
From the Writings of Liszt

Liszt was in his twenties (and very much under the influence of Saint-Simonian socialism and the religious ideas of the unorthodox reformer Lamennais) when he published a series of articles in the *Gazette musicale de Paris* under the title "Concerning the Situation of Artists and Their Condition in Society." The following extract (from the article of 30 August 1835) points up the unbroken line that connects Rousseau and the French Revolution to some of the socio-religious ideals of the Romantics. (Note the close resemblance between Liszt's program and that of the founders of the Conservatoire, p. 271.)

Gods depart, kings depart, but God remains, and the peoples rise. Let us then not despair of art.

According to a law passed by the Chamber of Deputies in 1834, music will soon be taught in the schools. We rejoice at this sign of progress and accept it as a pledge of even vaster progress, whose influence on the masses will appear all but miraculous.

We allude to the regeneration of *religious music*.

Although the term is normally restricted to music performed in church during the divine service, I take it here in its wider sense.

In the days when worship expressed and at the same time satisfied the people's beliefs, needs, and sympathies, when men and women sought and found in their churches an altar before which they could kneel, a pulpit that nourished their spirits, a spectacle that entertained and elevated their senses piously, religious music could afford to confine itself within the holy precincts, could be content merely to accompany the splendors of the Catholic liturgy.

Today, when the altar is cracked and tumbling, today, when pulpit and ceremonies have become objects of doubt and derision, art must emerge from the temple, must spread out and accomplish its far-reaching evolution outside.

As before, and to an even greater degree, music must seek out the PEOPLE and GOD, go from one to the other; improve, moralize, console man, bless and glorify God.

Now, to accomplish this, the creation of a *new music* is imminent; essentially religious, strong, and effective, this music, which for want of a better name we will call *humanitarian*, will embrace within its colossal dimensions both the THEATER and the CHURCH. It will be both dramatic and sacred, splendid and simple, pathetic and solemn, fiery and unruly, tempestuous and calm, serene and tender.

The *Marseillaise*—which better than Hindu, Chinese, and Greek myths, has *proved* the effectiveness of music—the *Marseillaise* and the other fine songs of the Revolution have been its terrible and glorious precursors.

Yes, we do not doubt it: soon we shall hear the fields, hamlets, villages, suburbs, workshops, and cities resound to national, moral, political, religious songs, canticles, airs, and anthems *made* for the people, *taught* to the people, *sung* by tillers of the soil, artisans, laborers, the boys and girls, the men and women of the *people*.

All great artists, the poets and the musicians, will furnish their quota to the constantly enriched popular repertory. The state will distribute honors, public rewards, to those who have won three general competitions; and *all classes of society*, finally, will merge in a common religious sentiment, grand and sublime.

And art shall say, "Let there be light."

May it come, may it come, therefore, this glorious era in which art shall fulfill itself by developing in all its aspects and rise to the highest level by uniting mankind in brotherhood by means of rapturous wonders. May the time come when the artist's inspiration shall no longer be as bitter, elusive water reached after much effort beneath sterile sands, when instead it shall pour out as an inexhaustible, life-giving stream. May it, oh may it come, the hour of deliverance when poet and musician shall no longer say "the public"—but the PEOPLE and GOD!

Jean Chantavoine (ed.), *Fr. Liszt: Pages romantiques* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1912), 65–67, Trans. P. W.

Liszt's pen portrait of the Irish pianist and composer John Field (1782–1837) and his works is a repository of many of the tenets of Romanticism in music. The artist's idealism; his complete individuality and indifference to public acclaim; the exaltation of spontaneous feeling over form, its supposed enemy; music as a magic conveyance to an "inner world" of subjective reverie—these were the ideas that reigned in the salons and the garrets of the early nineteenth century, and Liszt (or probably his ghost writer, Princess Wittgenstein) recaptured them well in retrospect, some two decades

after Field's death. The prose itself calls for comment: poetic, evocative, full (perhaps overfull) of imagery, it seeks to recreate the feelings it describes. Here is the Romantic conviction of the underlying unity of the arts confirmed from the other end—it was an age not only of “literary music,” but of musical writing as well. We should add, too, that Liszt was as little concerned with objective matters as was his subject. The history of the “character piece” for piano did not begin with Field, and the view of his effortlessly spontaneous creative process is no doubt exaggerated. For a more realistic account of a Romantic genius at work, see George Sand on Chopin (next reading).

John Field and His Nocturnes

Alongside so much that has long since grown old, the Nocturnes of Field have retained their youth. Forty years and more have passed over them and still they exude a balmy freshness, still they give off their sweet perfume. Where else but in Field will we find an innocence so perfect and incomparable? No one after him has been able to recreate the charms of his language—a language as coaxing as a tearful look, as lulling as the even back-and-forth of a rocking boat or a swinging hammock, whose languorously easeful movements persuade us that we hear the sweetest of breezes whispering all around us.

No one since has achieved these Aeolian-harp sounds hanging like half-sighs in the air, which, softly plaintive, lose themselves in blissful pain. No one has dared venture to create anything like them, least of all those who were privy to Field's own playing, or rather, dreaming, when he would give himself up entirely to the inspiration of the moment. He did not restrict himself then to the notes he had earlier prescribed, but festooned his melodies anew with uninterrupted arabesques and garlands. Although he ever-resourcefully decorated them with new bouquets that fell on them like a rain of flowers, the melodies never disappeared beneath the ornaments, whose languorous billows and exquisitely graceful tracery veiled them but never covered them up. With what inexhaustible richness he varied the repetitions! With what rare felicity he could twist his thoughts, without ever losing their thread in the network of his fancies!

If there is anything whose secret it would be vain to investigate (unless by a special favor Nature had confided it to our talent), it is the chaste grace of purity, the charm of a naive, innate ingenuity—qualities which one either possesses as Nature's dowry or not at all. Field was endowed with them. They lent his creations a magic over which time can have no power. Their form will never grow old, for it accords perfectly with his feeling, which belongs not to the category of transitory, passing moods engendered by the moment, but to that pure exaltation which has a permanent hold over the heart of man. Unlike the beauties of Nature, and unlike those sweet moods which belong to the morning of one's life, when the shining prisms of feeling are as yet unclouded by the shadows of reflection, these feelings endure; they are forever the same. So we may never dream of taking these works as a model, of patterning our own works after them. Without a wholly unique impulse their effects are unattainable. They cannot be found unless one seeks them not. Vain would be any attempt to analyze the charms of their spontaneity.

In writing as in playing, in the one as in the other, Field was intent only on expressing his inner feelings for his own gratification. It would be impossible to imagine a more unabashed indifference to the public than his. He enchanted his public without knowing it or wishing it. His nearly immobile posture, his expressionless face did not attract notice. His glance did not rove. His playing flowed on, peaceful and limpid. His fingers glided over the keys and the sounds they evoked seemed to follow one another

in a curling wake. Withal, it is not hard to see that he was his own chief audience. His calm was all but sleepy, and could be neither disturbed nor affected by thoughts of the impression his playing made on his hearers. No haste, no excess, whether in deportment, in phrasing, or in tempo ever broke the melodious reverie that filled the atmosphere with an exquisite aura that seemed to whisper love-drunk melodies, impressions of sweetest bliss, and delightful murmurs, *mezza voce*, all around us.

Art was for him in itself sufficient reward for any sacrifice. Anything over and above that—positions he might be appointed to, the reputation that might surround him, the success and longevity of his composition—all this did not concern him. Field sang for himself alone. To please himself was all he asked of music. But it is directly to this total disregard of anything that aims merely at effect that we owe the first attempts—and what perfect ones!—to infuse the piano with feelings and dreams and to free piano music from the constraints imposed until then by regular and “official” form on compositions of all kinds. Before him they all had of necessity to be cast as sonatas or rondos or some such. Field, contrariwise, introduced a genre that belonged to none of these existing categories, in which feeling and melody reigned supreme, and which moved freely, without the fetters and constraints of any preconceived form. He cleared the path for all those offspring which have since appeared sporting names like “Songs Without Words,” “Impromptu,” “Ballade,” and so on, and one can trace to him the origin of all such pieces, which seek to express intimate, subjective emotions. He was the discoverer of these realms; he opened up a field as new as it was propitious for subtle rather than grandiose imaginings, for delicate rather than lyric inspirations.

The name “Nocturne” suits splendidly the pieces Field was inspired so to christen. For from their very first sounds we are immediately transported to those hours when the soul, released from the day’s burdens, retreats into itself and soars aloft to secret regions of star and sky. We see it here all airy and winged, hovering like Philomela of old in the scented air over the flowers, rapturously engulfed by Nature.

L. Ramann (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften von Franz Liszt*, IV (Leipzig, 1882), 263–68. Trans. R. T.