

THOUGHTS ON MUSIC AND INTERPRETATION**SOMETIME IN APRIL 2011? WHY DO I NOT DATE THESE RAMBLINGS??****LISZT AND ME.1**

Well, this is the Liszt Year, so I suppose everyone is thinking about Liszt, or at least an awful lot of pianists are practicing Liszt. I do hope they are also *thinking* about Liszt, because he is indeed a marvel. I hope some singers are programming Liszt –I see one or two here in México- supposing they can find a pianist collaborator who can deal with those scores, because Liszt's *lieder* are extraordinary, and extraordinarily underplayed.

For various reasons I'll go into later, I myself am re-entering the Lisztian Universe at present. And I am enchanted.

I came late to Liszt. I've been thinking a bit about why. I suppose it's because right when I was physically almost ready for his music, I changed teachers for the first real time in my life: I left the teacher I'd had since I was about eight years old –the one I had after my mother— to go away to university where I had another teacher. This was the adorable and caring Kate Wolff, at Bard College which I still proudly declare as my alma mater. Being a fitting member of the faculty of a liberal arts institution and also being who she was, Mrs. Wolff in large measure gave me my head in terms of repertoire. Since my childhood teacher of some ten years was part of the National Guild of Piano Teachers, I was used to having –in effect-- a program assigned every year. That childhood teacher was LaSalle Spier in Washington, DC, where I grew up; and I am more than ever conscious of how wonderful a foundation he gave me.

If Mrs Wolff continued with assigning me a program, I have no memory of what it was. All I remember is that she assigned me to learn the *Emperor* Concerto of Beethoven, which I obediently did. I don't remember her giving me Liszt. But all of this is a story for another chapter. For now I want to write about Liszt and my relationship with him, late-blooming though it may be.

So I came late to Liszt. I was aware that Liszt was important, but I think that in my twenties I simply wasn't ready to understand why. Part of this was fear, of course: part of the Received Wisdom about Liszt is that his music is horrendously difficult. It is. But at that time in my musical development I was completely unequipped to understand the how and the why of its difficulty – which are quite different from the Received Wisdom.

A couple of years ago, coming out of *Solo Rumores*, I began to get the itch to explore Liszt. There is no way to explain this, as there is no way to explain why, at more than 40 years of age, I got a dog for the first time and now cannot imagine living without one. Or rather, the explanations would be long, complex, and interior: and thus of little interest to anyone but myself or a close friend or two over a bottle of wine.

It was similar to what happened when I was irresistibly drawn –sometime in 2000, I believe it was-- to learn Arturo Márquez' *Días de Mar y Río*, a work which I have played countless times and which, I suppose, has become something of a signature piece for me. I had the very clear sense that it was time for me to play a big, muscular, virtuosic piece and I very much wanted the challenge –musical, physical, mental— of doing that.

And there are other similarities. What I found with Márquez, over the long haul, is that for that piece to work well I have to think of ... Mozart. Clarity, delicacy, how close Mozart is to CPE Bach and his lightning changes of *Affekt*. Galvanic strength when the moment is right, but the rest is Mozart; even, in certain spots, the woody, intimate sound of a fortepiano.

There is so much stereotyping of Liszt, particularly around the idea that virtuoso playing has to do with a lot of pounding, a lot of sound and fury. Oh dear. I make my way into Liszt, these last few years, finally ready –I feel— to understand him, and I realize how close Liszt is to CPE Bach. *Affekt* ...

Liszt's abiding love of song, and of words. Schumann, Schubert, Petrarch.

I have felt for a long time now that Mozart –for example, because there are others as well, for example Schubert— was always really writing for the voice ... just that he heard things in his inner ear that no single human voice could accomplish, and so he wrote for the violin, the clarinet (late, late in his life) the piano, groups of instruments, to be able to make that real.

Here, with Liszt, the piano becomes a new kind of extension of the voice, and of all the emotions as well. The carefully calculated arpeggios, which are sometimes *anacruses* and sometimes *portamenti*; the voicing of chords, all are ways of summoning up the resonances, the harmonic series with which a great singer infuses his or her tones. Yes, absolutely, there are those moments of galvanic energy from Deep Down Under ... but they acquire a large measure of their force from the long and carefully calibrated *crescendi* which lead up to them. Simply pounding not only doesn't do the trick, it ends up sounding like endless screaming, which means sleepy-time: the ears just shut down. Thus I can say with certainty that Liszt is also about architecture, in the same way that Mozart is: emotional architecture supported by a firm underpinning of rhythmic and harmonic structure.

Visionary, yes, in the most absolute and abundant sense, about the piano. Liszt was quintessentially a pianist. His absolutely gorgeous songs are rarely performed, I suspect because there are four or five pianists in the entire world who could do justice to such a collaboration. I think he did not need an orchestra: he found all he needed in the piano: the instrument which he transformed by means of what he heard through it, what he dreamed it capable of.

Yet the piano he played was one very different from our "modern" piano, far closer to the fortepiano of Mozart, one which still had the delicacy of which Chopin's Pleyel and –a bit later still—Brahms' Erard, were capable. As I've written in other moments, we have to imagine first, how Liszt with the piano he was playing could imagine the extraordinary force of which a modern piano is capable, and second, how to imagine OURSELVES into the delicacy and *finura* of which his piano was capable. Kempff did this, perhaps better than anyone; Kempff and Brendel.

It's not surprising, as I think on it, that my way into Liszt was through his versions of Schumann and Schubert *lieder*. My own abiding love of that repertoire finds a new –or at least additional— voice, through Liszt's hearings of those songs.

These **Monarca** pieces have made me think more than ever about how they may be put into conversation with other works, in one of my favourite kinds of programming.

Amazingly, several of them have a kinship with Liszt, primordially in that they too are versions of songs: **Joelle Wallach's** *Lágrimas y locuras (Tears and Madness): Mapping the mind of a Madwoman*, a Fantasy on *La llorona*; **Paul Barker's** shimmering, powerful piano transcription of an aria from his own opera *La Malinche*; **Charles Griffin's** *...like water dashed from flowers ...* based on a ground which is *La Sandunga*; among others.

It's easy, as a pianist, to become drunk with the amount of sound you can make -- just pure sound. Much has been written about how Liszt was the first real Rock and Roll hero: how women tore off their clothes and hurled their garments at him on stage. I think a lot of this has to do with that enormous passion which his vision enabled him to communicate, and with the sound that he summoned up to bring it to his listeners. What we sometimes forget is that that sound must often have been as delicate and tenuous as angels' wings brushing our temples, as warm and tender as a lover's arm around us after making love ... much more than than thundering octaves. We forget that the power of our sound has as much to do with one single line, *parlando*, heartbreakingly eloquent, as it does with those thundering octaves and chords. I always remember Ysayë (as quoted by Gingold) saying that true virtuosity is to be able to play a scale and draw tears from your listener.

Young Liszt full of testosterone, no question. But even then he was searching out a new idea about the piano. The **Années de Pélerinage** start in 1855 when he was 44 and finish in 1858-59. The Schubert transcriptions, on the other hand, he started as early as 1837 when he was only 26! The difference, the evolution, are moving and extraordinary.