NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

# Liszt and His Treatment of Song and Opera Transcriptions after German and Italian Composers: A Study of Selected Transcriptions Based on Works of Schubert, Rossini, Wagner and Verdi.

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Charles Badami

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## A Brief Overview of the Art of Transcription and Franz Liszt

When considering his pioneering and innovative role in broadening the tonal palette of the piano, as well as his tireless efforts to promote his own and other composers' music, it is not surprising that a large percentage of Franz Liszt's compositional output for that instrument is made up of transcriptions. To define the term "piano transcription" as merely a piano solo arrangement of the notes of another genre is to miss most of the importance of this craft and its artistic meaning when employed by Liszt. A good first step in understanding the scope and variety of these transcriptions is to realize that they fall mainly into two types: namely, paraphrases, in which the original is "transformed and freely recomposed;" and partitions, where Liszt "faithfully transcribes a work from one medium to another, sometimes [without] deviating from the original by so much as a single note." (Wilde, 1976, 168) Sometimes other terms are used to differentiate types even further, such as arrangements, reminiscences (which Liszt himself claims to have coined), and fantasies, and at times even the term transcription is used for partition. For our purposes the first two terms, paraphrase and partition, will serve to clarify things sufficiently. (Walker, 2007) With regard to the repertoire chosen for this study, the works range from the slightly altered, yet effective partition to the extremely personalized and embellished paraphrase.

Having listed some of the basic descriptive terminology, one may address the question of Liszt's motivations in writing and performing such a prolific body of this repertoire.[1] David Wilde mentions that Liszt himself explains one reason in the preface to his transcriptions of the Beethoven Symphonies: the greatness of Beethoven's music spurs his desire to make it "accessible and popular." (Wilde, 1976, 168) Another practical motivation, that of wanting to

[1] Almost two hundred were written, in fact, mostly of other composers' works; about a quarter of these are of his own works.

help his fellow composers, is evidenced by the fact that Liszt often programmed transcriptions on his recitals of colleagues' newest compositions. He was thus using his brilliant reputation to assist him in promoting their music. Letters exist illustrating this arrangement. For example, a letter from Meyerbeer to Liszt in 1852 expresses Meyerbeer's gratitude for the maestro's help. (Wilde, 1976, 169)

Altruistic motivations aside, one must remember that Liszt was known for the dramatic effect of his playing. The act of performing at the piano an entire orchestral and even operatic texture would be an impressive display, dazzling audiences. This was no doubt another influential factor for him. (Bellak, 1970, xxi)

Finally, with the increasing public demand in the nineteenth century of owning and performing these works, the financial benefit of catering to this market and working with publishers was a major consideration. In fact, one contemporary source gives an account of an overwhelming demand for the Schubert transcriptions: "The very day a shipment arrived it would already be sold out; many hopeful people would be turned away unsatisfied and have to wait for the next shipment, at which time the same would ensue." (George, 1976, 49)

For performers and audiences of today, the value of Liszt's transcriptions has a slightly different relevance. On one hand, the need to promote his colleagues' music and make it more accessible to the public has long since passed. The existence of recording technology and modern transportation has made accessibility to any performance virtually unlimited. On the other hand, there is still much financial and creative benefit to be had from the transcriptions. Pianists can still learn volumes from them technically and musically, while audiences can enjoy the colors, nuances and other additions by Liszt that make them unique works of art.

## Song and Opera

Transcriptions of vocal music, specifically solo song and especially opera, make up the majority of Liszt's output in this genre. The transcription of song for solo piano allowed Liszt to focus on the contrast in melodic vocal color (and text) with its accompaniment, expanding the vocal line in uniquely pianistic ways. At the same time Liszt elaborated the accompaniment and found ways to solve the various issues of doing both simultaneously. As seen in his versions of the songs of Schubert and Rossini, Liszt had a knack for effectively choosing which elements of the original would be left unchanged, and which would be changed through his own unique touches.

Opera as a transcriptional subject was an experimental playground for Liszt. These works were immensely popular with the public in the nineteenth century; Suttoni mentions that "Virtually every concert program from about 1830 to 1860 included opera fantasies, with each pianist usually writing his or her own, and it was these pieces, not the piano works of …Beethoven, …Schubert, or even …Chopin and Robert Schumann, that provided the standard concert fare of the period." (Suttoni, 2002, 179) Another point of view reasons that "Opera was the source of the most easily recognizable musical material throughout Europe of the day and provided an easy link between performer and audience in an age when the entity now called 'the repertoire' did not yet exist." (Bellak, 1970, xxi) Opera is still widely considered the culmination of music and the other arts. Liszt's ability to scale things down and give a more accessible version to the public was an extremely valuable skill. In his opera paraphrases and fantasies, Liszt was not only able bring this music to the masses and to feature his fellow composers, but also realize much of his own musical potential.

In considering the works that are the subject of this study, several questions can be posed, using specific musical examples to address the answers:

1.) In the song repertoire, what are some of the ways Schubert and Rossini illustrate or "paint" the meaning of the text, and what does Liszt add or change musically and technically in the piano solo versions?

2.) How does Liszt's treatment of Rossini differ from that of Schubert?

3.) How does song transcription differ from opera transcription?

4.) In the operatic repertoire, what are some of the compositional techniques Liszt uses to emulate the original orchestral colors?

5.) Finally, how does Liszt transport the dramatic qualities originally intended by Wagner and Verdi into these particular opera transcriptions, taking into account differences in the styles of these two composers?

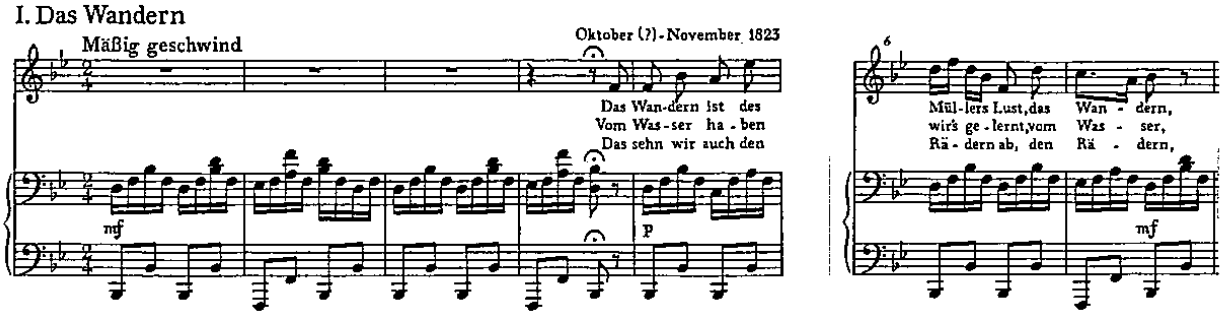
## Song Transcription after Schubert

### *Das Wandern*

*Das Wandern (Wandering)* is the first song from a cycle of twenty, titled *Die schöne Müllerin,* written in 1823. The story of the cycle has to do with a young man's progression from happiness and love to despair and suicide. Throughout the cycle, the young man interacts with both natural and inanimate objects: a brook, the mill and the grass. These often make comments to him. In the original setting of *Das Wandern* there are five verses which are set in identical musical repetitions; each verse emphasizes the young man's expression of a universal need for movement or "wandering." This need is obvious not just in humans but also in the water, the wheels and the stones. As each verse is set to identical music, it is the singer's responsibility to refer to the meaning of the text in order to make tonal changes, ensuring variety. Schubert's accompaniment is clearly a motoric representation of this universal need for "wandering;" the

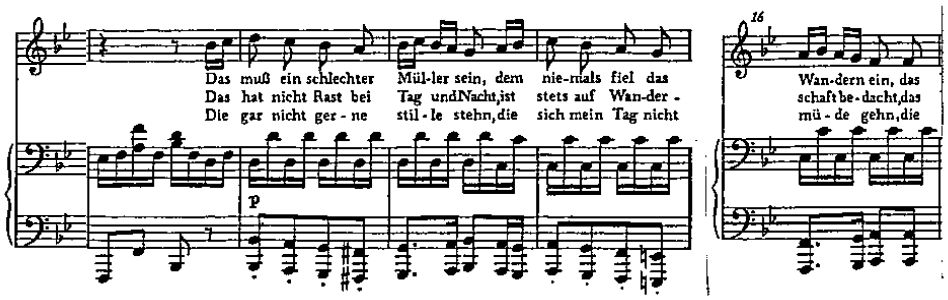
vocal line begins with purposeful leaps and a colorful arpeggio, representing the similar nature of the young narrator:

Ex. 1




In the second half of each verse, Schubert provides a stepwise, four-measure melodic sequence, which provides contrast to the otherwise disjunct thematic material and thereby highlights the significance of the melodic leaps. The vocal line is in duet with the bass line of the piano, also stepwise:

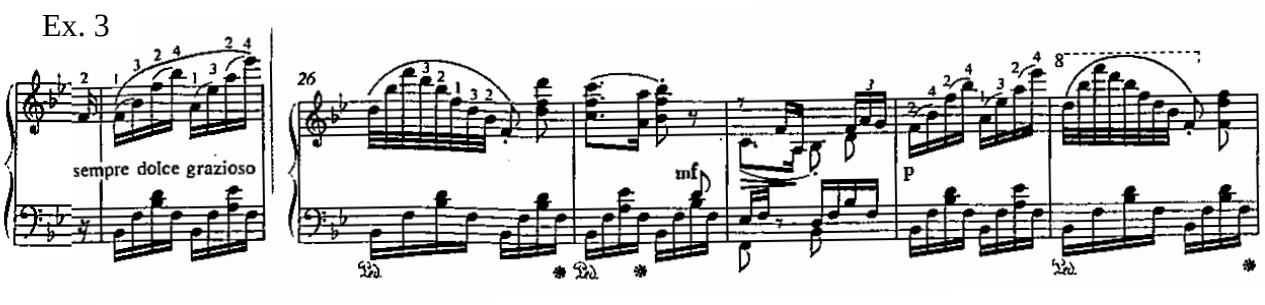
Ex. 2




Liszt's version of the piece has only three verses and the music for each is quite different, essentially creating a theme with two variations followed by an extended postlude. The initial verse is a fairly literal transcription of Schubert's original, and in this way acts as the theme upon which the following variations are based. Liszt retains the motoric rhythm throughout the piece, and the melody, though embellished, is basically intact in each verse. However, there are

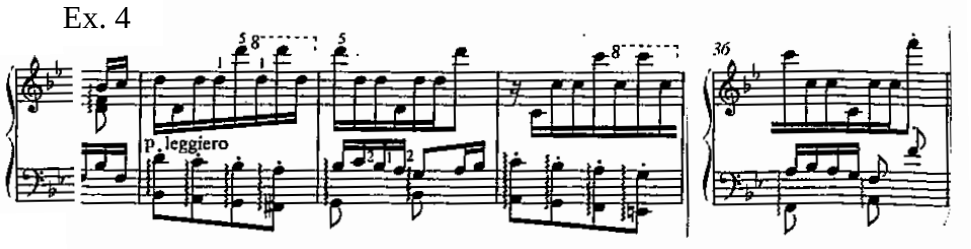
differences within each variation that creatively highlight the original song's textual meaning. One example of this is in the second verse where the embellished version of the melody flows more fluidly, likely a reference to the water and/or the wheels in the poem:

Ex. 3



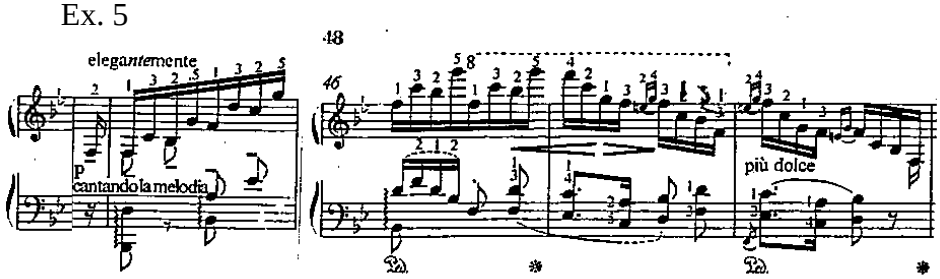

In the second half of this variation, the contrasting, stepwise melodic material is contained in the left hand, while the right hand accompanies with a single-note, broken sixteenth-note pattern, displaced to three octaves. One might say this adds a splash-like effect, which could again be a reference to the water of the mill:

Ex. 4



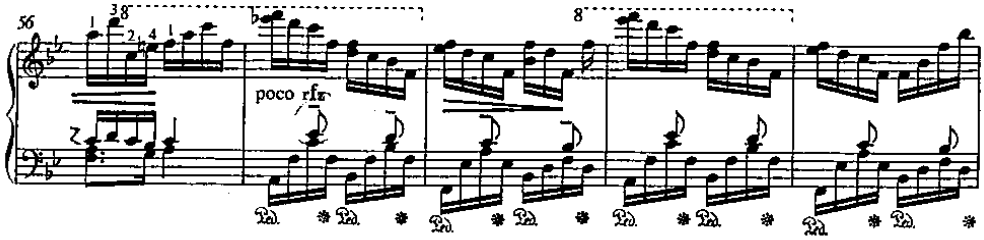

In the third verse or second variation, the melody is presented an octave lower in the left hand and in parallel sixths, while the right hand acrobatically moves up and down the keyboard in a highly ornamental, sixteenth-note accompanimental pattern. The choice of a deeper register for the melody is perhaps a reference to the stones in the fourth stanza of the original poem:

Ex. 5




About this verse, Madsen remarks that "in modern day performance this final strophe is often taken at a slightly slower tempo to suggest the weight of the stones." (Madsen, 2003, 339) The final phrase of this variation, which Liszt states twice, contains a descending sixteenth-note figuration in the right hand, which begins in a high register and emphasizes seconds and thirds amidst stepwise motion. The effect of cascading clusters is heard, which could be understood as another depiction of stones (perhaps knocking together in the stream):

Ex. 6



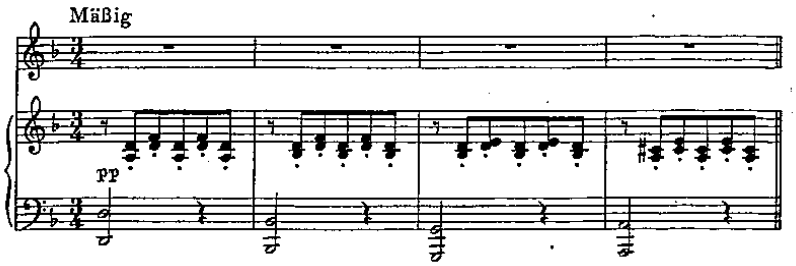

At the end of the piece, a twelve-measure postlude is an extended and embellished version of Schubert's motoric introduction which Liszt describes as a "ritornello." The repetitive quality of the rhythmic figures, combined with the gradual fading of dynamics (*perdendo* to *pianissimo*) possibly suggest Liszt's vision of the continuing journey of the wanderer in the poem, as he walks carefree into the distance.

**Ständchen**

*Ständchen* (*Serenade*) was composed toward the end of Schubert's life and became part of the posthumously published cycle now known as *Schwanengesang*, or "Swan Songs." The serenader beckons to his lover at night, using the nightingales as examples of lovers surrendering to each other. Schubert's song organizes the poem's five strophes into three verses – the first two stanzas become verse one, stanzas three and four become verse two, and the final stanza becomes the last verse. The music for the first two verses is the same, but for the third verse is contrasting, creating an AAB formal structure. The fact that the last stanza of the original poem is set apart musically from the others makes sense, when one considers the text. Stanzas one through four deal with love in the calming setting of the night, while the last stanza is an emotional pleading and desire for release, referring to a love that is stirring and agitated within the beloved's breast.

Schubert's rhythmically consistent, broken-chord piano accompaniment is an effective representation of a guitar-like instrument, appropriate for one who serenades. The first four measures simply and subtly prepare the listener for this atmosphere:

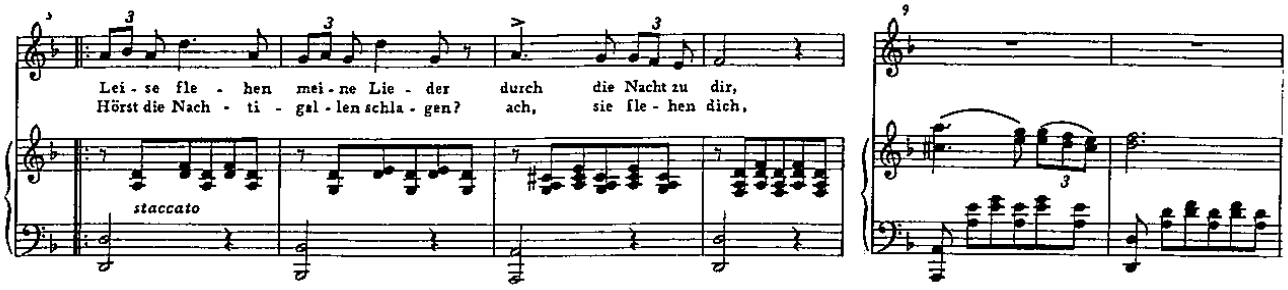
Ex. 7a




At the end of every phrase, the piano echoes the last measure of the melody at *pp*, creating a haunting effect which helps to paint a picture of a nocturnal song in the moonlight, as

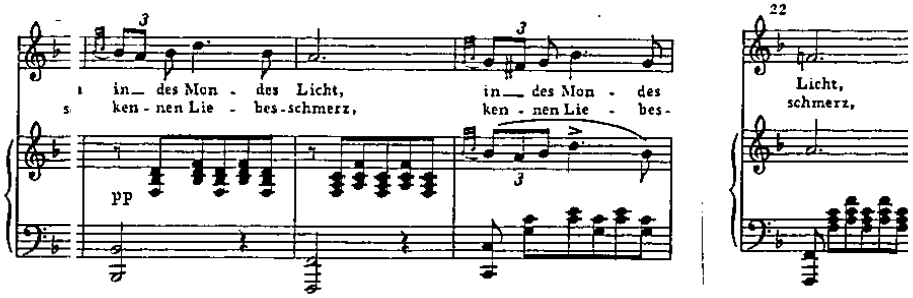
if the nightingale is singing the echoes. These echoes are also harmonized in thirds and sixths, which is reinforcement of the idea of two lovers intertwined and singing the same song:

Ex. 7b



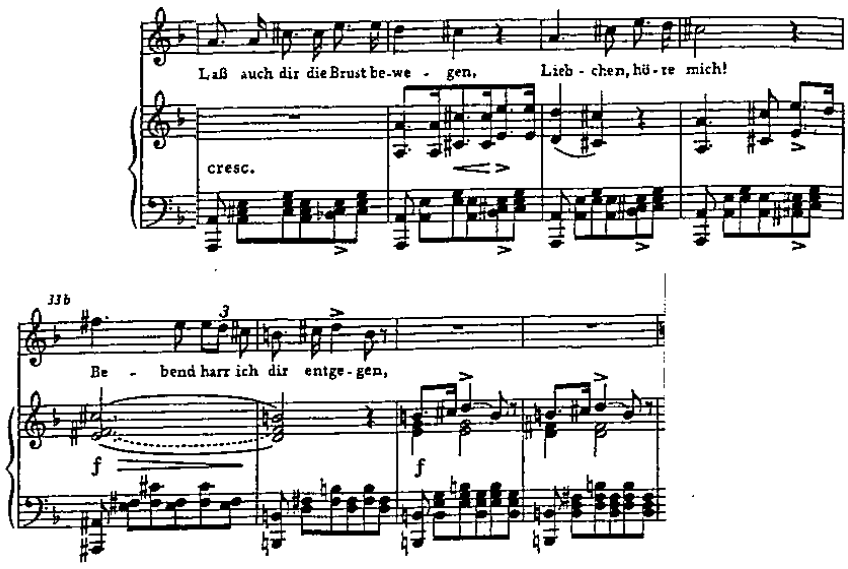

In the second half of each "A" verse, the vocal line participates in the echo duet, intensifying this intertwining:

Ex. 8




The final verse is suddenly more agitated, moving further from the D minor tonality (to B minor, the relative minor of D major), and the dynamics are intensified to *forte* for a longer period of time. In addition, the echoes now happen one measure apart, creating a stretto effect. The combination of these devices accentuates the trembling and agitated pleading of the serenader:

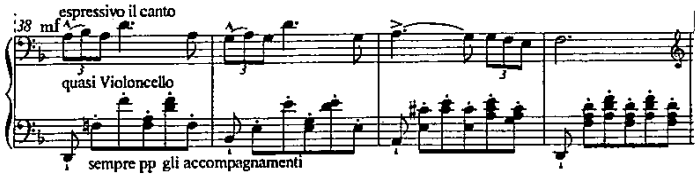
Ex. 9




Finally, the atmosphere calms down to its original reserved and mysterious character, as the piece fades to quiet D major chords.

Liszt did not make particularly drastic changes to the main body of the song, but composed several significant alterations.[2] In the first of these, the melody of the second verse has been lowered an octave, causing it to share the register of the accompaniment. Liszt provides three expressive terms, indicating how he envisioned this passage to be performed; namely "*espressivo il canto," "quasi Violoncello"* and "*sempre pp gli accompagnamenti:"*

Ex. 10



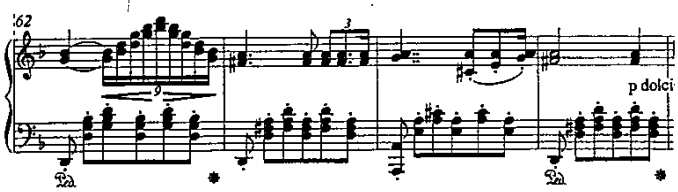

The composer realized, of course, that the melody and accompaniment, sharing the same space on the keyboard, present a technical problem for the pianist. Therefore Liszt's indications,

[2] Liszt did, in fact, include an *ossia* version which is easier and shorter, however this study will focus on the longer and more difficult version.

especially his direction that the melody be played like a cello, should stimulate in the performer the proper execution of balance and tone in this section, creating a warm color and register change difficult to duplicate in one singer's voice.

Another notable change made by Liszt is a brief but virtuosic embellishment of the second piano interlude. Here Liszt emphasizes and colors the suspended harmonies of the minor and major subdominants (G minor and G major, respectively, in the key of D minor) through the use of (mostly) parallel third arpeggios; he also adjusts the rhythm of the even eight-notes that follow, creating triplet and dotted variations. Perhaps Liszt envisioned an improvisatory side to the serenader's playing:

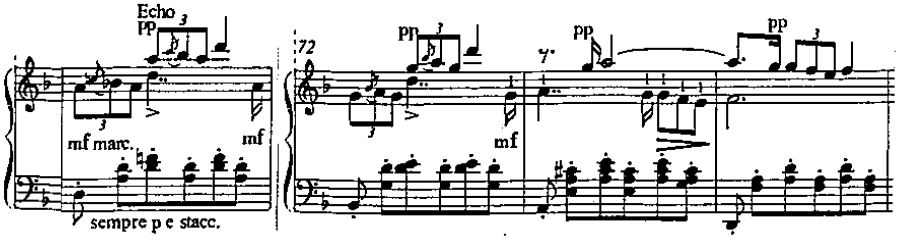
Ex. 11




Later, one finds a similar improvisatory style in the form of a somewhat capricious chromatic scale. This becomes a link to the final interlude, or coda.

The last and probably most creative of Liszt's additions to this work is an extra verse (without text) which is in one sense a variation of the first verse. During this verse he uses a melodic echo effect, which takes the form of a canon at the octave with a rhythmic delay of one beat. Liszt's own indication is "*Echo,"* and the lower part is further distinguished from the upper part dynamically (*mf marcato* vs. *pp*). The pianist must again show technical mastery in performing this passage by using careful fingering and by projecting tonal differences in the same hand, thereby clarifying the texture and creating a quasi three-handed effect:

Ex. 12

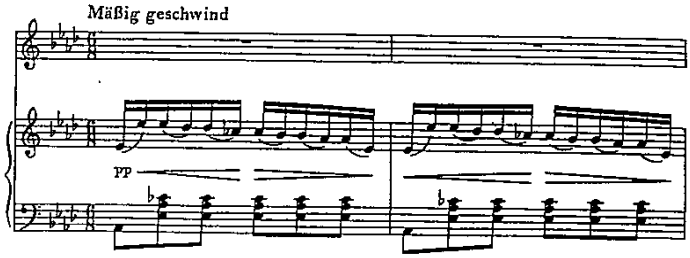



At the end of this "echo" verse, Liszt finally makes the transition to the climactic "B" verse, which has been excellently prepared by the canonic passage that precedes it, and which then ends the piece with one last improvisatory gesture in the form of a multi-register D major arpeggio. Regarding the inclusion of the extra verse and its compositional significance, Madsen remarks, "Liszt's consistent application of this canonic technique can be seen to both expand upon the echo technique used by Schubert in the first strophe and to anticipate the greater frequency of its use in the final strophe. Therefore, Liszt's application of the canon is a logical compositional development and strengthens the connection between the two sections of the song." (Madsen, 2003, 130) In any case, the symbolism of the two lovers shown through the canonic passages is indisputably clear.

## Auf dem Wasser zu singen

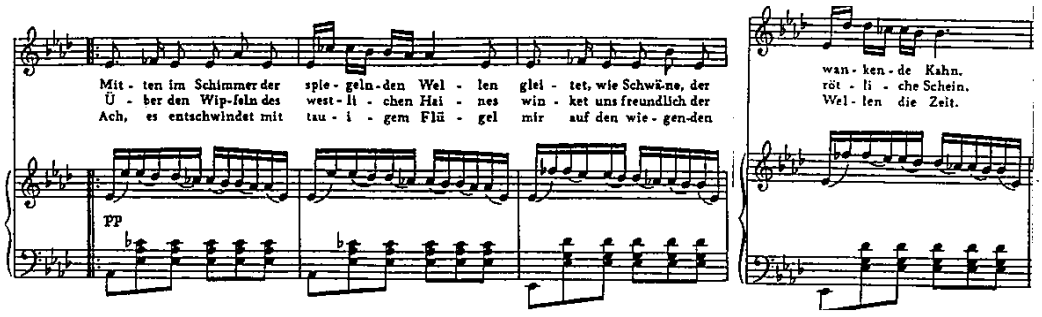
*Auf dem Wasser zu singen* (*To Sing upon the Water*) was composed by Schubert in 1823 but was originally not part of a cycle. This metaphysical text likens the soul to a boat wavering upon a shimmering body of water until the time comes to pass into death. Schubert's lilting melody is tossed upon an accompaniment of a chain of sighing motives, vividly depicting rippling waves. This first appears without the melody:

Ex. 13



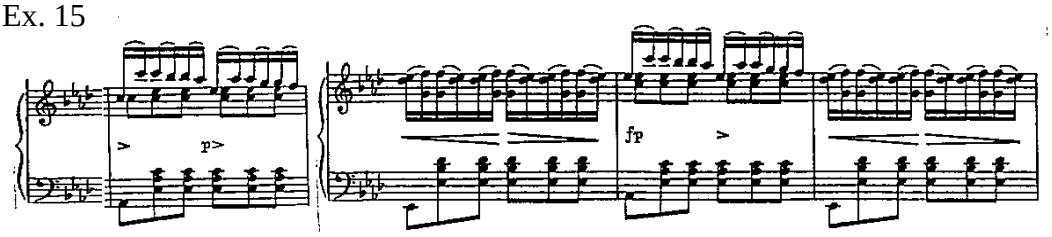

Then, after the vocal part begins, sections of the singer's melody even join in this wave music (see second and fourth measures of Example 14):

Ex. 14




The depiction of wave surges can be heard at the end of each verse, as the minor mode is suddenly changed to major, and dynamic swells wash through the music:

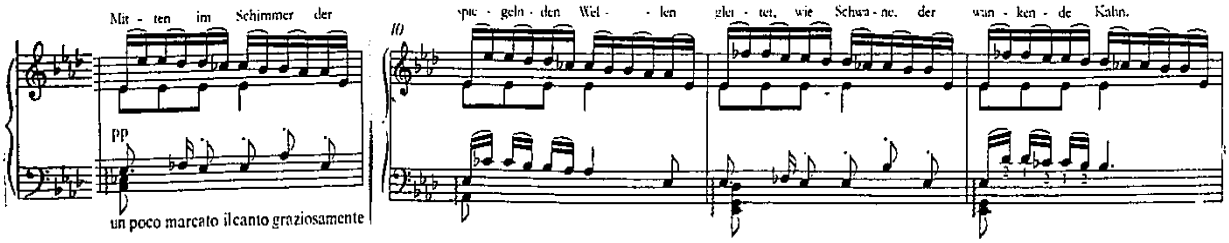
Ex. 15



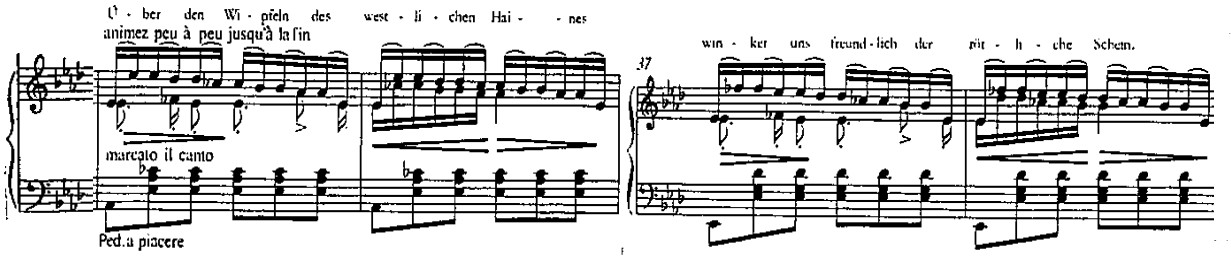

Schubert's song ends simply, as the rhythmic motion comes to a close on the tonic chord.

In Liszt's version of *Auf dem Wasser zu singen*, as in his transcription of *Ständchen*, one finds a high degree of fidelity to the original song, thus demonstrating one example of Liszt's esteem of Schubert's compositional efforts. That being said, there are several compositional additions and changes that are employed by Liszt that greatly enhance the expressive possibilities of the poetry, while also adding textural interest to the work as a piano solo. One of the most striking compositional techniques Liszt uses to enhance this transcription is that of changing registers. With each statement of a new verse of music, the melody changes register, starting in the tenor register of the piano (below middle C), and getting progressively higher by an octave in each verse (compare Examples 16-18 from verses 1-3, respectively). In addition, Liszt gives indications that increase both the tempo and the dynamics upon the iteration of each new verse:

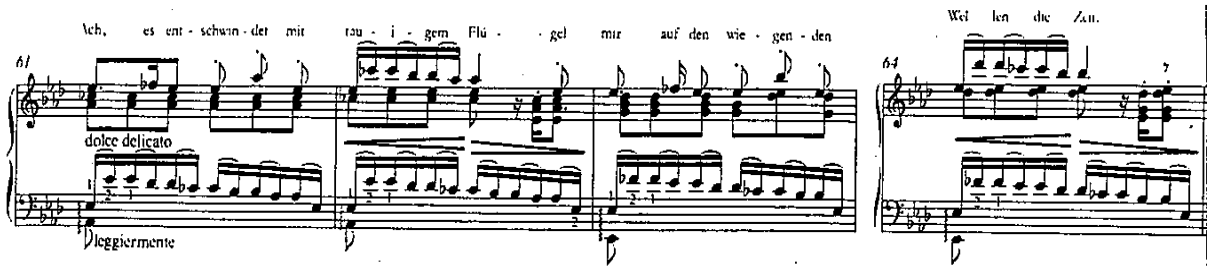
Ex. 16




Ex. 17



Ex. 18

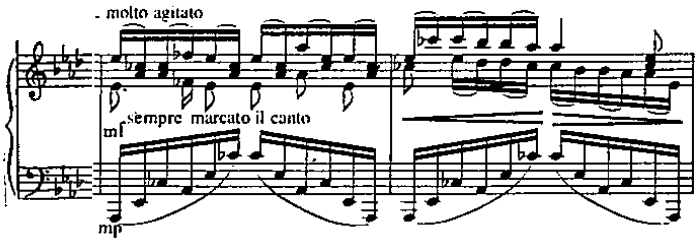



The upward direction of the melodic registral changes work together with the increased tempo and dynamics to build excitement and move the music to a climactic goal. In this, there is a special fit with the idea of the soul making its journey heavenward. In order to accomplish this musical flow, the required technique changes as the music progresses. In the first verse, the left hand has the responsibility of emphasizing the melody amidst rolled chords, while the right hand remains undisturbed in its presentation of the wave music (see Example 16). It can be relatively easy, if not careful, to make the left-hand melody too heavy in an effort to "sing." The second verse poses the problem of the juxtaposition of the wave music (an accompanimental figure) and the melody in the same (right) hand (see Example 17). This is a common technical issue in song transcriptions, and the ability to produce individual tonal control for multiple musical lines in a single hand is a necessary skill. The third verse can be considered a technical inversion of the first verse, as the left hand now has the wave music, while the right plays the melody amidst a chordal texture (see Example 18). However, the left hand has new fingering issues, as its shape is a mirror image of the right hand, but the shape of the wave music (descending sighs) stays the same.

The most significant addition Liszt makes to Schubert's original is that of an extra verse of music, which is "where Liszt's compositional persona takes over." (Madsen, 2003, 147) As before, the rhythmic motion continues. However the melodic textures, dynamics and overall

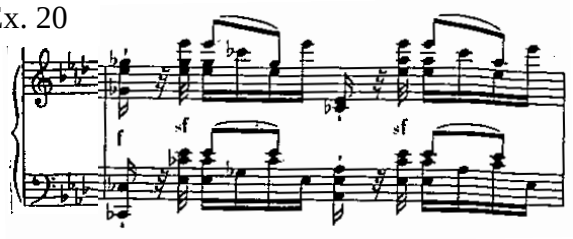
sweeping musical shapes transcend the scale of the rest of the song. This can be attributed to Liszt's attempt to intensify the water imagery and the transfiguration of the soul, while moving a few steps further than Schubert in order to illustrate the final point of the poetry. From the outset of this final, extra verse, Liszt has already replaced much of Schubert's wave music with more turbulent figures, as well as exclaiming the melody in octaves and broken chords. What remains of the original wave figure is set in close imitation with itself. This can be seen as a representation of the beginning of the turbulent rebirth of the soul, as referred to in the last stanza of the poetry:

Ex. 19




A second stage of departure from the fluidity found in the earlier verses can be found starting in measure 92, where Liszt inserts rhythmic breaks in order to achieve accented, broken-chordal rhythmic figures that rapidly go back and forth between registers:

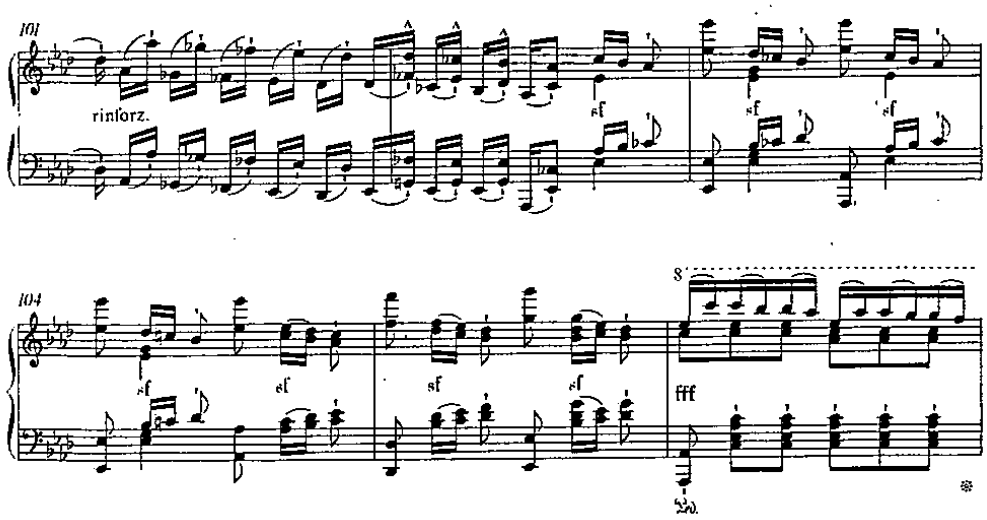
Ex. 20




At measure 98, Liszt departs from the melody altogether and the texture is transformed into a somewhat chromatic display of broken octaves, followed by a passage of octaves rapidly

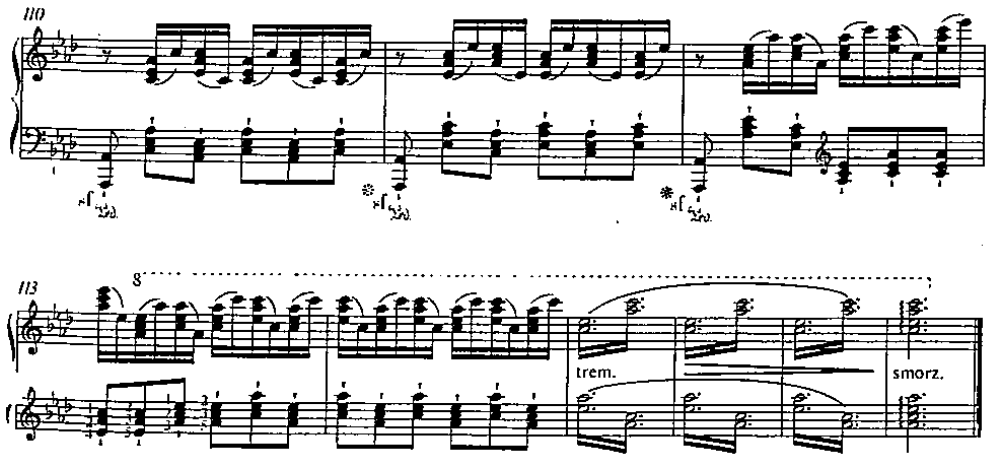
alternating (between registers) with sixteenth-note figures, preserving the harmonic progression from the end of the original verses and leading to a crescendo at the final, brilliant statement of the wave music:

Ex. 21




This musically and technically dramatic writing enables Liszt to bring his own vision of the meaning of the poetry's last stanza forward, modifying and adding to Schubert's original ideas. The last few lines of the poem refer to a self, or soul, using wing imagery to describe its transfiguration into the hereafter. This is paralleled in the last nine bars of Liszt's transcription, where he adds several broken tonic chords that ascend the keyboard and end in a tremolo, an addition that extends the simpler proportion of Schubert's ending:

Ex. 22




**Song Transcription after Rossini**

As a transcriber, Liszt seems to take more liberties with Rossini's songs than with Schubert's. One reason for this is the bel canto style in which Rossini writes the originals. In this style cadenzas are often added. This is an area of particular expertise for Liszt as improviser. Hence, where often a singer would perform a vocal cadenza, Liszt writes a passage more appropriately idiomatic for the piano. The original accompanimental figures are purposely embellished as well. One suspects that this is due to the fact that Rossini's accompaniments are relatively simple, this being another trait of the bel canto style where the vocal line is primary. If Liszt felt the accompaniment needed enhancement, he took the opportunity to add his creative touch.

The following three songs are drawn from Rossini's *Serate musicali* (Musical Evenings), a series of songs and duets written in the early 1830's, after Rossini had retired from composing opera.

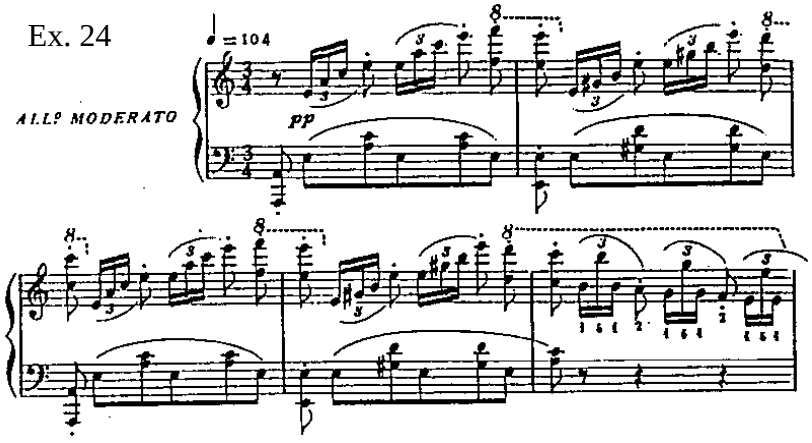
## L'invito

*L'invito (The Invitation)* is an insistent plea from a character named Eloisa to her lover Ruggiero, passionately inviting him to fulfill her desire without delay. It is based on the bolero dance rhythm, which is contained in a lively, triple meter that has a characteristic $8^{th}$-$16^{th}$-$16^{th}$-note pattern on the first beat of every group:

Ex. 23

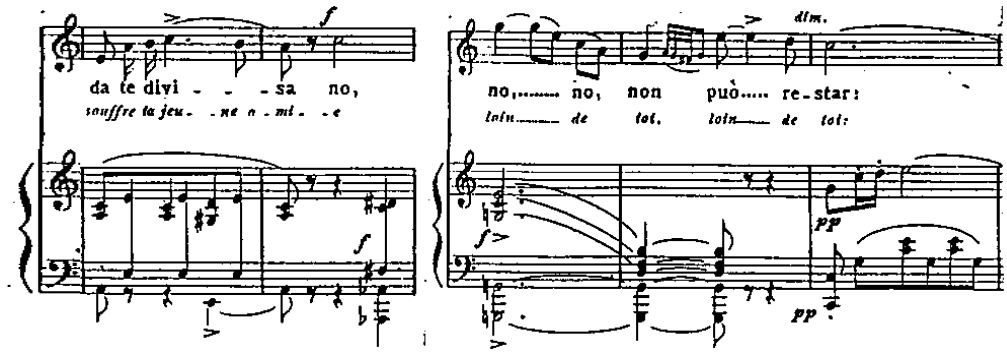
The poem is written in two stanzas; however the song has a round-like form (ABACA). Rossini adjusts for this by setting repetitions of the second stanza to the changing music. The second stanza is the more emphatic verse; it is a more urgent plea for the lover to arrive with a more vivid depiction of Eloisa's agitation. The excitement evoked by the song comes not so much from the marriage of text, melody and accompaniment, but from the rhythmic vitality, tonal contrast, and several highly dramatic melodic turns. One example of this rhythmic vitality can be found in the instrumental introduction, which exploits a variant of the bolero rhythm and employs a triplet figure:

Ex. 24



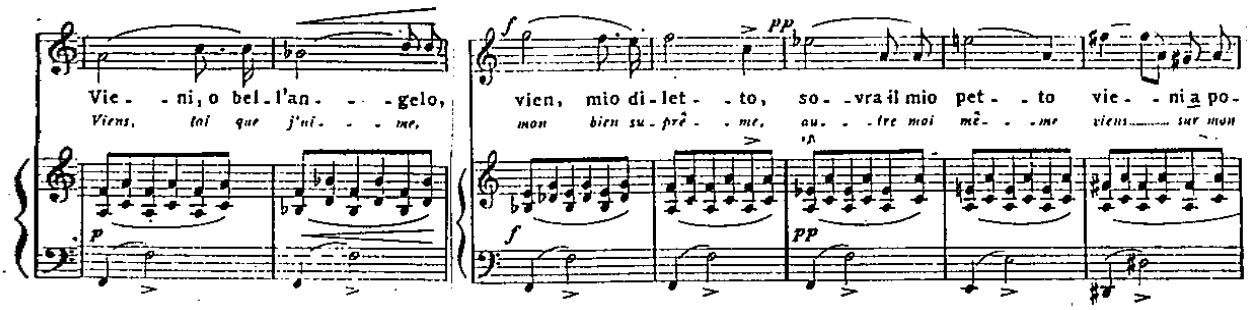
As soon as the voice enters, Rossini simplifies his accompaniment and leaves the rhythmic interest to the singer's melodic line. The climax of the initial phrases of the vocal part is characterized by dramatic leaps and ornaments, while the piano part is simplified to the point of long, held chords:

Ex. 25




In terms of tonal contrast, the two sections ("B" and "C") that are interspersed with the recurring "A" sections provide striking differences of key, as well as more lyrical melodic lines, acting as brief respites from the agitated bolero rhythm. In the poetry, one might interpret these changes of color as an alternative, more seductive way that Eloisa gets her wish. The first of these more lyrical sections ("B") is more of a dramatic change than the second ("C"), due to the fact that the new key of F major is more remote from A minor. The accompaniment in both sections is made up of legato eighth-notes:

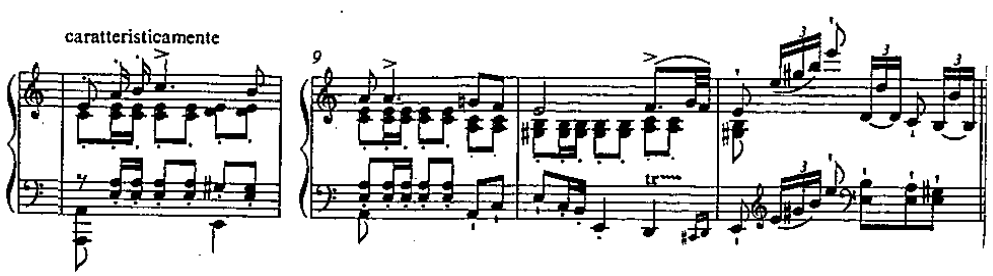
Ex. 26



The work ends with the same interlude that pervades throughout. Due to the operatic and extroverted nature of this Italian music, one could assume that the singer might infuse the interludes with a certain amount of dramatic flair in order to vary their meanings.

Liszt saw no reason to change the overall form of the original in this particular transcription. However, within the existing formal sections there are several modifications, usually having to do with embellishing the accompaniment, providing virtuosic cadenzas, or experimenting with register changes. Liszt clearly wanted to magnify the insistent character of both the feminine speaker of the text, and of the exotic bolero rhythm. At the first entrance of the melody of measure 8 (the first "A" section), one immediately notices the application of the bolero rhythm in the accompaniment. This is quite a bit more active and driving than Rossini's original eighth-note rhythm. The bass line is also developed into a more playful, melodic counterpoint that adds musical interest when the singer's line is a longer, sustained note. Liszt thus sets the basis for each "A" section upon its recurrences in the piece. Of interest also is the indication "*caratteristicamente,"* which is a further clarification of Liszt's intention that the bolero be performed in an extroverted manner:

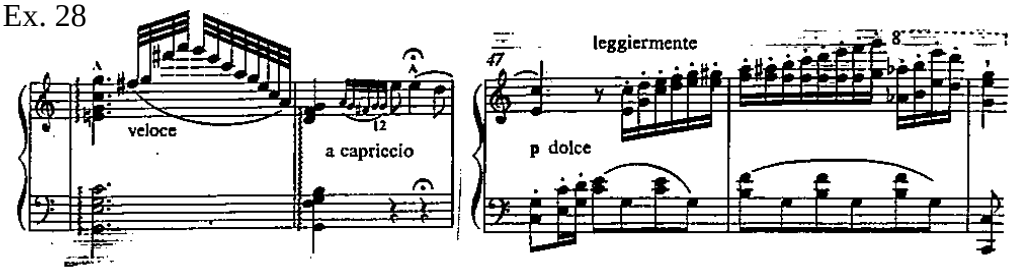
Ex. 27




In the middle of this initial "A" section, in a modulation to the relative C major, Liszt leaves the melodic material as it is in the original (see the last two measures of Example 25) instead of adding a new cadenza. In this way, the listener has a chance to first hear the passage in its

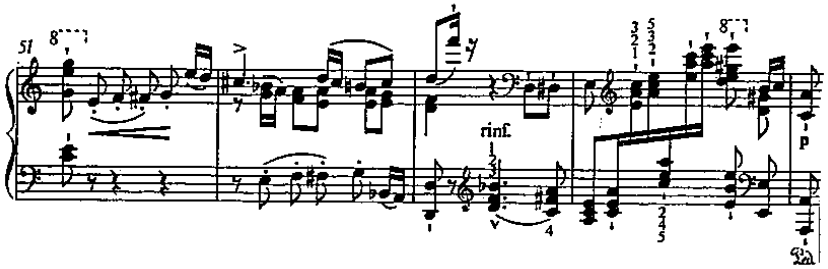
simplified form, making the cadenzas that occur later all the more effective. The second half of the section exhibits minimal embellishments when compared to the analogous passages that follow. Indeed the second and third "A" sections are progressively more elaborate, virtually exploding at the end of the song. In "A" section number two, for example, Liszt inserts his first cadenza at the C major modulation, here only a quick, embellished flourish of a C major arpeggio. In the following measures, he writes in the right hand a brilliant, ascending passage of staccato parallel intervals, somewhat chromatic and varying in size; the left hand solidifies the passage technically, retaining even eighth-notes for the most part:

Ex. 28




"A" section number two ends with a brief imitative gesture in the left hand of the right hand melody, and an extended, slightly more agitated, block-chord A minor arpeggio at the cadence:

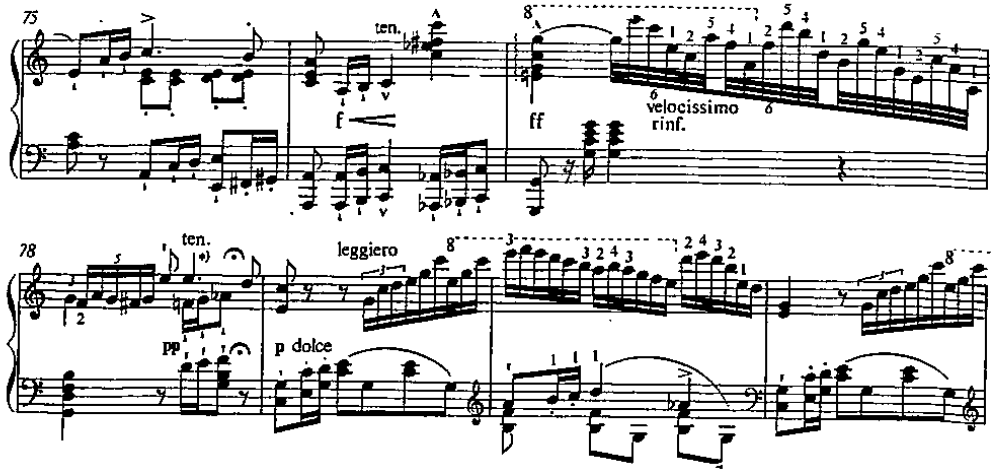
Ex. 29




Liszt saves the most brilliant gestures for the final "A" section, which is the culmination of the song's excitement and an exuberant final variation of the bolero. This time, the head motive of

the bolero ($8^{th}$-$16^{th}$-$16^{th}$) is written in imitation through different registers, one beat apart, while the melody remains intact above it. This motive is doubled in octaves, which leads to the most explosive cadenza thus far – a descending sequence of rapid arpeggiated figures that starts in the highest register of the piano. Rapid figuration in the high register is continued in the following measures, this time more scalar, this being difficult to sustain evenly with the left hand's melodic figurations:

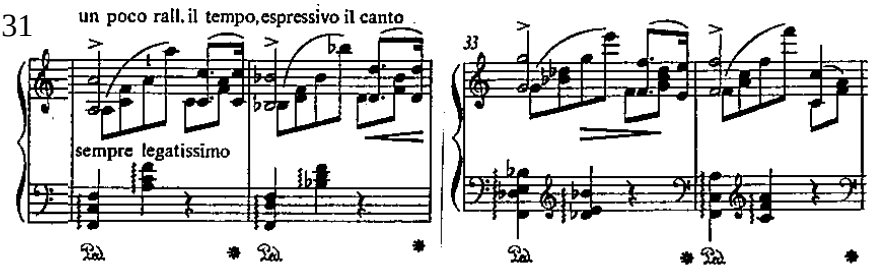
Ex. 30




The closing measures of this section include emphatic octave doubling, and, at the cadence, a *fff* A minor arpeggio in both hands that is dramatic in its range and sudden in its shift to contrary motion.

Also significant is the way Liszt treats the more lyrical and contrasting "B" and "C" sections, and the recurring "instrumental" interludes. Both "B" and "C" are treated similarly, in that the melody is presented in octaves, while the legato accompaniment is threaded through the melody's range by registral displacement:

Ex. 31

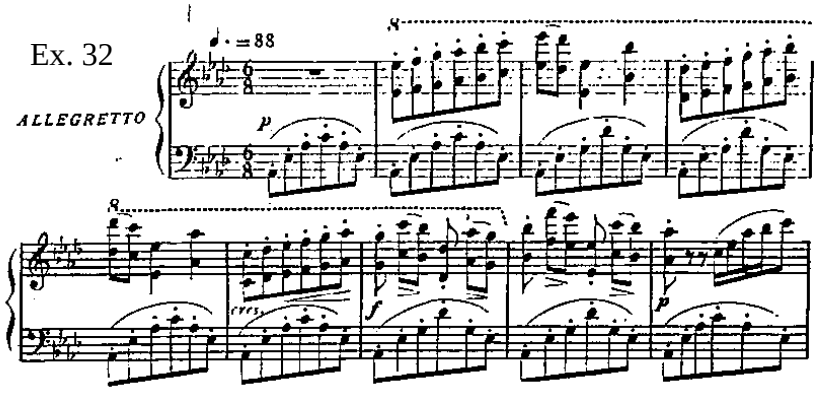



In the bolero interlude, which also acts as a prelude and postlude, Liszt fills in the texture slightly with each recurrence; he also indicates that each statement of this interlude should be slightly faster and louder, progressing from *ppp, Allegro moderato,* to *ff* and *molto animato* for the final statement. In this way, Liszt is able to terrace the increasing volatility of the piece, while moving through contrasting sections of music.

**La promessa**

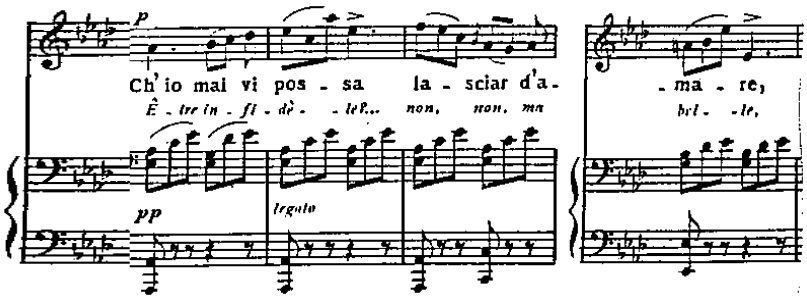
*La promessa (The Promise)* is another two-part poem set to three-part music. Rossini simply repeats the first stanza with the corresponding repeat of the same musical material, and adds a coda. The text is a fairly simple and seemingly sincere expression of faithful love, with lighthearted images that perhaps mean to emphasize this sincerity. As in *L'invito,* Rossini writes an instrumental prelude that returns later in the song; however, in *La promessa* this interlude does not remain strictly instrumental, but instead is joined by the vocal melody, which enriches the texture. This interlude has a playful rhythmic character, alternating between feelings of 6/8 and 3/4:

Ex. 32



The first stanza of poetry is an expression of love and fidelity from one lover to another, with the added assurance that the speaker would never jokingly deceive the object of his affection. The melody in the corresponding musical passages (A and the return of A) begins in the shape of a lyrical arch, with a simple tonic-dominant harmonization:

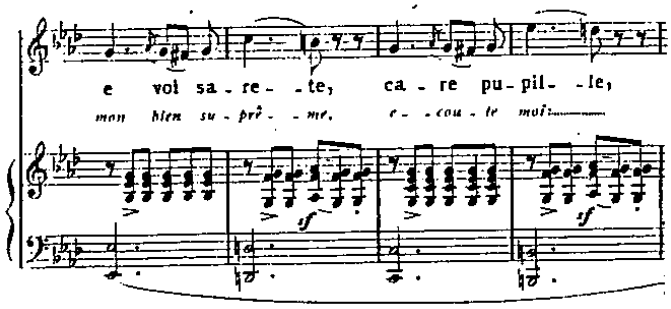
Ex. 33




In this passage, Rossini occasionally adds grace notes to the melody (see the third measure of Example 33), creating a motive that returns in the second section. This grace-note motive adds a certain emotional quality to the vocal line, making the lover's plea more insistent.

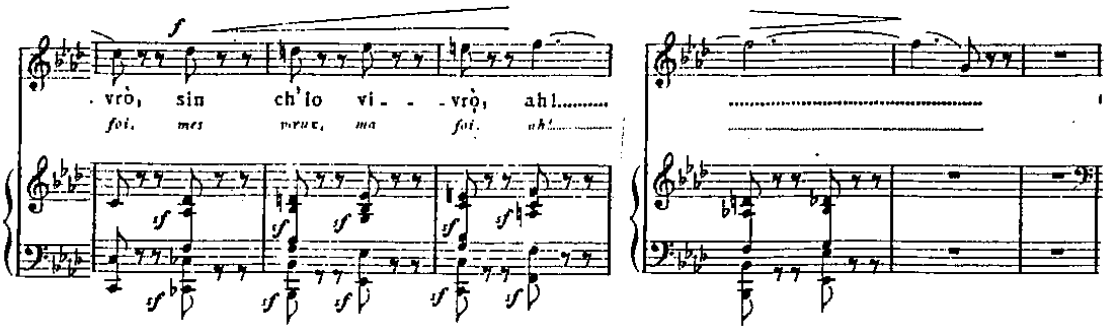
The "B" section is in the key of the dominant (Eb), and is more chromatic than the surrounding "A" sections. Throughout the harmonic progression of this passage, which eventually journeys to C minor, Rossini brings back the grace-note motive to help unify the sections. Coincidentally, this motive now takes on an added meaning, as the speaker here refers to his love's eyes as sparks:

Ex. 34



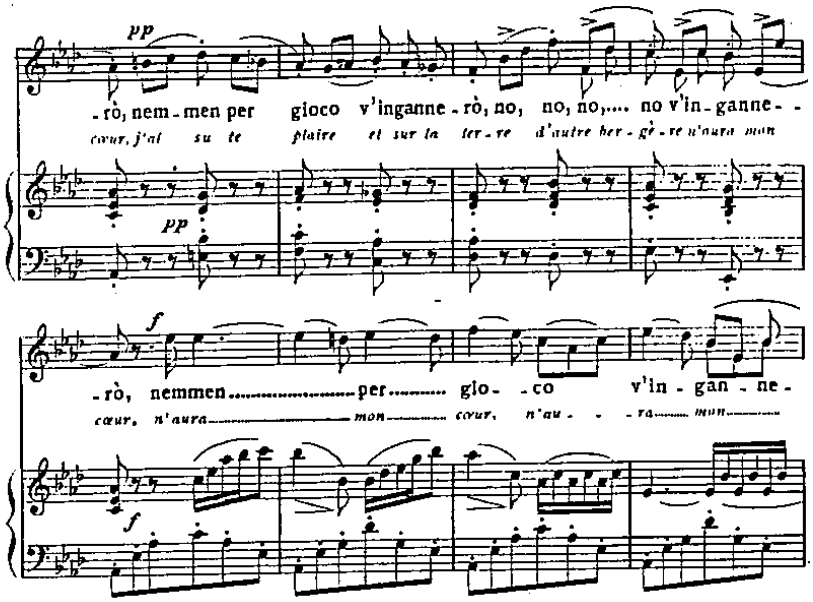
The spark imagery continues and is expanded as the speaker refers to his lover as his "fire" or reason for living, culminating with an "Ah!" which accentuates a passionate moment. Rossini depicts this musically through a detached, ascending chromatic melodic line, supported by a sequence of secondary dominants, and ending with an a cappella sigh:

Ex. 35

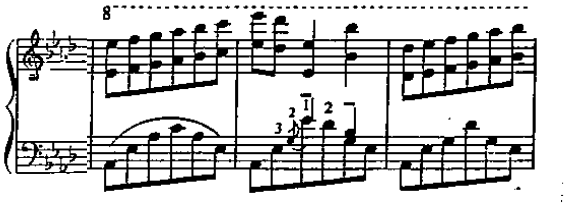



The coda can be seen as an emphasis of the promise of fidelity, even if facetious. This is not only due to the repetition of these key words of the text, but also because of the playful nature of the melodic and harmonic material. The use of staccato secondary dominants as accompaniment, beneath a sequence of short melodic fragments, is juxtaposed with a more sustained melody and fuller accompaniment:

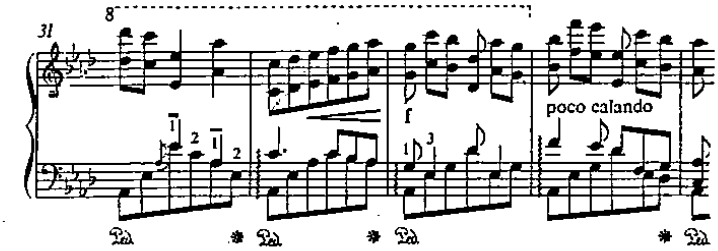
Ex. 36



In *La promessa*, Liszt inserts his own ideas into Rossini's original work in a very natural way. Much of Liszt's ingenuity in writing this transcription is seen in the way he solves melodic placement, fingering, and other transcriptional issues. He leaves the form and most of the melodic and accompanimental figures more or less intact if compared to the original. However, as always, there is just enough of Liszt's compositional personality in the few changes he does make to add a new and interesting layer of expression to the piece. One of the transcriptional challenges faced in this piece is how to satisfactorily arrange the melodic material, particularly that which is added to the second and third occurrences of the interlude. The right hand is so active with octave scales in the interlude that it becomes very difficult to fit in the extra melody and maintain the flow and integrity of these octaves. Liszt solves this problem by simply moving this melody down an octave from its original range, where the arpeggiating left hand has a much better chance at performing it clearly. There is still a conflict of space and rhythm between melody and accompaniment in this lower register, but Liszt solves this as well by indicating both arpeggios and grace notes in order to fit all the material together clearly:

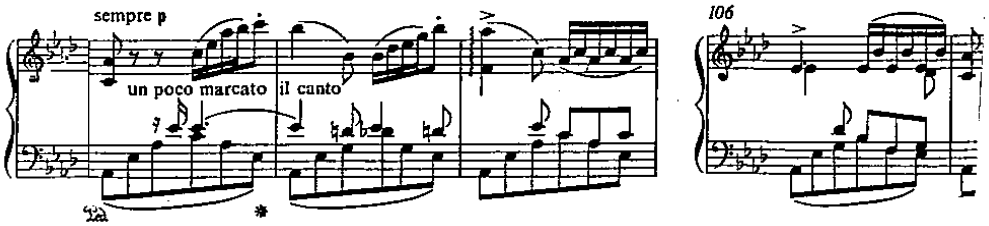


Ex. 37



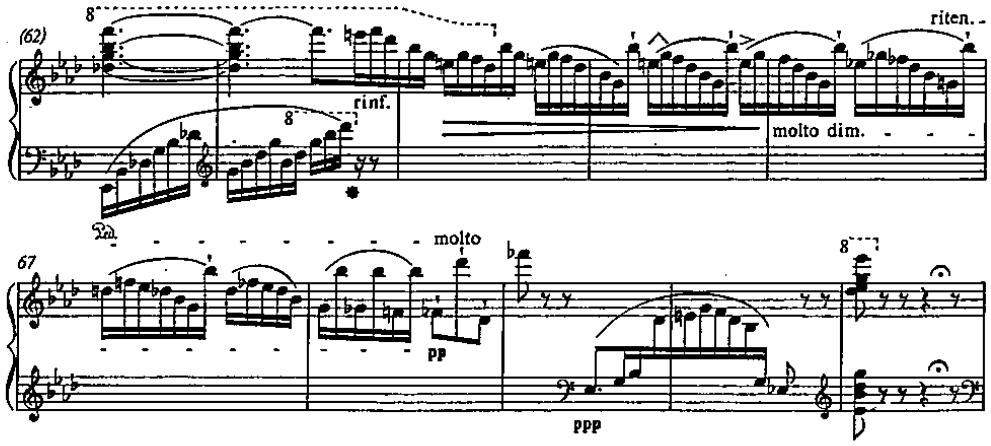
A similar problem occurs in the coda, and this time the rhythmic conflicts are slightly more complex. Liszt's method is again to put the melody in the left hand, but this time the right hand assists by taking a few melody notes:

Ex. 38



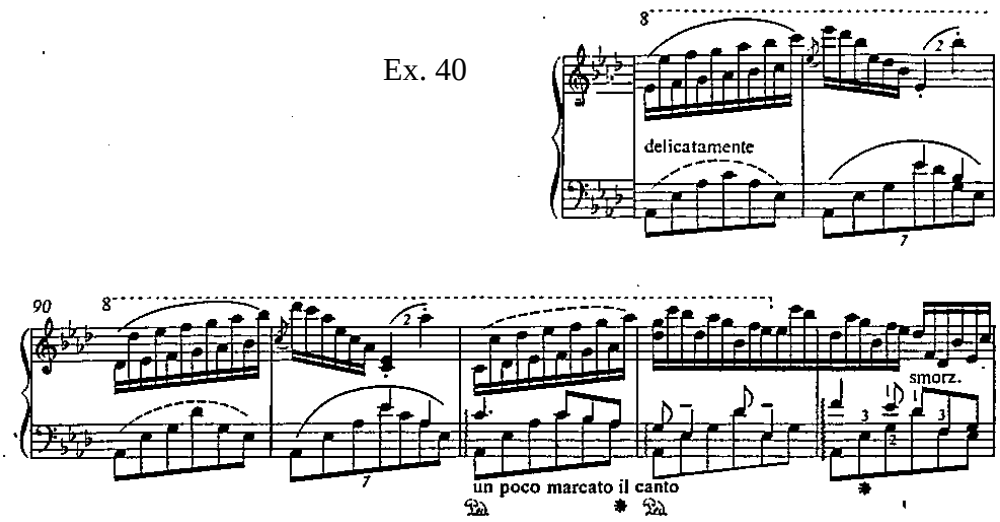

There are three areas in the *La promessa* transcription in which Liszt makes significant alterations to satisfy his personal taste. One of these areas is the addition of a cadenza, and the other two have to do with embellishment of existing material. The cadenza occurs at the most logical point in the piece, the place mentioned above at the end of the "B" section, where the singer is left a cappella, singing a sigh through the interval of a minor seventh (see Example 35). Rossini portrays this emotional release rather simply, with a chromatic scale that ends in a high sustained pitch and colorful release. Liszt takes the opportunity to personalize the moment by extending the sequence with chromatically-altered dominant arpeggios, which pass through diminished harmonies and are punctuated with a *ppp* dominant seventh chord in the high register:

Ex. 39



At the end of the final "A" section, and briefly in the coda, Liszt adds to Rossini's music by tastefully embellishing what is already there, doing so in such a way as not to disturb the musical flow. Where the interlude normally contains ascending simultaneous octaves in the right hand, Liszt writes ascending broken octaves, followed by a sparkling, descending sextuplet. This happens for the first two segments of the interlude, and for the third segment there is even more extended figuration:

Ex. 40



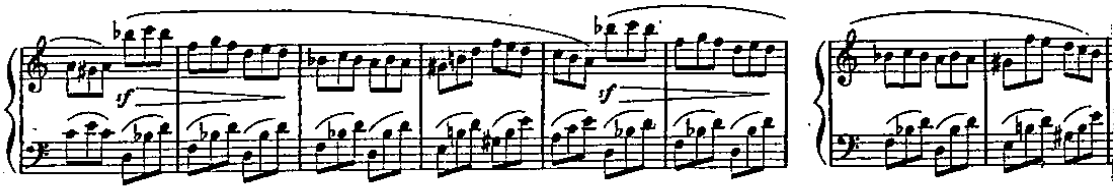

**La danza**

*La danza (The Dance)* is based on one of the more famous Neapolitan tarantellas, with its lively 6/8 rhythm and patter-like text. The large number of words in this song seems to have an onomatopoetic effect, rather than expressing significant emotional depth. There is quaint imagery of the moon dancing on the sea, and folk-like references to the nocturnal dancing of a group of fun-loving people in the outdoors. In fact, much of the song consists of a series of "la" syllables, which shifts focus from the text to the instrumental character of the music.

Due to the instrumental character and fast tempo of the tarantella, Rossini does not attempt to match the vocal melody with specific nuances of textual meaning. Instead, there is a general atmosphere and feeling for the text, which in this case is all about dancing.

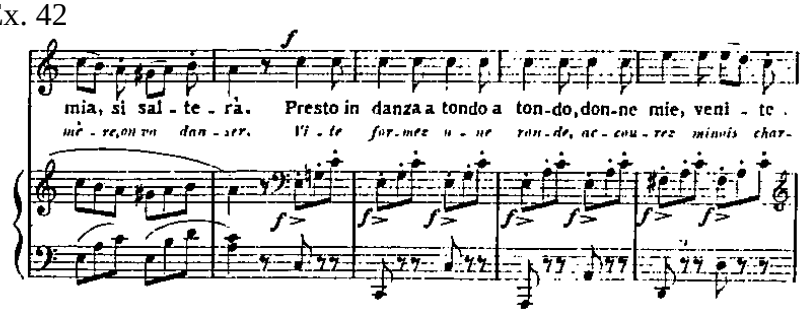
The piece begins with a long instrumental introduction or ritornello, a perpetual stream of eighth-note triplets. This introduction is self-contained and presents most of the musical material of the piece, giving the listener a thorough sense of what the song is about before the words even begin. Each phrase of this perpetual melody begins on an upbeat, which propels the rhythm forward and adds a certain edge to the momentum. Harmonically, there is a dramatic change in the third phrase of the ritornello where Rossini uses the colorful Neapolitan chord (Bb in A minor) with a sudden accent (*sforzando).* This fits the origin of the label "Neapolitan" well, especially when you consider Rossini's subtitle of "Tarantella Napoletana:"

Ex. 41



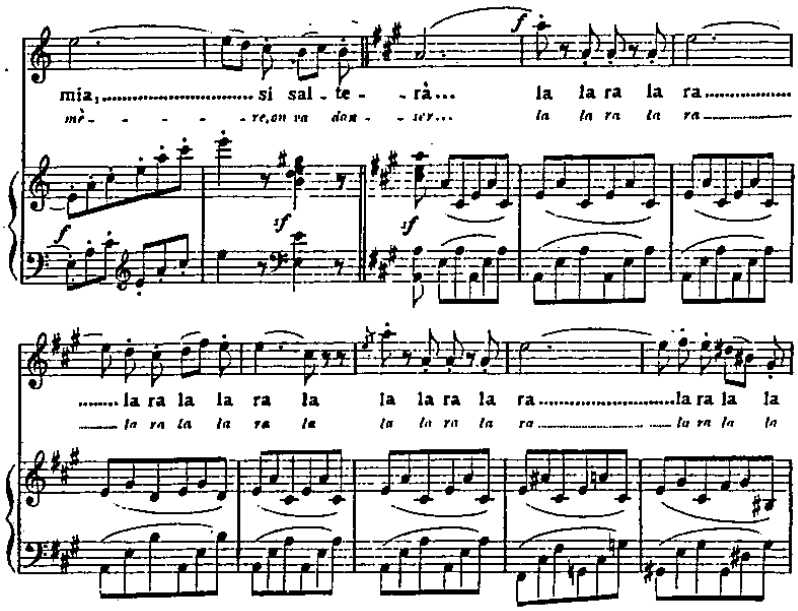

Rossini sets the vocal solo to similar sequences of triplets, and intersperses this melodic material with the second, third and fourth phrases of the ritornello. The verse contains a new harmonic contrast when the text speaks of the most handsome men dancing with the fairest women. The music modulates to the relative major (C) and the rhythm becomes much more marked, with accents on every beat:

Ex. 42




By far the most exciting contrast comes at the moment the words are abandoned and the singer uses only "la" syllables. The music modulates unexpectedly to the parallel key of A major, and the singer is given several octave slurs that leap to a high A natural. The harmonic underpinning is mostly tonic-dominant changes, with a brief reference to C# minor. This brings the melody to a slightly lower range and provides a colorful contrast to the higher gestures:

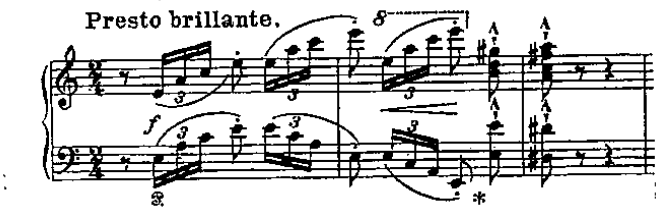
Ex. 43




The effect of dissolving the text of the main body of the song into the neutral "la" syllables in the A major sections is a suggestion of an emotional outburst, a result of the buildup of excitement that the festive dancing creates.

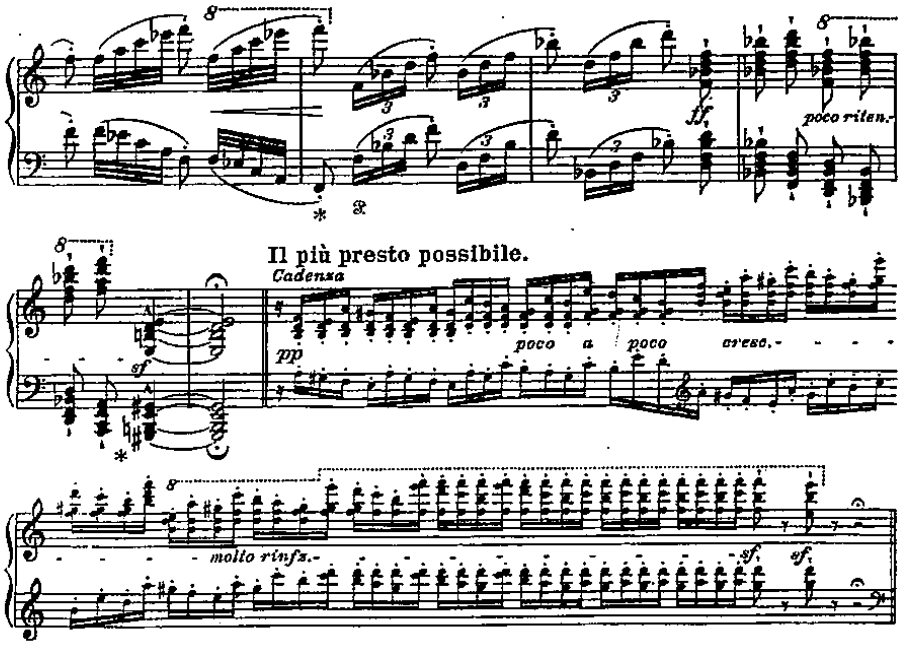
Liszt exuberantly tackles the transcription of this piece, creating a powerful and original introduction and letting the listener know immediately that this will be a virtuosic *tour de force*. The tempo is marked "Presto brillante," in contrast to Rossini's "Allegro con brio." Liszt begins this introduction with rapid arpeggiated triplets of an A minor chord in second inversion, played in contrary motion with both hands, and followed by a deceptive cadence (V7 to vii7dim of V):

Ex. 44




This move is based on the similar cadence appearing near the end of Rossini's original interlude. Liszt seems to want to immediately seize the listener's attention, starting with this unexpected harmonic motion. The introduction then progresses to emphatic Bb chords, leading to a dominant seventh chord in first inversion under a fermata; the Bb chord is a reference to the Neapolitan harmony that is stressed in the original prelude. Thereafter follows a flurry of sixteenth-note chords that embellish the dominant and emphasize the harmonic minor scale. These chords accelerate and climb to a high register to state the unstable dominant seventh one last time, peaking the audience's suspense:

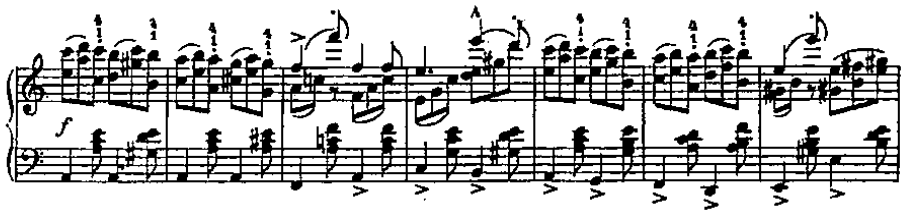
Ex. 45




After indulging in such a show of virtuosic power, Liszt continues with Rossini's original introduction. This is literally transcribed except for an alternate ending; Liszt prefers to close with a Phrygian half-cadence instead of the tonic A minor cadence.

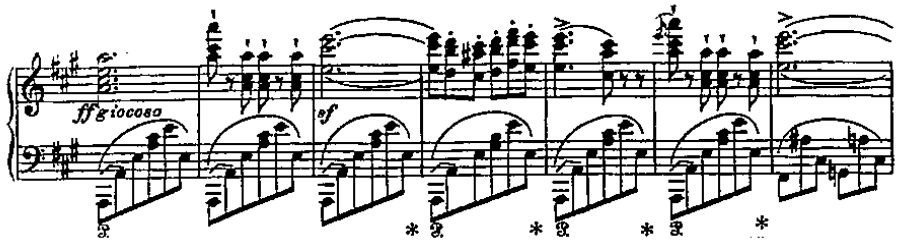
A few of the more lavish displays of virtuosity are worth mentioning, as they are characteristic examples of Liszt's exuberance in the spirit of the tarantella. At the point where the singer's melody enters, Liszt first emphasizes Rossini's original two-phrase tarantella refrain. He then immediately complicates things by embellishing the same refrain with rapid, single-handed, alternating octaves, fifths and sixths:

Ex. 46



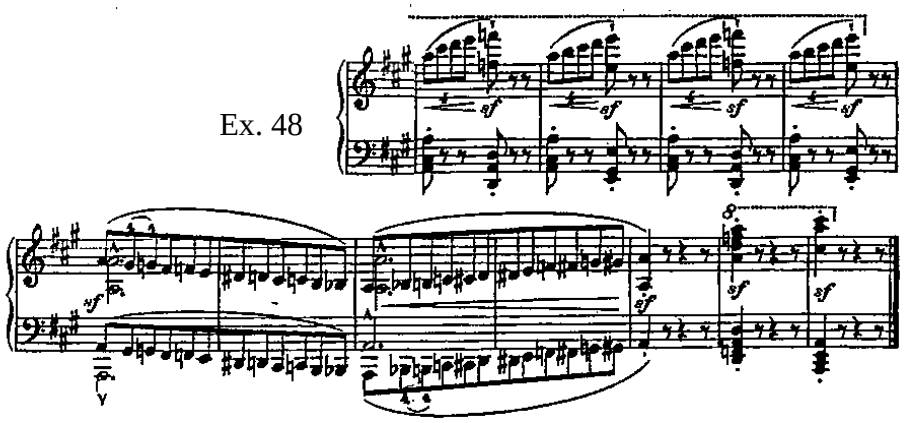
A second instance occurs in the A major "la" section. Where the original song's melody is monophonic and exciting by virtue of the quick register change of the singer's voice, Liszt's piano version has a flashy quality of its own. The melody is presented in incomplete octave-wide chords, which pose quite the technical challenge when performed quickly while leaping in different directions:

Ex. 47




Finally, at the end of the piece, instead of a restatement of Rossini's interlude, Liszt substitutes his own more dazzling coda. After alluding to his introduction by twice stating the previously emphasized Phrygian progression twice (minor iv to V), Liszt unleashes one final expression of pianistic resonance in the form of a rapidly descending-ascending chromatic scale in both hands in the lower half of the piano:

Ex. 48



The kind of compositional bravura shown in Liszt's version of *La danza* reminds one of a diabolical dancing song, such as that exemplified in the famous *Mephisto Waltzes.* In fact, a study by Izumi illuminates Liszt's obsession with the relationship of the tarantella to the Devil and ultimately to death itself. Izumi's study provides extensive background on the origins of the tarantella, and the author even makes the assertion that some of Liszt's transcriptional embellishments have "nothing to do with Rossini's tarantella but [are] related to Liszt's own more ominous iconography of tarantism." (Izumi, 2001, 97)

## Opera Transcriptions

There are three main issues that arise in creating an opera transcription that are intrinsically different from those in a song transcription. These issues are the size of the works involved, textual concerns, and arrangement of orchestral music. In obvious terms of scale, a solo song is brief compared with the large-scale scope of opera. Liszt solved the problem of paraphrasing an opera using two different approaches. Either he composed a work using selected themes from various places in the opera, or he focused on one particular aria or ensemble.

The lyric text is another issue, for one quickly encounters multiple characters singing different texts simultaneously in a given operatic excerpt, as in the famous "Quartet" from *Rigoletto*. Since a piano transcription has no text, the musical lines tend to blend together more easily. This is perhaps due to the homogenous timbres of a single instrument, where much of the dramatic meaning may be lost. Liszt solves this problem by judiciously keeping the more

complicated textual tapestries relatively simple, while using effective pianistic devices and embellishments to highlight the overall dramatic content in the music.

One other significant issue is that of orchestration. This is a problem that varies with choice of opera, as different composers and style periods offer a myriad of compositional voices and therefore sound combinations. The role of the orchestra in relation to the voice varies greatly as well. One of the ways Liszt's genius is apparent is in his imaginative solutions to orchestral transcription in opera, several examples of which can be seen in the Wagner transcriptions, such as the *Spinning Song* and *Isolde's Liebestod*.

## Opera Transcription after Wagner

Wagner and Liszt had a special relationship on more than one level. In addition to being close colleagues, proponents of each other's work, and friends, Wagner married Liszt's daughter Cosima. In the family relationship, things were not always smooth. However, Liszt appreciated Wagner's musical genius and did his best to promote Wagner's work in many ways, not the least of which was through the art of transcription. There are ten Liszt transcriptions from Wagner operas.

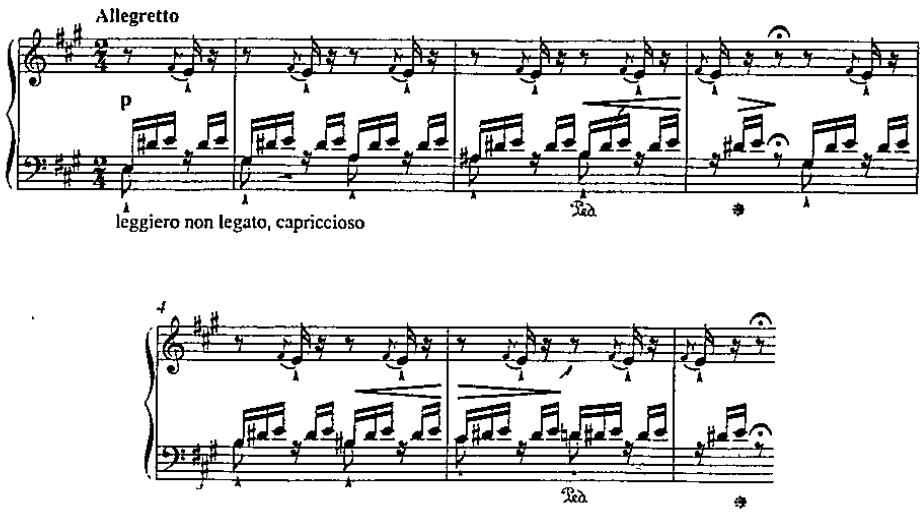
### Spinning Song

The *Spinning Song* from *"The Flying Dutchman"* is an example of a transcription of an opera ensemble number, in this case not a group of soloists but instead a chorus. At this point in the drama, the maidens of the town are spinning cloth on their looms, and the song they sing draws a connection between this repetitive activity and marrying a wealthy man. The irony is

that Senta, the only one not singing, is also the only one haunted by a man. It is no ordinary man, however, but the immortal Dutchman. Because he is not allowed to rest until he finds a faithful woman, he inhabits her dreams.

In effectively portraying the vivid ironic drama of this chorus, Liszt's transcriptional efforts can be discussed in two groups. The first group is Liszt's addition of his own musical material, which lengthens Wagner's original scene; the second group demonstrates Liszt's adaptation of orchestral effects to the piano. In regard to the first group, one finds three areas in Wagner's scene to which Liszt adds pianistic out-growths. First, Liszt creates a musically-related, cadenza-like introduction to the scene, based upon Wagner's instrumental spinning figure: a half-step triplet figure combined with a trill that hovers around the dominant. This introduction begins rather hesitantly, with a creeping chromatic line in the bass and written pauses, as if to imitate the warming-up of the spinning looms. Note the "capriccioso" indication:

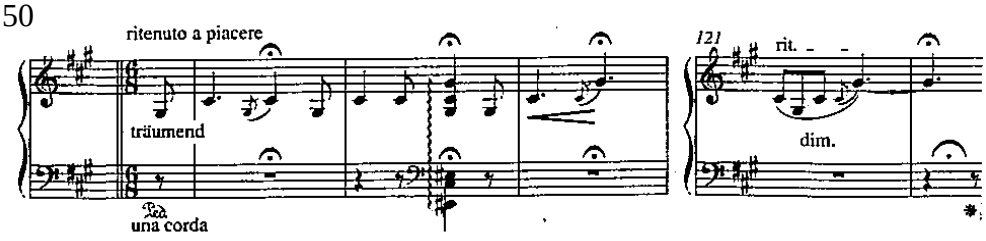
Ex. 49




The introduction ends with an ascending flourish in broken thirds; then a descending, semi-chromatic scale that melts into a dominant trill and leads into Wagner's original beginning of the

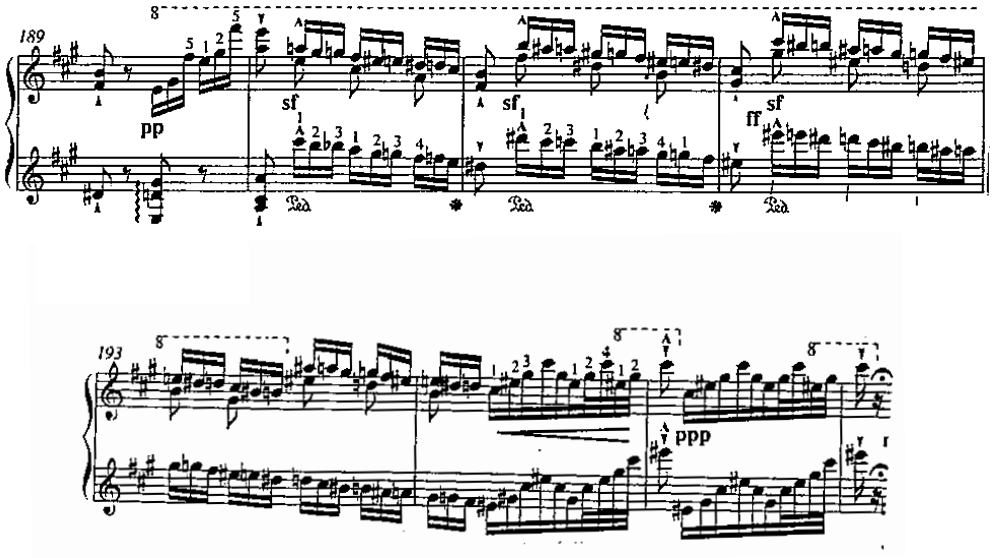
scene. The second significant section in which Liszt adds material is in the middle of the chorus. Everyone stops and chides Senta for being distracted. Liszt cleverly inserts a dreamlike cadenza at this point, featuring the Dutchman's theme, which is first heard in the overture to the opera. This is clearly a depiction of Senta's thoughts during this distracted trance, as shown by the free rhythmic character of the Dutchman's theme. This is a contrast to the machine-like rhythms of the rest of the scene, as well as by Liszt's own indication of "träumend" (dreaming):

Ex. 50



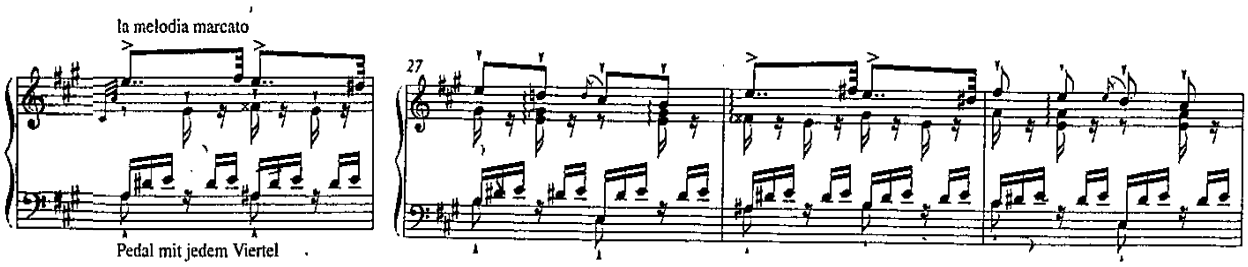

Lastly, since in the opera there is a segue from this chorus to the next scene, Liszt obliges the listener with an extended, bravura coda to make it suitable for performance as an individual piano piece. The coda is two pages long, and full of wildly rapid arpeggiated sequences, as well as technically demanding series of fast, descending chromatic scales in parallel sixths:

Ex. 51



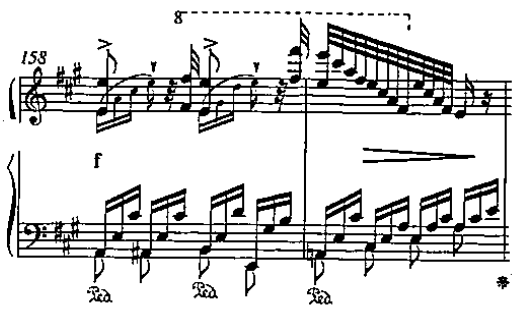
There are four prevalent musical layers in Liszt's pianistic adaptation of the orchestral music of this scene. One of these dimensions is the spinning sound created by the second violins and violas. The second layer, with which the first is coupled, is made up of short, sharply ornamented chirping sounds in the horns and winds. The pizzicato bass line is a third element of this texture. Finally, the main theme arrives, played initially by violin 1 and oboe, but eventually taken over by the women's chorus. Measures 26-29 show the texture when all four elements are present in the piano:

Ex. 52




Liszt manages to distribute the music between the hands in such a way that all of these layers can be articulated clearly. This is accomplished partly by using his suggested fingering, and partly by following his indications of "la melodia marcato" and "pedal with each beat." It's also important to mention that when the dynamics increase and Wagner adds instruments to build the sound, Liszt represents this pianistically by covering more registers, doubling melodies at the octave, and increasing pianistic resonance with well-placed runs. Example 53 is an excellent example of these types of adaptations:

Ex. 53

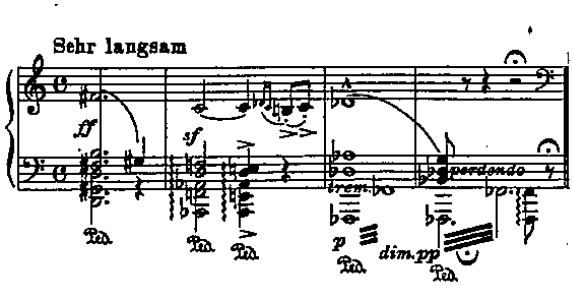


**Isolde's Liebestod**

*Isolde's Liebestod,* from *Tristan und Isolde* is derived from the section of the opera originally designated by Wagner as "Transfiguration;" however, the present title remained after Liszt used it for his transcription of the scene (Suttoni, 2002, 187). An entire study could be devoted to this work alone, but this discussion will be limited primarily to the way it is handled through Liszt's transcription of orchestral timbre. Dramatically, Isolde is holding her lover Tristan who is dead. The other characters are puzzled as they watch her; she is singing about Tristan as if he were alive. She appears to experience greater and greater emotion until finally, her greatest ecstasy is also the moment of her own death. The music for this scene is first heard in an abbreviated love duet from Act II, and is allowed here to come to musical and dramatic fruition, at the end of the opera.

It is clear from examining Liszt's version of the *Liebestod* that the composer is attempting to realize Wagner's exact intention in the sounds and buildup of this scene, note for note, sacrificing nothing. In fact, Liszt's only addition is a conservative, yet poignant four-bar quote from Act II which he uses as a short introduction to the piece (see Example 54). It is this quote from which the title "Liebestod" is derived[3]. (Suttoni, 2002, 187)

Ex. 54

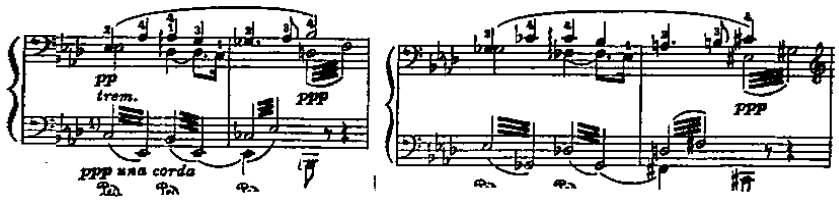



[3] The text of the four bars from which Liszt quotes reads "sehnend verlangter Liebestod!"

Since the "Liebestod" occurs at the end of the opera, Liszt's introduction succinctly sets the mood and prepares the listener for this final dramatic point.

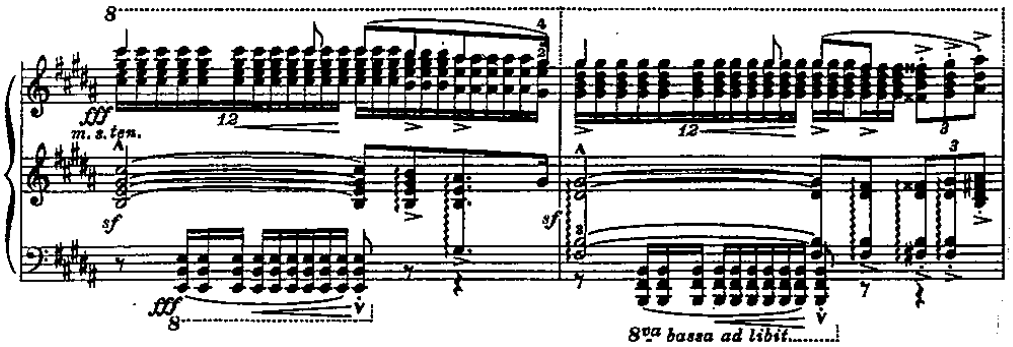
The popularity of this transcription is one testament to Liszt's success in transcribing orchestral timbres. One of the most significant of these timbres is the sound of string tremolos, which occurs throughout the piece in different registers and with varying dynamics. These string tremolos are transcribed on the piano as shaken, broken chord and octave (or other intervallic) tremolos. It is a significant technical challenge to make the tremolos sound even and balanced on piano, while keeping simultaneous melodic material clear and properly shaped. However, Liszt instinctively knew when to shift the location of the tremolos between hands, making a particular musical passage easier to emphasize. An example of this can be seen in measures 4-8 of the piece, where most of the tremolos of each phrase are written for the left hand. The final tremolo, however, is sent to the right hand:

Ex. 55




Also at issue is the dialogue between the clarinets and the horns, who take turns playing the rising opening motive of the scene which follows the introduction. Liszt tries to ensure a successful rendering of these sounds chiefly through careful dynamic and expressive indications, thoughtfully guiding the balance of each element. Finally, when faced with simulating the massive dynamics of the huge Wagnerian orchestra, Liszt uses a surprisingly effective method at the climax of the main crescendo of the *Liebestod,* which occurs nineteen measures from the end of the piece:

Ex. 56




Liszt frames the suspended harmonies that occur on the downbeats of each measure with emphatically repeated *fff* chords, above and below, which echo the same harmony and create incredible resonance, thereby producing a rather convincing simulation of a sustained orchestral crescendo.

## Opera Transcription after Verdi

### Concert Paraphrase of "Rigoletto"

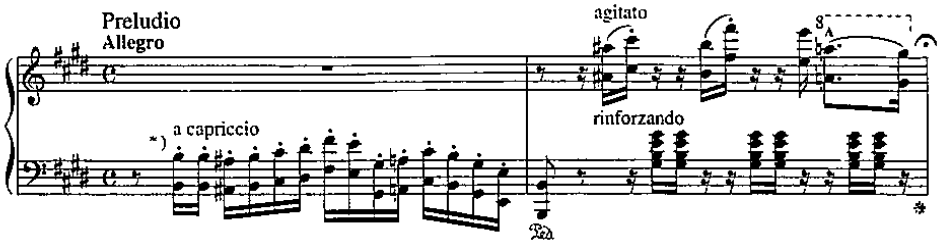
In writing his paraphrase after one of Verdi's most famous operas, Liszt chose to focus on one of the more well-known scenes from the opera, the quartet from Act III. As in his comparative approaches to Rossini and Schubert, Liszt seems to have a more liberal approach in transcribing this particular Verdi scene, compared to his treatment of the Wagner transcriptions. It's likely that the quintessentially Italian affinity for operatic vocal cadenzas was a persistent inspiration for Liszt, granting him countless opportunities to exercise his improvisatory prowess.

In this quartet, four characters are singing four different texts and melodies simultaneously; yet musically they are combined into one ensemble. Dorgan remarks that this is not unusual for Verdi, and points out that "His real achievement here was to apply the

differentiating technique *vertically* and within a regular, almost classical design..." (Dorgan, 1982, 59) The setting is the inn of Sparafucile, who has been contracted by Rigoletto to kill the Duke of Mantua. Inside the inn, the Duke is trying to seduce the sister of the innkeeper, Maddalena. She, on the other hand, sings about how she is not fooled by his fake charms. Outside the door, Gilda, who loves the Duke, is witnessing his seduction of another; her heart is breaking. Rigoletto, Gilda's father, tries to calm her while seeking his own solace in his secret plot for revenge on the Duke.

In general, Liszt retains the original order of formal sections in his paraphrase. One can easily recognize the characters' individual lines as they enter, since Verdi has composed them so uniquely: the Duke, a lyrical, pathetic theme; Maddalena, a laugh-like melody; Gilda, a chain of sobbing motives; Rigoletto, driving repetitions of notes and pedal tones. However, significant divergences do occur. Initially there is a fantasy-like introduction, improvisatory in character but based on Verdi's motives. In fact, the first two measures introduce the two women of the quartet: Maddalena's theme in the left hand, Gilda's theme in the right (see Example 57). (Dorgan, 1982, 60)

Ex. 57



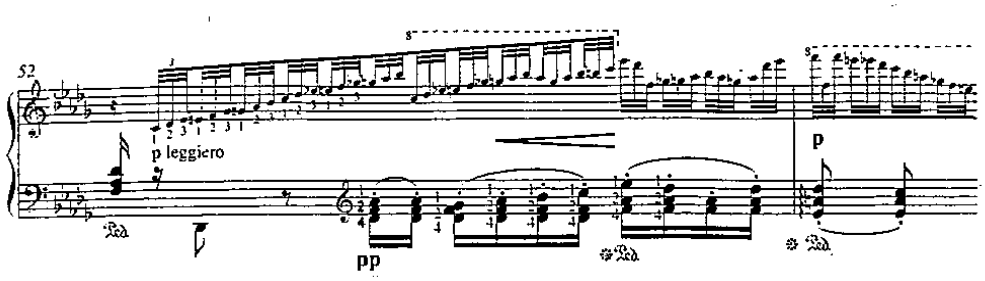

The introduction begins in E major, which is quite distant harmonically from the Db major "Andante" of the main section. Liszt's facilitates a modulation with a cascade of rapidly

arpeggiated and ascending diminished chords, dissolving quietly into a cadence on an Ab7 chord, the dominant of the new key.

After the "Andante" begins and as the vocal melodies begin to enter successively, Liszt has ample opportunity to infuse his compositional creativity, due partly to the fact that the original orchestral texture is relatively thin. One of the first and most striking changes Liszt makes to the music is not in the orchestral part, however, but in one of the vocal parts, actually modifying one of the essential notes of the Duke's melody. Liszt replaces the low Ab in the Duke's final measure with Bbb, creating a considerable color change and a unique musical imprint that is easily recognizable when it returns. This is particularly noticeable to those who know the original quartet.

As the piece progresses, one observes several extended, chromatic cadenzas, especially when the Duke's part ascends to a held high note. Also significant is the fact that Liszt writes longer and longer chromatic scales to accompany thematic material, until about half-way through the piece (measure 52). Therein begins a page-long fantasy-like passage that almost abandons the original structure of the quartet completely, save a reharmonized fragment of Maddalena's theme:

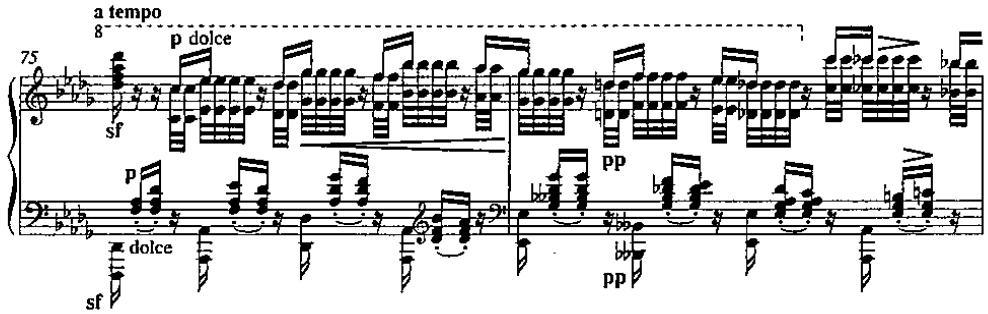
Ex. 58




Two final areas of departure from Verdi's original musical arrangement stand out in terms of special pianistic interest. First, Gilda's theme is embellished during the repeat of the final impassioned section of the quartet (measure 75, etc.). In a dramatic attempt to express

Gilda's increasing agitation, Liszt rhythmically charges her simple two-note, sobbing motive with rapid, repeating octaves:

Ex. 59




Finally, in contrast to the quiet fading of the end of Verdi's version of the quartet, Liszt finishes the piece with a storm of octaves, initially based upon Gilda's sighing motive just mentioned. However the ending exhibits three *fff* statements of descending double octaves that outline a Db pentatonic scale. This is closely related to the Duke's original Db theme.

## Conclusion

After examining examples of Liszt's transcriptional technique in Italian and German song and opera repertoire, it is now possible to come to significant conclusions about the questions that were raised at the beginning of this study. On the question of painting the meaning of the text in Schubert and Rossini, it seems clear that Liszt's ideas went above and beyond the scope of the original composers, perhaps suggesting ways of interpreting the text that one would not discern by listening to the original song. Secondly, although Liszt's treatment of Rossini's and Schubert's music takes creative liberties with both composers, the Rossini repertoire is more suggestive of Liszt's improvisational nature. This could be interpreted to mean that he did not think it necessary to change Schubert in this way, showing a higher level of respect for the Austrian composer.

When one considers the questions relating to the opera transcriptions, it is fair to say that the relative importance of the orchestra probably has the most significant bearing on Liszt's versions of these works. In Wagner, the vocal line is often a seamless part of the overwhelming orchestral texture; therefore Liszt's transcriptional ideas seem to be generated from overall orchestral considerations. In Verdi, as was seen clearly in the example of the quartet from Rigoletto, the vocal parts and their characteristic melodic contours often play the most significant role, and use more of an accompanimental orchestra. In both the songs and the opera transcriptions, Liszt does a convincing job of conveying what he sees as the dramatic essence of his subject, whether it be one particular poem, or a more intricate opera plot. Because of this, one can be assured of deriving great value from listening to and performing these works.

Piano transcription as an art has always raised several issues, such as musical quality, creative purpose and a test of a composer's choices and abilities. This study has focused on

selected song and opera transcriptions in an attempt to give an analytical perspective of Liszt's work and influence in this genre. Perhaps this insight into the craft and artistic significance of these works will serve to intensify one's curiosity, motivating more research and ultimately enjoyment of this body of repertoire.

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