Introduction: The visible transcriber

> In transcription there is no need for too much invention: a certain conjugal fidelity to the original is usually best . . . Perhaps practicing the art of transcription (which I basically invented) for fifty years has taught me to maintain the right balance between too much and too little in this field. If you had remained in Weimar for a few more days, I would have been able to explain my thoughts on the topic with greater clarity.
>
> Franz Liszt to Count Géza Zichy, 1880[1]

It is a pity that Zichy, one of Liszt's closest friends during the composer's later years, did not stay longer in Weimar to record Liszt's thoughts and leave them to posterity. For while a dizzying amount of primary source material is extant – including reminiscences by students, friends, admirers, and critics; press reports and contemporary biographies; and Liszt's own cache of published compositions and prose works, as well as perhaps more than 10,000 pieces of correspondence – very little of it deals with the field that Liszt considered himself to have "basically invented."

Compared to contemporaries like Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann, who dabbled in transcription during their apprentice years, or Johannes Brahms coordinating piano arrangements with the publication of his larger ensemble works, Liszt honed his skills as transcriber with little interruption throughout his long life. One of the last pieces he was to complete before his death in late July 1886 at Bayreuth was, in fact, an arrangement for solo piano of César Cui's *Tarantelle*, op. 12; he had begun transcribing more than fifty years earlier in France, as he reminisced to Zichy, by tackling the compositions of Franz Schubert and Hector Berlioz. Indeed, roughly half of his vast output relies on the music of other composers.

Whether stemming from a paucity of compositional talent, a need to conform to the demands of the early Romantic virtuoso lifestyle, or a more communal understanding of the musical work, "Liszt's imagination," as Kenneth Hamilton has recently observed, "often seemed to need a specific pre-existing musical stimulus (however trivial) to work from, and this could include his own early pieces as well as the works of others."[2] Ironically, it has been Liszt's unimpeachable status since the early 1830s as the most successful

transcriber of his era that has worked against a fuller understanding of his contributions to this art form. Schumann's famous assessment of Liszt the arranger from 1835 continues to loom large in nineteenth-century historiography. Although he only had Liszt's transcription of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* as a basis for his judgment, Schumann noted that it nevertheless was "one that indicates the most important details of instrumentation . . . Everything seems to me conceived and worked out so completely in orchestral terms, with each instrument so exactly placed and exploited, so to speak, with regard for its basic sonorous quality, that a good musician could prepare a passable score from the arrangement."[3]

Scanning through the transcriptions of Ludwig van Beethoven's symphonies or many of the excerpted arrangements from Richard Wagner's operas, one cannot help but be impressed by Liszt's talent in this regard. But he has been undone by his own success. Indeed, Schumann's observations have set the tone for subsequent scholarly inquiries into Liszt's transcriptions, which have largely been concerned with uncovering the level of quantitative fidelity that Liszt's ostensible copy shares with the original composition. The interest remains entirely within the work, with little consideration being given to its contextual dimensions, so that more often than not such a methodology leads to the following tautological conclusion: if Liszt is the preeminent arranger of his day and his primary goal is to produce a version for piano of the work he arranges, then an arrangement by Liszt must represent the most faithful copy of the original. Moreover, the angle chosen by many scholars to interrogate the reproduction as an essentially static and automated procedure – in the modern sense of recorded sound being transmissible in virtually indistinguishable copies by means of CD or MP3 – overlooks many of the musical and social issues in which a fundamental component of nineteenth-century culture like the piano transcription could be implicated.

A Lisztian transcription, after all, is simultaneously a type of tool for a variety of projects, an adaptable process, a coming-to-terms with preexisting material usually engineered by someone else. Thus they inherently exhibit what Roger Parker has described in operatic production as a "surplus of signatures," which "routinely involves the dictates not of an authorial intention but of multiple (often vigorously competing) authorial intentions."[4] Just as a book might pass from owner to owner, over time accumulating evidence of its many unique uses – dedications, corrections, marginal notes – so too is a work of music signed by its transcriber or transcribers.[5] Some of the residual signatures in Liszt's transcriptions are clear, others faint; some consciously collaborative, others defiantly contradictory. Taken as a whole, though, they

elucidate aspects of such subjects as the work concept, virtuosity, the crisis of composition, nationalism, (auto)biography, and the concretization of a canon of composers. For Liszt, transcription is the tie that often binds these seemingly independent issues.

Reorienting the investigation of this material toward uncovering and deciphering the relationship among these signatures allows for a more comprehensive survey of Liszt's output as arranger. To take but one example: while Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* and Beethoven's symphonies were offered to the public by Liszt as *partitions de piano* – thus ostensibly sharing many of the same ontological goals – the impulse behind their creation and the story of their subsequent dissemination share little in common. Indeed, it is more fruitful to consider, say, how Liszt's arrangements of Franz Schubert's lieder and Beethoven's symphonies helped him forge a German identity in the 1830s and 1840s, or the ways in which Liszt worked elements of his late compositional style into his arrangements of symphonic and choral works by César Cui, Camille Saint-Saëns, and Giuseppe Verdi. Investigating his transcriptional output along such ideological lines can help illuminate what arbitrary generic or schematic boundaries obfuscate.

At the same time, Liszt's transcriptions expose the full panoply of his involvement in the course of nineteenth-century musical events: he met Beethoven and Claude Debussy, attended the premieres of the *Symphonie fantastique* and *Parsifal*, toured most of the continent (during which time he generously offered his talents to the needy), was the driving force behind the *Allgemeiner deutscher Musikverein*, wrote about musical aesthetics and the future of church music, and prefigured – or at least kept pace with – innovations in harmony, form, and even instrumentation that had long been ascribed exclusively to others. Many of these experiences are embodied in his transcriptions, testaments to some especially productive and collaborative artistic moments in his life. And if this study seems to give special emphasis to the 1830s and early 1840s at the ostensible expense of Liszt's equally productive Weimar and post-Weimar periods, it is because Liszt was never really able to break away from either his compositions or their underlying aesthetic in his later years. Many of his late works remain indebted – albeit in somewhat modified forms – to the philosophical and aesthetic currents of the July Monarchy. François-Joseph Fétis had written in 1829 that "If it were only possible to hear the productions of the great composers by means of a full orchestra, then they would be very little known; the taste for music would be less common, and the progress of this art would be significantly slower."[6] Liszt was well aware of the ways in which transcriptions could

accomplish what original works could not – as propaganda to be sure, but also as a means to fashion himself as composer, disciple, cultural architect, and, of course, Romantic artist.

It is this range of applications for the transcription that makes understandable Liszt's inability to describe his art precisely to Zichy, for little else connects these numerous approaches to reducing works by more than fifty composers than a "certain conjugal fidelity." What, then, did Liszt actually "invent" with his transcriptions? Certainly not the act of transcription itself, which had thrived during the Renaissance, if not before, in the forms of parody masses, organ and lute intabulations, and "si placet" additions.[7] Nor could Liszt have had in mind solely the economics of transcription, as he surely knew that the predecessors of the firm Breitkopf & Härtel had been publishing arrangements since the middle of the eighteenth century in an effort to increase interest in, and sales of, symphonies and operas. Schumann suggested in his review that Liszt had managed to reproduce Berlioz's score with almost photographic precision, but this feat, too, had precedents. And Liszt was not the first to refashion the music of others for his own interests, as J. S. Bach, Handel, and W. A. Mozart had already famously demonstrated.

Liszt understood transcription to be the creation of difference; that is, an act of violation of – even violence toward – the original. According to the linguist Lawrence Venuti, something very similar occurs in literary translation:

> [The] reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that preexist it in the target language, [is] always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts. Translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target language reader. This difference can never be entirely removed, of course, but it necessarily suffers a reduction and exclusion of possibilities – and an exorbitant gain of other possibilities specific to the translating language.[8]

The gains won through transcription are not limited, however, to the original and copy. Indeed, Liszt's great invention concerns the artistic elevation of the transcriber, so that – arguably for the first time in history – Liszt made the transcriber visible. In doing so he created roles for the transcriber that previously had been considered inaccessible: composer, amanuensis, critic, propagandist, historian, trendsetter. Thus his transcriptions not only constitute great acts of creativity, but also great works of originality.

Liszt invigorated facets of the nineteenth-century musical scene by incorporating vanguard creative elements from translation theory, the graphic arts, and other media of reproduction into his keyboard transcriptions. Indeed, artistic activities that are considered reproductive today – translation, printmaking, engraving, and others – assumed much more individual profiles through their nineteenth-century practitioners. Philosophers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm von Humboldt ushered in a new era in translation theory by advocating fidelity to the model work through the substitution of idiomatic equivalencies for literalness. In the field of visual reproduction, daguerreotypes and copper engravings brought artistic masters of the Italian Renaissance into the European home much in the same way that transcriptions brought the orchestral Beethoven or operatic Mozart to the piano bench. Chapter 1 explores these overlapping branches of the "reproductive" arts, suggesting that in the nineteenth century the piano transcription was not necessarily considered to be a prohibitive, exclusively derivative, or especially insidious product; nor was this position consigned solely to music. Understanding musical transcription, visual engraving, and literary translation to be endeavors that in theory could approach original composition, Liszt and many of his contemporaries endorsed an elastic conception of artistic reproduction that acknowledged the executor's creativity and the work's independence.

This inherently open-ended and collaborative approach to the transcription helps explain the complicated genesis and dissemination of Liszt's arrangement of the *Symphonie fantastique*. As Chapter 2 chronicles, for Liszt the 1830s were a period of intense artistic and professional collaboration with Berlioz, and the genesis of the *Symphonie fantastique* transcription is emblematic of this developing relationship. An analysis of the work's content – as it can be recreated in part through Liszt's meticulous performance notation – indicates that the transcription served to reinforce a public perception of Berlioz as composer and Liszt as performer, whereby Liszt guided his audiences through Berlioz's enigmatic compositions by means of kinesic visual cues. Many years later, Wagner would wonder of Liszt's Symphonic Poems: "A symphony's meaning cannot be expressed in a programme, which tosses the awkward question of Why? around rather than settling it. The meaning can only be expressed in the actual drama played out on the stage."[9] Of course, the drama that Wagner had in mind was of a completely different nature than that of Liszt, but his comment highlights the necessity of performance in order to establish a musical work's identity and create meaning to those involved. While it would be an exaggeration to say that most of Liszt's transcriptions espouse programmatic elements

bounded by an internally consistent form, they nevertheless project a dramatic arc when rendered on stage, often one quite different than their model. Indeed, the arrangement of the *Symphonie fantastique* is the first of many transcriptions by Liszt whose performance element contributes significantly to its individuality.

As the 1830s waned, Liszt aligned himself more closely with Schubert and Beethoven. The three great sets of arrangements of Schubert's songs from this period – the *12 Lieder von Franz Schubert*, *Schwanengesang*, and *Winterreise* – document Liszt's maturing and increasingly innovative approach to large-scale forms, born out of a fusion of the concert fantasy and an urgent need to assert himself as an original composer. By considering the genesis and structure of all three song sets, Chapter 3 argues that Liszt's *Winterreise* is itself a complete song cycle, one almost entirely independent of Schubert's conception. Indeed, Liszt began with Müller's, rather than Schubert's, work. He selected the appropriate poems, reordered them, and excised incongruous verses in order to create a cogent narrative. And as emendations in the surviving sources attest, Liszt sought to further strengthen the musical coherence between songs by reusing memorable motives and characteristic accompanimental figures. By fashioning a tonal, thematic, and narrative order out of Schubert's set of lieder, Liszt created one of the first concrete examples of the "instrumental" song cycle, echoes of which can be found in much of his subsequent oeuvre. As a type of "contrary paraphrase" – to use Richard Taruskin's summary term for the process famously described by Harold Bloom as "misreading" – Liszt's *Winterreise* celebrated its model while simultaneously breaking away from it.[10]

To be a major Romantic composer meant to grow up in the shadow of Beethoven. And with the possible exception of Chopin, virtually every major composer of the first generation of Romantics grappled with the legacy of his work, particularly the Ninth Symphony.[11] While scholars have excavated the mine of philosophical impulses that contributed to the creation of the Beethoven myth, few have investigated the ways in which the infrastructure of domestic music-making contributed to that fashioning. Engaging Beethoven most directly came through the act of transcribing him, and Liszt's transcriptions of Beethoven's symphonies – carried out in two very different phases of his career – represent a crucial and underresearched phase of Beethoven's posthumous reception. Chapter 4 examines these works in light of the Romantic mythology of Beethoven, suggesting that Liszt created them in part to exclude others from participating in and owning a share of the Beethoven legacy. Although Liszt repeatedly stressed in his writings and concerts that Beethoven's music should serve as the

cornerstone of the European musical canon, his virtuosic arrangements – unplayable by all but the most seasoned virtuoso musicians – distinguished him as the one and only torchbearer and musical heir apparent.

As the final member of Liszt's early triumvirate, Carl Maria von Weber enjoyed significant attention from Liszt during his virtuoso years – emblematized by Liszt's coruscant arrangement of the popular *Konzertstück*. Once Liszt settled in Weimar, however, his interest in Weber cooled in direct proportion to Wagner's rising star. The Liszt–Wagner collaboration of the 1850s and beyond was persistently contentious, and as Chapter 5 argues, the numerous arrangements of selections from Wagner's operas that Liszt famously produced can be read as subtle critiques of Wagner's musico-dramatic enterprise. Indeed, the seemingly indefatigable propagandist never accepted Wagner unconditionally. His excerpts from *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan und Isolde*, for instance, significantly reconceptualize Wagner's goals to accord more closely with Liszt's cosmopolitan approach to opera and drama, in which the formative elements of Liszt's artistic past – grand opera, Romantic pianism, and significant predecessors like Weber (by way of Paris) – retained their relevance for the present.

In fact, later in life, Liszt would make significant use of the music of his contemporaries by way of transcription in order to disseminate what was increasingly becoming a challenging and publicly unpopular compositional style. In the 1830s Liszt had appropriated Schubert's songs as a means to develop his compositional voice, essentially rearranging his source material so that, through the accumulation of small but material changes, new works emerged. The exercises paid off, for within two decades Liszt would have a number of original large-scale works to his credit, with his compositional style being dubbed "futuristic," "progressive," and "New German." Beginning in the early 1860s, however, Liszt's style appears to have splintered. To be sure, the progressive qualities remained, but these were increasingly applied toward his sacred and Hungarian-themed compositions. Chapter 6 explores how Liszt adapted his transcriptions of Cui, Verdi, and Saint-Saëns to accommodate the directions of his late style, which in fact had its roots in some of Liszt's early compositional experiments from the 1830s.

As he thus relayed to Zichy, throughout his life transcriptions helped Liszt solve his most vexing compositional, performative, and technical problems, and they allowed him to forge unique relationships with his audiences that in turn shaped numerous aspects of his legacy as an artist. This legacy of the visible transcriber was not without its opponents, particularly during the turbulent late years of his life. Writing in 1876 on the subject of "Arrangements and Transcriptions," an unsigned critic for Leipzig's

Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung argued that present-day aesthetic considerations made works like Tausig's arrangements of Weber's *Aufforderung zum Tanz* or Liszt's *Midsummer Night's Dream* Paraphrase untenable. "If you want to arrange," he continues, "then leave things be. Your only goal is to capture – without unnecessary coloration – the impression of the original, while ensuring that you [the arranger] are forgotten as much as possible."[12]

This reviewer confuses visibility with transparency; thus in overlooking how transcription was the fulcrum on which much of Liszt's artistry moved, he arguably misses much of what makes Liszt's transcriptions exceptional. The pages that follow seek to make visible the associations between Liszt's own compositions, the works he transcribed, and the concerns of his era in order to bring about a more precise and illuminating understanding of the musical life of Liszt and his world.

1 Models and methods

> The engraver knows only the timid joys of genius, for his pleasure is constantly troubled by the fear that he may be led into becoming a creative artist himself. I would not venture to decide the difficult question as to whether an engraver should faithfully copy the defects and qualities of his model, or copy freely, giving scope to his own genius.
>
> George Sand[1]

Near the conclusion to his monumental *Grammaire des arts* of 1867, the artist-turned-critic Charles Blanc called upon artisans of fellow disciplines to help support a sweeping claim:

> Like Diderot we believe that engraving is less a copy than it is a translation. Like the musician who arranges a tune, like a writer of prose who translates foreign poetry into his own tongue by maintaining first and foremost the genius of the poem, the burinist who engraves a painting onto the copper plate makes it come back to life.[2]

Blanc had a legacy of evidence for his invocation, not the least of which were the magnificent burin engravings exhibited earlier in the century by his teacher Luigi Calamatta, known to musicians both past and present for his renderings of, among others, Jean-Dominique Ingres's portraits of Nicolò Paganini and George Sand. Calamatta's success in capturing the originals was recognized immediately, and they continue to astound – especially when one considers that he had but a handful of sharp tools and a copper plate with which to work.

Blanc saw this prestigious and highly labor-intensive profession to be threatened by the growing popularity of a new means of visual reproduction: photography. Indeed, at the heart of his defense is not a condemnation of photography per se, but rather a concern that the photographic process undermined the original's ability to "come back to life." If a photograph historicized its subject, if it could only copy rather than translate, then a substantial component of the work's essence was diminished or lost entirely in the transferal. "Though photography is a marvelous invention," continues Blanc, "it is not art precisely because it imitates everything while expressing nothing."[3] In reviewing the offerings at the 1859 Salon, Charles

Baudelaire had come to the same conclusion. If photography is "allowed to infringe upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary," then "art daily diminishes its self-respect by prostrating itself before external reality. The painter increasingly becomes inclined to paint not what he dreams, but what he sees."[4] The argument of both authors is clear: Should not the act of reproducing create something new?

The technology that made photography possible deprived the artwork of artistic revitalization by denying its contemporary presence. Blanc and Baudelaire maintained that the creative touch provided by engravers, translators, and transcribers distinguished subjective reproductions of masterworks from their mechanical competitors. Although the purpose of these self-conscious statements was to aggressively (re)affirm the value of what was widely believed to be an intrinsically unique genre of visual art, resonances of their nineteenth-century spirit can nevertheless be felt in the domain of music less than half a century later. Ferruccio Busoni, the most vocal defender of the piano transcription, made the audacious claim that "Transcription occupies an important place in the literature of the piano; and looked at from a right point of view, every important piano piece is the reduction of a big thought to a practical instrument."[5] For Busoni, not only does the piano transcription have a right to exist as an independent art form, but it is actually through a transcriptional process that new works come into existence. Indeed, by 1913 Busoni came to view virtually every aspect of music as a product of transcription:

> The moment that the pen takes possession of [an abstract idea] the thought loses its original form . . . The idea becomes a sonata or a concerto; this is already an arrangement of the original. From this first transcription to the second is a comparatively short and unimportant step . . . The performance of a work is also a transcription, and this too – however free the performance may be – can never do away with the original. For the musical work of art exists whole and intact before it has sounded and after the sound is finished.[6]

Busoni conceptualized the process of music-making – from inspiration through notation to performance – as a type of mediation through chains of transcriptions. In doing so he challenged Socrates's time-honored theory of forms, in which a form's truth or rationality becomes increasingly diluted the more it is subjected to mimetic processes. Thus Socrates claims that "Imitation is surely far from the truth, [for] it produces everything – because it lays hold of a certain small part of each thing, and that part itself is only a phantom."[7] Moreover, he continues, imitators need not – indeed, do not – understand the craftsmanship that goes into the creation of the object being