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Franz Liszt: The Sonata in B Minor as spiritual autobiography

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Franz Liszt:
The Sonata in B Minor as Spiritual Autobiography
Jonathan David Keener

A document submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Table of Contents

List of Examples.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
Introduction and Background.....	1
Form Considerations and Thematic Transformation in the Sonata.....	6
Schumann's <i>Fantasie</i> and Alkan's <i>Grande Sonate</i>	14
The Legend of Faust.....	21
Liszt and the Church.....	28
Symbolism in the Sonata in B minor.....	33
Conclusion.....	52
Bibliography.....	55

List of Examples

Example 1.....	6
Example 2.....	7
Example 3.....	7
Example 4.....	7
Example 5.....	8
Example 6.....	8
Example 7.....	11
Example 8.....	12
Example 9.....	18
Example 10.....	19
Example 11.....	20
Example 12.....	20
Example 13.....	34
Example 14.....	38
Example 15.....	39
Example 16.....	40
Example 17.....	41
Example 18.....	42
Example 19.....	43
Example 20.....	44
Example 21.....	46
Example 22.....	47

Example 23.....	48
Example 24.....	48
Example 25.....	49
Example 26.....	50
Example 27.....	51

Abstract

Many composers, particularly in the 19th century, have attempted to write “autobiographical” music. Although Franz Liszt never explicitly mentioned that any of his works were autobiographical, the facts we have about his life and the symbolism within his Sonata in B Minor suggest that this piece may serve this purpose, either intentionally or subconsciously. Liszt, having strong ties to the Catholic Church, may have also consciously or unconsciously incorporated religious symbolism into the work. Works that exerted influence on the formal structure and the possible extra-musical meaning of the Sonata in B Minor include Charles-Valentine Alkan’s *Grande Sonate*, Robert Schumann’s Fantasy, Op. 17, and Franz Schubert’s “Wanderer” Fantasy. In the end, although there is no written evidence that Liszt intended his Sonata to be autobiographical, it is the intent of this document to demonstrate that the Sonata in B Minor is at very least an unintentional archetype of a spiritual struggle within Liszt’s life. Liszt’s Sonata in B Minor is an image of a soul laid bare, struggling against sin and guilt, but with hope and joy as well. There is no more complete picture of the many layers of Liszt’s personality and beliefs than in his Sonata in B Minor.

Introduction and Background

Many composers, particularly in the 19th century, attempted to write “autobiographical” music, representing a personal experience or event in their lives. Examples of this include Hector Berlioz in his *Symphonie Fantastique*, which is autobiographical in that it was inspired by the composer’s real life experience with unrequited love, and Gustav Mahler in *Das Lied von der Erde*, his “most personal of compositions.”¹ Although Franz Liszt never explicitly mentioned that any of his works were autobiographical, the facts that we have about his life and the symbolism within his music suggest that he may have done so in some of his works, either intentionally or subconsciously. Two of Liszt’s works that could be considered autobiographical are his *Faust* Symphony and his Sonata in B minor, S. 178. The latter work is the focus of this document. Because of Liszt’s well-documented religious life, he may have incorporated religious symbolism into his Sonata as well. Whether or not Liszt considered his Sonata in B Minor to be an autobiographical work, I would like to suggest that it is, at very least, an archetypical representation of Liszt’s psychological and spiritual state at the time he wrote the Sonata.

Franz Liszt completed his Sonata in B Minor on February 2, 1853 when he was 41 years old, though most of it was written during the latter half of 1852.² Initially, the Sonata was not well received, even when the composer himself played

¹ Stephen E. Hefling, “Aspects of Mahler’s Late Style,” in *Mahler and his World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 199.

² Kenneth Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata in B minor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

it.³ Liszt reported that his playing of the Sonata was ‘an invitation for stamping and hissing.’⁴ Brahms reportedly fell asleep when Liszt played it for him privately.⁵ It was a full four years before the Sonata received its premier public performance, by Liszt’s pupil Hans von Bülow in 1857.⁶ After 1861, the Sonata was not performed from the concert stage until 1880, when Saint-Saëns finally reintroduced it to the public.⁷ Eventually, the Sonata was accepted by the general public, and today it is widely considered to be Liszt’s greatest work for the piano. Many scholars and musicians even claim that the Sonata is Liszt’s greatest work in any genre. Today, the Sonata’s popularity is immense, with roughly twenty performances per season in the Greater New York area alone.⁸

Although Franz Liszt has long been associated with program music, we have no record that he ever mentioned that his Sonata had a program. However, because of the Sonata’s narrative quality, many scholars have suggested that it must be based on extra-musical ideas. Some, like Paul Merrick, believe the Sonata represents spiritual struggle.⁹ Others, like the pianist Tibor Szasz, claim it represents the Fall of Man as illustrated in Milton’s “Paradise Lost.”¹⁰ Paul Raabe believes that the piece is

³ Adrian Williams, *Portrait of Liszt: By Himself and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 335.

⁴ Anthony Wilkinson, *Liszt* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1975), 74.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alan Walker, *Reflections on Liszt* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 144.

⁷ Ibid., 148.

⁸ Ibid., 149.

⁹ Paul Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Franz Liszt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 293.

¹⁰ Tibor Szasz, “Liszt’s Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical: Their Revelation of a Program in the B-minor Sonata,” *The Journal of the American Liszt Society* 15 (June 1984), 39-95.

an autobiography,¹¹ and others associate it with the legend of Faust.¹² Kenneth Hamilton¹³ and Alan Walker,¹⁴ two prominent Liszt scholars, both claim that the Sonata is nothing more than absolute music. Walker also points out the widely varied interpretations of the piece: “Everyone appears to think that he is entitled to hold an opinion about it. And since many of those opinions are mutually exclusive, the literature has become a minefield through which both player and teacher proceed at their peril.”¹⁵ Walker aptly describes the variety of opinions, often held strongly, by various scholars, teachers and performers. In this document I will offer my own perspective. Although I recognize that not everyone will accept my point of view, I hope that the program I will suggest for the Sonata will shed further light on the interpretational possibilities for the piece.

Those, like Walker, who believe the Sonata in B Minor has no extra-musical meaning hold their view as strongly as those who associate the piece with a program. I would argue, however, that program music was such a prominent part of Liszt’s compositional language that it is very likely that the Sonata had some meaning beyond itself, either intentionally or subconsciously. Even Charles Rosen, who does not believe the Sonata is based on a program, admits that imagining a

¹¹ Paul Raabe, *Franz Liszt: Leben und Schaffen*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart, 1968), 59-62 (Referenced in Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Weimar Years*, 150).

¹² Bertrand Ott, “An Interpretation of Liszt’s Sonata in B Minor,” *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 10 (December 1981): 30-38.

¹³ Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata in B minor*, 31.

¹⁴ Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Weimar Years* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 151.

¹⁵ Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*, 128.

program for the piece is “unavoidable.”¹⁶ Liszt was a musician and artist who often wrestled with questions about his religious faith, and he often expressed these struggles through his music and literary writings.¹⁷ The Sonata in B Minor is a likely example of Liszt’s self-expression. Many scholars have noted thematic connections between the Sonata in B Minor and other pieces, both by Liszt’s contemporaries and other pieces dating back to Gregorian plainchant. These scholars have used these connections to suggest possible “secret” programs for the piece.

I believe that the Sonata in B Minor can be seen as Liszt’s spiritual autobiography. Peter Raabe described the autobiographical and spiritual nature of the Sonata well when he wrote:

Hardly anywhere else in the whole of [Liszt’s] works has he so uncompromisingly laid bare the sorrow of struggle as in this psalm that cries out towards enlightenment and salvation, in this poem that speaks with the same intimacy of jubilation and lament, of defiance and humility. The hesitating, mysterious opening is a revelation of the Liszt who stood in an attitude of expectancy toward everything that was great, not groping timidly, but with the calm that is needed to recognize how we should bear ourselves towards what is great. This greatness is here *Combat*. How his will asserts itself in the first allegro energico! It is as if he had caught sight of the enemy. Then [here Raabe quotes the Theme 1] the malediction of the restlessness that burdened his life. He pauses, horrified. The theme returns, more clearly defined, more threateningly. Now he no longer recoils. The storm breaks; and now comes a struggle between resolution and doubt, a struggle that becomes ever more passionate, more embittered, till the tense gathering up of the foaming masses in the unison culminates in a hymn – ‘God alone it is who decides in such a fight.’ Faith brings peace... There is no parallel in other music to the way in which Liszt carries out the remainder of the sonata – the course of the combat – always evolving something new by means of

¹⁶ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 480.

¹⁷ Young Ran Oh, “The Eternal Paradox in Liszt’s Persona: Good and Evil as Illustrated in His Piano Sonatas” (DMA Dissertation, University of Washington, 1996), 2.

the repetition of the assaults and the repulsion of these, exactly in the same way as in the course of his own life... The fight is renewed, but it is never the same; the flight to God recurs, but never in the same form; sternness is succeeded by mildness, but always in a different form. Finally his confidence in God becomes a roar of jubilation; sinking back upon the earth he reaches the simple but moving conclusion – humble resignation, in the distance the call to combat, a deep sigh, a reminiscence of the commencement of all this torment and pain, a last tired look towards heaven.¹⁸

In addition to comparing different programmatic interpretations of the Sonata in B Minor and suggesting my own idea of a program, I will also later discuss possible reasons why Liszt would have kept the program of such a great work secret.

¹⁸ As quoted in Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*, 299.

Formal Considerations and Thematic Transformation in the Sonata

Though passionate debate rages over whether the Sonata in B Minor is based on an extra-musical program, scholars universally agree on Liszt's ingenuity in the use of thematic transformation within the work. The motives upon which the piece is built are varied throughout the work to such an extent that we may not immediately recognize them, but careful analysis shows us they are the same motives. Liszt bases the majority of the Sonata on three motives, which are all quoted on the first page, but transforms them throughout the work. In addition to the opening descending scale (Example 1), the entire Sonata is built on three themes (Examples 4, 5 and 6). The first of these themes combines two of the opening motives (Examples 2 and 3). These motives and themes are also related to each other in various ways to the extent that some, like pianist Claudio Arrau and musicologist Paul Egert, suggest that the Sonata is actually built on a single motive, the descending scale at the opening (Example 1).¹⁹ It is remarkable how Liszt built such a large-scale work from very limited motivic material.



Ex. 1: Motive 1 (Franz Liszt: Sonata in B Minor, ms. 1-3).

¹⁹ Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata in B minor*, x.



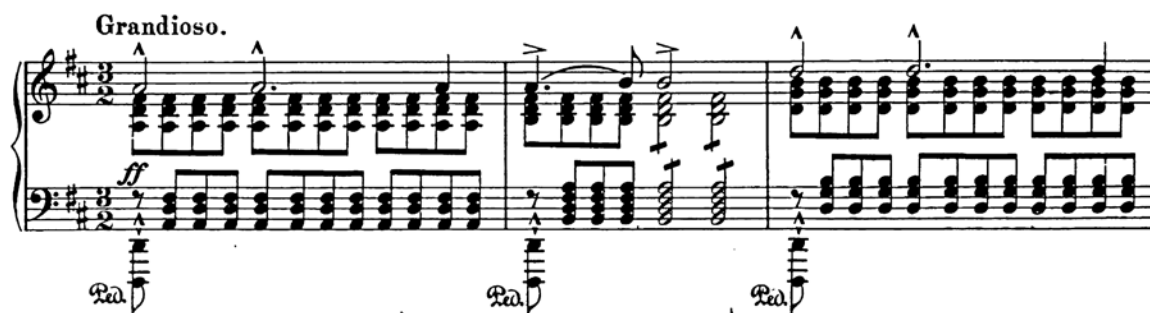
Ex. 2: Motive 2 (ms. 8-13).



Ex. 3: Motive 3, played in the left hand (ms. 13-15).



Ex. 4: Theme 1 (ms. 32-33).



Ex. 5: Theme 2 (ms. 105-107).



Ex. 6: Theme 3 (ms. 331-334).

The Sonata in B Minor is remarkable in that it is written as a single movement, taking roughly a half hour to perform. Although the Sonata is written as a continuous work, it can also be analyzed as three or four separate movements connected without pause, in the traditional fast-slow-fast (or, allegro-adagio-scherzo-finale) order. Liszt had previously experimented with writing a multi-movement structure within a continuous piece in such works as *Bénédiction de Deus dans la Solitude* and *Funérailles* from his *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses*, the *Grosses Konzertsolo*, *Pensée des Morts*, and *Après une Lecture de Dante: Fantasia*

quasi Sonata (the “Dante” Sonata).²⁰ The Sonata in B minor is Liszt’s most developed example of Sonata form.²¹ Liszt was determined not to limit himself to rigid “formulae” but rather wanted the form of his pieces to be determined by the content alone.²²

According to Charles Rosen, Liszt was also influenced by other pieces in determining the formal construction of his Sonata, including many by Beethoven. Most notably, Liszt was influenced by the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, which also has a “dual-function form.”²³ This piece towered over the Romantic Era as a monumental achievement to which European composers aspired. Rosen and Leo Treitler have described the final movement as representational of a “four-movement symphonic form.” Rosen points out a fugal section within the movement, which takes place after the ending of the “slow movement” of the “four-movement” form.²⁴ Liszt placed a fugue at a similar place in his Sonata in B Minor, immediately following its “slow movement.” Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was well known to Liszt,²⁵ and it also influenced Liszt’s *Faust Symphony*,²⁶ written at about the same

²⁰ Derek Watson, *Liszt* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 239.

²¹ Paul Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Franz Liszt*, 283.

²² La Mara, ed., *Letters of Franz Liszt*, I, trans. Constance Bache (London, 1894), 273.

²³ Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 480.

²⁴ Benjamin David Levy, *Beethoven: The Ninth Symphony* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 92.

²⁵ La Mara, ed., *Letters of Franz Liszt*, I, 96.

²⁶ Levy, *Beethoven: The Ninth Symphony*, 170.

time as his Sonata.²⁷ Liszt transcribed all of Beethoven's symphonies for solo piano,²⁸ indicating that he was intimately familiar with them.

In 1852, the year in which Liszt wrote most of his Sonata, he said this of Beethoven: "For us musicians, Beethoven's work is the pillar of cloud and fire which guided the Israelites through the desert – a pillar of cloud to guide us by day, a pillar of fire to guide us by night, so that we may progress both day and night."²⁹ As Kenneth Hamilton puts it, Beethoven's overwhelming influence in the early Romantic Era resulted in a plethora of young composers writing sonatas for the piano, attempting to follow in Beethoven's "tradition" of great piano sonatas.³⁰ Although composers during the Romantic Era were innovative with regard to harmony and emotional content in works, Liszt commented that many composers were simply straight-jacketing themselves in Sonata form. Liszt derided other composers for never daring to experiment with form similar to the way Beethoven had done, suggesting, "*Forms* were too often changed by respectable people into *formulae*."³¹ In addition to his approach to form in the finale of his Ninth Symphony, Beethoven also blurred the lines between movements in many of his piano sonatas.

²⁷ I believe Liszt's *Faust* symphony may possibly be a "parallel" piece to the Sonata.

²⁸ Liszt began transcribing Beethoven's symphonies in 1837 but didn't complete them until 1864. [Alan Walker, et al, "Liszt, Franz," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/48265pg28> (accessed April 16, 2011)].

²⁹ La Mara, ed., *Letters of Franz Liszt*, I, 151.

³⁰ Hamilton, *Franz Liszt: Sonata in B minor*, 8.

³¹ La Mara, ed., *Letters of Franz Liszt*, I, 273, as quoted in Hamilton, *Franz Liszt: Sonata in B minor*, 8 (italics are Hamilton's).

Notable examples include Op. 27 No. 1, Op. 53 (“Waldstein”), Op. 57 (“Appassionata”) and Op. 101, among many others.

Another influence on the Sonata’s form was Franz Schubert’s Fantasy in C major, Op. 15, also known as the “Wanderer” Fantasy.³² Schubert’s Fantasy is clearly divided into four sections, which could be interpreted as separate movements of a larger Sonata (Allegro-Adagio-Scherzo-Finale), but as in Liszt’s Sonata, it is played without pause. Also, like the Liszt Sonata,³³ the entire “Wanderer” Fantasy is based on a single motive (the specific rhythm of the repeated chords that open the work as shown in Example 7). Liszt not only introduced the “Wanderer” Fantasy to the public,³⁴ but also transcribed it for piano and orchestra in 1851,³⁵ immediately before writing his Sonata. Therefore, it is probable that the form of Schubert’s Fantasy was in Liszt’s mind when he was planning the form of the Sonata.



Example 7: Franz Schubert: “Wanderer” Fantasy, ms. 1-3.

³² Chunghua Hur, “Schubert’s Wanderer Fantasie: A Creative Springboard to Liszt’s Sonata in B Minor” (DMA Dissertation, University of Arizona, 1997), 51.

³³ According to Paul Egert and Claudio Arrau.

³⁴ Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*, 129.

³⁵ Wilkinson, *Liszt*, 74.



Example 8: Franz Schubert: Opening of the second “movement” from “Wanderer” Fantasy, ms 189-192.

Schubert’s “Wanderer” Fantasy is based on his song “Der Wanderer,” D. 649, written in October, 1816. The text of this song may contribute to a “secret program” in the Sonata. Measures 23-26 from this song are quoted at the opening of the second “movement” of the Fantasy (Example 8). Not only had Liszt transcribed the “Wanderer” Fantasy, but he also transcribed the song itself for piano solo.³⁶

Following is a translation of the poem by Schmidt von Lübeck that is used in the song:

I come from highlands down to shore,
the valleys steam, the oceans roar.
I wander silent, joyless here:
my sigh keeps asking, Where? Oh, where?

Their sun appears to me so cold,
their blossoms limp, their life so old;
and what they speak of, empty fare:
I am a stranger everywhere.

Where are you, land, beloved home?
Imagined, sought, but never known!

³⁶ Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*, 130.

The land, the land, whence hope does flow,
the land where all my roses grow,

Where friends shall never meet in vain,
where all my dead shall rise again,
the land that speaks my language true:
Oh land, where are you?...

I wander silent, joyless here,
my sigh keeps asking, Where? Oh where?
The specters answer my distress:
"Where you are not, there's happiness."³⁷

The poem portrays a "Wanderer" who does not feel at home anywhere he goes, feeling like a stranger. Liszt's religious faith may have inspired this connection to Lübeck's text, which may refer to the Christian view that Earth is just a temporary dwelling place, in contrast to Heaven, which is permanent. Liszt may also have felt as though no one was, to borrow the idea from the poem, "speaking his language," possibly referring to his progressive approach to harmony that was not always accepted by his contemporaries.³⁸

³⁷ Schmidt von Lübeck: Der Wanderer,
<http://myweb.dal.ca/waue/Trans/Schmidt-Wanderer.html> (accessed April 4, 2011).

³⁸ cf. Alan Walker, "The War of the Romantics," in *Franz Liszt: The Weimar Years (1948-1960)* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 338-367.

Schumann's *Fantasie* and Alkan's *Grande Sonate*

Liszt's dedication of the Sonata in B minor may also indicate the influence of another piece. Liszt dedicated his Sonata to Robert Schumann, in response to Schumann dedicating his great *Fantasie*, Op. 17 to Liszt. Both the *Fantasie* and the Sonata (along with Schubert's "Wanderer" Fantasy) are among the greatest large-scale works for the piano from the Romantic Era. Ironically, Schumann's *Fantasie* is in three separate movements, rather than the typical single movement for Fantasies,³⁹ whereas Liszt's Sonata is written as a single movement, rather than the typical three or four separate movements of a Sonata.⁴⁰

The dedications included with the Sonata and the *Fantasie* may not seem remarkable until we compare the two pieces. Both works break new ground with regard to form, daringly reinventing traditional forms. In the same way that the Sonata in B minor suggests the influence of Beethoven, the Schumann *Fantasie* was also inspired by Beethoven, a "pictorial allusion to Beethoven's heroic career."⁴¹ The most interesting connection between the two works, however, is how they both arrive at a musical quotation by piecing it together as the piece progresses. Schumann's *Fantasie* famously contains a musical quotation at the end of its first

³⁹ Nicholas Marston, *Schumann: Fantasie, Op. 17* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 26.

⁴⁰ Unfortunately, though Liszt continued to promote Schumann's music, his relationship with Schumann had soured since Schumann published his *Fantasie*, due to a growing difference in musical tastes. Liszt's dedication was received with embarrassment, and in a posthumous reissue of Schumann's *Fantasie*, Clara Schumann took out the dedication to Liszt. [Watson, *Liszt*, 93].

⁴¹ Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*, 41.

movement from the Beethoven song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, [“To a Distant Beloved”] based on poetry by Aloys Jeitteles.⁴²

Although Schumann never acknowledged this musical quotation,⁴³ it is widely recognized by musical scholars today. The quotation was set to the following text in Beethoven’s song cycle, translated into English: “Accept then these songs, beloved, which I sang for you alone.” Because of Schumann’s situation with Clara Wieck⁴⁴ at the time he was writing the *Fantasie* (desiring to marry her against her father’s wishes), it is possible that this piece may have been a secret message to Clara. The idea that Schumann’s *Fantasie* included a secret message is further supported by a letter Schumann wrote to Clara, which includes the following in reference to the *Fantasie*: “The first movement may well be the most passionate I have ever composed – a deep lament for you.”⁴⁵

At the top of the *Fantasie*’s first page, Schumann quotes this poem by Friedrich Schlegel:

<i>Durch alle Töne tönet</i>	Resounding through all the notes
<i>Im bunten Erdentraum</i>	In the earth's colorful dream
<i>Ein leiser Ton gezogen</i>	There sounds a faint long-drawn note
<i>Für den, der heimlich lauschet.</i>	For the one who listens in secret. ⁴⁶

In a letter dated June 9, 1839, Schumann asked Clara, “Are you not the ‘note’ in the motto [from the poem quoted at the opening]? I almost believe you are.”⁴⁷ It seems

⁴² Marston, *Schumann: Fantasie, Op. 17*, 35.

⁴³ Ibid., 36. The earliest known reference to the quotation was by Hermann Abert in 1910.

⁴⁴ Clara Wieck later became Robert Schumann’s wife, taking on her better-known married name, Clara Schumann.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 10.

logical that one of Schumann's main purposes in composing the *Fantasie* was to send a secret message to Clara, his own "Distant Beloved."

If we accept that there is a "secret message" in Schumann's *Fantasie*, we must ask ourselves if there is a secret message in the Sonata in B Minor, because of the reciprocated dedications. Based on a musical quotation from Charles-Valentine Alkan's⁴⁸ *Grande Sonate*, Op. 33⁴⁹ that I will later describe in greater detail, I would like to suggest that a possible secret program in Liszt's Sonata is an autobiographical sketch of his life in the decade preceding the Sonata's composition. Alkan's *Grande Sonate* was composed toward the end of 1847,⁵⁰ so the possibility exists that Liszt knew the piece before he started composing his own Sonata. Ronald Smith suggested that this must be the case, based on his analysis of the Sonata in B Minor.⁵¹ Like Liszt's Sonata, Alkan's work goes against the conventions of typical Sonata structure. The first movement is not in Sonata form, and each successive movement is slower than the one before.⁵² Alkan wrote his *Grande Sonate* during a particularly dark time in his life, having faced disappointment by not being selected as head of the piano department at the Paris Conservatory, a position for which he

⁴⁷ Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*, 42.

⁴⁸ Alkan was an almost exact contemporary of Liszt (He lived from 1813-1888), and according to an article about Liszt published in 1835, Alkan and Liszt were friends. Like Liszt, Alkan possessed formidable piano technique and much of his music is technically difficult to play. Unfortunately, Alkan's music is almost never heard today, though much of it was better known in Liszt's day. [Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Enigma* (New York: Crescendo Publishing, 1977), 23]

⁴⁹ Tibor Szasz, "Liszt's Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical," 76.

⁵⁰ Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Enigma*, 40.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵² *Ibid.*

had strongly lobbied.⁵³ If Liszt consciously connected his Sonata to Alkan's work, it is possible that it was indicative of similar personal struggles in his own life.

The subtitle of Alkan's *Grande Sonata* is *Les quatre ages* ["The Four Ages"] and each of the four movements refer to different "ages" or "periods" of a man's life: "20 ans" [years], "30 ans," "40 ans" and "50 ans." Each movement of Alkan's *Grande Sonate* is slower than the one before, corresponding to the "slowing" that is often associated with aging. If Alkan's *Grande Sonate* and Liszt's Sonata in B Minor are in fact connected, it would provide substantial evidence that Liszt's Sonata also refers to a "lifetime," possibly his own. Liszt's Sonata itself was written near the middle of Liszt's life and, according to Charles Rosen, was a pivotal work between Liszt's early and late styles.⁵⁴ The Liszt Sonata also contains a quotation from the second movement of the *Grande Sonate*, with the subtitle "30 ans" [30 years], the decade of life that Liszt had just completed when writing his own Sonata. This decade of Liszt's life was a time when he underwent major changes, leaving his career as a traveling virtuoso and moving to Weimar to focus on conducting and composition. Another connection between the two pieces is the use of a fugue. The movement entitled "30 ans" contains an eight-voice fugue soon after the halfway point of the movement. Liszt's Sonata also contains a fugue, though only in three voices, at about the same point in the work.

The opening of "30 ans" includes the marking "Sataniquement" over the opening theme (Example 9). When this theme returns later in the movement it

⁵³ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁴ Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 480.

includes the indication “Le Diable” [The Devil] and “Diabolique,” suggesting a diabolical character.



Ex. 9: The “30 ans” movement of Alkan’s *Grande Sonate*, ms. 1-3.

This theme has two parts, in separate registers. The first part has a double-dotted rhythm and the second contains fast triplets preceding repeated Bs in the bass clef. A closer examination shows us that these two parts are very closely related to two of the opening motives from the Liszt Sonata (Examples 2 and 3), which interact with each other throughout the Sonata to such an extent that they could be interpreted as being part of the same “theme.” The first part of Alkan’s theme not only has the same rhythm as Motive 2 from the Liszt Sonata, but also has the same melodic contour as its inversion, which occurs at measure 509 in the Liszt Sonata. The connection is even clearer between this measure of Liszt’s Sonata and measure 204 of “30 ans” (including the ascending triplet figure), as pointed out by Tibor Szasz (Example 10).⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Szasz, “Liszt’s Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical,” 76.



Ex. 10: Comparison between m. 509 of Liszt's Sonata and m. 204 of the "30 ans" movement of Alkan's *Grande Sonate*.

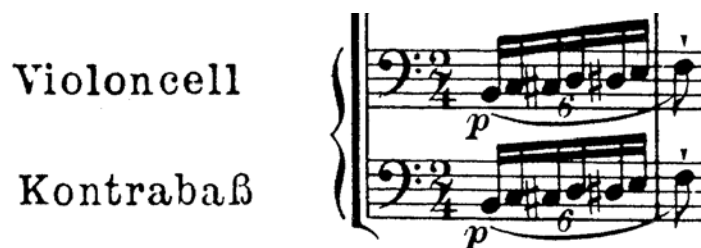
These connections seem not only to suggest that Liszt's Sonata, like Alkan's, represented a person's life (in this case possibly his own), but also that there was a diabolical element in Liszt's Sonata as well. Szasz suggests that Motive 3 from the Liszt Sonata, with the ascending pick-up notes and the repeated staccato notes were both techniques used by other composers (and by Liszt in other pieces) to represent evil, Satan or Mephistopheles.⁵⁶ Another example of repeated notes having this connotation is the opening of Liszt's "Mephisto" Waltz No. 1, S. 514 (Example 11).

⁵⁶ Szasz, "Liszt's Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical," 72. Examples of these musical features from Liszt's output include m. 7 in the "Mephistopheles" movement from Liszt's "Faust" Symphony, sections in all four of his "Mephisto" Waltzes and his "Mephisto" polka. Works by other composers include the openings of Alkan's *Les Diabolins*, Stravinsky's "Triumphal March of the Devil" from *L'Histoire du Soldat*, Bartók's "Suite for Two Pianos," Op. 4 (II. *Allegro diabolico*) and repeated-note sections of Ravel's "Scarbo" from *Gaspard de la Nuit*.



Ex. 11: Franz Liszt: “Mephisto” Waltz No. 1, S. 514, ms. 1-9.

The ascending “grace notes” preceding the repeated staccato notes in the Liszt Sonata were often associated with Satan or Mephistopheles, as in the very opening of the “Mephistopheles” movement from Liszt’s *Faust* symphony (Example 12).



Ex. 12: Opening of “Mephistopheles” movement from Liszt’s *Faust* Symphony.

The Liszt Sonata’s connection with Alkan’s *Grande Sonate* not only suggests that Liszt’s work may have been autobiographical, but also that it may include a reference to Mephistopheles, the character for Satan in the Faust legend. This reference may show a personal struggle Liszt experienced against a perceived evil.

The Legend of Faust

The “30 ans” movement from Alkan’s *Grande Sonate* is subtitled “Quasi Faust,” referring to the legend of Doctor Faustus, or “Faust,” perhaps the most enduring legend in German folklore. The legend of Faust is based partly on a real person who lived from about 1480-1540 and studied at the University of Heidelberg in Germany.⁵⁷ The legend claims that Faust sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for infinite knowledge and superhuman power.⁵⁸ Stories about this man became more and more elaborate to the extent that it is difficult to know what is true and what is fiction. He was an almost exact contemporary of the Church reformer Martin Luther, who spoke out against Faust’s evil actions. Many church leaders used the Faust legend as an example of what to avoid in life. Because Liszt had “sold his soul” to the Devil and it was believed that he suffered eternal torment in Hell after he died.⁵⁹

Perhaps the most famous German poet in history, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), took the Faust legend in a new direction by writing *Faust*, a play, in two parts. The first part was published in 1808 and the second, posthumously, in 1832.⁶⁰ After Goethe’s play, the Faust legend began to be primarily represented through music, almost to an even greater extent than it had previously

⁵⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Faust,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/202814/Faust> (accessed February 28, 2011).

⁵⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Faust (First Part),” translated with introduction and notes by Peter Salm (New York: Bantam Dell, 1962), *viii*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, *vii*.

⁶⁰ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Faust,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/202814/Faust> (accessed February 28, 2011).

been portrayed in literature.⁶¹ Goethe adds much to the story, beginning with a scene much like the opening of the book of Job from the Bible, where Satan makes a wager that he can convince Job to turn against God. In the case of *Faust*, Satan makes a wager with God that he can tempt Faust to commit evil acts. These acts included seducing a morally upright and innocent character named “Gretchen.” At the end of the first part of Goethe’s work, Gretchen’s soul is saved, and Faust’s is taken away by the Devil. At the end of the second part, however, Faust’s own soul is saved. Thus, though Goethe calls the work a “tragedy,” it has a positive ending. Many scholars believe that Liszt’s Sonata is based on the Faust legend.⁶² The pianist Claudio Arrau even claimed that this idea was “taken for granted” by Liszt’s own students.⁶³

European society’s interest in the legend of Faust explains the widespread fascination with the violinist Paganini (1782-1840). During his own lifetime, Paganini’s virtuosity was so legendary that to account for it, most people assumed him to be in league with the Devil.⁶⁴ His physical appearance supported this impression. Alan Walker describes it well:

...in 1831, Paganini was forty-eight and was already wasting away from syphilis, although he still had another ten slow years in which to die. His skeleton body, racked with pain, glided rather than walked on to the stage. He dressed in black. His dark, piercing eyes had receded deep into their sockets and this, together with his waxen complexion, gave him a spectral appearance which was enhanced by the dark blue glasses he sometimes wore – two black caverns set in a death-white face. The macabre impression was

⁶¹ Patrick Carnegy, “Faust in His Element: A Musical Career and its Consequences” in *The Romantic Tradition: German Literature and Music in the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 264.

⁶² Williams, *Portrait of Liszt: By Himself and His Contemporaries*, 301.

⁶³ Joseph Horowitz, *Conversations with Arrau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 137.

⁶⁴ Alan Walker, “Liszt’s Musical Background” in *Franz Liszt: The Man & His Music* (London: Berrie & Jenkins, 1976), 45.

that of a bleached skull with a violin locked under its chin. Some hearers suspected he was Mephistopheles personified; and when he began to play they became convinced of it.⁶⁵

This description seems to fit a “Faustian” persona. In March 1831, Paganini performed in the Paris Opera House, with Liszt in attendance. The performance had a profound impact on Liszt, and he sought to achieve with the piano what Paganini had done with the violin. To accomplish this, Liszt would practice ten, twelve and sometimes even fourteen hours a day.⁶⁶

The Faust legend’s influence on Liszt can also be seen when we consider Liszt’s life around the time he wrote the Sonata. In 1847, when Liszt was 36 years old, he retired from full-time performing. At this point, Liszt was unquestionably the greatest pianist in Europe, and his popularity was equivalent to that of a “rock star” today. There are many theories as to why Liszt left the concert platform. Many biographers have suggested that he was influenced by the Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittenstein to give up performing and instead focus on composition.⁶⁷ Carolyne was the one of all Liszt’s lovers that he was closest to marrying. In fact, Liszt and Carolyne intended to marry but were prevented from doing so by the Catholic Church refusing to annul Carolyne’s previous marriage. They moved to Weimar together in 1848, where Liszt focused on conducting and composing.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Marie d’Agoult, perhaps the second most important lover in Liszt’s life, had also tried to convince Liszt to focus on composing, before he met Carolyne. Though he did compose for a little while, Liszt returned to performing and continued with other affairs, and Marie and Liszt parted ways [Gundry, *Composers by the Grace of God*, 174].

⁶⁸ Inglis Gundry, *Composers by the Grace of God: A Study of Music and Religion* (London: Thames, 1998), 175.

Though Carolyne was obviously a very important part of Liszt's life, Liszt himself responded to rumors that Carolyn had too much influence on him, saying, "...except for the dogmas of the Church, I retain my complete independence."⁶⁹

Although Carolyne may have had some impact on Liszt's decision to leave the concert platform, I would suggest he might have also been influenced by the legend of Faust. I believe that Liszt realized that he had, in a sense, "sold his soul" to achieve great fame and take part in various and infamous love affairs during his career as a performer. If Liszt had a "change of heart" when deciding to quit full-time performing, this moment was also a turning point in his approach to relationships with women. After giving up performing, Liszt remained committed to Carolyne, though they never married.⁷⁰

When Liszt was sixteen years old, his father died, and his last words expressed his fear that "women would trouble [Franz Liszt's] life and bring him under their sway." This fear was prophetic, for as early as the next year Liszt, in the midst of religious doubts, was discovered having an affair with one of his students. In the aftermath of this affair, Liszt had a nervous breakdown and his conscience suffered for the next two years.⁷¹ Liszt remarked in a letter to his mother how he felt that his life was a contradiction. On one hand, he felt remorse for having committed immoral acts, but he also referenced his strong faith: "Notwithstanding all the

⁶⁹ Phillip Nixon, "Franz Liszt on Religion," *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 17 (June 1985): 181.

⁷⁰ Watson, *Liszt*, 122.

⁷¹ Sacheverell Sitwell, "Liszt: A Character Study" in *Franz Liszt: The Man & His Music* (London: Berrie & Jenkins, 1976), 4.

aberrations and errors of my life, nothing and nobody have ever been able to shake my faith in immortality and eternal salvation.”⁷²

Liszt felt a constant pull between “ascetic Christianity and worldly fame,” and experienced an intense spiritual struggle as a result.⁷³ Louis Kentner describes this duality quite strongly: “Liszt was a devout Catholic: he feared God, but he loved the Devil. Of the many and diverse personalities that co-existed in him none was more fascinating than the ‘Diaboliszt.’” Kentner’s statement, with a memorable pun, highlights Liszt’s preoccupation with the idea of Satan.⁷⁴ Goethe’s version of the story demonstrates Faust’s dual personality,⁷⁵ and many scholars have suggested that Liszt related well to this persona.⁷⁶ Goethe’s *Faust* displayed two characters: one pursuing truth and overcoming “fleshly weakness” and the other giving in to evil desires “without remorse.” Liszt composed the *Faust* Symphony at about the same time as the Sonata (most of the Symphony was written in 1854), and the legend may have been on his mind while composing the Sonata. Hector Berlioz introduced Goethe’s *Faust* to Liszt in 1830,⁷⁷ and it was an 1852 performance of Berlioz’s *La Damnation de Faust* in Weimar that provided the final impetus for Liszt to compose his own *Faust* Symphony.⁷⁸ In fact, Liszt even dedicated his *Faust*

⁷² Gundry, *Composers by the Grace of God*, 274.

⁷³ Nixon, “Franz Liszt on Religion,” 180.

⁷⁴ Louis Kentner, “Solo Piano Music (1827-1861)” in *Franz Liszt: The Man & His Music*, (London: Berrie & Jenkins, 1976), 100.

⁷⁵ Goethe, *Faust*, xvi.

⁷⁶ Oh, “The Eternal Paradox in Liszt’s Persona...,” 35.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁸ Humphrey Searle, “The Orchestral Works” in *Franz Liszt: The Man & His Music* (London: Berrie & Jenkins, 1976), 304.

Symphony to Berlioz.⁷⁹ 1852 was the same year that Liszt wrote much of his Sonata, and Berlioz's work may also have had an impact on the Sonata.

Liszt wrote a *Dante* symphony and "Dante" Sonata. Because Liszt had also written a *Faust* Symphony, it is entirely possible that he had intended his Sonata in B minor to be a "Faust" Sonata.⁸⁰ I believe that the reason Liszt made no explicit reference to the Sonata's connection with Faust was that it was an archetype of a deep inner struggle that was so personal that he did not feel the need to share it with anyone. According to Vladimir Stasov, Liszt claimed that a program existed for his famous work for piano and orchestra, "Totentanz," but that it was not to be made public.⁸¹ It is entirely possible Liszt had the same intention with his Sonata.

William Wallace aptly describes aspects of Liszt's dual personality in his 1927 book *Liszt, Wagner, and the Princess*:

...here we have the paradox that [Liszt] seemed unconscious of the power that within him lay, and wished to abandon music and submit himself to the religious life. Nowadays we should view with no small amount of apprehension this swing of the pendulum, this tendency to go from one extreme to another – from the freedom of the artist's life and thought to self-renunciation and the cloister. Liszt was to have it both ways. There was a moment, imperceptible, but still measurable, when the pendulum hovered between pianist and penitent, virtuoso and voluptuary, and shared its favours impartially.⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ In an informal interview I had with the Brazilian pianist Alexandre Dossin (professor of piano at the University of Oregon) on April 4, 2011, he discussed his belief that the "Dante" Sonata is also autobiographical in nature.

⁸¹ As quoted in Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Franz Liszt*, 280.

⁸² William Wallace, *Liszt, Wagner and the Princess* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1927), 7.

The contrasts within Liszt's Sonata may have been an archetype of Liszt's dual personality, whether or not Liszt's specifically intended to portray this in the work.⁸³

⁸³ Though Liszt's dual personality may be reflected in the Sonata, Wilkinson suggests that the contrasts within the Sonata may simply show the influence of the emotional contrasts of Beethoven's style [Wilkinson, *Liszt*, 74].

Liszt and the Church

In contrast to Liszt's "Faust" persona, Liszt felt a strong connection to the Catholic Church from a young age. His father commented in his diary: "From youth up, Franz's spirit was naturally inclined to devotion, and his passionate feeling for art was blended with a piety which was characterized by all the frankness of his age."⁸⁴ As a child, Liszt's favorite reading materials were the Bible, Thomas à Kempis's *De imitatione Christi* [The Imitation of Christ], and biographies of the saints. The story of Christ's passion moved him to tears, and even simple bedtime prayers brought him comfort.⁸⁵ His father had been a Franciscan monk for two years before Liszt's birth, and Liszt himself had been very interested in joining the Franciscan order, but never actually did. Liszt wrote to Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittenstein in 1868: "If it were not for a certain independence which I do not think I ought to combat, I would willingly turn Franciscan."⁸⁶ St. Francis' influence on Liszt is demonstrated in Liszt's piano work, *St. François d'Assise: La Prédication aux oiseaux* [Saint Francis Preaching to the Birds], S. 175, No. 1.⁸⁷ As a teenager, Liszt had also desired to become a priest, but his family, though devoutly Catholic, discouraged him from doing so, instead encouraging him to pursue a career in music.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, later in life Liszt did join the church as an *abbé* through the acquisition of four minor orders.⁸⁹ Despite leading a seemingly immoral lifestyle for

⁸⁴ As quoted in Patrick Kavanaugh, *Spiritual Lives of the Great Composers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 94.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ As quoted in Nixon, "Franz Liszt on Religion," 180.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 182.

⁸⁸ Kavanaugh, *Spiritual Lives of the Great Composers*, 94.

⁸⁹ Gundry, *Composers by the Grace of God*, 173.

much of his life, it seems that his life began and ended with a desire for personal piety and religious experience. He wrote to his mother:

You know, dearest mother, how during the years of my youth, I dreamed myself incessantly into the world of the saints. Nothing seemed to me so self-evident as heaven, nothing so true and so rich in blessedness as the goodness and compassion of God. When I now read the lives of the saints I feel I am meeting again, after a long journey, old and revered friends from whom I shall never part.⁹⁰

Throughout his life, but particularly moving to Weimar in 1847, Liszt wrote pieces with strong religious overtones, even the purely instrumental works. At the age of 22, Liszt published his *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* for solo piano (republished in 1847 in the better known form of a set of ten pieces), inspired by the poetry of Lamartine (1790-1869) and containing vivid religious imagery. In the last thirty to forty years of Liszt's life, after writing the Sonata in B Minor, he wrote a large concentration of religious works, including the oratorios *Christus*, *St. Elizabeth* and *Via Crucis* ["the Way of the Cross"], and volume three of *Années de pèlerinage* for piano solo, including the famous *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este*, which is an impressionistic portrait of water fountains and includes a quotation of John 4:14 above measure 141:⁹¹ "But whoever drinks the water I [Jesus] give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

At the age of 24, Liszt wrote a famous statement about Church music, part of which is quoted below:

⁹⁰ Ibid., 274.

⁹¹ Franz Liszt, *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este*, edited by Ernst Herttrich (München: G. Henle Verlag, 1980).

Today, when the altar trembles and totters, when [the] pulpit and religious ceremonies serve as subjects for the mocker and doubter, art must leave the sanctuary of the temple and expand into the outside world to seek a stage for its glorious manifestations... Music must recognize God and the people as its living source; must go from one to the other to ennoble, to comfort, to purify man, to bless and praise God... To attain this, the creation of a new music is indispensable. This music, which... we would call *humanitarian*, must be inspired, strong and effective, uniting, on a colossal scale, *theater* and *church*: at the same time dramatic and sacred, splendid and simple, solemn and serious, fiery and wild, stormy and calm, clear and tender... Yes, banish every doubt, soon we shall hear in fields, in forests, villages and suburbs, in the factories and in the towns, national, moral, political and religious songs... which will be composed *for* the people, taught *to* the people and sung *by* the people; yes, sung by workmen, day-laborers, handicraftsmen, by boys and girls, by men and women *of* the people!⁹²

Although Liszt's view of church music was neither accepted nor recognized by the Catholic Church,⁹³ this statement is a window into his ideas of religion and music. In effect, Liszt wanted to blur the lines between "sacred" and "secular," and as a result we see the influence of scripture and spiritual themes in his instrumental works. He also sought to bring religious music to the masses, uniting a "universal brotherhood," in the words of Mark Bangert.⁹⁴ Bangert's claim could also explain why Liszt's religious music has extreme variety, unlike most church music of the time, which was more homogenous.⁹⁵ Liszt used Gregorian Plainchant in many of his works, such as *Christus*, the *Hungarian Coronation Mass*, *Via Crucis*, and possibly in the Sonata in B Minor. As a way of bringing "Church music" to the masses, Liszt and other nineteenth-century church reformers used harmony as a vehicle for

⁹² As quoted in Watson, *Liszt*, 34.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁹⁴ Mark P. Bangert, "Franz Liszt's Essay on Church Music (1834) in the Light of Felicité Lamennais's System of Religious and Political Thought" in *A Tribute to Donald N. Ferguson at his Ninetieth Birthday* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1972), 177.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

presenting traditional chant melodies to a wider audience.⁹⁶ Theme 2 of the Sonata presents a portion of plainchant that is harmonized (Example 4).⁹⁷ We also find other examples of spiritual imagery in the Sonata. I will mention these examples later in this document.

In 1865, Liszt received four minor orders in the Catholic Church: doorkeeper, lector, acolyte and exorcist.⁹⁸ Liszt was often labeled a “Liberal Catholic,” but many of his views were more conservative. For example, Liszt believed in miracles, and did not believe that the Apostle Paul’s Epistles were mere opinion, but that he “preached Christ crucified, resurrected, [raised] into heaven.”⁹⁹ Because of his reputation, many people scoffed at the idea of Liszt joining the Church, it seems that it was a sincere decision.¹⁰⁰ Liszt also improvised music for the Pope, who hoped that Liszt’s music could be used in “healing” and to lead “hardened criminals” to repentance.¹⁰¹ The Pope at the time, Pius IX, often called Liszt “Palestrina,” referencing the earlier composer (1526-1594) and his influence on the music of the church,¹⁰² and perhaps suggesting that Liszt’s music could have a similar impact.

Liszt was also well known as a philanthropist. As a young man, he used much of his earnings to support his mother and to pay many of his deceased father’s

⁹⁶ Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Franz Liszt*, 283.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 90.

⁹⁸ Alan Walker, et al, "Liszt, Franz," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/48265pg21> (accessed April 17, 2011).

⁹⁹ Nixon, “Franz Liszt on Religion,” 182.

¹⁰⁰ Oh, “The Eternal Paradox of Liszt’s Persona...,” 29.

¹⁰¹ Gundry, *Composers by the Grace of God*, 176.

¹⁰² Wilkinson, *Liszt*, 37.

debts.¹⁰³ After moving to Weimar, Liszt refused to perform for profit, often appearing in concert to raise money for charity. For example, during a tour of Russia he earned a large sum of money, only to give every bit of it to charity.¹⁰⁴ Not only was Liszt financially generous, but also untiringly promoted the works of many aspiring composers, often programming them in concerts at Weimar where he was Kapellmeister. Liszt's promotion of Wagner's music, before the latter composer's fame as an opera composer, was particularly well noted. On one occasion, only a few tickets had been sold for a concert of Wagner's music, and Liszt offered to perform a Beethoven piano concerto as part of the program. As a result, the concert quickly sold out.¹⁰⁵

This religious side of Liszt, along with his famous generosity and promotion of other composers' works, seem to contrast with his reputation for taking part in various love affairs and his apparently vain pursuit of popularity as a piano performer. These two aspects of Liszt's life are further evidence of the two sides of Liszt's personality, which I have already noted with regard to the Faust legend and the Sonata's dual-function form.

¹⁰³ Kavanaugh, *The Spiritual Lives of the Great Composers*, 99.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 100.

Symbolism in the Sonata in B Minor

If we assume that there is a “secret” program for the Sonata in B Minor, it would be consistent with the fact that Liszt regularly incorporated symbolism and extra-musical imagery into his musical works. The following quote by Alan Hersh describes Liszt’s use of imagery well: “Liszt, in his use of musical symbolism, was [doing] Wagner one better by achieving the true unification of music and ideas without recourse to words.”¹⁰⁶ The following motives from the Sonata may symbolize different aspects of Liszt’s personal struggles and spirituality. As seen in Example 1, the opening motive is dark and mysterious. After two staccato octaves placed on off-beats, Liszt writes a descending scale built on two descending tetrachords, which also form the inversion of a major scale. In Medieval and Baroque times, the descending tetrachord was frequently used as a symbol of lament. For example, in Johann Sebastian Bach’s Cantata No. 78, *Jesu der du meine Seele*, and the first chorus of Cantata No. 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, we see the descending tetrachord as a ground bass associated with the mourning texts of the cantatas. In the Baroque era, the descending tetrachord often included passing half steps to create a descending chromatic line, referred to as *passus duriusculus* (see Example 13).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Szasz, “Liszt’s Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical,” 39.

¹⁰⁷ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 131.



Ex. 13: J. S. Bach: Cantata 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, continuo part at opening.

The text of this movement references the mourning that Jesus tells his disciples they will experience when he is led to the cross. Jesus follows this by saying that their mourning will turn to rejoicing, referring to his resurrection on the third day. The text is from John 16:16-23: “Verily I say to you... you shall weep and lament, but... your sorrow shall be turned to joy.” Liszt may have had the text of this cantata in mind when writing his Sonata, which ends peacefully, in contrast to its dark opening. Bach’s cantata was very familiar to Liszt, who wrote a set of piano variations based on the same ground bass that Bach had used.

The *passus duriusculus* is also present in the “Crucifixus” of Bach’s Mass in B Minor,¹⁰⁸ which represents the Cross of Christ. The Mass in B Minor was also familiar to Liszt.¹⁰⁹ Not only do Bach’s Mass and Liszt’s Sonata share the same key, but imagery of the cross may also appear in the Sonata’s Theme 2. The “Crucifixus” was the focus of Bach’s Mass, occurring at the center of the “Credo” within a chiastic structure.¹¹⁰ In the Romantic Era many people thought of Bach’s “Crucifixus” as representing inner struggles in Bach’s life.¹¹¹ Whether or not this is actually true is

¹⁰⁸ George B. Stauffer, *Bach: The Mass in B Minor (The Great Catholic Mass)* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 120.

¹⁰⁹ La Mara, ed., *Letters of Franz Liszt*, I, 142.

¹¹⁰ Stauffer, *Bach: The Mass in B Minor*, 48.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

not important. If Liszt believed it to represent inner struggle, it would make sense that he would use the same material in his Sonata if in fact he wanted the Sonata to represent his own inner struggle.

Szasz has suggested that Motive 2 (Example 2) represents the fall of Lucifer as described in John Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost."¹¹² Based on this motive's interaction with Motive 3, however, it likely represents humankind, Faust, or Liszt himself. Because of my autobiographical interpretation of the piece, I believe it represents Liszt, though it could also be interpreted as Faust, since Liszt may have considered Faust a reflection of his own character. I will call it the "Liszt" motive. The downward direction of this motive, with descending diminished-seventh chords, could represent the fallen nature of man, which in this case could be applied to Liszt's own life. Diminished-seventh chords contain two tritones. The tritone (diminished fifth or augmented fourth) was an interval that many composers before and during Liszt's lifetime referred to as *Diabolus in Musica*, or "the Devil in Music," which was thought to represent Satan or sin because of its highly dissonant quality.¹¹³

The next motive (Example 3) probably represents Satan or Mephistopheles, who was the character for Satan in the Faust legend. Almost without exception, authors that believe Liszt's Sonata is based on a program designate this motive as either "Satan," "evil" or "darkness." I will call it the "Satan" Motive. As mentioned earlier, many composers during Liszt's lifetime (including Liszt himself) used the

¹¹² Szasz, "Liszt's Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical," 41.

¹¹³ William Drabkin, "Tritone," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/28403> (accessed April 17, 2011).

repeated-note figure to represent Satan. The first and last notes of the “Satan” Motive are a tritone apart, also possibly representing Satan.

Theme 1 of the Sonata (beginning at measure 32), when we finally reach the tonic of B minor, combines part of the “Liszt” Motive played in the right hand and the “Satan” Motive in the left hand (Example 4). The highly dramatic nature of this theme suggests a struggle between Liszt and Satan, or perhaps Liszt’s “good side” against the evil in his life. This is also the only point of the Sonata that is stated exactly in exactly the same way in the recapitulation, at measure 533.

After a long period in which the first three motives are developed, the next theme is introduced at measure 105. Labeled “Grandioso,” this theme is in D major, the relative major of B minor, and is Theme 2 of the Sonata (Example 5). Since we have already made a connection with the Sonata in B Minor with Bach’s Mass in B Minor, we could also make a connection between this theme and the movement that follows the “Crucifixus” in Bach’s Mass, the “Resurrexit,” which refers to Christ’s resurrection. Bach often used the key of D major for laudatory tutti choruses and arias concerning Christ’s omnipotence, as in *Christe Eleison, Quoniam tu Solus Sanctus*.¹¹⁴ In the Baroque Era, the key of D major was normally associated with brass instruments, bright and triumphant.¹¹⁵ Because of equal temperament being the accepted norm today, we do not often hear the differences in character between keys as clearly as musicians in Bach’s time did. In the Baroque era, even up to the

¹¹⁴ Stauffer, *Bach: The Mass in B Minor*, 253.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

time of Liszt, these distinctions were more apparent¹¹⁶. This “D major character” definitely fits this theme, which is bold and powerful.

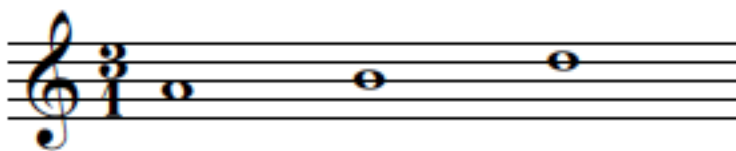
In Theme 2, Liszt uses a motive (Example 14) that he later described as representing something often seen as less than triumphant: the Cross of Christ. This three-note motive, called the “Cross” Motive, is based on the Gregorian Plainchants *Crux Fidelis* and the *Magnificat*, as described by Liszt in the footnote of his oratorio *St. Elizabeth* (See Example 14).¹¹⁷ This motive was also used in the Invocation from the *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses*,¹¹⁸ the piano works *Un Sospiro* and *Il Sospiro* of 1848, the Symphonic Poem *Hunnenschlacht*, and the song *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*.¹¹⁹ Because of its use of the three-note “Cross” Motive, I will call the second theme the “Cross” Theme. Although the motive represents the cross, the triumphant character in the Liszt Sonata seems to highlight the redemptive aspect of the cross, rather than the pain and suffering normally associated with it. The three-note “Cross” Motive also occurs in the “Liszt” Motive, possibly suggesting the Christian belief of man’s need for redemption (A#-B-D, the second, third and fourth notes from Example 2).

¹¹⁶ See Ross W. Duffin, *How Equal Temperament Ruined Harmony (and Why You Should Care)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

¹¹⁷ Watson, *Liszt*, 183.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹¹⁹ Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Franz Liszt*, 283.

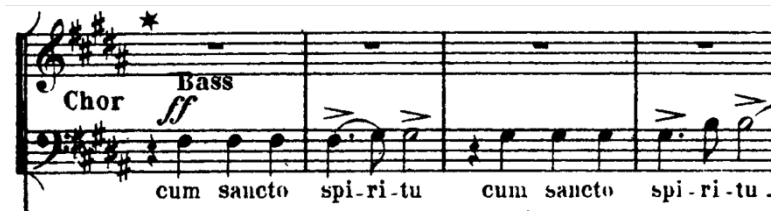


Ex. 14: The “Cross” Motive.

As mentioned earlier, Liszt sought to bring Gregorian plainchant to the masses by harmonizing the melodies that were traditionally sung monophonically, and this technique is clearly expressed in the “Cross” Theme. Liszt had studied modern notation of plainchant, using *Nouvel Eucologe en Musique... avec les Plainchants en Notation Moderne* [“The New Prayer-book on Music... with Plainchants in Modern Notation”], as a primary source. This book was published in 1851, just before Liszt’s Sonata was written. In Liszt’s book the binding is broken at a page that quotes Second Corinthians 11:25-12:10,¹²⁰ showing that this passage may have been important to Liszt. In this passage, Paul describes at length his personal struggles with pain, suffering and internal guilt, as well as his “thorn in the flesh,” which may represent a personal struggle Paul was experiencing. This passage may have had an impact on Liszt if indeed he was experiencing a similar personal struggle.

The “Cross” Theme in the Liszt sonata also bears a strong resemblance to the line “cum sancto spiritu in gloria” from the “Gloria” of Liszt’s *Missa Solemnis* (Example 15). Although the text does not have an apparent connection with the Cross, it clearly has religious meaning.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 90.



Ex. 15: Franz Liszt: *Missa Solemnis*, S. 9: from “Gloria.”

At measure 153, we see what seems to be a new theme, described by some authors as the “Love” Theme or the “Gretchen” Theme, referring to Faust’s love interest in Goethe’s tragedy (Example 16). A closer inspection, however, shows that it is actually a radical transformation of the “Satan” Motive. Here the motive has a completely different character than the original “Satan” Motive, now marked *cantando espressivo*. The radical transformation of the original “Satan” Motive into the “Love” Theme could represent Satan being crafty and deceiving.¹²¹ Could it be that Liszt was referencing his past love affairs, which could be seen as immoral though disguised as something pleasant?

¹²¹ Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Franz Liszt*, 283.



Ex. 16: Liszt, Sonata in B Minor, ms. 153: The "Love" Theme.

Following the "Love" Theme is a long rhapsodic development in which Liszt freely uses all of the motives presented up to that point and further develops them. Of particular interest is a section starting in the key of C-sharp minor at measure 297. At this point we see a transformation of the "Cross" Theme. Instead of sounding triumphant, here Liszt gives this theme a very intense, even angry, character. A similar statement occurs a few measures later in F minor, and it alternates with a contrasting section that seems to represent pain or anguish, marked "recitative" (see Example 17). The pianist Tibor Szasz pointed out that the harmonies of the first part of this section are almost identical to Station XI of Liszt's *Via Crucis*, where the crowd is crying out "Crucify him!" (cf. Matthew 27:22-23). The following recitative at measure 301 is very similar to what follows in the *Via Crucis*: Jesus calling out from the Cross, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).¹²² The crowd calling out for the crucifixion of Jesus could represent the Christian belief that collective sin is responsible for Jesus' death, and

¹²² Szasz, "Liszt's Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical," 65.

Liszt may have incorporated this imagery into his Sonata as a reference to his own sin being indirectly responsible for Christ's death.

The musical score for measures 296-307 of Liszt's Sonata is presented in four systems. The first system shows the piano introduction with a 'poco rall.' marking and a 'fff pesante' dynamic. The second system is marked 'Recitativo' and 'f ritenuto ed appassionato'. The third system continues the piano part with 'ff' and 'poco rall.' markings. The fourth system shows the vocal part with 'f ritenuto ed appassionato' and 'sempre f' markings, ending with a 'basso' marking.

Ex. 17: Ms. 296-307.

The next section continues to be very dissonant, culminating with the “Satan” Motive repeated in the bass register with the “Liszt” Motive, now harmonized, descending from high in the treble register (Example 18). This statement ends on a rather dissonant chord, repeated three times. This chord is fully diminished seventh

with a B in the bass that would seem to prepare us for the key of E Minor, the subdominant of B Minor. In the Baroque Era, E Minor characterized suffering or anguish.¹²³ Instead, we move to the key of F-sharp major, in what I will refer to as the “middle movement” of the Sonata, marked Andante sostenuto. At this moment we are introduced to an entirely new theme, Theme 3 (Example 5).



Ex. 18: Ms. 319-322.

The most significant aspect of this “middle movement” is the key. Liszt almost always used F-sharp major to represent the divine, heaven, or prayer.¹²⁴ Examples of Liszt’s use of F-sharp major include *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude*, the “Paradiso” section of *Après une Lecture de Dante*, and *Les jeux d’eaux à la Villa d’Este*. In addition to the key association, the texture of Theme 3 is that of a hymn. Because this section seems to represent prayer, or solitude in the church (where Liszt found peace during periods of struggle and turmoil), I will call this theme the

¹²³ Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, 133.

¹²⁴ Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*, 135.

“Prayer” Theme.¹²⁵ As the “middle movement” progresses, it incorporates previous motives and builds in intensity to a climax at measure 397 (Example 19). As Walker points out, though this not the only *fortississimo* dynamic in the piece, it is undeniably the emotional climax of the work.¹²⁶ This climax, where the “Prayer” Theme is transformed into a heightened emotional state, may represent an emotional outpouring during prayer, in which one brings his or her personal struggles to God.



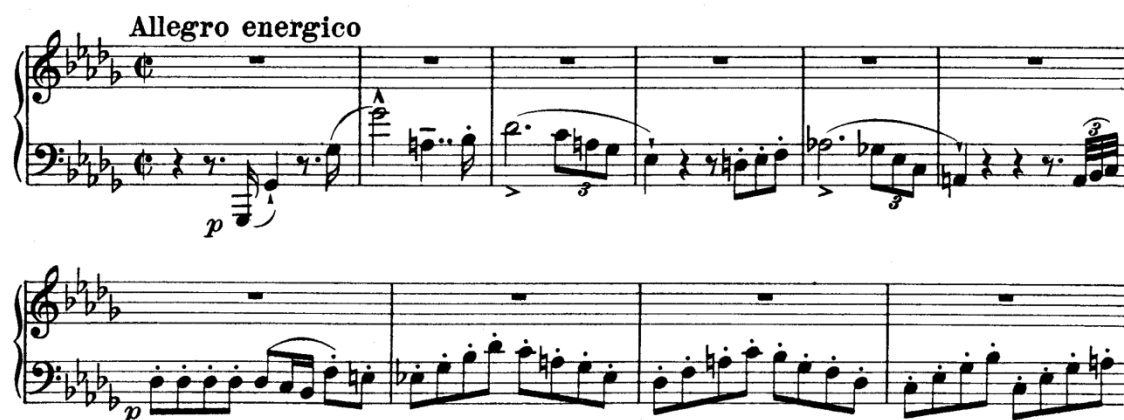
Ex. 19: Ms. 395-398.

Although this climax is followed by a peaceful and meditative section, the symbolism of struggle returns. As the “slow movement” draws to a close, we once again hear the descending scales first heard at the beginning of the piece, brooding and mysterious. Immediately following these scales is a three-voice fugal section, marked *Allegro energico*, which incorporates both the “Liszt” and “Satan” Motives (see Example 20). Alan Walker points out the “Mephistophelean” character of this

¹²⁵ Most of the themes from the Liszt Sonata were conceived in 1851 or 1852, but this “Prayer” theme was conceived as early as 1849. [Hamilton, *Franz Liszt: The Sonata in B Minor*, 1].

¹²⁶ Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*, 136.

section, suggesting that Liszt's constant indication of a "piano" dynamic highlights the lack of human emotion in this strain, which reveals the "diabolical qualities within."¹²⁷



Ex. 20: Opening of fugal section from Sonata in B Minor, ms. 460-469.

Thematically, this fugal section sounds like a recapitulation. However, the key is now B-flat Minor, a half step below the tonic, and we do not actually reach a full recapitulation until after the fugue, at measure 533 when Theme 1 is once again stated exactly as in the exposition. From Bach's time up to the time of Liszt, counterpoint and fugal writing were considered to have their natural home in the church,¹²⁸ and the fugue in Liszt's Sonata would be consistent with the possible religious intention of the piece.

Liszt often used fugues to represent struggle. In religious pieces, he used fugues specifically to represent the human struggle to reach a higher plane, to be

¹²⁷ Ibid., 137.

¹²⁸ Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Franz Liszt*, 281.

closer to God.¹²⁹ An example of this symbolism is the fugue from his *Fantasy and Fugue on 'Ad nos, ad Salutarem undam'*.¹³⁰ Peter Schwartz suggests that the fugue in this work is "...a conscious intensification of the earlier musical procedures towards another, higher plane."¹³¹ The fugal section of the Sonata may have a similar representation of struggle. Liszt wrote seventeen fugues, and all but the one in the Sonata are from explicitly programmatic works. It seems difficult to believe that the fugal section of the Sonata would be Liszt's only example of fugal writing with no programmatic intention.¹³² The specific struggle represented in this fugal section seems to be between Liszt and Satan, and is made clear because it contains the "Liszt" Motive followed by the "Satan" Motive. The Sonata's fugal section also has many similarities to the fugue of the "Mephistopheles" movement from the "Faust" symphony, including a descending seventh at its opening and alternating angular intervals (see Example 21).¹³³ Alan Walker comments on the similarities between the fugal section of the Sonata and the fugue from the *Faust* Symphony. Walker also points out that hearing Liszt's transcription of the *Faust* Symphony for two pianos makes the connection to the Sonata's fugal section even clearer because of the percussive nature of the piano sound.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Ibid., 272.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 278.

¹³¹ As quoted in Ibid., 279.

¹³² Ibid., 282.

¹³³ Ibid., 272.

¹³⁴ Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*, 137.



Ex. 21. Fugue from the “Mephistopheles” movement of Liszt’s *Faust* Symphony.

The Sonata’s fugal section also bears a resemblance to the fugue of Liszt’s symphonic poem *Prometheus* (Example 22). In *Prometheus*, the fugue’s subject is taken from the final chorus, which is set to the text “Was Himmlisches auf Erden blüht... Ist Menschlichkeit” (“From Earth aspiring towards Heaven... is Mankind”).¹³⁵ The idea behind this text is similar to the idea of “struggle” toward a higher plane that the Sonata’s fugal section may represent.

¹³⁵ Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Franz Liszt*, 275.



Ex. 22. Fugue from *Prometheus* (piano reduction).

As may be the case in the Sonata, the fugue in *Prometheus* comes immediately after a section suggesting prayer, and represents a struggle. According to Paul Merrick, the Sonata in B Minor, *Prometheus*, and many other large-scale works by Liszt, follow the structure of Lament-Prayer-Struggle-Triumph.¹³⁶ This structure shows itself most clearly in both the *Fantasy and Fugue on 'Ad nos, ad Salutarem undam*, and the Sonata in B Minor. In the *Fantasy and Fugue*, the “Lament” is a Fantasy, the “Prayer” is a chorale in slow tempo, the “Struggle” is a fugue, and the Triumph is a final statement of the chorale. These sections correspond closely with the form of the Sonata.¹³⁷

As the fugal section draws to a close, the “Satan” Motive disappears, and all that remains is the “Liszt” Motive, expressed in repeated chords in the right hand over the same motive inverted in the left hand.¹³⁸ The character marking *energico*, the sudden change in texture, and the inversion of the theme seem to show that this is a pivotal moment in the Sonata. Perhaps inverting the “Liszt” Motive represents a

¹³⁶ Ibid., 281.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 279.

¹³⁸ The left hand is the possible quotation from Alkan’s *Grande Sonate* as referenced in Example 2

conversion experience, coming immediately after a struggle against Satan (Example 23).



Ex. 23: Liszt, Sonata in B Minor, ms. 509-512.

After this “turning point,” the struggle continues as we reach the full recapitulation, once again representing the dichotomy between Liszt and Satan. When the “Cross” Theme returns (Theme 2 of the recapitulation), it is in B major, as might be expected. This time, instead of having the dynamic marking *fortissimo*, the motive is marked *mezzo forte*, and the accompanying chords are played twice as slowly as in the exposition (Example 24). Even Kenneth Hamilton, who is strongly opposed to any programmatic interpretation of the Sonata, says that this moment reminds him of the redemption of Faust at the end of Goethe’s poem.



Ex. 24: Ms. 600-603.

From this moment to the end of the piece, the key remains B Major, the parallel major of the opening key. Although moving to the parallel major in the recapitulation is not atypical, in this case it may suggest redemption. The “Love” Theme follows, building to climax of rapid octaves. These octaves contain the “Liszt” Motive, but now in a major key. Instead of being dissonant, the motive seems to represent joy (Example 25). The repeated chords in the left hand line up exactly with the “Cross” Motive that is embedded within the “Liszt” Motive in the right hand (A-sharp, B and D-sharp), possibly highlighting the impact of the Cross on Liszt’s life.



Ex. 25: Ms. 682-685.

Liszt originally intended for the Sonata in B Minor to end loudly,¹³⁹ which might seem logical after such a long, powerful piece. However, scholars universally agree that the version we have today is far superior. The “Prayer” Theme returns, now in B major, with a calm and meditative character. For a moment, we hear the “Satan” Motive return, repeated around a low B (Example 26), reminiscent of the

¹³⁹ Hamilton, *Liszt: Sonata in B Minor*, 56.

lead-up to the “middle movement” as seen in Example 18. This time, however, the right hand plays ascending chords, rising further and further away from the “Satan” Motive. Paul Roës suggests that the increasing distance between the hands represents the “soul separating itself for eternity.”¹⁴⁰



Example 26: Ms. 730-732.

The final section of the Sonata may represent Liszt’s view of life after death, an apocalyptic event that brings peace.¹⁴¹ Just before the ending, the descending scales first heard at the opening of the piece return, helping to bring closure to the work. The Sonata ends with a slow cadence in the treble register that ends on a B major chord in second inversion (Example 26). In many other works, when Liszt concluded a piece with a chord in second inversion, it represented eternity.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Paul Roës, *Music, the Mystery and the Reality*, translated by Edna Dean McGray (Chevy Chase, MD: E & M Publishing, 1978), 50.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴² An example of this use of the second-inversion chord occurs at the end of the final movement of Liszt’s last Symphonic Poem, *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe* [From the Cradle to the Grave], representing the end of one’s life, followed by the afterlife. [Szasz, “Liszt’s Symbols for the Divine and Diabolical,” 91].

The image shows a musical score for the final 7 measures of the Sonata in B Minor. The score is written for two staves, both in treble clef. The key signature is B minor, indicated by two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The time signature is not explicitly shown but is implied to be common time (C). The first staff begins with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic marking. The second staff begins with a *ppp* (pianississimo) dynamic marking. The music consists of dense, complex chords and arpeggiated figures. The final measure of the second staff features a *8^{va} bassa* (octave lower) marking, indicating a lower register for the final notes.

Ex. 26: Final 7 ms. of the Sonata in B Minor.

Conclusion

Lina Ramann (1833-1912) wrote a biography on Liszt's life, starting research for it in 1874.¹⁴³ Liszt, obviously uncomfortable with the idea of having someone write a biography of his life, wrote in a letter, "From the moment that [Ramann] started her work, I told her that I did not attach any importance to my biography... What is the point in resurrecting the details of the past? Had she listened to me, she would have limited herself to the musical and aesthetic analysis of my works."¹⁴⁴ Could it be that rather than wanting a formal biography written of his life, Liszt rather wanted it to be interpreted through the "musical and aesthetic analysis" of his own works?

Although we really do not know for sure if Liszt intended his Sonata to be autobiographical, it is very difficult to believe that Liszt found no extra-musical meaning in this piece, especially because of his affinity for program music. There is much evidence to suggest that the Sonata in B Minor was at very least an unintentional archetype of Liszt's personal spiritual struggle, based on connections with other pieces, symbolism within the work and other associations. The fact that Liszt quotes musical material from Alkan's *Grande Sonate*, a piece that represents a person's life, in his Sonata in B Minor suggests that Liszt's work was autobiographical. Liszt's fascination with Goethe's *Faust* and the fact that the Sonata was written close to the time of Liszt's *Faust* Symphony suggest that Liszt may have also incorporated elements of Faust's persona into the program of his Sonata. The

¹⁴³ Alan Walker, "Ramann, Lina," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/22830> (accessed April 28, 2011).

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

Sonata's dedication to Schumann, in response to Schumann's *Fantasie*, a piece possibly containing a secret message, being dedicated to Liszt, suggests that the Sonata's program may have been intended to be secret.

The Sonata in B Minor is filled with religious symbolism, suggesting that the piece may have held spiritual meaning for Liszt. Examples include the use of the "Cross" Motive, imagery of Mephistopheles in the "Satan" Motive, possible connections with *Via Crucis*, and the final chord representing eternity. The idea that the Sonata in B Minor has religious overtones has also been suggested by such authors as Tibor Szasz and Paul Merrick, and is consistent with the generally accepted fact that Liszt was a very religious person.

Ernest Newman claims Liszt was one of the few composers who "painted" himself clearly in his music. He believed that for Liszt there existed a "parallelism between his life, his character and his work."¹⁴⁵ Paul Raabe suggests that the first movement of the *Faust* Symphony is "a self-confession, the [parallel] of which is to be found only in the B minor Sonata."¹⁴⁶ Louis Kentner listed four pieces that not only "bear witness... to Liszt's extraordinary creative energy," but also demonstrate "his ability to paint a great self-portrait." These pieces were the *Faust* Symphony, the oratorio *Christus*, the great organ work *Fantasy and Fugue on 'Ad Nos,'* and the Sonata in B minor.¹⁴⁷ Liszt often programmed his Sonata with other religious

¹⁴⁵ Ernest Newman, *The Man Liszt: A Study of the Tragi-comedy of a Soul Divided Against Itself* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1935), 299.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹⁴⁷ Kentner, "Piano Music: 1827-1861," 83.

works,¹⁴⁸ further supporting the fact that the Sonata may have held religious meaning for Liszt.

All of this evidence supports the premise that the Sonata in B Minor can be understood as Liszt's spiritual autobiography. There is no other work that offers such a complete picture of the many layers of Liszt's personality and beliefs than this work. The Sonata in B Minor is an image of a soul laid bare, struggling against sin and guilt, but with hope and joy as well. In this way, perhaps, the Sonata in B Minor represents a struggle that is within us all.

¹⁴⁸ Franz Liszt, *Liszt Letters in the Library of Congress* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2003), 240.

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