

A Year in Classical Music: 1837, vol. 3

Spanish guitarist and composer Fernando Sor was born in 1778. He grew up at Montserrat, which is just outside Valencia, halfway up the east coast of Spain on the Mediterranean. In 1808, when Sor was 30, the French under Napoleon had invaded Spain. Sor fought against them, but Spain was eventually defeated and occupied. The French were foreign conquerors, and of course few Spaniards found their conquerors agreeable. On the other hand, though, the French occupation had brought Liberalism to Spain. Many Spaniards saw Liberalism as a degenerate force that was destroying France and would destroy Spain, too, but Sor like many others believed in it. He saw French Liberalism as the way forward, the way to reform and modernize Spain. So Sor had sided with Spain's conquerors, accepting an administrative position in the new French government in 1810. In 1813, though, the Spanish resistance forced the French out and Ferdinand the Seventh was reinstated as king. The reinstated monarchy saw Sor as a traitor, and exiled him from Spain. He relocated to Paris.

From 1813 until 1826 Sor had traveled extensively, taking residencies in London and in Russia and touring around Europe playing concerts. His compositions from those years were mostly not for the guitar: he wrote orchestral music, ballets, opera, and songs. But in 1827, as he was approaching age 50, Sor had decided to retire from touring and international travel. He returned to Paris, where he would remain for the rest of his life. His ballets and operas were much less in demand by the 1830's, so he had devoted himself to the guitar for this third and final period of his career. Sor was a great virtuoso guitarist. He had once shared concert billing with no less a virtuoso than pianist Johann Nepomuk Hummel, whose life and work in 1837 I discussed on the last episode. When Sor returned his focus to the guitar again in the 1830's, teaching became his primary source of income. One of his guitar students in those years was General San Martín, "The Liberator of Argentina," who had moved to Paris in 1824 after leading the armies that defeated the Spanish rulers of Argentina, Peru, and Chile.

Virtuoso player and sought-after teacher that he was, Sor wrote many collections of guitar duets, most of them during this last period of his career. Most of these collections are simpler, student-grade material. One guitar plays a more demanding lead part, with the other, the student part, getting the accompanying material. That's the case with Sor's op. 61 guitar duets, composed in 1837. You can listen to these op. 61 duets on vol. 2 of the complete Sor guitar duets on the Naxos label; they're played by Robert Kubica and Wilma van Berkel.

Fernando Sor did write two collections of guitar duets that offer virtuoso material for both players: the op. 41 duets from around 1830, entitled *Les Deux Amis*, or *The Two Friends* (which are the best-known and best-loved of Sor's guitar duets), and the op. 63 set, entitled *Souvenir from Russia*. The same album that offers the op. 61 duets from 1837 also includes Kubica and van Berkel's performance of those virtuosic op. 63 duets, the *Souvenir from Russia*

– a set of variations on a Russian melody Sor had picked up there during his traveling years.

The op. 63 *Souvenir from Russia* duets, probably composed in 1838, would be Sor's last published work, as the end of his life and career were not far off. In 1837 Sor's daughter Caroline died suddenly at the age of 20. She had been a talented painter and harpist, and Sor had played and performed with her as a guitar and harp duo. Her death devastated Sor. He composed a mass for her in 1837, just after she died; unfortunately the score has been lost. A year later, in the summer of 1838, the distraught and emotionally broken man contracted his final illness. It would kill him after another year, in 1839.

Russian composer Mikhail Glinka rose to fame during the 1836 - 1837 concert season, with the premiere of his opera *A Life for the Tsar* in December of '36. Besides marking the beginning of Glinka's career as a major composer, *A Life for the Tsar* marked the beginning of Russian classical music in its own right. Before *A Life for the Tsar*, Russia had imported its fine art music, with composers mostly from Italy and Germany having moved there to take important jobs, composing Russian church music and concert music in Italian and German styles. You hear an Italian influence in *A Life for the Tsar*, too, since Glinka had lived and studied in Italy from 1830 to 1833, meeting Donizetti and Bellini and becoming intimately familiar with their *bel canto* style. Despite those Italian influences, though, *A Life for the Tsar* would transform Russian classical music, establishing the first model for composing in a distinctly Russian style. Glinka became the first composer to capture the spirit of Russian folk music through classical composition. Fifty years later, Tchaikovsky would put it this way: "A dilettante who played now on the violin, now on the piano, who composed colorless quadrilles and fantasies on stylish themes, who tried his hand at serious forms and songs but produced nothing but banalities – who suddenly in the thirty-fourth year of his life produces an opera which by its genius, breadth, originality and flawless technique stands on a level with the greatest and most profound music!" All of Russian Romanticism in music would follow after *A Life for Tsar*, with great figures like Mussorgsky, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Tchaikovsky referring back to the score for their model of the Russian voice in classical music.

So at the start of 1837, Glinka had all of a sudden become a musical celebrity in Russia. On New Year's Day, he was appointed Kappelmeister of the Imperial Chapel Choir at St. Petersburg. For this choir he composed five new works in 1837: four for a *cappella* choir and one for chorus and orchestra. I've only been able to find a recording of one of these: the *Kheruvimskaya*, which means *Cherubic Hymn* or *Angelic Hymn*. Glinka composed his setting of the *Kheruvimskaya* for a *cappella* choir in early June of 1837. In the Eastern Orthodox Christian liturgy, this hymn is sung after the gospel reading and homily, at the start of the celebration of the Eucharist. The text says, "Let us who mystically represent the cherubim, and who sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity, now lay aside all earthly cares that we may receive the King of all, who comes invisibly upborn by the angelic host." You can hear

Glinka's *Kheruvimskaya* performed on *Sacred Songs of Russia*, an album by a choir from Massachusetts called *Gloriæ Dei Cantores*.

It's interesting to note that Glinka's career began with *A Life for the Tsar* at the same time that the great Russian writer Alexander Pushkin's life and career ended. Pushkin wrote his last novel, *The Captain's Daughter*, in 1836, and died in '37 – the same years Glinka rose to prominence and established the Russian voice in classical music.

On the last episode I discussed Frédéric Chopin, who was 27 years old in 1837. Just a year younger was the Hungarian pianist and composer, Franz Liszt. And just as Chopin's personal life would soon be caught up in his affair with Amantine Dupin – the writer better known by her pseudonym, George Sand – in 1837 Liszt was in the fifth year of his relationship with Marie d'Agoult, a writer who would come to be known by her pen-name, Daniel Stern.

Two years earlier, in 1835, Marie had gotten pregnant, so she and Liszt had eloped to Switzerland to escape the scandal they thought their affair would provoke. Marie had fled her high society marriage to Count Charles d'Agoult to be with Liszt, abandoning the seven- and five-year old daughters she had with the Count, as well. But as it turned out, there wasn't a scandal. There was a lot of gossip, but Liszt and Marie remained welcome within society circles in Paris, while the Count and the rest of Marie's family forgave her for humiliating their family, and told her they would always welcome her back – which only made the whole affair that much more sad, on the losing side of it. Liszt and Marie had married and would live mostly at Geneva, a French-speaking Swiss city, until 1839. Liszt spent much of 1837 teaching piano at the Geneva Conservatory, and at the end of the year, on the day before Christmas, Marie gave birth to their daughter Cosima.

Cosima was born at Como, an Italian city just across the border from Switzerland. Como is about 50 miles away from three other cities in northern Italy: Bergamo, where Donizetti had grown up, Novara, where Mercadante lived and worked in 1837, and Milan. As for Liszt's daughter Cosima, she would be remembered for marrying Richard Wagner in 1870. Cosima would be a vital part of Wagner's life and a major inspiration of his work. After his death she would remain at the center of what amounted to a Wagner cult, centered at the opera house he built at Bayreuth. Cosima lived a very long time, dying in 1930 at age 92. By then, sad to say, the cult of Wagner she'd presided over at Bayreuth had done much to inspire the ideology of racial purity that so defined Nazi Germany.

Liszt finished 15 compositions in 1837, and Chopin finished 13. Liszt's pieces are much lengthier, though. All of Chopin's music from 1837 can be played in around 45 minutes, but Liszt's pieces take up around 7 hours. One reason Liszt was so much more prolific is that with just two exceptions, all of his 1837 pieces were transcriptions or arrangements, for the piano, of other composers' work. All of Chopin's pieces were originals. Chopin had known Liszt well during the five years they both lived and worked in Paris, from 1831 through 1835. While Chopin certainly had a professional respect for Liszt's

piano technique, which was superior to his own, he had not thought highly of Liszt's artistry, as composer nor as pianist. Chopin had dedicated his op. 10 etudes to Liszt, but he thought the way Liszt played them was ostentatious and artless. He thought much the same of Liszt's original compositions, and by comparison to his own compositions of the early 1830's Chopin was right to hold Liszt in low regard; the Franz Liszt of the 1830's was much more a piano virtuoso than a composer. By the middle 1830's this had started to change, though. In 1834 Liszt had composed his *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses*, an advanced, asymmetrical score for solo piano that looks forward to Bartók. Some other distinguished and original pieces would follow through the later 1830's and the 1840's, but still, Liszt didn't really come into his own as a composer until the 1850's, after Chopin died. It was in those later years, after he'd mostly retired from touring and performing, that Liszt gave us the compositions for which we best remember him: the *Piano Sonata in B Minor*, the orchestral tone poems, the piano concertos, the sacred choral works.

The piano as we know it today had only recently, in the 1820's, begun to appear on concert stages and in the display rooms of piano builders, who designed instruments with more and more powerful, sustainable sounds that could imitate the *bel canto* opera singers of the day. These new grand pianos sounded very different than the small fortepianos of Mozart's time, which to modern ears can sound almost like banjos in comparison. Even these 1820's and 1830's pianos made a sound that was only about halfway between a Mozart fortepiano and the modern grand, which didn't appear until the 1860's. So the grand piano was still a new and developing instrument, and Paris was home to the first great school of grand piano playing, known as the "flying trapeze" school. The Paris pianists of the 1830's were the world's finest. They were high-wire act players, stunt players, and as a group, they had solved some of the most difficult problems of piano technique. Virtuoso players like Thalberg, Dreyshock, and Kalkbrenner each had their own specialty techniques: Thalberg composed and performed piano pieces that made it sound like there were three hands at work, Dreyshock could play octaves as fast as other players could play single notes, and Kalkbrenner was famous for his immaculate, flawless passagework. In 1832, Liszt had attended a violin recital Paganini gave in Paris. It was an epiphany for Liszt: he realized then and there, listening to Paganini play, that he was destined to become the Paganini of the piano, to transcend all its difficulties and challenges. So Liszt started to spend four or five hours a day practicing. Before long he could outplay any of his rivals in Paris's flying trapeze school of pianists. Liszt could beat each of them at their own game. He could outdo them using their own specialty tricks and techniques, and he had become more than just the sum of the parts of the Parisian school: by the later 1830's, Liszt was able to draw sounds from the piano that no other pianist could – that no other pianist had imagined before.

By 1837, then, Liszt had made himself into probably the greatest pianist of all time. His one fully original composition of 1837 is as much an anthology of his new super-virtuoso piano technique as it is a piece of music; but so far-reaching were the innovations and advancements Liszt brought to piano

writing, they make for an important element of the music in their own right. The piece is Liszt's *Douze Grandes Études*, or *Twelve Grand Studies*, for solo piano. The 1837 version of these pieces is the second, of three drafts, of what would become the well-known *Transcendental Etudes* of 1851. Liszt composed the first version in 1826, when he was just fourteen years old. Then in 1837 he revised the etudes extensively, making them ridiculously hard to play to document his new, unheard-of playing technique. So the 1837 version of these studies is the hardest to play of the three. When they were first published, Robert Schumann wrote that only ten or twelve pianists in the world were capable of playing them, and even today very few professional pianists can even attempt them. With the 1851 revision of this music, the *Transcendental Etudes*, Liszt found more efficient ways to achieve more or less the same effects; so for as infamously difficult as the *Transcendental Etudes* are, they're quite a bit easier to play than the 1837 studies.

Today there are only two quality commercial recordings of all twelve *Douze Grandes Études*: one by Turkish pianist İdil Biret, and one by Australian pianist Leslie Howard, the only pianist ever to record Liszt's complete piano music. Howard's performance is better, all in all, than Biret's. He's more assured, he conveys confidence and even swagger, and with his larger hands, Howard can more easily cover Liszt's huge chords. In some passages, though, Biret breathes more character into the studies, in places where I found Howard's interpretations a little flat. Both are worth hearing, then, so there are links to both albums at ayicm.com.

Next up are two recordings of music that Liszt and his supposed rival, Sigismond Thalberg, played in a famous piano showdown in 1837. In the spring of 1835, Liszt and Marie had fled Paris, eloping to Switzerland to escape the gossip and scandal surrounding their affair. That fall Sigismond Thalberg, a new star pianist, had made his debut back in Paris. Today we hardly remember Thalberg, but for about 50 years during the 1800's, he was one of the most famous and influential of the pianist-composers. Many of Thalberg's compositions are fantasies on opera arias that were popular at the time – so again you see how opera and song dominated early Romantic music, even piano music. Thalberg's signature technique was the three-hand effect. It was a clever way of arranging music for the piano, with both hands flying up and down the keyboard, playing quick, dazzling figures that outline the accompanying chords. These harmonizing figures are designed so that whenever it's time to play the next melody note, one hand or the other is in the right position to play that note with the thumb. A skilled performer can use the piano's pedals to sustain the melody notes but not the accompanying notes, making it sound like there's a third hand in the middle, playing a broad, singing melody, while the other two hands play the fast accompanying arpeggios and scales. In 1837, Thalberg composed his best-known piece using this three-hand technique: his fantasy on melodies from Rossini's 1818 opera *Mosè in Egitto*, or *Moses in Egypt*. Thalberg's *Mosè* fantasy would remain as one of the most popular piano recital pieces in Europe for the next fifty or sixty

years. Clara Schumann loved to play it, Liszt's daughter Blandine learned it, and Hector Berlioz remembered it fondly in his memoirs.

So, as for the showdown between Thalberg and Liszt: with his first performances in Paris in '35 and '36, Thalberg had won over a Parisian music critic named Fétis. Fétis proclaimed Thalberg to be the champion of Europe's pianists, and many agreed. Then, in the fall of '36, Liszt was scheduled to write a review of Thalberg's compositions for Fétis's publication, the *Revue Musicale*. But Liszt's wife, Marie, was gaining confidence in herself as a writer at the time – she was starting to become Daniel Stern, a literary voice that's still remembered in France today. Like any aspiring writer Marie was eager to be published, so she convinced Liszt to let her write the review of Thalberg's pieces. Marie's called Thalberg's music worthless, right there in the pages of Fétis's *Revue Musicale*. This outraged Fétis. He attacked Liszt in his next article, saying that Thalberg was the founder of a new school of pianism that made Liszt's style a thing of the past, and so the controversy flared throughout European music culture. It was a passionate debate amongst their aficionados, but not so much between Thalberg and Liszt themselves. As far as I can tell, Thalberg wanted nothing to do with the feud. He had great respect for Liszt's playing, which astounded him. As for Liszt, he was mostly just curious about Thalberg. But Liszt *had* sought to become the Paganini of the piano, so he might well have had some desire to remind the Paris music circles who was the best. They finally played "against" each other in a private concert in March of 1837. Thalberg played his new *Moses in Egypt* fantasy, then Liszt played the fantasy he'd written on Pacini's opera *Niobe* in 1835. Neither pianist "defeated" the other, though. The verdict was, "Thalberg is the greatest pianist in Europe, but there is only one Liszt." Thalberg was Europe's greatest master of the old school of playing, the tradition of Mozart and Hummel; but in Liszt's hands, piano playing had become something entirely new, something revolutionary.

In 1991, American pianist Steven Mayer released an album called *Liszt vs. Thalberg*. It recreates the 1837 showdown, with Mayer playing Thalberg's *Moses Fantasy* and Liszt's *Niobe Fantasy*. There are other pieces by Liszt and Thalberg on the album as well, so you can further explore the difference between Thalberg's old school style and Liszt's newfangled, groundbreaking style. Mayer plays the music well enough, but if you're interested in Thalberg's *Moses Fantasy*, which is the 1837 composition, the 1992 recording by Italian pianist Francesco Nicolosi is better. He plays with more clarity and agility and Romantic yearning than Mayer.

The Liszt vs. Thalberg duel was hosted by Christina Belgiojoso, an expatriate Italian princess and infamous eccentric in world of the Paris salons. Immediately after the Liszt vs. Thalberg showdown, Belgiojoso commissioned an important 1837 composition for the piano called the *Hexaméron Variations*. The princess invited six composers – Liszt, Chopin, Thalberg, Pixis, Herz, and Czerny – to collaborate on the piece, each of them writing a variation on the march tune from Bellini's opera *The Puritans*. Liszt collected these six variations and added an introduction, a finale, and interludes that offer smooth

transitions from one variation to the next. It's a great piece – especially Chopin's variation, which is the gem of the set. *Hexaméron* is fine entry in the catalog of Romantic piano literature, one that Liszt continued to perform for as long as he gave public recitals. The best recording of *Hexaméron*, by a wide margin, is the fiery, dazzlingly virtuosic reading by American pianist Raymond Lewenthal, made in 1966.

Still professionally active in 1837 was a French violin virtuoso named Charles Philippe Lafont. He was just a year older than his famous contemporary, Paganini, and in fact, in 1816, he had played in a contest versus Paganini, very much like the Liszt vs. Thalberg showdown. The Lafont vs. Paganini contest was judged to be a tie; but it was held at La Scala, the well-known Italian opera house in Milan, where the audience was more on Paganini's side than on the Frenchman's. So who knows? Perhaps, at least on that day, Lafont was the better player, even if his polished old school French technique was no equal to Paganini's revolutionary reinvention of the instrument. In 1837, Liszt wrote a set of variations for violin and piano, based on a melody from one of Lafont's compositions, called *Le Marin*. The full title of Liszt's piece is *Grand Duo Concertant sur la Romance de M. Lafont, "Le Marin."* (Liszt revised the piece in 1849, but I usually date revised compositions by their original versions.) The recording to hear is of a breathtaking live performance by violinist Friedemann Eichhorn and pianist Peer Findeisen, on their album *Encores and More*. The album offers a collection of 12 mostly lesser-known violin and piano showpieces, each one recorded in a live performance, and each one from a different country, a different music culture; it's a beautiful album of classical music, a real achievement. Liszt's variations on Lafont's melody have violinist and pianist sparring with each other, and are a lot of fun to hear.

The rest of Liszt's output from 1837 is transcriptions and arrangements, for piano, of other composers' music that was not originally for piano. He arranged and transcribed five composers that year: Bertin, Schubert, Rossini, Berlioz, and Beethoven. As Liszt revolutionized piano playing in the 1830's, he discovered new textures, colors, and effects that could be drawn from the instrument. It was largely through writing his many transcriptions that he explored and developed these innovations in composing for the piano. Especially before he came to maturity as a composer in the 1850's, then, Liszt the transcriber was more important than Liszt the composer. Liszt was the first musician to make a fine art form of piano transcriptions.

First are Liszt's three arrangements drawn from Louise Bertin's 1836 opera, *La Esmeralda*. Bertin was a writer and poet as well as a composer. She was a friend of novelist Victor Hugo, and they had worked together to write the libretto for *La Esmeralda*, which was based on Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Bertin was the only composer to collaborate with Hugo on an opera. *La Esmeralda* was a flop, unfortunately, and the last opera Bertin would compose, but it did inspire these three Liszt piano pieces. Liszt transcribed the entire score for piano and voices, so that's the first of his *Esmeralda* arrangements; and there's some indication, by the way, that it may

have been Berlioz who orchestrated *Esmeralda*, so Liszt's piano reduction might be as much of Berlioz's work as of Bertin's. Liszt's two other *Esmeralda* transcriptions are of arias from the opera. To my surprise, though, I haven't been able to find any recordings of these three transcriptions – not even in Leslie Howard's complete Liszt cycle.

Liszt had dueled with Thalberg at the end of March in 1837. He left Paris soon afterwards to meet up with Marie again at George Sand's summerhouse, her chateau in the country in central France. Sand would begin her long affair with Chopin early the next year, but in the summer of '37 she was seeing Michel de Bourges, a prominent lawyer and politician. Liszt and Marie spent three months in the country with Sand and de Bourges that summer. After their dinners the four of them, together with other visitors, would move outside onto the terrace to enjoy the gorgeous, warm evenings. They'd have their *soirée*... but before long Liszt would move back inside, open the windows, and start to play for everyone. Mostly he played Beethoven and Schubert, two of his musical heroes. Liszt would lose himself in his playing, continuing on long after everyone else had gone to bed. Sand wrote in her diaries about working on her writing projects at night, deeply moved by Liszt's playing downstairs. Marie had recently made French translations of the German texts to Schubert's songs for Liszt, so that he could understand them better, and it was while they stayed at Sand's chateau that summer that Liszt wrote a number of his Schubert song transcriptions, for solo piano.

The recent duel with Thalberg may have helped motivate Liszt to focus on transcribing the Schubert songs. By the time he arrived at Sand's chateau that summer, Liszt found himself at a crossroads, found himself ready to turn to a different path as a composer/transcriber. His transcriptions up to that time had mostly been of huge, powerful orchestral scores by Berlioz and Beethoven, but after the concert with Thalberg, Liszt became more interested in simple melody. Maybe he'd recognized that Thalberg's emphasis on melody, with his thumb technique, was a more effective way of writing for the piano than he'd given Thalberg credit for at first. In Schubert's music, Liszt saw a path to further develop the melodic dimension of his own music. Schubert had based many of his important instrumental works on melodies from his songs: think of the *Trout Quintet*, the *Death and the Maiden* string quartet, the *Wandererfantasie* for piano. Liszt began to model his own compositions on those song-based instrumental works by Schubert. This was how Liszt began to develop the style and expression that would characterize his best compositions of the 1850s.

For Liszt, Schubert was the great poet of composers. But in 1837, just nine years after his death, Schubert still didn't have much of a reputation outside of Vienna, where he'd lived and worked. So Liszt did everything he could to promote Schubert's music. Through the course of his career he would write piano transcriptions of 56 of the 600 songs Schubert composed. These are what we call "art song" – poems set for voice and piano, making use of the full palate of musical techniques and effects and colors that skilled composers can bring to their work. Liszt transcribed the Schubert songs so as to allow the

pianist to deliver both the vocal line and the basic shape of Schubert's own piano accompaniments to those lines. In 1838, Liszt would publish the first set of his Schubert song transcriptions, twelve of them. They were so popular with the public, they became for Liszt what the *Prelude in C-Sharp Minor* would be for Rachmaninoff. Liszt had to play one or two of them at almost every performance he gave, even if they weren't on the program. And it wasn't just Liszt: Clara Schumann and Sigismond Thalberg and other pianists started playing Liszt's Schubert song transcriptions at their recitals, and many of the pianist-composers who followed Liszt would model their own song transcriptions on his.

It's not known exactly when Liszt wrote each of his different Schubert transcriptions. So there were certainly others that year, but the one Liszt definitely wrote in 1837 is of Schubert's song *Lob der Tränen*, or *In Praise of Tears*. It has a slow, aching melody, and you can hear it played on Jorge Bolet's fantastic 1981 album of Liszt's Schubert song transcriptions. Bolet was a Cuban-American virtuoso who served for a while as the head of the piano department at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia.

Besides the transcriptions of Schubert's songs, Liszt transcribed Rossini's twelve-song set, *Soirées Musicales*, in 1837. Rossini had mostly retired from composing in 1829, after his opera *William Tell*. But then in 1835 he'd broken years of silence with *Soirées Musicales*. It's a collection of eight songs and four duets. They're simple and direct, but I mean by that the simplicity and directness of a master composer: simple without being simplistic or vapid, a deceptive simplicity that few artists achieve. Liszt recognized this, and sought to capture Rossini's simplicity and directness in his transcription. (Rossini's original piano accompaniments to these songs are unusually interesting for art song, so that no doubt helped to attract Liszt to them, as well.) You'll enjoy the 1996 recording of Liszt's *Soirées Musicales* transcription by Croatian pianist Kemal Gekić, who since 1996 served as Artist in Residence at Florida International University in Miami. He matches the virtuosity necessary to play Liszt with a good feel for Rossini's style.

So, this leaves us with Liszt's 1837 transcriptions of orchestral music by Berlioz and Beethoven. First, Berlioz. It had been Hector Berlioz, in the early 1830's, who had first inspired the young Liszt to write piano transcriptions. Liszt had been in the audience at the first performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* in 1830. He decided right away to transcribe the piece for piano. Liszt's musical thought was always at the cutting edge, the avant-garde of Romanticism. So he understood right away and better than most how important, how ingenious Berlioz's music was, and he wanted to help promote it. In the 1830's, obviously there were no recordings or radio broadcasts, but even live orchestra performances were much more rare than they are today. If you didn't live in a major city, you had no access to orchestral music at all; so the only way to hear it was through piano transcriptions. In 1836 Liszt wrote to Berlioz, asking him for the score to *Harold en Italie*, which had premiered in November of 1834. *Harold en Italie* is a tone poem for viola and orchestra — it's not a viola concerto, strictly speaking. *Harold en Italie* is based on Lord

Byron's narrative poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The poem, which had made Lord Byron famous by 1818, is about a man who's come to regret having wasted his youth on a life of hedonism and pleasure seeking; he travels abroad, trying to reinvent himself. In its time, Lord Byron's poem served as a metaphor for the disillusionment and world-weariness of the generation that had lived through the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars. So in Berlioz's tone poem *Harold en Italie*, the solo violist gives you a musical depiction of Harold's character, with the orchestra representing the wider world and the other people he meets.

When Liszt had written to Berlioz about transcribing *Harold en Italie* in 1836, Berlioz had been reluctant. Berlioz was classical music's first great orchestrator, and as such he'd always thought that he couldn't fully express himself through the piano – only the orchestra could provide the musical resources he needed. When he'd heard Liszt's *Symphonie Fantastique* transcription he'd been astonished at Liszt's ability to translate orchestral colors and textures to the piano, but still he was reluctant to approve Liszt's request to transcribe *Harold en Italie*. He'd heard bad piano transcriptions of his orchestral music, too, including an awful rendition of his *Francs-Juges Overture* by an anonymous transcriber. So, before he gave Liszt permission to transcribe *Harold en Italie* for viola and piano, he sent him his *King Lear Overture* to transcribe first. The impatient Liszt went ahead and transcribed the second movement of *Harold en Italie* – called *The March of the Pilgrims* – for piano alone, without the viola, while he was waiting for Berlioz's blessing to go ahead with the full transcription. You can hear both of these 1837 transcriptions, the *King Lear Overture* and *The March of the Pilgrims*, on volume 5 of Leslie Howard's complete Liszt cycle. (The problem is that the dates of these transcriptions are listed before 1837 on Howard's CD. *King Lear* is dated 1833, and *Pilgrims* 1862. The 1862 *Pilgrims* transcription could be a later revision of the 1837 original, but as for the 1833 *King Lear*, I don't know what to tell you. The CD lists information at odds with the biographical data I found. So enjoy it more for the music, I guess, and less for the certainty that you've got an 1837 artifact on your hands.)

I listened to five different recordings of Liszt's full transcription of *Harold en Italie* – which is definitely from either 1837 or '38 – and there's a clear favorite amongst them. It's a 1983 performance by two French musicians: violist Bruno Pasquier and pianist Jean-François Heisser. They aren't closely miked – you hear the music as though you're out in the hall, not up on stage right by the instruments. But the recorded sound is clear, you can hear everything, and as for the performance it's a show-stopper. Pasquier and Heisser hold this lengthy piece together like no one else. They deliver a coherent and captivating musical narrative. Liszt's transcription allows for softer and more intimate playing from the violist, who doesn't have to balance the part against a full orchestra. It's one of the few great works in the viola recital repertoire.

This brings us to the last four Liszt transcriptions featured on this podcast: his piano renditions of the *Fifth*, *Sixth*, and *Seventh* of the Beethoven

symphonies, and his fantasy for piano and orchestra on a theme from Beethoven's *Ruins of Athens Overture*. First, the *Athens Fantasy*. It's full of impressive piano writing, as you would expect, but it's one of Liszt's lesser efforts as a composer. Beethoven wrote the orchestral score as incidental music for a play, *The Ruins of Athens*. It's not one of Beethoven's more inspired efforts, either, though it does contain a well-known Turkish march melody. The Turkish march is the main theme Liszt plays with in his *Fantasy*. It's all pretty much just a collection of lightweight melodies and flashy piano figurations, though, and certainly the weakest piece Liszt wrote in 1837. If you're interested, though, pianist Louis Lortie does everything he can for it, along with the Resident Orchestra of The Hague under conductor George Pehlivanian.

Last but far from least, then, we've arrived at Liszt's Beethoven symphony transcriptions from 1837. Beethoven, one of Liszt's heroes, had been dead only ten years. There weren't many yet who knew Beethoven's music, so Liszt wrote these piano transcriptions to help popularize the symphonies at his recitals. Most people know Beethoven's *Fifth*, *Sixth*, and *Seventh* symphonies pretty well, so I'll limit myself to discussing a performance each of Liszt's transcriptions of them.

For Liszt's piano transcription of the *Fifth* Beethoven symphony, the performance you want to hear is Konstantin Scherbakov's. Scherbakov was born in Siberia, and since 1992 has lived in Zurich, where he's taught at the Zurich Academy of the Arts. He's made a great many recordings for different labels, showcasing his specialty of playing extremely difficult piano literature. Scherbakov's performance of Liszt's transcription of the Beethoven *Fifth* captures the exhilarating struggle between darkness and light that Beethoven depicts in this symphony. Scherbakov's technical prowess and the sheer power he draws from the piano are astounding.

Yury Martynov, another Russian pianist, gives my favorite performance of Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony* as transcribed by Liszt. Quite unlike the driving, relentless *Fifth Symphony*, the *Sixth* is all dreamy pastoral poetry. Completed in 1808, it's music with which Beethoven looked ahead to the early Romantic style that would hold sway in 1837. And where the *Fifth* deals in Classical symmetry, the *Sixth* is a good piece for performers to indulge in Romantic rubato, to linger on pretty notes and details of phrasing. That's what I like so much about Martynov's performance of the Liszt transcription of the *Sixth*: he renders it as the Romantic poetry that it is. Also, Martynov plays an 1837 Erard piano on his Liszt/Beethoven recordings. What a perfect fit for this podcast: Martynov plays a transcription Liszt wrote in 1837 on a piano built in 1837, which we're discussing on *1837: A Year in Classical Music*. And Erard, by the way, was Liszt's favorite piano maker, so it's a perfect match all around.

Martynov has also recorded Liszt's transcription of the Beethoven *Seventh Symphony* on his 1837 Erard, but I don't think his approach works as well with the *Seventh*. Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* is built on steady dance rhythms, but Martynov plays it the way he does the *Sixth*: full of the ebb and flow of rubato, as though he were playing a Chopin nocturne. So for the

Seventh, I recommend Cyprien Katsaris. Katsaris captures the symphonic scope of Beethoven's *Seventh* in his rendition of Liszt's transcription.

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