

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Franz Liszt's (1811-1886) late piano music, especially written during the last five years of his life (1881-6), have been the object of continual fascination¹ that relates to various depressing moments of his life. There are specifically two aspects that to a remarkable extent, these works have been the most innovative features of the "romantic" period: first, the elevation of such chromaticism to the point that results in early tonal dissolution since Liszt felt that tonality could no longer express/satisfy his depression; and second, the expression of programmatic suggestion of mystical character especially related to the death of Richard Wagner.

The continuous series of unfortunate events, starting around 1860, marked a dramatic change in Liszt's life that took serious emotional and physical toll on the composer especially during the last five years of his life. Towards the end of his life, Liszt grew increasingly isolated and depressed, often overwhelmed by sadness as he told Lina Ramann, his biographer, "I carry a deep sadness of the heart which must now and then break out in sound."² These events included the end of his long-career as a court conductor in Weimar; the sudden death of his two children in 1859 and 1862 respectively; the unstable relationship with Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein³ that led to no solution; the newspaper protest against his new music

¹ James M. Baker, "The Limits of Tonality in the Late Music of Franz Liszt," *Journal of Music Theory* 34, no. 2 (1990): 145, www.jstor.org/stable/843836.

² Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Final Years, 1861-1886* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1996)

³ A Polish noblewoman and Liszt's romantic partner from 1848-1886.

under the signature of Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) and Joseph Joachim (1831-1907); the continuous struggling relationship with Wagner; the resignation from Catholic Church ordination in Rome; and the series of illness after Liszt fell down from stairs.

These depressions were seriously reflected in Liszt's late piano music (especially after 1880) as he composed them in a radical manner illustrating his experimental style at its extremity as stated by Humphrey Searle:⁴

“It is against the background of these events that the works of Liszt's last period must be viewed, for they explain the personal significance of some of these compositions, and also show the direction in which his thoughts were tending.”⁵

These works suggest improvisatory flow of materials, as though Liszt sought to mimic the thoughts experienced in dreams or introspection, illustrating death, despair and recollections of the past. Moreover, these works were also written with the central idea of the breakdown of traditional tonal functions and the subsequent rejection, resulting in declining tonality and early atonality, analyzed by the lack of tonal definition and sense of cadence, the pillar on which tonality rests. To describe this writing, Jim Samson explains as follows:

“... but it is above all in the short piano pieces written in the eighties that we are made acutely aware of Liszt's dissatisfaction with a traditional means of expression. The harmonic language of these late pieces often rejects traditional diatonic functions, responding freely and boldly to programmatic suggestion of a

⁴ Searle developed the most authoritative catalogue of Franz Liszt's works which are established as the Searle's numbering system, abbreviated as “S”.

⁵ Humphrey Searle, “Liszt's Final Period (1860-1886),” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 78 (1951): 68, www.jstor.org/stable/766047.

mystical or valedictory character.”⁶

Humphrey Searle also adds the following regarding Liszt’s dissatisfaction with traditional tonality:

“The style has become extremely stark and austere, there are long passages in single notes and a considerable use of whole-tone chords, and anything resembling a cadence is avoided; in fact, if a work does end with a common chord it is more often in an inversion than in root position. . . . For the majority of these works he returned to his first love, the piano; but in general, the old pianistic glitter is absent.”⁷

Liszt’s late writing also responded boldly to programmatic suggestion of a mystical character, especially associated with continuous premonition of Wagner’s death (1883). American scholar, Maurice Hinson describes Liszt’s extreme piano writing during the last five years of his life as follows:

“Liszt’s music was aggressively advanced, especially in his cryptic late works, which pushed well beyond the confines of traditional tonality to suggest the forthcoming musical styles of both impressionism and expressionism.”⁸

There are four works directly associated with the premonition of Wagner’s death: both *La Lugubre Gondola* (the analyzed study case in this research), *Richard Wagner-Venezia*, and *Am Grabe Richard Wagner*. In a letter to Frederick Taborszky on 8th June 1885,⁹ Liszt particularly mentioned regarding *La lugubre Gondola*, S. 200:

⁶ Jim Samson, *Music in Transition: A Study of Tonal Expansion and Atonality, 1900-1920*, american ed. (New York: Norton, 1977), 15.

⁷ Humphrey Searle, *The Music of Liszt* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2012), 108.

⁸ Maurice Hinson, *Guide to the Pianist’s Repertoire*, 4th edition, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 611.

⁹ A music published in Budapest.

“The title is *La lugubre Gondola* (the funeral gondola). As though it were a presentiment, I wrote this élegie in Venice six weeks before Wagner’s death.”¹⁰

The purpose of this research is to provide in-depth analyses of both numbers of *La lugubre Gondola* [The Funeral Gondola], S. 200 and evaluate how Liszt expressed his musical language as a result of various dramatic depressing moments of his life, at the same time confronts and opens up new path for early twentieth century composers to follow. This research is conducted based on qualitative research study with historical study and literature study, by gathering data from books (print out and online); online dissertations and theses; and online journals. The collected data are then examined with descriptive analysis and comparative study between the two numbers of *La lugubre Gondola*, which is then evaluated to reach a conclusion.

1.2 Research Question

How did Liszt elevate such chromaticism and express his dissatisfaction with traditional tonal system in *La Lugubre Gondola*, S. 200 hence conveying his depressing life moment – specifically, in relation to the premonition of Wagner’s death?

1.3 Scopes of Research

1. The research topic is limited to Liszt and his late piano music (1881-1886).
2. The main analysis is on Liszt’s *La lugubre Gondola*, S. 200 (Editio

¹⁰ Franz Liszt, trans., *Letters of Franz Liszt: From Rome to the End*, comp. La Mara, trans. Bache Constance (London: H. Grevel, 1894), 2:473.

Musica Budapest edition).

1.4 Purpose of Research

1. To provide descriptive analysis of musical elements in both numbers of *La lugubre Gondola*, S. 200
2. To provide evaluative assessment of how Liszt expressed his musical language as a result of various dramatic and depressing moments of his life through the descriptive analysis.
3. To provide scholarly insights that the late music of Liszt really confronts and opens up new path for early twentieth century composers.
4. To provide historical evaluation that although his late works are often overshadowed by the earlier works, nevertheless, they are the ones that enchant and captivate attention of both music scholars and composers entering the twentieth century.

1.5 Research Writing Structure

Chapter I, “Introduction” includes background of the scientific work; research question; scopes of research; and purpose of the research.

Chapter II, “Theoretical Framework” includes theoretical explanations regarding elements that are linked to Liszt and tonal expansion, such as the understanding of tonality, tonal expansion and dissolution in the nineteenth century, the brief biography of Franz Liszt, the dramatic changes in Franz Liszt’s life since 1960 and the late mystical piano works of Franz Liszt.

Chapter III, “Methodology” includes methods and analysis procedures of

this research, such as reconfirming background of research topic choice, research methodology, sources with similar topic, review for sources of research, data analysis, hypothetical conclusion, and research timetable.

Chapter IV, “Discussion” includes descriptive analysis and comparative study of the two numbers in *La lugubre Gondola*, S. 200.

Chapter V, “Conclusion” includes the evaluation and the result of this research as an evidence to the Liszt’s dissatisfaction with the traditional tonal system in *La lugubre Gondola*, S. 200.

