

Title: A Guide to Franz Liszt's Piano Transcriptions of Franz Schubert's Songs

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) made fifty-six transcriptions of Schubert's songs over a period of eight years (1838–46) to introduce the name of the composer, who was little known both in and outside Vienna during his lifetime.¹ Because Liszt intentionally preserved all the details of the original songs,² these transcriptions present challenges for a pianist, such as how to produce a vocal line on the piano, as well as interpretive issues such as ornamentation, style, and conveying the meaning of the lyrics on the piano. The purpose of this presentation is to introduce pianists to study practices employed by singers, with the goal of interpreting the vocal aspects of Liszt's Schubert song transcriptions.

Many prominent vocal pedagogues, including Cornelius L. Reid,³ Appelman,⁴ and Richard Miller,⁵ consider that control of the breath is vitally important for supported singing.⁶ Although breathing is essential for singing, it is easy for pianists to overlook the importance of breathing, because that is not a primary factor in physically producing sound on the piano. Nevertheless, it is critically important that pianists studying Liszt's Schubert song transcriptions for the first time acquire an understanding of breathing in order to interpret the vocal aspects of his transcriptions. Breathing helps pianists to understand the direction of a phrase, as well as to maintain its continuity in legato.

It is crucial that pianists study the notated ornaments of Schubert's songs in order to distinguish the original vocal ornamentation from Liszt's pianistic ornamentation. An understanding the vocal performance practices helps pianists to recreate vocal qualities on the piano.

Schubert's most remarkable accomplishment is to match the musical line to the text, and he used speaking style as a compositional method for dramatic effects. Liszt marked expression marks (e.g., *parlante*) and various notations (e.g., staccato with slur) to indicate speaking style, but this alone does not guide pianists in how to interpret speaking style on the piano.

Although Liszt encouraged publishers to print the song text above the staff, the text does not offer any guidelines on how to transfer the vocal interpretation to the piano. A study of the original song text from a vocal point of view helps pianists to reflect the style of the language and to deliver the meaning of the text on the piano.

¹ Liszt's song transcriptions also widened his own repertoire. Alan Walker, "Liszt and the Schubert Song Transcriptions," Introduction to *Franz Liszt: The Schubert Song Transcriptions for Solo Piano, Series III* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999), ix.

² Alan Walker, "Liszt and the Schubert Song Transcriptions," *Musical Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (winter 1991): 249–51.

³ Cornelius L. Reid, *The Free Voice: A Guide to Natural Singing* (New York: Joseph Patelson Music House, 1972), 160–69.

⁴ D. Ralph Appelman, *The Science of Vocal Pedagogy: Theory and Application* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 10–11.

⁵ Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing: System and Art in Vocal Technique* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), 20.

⁶ "In the beginning there was Breath and Singing was with Breath and Singing was Breath. And all Singing was made by the Breath and without Breath was not any Singing made that was made." Robert C. White, "On the Teaching of Breathing for the Singing Voice," *Journal of Voice* 2, no. 1 (March 1988): 26.

The composer Robert Schumann once remarked that Liszt's transcriptions were perhaps the most difficult pieces written for the piano up to that time, and only an intelligent artist could satisfy Liszt's high level of virtuosity without destroying the identity of the original work.⁷ This could be considered a warning to pianists not to focus on the technical aspects only. The pedagogical guide presented in the study, based on singers' approaches to the actual songs, should help pianists to "see beyond the notes" and achieve a performance closer to the heart of the songs.

⁷ Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, ed. Konrad Wolff, trans. Paul Rosenfeld (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 154–55.

A GUIDE TO FRANZ LISZT'S PIANO TRANSCRIPTIONS OF FRANZ SCHUBERT'S SONGS

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Introduction

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) made **fifty-six** transcriptions of Schubert's songs over a period of eight years (1838–46).

Liszt's Schubert song transcriptions are faithful to the vocal materials of the original songs.

When Liszt published his song transcriptions, he showed his respect for the original works by printing the song text above the staff (Walker, 252).

When Diabelli brought out the first batch of twelve transcriptions, in 1838, Liszt wrote the publisher that he was pleased that the transcriptions were printed with the words underlying the notes—*exactly* as Schubert himself had set them—rather than what was eventually carried out.

Liszt's experience with singers helped him to preserve the original work when transcribing the songs for piano. A critic wrote about Liszt's ability to help a singer to interpret songs more effectively (Liszt, 52):

"His high understanding of the instruments, his deep sympathy in following, and his knowledge of the human voice, which he had learned from the performance by Liszt and Adolphe Nourrit.... But then, who but Liszt could follow the singer through all the nuances of his interpretation and still make the audience feel when hearing the cries of the doomed child?"

Altogether in his song transcriptions, Liszt used many more expression marks, including especially *il canto* (the song), *parlante* (speaking), and *voce* (voice).

Objectives

1. How to produce a vocal line on the piano
2. How to interpret ornaments and speaking style
3. How to convey the meaning of the lyrics on the piano

Methods and Application

1. BREATHING

Breathing for phrasing

Schubert-Liszt, *Gute Nacht*, S. 561, No. 1, mm. 7–11

Inhalation – Exhalation – (Partial breath) – Inhalation

Breath preparation at the beginning of a phrase

Schubert-Liszt, *Die Rose*, S. 556, mm. 5–8

Humming for legato singing

Schubert-Liszt, *Ave Maria*, S. 559, No. 12, m. 3

Mental concentration for breath-planning with inner listening

Schubert-Liszt, *Meinestille*, S. 558, No. 5, mm. 1–2 (It follows a similar format to Frank Merrick's example, Merrick, *Practising the Piano*, 1–5.)

2. ORNAMENTATION

Appoggiatura

A small ornamental note should often be stressed and performed on the beat. An appoggiatura takes the entire value of the note it decorates, the following note being unaccented (*Meine Ausgabung*).

Schubert, *Frühlingsglocke*, D. 586, No. 7, m. 18

Schubert-Liszt, *Frühlingsglocke*, S. 558, No. 7, m. 18

Trill options, Schubert-Liszt, *Das Fischermädchen*, S. 560, No. 2, m. 22

3. STYLE

Application of *parlando* style

Schubert, *Der Leiermann*, D. 911, No. 24, mm. 9–10

Schubert-Liszt, *Der Leiermann*, S. 561, No. 8, 9–10

*The mark means a stressed syllable.

Application of recitative

1. Schubert-Liszt, *Der Wanderer*, S. 558, No. 11, mm. 5–9
2. Use of fermata for emotional intensity 4, mm. 12–37
3. Change from monologue (narrator) to dialogue (conversation) style Schubert-Liszt, *Die Meistersinger*, S. 561, No. 2, mm. 15–20

4. TEXT COMPREHENSION

Use of pause and fermata for change of mood

Schubert-Liszt, *Der Leiermann*, S. 561, No. 8, mm. 28–34

Silence

1. Highlighting Schubert-Liszt, *Der Wanderer*, S. 558, No. 11, mm. 21–28
2. Theoretical moments Schubert-Liszt, *Der Leiermann*, S. 561, No. 2, mm. 14–17

Conclusions

A pedagogical guide based on Schubert's approaches to the original songs helps to see Liszt's singers' song transcriptions from a singer's viewpoint.

- An understanding of breathing helps pianists to understand the direction of a phrase, as well as to maintain its continuity in legato.
- It is crucial that pianists study the notated ornaments of Schubert's singers' transcriptions to understand the vocal ornamentation for Liszt's pianists' ornamentation.
- A study of speaking style is necessary for pianists to match the musical line to the text.
- An understanding of the song text helps pianists to deliver the meaning of the text on the piano.

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