

Iconography

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Liszt possessed, in addition to his fame and longevity, a singular attraction for artists. Especially in his youth, his Byronic good looks, characterised by an ivory profile, was such that his face was “one of the ‘looks’ of the nineteenth century”¹. Much of this imagery can be placed within a very well-researched and documented biography to which the visual can constantly be referred. Nonetheless, the complexity and diversity of this vast array of representations is greater than one might at first expect as resulting simply from its scale. Richard Leppert aptly described this diversity when he observed that:

The images [of Liszt] employed all major visual media of the nineteenth century: photography, oil painting, oil miniature, pastel, drawing ... watercolour, silhouette, wood engraving, steel plate engraving, lithography, sculpture, relief ... and caricature. In an age obsessed with the visual, Liszt’s body was an object of almost fetishized fascination, whether in a form that idealised him as an artistic genius or mocked him as a freak of nature or tasteless circus performer.²

It is also worth pausing for a moment to consider implications of this richness of the source materials from the perspective of how we are to approach it now. While scholars can find frustration in dealing with, say, the paucity of portraits and relevant information for Haydn, we have sheer abundance with Liszt. We may not be hampered by uncertainty over provenance or identity of the artist, but the very mass and variety of Lisztian iconography presents its own not insignificant challenges. The risk most apparent to scholars seeking confirmation of presumed biographical or historical narratives is that isolated images can be cherry-picked to match assumptions: Liszt as showman, as revolutionary, as romantic hero and so on. All of these, and more, can be readily confirmed by his iconography and yet this approach offers little insight beyond his well-known biography and reception. It is, in other words, easy to slip into the mode of interpretation that views Liszt’s images as uniquely distinctive to him. Lithographs or photographs are not compared to the countless others from the same times or places or even to those of other artists. Interpretations of one-off oil

portraits of Liszt, for example, easily tempt us into self-referential stances, especially so if not compared with others by the same artist.

As musicological scholarship has increasingly highlighted, there is a deeply problematic side to the phenomenon of the nineteenth century virtuoso. Liszt's persona acted as an intersection for various romantic tropes, performativity, fame and celebrity. His iconography doubtless is reflective of, and in turn an influence upon, the emerging social and critical consciousness of this phenomenon. When considering images of Liszt as a totality, while they do not necessarily represent a clearly coherent mass around a stable core, they parallel the contradictions and challenges that nineteenth century virtuosity presents, both then and now.

So, looking for simplistic trends in Lisztian portraiture is perilous from the beginning. He was depicted by so many artists and in such a variety of styles that there is no simple template or sense of linear evolution or development along any particular stylistic path. Equally, to consider a portrait of Liszt from the 1830s in complete ignorance of major cultural figures ubiquitous at the time, such as Napoleon or Byron, would be a serious defect. The focus of this book, examining Liszt from many contexts, will help emphasise to the reader that any given image may relate in nuanced ways to a particular aspect of his life and times. What follows is necessarily a select handful of examples, chosen to highlight the points just made.

The earliest iconography is in the form of lithographical prints dating from Liszt's youthful success in the mid 1820s, where his sensational precocious talent led naturally to comparisons with W.A. Mozart. But it is in the 1830s that the young Liszt attracted the attention of artists and public, especially in lithographs. Two of the finest and most successful lithographic artists of his time were the Paris-based Achille Devéria (1800–1857)—a well-known portrait artist from 1832—and his exact contemporary, the Viennese-based Josef Kriehuber (1800–1876)—prolific in the 1830s and 1840s. As mentioned above, viewing these portrayals in conjunction with the vast output of each artist helps nuance our possible interpretations. Devéria's portraits, numbering over 450, constitute a “gallery of romantic Restoration society”, and include Dumas *père*, Géricault and Victor Hugo.³

Even for Devéria, who made a name with erotic works as well as portraits, his 1832 portrait of Liszt is heavily romanticised. With most of Devéria's portraits, he poses his sitter such as to acknowledge the viewer by looking at them with an engaging expression. Here, Liszt looks off dreamily into the distance, presumably lost in creative broodings, ignoring the viewer, while a manuscript sits immediately behind him. Kriehuber's portraits by contrast, are at first glance more in line with the expectation of his Viennese and Biedermeier style, are at once both more obviously physiognomically accurate and yet subtly play on romantic tropes of the creative genius, as with Devéria. While the earliest Kriehuber lithograph of Liszt dates from the late 1830s, those from the mid 1840s, such as his *A Matinée at Liszt's* (1846, itself based loosely on the famous earlier painting by Josef Danhauser) and portrait from the same year, depart still further from the rather generic "Biedermeier" portrait style in Vienna at the time by creating a more narrative type of scene suggestive of Liszt's creative link to Beethoven or to his deeply contemplative inner life as an emerging composer.⁴

Alongside the popular media of lithographic prints in the 1830s and 40s, there remained a steady flow of oil portraits by leading artists of the day. Liszt was painted by several of the leading painters of his time, and was himself personally acquainted with several, mixing in their artistic and political circles. Just some examples include Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1804–1874), Josef Danhauser (1805–1845), Henri Lehmann (1814–1846), Ary Scheffer (1795–1858), Franz von Lenbach (1836–1904) and Jean-Auguste-Dominique (1780–1867), the last of whom recorded a famous pencil portrait of Liszt.

The stature of those who painted Liszt, while not all well-known today to those outside art history studies, aligns well with his own fame and prominence. Dutch-French Ary Scheffer and the German-born Henri Lehmann, for example, were establishment artists, well-connected politically and/or artistically: Scheffer particularly through his links to the French King Louis-Phillippe and Lehmann as an outstanding student of Ingres.

Scheffer was personal friends with Liszt and was fascinated by the musician's physiognomy. Aside from his 1837 portrait, he used Liszt as a subject in his 1844 allegorical painting, the *Three Magi*, with Liszt as the youngest king. As Imre Kovács observed, "By identifying the

portrait of Liszt with one of the three kings, Scheffer promoted the Artist to a rank that was only attainable by the Biblical kings and the monarch of this world looking for a model of identification in them through their portraits.”⁵ Liszt would also be used as a “clandestine” model in paintings by Henri Lehmann (1814–1882), Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898) and others, as documented by Pauline Pocknell.

Lehmann’s well-known portrait of Liszt from 1839 is an outstanding work from the period, synthesising the Romantic trope of the isolated artistic genius with a rare commitment to realism: striking lighting effects with prominence given to the head through isolating it, the steady gaze and unsmiling expression that meets the viewer, and the physiognomical accuracy of the painter’s recording of Liszt’s face and unique remarkable spatulate fingers (hardly ever depicted this way in paintings, although to be seen in later photographs).

These portraits come from the height of Liszt’s concert success and his prominence in the elite artistic salon society of his day. The stark visually-constructed isolation in Lehmann’s portrait parallels some of the tropes expressed in Liszt’s published writings from the time. For example, his public letter to George Sand of 1837 shows his absorption of some fundamental tenets of the artistic and intellectual reformers, exemplified in his declaration that “the artists lives alone, and when circumstances throw him into the middle of society, he, in the midst of discordant distraction, creates an impenetrable solitude within his soul that no human voice can breach.”⁶ In both the Scheffer and Lehman paintings, we can identify clear allusions to Liszt’s intellectual and spiritual links to the Saint-Simonians and to the “emblematic image of the inspired, religious Artists depicted in a mediating, priestly function...”.⁷ While there is little or no documentary evidence of Liszt’s direct input into his iconography (letters between artist and sitters, for example), the strength of the correlation between Liszt’s expressed views and his mode of representation is highly suggestive of his influence.

Liszt continued to attract the attention of leading painters throughout much of his life, with portraits by Josef Danhauser, Franz von Lenbach (1836–1904), Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805–1874), Miklós Barabás (1810–1898) to name just some. These and others are worthy of close attention not only on their own merits, but also as indications of the varieties of

style and approaches Liszt would receive later in life. The theme of artist-as-genius continues, but each example has its own unique combination of factors not least of which is the painter's strongly individual style (especially in the case of Lenbach, for example).

The mid-century marked a period of profound change for Liszt, with his withdrawal from the frantic touring concert life to take up his position as Kapellmeister in Weimar. At the same time, it was a period of revolutionary advancements in photographic methods and reproduction, such as that of the wet collodion processes in the early 1850s, and from the mid-1850s the ubiquitous format of the *carte de visite* that was to dominate through the next decade. When considering photographs of Liszt at the piano, it is worth noting here that most would have been taken in the photographer's studio. This meant, along with generally long exposure times, that the photographer would often use available studio props, such as the piano and its stool.⁸

One of the most active photographers in Weimar during Liszt's time there was the former lithographer Franz Hanfstaengl (1804–1877). Along with portraits of Clara Schumann and Richard Wagner, Hanfstaengl's portraits of the middle-aged Liszt are some of the most striking from this period of his life, demonstrating the portraitist's expertise in nuanced posing (doubtless gained whilst a lithographer), handling of lighting, and in drawing attention to Liszt's unique countenance as captured through the accuracy of the camera lens.

As Hanfstaengl's examples demonstrate, at one level, photographs can be approached as yet another nineteenth-century medium in which established visual codes and norms were deployed. It is all too easy to see photography as essentially "modern" and so to focus upon or seek the avant-garde rather than what can perhaps be characterised as a rather conservative medium in some ways. Photographic portraitists relied heavily upon conventions of oil portraiture. The results were mocked for the jarring combination of the warts-and-all accuracy of their reproduction alongside the contrived poses and attitudes of classical portraiture.

Aside from Hanfstaengl, leading photographers who photographed Liszt during the 1860s included Pierre Petit (1832–1909) and Joseph Albert (1825–1886), with the latter capturing a group portrait with Liszt’s fellow musicians Ede Reményi and Ferdinand Plotényi. This example is illustrative in showing each sitter in a distinctly different pose and attitude, a contrivance common during the time as photographers struggled to create a coherent image when a group was present. This variety, perhaps disconcerting for modern eyes, is dominating in larger group photographs of Liszt from his final days in Weimar, such as those by Louis Held (1851–1927). Some of the most striking images of Liszt in his last days come from Paul Nadar (1856–1939), son of the famous caricaturist, with dramatic lighting highlighting the aged musician’s physiognomy.

Paradoxically, photographs provide a nice segue into caricatures. Prior to the widespread availability of photographs (noting the one-off nature of the earlier daguerreotype), a physiognomically-precise knowledge of Liszt’s visage was not known to those who had seen him; not known in the sense that portraits had always represented varying degrees of “idealised” representations. Once photographs became widespread, a warts-and-all representation could be available to all. As caricatures rely on a form of visual “shorthand”, it was only natural that those from the first half of Liszt’s life typically hone in on a well-known aspect of his personality or biography: his theatrical gestures during performance, or his (in)famous Magyar regalia.

This is not to say that caricaturists were not inviting ridicule of him by highlighting these visual accoutrements, as they certainly did in Paris, but rather that they also formed visual cues that the image was of “Liszt”. With the availability of photography from the 1860s on, caricaturists could also include reference to specific aspects of his appearance in previously unviable ways. As caricatures could use Liszt’s physicality as a representative tool, some probably give us a better sense of what Liszt looked like in concert than other forms that show him sitting at the piano.

The humorous statuettes of Liszt by Jean Pierre Dantan (1800–1869) are significant for their popularity and influence. They perfectly represent the motifs available within the caricaturist’s armoury and target Liszt’s persona with alacrity. Dantan “effectively invented

the new genre of the *buste charge*", as Laurent Bairdon noted, and this new form was enormously successful and inspired other artists to take it up.⁹ The impact of Dantan's 1836 statuette of Liszt at the piano was such that it was illustrated in the leading humorous magazine *Charivari*. Showing Liszt in "agonised caricature" to quote Alan Walker's phrase: the statuette depicts Liszt with arms stretched out across the entirety of the keyboard, hair cascading down past his shoulders. Perhaps the most compelling and justifiably best-known set of images of Liszt are the series of eight by the caricaturist János Jankó (1833–1896) published in the humorous magazine *Borsszem Jankó* in April 1873. Unusually, given what was noted above, the set is an artistically successful convergence of the tropes of Liszt in action typical of pre-1850s caricatures combine with the accurate physiognomy post widespread dissemination of photographs.¹⁰

As can be seen from this short and necessarily selective excursion into Lisztian iconography, the variety of media, genres and styles is considerable. This should not be taken to imply, however, that his images were always at the mercy of forces beyond his control or simply subject to the whim of those who portrayed him. By and large, it can be confidently posited that Liszt had a say in how he was depicted, especially in the "serious" forms of oil painting, lithographs and photographs. The necessary relationship and negotiations between artist and sitter would have both mediated and nuanced the inevitable norms and practices of artistic schools, national styles, genre conventions and so forth.

Conversely, it could be argued that Liszt had difficulty shaping the construction of a managed and convincing image of himself as an artist-hero (of whatever precise bent), although several portraits do conglomerate around this broad trope. One reason for this may well be that he lacked sufficient – if not necessary – biographical elements to underpin such a conceit. Absent was the deafness of Beethoven, the insanity of Schumann, the early death of Schubert. Liszt's long life was, for all intents and purposes, successful and productive. Indeed, as Alfred Brendel astutely observed in the anniversary year of 1986, Liszt "made the mistake of leaving behind an unusual legacy of envy."¹¹

Liszt's place in nineteenth-century music iconography is nonetheless both significant and unique, most obviously in the first instance for its remarkable breadth. His relatively long life

spanned not only dramatic social and political upheaval, but also transformative developments in nineteenth-century visual media. In turn, he was one of the most singularly important recurring musical figures in visual history, including popular media, and arguably a major precursor to more modern icons of mass culture.¹²

[3017 words]

Further Reading

Burger, Ernst. *Franz Liszt: A Chronicle of His Life in Pictures and Documents*. Princeton University Press, 198

Davison, Alan. "Franz Liszt and the Physiognomic Ideal in the Nineteenth Century." *Music in Art* (2005): 133-144.

Gooley, Dana. *The Virtuoso Liszt*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Shephard, Tim, and Anne Leonard, eds. *The Routledge companion to music and visual culture*. Routledge, 2013.

¹ Pauline Pocknell, "Clandestine Portraits: Liszt in the Art of His Age", in Michael Saffle and James Deaville eds, *New Light on Liszt and His Music: Essays in Honor of Alan Walker's 65th Birthday*, Pendragon Press, 1997, 123. The fascination with Liszt's face in particular was at least partly rooted in contemporary views on physiognomy and phrenology. For an overview of studies on Liszt's iconography, see Michael Saffle, "Iconographies and Iconographical Studies", in his *Franz Liszt: A Research and Information Guide*, Routledge, 2013, 68–72.

² Richard Leppert, "Cultural Contradiction, Idolatry, and the Piano," in James Parakilas ed., *Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life with the Piano*, Yale University Press, 1999, 264–265.

³ Beatrice Farwell, ed., *The Cult of Images: Baudelaire and the 19th Century Media Explosion* University of California Press, 1977, 71.

⁴ For more on the Danhauser painting, see: Davison, "Virtuosity domesticated: Portraits of Franz Liszt by two Biedermeier artists", *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 2/1 (2005): 3–22; Imre Kovács, "The Apotheosis of Beethoven in Danhauser's Painting Liszt at the Piano", *Studia Musicologica* 55/1-2 (2014): 119–130; and Suzanne Marie Francis, "Liszt at the piano: The impact of iconography on mid-nineteenth century musicology," *Studia Musicologica* 55, no. 1-2 (2014): 131-144.

⁵ Imre Kovács, "The Portrait of Liszt as an Allegory of the Artist in Ary Scheffer's 'Three Magi'", *Studia Musicologica* 49/1-2, (2008): 100.

⁶ Liszt, letter to George Sand, 30 April 1837, published in *Gazette Musicale* 16 July 1837, translated in: Franz Liszt, *An Artist's Journey: Lettres d'un bachelier ès musique, 1835–1841*, trans. and annot. by Charles Suttoni, University of Chicago Press, 1989, 28–29.

⁷ Kovács, "The Portrait of Liszt as an Allegory of the Artist", 102.

⁸ As an aside, photographs should be viewed cautiously as providing definitive evidence for Liszt's performance practice, such as in regards to his seating position, arm and hand positioning and the like. See Davison, "Franz Liszt and the development of 19th-century pianism: A re-reading of the evidence," *The Musical Times* 147, no. 1896 (2006): 33–43.

⁹ Laurent Baridon, "Word and image in Daumier's Bustes des Parlemfntaires", *Word and Image*, 11/2 (1995): 109.

¹⁰ Davison, "Liszt and Caricatures: The Clarity of Distortion", in *Liszt: A Chorus of Voices*, 68–75.

¹¹ Alfred Brendel, "The Noble Liszt," *New York Review of Books* 33, no. 18 (1986): 3.

¹² Davison, "Romantic Musical Celebrity and Printed Portraits: Visual Intimacy and Mass-Market Distance", in Silverthorne, Diane V. ed., *Music, Art and Performance from Liszt to Riot Grrrl: The Musicalization of Art*, Bloomsbury, 2018, 33–48.