

Jonathan Kregor, *Liszt as Transcriber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). xiii + 299 pp. £55.00.

A self-acknowledged Lisztian, Jonathan Kregor has taken on the task of dealing with Franz Liszt as a composer with a seriousness of purpose, musical intelligence and depth of detail that I have rarely found. The idea of seeking the essential Liszt in his transcriptions is not original to Kregor – Charles Rosen has indicated this direction in *The Romantic Generation*<sup>1</sup> – but Kregor deserves credit for digging beyond the usual mythologies and contextualizing the act of transcription in philosophies of literary translation current in Liszt's era. In fact, this basic idea of understanding musical transcription as only one manifestation of an art of translation that encompasses literature and visual art is at the center of this book. For the German Romantic writers, translation was not a literal act; it was understood more as a kind of paraphrase, in which conveying the meaning and flavour of a work in a new medium (a different language) was the final goal. As such, the hand of the translator was hardly invisible. Liszt, as Kregor writes, 'made the transcriber visible' (p. 4). That visibility is manifested in numerous ways in Liszt's output, from his work in collaboration with Berlioz on the *Symphonie Fantastique* to his transcriptions of Schubert *Lieder*, Beethoven symphonies, and excerpts from Wagner's works. Liszt's visibility is also evident in the act performance itself – in the fact that Liszt's versions of these works, ostensibly produced to popularize them with the public, were often only performable by a virtuoso pianist. By the end of Liszt's life, many of the most difficult transcriptions remained only as published monuments to his own history.

Coming to terms with the scope and variety of Liszt's output of arrangements, transcriptions, fantasies, paraphrases, and so forth, even for those, myself included, who believe that this body of work contains much that is great, has long eluded writers on Liszt. The sheer number of works is daunting. And, the generally low esteem in which the art of transcription has been held since the advent of widely available sound recordings has not helped. Kregor's extensive first chapter, 'Models and methods', which introduces the discussion of transcription as translation, serves as a kind of justification of the medium. He follows that with a largely chronological narrative that places transcription-as-transformation at the centre of Liszt's development as a composer and performer.

As a performing pianist, and sometime transcriber of some of Liszt's symphonic works, I had come to accept certain things about Liszt the transcriber. One was the 'faithfulness' of certain of his transcriptions to their sources, in particular the Berlioz transcriptions (I've performed *Harold en Italie*), the Schubert song transcriptions, the Beethoven symphonies, and the Wagner transcriptions. Understanding the opera fantasies to be free paraphrases, some more narrative than others, blinds many of us to the subtleties of fantasy and recomposition that are evident in different ways in the 'straight' transcriptions. Kregor's book serves as an important corrective, amplifying the ways in which Liszt recasts and rethinks his sources, making of transcription an act of personal creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998): 511–41. Rosen's perspective is both broader and narrower than what Kregor presents: I sense that Rosen thinks that many of the transcriptions are in bad taste. However, his discussion of the *Don Juan Fantasy* (pp. 528–41) is brilliant, and shows a respect for Liszt's ability to make something original from borrowed material. Kregor's book essentially takes off from this point.

Kregor's description of the composition and performance of Liszt's version of the *Symphonie Fantastique* focuses not only on the collaboration between Liszt and Berlioz that is evident in their correspondence, but also on Liszt's desire to recreate the *effect* of the work at the piano. Ironically, Liszt seems not to have actually performed the work all that much in public (and then, most often, only the second movement) – the *partition de piano* is, in itself, the performance. And the public performances that did occur were often part of a concert in which the original orchestral version was also performed (p. 60). So, while the publication of Liszt's *partition* was an important event in spreading the word of Berlioz's accomplishment, and a long-term money maker for Liszt and his publishers, it was perhaps more important to Liszt's creative development as a composer in his own right.

One strand of Kregor's argument throughout the book is Liszt's subtle re-imaginings of texture to highlight what he finds to be most important about the work under consideration. Liszt's choices of physical accompaniments to the *idée fixe* are, in Kregor's reading, linked more clearly than their orchestral models (pp. 48–50). The very physicality of playing these gestures on the piano creates a strong dramatic linkage. He points out that a similar methodology pervades Liszt's original conceptions in this period, in particular the early versions of *Vallée d'Obermann* and the *Dante Sonata*.

Kregor's narrative of the transcription and publication of Schubert's *Lieder* in the late 1830s and early 1840s pulls together information from numerous sources and adds the author's own suggestions as to how and why Liszt chose the songs he did and how he came to order them in the publications. This process seems to happen in parallel with Liszt's developing thoughts on piano cycles and, in my opinion, may help to explain how Liszt arrived at his metaphysical idea of structural unity in the final versions of the *Années de Pèlerinage*. Liszt's arrangements from *Winterreise*, in particular, show a self-conscious attempt at rethinking Schubert and Müller – in effect creating an entirely new cyclic piano work using Schubert's song cycle as a basis. Liszt chooses a key scheme and a selection and reordering of the songs that foreshadows the process that leads him, for example, from the *Album d'un voyageur* to the first book of *Années de Pèlerinage* in the 1850s.<sup>2</sup>

Another important aspect of Liszt's compositional development is his mastery of strophic form both as a means of virtuoso show – the standard brilliant variations on operatic material expected of any pianist of the time – but also as an important musical structure for more subtle expression. (*Au bord d'une source* or his reworking of Paganini's *La Campanella* are two examples that I often cite for students.) Kregor's explanation of the connection of Liszt's use of strophic forms to his Schubert *Lieder* transcriptions is supported by excellent examples; Kregor cites *Ständchen* in particular (pp. 76–8). In fact, to me, the strong structural and musical affinities between a transcription like Liszt's of Schubert's *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* and his own *Au bord d'une source* is strong support that Liszt's work with Schubert songs was intrinsic to his compositional development. Appropriately enough, Kregor poses the question, 'where does Schubert end and Liszt begin?' (p. 78).

Liszt's involvement with transcribing Beethoven's symphonies occupies an important place in any discussion of the field. Kregor suggests that Liszt's

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<sup>2</sup> Similar evolution in key scheme and ordering can be found in the versions of the *Petrarch Sonnets*, especially as placed in the larger context of the second book of the *Années*.

reasons for transcribing the symphonies included not only the desire to affirm Beethoven's place at the head of the pantheon of composers, but also a need to establish Liszt as Beethoven's heir (pp. 131–7). Competition with Clara Wieck, along with usual suspects Kalkbrenner and Thalberg, apparently was partly behind this exercise, in which Kregor detects a certain defensiveness on Liszt's part. What also is clear from the discussion here is that Liszt himself never performed most of these transcriptions – they were for publication and for use by the public. Of course, what kind of public actually could play them is an open question!

Liszt's transcriptions from Weber are not often performed, in spite of the strong imprint of Weber's style in Liszt's music. Kregor's discussion of Liszt's version of the *Oberon* overture is particularly illuminating, partly through the inclusion of adequate musical examples, comparing Liszt's version with Weber's own piano arrangement and with the orchestral score (pp. 156–63).<sup>3</sup> Here we can see Liszt channelling Weber's own virtuosic piano writing (particularly his large-spanned left-hand chords) where Weber, in his own arrangement intended for amateur use, had avoided being true to himself. Liszt was a great admirer of Weber's piano music, and his transcriptions in this case serve as an appropriate homage to Weber's own way of writing for the instrument.

Another interesting discussion here is of Liszt's recastings of works originally written for piano solo, including those of Weber and Schubert (pp. 164–5). Here we see Liszt trying to remake his predecessors in his own image, particularly in the case of emendations to the Schubert G-flat major Impromptu, op. 90, no. 3 (in the key of G major, as it had first been published). In terms of understanding Liszt's own pianism and ear for piano sound, these examples are illuminating.

No discussion of Liszt the transcriber can avoid the field of opera. Kregor broadens the discussion to include Liszt's relationships with other composers, and, in particular, the ever-problematic relationship between Liszt and Wagner. While it is generally acknowledged that Liszt's admiration for Wagner's compositions was not reciprocated, and Wagner was generally better at taking than giving, Kregor arrives at the conclusion that Liszt's pianistic reworkings of Wagner were not merely tributes and means to popularize Wagner's music, but were at times subtle criticisms of Wagner's dramatic and musical conceptions. Kregor's summing up of the Liszt–Wagner relationship is worth quoting:

In fact, throughout their often tumultuous relationship, Liszt and Wagner kept the poles of artistry and personality almost entirely separate. Each just focused on one pole: Liszt on Wagner's artistic genius; Wagner on Liszt's personal magnanimity. To be sure, Liszt's reverence for Wagner's artistry knew few bounds, but he was not willing to sacrifice his own aesthetic doctrines in order to become Wagner's surrogate. Perhaps this accounts for the consciously paraphrastic quality of these arrangements. Each betrays a hybrid, sometimes confused, but almost always brilliant sense of drama. Wagner's original dramatic motivations generally remain visible, but equally prominent in their potential for dramatic re-conception are Liszt's additions.... (p. 184).

Kregor also considers Liszt's later work on transcriptions, and deals in depth with the additions that Liszt made in his version of Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* (1876–7) – putting it forth as a mixing in of Hungarian elements (pp. 203–7).

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<sup>3</sup> One reservation I will admit to in looking over this book is that there are far too few opportunities to compare originals with their transcriptions through the included examples; the *Oberon* overture is notable for being exceptional.

I might add to this discussion the clear imprint that Saint-Saëns's style made on Liszt's own seldom-played second Mephisto Waltz, a work that exists in both orchestral and piano versions from the early 1880s and is dedicated to Saint-Saëns. A number of other obscure transcriptions from this period are brought into the discussion to demonstrate Liszt's continuing curiosity on two fronts: international musical developments, especially Russian, and his interest in music with a religious dimension.

Overall, Kregor's book is an important addition to the literature on Liszt. His understanding of musical, biographical, and historical contexts for Liszt's transcriptions reinforces the case for Liszt's music essentially being based in transformations, whether the material is original to him or appropriated from another source. Liszt approached transforming his own material in much the same way that he approached transforming others' music. Seeing how he chooses areas for emphasis or recomposition when setting music by Berlioz, Schubert, Beethoven or Wagner helps us better approach Liszt's original works. In fact, the 'originality' of the transcriptions, both pianistically and compositionally, further elevates their importance in Liszt's output. For me, some areas that are not included in the book become even more intriguing. Are the Paganini Etudes any less significant than the Transcendental Etudes, just because they are based on foreign material? And are Liszt's versions for piano of his own works (for example, *Gretchen*, from the *Faust* Symphony, or the first two Mephisto Waltzes) also worth looking at in the same way as his transformations of the works of others? (Why, for example, does Liszt add an extra bar in the tuning-up section at the beginning of the first Mephisto Waltz, breaking the four-bar hypermeter, only in the solo piano version?) I am grateful, even after the deluge of Liszt-related performances and materials generated to celebrate his bicentennial, to find my own curiosity reignited by this excellent book.

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Wm. A. Little, *Mendelssohn and the Organ* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). xvi + 504 pp. \$65.00.

Here's a puzzle: Why did one of the most supremely gifted musicians of all time struggle for years to master the king of instruments? The image of Felix Mendelssohn as an individual who knew no difficulties, who conquered the musical world while still in his teens, and whose mouth was crammed with silver spoons, is firmly entrenched in our consciousness. He acquired a virtuoso piano technique by the age of thirteen, and his first masterpiece, the Octet, op. 20, was written when he was only sixteen. Yet, as Wm. A. Little illustrates in this major new study, the organ remained a challenge for Mendelssohn until his thirties. Even then, he never managed to learn more than a handful of large-scale works.

The initial sections of the book return repeatedly to the difficulties that Mendelssohn faced when learning the organ. In a series of observations that lead us perceptively into the world of the nineteenth-century organist, Little details some of the impediments. First, there was the problem of gaining access to