

Mediatisation in 19th Century Music

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▶ **To cite this version:**

Damien Ehrhardt. Mediatisation in 19th Century Music : The 'hero' Franz Liszt and its salon in Weimar, 1848-1861. Anneliese Maier Research Award 2016: Awards Ceremony and Colloquium, Forum for Early Career Researchers, Focus Topic Visual Studies "Heroes"„ Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Sep 2016, Berlin, Germany. hal-01449312

HAL Id: hal-01449312
https://hal.science/hal-01449312

Submitted on 30 Jan 2017

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The 'hero' Franz Liszt and its salon in Weimar, 1848-1861

Paper given at the "Forum for Early Career Researchers"
(Focus Topic Visual Studies "Heroes", 9 September 2016,
Chair: Barbara Mittler, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg),
Anneliese Maier Research Award 2016: Awards Ceremony and Colloquium,
Berlin, Courtyard Berlin Mitte, 7-10 September 2016.

by
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To begin, I would deeply thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the University of music Franz Liszt Weimar: without their support I would not had the opportunity to do my research from 1999 to 2001 in the Altenburg, Liszt's residence in Weimar in the years 1848-1861, which is discussed here. Nicolas Dufetel and I would pay homage to our host in Weimar, Prof. Dr. Detlef Altenburg who unfortunately passed away seven months ago. He was *inter alia* the former president of the Gesellschaft für Musikforschung and a great Lisztianer. He was even living in the Altenburg.

The 'hero' Liszt

Franz Liszt was one of the most prominent pianists and composers of 19th Century Music. His great reputation is essentially due to:

- his concert tours as pianist through all Europe especially during the *Glanzperiode* (his glory-days as a touring virtuoso between 1838-48),
- his work as editor of determining texts about aesthetics,
- and his commitment to create the *Neu-Weimar-Verein* which leads to the foundation of the first national school in 1859, the *Neudeutsche Schule*, that will stimulate the creation of other schools of the same kind in France, Russia, Scandinavia etc.

These facts highlight different facets of Liszt: the pianist virtuoso on the one hand, the composer and critic, leader of the national schools, on the other hand.

But very often, the pianist Liszt takes precedence over the composer. This is testified by a lot of caricatures that underline the glory of the pianist. His image is very often that of a sulphurous virtuoso and a seducer, playing the piano with an almost diabolical gift (like Paganini for the violin).

But Liszt trips during the *Glanzperiode* have most contributed to his fame as one of Europe's best known personalities. The fact that he was travelling on a passport issued by the Austrian authorities bearing the simple legend *Celebritate sua sat notus* (Sufficiently known by his fame) is the best evidence of his incredible reputation. The figure of the hero Liszt like those of all heroes has been constructed.

Playing on his reputation as virtuoso gained during his Parisian years, he met an impressive number of colleagues and prominent figures throughout his travels which were highly organized with an effective time management.

Beyond the interpretation of his time, Liszt still remains a figure of interculturality as other heroes like Alexander von Humboldt. They are very important in a world more and more plagued by extremism and nationalism. Interestingly, Liszt was both: a cosmopolitan and the leader of national schools. He decided to become Hungarian largely because of the success of his benefit concerts in Vienna for the victims of the flood in Pest in 1838. If the situation had been different he could have identify with any other country. A great part of his family was German and French was the language he spoke the best. His identity is not clearly defined, but instead of being homeless ("sans papier"), he can be considered as beyond identity papers ("au-delà des papiers").

But against all odds, the hero Liszt during the Weimar years does not appear on the pictures published by Richard Pohl in 1855. These pictures, which are designed to publicize the salon held by him and his companion the Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein at the Altenburg, were published in the oldest German illustrated newspaper, the *Illustrirte Zeitung*, intended for a wide audience that exceeds the only musical world. A special care has certainly been taken in the making of these illustrations: they embody more than the mirror of the salon they represent, but they are "ways of worldmaking" (Nelson Goodman).

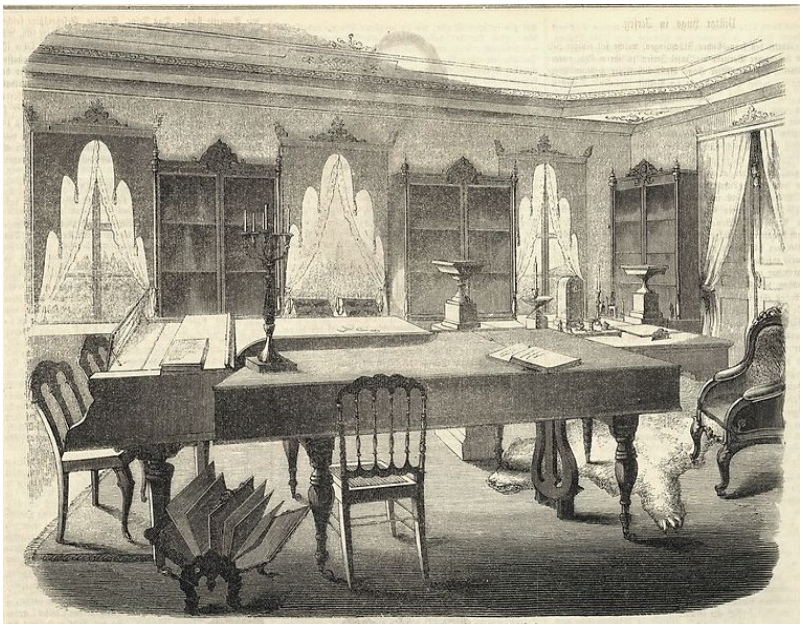
Liszt and 19th Century Music Salon

But before studying both illustrations, let me say a few words about 19th century music salon, especially during the July Monarchy in Paris. With the emergence of a new aristocracy in search of easy money, the salon is less than before linked with spirit and reasoning and becomes the favorite place of high-society entertainment.

If music constitutes an important ingredient of the salon culture, its superficiality is highly disapproved by most demanding critics like Robert Schumann. But salons were useful as a gateway for the virtuoso careers.

However, Franz Liszt regrets the subalternity of musicians. For him, the artist should reveal itself to the public and the materialistic society as a creator or a "priest of an unspeakable and mysterious religion". In the salons of the Parisian high society, he was struck by the discrepancy between the high mission he concedes to the artist and the social reality of the latter. In his own salon, Liszt could take the opposite course to the Parisian places of sociability. Do these illustrations symbolize Liszt's conception of the music salon?

1st illustration: Library and music salon, 1st floor, Altenburg



In the foreground appear two pianos fitted head to tail: an Erard grand piano and a Broadwood that belonged to Beethoven, of which Liszt was particularly proud. The piano on the right, on which a candelabra is placed, seems to be Beethoven's one. It looks like the instrument now kept in the Hungarian Museum in Budapest. At the back of the room, there are three bookcases. Between the two pianos and the back of the room is a table with displays at the two ends and a clock flanked by two candlesticks in the middle. On the floor is placed a mat polar bear skin, which brings a rustic touch in the entire room.

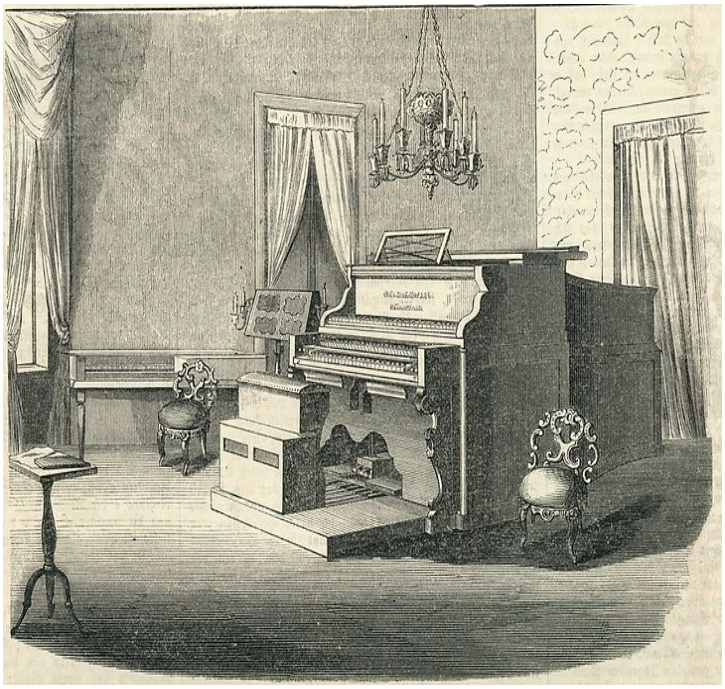
The image can be divided into two parts horizontally. The lower part includes the pianos, the table, the chairs, the armchair, the clock, the candlesticks, the candelabra, the carpet: that means, current items of furniture in 19th century salons. Appear in the higher part of the picture the bookcases and the windows from which shines the light. In this way Liszt intended to honor the books of his salon as a symbol of knowledge, which have to bathe the room as well as the natural light.

The most enlightened place of the entire picture appears on the left grand piano that sparkles. The right one symbolizes obviously Beethoven; the left one, more recent, could be attributed to Liszt. The disposition of its reading desk, the chairs around him and the storage rack for music scores suggests that the left piano is the composer's working instrument with two chairs for lessons or four-hand piano. That is not the case by the piano on the right which seems to be more rarely used. The armchair at the right is far from it. The instrument is certainly kept in the manner of a museum piece.

This illustration can be read from the bottom up. Under my reading, this picture shows two periods of music history: the base is represented by Beethoven who parts from classicism to pave the way to the neo-Weimarian fusion of the arts. From this point of view, the bookcases symbolize not only the knowledge, but also the opening of music to the other arts.

In addition, an intimate atmosphere suitable for the cult of music emerges from this visual representation because of the presence of many personal items and the master's library. Therefore, the members of Liszt's circle wanted certainly to transmit through this picture the spiritual dimension of music. Not the master is present, but his spirit.

2nd illustration : Music salon, 2nd floor, Altenburg



On the second floor, the main music room is situated just above the library-music salon. Even if it is the main music room, its area is smaller than the library and music salon.

At the center of the main music room sits a grand pedal piano, illuminated by daylight. Also known as "giant piano", halfway between piano and organ, it is the work of a Parisian factor named Alexandre et Fils. It belongs nowadays to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. On Pohl's illustrations, the giant piano was placed on a pedestal, and the chair before him seems tiny. It is certainly to accentuate the contrast between its big size and the small size of another musical instrument, placed in the back of the room, against the wall: a spinet that had once belonged to Mozart. To better visualize the space occupied by these two instruments, a chair, identical to that in front of the giant piano, was placed in front of the spinet. Both chairs are used as a standard to measure the two pieces of furniture. In addition, the giant piano is illuminated directly by daylight, unlike Mozart's instrument. In his article, Richard Pohl explains this contrast. The spinet as symbol of the past is opposed to the giant piano, at the cutting edge of the production of musical instruments:

> *Während ich staunend bei dem Rieseninstrument verweilen wollte, trat Liszt an ein kleines, vom Alter dunkelbraun gefärbtes Klavier von einfachem Eichenholz, mit schwarzen Tasten und Metalltangenten, und sagte: "Das ist eine Reliquie, die ich Ihnen zeigen wollte: Mozarts Instrument!" – Nur ein Menschenalter liegt zwischen Mozarts Klavier und Liszts Riesen-Pianoforte – aber von jenem bis zu diesem, welcher unendliche Fortschritt! Beide bezeichnen, hier nebeneinander stehend, den Anfang und die höchste Spitze unserer heutigen Klaviertechnik. Sie sind die zwei Grenzscheiden der musikalischen Kultur des 18. und des 19. Jahrhunderts!*

This opposition corresponds to the neo-Weimarian idea of progress as a historical dimension. This progress led from the *Altdeutsche Schule* to the *Neudeutsche Schule*, by going through

the era of absolute music. These various periods of history were determined by Franz Brendel, a disciple of Hegel: they correspond, as in the philosophy of history, to logical moments of the elucidation of the Spirit.

Finally, the image can be read from left to right, from the past to the future: the spinet is on the left, the giant piano on the right. We can draw a horizontal line through the keyboard of the spinet and the lower keyboard of Liszt's piano. On both sides of this median line other force lines can be drawn. They accentuate the increase of the space occupied by the successive instruments.

The three music salons of the Altenburg

During the years 1848-1861 the music salons of the first and second floors are the place where the events and the master classes are held, and where the artists and the intellectuals meet together. The room of the second floor – despite its small size – is the most important, because of the presence of the giant piano and its location close to Liszt's apartments.

According to descriptions of Richard Pohl and Peter Raabe, each floor has its own music salon. An additional music room on the ground floor was certainly intended to chamber music, with a Viennese grand piano, music stands and many scores, especially in the domain of chamber music.

We can state the symbolism of each salon: the room in the ground floor is devoted to the intimacy of chamber music in the classical tradition; the first floor the fusion of the arts realized in Liszt's vision of program music; the second floor the postulate of progress as a historical dimension.

These pictures, which are designed to publicize the Liszt salon, underline its specificity as a cenacle defending the aims of the *Neu-Weimar-Verein*, a vision diametrically opposed to Parisian virtuosity salons. Can we explain the absence of the composer on these illustrations because of his great fame (*Celebritate sua sat notus*)? Or is it a form of deification? If Liszt compares the artist with a priest, I think that the most important for his circle is that he trades the image of a devilish virtuoso for that of a serious symphonist. Liszt likes to base discourses about new aesthetics on the *genius loci* of the cities where he lived. In Paris, the place where virtuosos made their reputation, Liszt became a well-known pianist. In Weimar, the situation is different: he considers himself as Goethe's successor. He would now be the symphonist who realizes the synthesis between the *Wiener* and the *Weimarer Klassik*. It seems clear that the image of the pianist virtuoso is no longer sufficient. For him and his circle it is time to reconstruct the hero and the publication of these two illustrations is part of this reconstruction.