Franz Liszt and the Concept of Genius: Génie oblige and Artistic Promotion

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“I hope to show the necessity of bringing to light the suppressed Truth, and reclaim the artist’s rightful dignity, which until now has not been recognized. Thereby, the founders and constructors of the new Temple of Art, whose scattered building blocks I can only suggest prophetically, will be enshrined in glory.” (Franz Liszt, “On the Situations of Artists,” in The Collected Writings of Franz Liszt: Volume 2 Essays and Letters of a Traveling Bachelor of Music, trans. and ed. Janita Hall-Swadley (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, Inc.), 75.) Liszt’s quotation is possibly the best definition that we have of his famous génie oblige motto. This idea caused Liszt to devoted large amounts of money and equal amounts of effort on humanitarian-artistic endeavors throughout his exceptionally prolific and successful career.

However, while Liszt’s humanitarian and artistic supported ventures have been discussed in recent literature, albeit often in the most cursory of manners, there remains a dearth of information and insight that delves into Liszt’s motivations and influences as a champion of others that ultimately can account for why they were undertaken in the first place. While scholars have quite successfully mined his patronage of Richard Wagner, the exploration of Liszt’s endeavors on behalf of other composers, even the well-researched Robert and Clara Schumann relationship, has been left incomplete or entirely unearthed. The fleshing out and filling in of this lacuna in Liszt scholarship is a necessary next step to understand a complex individual who has often been portrayed as a one-dimensional performer virtuoso.

Liszt’s penchant for championing other composers was not an isolated occurrence restricted to a few select friends, but a life-long habit that was deeply intertwined with his philosophical and religious beliefs that was far from just a sense of fraternal obligation or respect of another musical innovator. Alan Walker has identified a key group of composers and students who found themselves drawn to Liszt during his tenure as Kapellmeister of Weimar. These “Altenburg Eagles,” composed of musicians such as Hans von Bülow, Carl Tausig, Peter Raff, Peter Cornelius, Karl Klindworth, Alexander Ritter, and Felix Draeseke among others, represented what Walker and others have termed the “New Weimar School.” (Alan Walker, Franz Liszt: The Weimar Years 1848-1861, vol. 2 of 3 volumes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 168). This group would eventually be subsumed into the New German School of aesthetic taste and become the opposing side of the ensuing “War of the Romantics” that would occupy the musical papers of the middle 19th Century. Walker posits that this gathering of artists and minds were “attracted to Weimar solely by Liszt’s magnetic presence” and were also “responsible not only for the resurgence of artistic activity that swept through the city in the 1850s” and “for the renewal of the Romantic movement in Germany itself.” (Ibid., 167) While Walker’s latter statement may be a bit overblown, it nonetheless teases out an important facet of the development of Romantic music aesthetics that has not been given in-depth treatment. What recent scholarship has not considered is the impetus behind Liszt’s reasons for fostering a gathering of like-minded musicians and composers in Weimar. It is for this purpose that this study explores the overarching intentions under the surface of
Liszt’s desire of musical champion as demonstrated in several case studies: his writings, humanitarian ventures, tenure at Weimar, and his direct support of musicians.