

Erika Quinn, *Franz Liszt. A Story of Central European Subjectivity*, Brill, Leiden, 2014, 276 pp.; series: Studies in Central European Histories, 59

Erika Quinn has proposed a biographical story on the composer Franz (Ferenc) Liszt, presenting (mostly) the facts of his life (and, partly, creative output) against a broad background of cultural history. Viewed from a different perspective, the story is about certain important phenomena in nineteenth-century artistic culture, illustrated by the exemplary biography of a composer and virtuoso. Central to the conceptual apparatus employed for the purpose is the category of *subjectivity*, which reappears (at times, excessively) throughout the story. As we are told in the introduction, the term is intended to replace the notion of identity which, in the author's opinion, associates with something durable, fixed once and forever, whereas subjectivity is changeable, fluid, indeterminate, and dependent on a variety of contexts. Hence, the book traces various subjectivities of Liszt, which defined his self-identification in the different periods of his life. As Quinn quite aptly remarks in the conclusive

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summary, since no individual has infinite options to choose from, the choices he or she individually opts for can tell us something about the cultural and historical context in which they have been made (p. 247). This mutual dependence, or interdependence, between the period and individuality is reliably discussed in the study, to the advance of the latter.

There are six chapters, each telling a story of one age in the life of Liszt – and, of one of his respective (assumed) subjectivities. Chapter One, having briefed us on the childhood years of the central character, focuses on Liszt's virtuoso career in Paris, with the related facets of his success: artistic and social, love affairs included. It also deals with musical virtuosity as a phenomenon specific to social reception of music in the Romanticist period. The second chapter recounts what happened in the 1840s: the time Liszt found – or rather, chose – the Hungarian identity for himself and became a convinced Hungarian patriot. The third chapter presents Liszt's activities in Weimar in the latter half of the 1840s and in the 1850s. Liszt was attracted by the peculiar cultural ambience of Weimar, which prevailed there since Goethe's time. The local princes had the ambition to earn their merits as patrons of arts, whereas Liszt's ardently sought to transform the German music: thus, a field for action opened before both parties. Quinn enters a polemic with those scholars who interpret the German bourgeois culture as a manifestation of escapism – a refuge for the educated strata from politics in a time that, following the defeat of the Spring of Nations, did not favour liberalism. Some of these scholars, advocating the argument of a German *Sonderweg* – 'special path', believe that this escapism effectively debilitated the German liberalism (with the final prevalence of Nazism in 1933 as the late effect of the trend). The *Sonderweg* thesis has been broadly criticised in the recent thirty-odd years, and thus its rejection is not a particularly novel move; however, it is in a very interesting and out-of-the-ordinary way that Quinn argues in favour of the view that the switch into cultural activity was *not* a form of escapism, while the strife for transforming the culture was no less important for the liberal thought than political endeavours. Consequently, the German liberals' switch from political into cultural activities cannot be interpreted as attesting to a weak constitution of the German liberalism. I find these arguments mostly convincing (though the element of escapism does seem obvious to me); the section under discussion is one of the most interesting moments in this book.

Following up the preceding issues, the fourth chapter analyses the 'war' waged inside the German musical milieu between the followers of the 'programme' music, which was meant to illustrate certain ideas or psychical conditions, and the 'autonomists' – that is, adherents of 'pure' music, one whose only means of artistic expression was the sound. Liszt was a leading adherent of programme music; he was supported to this end by his son-in-law, Richard Wagner. Programme music was associated with the hope for

widening the group of listeners, whilst pure music appealed to a narrow group of elitist recipients.

Chapter Five addresses Liszt's recurring interest in matters Hungarian, in parallel with his increasing religious involvement, which was crowned with his entry in the Third Order of Saint Francis. The element of cultural contextualisation seems to be the weakest at this point – as if the author were less knowledgeable in issues regarding the Catholic Church and the Hungarian history, compared to the other problems. However, the perception of the nineteenth century as an epoch of 're-confessionalisation' and increased religiosity, with Liszt's individual piety being seen as a manifestation of growing interest in religion among European cultural elites, is worth of attention.

Lastly, Chapter Six covers Liszt's latest years, the time he spent travelling between Weimar, Rome, and Budapest. The focus here is on his involvement in the German musical milieu, part of it being the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein*. The role of music in the development of German national awareness is emphasised, along with Liszt's own conviction that culture is capable of supporting the national movement whilst also alleviating its aggressiveness. In line with the 'Weimar' tradition, which was Goethean at its root, and which was enthusiastically professed by Liszt, the Germans were regarded as a 'Kultur-nation' – a nation that becomes materialised and fulfils its potential through culture, and is open to the other nations; a nation, moreover, whose cosmopolitan nature, of a sort, is part of its very essential identity. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as the aggressiveness of the nationalisms grew exacerbated, such understanding of national identity appeared increasingly anachronous. As Quinn remarks, Liszt belonged to an age when a national identification did not yet have to be exclusivistic. His Hungarian patriotism, German patriotism, fondness for France (the country where he made his reputation), his loyalty towards the Habsburgs, and his Catholic religiousness all made up a harmonious whole in his *Weltanschauung*. Yet, a syncretic worldview of this kind was gradually moving away in the latter half of the century.

The book is readable, and it really has several interesting things to tell us about nineteenth-century culture. While I have already tried to summarise the key observations, a number of detailed remarks can be added to this set. Among the latter, I should mention the strife of the age's rulers for a cultural compromise with the bourgeoisie (p. 121); or, the reappearing references to the various contexts in which the musical ideas overlapping with the national ideas in the Romanticism age – with all the ensuing problems. Lastly, adoption by Liszt of his own subjectivities is the issue that forms one of the leading axes of this book. The tension between the real experience and theatricality, between individual sensing and the models of sensing imposed by a culture whose part Liszt himself was, cannot possibly produce any clear settlement or resolution, but it does provide quite a quantity of material for reflection. According to the intensified strife for 'authenticity', so characteristic

of Romanticism, was, as it were, a correlate of the modernisation transition: the sense of uncertainty triggered by the external change elicited a psychological need to get embedded in 'the inner truths' (pp. 32–3).

As a weak point of this study, I would point out something that is hard to precisely demonstrate with use of concrete quotations – namely, a feeling of interpretative superficiality and, as if, glossing over the problems. The permanent referencing to psychoanalysis, in an extremely shallow manner, is a little irritating: as if it should be obvious that the sabre strapped to Liszt's waist on a caricature drawing is an 'obvious phallic symbol' (p. 92). While I do not deny psychoanalytic(al) interpretations as such, I would instead prefer to hear some arguments supporting the legitimacy of such an interpretation in the given case. Superficial are also the references to the term 'Central Europe' used in the title; the mention about Liszt's 'Central European' identity lacks any supporting evidence. One gets the impression (without getting it explained) that the author considers 'Central Europe' to be German-speaking lands plus Hungary; apart from a few mentions of Chopin, Poland does not appear in the book – as if it were not part of it.

'Central Europe', as a term or idea, has no analytical function in this study and it might have not appear there at all without a detriment to the whole thing. The region, while territorially undefined, is ascribed in several moments some rather stereotypical features, its apparently dominant multilinguality among them. The linguistic landscape of various European languages is an immensely complicated issue – and simplifications of the sort do not make its comprehension any easier. As is customary with American books, the reference literature published earlier than twenty or twenty-five years ago is virtually inexistent. Which is a pity, since a few good old books, if well thought-over, would have helped the author in a number of moments (to mention Meinecke's *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* – with respect to German patriotism and its evolution).

Of the minor errors, the author apparently believes that the mediaeval 'Hungarian constitution' was a concrete, written-down document (while a 'constitution' may refer to the political system as such, and not just a written document defining its principles; see p. 67); that Saint Stephen of Hungary lived in the thirteenth century (p. 191); and, that "the Pope issued a statement of Papal Infallibility" in 1870 (*ibidem*) – rather than, matter-of-factly, the Vatican Council adopted the relevant dogma. Such trifle things (related, mainly, to Church and Hungarian affairs), quite sparse indeed, do not affect the content of the study – while they do reinforce the sense of interpretative superficiality. All in all, we deal with a good and interesting, if slightly superficial book which proposes several important interpretative ideas – and I do have the feeling that I have read it to my advantage.