LESZEK POLONY

Department of Theory and Interpreation of Musical Work, Academy of Music, Cracow

The 'Faust' or 'Lucifer' Sonata?
On Liszt's idea of programme music
as exemplified by his Piano Sonata
in B minor

ABSTRACT: The musicological tradition places Liszt's Sonata in B minor within the sphere of compositions inspired by the Faustian myth. Its musical material, its structure and its narrative exhibit certain similarities to the 'Faust' Symphony. Yet there has appeared a different and, one may say, a rival interpretation of *Sonata in B minor*. What is more, it is well-documented from both a musical and a historical point of view. It has been presented by Hungarian pianist and musicologist Tibor Szász. He proposes the thesis that the Sonata in B minor has been in fact inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with its three protagonists: Adam, Satan and Christ. He finds their illustrations and even some key elements of the plot in the Sonata's narrative.
But yet Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Goethe's *Faust* are both stories of the Fall and Salvation, of the cosmic struggle between good and evil. The triads of their protagonists – Adam and Eve, Satan, and Christ; Faust, Mephisto and Gretchen – are homological. Thus both interpretations of the Sonata, the Goethean and the Miltonian, or, in other words, the Faustian and the Luciferian, are parallel and complementary rather than rival. It is also highly probable that both have had their impact on the genesis of the Sonata in B minor.

KEYWORDS: Franz Liszt, Piano Sonata in B minor, programme music, Tibor Szász, Márta Grabócz, John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*

The idea for a closer association between music and poetry, and other arts, in the spirit of their Romantic *correspondence*, struck Liszt well before he composed his first symphonic poems. Its sources or even the moment of its birth might be traced back to the powerful experience that was, for him, at 19, his first encounter, in 1830, with Hector Berlioz and the latter's *Symphonie fantastique*. And that despite the fact that Liszt's conception of programme music was radically different from that of Berlioz while being paradoxically not far removed from the Romantic philosophy of absolute music.

In 1835, Liszt published the following statement in *Gazette Musicale de Paris*:

> That musician especially who is inspired by nature, without copying her, breathes out in tones the tenderest secrets of his destiny: he thinks, feels, and speaks through her.

Yet because his language, freer and less determinate than all other languages, allows a multitude of interpretations..., it is neither futile nor ridiculous, as they like to say, that the composer comments in a couple of lines on the psychological outline of his work; that he says what it was that he wanted to create and that, without descending to childish explanation, to meticulous detail, he expresses the primary idea of his work.[1]

Liszt motivated his idea with the need to restore music to its bygone status; he cited the ancient union of music, knowledge and philosophy, the primeval harmony of culture.

Yet it has been proven by Carl Dahlhaus[2] that the idea of absolute music, in his opinion the very core of Romantic aesthetics, is certainly not limited to pure structure of tones, to mere self-exhausting form. The Romantic composers understand the absolute in terms of emphasis and symbol: as a metaphysical apology for instrumental music. The absolutism of music is identified with a reflection, a premonition or indeed an incarnation of the absolute. It is the spiritual substance of music, its essence, its poetic element identified with the fundamentals of Romanticism, with endless longing, solemnity, religious concentration, Heaven's emanation or supranatural intelligence. This is the spirit of thinking about music represented by Ludwig Tieck, Jean Paul, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Robert Schumann, but equally so by Józef Kremer, Karol Liebelt, August Cieszkowski or Józef Maria Hoene-Wroński.[3]

The antithesis of the absolute and the programme music is thus artificial and ahistorical. In the beliefs of the forefathers of Romanticism, absolute or **poetic** music finds its opposite in music prosaic or trivial: one that consists in programme storytelling, one that is illustrative, overly expressive in character, empty virtuosity – in short, music that is slave to its external functions, texts, obvious emotions and characters. Meanwhile, Liszt – clearly in contrast to Berlioz yet much like Schumann – equally distances himself from illustration, from petty tone painting or detailed comments. He describes programme comments as the work's 'psychological outline' that expresses its 'primary idea' or 'leading thought.'[4] This is then too a poetic idea. As stated by Carl Dahlhaus, Liszt's understanding of the essential content of a work of music is that of a third reality that 'is derived from the relationship between the idea of absolute music and the actual practice of programme music.' The programme helps determine music's expressive character;

---

[1] Franz Liszt, *Pages romantiques*, trans. J.R (Paris-Leipzig: F. Alcan – Breitkopf&Härtel, 1912), 105.

[2] Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music,* trans. Roger Lustig, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1-17.

[3] Leszek Polony, *Polski kształt sporu o istotę muzyki. Główne tendencje w polskiej myśli muzyczno-estetycznej od Oświecenia po współczesność* [Polish Dispute on the Idea of the Essence of Music. Main Trends in Polish Musical-Aesthetic Reflection from the Enlightenment to the Present Age] (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna, 1991), 73-102.

[4] Liszt, *Pages romantiques,* 105.

music reveals the poetic essence of the programme and 'realizes it for the senses.' The programme, seen as literary commentary, is thus not identical with the poetic substance of music. It is but its sign, its sketch, its 'hermeneutic parable.' This understanding of the idea of programme music does not quarrel with its aesthetic antinomy postulated by the believers in absolute music.[5]

As a consequence, the presence or absence of formulated literary programme does not determine the intentional content of music and it seems impossible to draw a clear-cut demarcation line between absolute and programme music. Liszt's *oeuvre* provides a crucial example: what I have in mind here is the relationship between his 'Faust' Symphony and his Sonata in B minor. The latter and earlier work could well function as fully individual, autonomous and absolute, yet musicological tradition places it within the sphere of compositions inspired by the Faustian myth. Its musical material, its structure and its narrative exhibit certain similarities to the 'Faust' Symphony. Chief among these is the affinity of the first theme in the Sonata to the main theme of Faust in the Symphony, namely their inherent motif of a falling seventh leap (the seventh is diminished in the Sonata and major in the Faust Symphony) and reversed punctuated rhythm either heroic (Sonata) or lyrical-sighing (Symphony) in character. The strongly antithetical melodic outline of the motif seems to express the persona's dilemmas and transcendent quest, a symbol of 'a leap into an abyss' or 'reaching deeper' on the one hand, and striving towards a 'higher reality' on the other. (see: ex. 1a, 1b, p. 20)

As is well known, the main three parts of the *'Faust' Symphony in Three Character Pictures* deal with the three personae of Goethe's drama: Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles. The victory of pure love over Mephisto, heralded by the return of the Gretchen in the final part of movement three, seemed not articulate enough to Liszt: three years after the creation of the first version of the Symphony yet still before its premiere, he added the final *Chorus mysticus*, with lyrics taken from the text that closes Goethe's *Faust* Part Two – for male choir with tenor solo. The latter is entrusted with the multiple repetition of the phrase *das Ewig-Weibliche*, sung to the melody of the Gretchen theme; the choir's dialogue with the tenor solo ascends into ever-higher registers and dissolves a solemn final C major with abundant tremolo in strings, arpeggios in harp, and sounding of organ.

By contrast, the Sonata is a single-movement piece, yet its hybrid form betrays elements of the sonata allegro as well as those of the sonata cycle. Marta Grabócz lists seven thematic complexes within the Sonata that respectively correspond to:

1. the group of the first theme consisting of two motifs (the so-called first and second mottoes) with the first development (b. 1-100)

2. the group of *grandioso* and *cantando espressivo* themes (b. 101-204)

3. the group of the epilogue of the exposition with a transition to the second development in the middle section (b. 205-318)

---

[5] Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 20, 44, 135.

Example 1a. *Sonata in B minor*, b. 8-17

Example 1b. *Faust Symphony*, b. 3-5

4. the middle section with a pastoral-religious *Andante sostenuto* theme and the central apotheosis of a *grandioso* theme (b. 319-452)

5. the recapitulation of the first theme (mottoes 1 and 2) in the form of fugue-scherzo and its development (b. 453-599)

6. the recapitulation of the *grandioso* and *cantando espressivo* themes (b. 600-700)

7. the coda that begins with the return of the *Andante sostenuto* theme (b. 710-760).[6]

---

[6] Márta Grabócz, "La Sonate en si mineur de Liszt; une stratégie narrative complexe", *Analyse musicale* 6 (1987), 64-70; 'Semiological Terminology in Musical Analysis', in: *Musical Semiotics in Growth,* ed. Eero Tarasti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996),

A symmetry is clearly visible in the structure of the Sonata, which might too be seen as a certain analogy to the Symphony. The Symphony's second movement, the portrait of Gretchen, has its counterpart in the middle slow section of the Sonata: *Andante sostenuto* (the central fourth thematic complex according to Marta Grabócz). The *Andante* is also maintained in an ABA₁ form, with an F-sharp major tonic. It ushers in, in the extreme sections, a separate pastoral-religious theme and develops a cantabile theme; in the middle section, it brings about a climactic apotheosis of the *grandioso* theme, after which the narrative takes a dramatic turn from F-sharp major to G minor, then to repeat the theme and revert to the main key with the recapitulative section. In both cases, the Gretchen universe – at least at the beginning of the plot – is stable, unchangeable, governed by order and faith; that harmony is shattered by her love to Faust. The third movement of the Symphony, the portrait of Mephisto presented by parodically distorted Faust themes has its counterpart in the fugue scherzo in the B minor Sonata (Grabócz's fifth thematic complex). The scherzo also creates an aura of demoniac or mocking grotesque with a deformation of the main Faust theme, namely its inversion (b. 509-519). Finally, the Sonata's coda (Grabócz's seventh thematic complex) begins with the return of the *Andante sostenuto* theme in B major, a counterpart, in a way, to the Symphony's chorale that corresponds to the Gretchen theme. In the words of the Hungarian musicologist, however, the Sonata's coda is dominated by dismal, mournful, deathlike scenes, while the finale of the Symphony is ruled by a religious-pantheist isotopy, or, as I prefer to call it, the Platonic-Christian spirit of eternity.

The character of Faust seems to dominate the Sonata in B minor. After all his spiritual tribulations, his heroic struggle, he is confronted with the mystery, the unknown, indeed with nothingness; in the very finale, the divergent motion into opposite registers confronts the symbolism of death with religious-pantheist solemnity, or perhaps Hell with Heaven. In the Symphony, Faust becomes ennobled by Gretchen's love. In the end, he does fall victim to Mephisto, who transforms all efforts and reflexes into a cosmic mocking chuckle and destruction. But a vision opens before the protagonist's soul, that – possibly Utopian – of all-encompassing and redeeming love.

Yet there has appeared a different and, one may say, a rival interpretation of Liszt's Sonata in B minor. What is more, it is well-documented from both a musical and a historical point of view. It has been presented by Hungarian pianist and

195-218; Irena Poniatowska, 'Glossa do badań nad *Sonatą h-moll* Franciszka Liszta' [The Gloss to the Research on Franz Liszt's Piano Sonata in B Minor] in: *Forma sonatowa. Sonata romantyczna w świetle metod hermeneutycznych, semiotycznych i strukturalnych* [Sonata Form. Romantic Sonata in the Light of Hermeneutic, Semiotic and Structuralist Methods] (Warszawa: Centrum Edukacji Artystycznej, Zespół Państwowych Szkół Muzycznych im. F. Chopina, 2001), 69-79.

musicologist Tibor Szász.[7] This interpretation begins with the significant discovery that the Sonata's *grandioso* theme (first presented in b. 105-114) is a stylized quotation of the Gregorian Good Friday hymn, *Crux fidelis*.

Crux fidelis
Escuchar

Revisión y edición: Abel Di Marco, Pbro. Derechos reservados. © A. Di Marco. ASCAP 3506300.
Se permite el uso y duplicación de este material sólo con fines Pastorales. Prohibido su uso con fines económicos.

Example 2a. the hymn *Crux fidelis*

---

[7] Tibor Szász, "Liszt's Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical: Their Revelation of a Program in the B Minor Sonata", *Journal of the American Liszt Society*, 15 (1984/2), 39-95.

Example 2b. *Sonata in B minor*, b. 105-113

The pentatonic melodic skeleton of its incipit, consisting of two second-third cells united by a common tone, appears as a symbol of the Cross, of Christian faith or of the person of Christ himself in many other works by Liszt: the oratorios *Saint Elisabeth* and *Christus*, in the 'Dante' Symphony, in the symphonic poem *Hunnenschlacht*. Its minor-key version of the *grandioso* theme, interspersed with recitatives (b. 297-310), is well-nigh identical to the music that accompanies the crucifixion scene in Liszt's *Via crucis*, its junior by 26 years (dee: ex. 3a, 3b p. 24-25).

Using this as his premise and helped by painstaking comparative analysis of the main motifs and themes of the work, and by certain biographical facts, Tibor Szász proposes the thesis that the Sonata in B minor has been in fact inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with its three protagonists: Adam, Satan and Christ. He finds their illustrations and even some key elements of the plot in the Sonata's narrative. For instance, the first seven bars of the introduction would be the scene of the temptation of Adam, in fact of his reaching for the apple; the main theme of the Sonata would function as a symbol of the Devil in his dual nature as Lucifer the fallen angel and as Satan proper. In its two basic motifs, this theme condenses the antithesis of the Fall on the one hand and the obsessive drive, frenzy or demoniac

energy on the other. This duality is obviously imparted upon the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, who reach for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As has already been said, the *grandioso* theme is a symbol of Christ; the theme's final climax before the coda is supposed to usher in a musical version of the Last Judgment.

Example 3a. *Sonata in B minor*, b. 297-307

Example 3b. *Via crucis*, Station XI

Apart from the motif of the Fall of Lucifer (Adam) in the form of a sudden falling leap, the Satanic symbolism of the main thematic complex would be evidenced by other characteristic elements: repeated tones (preceded, in many other 'Mephistophelian' pieces by Liszt, with acciaccaturas), omnipresence of the tritone, instantly rising anacrustic phrases. According to Szász, Liszt's characterization of the diabolic seems to deny the thesis of the insubstantiality of evil, of its only possible expression as lack of good, as nothing but constant negation. This vision of the entirety of the Sonata is that of a musical representation of the three fundamental dogmas of Christian faith: Original Sin, Crucifixion and Last Judgment.

Still it is worthwhile to add a fairly obvious comment to Tibor Szász's discussion. Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Goethe's *Faust* are both stories of the Fall and Salvation, of the cosmic struggle between good and evil. The triads of their protagonists – Adam and Eve, Satan and Christ; Faust, Mephisto and Gretchen – are homological. Faust is a late grandson of Adam, Gretchen inherits and atones the error of Eve, original sin. In the name of cosmic love, she re-enacts Christ's sacrifice, however heretical this may sound. In a translation of all of the above into purely musical terms, it seems interesting to re-examine the *grandioso* theme: its chordal repetition evokes the peal of church bells and the melody that rises over it. It is quite plausible that the first entry of this theme corresponds to the scene in the study when the lonely and despairing Faust, contemplating suicide, is awoken by Easter bells and angelic singing. The development part of the Sonata begins with the very same theme in its funereal version as a possible symbol of the Crucifixion. The *Andante sostenuto* theme expresses, according to Szász, 'man's entrusting himself to Christ' which fails due to man's relapse into sin.[8] Yet this middle section might have been just as well inspired by the scene in the cathedral, where Gretchen seeks comfort but only finds remorse, torment and fear. Let us compare the description by the famous interpreter of Goethe's *Faust*, Marshall Berman: 'the bells that saved her lover's life now toll her doom. She feels it all close in: the organ is stifling her, the choir dissolves her heart, the stony pillars imprison her, the vaulted roof is crushing her.'[9] Do not these words correspond vividly to the climax of this section that begins with the entry of the *grandioso* theme in G minor?[10] After the meditating sage and the lover, the third incarnation of Faust should be remembered here as that of the creator of a new civilisation. At the final goal of this gigantic task, Faust is hindered by an aged couple, the personification

---

[8] As established by the critic, this theme is a quotation of a song by Weimar Princess Anna Pavlovna. Szász, "Liszt's Symbols".

[9] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London–New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 56.

[10] The motif of the church bells in Goethe's *Faust* and its different colours that evolve from the joyful and triumphant aura of childhood through persistent warning to dramatic *memento* is discussed by Agata Bielik Robson in *Duch powierzchni, Rewizja romantyczna i filozofia* [The Gost of the Surface. Romantic Revision and Philosophy] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 83-95.

of the kindness and the nobleness of the old world. He orders Mephistopheles to eliminate the old man and woman. On learning of their killing, he is overcome with dread. The bells resound for the third time: these are funereal bells, but they are then transformed into the "sweet" bells of final repose and transcendental happiness.[11] Is not the recapitulation of the Sonata, with its scherzoid fugue, another exposition and then the final climax of the *grandioso* theme, and, at the very end, with the mysterious and dismal coda that begins the last recurrence of the possible Gretchen theme (*Andante sostenuto*) – a musical reflection of the final act of Goethe's drama?

Liszt was fascinated by the Faustian myth. Himself nicknamed 'Mephistophelian Priest', he took his cue from Milton, Goethe, and numerous artists of his own age in his 'Romantic exoneration' of Satan. He presents the Enemy's many facets, including his better 'Luciferan' aspect, associated with the spirit of discontent, restlessness, and quest. Polish scholar Wojciech Gutowski, the authority on the Young Poland modernist movement, states the following:

> The constant self-transcendence is what brings the myth of Lucifer close to that of Faust. The Faustian side of the Young Poland Lucifer implies his opposition against two principles that, according to modernists, dominate contemporary culture:
> a) the principle of stagnation, according to which all individualistic creation would be seen as an element of heresy, psychopathy or perversion;
> b) the principle of negation of evil in the sphere of ethics, leading to denial and minimisation of evil, which makes the acceptance and the functionalization of evil impossible.[12]

It should be added that what Gutowski describes technically as 'functionalization of evil' finds its early roots in the Old Testament Book of Job and its more contemporary literary illustration in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, to name but one title.

To conclude our discussion in terms of intertextual theory, Goethe's *Faust*, irrespective of the Renaissance sources of the myth, can be seen as a hypertext to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, itself a hypertext of sorts to its own archetext, the Bible. Thus both interpretations of the Sonata, the Goethean and the Miltonian, or, in other words, the Faustian and the Luciferian, are parallel and complementary rather than rival. It is also highly probable that both have had their impact on the genesis of the Sonata in B minor.

It is then time to return to our original thesis. The literary inspiration of the musical work, whether supposed or straightforwardly confirmed by the composer,

---

[11] Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 60-70.

[12] Wojciech Gutowski, "Królestwo Antychrysta i tęsknota Lucyfera. Oblicza Szatana w literaturze Młodej Polski" [The Kingdom of Antichrist and Lucifer's Longing. Faces of Satan in the Literature of Young Poland] in: *Stulecie Młodej Polski. Studia* [A Centenary of the Young Poland Movement. Studies], ed. Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska (Kraków: Universitas, 1995), 129.

does not exhaust its poetic and expressive content, especially if the poetic is defined as the supratextual or 'suprasemantic' sphere. Texts are but 'hermeneutic parables' to music itself. To quote the composer yet again, 'language (of music), freer and less determinate than all other languages, allows a multitude of interpretations.' In his musical-aesthetic programme, Liszt generally distanced himself from tone painting or from faithful reproduction of any scenarios – except perhaps for what he himself described as a work's 'psychological outline', its 'primary idea' or 'leading thought': a psychological or philosophical narrative *par excellence.*

Translated by *Jan Rybicki*