

The Grand Sonata – Liszt's Piano Sonata in B Minor

Written by bluesever

Tuesday, 01 November 2016 15:07 -

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What we can never deny is that Liszt and Chopin were the two that totally changed the piano technique, and we would not be wrong to say that not such an important advancement in piano technique has been made since what they did. Starting from the technique of using a coin on the wrist and then developing their études (either by Chopin or Liszt), it seems one of the big gaps ever jumped in the history of art.

The Liszt Sonata in B Minor. The name causes pianists to tremble, perhaps even fall off their piano benches. Liszt's powerful masterpiece is difficult to understand, and even more devilishly difficult to *play*. The roughly 30 minute piece is one of Franz Liszt's greatest achievements. It really sums up Liszt as a composer: forceful, unforgiving storms of sound, wild cadenzas and soul-stirring melodies.

Liszt - Piano Sonata in B Minor

It is likely that Liszt derived the idea of thematic transformation as a unifying process from Schubert's "Wanderer Fantasy," a work which he himself transcribed for piano and orchestra in 1851. Schubert's themes run through all four movements of the fantasy in varied forms. The four movements are played without a break, and outline a symmetrical key scheme— C, E, A flat, C. This kind of formal plan held a strong attraction for Liszt, and many of the works of his Weimar period follow this model, besides the Piano Sonata in B Minor also the first piano concerto is another example.

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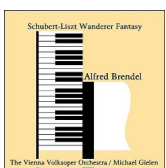
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Franz Liszt

The sonata in B minor is possibly the best exponent of Liszt's mastery in piano and in composition. Indeed a pinnacle, a monument, in the history of piano and of music in general, not only for his improvements in the technique but also for the revolutionary conception of the piece itself. The big scales, chords and succession of octaves must not be seen as a mere adornment since they not only give stress but give together a sensation of orchestral sound in the piano. Apart from the mere piano technique, the composer followed the path of changing the sonata form, a path formerly opened by Beethoven, to turn it into one big movement, as in his symphonic poems.



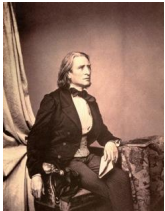
Schubert-Liszt – Wanderer Fantasy (Brendel)

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But in reality the whole work is tightly constructed from the music of the sonata's introduction. From that introduction he develops, first, three striking and powerful themes, then a passage sounding like a religious chorale. The final main section not only demands the utmost in piano technique to deal with its *prestissimo* tempo, but also employs elements of all the themes which have been spun out of the opening. Ultimately, in an eloquent concluding Andante, Liszt returns to the earliest versions of the main musical material and recedes into silence. Full of Romantic fire and spontaneity as the sonata may be, it also fits, depending on how one listens to it, into either the pattern of a single sonata-allegro-form movement (with exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda), or the four-movement structure of a traditional sonata (opening movement, slow movement, scherzo, and finale). Thus this work remains an enduring masterpiece even in the estimation of those listeners who tend to find Liszt's music overblown. In the Sonata in B minor, Liszt, the great radical, connected himself convincingly with the sonata tradition.



Franz Liszt

The sonata was published in the spring of 1854 and dedicated to Robert Schumann. Liszt meant this as a reciprocal gesture to Schumann in response to his being the dedicatee of the latter's *Fantasy in C major* (1839), a work that Liszt described as sublime. However, Schumann never knew of the *B Minor Sonata's* existence since by the time a copy of the newly published work arrived at the Schumann's home in May, 1854, Schumann was already at the asylum at Eendenich.



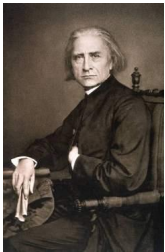
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Clara and Robert Schumann

Clara Schumann, venerated as the leading woman pianist of the time, despised it, writing in her diary that *"it is a blind noise.... It really is too awful."* Unfortunately, Clara's opinion was not atypical. During this period, and especially in this part of Germany, Liszt was often treated to an unkind dismissal by the musical society. When the work received its première performance, in Berlin, on January 22, 1857, nearly four years after its composition, it provoked a minor scandal among the conservative critics, from which it recovered with difficulty. Rarely did such great music get off to a less promising start.



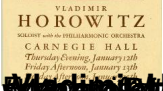
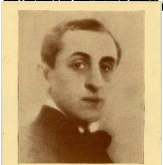
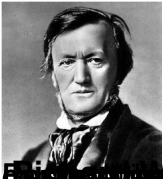
Franz Liszt

In 1855 Liszt's pupil Karl Klindworth gave Richard Wagner a private recital in London. The next day, Wagner wrote to the composer, *"Dearest Franz, You were with me, the sonata is beautiful beyond compare; great, sweet, deep and noble, sublime as you are yourself."*

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Liszt – Sonata in B Minor. Vladimir Horowitz 1932