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**Autor:** Samson, Jim

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JIM SAMSON

## Orpheus and the Exile : Liszt and Victor Hugo

### Victor Hugo and Music

In February 2002, Victor Hugo was kidnapped, or so the French media described the events surrounding the bicentenary of his birth. Lionel Jospin hired special transport to take a group of intellectuals *de gauche* to Hugo's birthplace. In his speech he likened his own project to Hugo's, and more specifically to the exploits of Jean Valjean. Chirac's supporters fired back, suggesting that if there was a resemblance at all it was rather with the sinister Inspector Javert. In any case Chirac was surely the true successor to Hugo, who had, after all, pioneered the European Union, and indeed the Euro. Then the Communist Party weighed in, presenting Hugo as the imaginary « guest editor » of its newspaper *L'Humanité*, and playing up his campaigns for social rights, an end to the death penalty, and so on<sup>1</sup>. These events were the culmination of a century's manipulation of Hugo in French public life, taking us from right-wing propaganda at the beginning of the century through the nationalisms of the Resistance to the leftish movements of the late sixties. In all of this we have a measure of the wide spectrum of views embraced by Hugo (however insecurely) at different times during a long life, and also of his remarkable popular appeal. His was the kind of populism we associate with « massive genius »<sup>2</sup>, with big, all-embracing subjects, a populism that sits uneasily with those technically innovatory qualities appreciated by the poets and critics. For them the popularity could be something of a problem – « too prolific, too popular » is how Suzanne Nash summed it up<sup>3</sup>. So there is a real ambivalence here. From Baudelaire through to Riffaterre, we have grudging admiration on the technical front – Hugo as proto-Symbolist,

1 Charles Bremner, « « Victor Hugo c'est moi », say all the poll contenders », *The Times*, 27 February 2002, p. 19.

2 John C. Ireson, *Victor Hugo : A Companion to his Poetry* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

3 Suzanne Nash, *Les Contemplations of Victor Hugo : An Allegory of the Creative Process* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 3.



proto-Formalist – but mistrust of the rhetoric and showmanship, and of the sense of mission that accompanies a particular brand of social Romanticism in 19<sup>th</sup> century-France, especially when it transparently twists and turns to personal advantage<sup>4</sup>. Hugo was never one for the coded messages of Modernism. The charges are of blatancy or worse.

I am not aware that politicians have been making claims on Liszt. Yet the same populism is there (« too prolific, too popular ») and again it sits oddly with conspicuous avant-garde pretensions. Like Hugo, Liszt tried somehow to absorb this populism within the larger mission of a humanitarian art, and thus to make it respectable. There was even some common sourcing here, notably in the thought of Ballanche<sup>5</sup>. As for the *connaissances*: with Liszt too the enthusiasm of the theorist for innovation and experiment has had to vye with the aesthetic mistrust of the critic, even the broadly sympathetic critic. And again the recurrent charge has been a tendency towards the kind of rhetorical overstatement of which Chopin, for example, is seldom accused. Charles Rosen speaks of « disreputable greatness », and that splendid phrase might work for Hugo too<sup>6</sup>. Whatever the prevailing norms of taste, both men seem destined always to be situated just a bit off-centre.

Michel Sogny has argued that creative admiration shaped Liszt's music<sup>7</sup>, and Hugo was among the admired, though, as a letter to Marie indicates, the admiration was not unqualified<sup>8</sup>. The two men were already acquainted in 1827, when Liszt was a mere sixteen-year-old, and they met frequently in social and musical circles during the 1830s and 1840s, with Liszt taking care to keep abreast of each new Hugo publication<sup>9</sup>. The first version of *Harmonies poétiques*, the watershed piece in Liszt's early development, was not just a tribute to Lamartine. Its original inscription

4 We may single out here Baudelaire's influential essay, « Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains » [1861], in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. C. Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961-1962), vol. ii, pp. 129-181; also Michael Riffaterre, « La poésie métaphysique de Victor Hugo », *Romanic Review*, 51 (1960), pp. 268-276.

5 See Liszt's references in his correspondence, as in *Franz Liszt: Selected Letters*, ed. A. Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 43 and 56. For Hugo's involvement with Ballanche, see Herbert J. Hunt and Jacques Roos, *Les Idées philosophiques de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Nizet, 1958).

6 Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 491.

7 Michel Sogny, *L'Admiration Créatrice chez Liszt* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1975).

8 *Franz Liszt: Selected Letters*, p. 160.

9 See Arnaud Laster, « Victor Hugo, la Musique et les Musiciens », in Victor Hugo, *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. J. Massin, 18 vols (Paris: Club Français du Livre, 1967-1970), vol. v, pp. i-xix.



was a quotation from Hugo's early gothic romance *Han of Iceland*<sup>10</sup>. And throughout the thirties and forties Liszt was engaged by Hugo's poetry ; inscribing one of the early odes into a sketchbook<sup>11</sup>, and exploring the musical possibilities – vocal and instrumental – of lyrics from *Les Orientales* and from the collections of the 1830s. Influence flowed in both directions. Hugo had a little help at the piano. But, more importantly, his musical tastes, and especially his lifelong appreciation of Beethoven, were certainly influenced by Liszt, as Arnaud Laster has suggested<sup>12</sup>. In later life Hugo went on to associate Beethoven with Shakespeare somewhat in the manner of a later « New German » criticism, and in fact there were already hints of this Wagnerian agenda in the prefaces to his four major poetry collections of the 1830s. Here Hugo articulated a philosophy of art that undoubtedly resonated in Liszt's thought and writings.

The last of those prefaces – to *Les Rayons et les ombres* of 1840 – has a summative status, and in it Hugo hints at artistic synthesis on two distinct levels. The first is close to Gautier's familiar « transposition », and is concerned with the interpenetration of media, rooted in invariants of number, letter and note [« l'algèbre est dans l'astronomie ... le chiffre, la lettre, la note »]. The second level is more ambitious, suggestive of a composite multi-genre art that might add up to a modern epic, a collective « poem of mankind ». I do not want to suggest that these are new ideas : Hugo was less an original thinker than an energetic persuader. But I do think that his input to debates about artistic synthesis and the modern epic has been undervalued. More to the point, Liszt's separate agendas for the *poème pianistique* and the symphonic poem (and these agendas should not be conflated) correspond rather closely to Hugo's two levels. The first was articulated in the preface to *Album d'un voyageur*, where correspondences work to irradiate what Liszt called the « intimate, poetic meaning of things » ; and the second is of course in the *Harold* essay, where the union of a musical process and a clearly indicated poetic concept would in theory allow an entrée to the highest spheres of art. For Liszt that meant nothing less than a modern parallel to an ancient epos.

Significantly the collection *Les Rayons et les ombres* includes poems that either mimic music or address it directly. The two so-called « guitars » come into the first of these categories, and both poems were in fact set by

10 See the facsimile in Rudolf Kokai, *Franz Liszt in seinen frühen Klavierwerken* (Budapest : Akadémiai Kiadó, 1968), facsimile 3, after p. 140.

11 Currently in the Goethe- und Schiller-Archiv, Weimar (D-WRgs N6, on p. 51). The draft is dated « 30 Août, 1831 ».

12 Arnaud Laster, « Victor Hugo, la Musique et les Musiciens », pp. xiii-xiv.



Liszt a year or two after their publication<sup>13</sup>. But more significant is the imposing Palestrina poem<sup>14</sup>, in which Hugo reflects on the nature of music, with twin reference points in the genius of Palestrina and in the modern symphony orchestra, and that meant Beethoven. As music history, Hugo's account is a travesty. Yet this is in many ways a remarkable poem. The second of its seven extended sections is really a description of the symphony orchestra, with visually arresting metaphors piled on top of each other in an onomatopoetic assault on the alexandrine, as the symphony (presumably the « Pastoral ») unfolds.

In a later poem, incidentally, Hugo actually dramatises the surrender of the piano to the orchestra<sup>15</sup>, something Liszt acted out in his own early Weimar years. Elsewhere, in the sixth section of the Palestrina poem Hugo describes the Orphic qualities of music, as melody penetrates thought, and also music's unique capacity to switch between affects – the military march and the lovesong side by side. And underlying these descriptions is a metaphysical point very much in harmony with Liszt's own writings. Nature is elevated as the force that not only nurtures artistic genius in general but actually gives birth to music (the young Palestrina, the chosen one, is depicted seeking the messages distilled in the sights and sounds of nature, and out of that process harmony is born). Music, then, is a kind of resonance of Nature which in turn is the voice of a God hidden from our view. In the third section Hugo makes this more specific, and at the same time picks up on a familiar polemic, when he elevates the mystery of Nature (German harmony) over the charm of Nature (Italian melody)<sup>16</sup>.

## Liszt and Hugo

What of the music of Liszt directly inspired by Hugo? I remarked earlier that *Les Rayons et les ombres* was published in 1840, and that it was the last of four collections of poetry written in the 1830s. The others were *Les Feuilles d'automne* (1831), *Les Chants du crépuscule* (1835) and *Les Voix intérieures*

13 Hugo's so-called « guitars » are *Comment disaient-ils ?* and *Gastilbelza, l'homme à la carabine*.

14 « Que la musique date du seizième siècle » : *Les Rayons et les ombres*, in Victor Hugo, *Œuvres poétiques*, ed. P. Albouy, 3 vols (Paris : Gallimard, Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, 1964-1974), vol. i, *Avant l'exil 1802-1851*, pp. 1098-1104.

15 See the discussion in Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo* (New York : Norton, 1997), pp. 336-337.

16 See Arnaud Laster, « Victor Hugo, la Musique et les Musiciens », p. xviii.



(1837). Now Hugo stressed in the preface to *Les rayons et les ombres* that he saw these collections as forming a kind of unity ; a « second creative period » in his own words. And it was to these four collections that Liszt turned when composing the six Hugo songs that were published in 1844. I will not discuss the songs in detail here, but I do want to highlight two issues. The first is Liszt's choice of poetry. What is interesting here is that Liszt chose poems that are far from characteristic of the prevailing tone of these collections. He went for either light, colourful, descriptive madrigals, a kind of hangover from Hugo's earlier neo-Classical poetry (*Gastilbelza* ; *Comment, disaient-ils*), or for simple, untroubled love lyrics, something new in Hugo in the late 1830s, and a direct response to his relationship with Juliette Drouet (*Oh ! quand je dors* ; *S'il est un charmant gazon*). He also homed in on the frankly sentimental (*La grave et la rose*). What he avoided was the more complex, troubled tone of self-doubt and sometimes bitterness that constantly tugs at the idealism of these four collections. That is their more truly representative tone. You can hear it as a private voice underlying the public, political poems, as a more insistent questioning in poems of social morality and religion, and as an undertone of pessimism disturbing even the amatory and domestic poems. And it becomes more explicit in a series of poems dealing with « the function of the poet », to cite the title of the opening poem of *Les Rayons et les ombres*. It is not that Liszt shied away from the melancholy and the metaphysical. Rather, I suspect he had a very particular sense of the purview of the *chanson* or *mélodie*. His *Lieder* tell a different story.

The second issue I want to consider concerns the revisions Liszt made to four of these six songs for his later 1860 collection, though there is space only to present in summary form what I take to be the key factors motivating the revisions. The most striking point is that Liszt eliminates totally the text repetitions that were common in the early versions, so that the song text becomes in effect identical to the poem. What this signals – and we find it elsewhere in the song revisions – is a radical change in Liszt's understanding of the aesthetics of song composition, a change that is entirely in keeping with his developing thought about music and the poetic in his Weimar years. Other changes then flow from this one : a simplification of the accompaniment pattern, for instance, and a tendency to favour an overall characterisation rather than to point up the word, phrase or even sentence. Now these changes are in step with the general thrust of Liszt's revisions in the early Weimar period. Indeed I want to suggest that exactly the same three guiding principles seem to have shaped the revisions to vocal and instrumental works alike. First, a desire to tone down what he then took to be gratuitous virtuosity.



Second, the search for an adequate musical response to a poetic idea. And third, a growing concern for formal coherence, so that an original, often diffuse, architectural ground plan is transformed into an evolving structure that focuses its energies on a single climax, fulcrum or expressive goal, often involving a significant recasting of the harmonic structure.

In 1847, some time before he revised those four songs, Liszt transcribed all six Hugo songs for piano. Indeed we know that some of the transcription was done in October of that year, while he was staying with Carolyn at Woronince in the Ukraine, just after their first meeting<sup>17</sup>. We also know that on that same occasion Liszt showed the Princess his early sketches for the Mountain Symphony, based on a poem from Hugo's *Feuilles d'automne*<sup>18</sup>. Here Liszt turned to just the kind of metaphysical poem he had studiously avoided in choosing his song texts. As John Ireson has pointed out, each of the four Hugo collections has a strategically placed poem on the general theme of doubt, of which *Ce qu'on entend* is the opener<sup>19</sup>. And it seems that for Liszt the appropriate medium for a visionary, contemplative poem of this kind, blending nature and religion, was not vocal but instrumental music, and specifically the symphonic poem. Actually the fitness of *Ce qu'on entend* for his purpose is due not just to Hugo's humanitarian statements, defined as they are in vague idealistic terms, but to the role of symbolic voices. Although Hugo plays on the distance between physical eye and mental gaze in this poem, he also traces two images of *sound* towards the opposed presences of a God heard in nature and of man heard in the discords of society<sup>20</sup>. Hugo's symbolic voices then give Liszt his perfect cue for the complex web of motives that has since been analysed exhaustively by German and American scholars.<sup>21</sup> We should note, though, that the synthesis effected by Liszt's two

17 See the worklist compiled by Rena Charnin Mueller and Mária Ekhardt for the Liszt entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, eds S. Sadie and J. Tyrrell, 29 vols (London: Macmillan, 2001, 2nd edition), vol. xiv, p. 804.

18 Although the initial version was composed in 1848-1849, the piece was reworked several times before publication in 1857; see the source history in Keith T. Johns, *The Symphonic Poems of Franz Liszt*, rev. and ed. M. Saffle (New York: Pendragon Press, 1996), pp. 139-140.

19 J. C. Ireson, *Victor Hugo: A Companion to his Poetry*, p. 51.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

21 See Carl Dahlhaus, « Liszts Bergsymphonie und die Idee der symphonischen Dichtung », *Jahrbuch des Staatlichen Instituts für Musikforschung*, 1975, pp. 96-130; and « Liszts Idee des Symphonischen », *Liszt-Studien 2: Kongress-Bericht Eisenstadt 1978*, ed. S. Gut (Munich and Salzburg: Musikverlag Emil Katzschler, 1981), pp. 36-42. See also Joachim Bergfeld, *Die formale Struktur der Symphonischen Dichtungen Franz Liszt* (Eisenach: P. Kühner, 1931). For a comprehensive study of motivic working in the *Bergsymphonie*, see Alfred Heuss, « Eine motivisch-thematische Studie über Liszts symphonische Dichtung < Ce



chorale statements is his own rather tidy resolution of a doubt that is never really resolved in Hugo's poem. It is a rather good illustration of the ambition of the genre as Liszt understood it.

But first I want to return to 1847, the year of the song transcriptions and the year in which Liszt showed Carolyn those initial sketches of the Mountain Symphony. It was also in that year, with things Ukrainian much on his mind, that Liszt published a piano piece called *Mazeppa*, with a dedication to Victor Hugo. The pre-history of this is well-known. The fourth of his youthful exercises of 1826 was transformed into the fourth of the *Grandes Etudes* of 1837. That was published in 1839, and a year later in 1840 Liszt added a brief prelude and coda to it and gave it the poetic title *Mazeppa*. That is the piece that was finally published seven years later in 1847. It was then recomposed in 1851 as the fourth of the Transcendental Studies, again with the title *Mazeppa*. Incidentally three of the other nine titles for the Transcendentals (*Paysage*, *Vision*, and *Wilde Jagd*) also correspond to Hugo poems<sup>22</sup>. In addition the fourth etude became the basis of the symphonic poem *Mazeppa*, whose first draft was completed in 1851 and whose final version dates from 1854. And for the sake of completeness I should add that Liszt later transcribed the symphonic poem for two pianos and for four hands, the latter transcription dating from 1874. So there are no fewer than 7 versions of *Mazeppa* spread across a fifty-year period.

Where, then, does *Mazeppa* come from? In fact there is rather a nice sequence here. In 1728-1730 Voltaire wrote his *Histoire de Charles XII, Roi de Suède* [History of Charles XII, King of Sweden], with the key players in the drama Charles XII and Peter the Great; the story of Mazeppa is just a brief episode within it<sup>23</sup>. Then, almost a century later, in 1819, Byron published his poem *Mazeppa*, with the opening « Advertisement » ascribing the source to Voltaire. Now there was a clear contemporary significance in Byron's decision to expand the tale supposedly told by an elderly Prince of the Ukraine to a Swedish king who had just invaded

qu'on entend sur la montagne » », *Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, 13 (1911-1912), pp. 10-21. See also the study of formal design, motives and tonality, together with an attempt to relate these to Hugo's poem, in Rey M. Longyear, « Structural Issues in Liszt's Symphonic Poems », *Analecta Lisztiana I. Liszt and his World*, ed. M. Saffle (New York: Pendragon, 1995), pp. 247-270.

22 *Paysage* (composed in 1823) and *Vision* can be found in Victor Hugo, *Œuvres poétiques*, vol. i *Avant l'exil*, respectively pp. 465-467, and pp. 327-331. *Le Chasseur Noir*, part of the collection *Les Châtiments*, post-dates Liszt's *Wilde Jagd*.

23 For the Voltaire, see *Œuvres historiques*, ed. R. Pomeau (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), pp. 53-316. This was in a sense contemporary military history (written c. 1728-1730), much of it based on first-hand accounts.



Russia. From the beginning, Byron's poem evokes the news of Napoleon's fated retreat from Moscow, and at one stage he intended to publish a note on the Emperor together with the poem. Yet, if Napoleon's Russian campaign suggested a new context for the story, Byron's treatment certainly moves far beyond that context. Basically he describes the nightmarish journey from Poland to the Ukraine of a young page from the King's court, who has been bound to the horse in punishment for a major indiscretion. The poem describes in detail the ride of the « wild horse » that obeys its homing instinct and so returns to the Ukraine, only to drop dead upon arrival. Subsequently, Mazeppa is found by the Cossacks and eventually elevated as a Cossack Hetman.

Now Byron's *Mazeppa* was translated into French in the collected edition of his works that appeared in Paris between 1821 and 1824, and its theme was quickly seized upon by French painters, beginning in 1823 with Géricault, who had already turned to Byron on several occasions<sup>24</sup>. The motif of the wounded rider and the wild horse or of riderless horses was a familiar one in Géricault, and characteristically he depicted the point at which Mazeppa's horse emerges from the river (Plate 1).

It may well have been Géricault's work that inspired his close friend Horace Vernet to turn to this theme in a series of paintings composed in 1825-1826, just after Géricault's death. The most dramatic of these is the oil *Mazeppa pursued by wolves* [*Mazeppa poursuivi par les loups*] which depicts the moment in Byron's poem where the wolves close in on the terrified horse (Plate 2). Nor was this series the last treatment of Mazeppa by the French colourists. Delacroix sketched several works on the subject from 1824 onwards (Plates 3a and 3b).

Then the young Louis Boulanger, the confidant to whom Hugo addressed several poems in the collections of the 1830s and whose Eastern subjects had inspired his *Orientales*, made his début at the 1827 Salon with a *Mazeppa* which places the action at the beginning of the ride (Plate 4)<sup>25</sup>.

The Mazeppa paintings typify a particular kind of exchange between Britain and France in the Romantic period. Byron provided a mythic image that energised French artists because it expressed romantic themes of freedom and destiny in terms of a single dynamic motif. Through the Mazeppa theme, painters could pay simultaneous tribute to Byron and Géricault. The theme allowed for the depiction of different stages of the

24 I am indebted to Stephen Bann for much of the art-historical information here.

25 See Christopher W. Thompson, *Victor Hugo and the Graphic Arts (1820-1833)* (Geneva: Droz, 1970), pp. 112-113. See also Monique Geiger, « Victor Hugo et Louis Boulanger », *Victor Hugo et les Images. Colloque de Dijon*, eds M. Blondel and P. Georgel (Dijon: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1989), pp. 29-41.



narrative, and it could be explored across a range of media: salon painting, oil sketch, drawing and lithographic print. Indeed it is partly this very diversity of outcomes that characterised the new openness and freedom of the French Romantic colourists. One of those who admired Boulanger's painting at the 1827 Salon was Victor Hugo, and his poem of May 1828, part of *Les Orientales*, was indeed dedicated to Boulanger. In Hugo's version of *Mazeppa* the first section occupies itself with the ride, but the second elaborates an allegory of the suffering artist, with the horse as the driving force of genius; it is really a kind of death and resurrection that is depicted here. This two-part allegorical structure would later become familiar in Hugo's verse. But this is its first appearance, and it requires little imagination to see how such a tale, and such an allegorical reading of it, would have positively invited an act of self-identification on Liszt's part.

Such was Liszt's enthusiasm for the theme that he considered using the title *Mazeppa* for several earlier pieces. It appears in the early Revolutionary Symphony sketchbook, in the later *Tasso* sketchbook, and also among some further sketch pages in Weimar, in each case referring to different bits of music<sup>26</sup>. Most of these were drafted before he homed in on the fourth of the *Grandes Etudes* in 1840, topped and tailed it and labelled it *Mazeppa*. It is tempting to think that Hugo's poem might already have been lurking in his thoughts when he recomposed the early exercise in 1837. Consider not just how the Cramer-inspired figure of the exercise becomes an accompaniment for that big, broad, intemperate tune, but also how the figure is presented in an ever more compressed form through successive strophes, in what appears to be such a graphic representation of the frenzied ride of our Cossack hero. When Liszt made his final revision in 1851, he used the opportunity to think again about the programmatic version of *Mazeppa* (the 1840 version), recasting it in a more ambitious form, with the « fall » of the horse in particular represented graphically. The impulse to this later revision was of course formal as well as programmatic. The key point is that the third and fourth of the six strophes are translated into a real « slow movement », their tonal differentiation from the outer sections supplemented by con-

26 In the early Revolutionary Symphony sketchbook (D-WRgs N6), used between 1829 and 1832, he added the title to a fragment of piano music, marked *con furore* and with a 4-flat key signature. Then, in the later *Tasso* sketchbook (N5) there is a fragment in G minor also labelled *Mazeppa*, and among some further sketch pages (gathered as Z18 in Weimar, though certainly originally part of N5) there is another version of the same G-minor fragment. And in yet another sketch from Z18, which we can assign (from its reference to Kiev) to February/March of 1847, there is a further draft of a piece in B flat minor, again labelled *Mazeppa*.



trasts of texture and character. Moreover strophe 4 is characteristically modified to increase the sense of anacrusis to the reprise, and thus to privilege the reprise as the apex or fulcrum of the structure. The changes were so extensive that Liszt wrote out an entirely new manuscript for *Mazeppa*, whereas for most of the Transcendentals he simply used paste-overs on the Haslinger edition of the *Grandes Etudes*<sup>27</sup>.

It seems that shortly after composing the third version of the etude in 1840, where for the first time he associated this music with Hugo's poem, Liszt gave some thought to an orchestral « overture » with the title *Mazeppa*. In the « Lichnowsky » sketchbook, which he used in the early 1840s, there is a reference to « 3 Ouvertures : Corsaire, Mazeppa, Sardanapale », though there are no musical sketches. The overture was eventually drafted as a *particella*, completed in January 1851, it was then orchestrated by Raff<sup>28</sup>, and it was revised in 1854<sup>29</sup>. The same sequence of six strophes makes up the body of the symphonic poem, albeit with interpolations and expansions, and with a tacked-on finale. So the inflected repetitions of the *Mazeppa* theme have to serve here as the basis of an extended orchestral work. This makes for a striking contrast with the *Mountain Symphony*, the other Hugo-inspired symphonic poem, especially in light of Liszt's agenda in his *Harold* essay. We might argue that in the *Mountain Symphony* the poetic element seeks to justify an excess of differentiation, a plethora of motifs spread across a « stretched » sonata-allegro form. Conversely, in *Mazeppa* the poetic element seeks to justify a lack of differentiation, essentially the inflected repetitions of a single theme.

Before leaving this topic I should mention Wagner's doubts about the success of Liszt's enterprise here. He said some nice things about the symphonic poems in his open letter<sup>30</sup>. But in his later essay « On the application of music to the drama », he pinpointed the real problem about them, referring to alarming tendencies towards « downright melodrama music », from which redemption would be possible only « by

27 Liszt used the Haslinger edition of the *Grandes Etudes* as the basis for the Stichvorlage he sent to Breitkopf & Härtel. This is part of the Liszt collection in the Goethe- und Schiller-Archiv in Weimar archive (D-WRgs J 23).

28 This is held by the Bibliothèque nationale (F-Pc Ms. 155). For a description, see Michael Saffle, « Liszt Music Manuscripts in Paris », *Analecta Lisztiana I. Liszt and his World*, p. 120.

29 The Stichvorlage is in Weimar (D-WRgs A6).

30 This was published in the spring of 1857 in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. It is printed in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, ed. W. Ashton Ellis, 8 vols (London : Kegan Paul & Co, 1892-1899), vol. iii, pp. 235-254.



openly and undisguisedly turning that line itself towards the drama »<sup>31</sup>. I take him to mean here that certain gestures that might be acceptable in the opera house can rather easily be reduced to « effects » – or, worse still, to kitsch – on the concert platform, where a validating programmatic component struggles to remain in our consciousness. This was of course a self-validating analysis. But it was also prescient. Wagner was precisely on target when he suggested that programmes could all too often encourage musical characterisations that risked ridicule when their signifieds were *in absentia*, but made perfect sense when they were enacted on stage. Indeed it is precisely this point that invites speculation about ontology, and especially about the status of the « extra-musical ». This has been debated by Lydia Goehr and others recently, but actually the key points were already in place in Ingarden's little book of the 1930s, where the term « quasi-musical » (rather than « extra-musical ») is used. And it may be that Ingarden's uncertainties about the ontological status of the programme can be directed back onto Liszt's self-consciously original and modernising agenda<sup>32</sup>.

## Common ground

Some thematic commonalities are worth exploring between Liszt and Hugo. I will do this synoptically, with a view to pulling out three major, poster-like themes. The first of these is virtuosity. In a separate study of Liszt I identify three related subtexts of virtuosity, and I suggest that the opprobrium attached to it often boils down to one or more of these three<sup>33</sup>. The first I describe as an occlusion of reference. When composers prescribe virtuosity, I suggest, they weaken or obfuscate any sense of an idea represented, a story told, a meaning rendered, or even a form articulated (the point can be most clearly argued in relation to idiomatic fig-

31 *Ibid.*, vol. vi, pp. 173-191 ; these quotations on pp. 179 and 182.

32 Roman Ingarden, *The Work of Music and the Problem of its Identity*, trans. A. Czerniawski, ed. J. G. Harrell (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1986 ; original edition 1928). See also Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice : On Music, Politics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 6-18, and Daniel Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 4 : « What, after all, is an « extra-musical » object ? It is obviously not Music, but neither is it non-music ».

33 Jim Samson, *Virtuosity and the Musical Work : The Transcendental Studies of Liszt* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003).



ures). To put it rather colloquially, the telling is destined to exceed the tale. Our unease about virtuosity, I claim, is partly due to this implicit challenge to expression and form, and to the kind of idealisation invited by work character. Virtuosity presents, rather than represents. It offends our sense – our hope – that there may be something behind the music. This relates rather clearly to my second subtext, which can be described as a surrender to mechanism. Here I look at instrumental technique, and its reification, inevitably invoking Max Weber in the process. And also to my third subtext, where I suggest that virtuosity can wear the stigma of the gratuitous. It is surplus or supplement, a surplus of technique over expression, detail over substance, even (implicitly) facility over quality.

Now I look at these subtexts in relation to Liszt. But they emerge too in commentaries on Hugo, and especially in discussions of his earlier poetry. John Ireson, writing of the 1828 ballades, speaks of « an exercise in bravura », of a « *tour de force* of prosody » as against a content whose « norms appear to be fixed »<sup>34</sup>. Compare Berthon : « Hugo's originality is not in the matter, but in the manner »<sup>35</sup>. Or consider Ireson's language in referring to some of the other early poems. Of *La Légende de la nonne*, he refers to a « self-imposed test of virtuosity ». Of *Le Pas d'armes* he describes the « scanty message permitted by the form », and of *Sara la baigneuse* from *Les Orientales* he speaks of « experiment with mimetic and impressionistic effects outstrip[ping] the concern for the theme » – an occlusion of reference<sup>36</sup>. Compare that with William Giese, Hugo's cruelest critic : he speaks of « the virtuoso enamoured of his own virtuosity » ; « no poet has given us less matter with more art ». And in discussing the tyranny of the metaphor, he sees « something of the calculable precision of machinery » ; the symbol is « divor[ced] from the theme » ; and – most damning of all : « only when thought is nothing may the metaphor be everything » ; « the volume of utterance is not justified by an equivalent weight in the things uttered »<sup>37</sup> ; compare Schumann on Liszt : « Great results can only be produced by great causes, and a public cannot be brought to enthusiasm for nothing »<sup>38</sup>. As to what I called the stigma of the gratuitous : the suggestion is that by composing in the difficulty (and

34 John C. Ireson, *Victor Hugo : A Companion to his Poetry*, p. 36.

35 Henri Edouard Berthon, *Nine French Poets 1820-1880* (London-New York : Macmillan, 1966), p. 214.

36 John C. Ireson, *Victor Hugo : A Companion to his Poetry*, pp. 35 and 41.

37 William F. Giese, *Victor Hugo : The Man and the Poet* (London : Andrew Melrose, 1927), pp. 47, 62 and 63.

38 Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, trans. P. Rosenfeld, ed. K. Wolff (New York : Pantheon, 1946), p. 152.



difficulty needs to be differentiated from complexity here), Liszt allows the work to be conceptualised as a (simple) idea, substance or structure overlaid or « surfaced » by ancillary or decorative detail. Rameau's nephew speaks of technical difficulty replacing beauty<sup>39</sup>. Again, compare Giese on Hugo : « What he worships is ornament [...] he finds his pearls and has hung them in triple and quadruple bands around the necks of all the moral and religious platitudes ». And again : « his brilliant powers » play « on the surface of things [...] resolutely gilding commonplaces with the splendours of style »<sup>40</sup>.

My second broad heading is the emancipation of colour, to use a familiar metaphor. In *The Romantic Generation*, Rosen claimed that Liszt, « in his concentration on tone colour may be seen as the most radical musician of his generation »<sup>41</sup>. This relates to my first theme in that the *locus* of virtuosity in Liszt often lies in the differentiation of a background accompaniment layer, if « background » is indeed the *mot juste*. Now part of the motivation for this expanding palette was Liszt's embrace of the poetic, and in part that meant translations of the visual (*Sposalizio*) and specifically of landscape (the travel pieces). I might just mention that there is a hinterland to the travel pieces in a developing tradition of published and illustrated « voyages », which were the appropriate contemporary form for disseminating new knowledge about foreign, historical sites, and also favoured the development of novel visual techniques in their representation, especially lithographic. These culminated in Nodier's *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques*, which began publication in 1820 under Charles Nodier. And we should note that Nodier interested Hugo in a parallel project, the *Voyages poétiques et romantiques*, in 1825.

In any case it is almost a cliché of Hugo criticism to refer to the visual character of his imagination, as Giese remarks, « his poetry is all derived from the eye, and it is all addressed to the eye – by way of the ear »<sup>42</sup>. The key collection here is undoubtedly *Les Orientales* of 1828, of which the epithet « colourful » seems inescapable. Pictorial sources abound : Goya is there ; also John Martin, Piranesi, Delacroix, and of course Louis Boulanger, who more than anyone brought the colours and atmosphere of Eastern subjects to the canvas. Indeed that 1827 Salon at which *Mazeppa* was exhibited seems to have been a turning point in terms of agendas of transposition within Hugo's circle : Sainte-Beuve calling for a poetry that would

39 Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew* (with *D'Alembert's Dream*), trans. L. Tancock (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1966 ; original ms., c. 1761-c. 1779), p. 100.

40 William Giese, *Victor Hugo*, pp. 49, 56 and 210.

41 Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, p. 507.

42 William Giese, *Victor Hugo*, p. 57.



rival the colours of romantic painting, and attributing specifically to Hugo « la manière d'artiste ». That was in 1829, and a year later Hugo himself argued that poets and painters shared a common interest in visual images and that the plastic arts were excellent points of departure for poetic reveries, suggestive images which could stimulate the poet's imagination.

It is interesting to juxtapose different critical perspectives on *Les Orientales*. Characteristically, Giese wants to complain about the picturesque in early Hugo: « How completely this teeming imagination [...] remains imprisoned in the world of form and color! »<sup>43</sup> But this can be turned around. In his study of *Les Orientales* Riffaterre argued that Hugo was less concerned with a portrayal of the outward through a picturesque imagination than with an inner vision in which the colour and exoticism are born of his efforts to free language<sup>44</sup>. After all the highly coloured images of *Les Orientales* – the violent contrasts (light and shade; splendour and squalor) – are really rather well suited to the structuralist method employed by Riffaterre, and I might add by his pupil Wendy Greenberg, who extended the approach to embrace *Les Rayons et les ombres*<sup>45</sup>. What this raises, of course, is a rather important analytical question, as relevant to Liszt as to Hugo. Basically, what we call colour or ornament depends on certain canonised assumptions about form and structure, and they might of course be challenged. In other words, we might reconfigure the constitutive elements of form. And if we do so the cultural value might also change, probably through a swerve in the direction of Modernism. We should perhaps heed Adorno, who urges us to « allow the composition something in advance »<sup>46</sup>.

And so to my third and last theme, which I will label « the commodification of Romanticism ». Graham Robb credits (or debits) Hugo with this in his biography<sup>47</sup>, and Liszt, it seems to me, might sustain a similar claim in the musical world. Here we would need to extend beyond the mid century, beyond the period of regular contact between Liszt and Hugo. Both men spanned the two halves of the century, both changed direction at the mid century, and there is a story to tell in both cases about the persistence of Romantic topics into a world of emerging mod-

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

44 Michael Riffaterre, « Hugo's Orientales revisited », *American Society Legion of Honor Magazine*, xxxii/2 (1965), pp. 103-118.

45 Wendy Nicholas Greenberg, *The Power of Rhetoric: Hugo's Metaphor and Poetics* (New York-Bern: Peter Lang, 1985).

46 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, « On the Problem of Music Analysis », ed. and trans. M. Paddison, in *Music Analysis*, i/2 (1982), pp. 168-187.

47 Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo*, p. 313.



ernism and also about the reception of those topics by a wider catchment area. I suggest that Liszt and Hugo were positioned oddly in relation to the canons of taste and the expectations of audiences in the late nineteenth century. Theirs was neither the remoteness of the avant-garde artist (their modernity had an element of modishness in it) nor the proximity of the popular culture icon (their populism was tempered by a pronounced streak of idealism). They were located at the edge of the Classical canon, yet at the same time hovered uneasily between the worlds of the avant-garde and of popular culture. In other words they somehow sustained a claim to modernist ambition, while remaining very much alive to populist prejudices about just what might reasonably be expected of art.

At risk of leaping too far, I suggest that they straddled categories of style and taste that were firming up and separating out, with less and less leakage between them, in the late nineteenth century – we might call them Classical, avant-garde and commercial. And if you do straddle such apparently irreconcilable positions, you run some risk of falling between the cracks. Worse still, you invite a challenge on no less a ground than the authenticity of the artwork, its « genuine-ness » ; what, after all, are the credentials of a popular modernism ? Hugo reception has arguably made its choice. Indeed it is precisely Hugo's neglect by the academy and his appeal to less developed tastes that has made him so useful to the politicians : witness my opening remarks on his bicentenary. Where Liszt is concerned, it is by no means obvious that the jury has returned, a century after Niecks pronounced it « out » in his book of 1907<sup>48</sup>. Part of the problem here is the difficulty, in today's world, of restoring the terms of a functional judgment for either virtuoso music or programme music without in the end reducing the music to an historical document ? That is another way of saying that both the virtuoso tradition and the symphonic poem were discredited in an era of modernism. Indeed it was precisely the performative and the poetic that worked to marginalise Liszt's music within the general practice of appreciating Western art music, and nowhere more so than within the academy. We may be struck, though, that these qualities are highly valued in other practices ; not only that, they are currently being rehabilitated in our own, and perhaps especially in the academy. If anyone kidnaps Liszt on the bicentenary of his birth it will be academics.

48 Frederick Niecks, *Programme Music in the Last Four Centuries : A Contribution to the History of Musical Expression* (London and New York : Haskell House Publishers, 1969, original edition 1907), p. 316.





Plate 1 : After Théodore Géricault, *Maxeppa*, s.d.  
(Dijon, Musée Magnin ; photo RMN - © Jean-Gilles Berizzi)



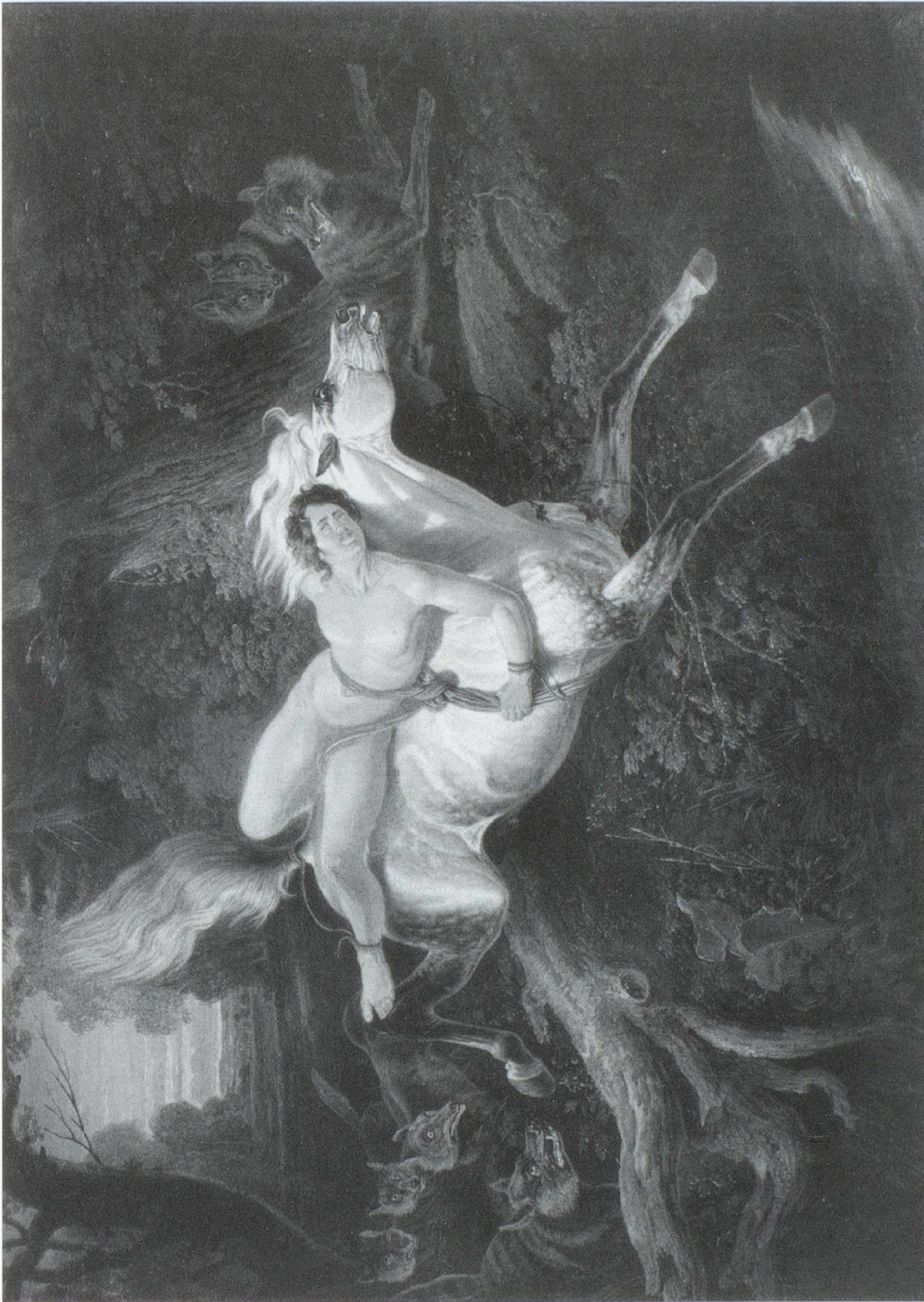


Plate 2 : John Frederick Herring, after Horace Vernet, *Mazzeppa Pursued by Wolves*, 1833  
(Tate Gallery, London – © The Tate Gallery)





Plates 3 :

3a) Eugène Delacroix, *Deux études d'homme nu, l'un attaché à un cheval, l'autre tombant de cheval* ; croquis pour un *Mazeppa* d'après Byron, 1824 (?)  
(Paris, Musée du Louvre, D.A.G. ; photo RMN - © Christian Jean)



3b) Eugène Delacroix, *Mazeppa attaché sur la croupe d'un cheval sauvage*  
(Dijon, Musée Magnin ; photo RMN - © Thierry Magne)





Plate 4 : Louis Boulanger, *Supplice de Mazeppa*, 1827  
(Rouen, Musée des Beaux Arts ; photo RMN – © Bulloz)



