking then, the Romantic sensibilities in Danhauser's 1840 image reflect a sense of fresh ideas and new directions within the arts. When considering the overall potential impact of *Liszt at the Piano,* whilst scholars such as Katherine Ellis suggest that 'in his fusion of meticulous detail and visionary symbolism Danhauser encapsulated the idea of the Romantic sublime towards which Liszt

27. Comini, *Changing Image,* 211.
28. Ibid., 209.
29. David A. Powell, *While the Music Lasts: The Representation of Music in the Works of George Sand* (London: Associated University Press, 2001), 289.
30. Ibid., 292.
31. Ibid., 86.

strove, and placed him at its epicentre,'[32] I argue that without Beethoven's musical and aesthetic legacy Liszt would have had a very different incarnation of the 'Romantic sublime' towards which to 'strive' in his endeavours, if indeed any at all. Consideration and understanding of all the symbolic and artistic elements discussed throughout this paper in relation to *Liszt at the Piano* are necessary then to arrive at an answer to the question of who achieves the highest level of homage in this image: Liszt, whose hands bring to life the music and whose name resides in the title, or Beethoven, visible only in the bust adorning the piano but whose presence resounds across the scene. Although initially such a seemingly difficult and subjective conundrum, the final reading can ultimately be quite simple: Liszt may have the title of the painting for posterity, but it is Beethoven who truly holds the key to its heart.

When examining the evolutionary nature of Danhauser's *Liszt at the Piano,* a strong view frequently prevails that Liszt 'clung' to Beethoven merely so he could exploit his own talents and aspirations. Whether or not this is the case, I contend that he is responsible, or at least can be said to be the catalyst for much of the public's exposure to Beethoven's music and posthumous iconography during the nineteenth century. In this way, then, Liszt has both deliberately and indirectly been of invaluable service to us here today, for through *Liszt at the Piano* we can see more than just the integration of Beethoven into the mid- to late Romantic culture and his place within its on-going development. We learn that it is through studying Beethoven and Liszt in relation to the artists who depicted them and other prominent public figures of their time that we can understand the continuing development of the musical and visual legacies of these two composers today.

32. Katherine Ellis, "Liszt: the Romantic Artist," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt,* ed. Kenneth More (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10.