# The Piano Concerto Transcription: Liszt's Back Door Entrance to the Genre

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It took Franz Liszt 23 years to premiere his Piano Concerto No. 1 (S124). He began composing the work as early as 1832, revising it multiple times over the next two decades, until he finally presented it to the public in 1855.<sup>2</sup> The work was innovative in its time, featuring cyclical use of themes as well as strongly unified movements that act as sections of one cohesive piece. Liszt specialist Jay Rosenblatt notes that, because of the work's structural and harmonic novelty. Liszt "must have been apprehensive about offering such a work to the musical world." Before Liszt gained the courage to perform his first original concerto, he premiered six piano concerto arrangements between 1835 and 1853. Liszt is, of course, widely known for his many solo piano transcriptions of orchestral works, operatic themes, and art songs, but he also arranged a few solo piano pieces and orchestral works for piano and orchestra. For Liszt, arranging these pieces for piano and orchestra served as a tentative way to establish himself in the concerto genre without risking the failure of an original work. An investigation of the circumstances surrounding each arrangement reveals Liszt's underlying motivation to use concerto transcriptions to meet his needs as a performer, teacher and composer, thereby reaping the benefits of producing virtuosic works for piano and orchestra while avoiding potentially poor reception of his progressive original works.

A cursory glance at a timeline comparing when Liszt's concertos were first drafted and first performed reveals a great disparity (see Charts 1 and 2 in the handout). Liszt completed versions of all his original concertos early in his career, but he delayed performances of each by at least fifteen years. In sharp contrast, Liszt's six concerto arrangements were premiered within a few years of their composition, and all before the premiere of the first concerto. These diametrically opposed approaches for original works and arrangements likely stem from negative critical reception Liszt received early in his career.

As a young virtuoso pianist and aspiring composer, Liszt naturally gravitated to the piano concerto genre from the start of his career. The first sketches of a mature work—what would become Concerto No. 1—date to 1832. Liszt had finished a draft of the entire concerto by 1834, but he did not seek performance or publication for the work and shelved it until 1839. Instead, Liszt composed and performed another work for piano and orchestra that year: the *Grande* 

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> All catalogue numbers refer to the revised catalog of Michael Short and Leslie Howard. See Michael Short and Leslie Howard, "Franz Liszt: List of Works," *Quaderni dell'Istituto Liszt* 4 (2004): 1–144.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Rena Charnin Mueller, "Liszt's 'Tasso' Sketchbook: Studies in Sources and Revisions" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1986), 159n87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Jay Rosenblatt, "Piano and Orchestra Works," in *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 293.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Michael Jay Rosenblatt, "The Concerto As Crucible: Franz Liszt's Early Works for Piano and Orchestra" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1995), 199.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Rosenblatt, "Piano and Orchestra," 281, 288.

fantaisie symphonique on themes from Berlioz's Lélio. The work is essentially a twenty-five minute paraphrase on themes from the first and third movements of *Lélio* (1832).

Liszt performed as soloist for the *Grande fantaisie*'s premiere on April 9, 1835, but the response was not what he had hoped. The work elicited strong reactions from critics that seemed to greatly affect Liszt's willingness to debut concertos later on. The critics all spoke favorably of Liszt's playing but many questioned the *Grande fantaisie*'s compositional merit.

A writer for the *Revue musicale* commented, "There reigns so much confusion, so many repetitions, of things unintelligible if long repeated, that it took nothing less than the marvelous execution of the author to applaud this performance." The reviewer from *Le pianiste* agreed, writing, "Liszt...showed great qualities and great faults; there are certain remarkable passages for the piano and interesting effects for the orchestra in the Fantaisie symphonique, but the overstatement is such that, in general, it stifles the good things we sometimes find in the piece." The review in *Le Figaro* was the most blunt of all: "As a composition, his work makes no sense." Such biting criticism would surely have been difficult to receive, and as Rosenblatt suggests, it "must have inhibited Liszt in the following years from introducing his original compositions for piano and orchestra."8

Though Liszt may have abstained from debuting new concertos in the next fifteen years, he remained devoted to composing and revising them. In 1839, Liszt returned to the draft of Piano Concerto No. 1, bringing it much closer to its final form. He also began work on Piano Concerto No. 2 and completed a draft that closely relates to the final version. <sup>10</sup> In addition, Liszt composed Piano Concerto No. 3, a one-movement work that foreshadows many of the compositional techniques of Liszt's symphonic poems. 11 Liszt never published this work, and it remained entirely unknown until Jay Rosenblatt uncovered it in the late 1980s. 12

Thus, by 1840 Liszt had workable versions of three original concertos, yet he chose not to premiere any of them during his many concert engagements. Indeed, Liszt's concert tours over the next decade rocketed him to international stardom, but original works for piano and orchestra played virtually no role in his success. From 1838 to 1947—his Glanzperiode in which he traveled Europe as the undisputed virtuoso par excellence—Liszt nearly always played Weber's Konzertstück when performing with orchestra, rather than original works. <sup>13</sup> The Konzertstück held great appeal for Liszt and influenced his own compositions. The piece features a novel structure of three movements connected by transitions intended to portray a dramatic program. Liszt followed in Weber's vein as he composed his own concertos, embracing non-traditional forms that serve his expressive ends in all his works.

On rare occasions, Liszt instead turned to *Hexaméron* (S365a), a new piano concerto transcription of an unusual solo piano work. 14 The solo version of *Hexaméron* (S392, 1837) featured six variations on a theme of Bellini commissioned by Princess Cristina Belgiojoso from six leading virtuosos of the day: Liszt, Frédéric Chopin, Johann Peter Pixis, Sigmund Thalberg,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Rosenblatt, "Concerto As Crucible," 276fn68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Rosenblatt, "Concerto As Crucible," 283.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenblatt, "Concerto As Crucible," 288.

<sup>9</sup> Rosenblatt, "Piano and Orchestra Works," 289.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Rosenblatt, "Piano and Orchestra Works," 289.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Rosenblatt, "Piano and Orchestra Works," 289.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Rosenblatt, introduction to Franz Liszt, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in E-flat Major, Op. Posth., ed. Jay Rosenblatt (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1989), 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Rosenblatt, "Piano and Orchestra Work," 292.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Rosenblatt, "Piano and Orchestra Works," 292.

Carl Czerny, and Henri Herz. Liszt also provided the work's introduction, first statement of the theme, and finale. Liszt arranged his concerto version to debut in Vienna on March 31, 1840. This single documented performance is the closest Liszt got to performing a work for piano and orchestra of his own during his concert tours. Rosenblatt notes, "It seems as if Liszt's ego did not allow him to jeopardize his success with experimental works such as his three concertos."

Liszt retired from concertizing in 1847 and took up residence in Weimar in 1848 in order to devote himself to conducting and composing. <sup>18</sup> In the 1850s, Weimar became the artistic center for the progressive New German School. The music of Berlioz, Wagner, Liszt, and Liszt's students flourished here, even if rejected elsewhere. Those who opposed this progressive movement, mostly based in Leipzig and Vienna, denounced Liszt's works throughout the decade. <sup>19</sup> Though conservative writers would not be united behind their strongest voice, Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, until the latter half of the decade, musicologist James Deaville maintains, "a survey of journal articles from the 1850s would nevertheless give the impression that the New Germans were far outnumbered." Deaville continues, "Works like [Liszt's] program symphonies and symphonic poems were regarded as profaning long-held aesthetic principles." Liszt himself was keenly aware of this criticism. He wrote in March 1854, "To approve of my works, or even to hear them without condemning them in advance, is a crime." Liszt ultimately disregarded the critics and persisted in premiering his groundbreaking symphonic poems and other orchestral works throughout the decade, but fear of negative reception likely delayed the introduction of his original piano concertos, as it had years earlier.

As Liszt settled in Weimar, he continued revising his existing concertos and started several new works for piano and orchestra. Rena Charnin Mueller asserts that producing a concerto was a high priority for Liszt at this time. She writes, "No piano and orchestra work of any kind had been published by 1848, and...the principal task in the first years of his residency was to remedy this lack." By October 1849, Liszt and his amanuensis August Conradi had completed copies of six works for piano and orchestra: Piano Concertos 1 and 2, the earliest version of *Totentanz*, and arrangements of a Hungarian Rhapsody (S122), Liszt's solo piano *Capriccio alla Turca* on motives of Beethoven (S123), and Weber's *Polonaise brillante* (S367). These works—with one addition, the transcription of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* (S366)—comprise the remainder of Liszt's output for piano and orchestra, and the order in which he publicly presented them betrays his lingering reluctance to debut an original concerto. Liszt put off the premieres of the original works, choosing instead the four arrangements to meet his pedagogical and compositional needs for concertos.

One of the primary functions of these transcriptions was to serve as virtuoso performing vehicles for Liszt's students. Liszt was a devoted teacher for much of his career. He had taught

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Rosenblatt, "Orchestral Transcriptions," in *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 311.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Rosenblatt, "Piano and Orchestra Work," 292.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Rosenblatt, "Piano and Orchestra Work," 292.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Alan Walker, Franz Liszt, vol. II: The Weimar Years, 1848–61 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 3–12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, vol. II, 337.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> James Deaville, "Liszt in the German Language Press," in *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold, 47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Deaville, 47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Wilhelm von Csapó, ed., *Franz Liszts Briefe an Baron Anton Augusz, 1846–78* (Budapest, 1911): 49. Translated in Walker, "*Franz Liszt*, vol. II," 300.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Mueller, 159.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Mueller, 160.

piano full time to support himself in his youth in Paris, but as he settled in Weimer he devoted himself to teaching a handful of especially talented pupils. As Liszt sought to premiere and publish a work for piano and orchestra, especially one that would serve his students, he returned to the music of Carl Maria von Weber. As mentioned previously, Weber's *Konzerstück* was an important part of Liszt's own concert success, and his choice to transcribe Weber's solo piano *Polonaise brilliante*, op. 72 (1821), for piano and orchestra seemed to build upon his previous triumphs with the *Konzertstück*. Both pieces feature sparkling passagework, require virtuosic poise, and are traditional crowd-pleasers, though they differ in affect. Weber's solo piano *Polonaise* is generally joyful and upbeat, but Liszt brought his arrangement closer to the seriousness of the first two movements of the *Konzertstück* through the addition of a slow introduction in E Minor based on a theme from Weber's *Grande polonaise*, Op. 21 (1815).

Liszt scheduled the premiere of the *Poloniase brillante*—his first work for piano and orchestra in over a decade—for April 13, 1851. Liszt's student Salomon Jadassohn performed as soloist as Liszt conducted the Weimar court orchestra.<sup>27</sup> Evidently pleased with the work's reception, Liszt sought to publish it and encouraged others to perform it as well. He wrote to pianist Theodor Kullack on June 15, 1852:

It is especially with a view to enlarging the concert repertory that I have undertaken my bit of work....You will see that I have done my best to serve the few pianists (the number is exceedingly restricted, I know), who would be eager to play at their concerts pieces that make a distinguished impression. Perhaps you would do me the honor and the favor to attempt this Polonaise one time in public, and in that case the success of it would be brilliantly assured. <sup>28</sup>

A. M. Schlesinger of Berlin agreed to distribute the *Polonaise brillante* in 1852, making it Liszt's first published work for piano and orchestra.<sup>29</sup>

Two other transcriptions received premieres due to the need for virtuosic showpieces for one of Liszt's most prized pupils, Hans von Bülow (1830–1894): the *Fantasy on Motives from Beethoven's Ruins of Athens* and the *Fantasy on Hungarian Folk Melodies*. The "Ruins of Athens" Fantasy originated in 1847 as a solo piano paraphrase of Beethoven's incidental music to the 1811 play of the same name. <sup>30</sup> By 1849, he had arranged the work for piano and orchestra. Similarly, the Fantasy on Hungarian Folk Melodies (sometimes simply called the Hungarian Fantasy) originated as a solo piano Hungarian Rhapsody as early as 1846. <sup>31</sup> Liszt reworked this material several times, first arranging it for piano and orchestra in 1849.

Bülow began studying with Liszt in Weimer in 1851.<sup>32</sup> Liszt took pride in Bülow, calling him "my legitimate successor, by the grace of God, and by his remarkable talent."<sup>33</sup> After a few

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, vol. 1, 130.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Michael C. Tusa, "Exploring the Master's Influence: Liszt and the Music of Carl Maria von Weber," *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 45 (1999): 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Rosenblatt, "Orchestral Transcriptions," 314.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Unpublished letter transcribed in Rosenblatt, "Concerto As Crucible," 442–3. Translated by Rosenblatt in "Orchestral Transcriptions," 314.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Rosenblatt, "Orchestral Transcriptions," 314.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Rosenblatt, "Orchestral Transcriptions," 314. Play by August von Kotzebue.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Short and Howard, "Franz Liszt," 44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Kenneth Birkin, *Hans von Bülow: A Life for Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 47.

years of study, Bülow was preparing for his first international concert tour in the spring of 1853. Liszt coached his protégé in a large repertoire of etudes, sonatas, and concertos.<sup>34</sup> Liszt also assigned his own compositions including several Hungarian rhapsodies and the unpublished Piano Sonata in B Minor.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, though Liszt assigned his Piano Concerto No. 1 to Bülow to practice, he did not suggest that Bülow perform the work on his upcoming tour. Liszt instead assigned his "Ruins of Athens" and Hungarian Fantasies, preparing new versions by January 1853.<sup>36</sup>

Bülow premiered the two fantasies in Budapest, the second stop on his tour, on June 1, 1853.<sup>37</sup> The performance was so successful that Bülow reportedly received ten encores and was forced to repeat the Hungarian Fantasy in its entirety!<sup>38</sup> Bülow performed both works multiple times on his tour and also programmed the *Polonaise brillante*. Bülow continued to perform these concerto arrangements for several years, playing the *Polonaise* six times, the Hungarian Fantasy four times, and the "Ruins of Athens" Fantasy twice between 1853 and 1855.<sup>39</sup> Bülow's continued success reveals that the concerto transcriptions were doing their job in helping Liszt's students establish their own performing careers.

Liszt may have also created concerto transcriptions to aid in his own development as a composer. This was likely a motivation for Liszt's transcription of Franz Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* (1822). Just as Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn copied fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* to master Bach's counterpoint, Liszt's arrangement of the *Wanderer Fantasy* immersed him in Schubert's cyclic structure and use of thematic transformation, preparing him to attempt similar gestures in his own works. <sup>40</sup> Scholars frequently cite the *Wanderer Fantasy*'s effect on Liszt as a composer. Alan Walker goes so far as to say, "If we wish to identify one work that had a greater influence on Liszt than all others, we shall find it in Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*." The act of transcribing the *Wanderer Fantasy* as a piano concerto may have been the primary medium through which its influence on Liszt's compositional thinking was cemented.

Scholars often identify the *Wanderer Fantasy* as a primary inspiration for Liszt's greatest contribution to the symphonic literature, the single-movement tone poem. The *Wanderer* Fantasy served as an existing model of what Liszt wanted to achieve in these works. <sup>42</sup> Donald Francis Tovey notes, "The 'Wanderer' Fantasia had a special interest for Liszt, because, without any revolutionary gestures, it solved the problem of the 'Symphonic Poem." The *Wanderer Fantasy* eschews the traditional form of a symphony or sonata by linking each movement and bringing back the opening theme as the fugue subject of the finale. Further, the themes of each movement

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Maria von Bülow, ed., *Hans von Bülow Briefe*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1895), 510. Trans. by Birkin in *Hans von Bülow: A Life for Music*, 64.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Birkin, 57.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Birkin, 48, 57.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Rosenblatt, "Orchestral Transcriptions," 314.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Walker, Hans von Bülow: A Life and Times (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 66–7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Walker, *Hans von Bülow*, 67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Birkin, 391–5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> See Hermann Abert, *W. A. Mozart*, ed. Cliff Eisen, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007): 793; Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven*, 2nd rev. ed (New York: Schirmer Books: 1998): 35; Eric Werner, *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and His Age*, trans. Dika Newlin (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963): 18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Walker, Franz Liszt, vol. II, 310.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> See Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 238.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Donald Francis Tovey, Essays in Musical Analysis, vol. 4, 6 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 70.

derive from the long-short-short-long rhythmic motive of the first line of *Der Wanderer*, Schubert's 1821 Lied that he re-imagines as the Wanderer Fantasy's second movement, achieving a high degree of thematic unity that Liszt emulated in his own works. Indeed, looking back, Tovey calls it "the first and greatest of all symphonic poems."<sup>44</sup>

Consequently, Liszt's choice to transcribe the Wanderer Fantasy was likely more than a gesture of admiration to Schubert. Through arranging the work for piano and orchestra, Liszt absorbed its novel features into his own compositional vocabulary, marking an important step in Liszt's creative growth. Further, by connecting himself with this respected work, Liszt may have hoped to bridge the gap between the Viennese tradition and his own groundbreaking symphonic poems. This might explain why Liszt had the work premiered in Vienna, a city with conservative musical tastes, by his friend Count Jules Hardegg and the orchestra of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde on December 14, 1851. 45 Thus, the *Wanderer Fantasy* transcription not only grew Liszt as a composer, but may have been an attempt to prepare listeners for his own original concertos and symphonic poems.

At long last, on February 16, 1855, Liszt debuted Piano Concerto No. 1 with Berlioz conducting. 46 He had waited over two decades since the work's first incarnation, experienced the height of his career as a traveling virtuoso, put forth six concerto arrangements, and was now beginning to premiere his revolutionary symphonic poems. He published Concerto No. 1 and the Wanderer Fantasy transcription in 1857 and debuted Concerto No. 2 the same year. 47 By 1865, all of Liszt's concertos were finally published.

The concerto transcriptions had served their purpose. Liszt, scarred by the poor reception of the Grande fantaisie symphonique early in his career, still managed to create virtuosic showpieces for himself and his students through an essentially new genre, the piano concerto transcription. These transcriptions—the Wanderer Fantasy in particular—helped Liszt grow as a composer, and all the arrangements helped Liszt establish himself in the concerto genre, ultimately preparing him to debut Piano Concerto No. 1. It may seem strange that a titan of the Romantic period such as Liszt could have been so sensitive to criticism that it stifled his efforts in the field of his own instrument for over twenty years, but without this hesitancy, he may have never produced these exciting concertos that both honor their parent compositions and display Liszt's unmistakable pianistic flair. Though the Grande fantasie symphonique's negative reception surely disappointed Liszt, generations of pianists are thankful for it and the works that grew out of it. The piano repertoire is better because of them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Tovey, *Musical Articles from the Encyclopaedia Britannica* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944): 236–7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Rosenblatt, "Orchestral Transcriptions," 310. Hardegg used the pseudonym Jules or Julius Egghard in

Short and Howard, "Franz Liszt," 22.
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