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.

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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.

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 (1836–46).

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 1836, he printed the poems separately inside the front covers. Liszt at once protested that this was useless and that the transcriptions must be printed with the words underlying the staves— exactly as Schubert himself had set them— a request that 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 skill in helping a singer to interpret songs more effectively (Liszt, 52):

To fully understand what is passing, inner, and exterior in Der Dornröschen, one has to hear that celebrated ballad of Beethoven and Schubert performed by Liszt and Adolphe Nourrit. But then, what artists could follow the singer through the masses of his interpretation and mark his playing with an energy and power that doubled that terror the audience felt when hearing the song of the dreamer child?

Altogether in his song transcriptions, Liszt used many more expression marks, including especially:

- 1. 笛音 (the tone), 1. παιχνίδι (speaking), and 1. παιχνίδι (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-Lisztranscriptions, S. 564, No. 5, mm. 1–2 (f) follows a similar format to Frank Merk’s example. Merk in, Practicing the Piano, 1–5.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breath</th>
<th>Phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In</td>
<td>Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In</td>
<td>Out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. 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 (Nevis Ausgabe).

Schubert, Frühlingsgrippe, D. 666, No. 3, mm. 5–8
Schubert, Frühlingsgrippe, D. 666, No. 7, mm. 18
Schubert, Frühlingsgrippe, D. 555, No. 7, mm. 18

Trill (shake)

An eighteenth-century trill starts on the main note and generally begin on the beat (Howard Ferguson, 191–23).

Schubert, Der Flaschenkünstler, D. 567, No. 10, mm. 22–23
Schubert, Der Flaschenkünstler, D. 567, No. 3, mm. 22–23

Trill options, Schubert-Lisztranscriptions, S. 560, No. 2, mm. 32

3. 3. STYLE

Application of parlando style

Schubert, Der Cronholmer, D. 911, No. 23, mm. 9–10
Schubert-Lisztranscriptions, S. 561, No. 8, mm. 9–10

R.P. Schubert, Der Cronholmer, D. 911, No. 23, mm. 9–10 (Glass, 995)

Die Cronholmer hand behind her head (and her head over)

Cronholmer behind the village stands an organ-grinder, (I)here behind the village an organ-grinder is standing (v)

The mark (above) means a stressed syllable.

Application of raccrescive

1. Flexibility

Schubert-Lisztranscriptions, S. 558, No. 11, mm. 3–9

2. Use of crescendi for emotional intensity

Schubert-Lisztranscriptions, S. 556, No. 4, mm. 12–17

3. Change from monologue (variation) to dialogic (conversation) style

Schubert-Lisztranscriptions, S. 561, No. 2, mm. 15–20

Conclusions

A pedagogical guide based on singers’ approaches to the original songs helps to see Liszt’s Schubert 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 noted ornaments of Schubert’s songs in order to distinguish the original vocal ornamentation from Liszt’s pianistic 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.

References


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