Sunday 13 February 2011 7.30pm
Barbican Hall

Evgeny Kissin

Liszt Étude d’exécution transcendante
No. 9, ‘Ricordanza’

Liszt Piano Sonata in B minor

Interval

Liszt Funérailles

Liszt Vallée d’Obermann

Liszt Venezia e Napoli

Evgeny Kissin piano
Franz Liszt at 200

A study in disreputable greatness

For many years Liszt was a marginalised figure. Amid the turbulence of the 20th century, when self-expression became viewed as vulgar indulgence, he was seen as a composer of excess: cheap and flashy, insincere, a charlatan. These are strong accusations, fleshed out – in his lifetime as well as ours – by charges of banal thematic invention, crude harmonies and repetitious formal structures. As the distinguished scholar-pianist Charles Rosen has pointed out, to accomplish greatness against such odds is no mean achievement.

Yet now, as we celebrate the bicentenary of his birth, Liszt’s position in the pantheon of great composers is largely secure. He is increasingly seen as a figure of crucial importance; perhaps, indeed, the central pillar of musical Romanticism in terms of the range of his endeavour, the reach of his influence and the way he encapsulates so many of the ambitions, aspirations and contradictions of the movement. Unlike other composers of his generation – Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn – he lived a long life, stretching from post-‘Emperor’ Beethoven to the infancy of Stravinsky, and this enabled a more radical stylistic development than was possible for them.

Franz Liszt was born on 22 October 1811 in Doborján, Hungary (which is now Raiding in Austria). As a young boy he was taken to Carl Czerny in Vienna, who recognised his prodigious talent and taught him for free. After the death of his father the teenage Liszt settled in Paris, where his fame spread rapidly, and during early adulthood two influences shaped his development: his religious conviction and the virtuoso violin-playing of Paganini, which Liszt set about emulating on the piano. In 1835 he eloped with Marie d’Agoult, a married woman six years his senior, staying first in Switzerland before moving on to Italy, experiences that ultimately resulted in the first two books of *Années de pèlerinage*. In 1839 he embarked on what was effectively the most fantastic concert tour in history. During eight years of gruelling travel Liszt performed in every corner of Europe, from the British Isles via the Iberian Peninsula to Constantinople, and the public’s fever-pitched reaction to his spectacular playing and personal magnetism was unprecedented. But Liszt was increasingly aware that if he were to be taken seriously as a composer he would have to stop making the sort of compromises involved in vapid
showpieces such as the *Grand galop chromatique* (a work he performed in public more than any other), and retreat from the spotlight of adulation. After 1847 he never again played the piano for a fee. The following year he took up a court position in Weimar, a provincial German city but one steeped in the culture of Bach and Goethe. There, as well as writing new music (mostly for orchestra), he revised many of his finest piano works of the 1830s and early 1840s, including the *Études d’exécution transcendante* and the first two books of *Années de pèlerinage*.

Liszt’s reputation ultimately rests on a small proportion of his huge and uneven output. Unlike Brahms and Chopin, who mostly left only final versions of music they deemed worthy of them, Liszt rarely threw anything away. His greatest works sit alongside entertaining *pièces d’occasion* and experimental compositions. If Liszt’s legacy has suffered as a result, we should remember that a piece of tinsel such as the *Grand galop chromatique* should not be judged with the same critical apparatus as a profound and ground-breaking masterpiece such as the B minor Sonata.

*Do composers gain from posthumous anniversaries? If their greatness is well enough established, the playing of their lesser-known works may further enhance their reputation; if unduly neglected, they may be helped out of their oblivion. Those afflicted by a history of chronic misrepresentation, pervasive malice and lingering doubt stand the slimmest chance ... a plethora of Liszt festivals, marathons and competitions may well prove to have further obscured the stature of a man who has to be defended on several fronts: against some of his champions and partisan admirers, against the crowd of sceptics and adversaries and, to a lesser extent, against himself.*

Alfred Brendel, writing in 1986, the centenary of Liszt’s death and the 175th anniversary of his birth.

Introduction © Tim Parry
Franz Liszt (1811–86)

Études d’exécution transcendante, S139 (1851) — No. 9, ‘Ricordanza’

Piano Sonata in B minor, S178 (1852–3)

Ricordanza

‘Ricordanza’ is the ninth study of Liszt’s formidable Études d’exécution transcendante, where it almost acts as a self-contained slow movement. The sequence of études builds to an awesome climax in No. 8, ‘Wilde Jagd’, while the final three, Nos 10–12, also form a satisfying group. Between these ‘Ricordanza’ provides an interlude of relative tranquillity. The beautiful opening melody, with its lovingly ornamented cantabile line and its nocturne-like accompaniment, is reminiscent of Chopin. But the theme itself is found in an earlier, much simpler, version from 1826, written when Liszt was a teenager, and stems – as does Chopin’s early melodic style – from the cantilena of Italian opera, Bellini especially. Enriched by cadenzas of increasing ardency and intensity, this is one of Liszt’s most poetically nostalgic pieces, likened by Busoni to ‘a packet of yellowed love-letters’.

Piano Sonata in B minor

Although Liszt arrived in Weimar with trunk-loads of manuscripts, and revised many earlier piano works during his time there, he did compose some major ones from scratch – none more important than the Piano Sonata in B minor, his crowning achievement. The sonata is generally accepted to be Liszt’s greatest work for the piano, and one of the most important contributions to the post-Beethovenian genre. The Liszt scholar Alan Walker believes that ‘if Liszt had written nothing else, he would have to be ranked as a master on the strength of this work alone’. Written in a concentrated period, it was completed in February 1853 and dedicated to Schumann, who never heard it. Clara Schumann did hear it, and hated it. Brahms fell asleep during an early private performance. But Wagner immediately recognised its quality. In its fusion of musical architecture, thematic integration and instrumental virtuosity it is one of the most significant musical works of the entire 19th century.

It is built on a small number of thematic cells, which – elaborated, transformed and variously juxtaposed – underpin both the work’s melodic content and its structure. The tonally ambiguous descending scales that open the work return at key moments, equivalent to a curtain between the acts of a play. Two other principal ideas are also presented on the opening page, the first a leaping octave declamation, the second a Mephistophelean gesture characterised by its repeated notes; the way Liszt develops and combines these ideas lies at the heart of the work’s power and cohesion.

Though the sonata unfolds as a single extended movement, it also alludes to a traditional three- or four-movement structure. Thus we get a slow section and a fugal scherzo as part of the development, and a recapitulation that doubles as a finale. Everything is meticulously planned and, although Liszt’s fondness for fluid chromatic harmony is strongly evident, the basic key relationships are deliberately more conventional than we often find in this composer’s work. Liszt originally wrote a loud conclusion to the sonata, which he later scrubbed out; the sublime, benediction-like epilogue, reuniting the main themes in a wonderfully fulfilling manner, was an inspired afterthought.

INTERVAL
Funérailles
Like the Piano Sonata, ‘Funérailles’ dates from Liszt’s early years in Weimar. It was composed in 1849 as part of the cycle of 10 pieces entitled Harmonies poétiques et religieuses – another set that had a long gestation, only reaching its final form in the 1850s, although ‘Funérailles’ itself is not based on an earlier work. A monumental and heroic elegy subtitled ‘Octobre 1849’, this is a magnificent tribute to the memory of those who died in the failed Hungarian uprising in that month (who included a number of acquaintances of Liszt’s), specifically the Hungarian prime minister Lajos Batthyány and 13 of his generals, whose mass execution on 6 October seems to have been the catalyst for the piece.

Coincidentally, this was also the month in which Chopin died, and it soon became an established Romantic fiction that ‘Funérailles’ was Liszt’s musical memorial to the Pole, an idea reinforced by the apparent reference to the rotating left-hand octaves of Chopin’s A flat major Polonaise, Op. 53.

Despite this, Liszt was quite explicit about the Hungarian origin of the work.

From the opening tolling bells, resonating from the depths of the instrument’s range, to the succeeding minor-key lament and major-key poignancy, this is a work that combines almost palpable anguish with the utmost nobility. The culmination of the octave storm is achieved without any overinflated bombast; rhetorical gesture is a key part of Liszt’s musical language, and here – as so often in his best music – the physical immediacy of the writing adds to the power of the work’s emotional force.

Vallée d’Obermann
‘Vallée d’Obermann’ is the finest and most extended piece in the first book, ‘Suisse’, of Liszt’s Années de pèlerinage. The first two books of these ‘Years of pilgrimage’ were inspired by Liszt’s travels through Switzerland and then Italy with Marie d’Agoult in the 1830s. Their contents were then revised – with varying degrees of refinement, cuts, elaboration and recomposition – in Weimar, and the ‘Suisse’ book was
published in 1855 (‘Italie’ followed in 1858). Liszt’s *Années de pèlerinage* enshrine many of the central features of Romanticism: the desire to wander, the search for solitude within beautiful landscapes and a sense of oneness with nature, the cross-fertilisation of music and literature or other cultural associations, as well as the journey of discovery, both outward (the physical exploration) and inward (the sense of personal pilgrimage).

‘Vallée d’Obermann’ was inspired by the French writer Senancour’s novel *Obermann*, itself set in Switzerland. The descending left-hand motif that opens the piece undergoes a series of thematic transformations, in the manner of a symphonic poem. Harmonically this piece is extraordinarily adventurous, in places anticipating Wagner, and the way Liszt conveys Obermann’s sense of wonder at nature’s impenetrable grandeur is hugely impressive. After a stormy central outburst heralded by *misterioso* tremolando, the music melts into a radiant E major, becoming increasingly florid and ecstatic before ending on a note of unresolved emotional ambiguity.

**Venezia e Napoli**

*Venezia e Napoli* was published in 1861 as a ‘supplement’ to the Italian volume of *Années de pèlerinage* – a lighter garland of encores. These three numbers are based on popular tunes that Liszt probably first heard during his travels in Italy with Marie d’Agoult.

‘Gondoliere’ is a gently undulating piece based on the song *La biondina in gondoletta* by Giovanni Battista Perucchini. Then comes the ‘Canzone’, a darkly passionate arrangement of a similar song, this time from Rossini’s opera *Otello*, which features a depressively pessimistic gondolier (a character not found in the original Shakespeare play) who regales his captive audiences with Dante’s *Nessun maggior dolore* (‘There is no greater sorrow’). Finally, Liszt returns to ebullient high spirits for the concluding ‘Tarantella’, incorporating lively themes by Guillaume-Louis Cottrau, in an evocative and triumphantly boisterous showpiece that once again illustrates Liszt’s ingenuity and keyboard inventiveness.

Programme notes © Tim Parry
Evgeny Kissin was born in Moscow in 1971 and began to play by ear and improvise on the piano at the age of 2. At 6 he entered the Moscow Gnessin School of Music where he was a student of Anna Pavlovna Kantor, who has remained his only teacher. He came to international attention when he performed Chopin’s piano concertos at the age of 12 under Dmitri Kitaenko; these were recorded and released the following year.

His musicality and extraordinary virtuosity have placed him at the forefront of his generation and he is in demand the world over, as both a concerto soloist and a recitalist.

Since his first appearances outside Russia in 1985, he has played with all of the leading orchestras and conductors and in recital in all of the world’s greatest halls. These appearances include a tour of Europe in 1988 with Vladimir Spivakov, the same year he made his London debut with Valery Gergiev and performed with Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic. Two years later he made his North American and BBC Proms debuts.

His many awards and tributes have included the Crystal Prize of the Osaka Symphony Hall in 1987, while in 1992 he performed at the Grammy Awards, broadcast live to an audience estimated at over one billion, and in 1995 became Musical America’s youngest Instrumentalist of the Year. In 1997 he received the prestigious Triumph Award for his outstanding contribution to Russia’s culture. That same year he was the first musician to give a solo recital at the BBC Proms. In 2001 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Music by the Manhattan School of Music. In 2003 he received the Shostakovich Award, one of Russia’s highest musical honours, and in 2005 he was awarded Honorary Membership of the Royal Academy of Music in London.

Evgeny Kissin’s discography has received numerous awards, including a Grammy, the Edison Klassik, the Diapason d’Or and the Grand Prix of La Nouvelle Académie du Disque. Among his many recordings are works by Bach–Busoni, Beethoven (including the complete concertos with Sir Colin Davis and the London Symphony Orchestra), Brahms, Chopin, Franck, Haydn, Liszt, Medtner, Mozart, Prokofiev, Rachmaninov, Schubert, Schumann, Scriabin and Stravinsky. Christopher Nupen’s documentary film Evgeny Kissin: The Gift of Music was released in 2000.
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