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Liszt and the French literary avant-garde of the 1830s

ABSTRACT: In France the 1820s and 1830s brought about enormous changes in the perception of literature and art as a whole. Young poets, encouraged by the success and novelty of *Méditations poétiques* by Alphonse de Lamartine, started seeking new possibilities of expression and ways of breaking with the several-centuries-old tradition. They met with a strong protest from conservative *milieu*, especially those linked to Académie française, and this made them fight for a new paradigm in literature. They eagerly experimented with language as sound (Lamartine, Sainte-Beuve) and graphic (Nodier) matter. They published their texts in the press (*Le Globe*) and presented them during meetings in artistic salons, which functioned as a kind of laboratory. Thanks to the support of Charles Nodier they could publish their poems in the best publishing houses, which largely contributed to their success. The final victory of the romantics was the premiere of *Hernani* by Victor Hugo in February 1830.

Franz Liszt, who came to Paris in 1823, was an active participant in the artistic and intellectual life there. Moreover, he was also a friend of many prominent artists of the epoch, which can be seen in his letters, writings, and piano music from the early 1830s. A particular example of the relationship between the composer's music and literary avant-garde is the piece *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* of 1835. We find there the domination of the sound element, formal freedom, the intertwining of poetical techniques, experiments with structure, and a strong stress on the word aspect of the oeuvre, for example through very precise notation of tempo markings.

KEYWORDS: Franz Liszt, French literature, romanticism, piano music, Alphonse de Lamartine, *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*

Janusz Sławiński defines the avant-garde movement as:

Collective name of the 20th-century artistic movements, especially from the first decades of the century, whose programmes and accomplishments stemmed from a strong opposition against the art of the epoch, its aims and achievements; they carved the way for new solutions in the sphere of art and of ideas, and formulated new criteria of evaluating art, based on new principles. [...] the tendencies shared by the avant-garde movement as a whole [...] include: anti-traditionalism, opposition against the conventions of realism and naturalism of the previous century, a search for means of artistic expression linked to the impulse of modernity, an eagerness to experiment, and a striving for creating programmes and providing theoretical justifications of artistic activity.¹

¹ "Zbiorową nazwę XX-wiecznych kierunków artystycznych, zwłaszcza z pierwszej ćwierci wieku, których programy i realizacje wyrastały ze zdecydowanego sprzeciwu wobec sztuki zastanej,

The developments which took place in the literature of the 20th century may be explained in that manner. However, this definition also describes precisely what happened in the sphere of literature in France at the beginning of the 19th century, especially in the 1820s and 1830s, when the classical paradigm was gradually being replaced by the avant-garde of that time, which was called romanticism. This period is symbolically marked out by two dates: 1820, the first publication of *Méditations poétiques* by Alphonse de Lamartine, and the premiere of *Hernani* by Victor Hugo at the Théâtre français in 1830.

Lamartine's collection became a turning point for poetry and, subsequently, for all French art. The novelty of this cycle primarily consists in the fact that, as Lamartine himself said, it was the first time that art descended from the Parnassus, and the muse's lyre was replaced by chords of the human heart moved by the flushes of the soul and of nature.² In place of the ancient gods, elements of Christianity appeared, in particular the idea of the soul's immortality (*L'Immortalité*), as well as a degree of religious syncretism (*La Prière, La Foi, Chant lyrique de Saül, imitation des psaumes de David*) and the presence of ordinary people (*L'Homme, Le Chrétien mourant*). There is also reflection on the fate of extraordinary minds (*Le Génie, Philosophie*), whose genius comes from divine inspiration, and poetry itself is associated with prophecy (*La Poésie sacrée, dithyrambe*). This small collection contains unusually personal poems that show considerable sensitivity and true feelings (*À Elvire*) unknown in France since the 16th century (since the epoch of the Petrarch followers). They are characterised by deep melancholy, giving expression to the experience of the pain of existence, and the awareness of transience (*L'Isolement, Le Désespoir, La Poésie sacrée*) foreshadowed by *René* and *Obermann*. Nature becomes one of the protagonists (*Le Vallon, Le Lac, Hymne au soleil*).

Another important feature of this poetry is its musicality, which manifests itself mainly in recalling the sounds of real musical instruments (harp, lyre, orchestra) or the human voice (children singing in *La Poésie sacrée*; bard singing in *Les Oiseaux*) or the so-called music of nature³ (waves, wind in *Le Vallon*), as well

jej zadań i osiągnąć, torowały drogę nowym rozwiązaniom ideowo-artystycznym i formowały na nowych zasadach oparte kryteria wartościowania dzieł sztuki. [...] tendencje wspólne całej awangardy [...] to: antytradycjonalizm, rozbrat z konwencjami zeszłowiecznego realizmu i naturalizmu, poszukiwanie środków przekazu artystycznego związanych z impulsem współczesności, nastawienie eksperymentatorskie, dążenie do programowości i teoretycznych uzasadnień działania twórczego". Michał Głowiński, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, Janusz Sławiński, *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of literary terms], ed. Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2010), 52.

² Alphonse de Lamartine, *Première préface des Méditations* in *Méditations poétiques. Nouvelles méditations poétiques*, ed. Aurélie Loiseleur (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2006), 56.

³ The dense accumulation of metaphors referring to the music of nature, or concerts of nature as Lamartine described them, as well as their precise application, brings to mind the 20th century *landscape music*.

as musical metaphors (chords of joy in *La Poésie sacrée*; the lyre of the soul in *À une enfant, fille du poète*) and references to Pythagorean theory of music of the spheres. This is why in those texts we encounter heavenly concerts (*Le Vallon*), the voice of the universe extolling its king, and the Pythagorean idea of the music of the spheres (*La Prière*), the harmony of waves (*Le Lac*), and even a vision of life as a two-voice hymn sung to the accompaniment of a lyre (*À une enfant*), which sometimes makes the logic of the poetic discourse unclear. In this way Lamartine refers to the auditory imagination of the reader – a practice that was at that time new and had profound consequences.

The auditory aspect that sometimes dominates the narration was the reason for attacks on Lamartine's work by some literary critics; for example, Léon Thiessé⁴ seemed not to understand the novelty and the importance of treating poetical language as sound matter. Lamartine also met with accusations of breaking the classical rules sanctified by the tradition of Corneille or Racine, in particular the varied versification and the introduction of new topics encountered strong opposition. However, a considerable section of the public was enchanted by the beauty of the texts and their 'otherness'. Lamartine was astonished to note that his texts were also being read by people not interested in poetry, such as Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, Louis-Mathieu Molé, or Étienne-Denis Pasquier. Even King Louis the 18th publicly praised this collection of poems, a fact related by the poet in his letter to a friend, Aymon de Virieu, on 23rd March 1820. As early as 1823, an influential librarian and literary critic, Charles Nodier, published a very enthusiastic review of *Méditations poétiques* by Lamartine, proclaiming the birth of a poetic genius and the renewal of French poetry through the new expression achieved by invoking Christian religion and by the deep feelings and passions, never previously present with such intensity.⁵ Nodier also saw Lamartine as the spiritual leader of a new school, that of romantic poetry.

The collection of Lamartine's texts soon found its supporters and followers among younger poets, who referred to the new elements he had introduced and elaborated on them in the philosophical and religious spirit (Victor Hugo, Alfred de Vigny, Alfred de Musset), or in the sentimental spirit with a deeper psychological aspect in confessions of the lyrical subject (Emile Deschamps, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Charles-Augustine Sainte-Beuve). However, they did not meet with the wider approval of the critics and the *milieu* associated with Académie française. This meant that they were forced to publish their artistic output, as well as voicing and defending their opinions, in special publications established for these very purposes. One may mention here *La Muse française* edited by Victor

⁴ More in Aurélie Loiseleur, *L'harmonie selon Lamartine. Utopie d'un lieu commun* (Paris: Champion, 2006), 154.

⁵ This review was published on 4th October 1823 in: *La Quotidienne*, while in 1824 it became the foreword to the 11th edition of *Méditations poétiques* by Lamartine. Charles Nodier, *Préface in Méditations poétiques. Nouvelles méditations poétiques*, 496–499.

Hugo or the later *Le Globe*.⁶ The development of this poetry was also boosted by social meetings in the salons of artists such as Hugo, the Deschamps brothers (Émile and Antoine-François), the Devéria brothers (Eugène and Achille), or Charles Nodier.

The last-mentioned salon served (from 1824) as a refuge for romanticism, after it was rejected by Académie française. Nodier was extremely open towards all innovations; he supported young artists, encouraged them to experiment, and enabled them to meet and to present their artistic output. As an admirer of the works of Hoffmann, Nodier stimulated the imagination of the young, encouraging them to seek inspiration in the world of fantasy and in the German culture (especially in Mediaeval myths and in Goethe's *Faust*). As a librarian and book-lover he also had acquaintances among publishers, which enabled him to support the publication of young poets' collections. The role of Nodier in the development of romanticism seems to be underestimated at the present time; it could best be summarised by Alfred de Musset's description of this polymath as 'le père du romantisme.'⁷

This fighting romanticism, as befitted an avant-garde movement, had its own programme, which was forcefully presented by the movement's central figure, Victor Hugo, in his famous foreword to *Cromwell* (1827). It could be summarised as follows: the most important rules for a writer are the rules imposed by his imagination; art should be based on real life; in drama, the style of an utterance should depend on the character speaking, hence solemnity may be intertwined with grotesque and all is determined by the 'artistic caprice' of an artist. Meanwhile, the aim of art is almost divine: 'ressusciter, s'il fait de l'histoire; créer, s'il fait de la poésie'.⁸ The artist should become a leader of humanity and lead people on the way of progress, towards the ideal. This vision was described by Hugo in his programme poem *Mazeppa* of 1828.

Among the actions of this 19th-century literary avant-garde movement one may mention the transfer of techniques between the arts, as in the case of the famous poem by Sainte-Beuve, *Les rayons jaunes*⁹, in which the author uses colour as a kind of *leitmotif*. Yellow appears in different places and contexts, each time with a different meaning. It bears memories from adolescence, admiration of nature (sunset in different seasons of the year), provokes reflection on transience and death (the skin colour of a dead aunt). This *quasi*-musical play with colour serves

⁶ More on this subject: Anne Martin-Fugier, *Les Romantiques 1820–1848* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), 4–78.

⁷ Vincent Laisney, *L'Arsenal romantique. Le salon de Charles Nodier (1824–1834)* (Paris: Champion, 2002), XIII.

⁸ Victor Hugo, *Cromwell* (Paris: Dupont, 1828), XL: "to revive, while dealing with history, to create while dealing with poetry."

⁹ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, "Les rayons jaunes" (1829), in: idem, *Poésies complètes*, (Paris: Charpentier, 1840), 62–65. A similar device will be used 20 years later by Théophile Gautier in his emblematic *Symphonie en blanc majeur (Emaux et camées*, 1852).

to strengthen the expression and the effect on the recipient. The poet explains this strategy in the following way: 'les couleurs naturelles des choses sont des couleurs sans nom; mais, selon la disposition d'âme du spectateur, selon la saison de l'année, l'heure du jour, le jeu de la lumière, ces couleurs ondulent à l'infini, et permettent au poète et au peintre d'inventer aussi à l'infini.'¹⁰

Yet another, more modern example of literary modernity is *L'histoire de Roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* by Charles Nodier published in 1830. This book lacks classical action; instead, there are the author's reflections, linguistic games and fragmentary narratives, while the three protagonists are incarnations of elements of the narrator's personality: imagination (Théodore), memory (don Pic de Fanferluchio) and judgement (Breloque). For Nodier a word was not a mere carrier of meaning, but was also material which he used to experiment on. The author, going somewhat further than Lamartine, takes up a kind of game with the sound characteristics of a text, creating with the help of onomatopoeic juxtapositions a new 'musical language':

Pif paf piaf patapan.

Ouhiyns ouhiyns. Ebrohé broha broha.

Ouhiyns ouhiyns.¹¹

There are also graphic experiments: at some points the text becomes an image, an illustration replaces a word, or the graphic layout of the words emphasises their meaning, which is perfectly demonstrated by the example below:

en
 descendent
 les
 sept
 rampes
 de
 l'escalier¹².

Nodier rejected the domination of narration over illustration as he considered the two carriers equal and their cooperation in the text was one of his "obsessions." Illustrations were an equivalent plane of narration and an element of the text at the same time, which translated into their number and layout. Meanwhile, the plot function of the illustrations creates an illusion of a narrative duet (transfer of musi-

¹⁰ Idem, *Pensées de Joseph Delorme* XI (1829) in: *ibid.*, 138: "natural colours of things do not have names, but depending on the mood of the spirit of the person who looks at them, depending on the season and time of day, depending on the play of light, these colours undulate infinitely and allow the poet and the painter to create infinitely."

¹¹ Charles Nodier, *Histoire du roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* (Paris: Frères Delangle, 1830), 381.

¹² *Ibid.*, 107.

cal technique). Both in the case of graphic and sound experiments, the language matter is transformed; there is interference within the literary text structure and the creation of new means of artistic expression, which was extremely important for the romantics.

The year 1830 symbolically closes this stormy decade with the victory of the romantics, which took place after the premiere of Victor Hugo's drama *Hernani, ou l'Honneur castilian* at the Théâtre français on 25th February. The battle won made the new kind of literature legitimate, and allowed artists to develop without any limitations imposed by Académie française, and romanticism became one of the official trends of 19th-century literature. The end of the battle led to a loosening of ties among the artists – in 1834 the *cénacle* from the Arsenal ended its activity, the salons of the Devéria brothers and Victor Hugo became empty, and each of them followed his own path. Artists still met in salons, but these were most frequently the salons of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, which played a somewhat different role.

This was the first time in the history of literature that the writers themselves gave a name to a movement they had called into being by defining it on many occasions. As early as 1833, Gautier ironically described a typical romantic attitude as being based on external appearance (outfit, hairstyle) and a certain style of writing, for example 'Le rêveur, avec une nacelle, un lac, un saule, une harpe, une femme attaquée de consommation et quelques versets de la Bible; l'intime, avec une savate, un pot de chambre, un mur, un carreau cassé, avec son beefsteak brûlé ou toute autre déception morale aussi douloureuse.'¹³ Romanticism itself was described almost as a synonym for modernity.

That variety of modern art has many features in common with the definition of avant-garde quoted at the beginning of this article (programme manifestoes in forewords and oeuvres that reject classical artistic conventions, inspiration drawn from beyond the real world, linguistic experiments, interest in modernity, a search for appropriate means of expression, and awareness of one's own role in the history of literature). Clearly, the applicability of this term to different situations points to the repeatability of certain phenomena, as well as reminding us how revolutionary French literary romanticism was in its assumptions.

At this point we encounter the question of what linked Liszt with the above literary phenomena. The first answer that comes to mind is that he lived in Paris from 1823. The young artist soon became a favourite of the Parisian public, and then a participant in the artistic and intellectual life. In Paris he had many famous friends and acquaintances, such as Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Jules Janin, Alphonse de Lamartine, Father Lamennais, Charles-Augustine Sainte-Beuve, George Sand, or Jean-Jacques Ampère, to mention but a few. Some of them were

¹³ Théophile Gautier, *Les Jeunes-France. Romans goguenards* (Paris: Eugène Renduel, 1833), 147: "In order to dream one needs a boat, a lake, a willow, a harp, a woman touched with exhaustion and several passages from the Bible. For intimacy one needs an old slipper, a chamber pot, a wall, a broken window, a burnt steak, or other equally painful moral disaster."

only acquaintances (Sand, Ampère), others were close friends (Dumas), and yet others – unattainable ideals (Hugo). Some of them also had their own salons, in which young Liszt gave concerts. Hugues-Félicité Robert de Lamennais was Liszt's mentor in the 1830s, and Sainte-Beuve was his confidant for more than ten years, while Lamartine was a close friend and a source of inspiration for the developing talent and musical imagination, which is clearly apparent in various aspects of Liszt's musical output as well as in his letters.

In Victor Hugo's salon Liszt met with Joseph d'Ortigue, Paul Fouchere, Pétrus Borele, and Louis Boulanger. He also paid visits to Madame Recamier, to Nodier's Arsenal and to George Sand's mansard at Quai Saint-Michel.¹⁴ He particularly valued his meetings with Hugo, a fact that the composer mentioned in his letter to Countess Marie d'Agoult: 'J'ai revu cette semaine notre ami Victor et Dumas; décidément c'est le suel monde, la seule société que je fréquenterai désormais; le reste me paraît si vide, si ennuyeusement vain.'¹⁵

Liszt's writings also contain ideas learnt from the Paris salons and the artistic activity of the most famous romantics, as, for example, the cycle of texts *De la situation des artistes et de leur condition dans la société* published in *Gazette Musicale* and inspired by Hugo's and Lamennais' ideas on art and artists and their role as spiritual leaders who should lead humanity to a set goal, and on faith in human progress, with art being one of the agencies through which it could be achieved.¹⁶ It seems that this continuous progress was Liszt's *credo*. Liszt also wrote on what he regards as the necessary unity of music and poetry, while all artists should 'établir entre eux un lien commun, fraternel, religieux'¹⁷, as art constitutes a kind of universal union of beauty and truth.

At the turn of the 1820s and 1830s Liszt wrote virtuoso fantasies on operatic themes, where he transferred operas, which were extremely popular at that time, and thus, indirectly, dramatic action, to the salon and to instrumental music. In this way he popularised selected works, combining genres and conventions as well as theatrical gestures and effects. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the form of fantasy, discussed by Bruno Moysan over many years, corresponds in its formal principles to the construction of operatic works.¹⁸ However, it is not the

¹⁴ Emile Haraszti, *Franz Liszt*, (Paris: Picard, 1967), 14–15.

¹⁵ *Correspondance. Marie d'Agoult-Franz Liszt*, ed. Serge Gut, Jacquelline Bellas (Paris: Fayard, 2001), 61: "this week I saw our friends Victor and Dumas; this is definitely the only milieu, the only company I want to meet with from now on, the others seem to me so empty, so tiresomely redundant." Letter written between 5th and 14th May 1833.

¹⁶ Franz Liszt, *De la situation des artistes et de leur condition dans la société*, in idem, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 1: *Frühe Schriften*, ed. Detlef Altenburg, Serge Gut (Wiesbaden, Breitkopf und Härtel, 2000), 26–32.

¹⁷ Ibid., 62: "establish among themselves fraternal, religious relations."

¹⁸ Bruno Moysan, *Liszt virtuose subversif* (Lyon: Symétrie, 2009), 134–143. Moysan points to the existence of a formal scheme of fantasy (*tempo primo* – *tempo lirico* – *tempo di mezzo* – final), in which the first part serves as the exposition of the main themes.

fantasies that establish most strongly Liszt's association with the literary avant-garde of the 19th century. *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, a composition from 1835 published by Schlesinger, is much closer to this movement. It is his first individual piece inspired by poetry.

This oeuvre conforms to the romantic principles on both the musical and extra-musical plane. Let us first concentrate on the latter category. The piece's programme is contained in two elements: in the title that refers to *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* by Alphonse de Lamartine, and in the foreword, which is further complemented by a dedication addressed to Lamartine, a fact that Liszt mentioned in his letter to Countess d'Agoult: 'notre harmonie sera dédiée à Lamartine.'¹⁹ The foreword mentioned above consists of two paragraphs taken from the foreword to the collection *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* by Lamartine. The fragment selected by Liszt concerns the few addressees of this poetry, spirits inclined to meditation, who look to religion and the infinity, since this poetry (and by implication, music) is a hymn to the divine and to hope. It is addressed to people able to feel empathy to worship nature and God, in solitude and together with the poet, his words, his lament and his song.

By means of the title Liszt also pointed to the whole collection by Lamartine as the oeuvre's programme. What dominates in this poetry is its very personal, almost prayer-like character, with the lyrical subject addressing deity and nature, and conducting a dialogue with the reader as well as with himself. Many poems in the collection are composed as Biblical hymns and psalms, in which praise of the creator and his creation plays a significant role.

In this collection we may also discern several motifs uniting the cycle, for example poetry regarded as singing and its close connection with music even in antiquity, pictorial descriptions of nature appealing to the senses of sight and hearing (various sensations becoming united in the recipient's imagination) as in the case of *Poésie, ou paysage dans le golfe de Gênes*. There are also elemental forces, symbolising the power of nature, mists that give the texts an oneiric character and emphasise the poetic message in its lack of precision. Another significant element is the poems' syncretism and lack of religious precision (Christianity, paganism, Judaism, Greek mythology), apparent even in the titles, such as *La lampe du temple ou l'âme présenté à dieu*, in which poem the action takes place in an undefined temple²⁰ or *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude*, in which the poet praises a god who combines features of the God of the Old and the New Testament, and of the Greek gods.²¹ He also compares religions as, for example, in *Jéhovah ou l'idée de*

¹⁹ Correspondance. Marie d'Agoult-Franz Liszt, 152: "our harmony shall be dedicated to Lamartine." Letter of 15.04.1834.

²⁰ Alphonse de Lamartine, *La lampe du temple ou l'âme présenté à dieu* in *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, Livre I (Paris: Gosselin, 1840), 39-43.

²¹ Idem, *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude*, in: *ibid.*, Livre I, 45-54.

*Dieu*²² and in three other poems that are its continuation: *Suite de Jéhovah*.²³ Other recurring motifs in this cycle are: praise of the creation (*Hymne de la nuit*, *Hymne du matin*, *Hymne de l'enfant à son réveil*), azure as the dominant colour (just as yellow was in Sainte-Beuve's poem), the graves of relatives (*Pensée des morts*), and a melancholic mood *Novissima verba*, *ou mon âme est triste jusqu'à la mort*. Lamartine also integrated all the four books of *Harmonies* by applying similar technical devices, such as different kinds of verse, thus influencing the pace and the perception of the text (alexandrine, octave, *Invocation*), mixing styles (lofty, idyllic), the use of contrasts (night, dawn, precise description, vague impression), and onomatopoeic elements.

However, the piece by Liszt contains yet another quotation that refers to *René* by Chateaubriand,²⁴ although it is somewhat hidden, being an executive designation in the first bar of the work: 'avec un profond sentiment d'ennui'.²⁵ In Chateaubriand's text, just as in Lamartine's poetry, there are numerous musical metaphors and onomatopoeic effects, while music (*mélodie*) is called upon as a comforter, sometimes strengthening the description of the protagonist's feelings.²⁶ Summing up, it should be concluded that in *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (1835) Franz Liszt used three different programme elements: the title referring to a poetic oeuvre, the foreword to Lamartine's collection and a quotation from Chateaubriand's narrative.

On the musical plane this work is an example of the rejection of the traditional rules governing the art of composing. It is a rebellion against metre, periodicity, and major-minor tonality; as the composer himself said: 'harmonie Lamartine sans ton ni mesure'.²⁷ It is also a clash between the desire to improvise and the necessity to enclose the piece in a conventional form.²⁸

The dominant principle is the freedom of artistic, subjective expression and the musical phrase freely follows poetic emotions. This leads to a lack of tonal stability, which stems from the application of the following technical solutions:

²² Idem, *Jéhova ou l'idée de Dieu*, in: *ibid.*, Livre II, 171-181.

²³ The following subtitles of *Suite de Jéhovah* are: *Le chène*, 183-190, *L'Humanité*, 191-201, and *L'idée de Dieu*, 203-207.

²⁴ Chateaubriand's piece was included in *Génie du christianisme* in 1802. This narrative deals with the fate of a European man living in America of the late 18th century. He is a man bored with civilization and tries to escape it; he seeks for a meaning in life and for this reason he undertakes many activities. He lived among the Indians, married one of their women, became a father, but could not find inner harmony, and so he abandoned this mode of living. The writer diagnosed that this boredom (*ennui*) and lack of emotional stability result from the character of the eponymous protagonist. François-René de Chateaubriand, *René*, in: idem, *Atala, René, Les aventures du dernier Abencérage*, ed. Jean-Claude Berchet (Paris: Flammarion, 1996).

²⁵ Franz Liszt, *Verschiedene Zyklische Werke*, 141: "with a profound feeling of boredom."

²⁶ Chateaubriand, *René*, 183.

²⁷ *Correspondance. Marie d'Agoult-Franz Liszt*, 93: "Lamartines' harmonies without bar and key". Letter of 30.10.1833.

²⁸ Joan Pauline Backus, "Liszt's 'Harmonies poétiques et religieuses'. Inspiration and the Challenge of Form", *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 11 (1987/21), 16.

ostinato centralising certain sound structures, sudden harmonic changes, progressions of the third constituting a diminished chord, enharmonic changes, harmonic saturation a-g-f sharp-f sharp-f sharp-g-a by using ninth and eleventh chords side by side, chromatic signs in a large part of the piece used randomly – sharps and flats used side by side, which may be also classified as a kind of bitonality (Ex. 1).



Example 1. *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, b. 1-2²⁹

Another result is metric freedom, which leads to frequent changes of pace, very precisely noted by the composer (*senza tempo* in the beginning), irregular accents (Ex. 2) as well as regular rhythmic groups intertwined with irregular ones (duplets – triplets) with differently placed accents, and numerous recitatives, usually with a very slow tempo (*adagio*, *a capriccio*). It is worth mentioning that the slow tempo creates the feeling of being suspended in space, of being beyond time.



Example 2. *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, b. 17-20

Just as in the poetic collection by Lamartine and in the piece by Liszt the sound quality seems to be the most important element of the composition, which sometimes determines the construction factors and musical notation, non-compliant with the major-minor notation. In the piece there are very distinct sound plans in particular segments, which are quite independent, as for example the independence of *ostinato* accompaniment and the melodic motifs of the first theme (T₁). In the second phrase the accompaniment gains additional melody that counterpoints

²⁹ The author would like to express her thanks to Mr Marek Dolewka for rewriting all the examples that are to be found in this article.

the main motif. It consists of two phrases: 4 and 9 bars, in which the initial motif becomes extended. The melodic line of the second theme (T_2) is a transposition of melody hidden in the upper sounds of the accompaniment of T_1 (a-g-f sharp-f sharp). This time it is played with minims by the left and the right hand, which allows the association of this theme with a chorale. This impression is further complemented by the tempo marking *marcato lugubre*. The melody is filled with repeated sounds that strengthen the feeling of tonal stability, D-flat major (Ex. 3).



Example 3. *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, b. 31-32

The third theme (T_3) is a variation of T_2 ; however, changes in texture, wording, the *religioso* character and tempo marking *quieto parlante*, as well as tonal (G major) and metric (2/4) stabilisation make it possible to perceive this structure as another theme (Ex. 4). This very peculiar mode of elaboration of theme, which consists of changing the meaning (here grief is transformed into religious ecstasy) will become one of the distinguishing features of Franz Liszt's style.



Example 4. *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, b. 63-67

The form of *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* is contained in three phases, in which the variation technique dominates, contributing thus to the hybridisation of the form. It could be presented in the following, schematic, way: part A: T_1 (bars 1-13) closed with a two-bar coda, next variation on T_1 (bars 14-28) also closed with a bridge; part B: T_2 (bars 31-39) and its variation in B major tonality (bars 40-54), in which the initial motif of T_1 appears as a counterpoint; this part is closed with an extended recitative being at the same time a link preparing for the

appearance of the following part (bars 54-62). Part C opens with T_3 (bars 63-76), then there is its variation with the elements of the initial motif. It is all closed with a coda, followed by a recitative (bars 98-102), which is a kind of synthesis: T_1 accompaniment, metrical instability and rhythmical irregularity from part A, chord texture from part B, and the initial motif from T_1 in inversion that closes the whole (Ex. 5). This piece is a variation with three themes, in which T_2 and T_3 are based on the melodic material from T_1 accompaniment; the T_1 initial motif in T_2 and T_3 is a counterpoint element in variations of other themes. To put it simply, the formal structure of the piece may be presented in the following way: $ABC_{AB'}$.



Example 5. *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, b. 120-124

These are but a few features of the piece which allow us to notice its similarity to poetry. The similarities include the formal aspects (freedom, lack of *a priori* construction), the mixing of genres (theatricality, poetic meditation, much extended instrumental miniature), material being dependent on the poetic content, an attempt to render a poetic mood and religious infinity (lack of bars and key), and recitatives which make instrumental music closer to speech. An element that links *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* by Liszt with the literary practice of the 19th century is also the use of quotations, borrowing titles, and paying tribute to an idol, who, according to Liszt, had an exceptional gift for not stepping beyond what was considered good taste while introducing innovative solutions.³⁰

Almost twenty years later Liszt published the final version of *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*; this time it was a cycle of ten pieces among which there was a new version of the piece dating from 1835. The composer himself described the first version of *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* as not very successful, and because of this he decided to change it (*Pensée des morts*). The changes aimed at greater formal precision, as Liszt clearly distinguished the middle part by introducing new musical material with a different key, melodic pattern, rhythmicity, texture, mode of performance (recitative), and deep religious expression. This fragment comes from a psalm for piano and orchestra *De Profundis* that was sketched as early as 1834. This may explain why the composer preserved several lines of the text

³⁰ Franz Liszt, *À M. Louis Ronchard*, in: idem, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 1, 132.

above the stave. In the first part, there are both phases from the previous version (T_1 and T_2), but with a new texture, whereas the third part constitutes a synthesis of ideas from the first part and, just as previously, contains a new theme, though this time this is theme number four – T_4 . What is interesting in this work is that we find here a reminiscence of another of Liszt's pieces – *Les cloches de G****** from *Album d'un voyageur*. The practice of auto-quoting is a characteristic feature of this cycle, in which Liszt refers to his earlier pieces, for example: *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* of 1835, *Liebestraum* number three, the above-mentioned *De Profundis*, choral *Ave Maria* and *Hymne de l'enfant*, and the piano piece *Consolation* number three.

Harmonies poétiques et religieuses of 1835 show how closely Liszt was associated with romanticism and how far he went in seeking his own artistic way. His courage and his need for new means of expression made him reach for poetical techniques, both those typical of the whole romantic school (quotations, dedications, foreword) as well as elements taken directly from the poetic collection by Lamartine (especially the domination of sound quality and formal freedom), whom Liszt respected so much. Despite the fact that later on Liszt 'softened' his innovativeness by returning to more classical forms and less radical harmonies, it is worth remembering what an important role the intellectual atmosphere of the Paris of the 1830s played in Liszt's development.

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