

LIFE OF LISZT

**BY
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

This little work, which is rather an essay upon the personal and musical characteristics of Liszt than a biography of him, as its title indicates, hardly needs more than an informal introduction to the public. It may safely be left to commend itself to readers upon its own merits. Unlike most of his other biographies, Dr. Nohl seems to have addressed himself to this with feelings of strong personal admiration and affection for his hero. It appears to be the universal testimony of those who have enjoyed Liszt's acquaintance, not merely his friendship, that he has inspired in them the strongest and most intimate feelings of personal attachment to him by his own genial and generous nature. If at times, therefore, the biographer appears to rhapsodize, it is probably because his relations to Liszt make it difficult for him to avoid idealizing him. If this be so, fortunately there is compensation in the reflection that no other musician of the present day, in every admirable quality of head and heart, so nearly approaches the ideal.

In reproducing the selections from Miss Amy Fay's "Music Study in Germany," which appear in the closing chapter of this volume, the translator, so far as has been practicable, for the German version does not follow the English very closely in its connection, or always literally, has made use of the original text. He has also prepared an appendix containing much interesting matter that serves to explain and sometimes to illustrate the contents of the work. The list of scholars of the great teacher to which Dr. Nohl also refers in the closing

chapter, and which were furnished to the biographer by Liszt himself, will be found at the close of this appendix. It is of more than ordinary interest as it contains indirectly the testimony of Liszt himself as to the relative prominence of the vast number of pupils who have studied with him. Surely such a life as his, so rich in success, so bountiful in reward and triumph, so fruitful in results, its skill and love attested to by eminent scholars in every country, refutes his mournful remark to George Sand, in one case at least, "Sorrowful and great is the destiny of the artist."

G. P. U.

Chicago, Feb. 1, 1884.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

In contrast with our practice in the previous biographies, let us, this time, as the master has also done in his greatest oratorio, disclose the life of the hero in his deeds, which display themselves before us in regular succession.

First of all appears his early youth with its incomprehensible virtuosity. It is the actual strangling of the serpents in the cradle, so utterly does this power defy every obstacle and difficulty in the revelation of its art. Then appears a new germ of the ever fruitful life of Nature, as specially manifested in the weird gypsy world. And now the great man rises resplendent in the great artist, in strong contrast with a kindred genius, we mean the great violinist, Paganini, in whom, so different from Liszt himself, the essential principle which lies at the very root of artistic creation, namely, the genius of humanity, was not apparent. It proved its power in the recognition of the one artist of equal rank whom he encountered and whom he unceasingly helped to realize that grand consummation which we possess to-day in Baireuth.

Still further, there appears in its wonderful versatility his active sympathy with all the momentous intellectual questions of the time and of humanity. We recognize it with astonishment in his imposing series of "Collected Writings" which rises up before us. Then follows the new epoch in art-development, the creation of the Symphonic Poem, growing, as it were, spontaneously out of his association with all that is

comprised in poetry and life. Then comes the crown of all, the latest and grandest work he has accomplished, the renovation of church music. We beseech the laymen at least to recognize the importance of this great accomplishment.

In a sketch of such a richly exuberant life it is essential that we fail not to recognize the personality of this genius in his creations as "Master." How much of loving kindness it manifests! It is not like Ludwig Richter's genial and gentle "Beemaster." It is like Michel Angelo's majestic "Lord" to whom the newly created Eve meekly bows. It is like Prometheus among his loved creations which his breath will first inspire with life. And to what extent this reaches, the world knows by the great number of his master-scholars whose eminent names enframe the complete picture.

Thus we wander here, as it were amid a new creation, and discover that in the pure art of music our time is not inferior to any other; nay, more, that it has added to the great possessions of the past many an enduring and noble work.

THE LIFE OF LISZT.

CHAPTER I.

LES PRELUDES.

Liszt's Childish Characteristics—The Home at Raiding—The Father and his Musical Abilities—His Ambition for his Son—Selections from his Diary—Young Liszt's First Appearances—Peculiarities of his Playing—The Gypsies—The Influence of their Life and Music upon him—Paganini and Bihary—Generosity of Counts Amadee and Szapary—His Studies with Czerny—Old Artists Astonished—Plays before Beethoven—The great Master kisses the Boy—The Journey to Paris—Cherubini's Churlishness—Liszt's immense Success—Ovations and Triumphs—A great Favorite among the Ladies—French and German Tributes.

"BEHOLD a young virtuoso, seemingly dropped from the clouds, who arouses the greatest astonishment. The performances of this boy border on the miraculous, and one is tempted to doubt their physical possibility when he hears the young giant thunder forth Hummel's difficult compositions," says a Vienna account of this boy, scarce eleven years of age. Only a year afterward, we see Paris wild with amazement over a phenomenon never beheld before. Like that of young Mozart at Naples, the piano was turned round so that they could see what they did not believe to be possible, thereby revealing the genial and manly characteristics of the young artist, which afterward became the delight of the world, like his playing. "His eyes gleam with animation, mischievousness and joy. He is not led to the piano, he rushes up to it. They applaud and he

looks surprised. They applaud afresh and he rubs his hands," it is said, and then are pointed out the national quality, the inspired fury, the unmistakable originality, and at another time the proud, manly expression, which gained for him the appellation of the "Hungarian Wonder-Child." We shall further notice the indications of these peculiarities, particularly as they are given in a longer biographical notice, which, in its main features, seems to have been taken from his own communication that appeared about the year 1830, in one of the first of Parisian musical journals, the "Revue et Gazette Musicale," which collapsed a few years ago.

Franz Liszt was born October 22, 1811, at Raiding, near Oedenburg. The comet year appeared to his parents a good omen of his future. The father, belonging to a not very wealthy family of the old nobility, was, in his prime, accountant at Eisenstadt with that Prince Nicholas Esterhazy for whom Joseph Haydn was Capellmeister. As he enjoyed the personal acquaintance of the honored master of the quartet, mostly at card-playing, which he practiced as a recreation in the midst of his always severe labor, he was brought into a sphere which was peculiarly musical in its character, and which furnished his own nature with the richest food, for father Liszt was on terms of personal friendship also with that best scholar of Mozart's, the distinguished pianist, Hummel, born at Presburg in 1778, who officiated many years as the Prince's Capellmeister at Eisenstadt and Esterhaz. No one esteemed him more highly as a pianist. His playing had made an indelible impression upon him. He was also musical himself in a high degree, playing nearly every instrument, particularly the piano and violoncello, and was only restrained by the displeasure of his family

relatives from perfecting himself as a thorough musician. So much the more his dreams and hopes of artistic power were transferred to his eldest son, whose rare talent had manifested itself early. "Thy destiny is fixed. Thou wilt realize that art ideal which fascinated my youth in vain. In thee will I grow young again and transmit myself," he often said to him. He was so strongly impressed with all the signs of promise in the boy that he devoted a diary to him in which he entered his notes "with the most minute and solicitous punctiliousness of a tender father." Here is a leaf from the recollections of that childhood:

"After his vaccination, a period commenced in which the boy had to struggle alternately with nervous pains and fever, which more than once imperiled his life. On one occasion, in his second or third year, we thought him dead and ordered his coffin made. This disquieted state continued until his sixth year. In that year he heard me playing Ries' concerto in C sharp minor. He leaned upon the piano and was all ears. Towards evening he returned from the garden and sang the theme. We made him repeat it but he did not know what he sang. That was the first indication of his genius. He incessantly begged that he might commence piano-playing. After three months' instruction, the fever returned and compelled us to discontinue it. His delight in instruction did not take away his pleasure in playing with children of his own age, although from this time forth he sought to live more for himself alone. He was not regular in his practice but was always tractable up to his ninth year. It was at this period that he played in public for the first time in Oedenburg. He performed a concerto by Ries in E major and extemporized. The fever attacked him just before he seated himself at the piano and yet he was strengthened by the

playing. He had long manifested a desire to play in public and exhibited much ease and courage.”

We interrupt the narrative at this point to inquire what was the active source of this inner consecration to art as well as of the passionate impulse to exhibit it in public. Neither Ferdinand Ries, who merely imitated the ornamentations of his great teacher, Beethoven, nor Mozart’s pupil, Hummel, who succeeded Haydn at Esterhaz, nor the great father of instrumental music himself even felt remotely that genius for execution, the wonderful results of which were already filling the youthful soul like a creative impulse and with a passionate longing for expression urging him on to public performance. In a letter from Paris to Schumann’s musical paper in 1834, it is said: “He often plays tenderly and with gentle melancholy;” then again: “With overpowering passion and with such fire and even fury, that it seems as if the piano must give way beneath his fingers. It often creaks and rattles during his playing. You see head, eyes, hands, the whole upper part of the body moving impetuously in every direction.” On one occasion he fell back from the piano exhausted. Whence this unprecedented devotion to music? Whence, as one might say, this merging of his very identity in his playing?

There are a peculiar people, scattered from the Himalayas even to the Ebro and the Scottish Highlands, possessing nothing, in this wide world of God, but themselves and nature. Neither house nor hearth, neither state nor social forms restrain them. They have no fixed pursuit, no calling which makes a firmly settled existence, based on duty and inclination. They have no manners, no church, no God. And yet these people have lived

for centuries, as we know, unchanged in kind and number, yet nowhere settled. They are the gypsies, who seemingly possess nothing which the earth offers men or which makes life valuable. And still more, wherever they appear they are completely ignored and even looked upon with utter contempt. Truly they have nothing and are, as it were, a miserable fragment of the human race, everlastingly forgotten by God. But they have one thing that vies with our culture and art—their music. As they feel the complete rapture of an existence in nature which is boundlessly free, free from everything which hinders the slightest movement or inclination, so in their habits, but particularly in their improvisations, they express the God-given freedom of the inner sensibility in all its emotions, from the proudest human consciousness to the inmost longing of the soul for sympathetic communion. This music is to them as it were their world and God, life and happiness, the sun and all that world-movement with which we feel ourselves closely associated. In a paper, worthy of notice, Liszt has sought to clear up the mystery of the vitality remaining in these dissevered fragments of the old Indian race, and explain the greater mystery how a people so destitute of any social and intellectual basis of life, possess one art and one of such originality, depth and power. We must follow him still further to understand the wonderful effect of his own performances.

“Recollections of the gypsies are associated with memories of my childhood and some of its most vivid impressions,” the world-renowned “Magician of the Hungarian Land,” writes in his fiftieth year: “Afterwards I became a wandering virtuoso, as they are in our fatherland. They have pitched their tents in all

the countries of Europe, and I have traversed the tangled maze of roads and paths over which they have wandered in the course of time, my experiences some years, in a certain sense, being very similar to their historical destiny. Like them I was a stranger to the people of every country. Like them I pursued my ideal in the continual revelations of art, if not of nature." In recalling these early recollections, he confesses that few things impressed him so strongly as these gypsies soliciting alms at the threshold of every palace and cottage for a few words softly whispered in the ear, a few loudly played dance-melodies, or a few songs, such as no minstrel sings, that throw lovers into rapture without their knowing why. How often he himself has sought the solution of this charm, which held all with unchallenged sway! As the weak pupil of a strong master, his father, he had as yet had no other insight into the world of phantasy than the architectural framework of notes in their artificial arrangement together, and when we think of the old-fashioned composers, like Hummel and Ries, we imagine that it must have doubly fascinated him to exercise that charm, which these calloused gypsy hands practiced before all eyes, when they drew the bow across the sighing instrument or made the metal ring with powerful defiance.

We now see how these children of nature, with their most mysterious and spontaneous power of sensibility, blossoming out in their art, absorbed him and filled a soul incapable of jealousy with a natural envy of the incredible effect they produced. His waking dreams had been filled with these bronzed faces, prematurely old with the vicissitudes of centuries and dissolute habits of every sort, their defiant smiles, their dull, red eyes, in which laughs a sardonic unbelief

and gleams flash out which glisten but do not glow. Their dances always floated through his visions with their languid, elastic, bounding and tempting movements. By degrees the conviction was borne in upon him that "in comparison with the continuously dull and sombre days imaged upon the background of our civilized world, upon which only here and there some moments beaming with joy or lurid with pain are conspicuous, these beings had fashioned a defter texture of joy and sorrow, alternating with love, song, wine and the dance, as they were excited and soothed by these four elements of passion and voluptuousness."

Thus early his soul had discovered the supernatural, throned like a sphynx in the inmost recesses of nature. He had felt that mysterious creative power which shapes and maintains the world. He felt it as belonging to his own inner nature and power, and his heart, in the profound consciousness of this magical possession, must have bounded more exultantly, since those other lofty human acquirements of culture and art-work, which first invest the deep outreachings of life with the nobility and loftiness of thought, were open to him also. Henceforth his genius illuminated him, but the activity of this genius, in other words, its creative power, he attributed to his always profound recognition of the mysterious operations of the creative power of nature. A Parisian description of his playing, and that of the similarly "demonish" Paganini, about the year 1834, says: "Music is to them the art which gives man the presentiment of his higher existence, and leads him from the occurrences of ordinary life into the Isis-temple, where nature speaks with him in sacred tones, unheard before and yet intelligible."

Let us now observe how the success of his playing, which this boy had already evidently achieved by his vigorous expression of his own feelings, influenced his future fortunes. "The tones of his bewitching violin fell upon my ear like drops of some fiery, volatile essence," he says of the gipsy virtuoso, Bihary, whom he heard in Vienna in 1822. "Had my memory been of soft clay, and every one of his notes a diamond nail, they could not have clung to it more tenaciously. Had my soul been the ooze from which a river-god had returned to his bed, and every tone of the artist a fructifying seed-corn, it could not have taken deeper root in me."

His father took him at this time to Prince Esterhazy, in whose family musical patronage was hereditary. "I believe that female influence alone succeeds with him," wrote the great Beethoven two years later, when he proffered the "Missa Solemnis" to him, as he had to another prince, for a subscription. He did not anticipate much kindly feeling on his part towards himself. Of what use, then, for a mere young beginner in art to expect anything? The Prince made him a gift of a few hundred francs. That was little for the heir of Haydn's patron. In contrast with this, the boy met with a merited reception in the larger and more cultivated city of Presburg. Six noblemen, among them Counts Amadee and Szapary, settled upon him for six years an annuity of six hundred gulden, which satisfied the father's desire to give the boy a fitting education.

Soon afterward, in the year 1821, he resolved to give up his position and settle in Vienna with his wife and child. He was met with the anxious misgivings of his wife (born in Upper Austria), who could not bear to see her darling exposed to the

vicissitudes of an artistic career, and who tremblingly asked what would become of them, if, at the expiration of the time, their hopes were disappointed. "What God wills," cried the boy of nine, who had listened to the conversation with a quiet timidity. The objections and solicitude of the mother were dispelled, all the more readily, as she was of a deeply and genuinely religious nature.

It was estimated that six hundred francs was a fair price for their household effects. On their arrival in Vienna the father selected the distinguished and unassuming Carl Czerny for the boy's teacher, for Czerny had been Beethoven's pupil a short time and played nearly all his compositions by heart. It was only the wonderful endowment of the boy that induced the overburdened teacher to accept him, and when he had finished playing to him he won his complete affection, as he did Beethoven's. How could a boy of such a fiery musical spirit, who had enjoyed such a free and overflowing life in this art of his youth, play the dry, pedantic Clementi, which Czerny at first selected as the pedagogical groundwork? "If he visited a music store he never found a piece difficult enough to suit him," says our informant. Once a publisher showed him the B minor concerto of Hummel. The boy turned over the leaves and intimated that it was nothing, and that he could play it at sight, making the assertion in the presence of the first piano-players of the city. The gentleman, astonished at the self-confidence of the boy, took him at his word and led him into the hall where there was a piano. He performed the concerto with equal skill and ease. It was the same composition which he played before Beethoven a year afterwards. Nothing could now restrain him from giving himself entirely to the public. "There is no greater

pleasure for me than to practice and display my art," Beethoven also wrote in his earlier years, and should not a genius who had acquired to his own thorough satisfaction the utmost freedom and highest success by such characteristic performances in public, seek its own free course, the open sea of the great public? "I still remember to have seen and heard this virtuoso whose manly, beautiful *personnel* displayed all the characteristics of his race," writes Liszt at the time he first heard Bihary in Vienna. "I can still recall the absolute fascination which he exercised when with an absorbed and at the same time melancholy listlessness, in striking contrast with the apparent buoyancy of his temperament and the flashing glances which, as it were, fathomed the souls of his hearers, he took his violin in his hands and for hours, forgetful that time was also flying, unloosed cascades of tones which streamed on in their wild plunges, anon rippling away as over velvety moss." On the 18th of December of the same year, 1822, the "Young Hercules" in that concert when he "thundered out" the Hummel composition, so united and as it were kneaded into one whole, the andante of Beethoven's A major symphony with an aria of Rossini's, who was at that time idolized in Vienna, that the relator excitedly cries out—"Est deus in nobis." Verily a god directed the creative and executive power of this little one, with his open brow, his haughty nose, and his countenance lit up by his large, deep eyes, which seemed set in the streaming hair, appearing as it were, like emanations of his power. All this it was that may have urged our serious Beethoven, who could so unerringly distinguish between the true and the false, the great and the little, to go up to the boy at the close of that concert of April 13, 1823, embrace and kiss him.

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