

he was a powerful symbol of transcendence. The type was represented most clearly by two men: Paganini and Liszt.

PAGANINI AND THE DREAM FACTORY; LISZT, L'ENCHANTEUR

It is unnecessary to record here the explosive impact of Paganini on the concert life of the early nineteenth century, to discuss the catalytic effect of his concert tours on pianistic virtuosity, or to list once more the many works composed by leading pianist-composers as a direct result of his influence. These matters are well documented and well known. However, it may be useful to consider some of the more general qualities of Romantic virtuosity associated with Paganini, before going on to look at some of these qualities, and others, in Liszt. One such defining quality has already been proposed. The Romantic virtuoso was above all an individual. 'I want to maintain my singularity', remarked Paganini,<sup>33</sup> and his repertory of novelties (some of them actually recovering much older, long-forgotten tricks of the trade) was developed to that end as well as to display his formidable technique. Not only was the Romantic virtuoso clearly differentiated from his rivals, his style of playing and stage manner distinctive and unique, imbued with subjectivity; he was also isolated (by his genius, which cannot be imitated) from the world at large, a solitary figure, with 'no brothers among men',<sup>34</sup> a 'being apart',<sup>35</sup> an 'exile from heaven',<sup>36</sup> though one whose solitude must be publicly observed, and even displayed. And as this suggests, his individuality was as much biographical as professional. His fame, in other words, rested not simply on a particular style of playing, but invoked no less a particular mode of living. A skein of legends was wrapped around him, and the resulting notoriety became an essential part of his appeal. Thus the public could follow Paganini's life with a mixture of repulsion and fascination. Even his diseased body was integral to his attraction.<sup>37</sup> The scandals and the mysteries helped. And it helped too that the life was larger than life. Again Liszt caught the point. 'People want to know the colour of your bedroom slippers, the cut of your dressing gown. . . . The newspapers, eager to profit from this pitiable curiosity, heap anecdote upon anecdote, falsehood upon falsehood. . . .'<sup>38</sup> This cult of the celebrity has a distinctly modern flavour.

For the developing image of the Romantic virtuoso in the early nineteenth century already approached that of a much later figure, the Nietzschean representation of Dionysian man, though it is arguably the Dionysus of *Twilight of the Idols* that is suggested rather than that of *The Birth of Tragedy*. The virtuoso was a man 'strong enough for freedom', and nothing pre-planned or pre-ordained could limit this freedom. Contemporary audiences were well aware of the disdain with which Paganini could treat the best-intentioned of collaborators, for the free man will not be subjugated or constrained. In his search for innovation, he will respect no convention, balk at no challenge, stop at no frontier. In this way the concert platform became an arena of risk and danger, an uncharted, unpredictable territory, and

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Julius Max Schottky, *Paganinis Leben und Treiben als Künstler und als Mensch* (Prague, 1830), p. 278.

<sup>34</sup> *An Artist's Journey*, p. 15. <sup>35</sup> *Le Moniteur universel*, 10 March 1831, p. 501.

<sup>36</sup> *An Artist's Journey*, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> See Bernstein, *Virtuosity of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 12, for a comparison with images of Mozart's body.

<sup>38</sup> *An Artist's Journey*, p. 14.

in negotiating it the virtuoso had to take his chance. ‘No living violinist dares to attempt as much as he does’, wrote Karl Guhr, in one of the more detailed contemporary accounts of Paganini’s playing.<sup>39</sup> The juggler risks another ball in the air, threatening not only the success of the enterprise, but also the pleasing nature of the pattern. Attendant on this was an acknowledgement that freedom, spontaneity and progress are barely compatible with any suggestion of limits or boundaries to knowledge and experience. The virtuoso could take us to the extreme limits of human potential. Like the acrobat, the sportsman, or the circus performer, he could stretch beyond what should be possible, affording us a glimpse of what human beings might be capable of – ever faster, ever further.

Paganini played mainly his own music, and he composed it with a view to displaying his technical mastery. Yet this very technical mastery could carry with it a sense of loss. When ‘Rameau’s nephew’ complained of ‘technical difficulty . . . replac[ing] beauty’, he was effectively lamenting a loss of aesthetic quality, in which the performative hollowed out elements of work character.<sup>40</sup> This again was a recurrent theme of the critics, and it was already well rehearsed in the eighteenth century. The addition of difficulty, it is implied, involves the subtraction or erosion of expressiveness, though it has to be said that Paganini himself was generally exempt from this charge, at least in the critical opinion expressed during his own lifetime. Moreover the ‘composing in’ of difficulty – of virtuosity – could also be read as a virtue, helping to restore the etymology; indeed Jankélévitch refers to a ‘beautiful difficulty’ in his book on Ravel, and goes on to speak of the player ‘complicat[ing] with pleasure the rules of the game . . .’.<sup>41</sup> The total command of technique also involved a sense of sacrifice; it was hard won, and that (ethical) quality was of its essence, suggestive of heroic resolution, a difficulty magnificently and bravely overcome (*di bravura*). Paganini’s regime of practice became legendary in his lifetime. Hour after hour of work was the price of a technique nearing perfection, and that meant a technique not only capable of the most astonishing agility and precision, but one that could summon at will a range of colours that left commentators at a loss for words – a technique in short that drove yet deeper the wedge separating the virtuoso from the common man.

Romantic virtuosity demanded more than an ethos of individuality and freedom, however, and more too than a technical mastery driven by what Maurice Bourges called ‘le démon du mécanisme’. It demanded also visibility. As Jankélévitch astutely remarked: ‘There are no unrecognised virtuosos’.<sup>42</sup> Virtuosity needed to show itself – to present itself – in order to exist, and to that end it cultivated a visual dimension; it was charismatic, a spectacle to be observed and wondered at. Much of its power lay in its presentation, its appearance, the immediacy of its impact. The ‘look’ of the virtuoso was crucial, and that included the dramas and discontinuities of his bodily activity. For the adoration of an audience was part of the constitution of virtuosity. Accounts of Paganini’s spectral appearance on the platform suggest a stage presence carefully calculated to intimidate, even to subjugate.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Guhr, *L’Art de jouer du violon de Paganini* (French trans: Paris, 1830), p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Denis Diderot, ‘Rameau’s Nephew (with d’Alembert’s Dream)’, trans. Leonard Tancok (Harmondsworth, 1966; orig. MS, c. 1761–c. 1779), p. 100.

<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Maurice Ravel* (Paris, 1939), p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> Jankélévitch, *Liszt et la Rhapsodie*, p. 34.

Czerny's account of a 'perfect virtuoso', and of his power 'over the feelings and the hearts of his auditors' could easily be transposed to Paganini: 'in his own person, he appears to render probable and worthy of belief the celebrated fables of *Orpheus* and *Amphion*'.<sup>43</sup> And this dynamic, predicated on the power of the one over the many, reveals the other side of the *Übermensch*, not just a passive exemplary figure, but an active, controlling one. There could be an element of play in this – the Romantic virtuoso as magician or clown presenting his tricks like some ancient *jongleur*, captivating the audience with his sleight-of-hand. But there could also be a sense of profounder mystery, evoking all the connotations of a supernatural power, demonic or divine – the gift of virtuosity traded in a Faustian pact, or ceded to the chosen one as a rare mark of favour. The virtuoso, in other words, played to a more general mystification of art in the Romantic era, though only up to a point. To be a misunderstood genius has always proved more helpful to composers than to performers.<sup>44</sup>

The dynamic of virtuosity, then, is a two-way process. Audiences shape it almost as much as performers; they mould it to their own needs. And in this respect the public concert tapped into a rather fundamental human need, the need to admire and applaud, to experience extremes of emotion vicariously, through a kind of secret identification with epic motifs unavailable to us in the normal course of things. The great performer, no less than the great composer, could generate the catharsis that occurs when emotional release in an artificial world (a world of art) rebounds on to the real world, and could do so even when the musical materials lacked significance. A comparison with other media may be to the point. We weep at Hollywood's dénouement, as well as Tolstoy's, for the moment of recognition (*anagnorisis*) is arguably more dependent on our own need to recognise than Aristotle allowed. This is not of course to equate Tolstoy and Hollywood. Recognitions may be revelatory, tantamount to self-recognitions, where the poetic becomes temporarily real through the combined force of plot and character. Or they may be fleeting, ephemeral and illusory, born of wish-fulfilment, of a sense of identification with the screen idol whose persona all but obliterates plot and character. These are different qualities of aesthetic experience, and we may reasonably choose to valorise them, but it is hardly adequate to view the one as entirely significant and the other entirely trivial.

Undoubtedly there is something of the dream factory in the world of Romantic virtuosity. Indeed the emergence of that world in the early nineteenth century was rather like a dry run for some of the most characteristic features of a culture industry whose definitive formulation would await the mid-twentieth century. We can recognise already in the accounts of Paganini's concertising, for example, a type of listener familiar enough in today's world. I mean here the aficionado of this or that celebrity performer, the disciple who fetishises the performer and the performance at the expense of the composer, and in so doing feeds and catalyses a cult of virtuosity rather than a culture of the work. For Adorno, this category of listener was of course the worst type of 'dilettante', to use a term which came into its own in the seventeenth century, but whose pejorative connotations date, significantly, from the early nineteenth, when an avant-garde first began to oppose itself to popular culture and an

<sup>43</sup> Carl Czerny, *Letters on Thorough-Bass, with an Appendix on the Higher Branches of Musical Execution and Expression*, trans. J. A. Hamilton (London, n.d., orig. edn, c. 1840), p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> See Jankélévitch, *Liszt et la Rhapsodie*, p. 41.

ethos of professionalism began to hold sway. The performer fetishist, for Adorno, was yet another symptom of the widespread degeneration of listening consequent on the culture industry. This is history from the standpoint of the avant-garde, privileging text and idea, and implicitly celebrating the egotism of the composer. For Adorno there could indeed be no other history, and we can recognise the potency of his reading while also recognising its bias.

For it is reasonable to value the autonomy character attributed to performance by the rise of Romantic virtuosity, just as we value the autonomy character attributed to composition by the strengthening of a work-concept. We can invest something, in other words, in each of the torn halves. Performers, like composers, can make their claim on our reading of music history, and not merely as faithful servants of the text. Their qualities are in part redemptive. They can complete the incomplete, improve the mediocre, give expression to the expressionless, transform all that they touch through a focus on sensuous surface and heard effect – through what Sontag has called an ‘erotics’ of art. They can create a rounded, satisfying musical experience from works which may well be found wanting *qua* works, a case that was indeed made in relation to Paganini. And even when the music is significant, and the demands of the composer considerable, the qualities of virtuosity have some capacity to compete, not least because the performer, unlike the composer, has an opportunity to communicate directly with a real – as opposed to an ‘ideal’ – listener. Those qualities – freedom and subjectivity, spontaneity and chance, charisma and presence, a capacity to overcome, to attain the unattainable – can make their own statement, and in doing so they can draw us away from the qualities of the work; indeed they may even appropriate the work, turning it to ends that promote the medium rather than the message. As noted already, it is in this sense that we may speak of a dialectic between virtuosity and the musical work.

Liszt biographers are united in their view that his indebtedness to Paganini amounted to nothing less than an impasse cleared, a dam of creative energy released. That turning-point came in 1832, and it is fair to say that there were other catalysts, notably his friendship with Berlioz and his initial contacts with Chopin. Prior to this point Liszt was primarily a performer, but in the early 1830s he produced his first homage to Paganini, the *La Clochette* Fantasy (based on the finale of the B minor Concerto), as well as his homage to Lamartine, the original version of *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. His models, then, and his creative responses to them, indicate that from the start there were two impulses at work, that his embrace of the poetic rivalled his engagement with virtuosity. As noted in chapter 1, Michel Sogny adds an additional layer of interpretation, suggesting that ‘creative admiration’ was the key motivating force of Liszt’s music from all periods, and viewing the Paganini influence in that light. Admiration, Descartes’s ‘première de toutes les passions’, would take us in this reading beyond the formative modelling processes common to all young composers and would tap into a much more fundamental level of creativity, a form of identification with the object which, as it comes close to realisation (so that subject and object become virtually indistinguishable), releases the creativity of the subject. Like Byron, then, Liszt would ‘live not in myself, but become a portion of that around me’. The self would be immersed in the sublimity of nature, in the exalted achievements of painters, poets and musicians, and in the process it would find its own creative voice, allowing these ‘objects’ to

be relived subjectively through music. There is a ring of authenticity to this reading which is fortunately not dependent on Sogny's attempts at posthumous psycho-analysis, where the 'fixation castratrice' of a youth from the Hungarian plains (rejected by the Parisian musical establishment) is confirmed through an 'interpretation' of the dream recounted by Liszt in his *Pages romantiques*.<sup>45</sup>

Sogny's interpretation is well exemplified by Liszt's own account of his response to Paganini. 'What a man, what a violin, what an artist! Heavens! what sufferings, what misery, what tortures in those four strings.' 'Here is a whole fortnight that my mind and fingers have been working like two lost spirits.'<sup>46</sup> What is clear from this is that Paganini's example not only released his own creative energy (by revealing to him the possibility of the impossible); it had the supplementary effect of immersing him again in the 'heroes' of world literature, painting and music. Note that 'mind and fingers' were both working. 'Homer, the Bible, Plato, Locke, Byron, Hugo, Lamartine, Chateaubriand, Beethoven, Bach, Hummel, Mozart, Weber are all around me, I study them, meditate on them, devour them with fury.' For Liszt, this was not simply a question of identifying with individuals, but rather of making contact (through those individuals) with the highest expressions of the human spirit. Characteristically this was achieved first and foremost through transcription, the ultimate mode of 'creative admiration', and there is a sense in which Liszt 'transcribed' poetry, painting, and even nature, just as he transcribed other music. His first inclination on hearing Paganini, then, was to produce (in 1832) the first stage of his Paganini triptych. And there is a powerful symbolism in this. Eighteenth-century virtuosity was in a sense encapsulated in Bach's reworkings of Vivaldi, and it is hard to avoid the suggestion that Liszt's reworkings of Paganini achieved something of the same for Romantic virtuosity. In both cases the mechanisms of translation could range from literal repetition (stretching keyboard technique through direct emulation of violin technique) to radical reinterpretation (paraphrasing violin technique in the terms of keyboard technique). But even the most remote reformulations arose from a spirit of imitation which has always played a central role in artistic creativity, and which acquired negative connotations during only the briefest period of Western art history.

Transcription was only the most blatant of Liszt's tributes to Paganini. At root, Paganini changed totally his understanding of the role and significance of virtuosity. It was something more than an agent, a 'mediator' (to use Wagner's deliberately pejorative term). Rather it was a powerful symbol of artistic perfection, engaging the total personality of the artist, 'not a secondary outgrowth, but an indispensable element of music'. Later, in his obituary of Paganini, he referred to a '*means*, not an *end*', but care is needed in interpreting such remarks.<sup>47</sup> The '*end*' here is not, or not only, the realisation of a composer's intentions, where virtuosity would be viewed simply as a servant of the text. Rather Liszt saw the end as a capacity to express anything and everything through music, not least the vast spaces of the artist's '*vie intérieure*'. Virtuosity was a means to *that* end; it was a way of ensuring that the limitations of the fingers should never prove an obstacle to the realisation of this grand

<sup>45</sup> Sogny, *L'Admiration Créatrice chez Liszt* (Paris, 1975), pp. 99–105.

<sup>46</sup> *Letters of Franz Liszt*, coll. and ed. La Mara, trans. Constance Bache, 2 vols. (London, 1894), vol. 1, pp. 8–9.

<sup>47</sup> 'Sur Paganini, à propos de sa mort', *La Revue et Gazette Musicale*, 7, 50 (1840), pp. 431–2.

ambition. In this way, God-like, the virtuoso mastered his own created world. Something of this potency also emerges in Liszt's essay on Clara Schumann, where it is clear that he sees the positive in virtuosity precisely in the ability to reach any goal, uninhibited by technical limitations. His impatience with technical skill for its own sake is made abundantly clear in his reference to Gusikow (in his 'xylophone' performances) as 'the musical juggler who plays an infinitely large number of notes in an infinitely short period of time . . . his talent, being misguided, has produced nothing but musical inanities to which the charlatans who write feature articles for the newspapers will ascribe incalculable value'.<sup>48</sup>

It was after the Vienna concerts of 1838 that Liszt embarked in all earnestness on the career of a travelling virtuoso, a career that focused both the liberating characteristics of virtuosity and its more threatening, dangerous potentials. Many of those qualities attributed to Paganini were very soon transferred to Liszt. For Amy Fay, he was 'Merlin-like', an 'old-time magician', a 'perfect wizard'; he was 'L'Enchanteur', presenting a tantalising vision of the unattainable, the 'promised land'.<sup>49</sup> For Schumann he was a 'demon exercising his powers', while, intriguingly, for Clara he invoked the other side of that noumenal coin; he was 'divine'; he could be 'compared to no other virtuoso. He is the only one of his Kind. He arouses fright and astonishment'.<sup>50</sup> Liszt was happy to collude in these perceptions, even down to borrowing from Paganini his awareness of the power of dress and physiognomy to exert their influence on an audience. However, he added something new to the image of the Romantic virtuoso. Later in life, he wrote about virtuosity in his essay on the Bohemian gypsy musicians. Here he argued that the virtuoso was not a mason, performing with conscientiousness and precision; he was not a passive instrument, reproducing an existing production; he was not a reader delivering a text. Rather he was the only one who could activate an entire world of feeling, for which the musical work was just the scenario. The virtuoso, with his capacity 'to endow the still lifeless form with an adamant nature into which he may infuse life at his own given moment' was in that sense as much a creator as the composer. Just as an actor could not 'have "created" a dramatic role unless he had conceived it in a manner so peculiar to himself that, although another might imitate it, he could never appropriate it',<sup>51</sup> so the virtuoso 'engenders the music anew and in his turn. He gives it a palpable and perceptible existence, and by that act he establishes the claim of his art to be ranked with those called autonomous'.<sup>52</sup>

In looking specifically to the gypsy in music, Liszt identified putative racial-national qualities that allowed him to turn a reflecting mirror on to instrumental music generally, and on to the performative. The oral traditions of the gypsies were apparently a kind of non-narrative saga or epic of a people, with attendant connotations of the infancy of a history (Hegel's epic as 'originary myth'). Moreover, the special proximity of the gypsies to the

<sup>48</sup> *An Artist's Journey*, pp. 19–20. But see Heine's comments on Liszt's manipulation of his audience in *Lutèce*, pp. 223–4; also Susan Bernstein's remarks on presentation and authorship: *Virtuosity of the Nineteenth Century*, p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> Amy Fay, *Music Study in Germany* (London, 1886), pp. 187–201.

<sup>50</sup> For an account of Clara Schumann's meetings with Liszt in Vienna 1838, and of the subsequent deterioration both of their relationship and of her view of Liszt as a performer, see Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (New York and London, 1985), pp. 209–16.

<sup>51</sup> *The Gypsy in Music*, trans. Edwin Evans, 2 vols. (London, [1926]), vol. 2, p. 267.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

raw material of existence – to Nature – rendered speech and abstract ideas less important to their needs than music-making, since the latter could express sentiment without proceeding to any direct application of it. Unlike Western, ‘civilised’ man, the gypsy allowed himself to be absorbed by Nature rather than attempting to master it. His was a ‘poetic egoism’, which could be satisfied by music alone. Like the ancient rhapsodes, he had a story to tell not only expressive of the spirit of his people, but of a more general love of God, country, cause and art. Interestingly, in the course of this discussion, Liszt introduced a further etymological twist to our understanding of the term virtuosity. It was indeed associated with the virtues; but both were ultimately derived from ‘vir’, with its cognate ‘virility’. And here the word *bravura*, ubiquitous in the titles of the brilliant style, can be seen in a new, gendered, light, with a suggestion of machismo, of the exploits of medieval chivalry or folk heroism.<sup>53</sup> Like Mazeppa, the very masculine hero must in the end triumph over adversity, even if the triumph comes in death. The concert was a battlefield, with conquests to be made. Even the instrument was there for the slaying, as contemporary cartoonists were quick to notice.<sup>54</sup> Moreover the conquests could include women’s hearts. Liszt was not just Merlin, the magician; he was Don Juan, the seducer, exerting his male power from the distance of the concert platform, and in ways that are rather familiar in today’s popular culture.

This points to an essential difference in the reception of Paganini and Liszt. Where the former was perceived as remote and inaccessible, the latter reached down from Olympus to make immediate contact with his audience; his was a ‘poetic virtuosity’, to use Schumann’s phrase, softened by its contacts with Berlioz and Chopin as well as Paganini. Moreover the differences between their two instruments carried significant connotative values in this respect. Paganini’s violin was in a sense an extension of the man – of his arm; it was a (miraculous) part of him, so that man and instrument were together distanced from the audience. Liszt’s piano, on the other hand, was an independent force, something to be mastered (another gendered term). It was ‘played upon’ by the hand, and this tactile quality was, and is, integral to the virtuosity of the (mechanical) piano. Like a hammer, the hand could pound the instrument into submission, engaging with it in a kind of furious combat; like a feather it could caress the keys (the *carezzando* touch), coaxing a response.<sup>55</sup> And the hand symbolised work; it was the agent of human skills. In that sense the velocity and precision of the virtuoso also tapped into ancient traditions of craft, the finely tuned workmanship of the artisan. Through the hand, the virtuoso demonstrated his superhuman skills, but at the same time his human sensitivities. His personality was transmitted through the hand to the instrument in a kind of expressive dialogue between man and machine, where the mechanical action of the one pointed up the free play of the other. The ‘touch’ of the virtuoso was the symbolic expression of this humanity.

<sup>53</sup> The gendering of virtuosity is, however, a two-way thing. When viewed pejoratively, it has often been associated with women. More subtly, the growing importance of interpretation could rather easily be linked with traditional (subservient) female roles.

<sup>54</sup> See Dana Gooley, ‘Warhorses: Liszt, Weber’s *Konzertstück*, and the Cult of Napoléon’, *19th-Century Music*, 24, 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 62–88.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Bellman, ‘Frédéric Chopin, Antoine de Kotski and the *carezzando* Touch’, *Early Music*, 29, 3 (2001), pp. 398–407.