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Between opera and the Lied – 'Tre sonetti di Petrarca' by Franz Liszt

ABSTRACT: Franz Liszt composed his songs in the time when Europe was at the peak of the development of the Romantic form – *das Lied*. However, it seems that not all of Liszt's songs should be discussed from this perspective, pointing at least at significant influences of the 19th century Italian opera. The second version of a set of *Tre sonetti di Petrarca* reflects not only some changes in the composer's technique or style, but above all, constitutes an evidence of certain tendencies in perceiving vocal technique and the development of Italian and European vocal aesthetics.

It might be assumed that, even though the music construction of the second version of the *Sonnets* – particularly in the layer of melody of the vocal part – brings to mind the Italian operatic aria in its almost purest form, the deeply emotional musical interpretation of Petrarch's most beautiful love lyrics seems to strongly derive from the already shaped German Romantic song. On the whole, the masterpiece is a bit eclectic, which in the light of Liszt's reference to the past (*belcanto* form of an Italian aria, Renaissance lyrics) constitutes – as it could be called today – the author's postmodern reinterpretation.

KEYWORDS: Liszt, *Tre sonetti di Petrarca*, *das Lied*, opera, *belcanto*, songs, singing aesthetics

The vocal works of Franz Liszt, though a bit in the background of his instrumental output, undoubtedly constitute a significant part of his compositional activity. Even the very number of songs that came from the pen of Liszt – one of the greatest composers of the Romantic period – may prove that he did not treat vocal lyrics in a marginal way. Today the list includes more than eighty original songs and almost forty adaptations and revised versions of compositions written earlier.¹

¹ Rena Charnin Mueller enumerates, for instance, 87 original songs for voice and piano, see Rena Charnin Mueller, "The Lieder of Liszt", in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 168; Ben Arnold gives the number of "at least eighty-six" music-accompanied texts and forty-one revisions, Ben Arnold, "Songs and Melodramas", in: *The Liszt Companion*, ed. Ben Arnold, (Westport: Greenwood Press 2002), 403; Andrzej Kosowski enumerates 80 titles and 29 adaptations made by the composer, not accounting for some arrangements for voice and orchestra, see: Andrzej Kosowski, "Liszt, Franz: Kompozycje" [Liszt, Franz: A List of Compositions], in: *Encyklopedia Muzyczna PWM. Część Biograficzna* [PWM Musical Encyclopedia, Biographical Part], ed. Elżbieta Dziębowska, vol. 5, (Kraków: PWM, 1997), 382 and following. Stanley R. Irwin in his Ph. D dissertation, referring to works cataloguing Liszt's masterpieces by Humphrey Searle (Humphrey Searle, *The Music of Liszt* [New York: Dover Publications, 1996]), specifies 91 catalogued songs and 35 revisions and indicates seven songs whose authorship was not confirmed or which were lost, see Stanley

Following Christopher Headington,² Stanley R. Irwin³ claims that a more precise assessment of the number of actually written songs is extremely difficult, also due to numerous revisions of earlier compositions, some of which so radically changing the original piece that they may be treated as separate compositions.⁴ It may be even assumed that in some cases we have to deal with setting poems to entirely new music containing auto-citations from the previous arrangement.⁵

Regardless of the attempt to provide a precise or only approximate number of compositions for voice with piano, it is doubtless that the vocal works of Franz Liszt constitute a highly valuable inheritance of the Romantic era. It is also worth mentioning that in English-language literature the term ‘Lied’ dominates in reference to Liszt’s songs instead of an obvious translation for ‘song’. This clearly suggests the close connection of Liszt’s vocal lyric with the German trend of Romantic songs. However, as Randall Umstead⁶ rightly observes, not all of Liszt’s songs should be discussed from this perspective, pointing at least at significant influences of the 19th century Italian opera. On the other hand, Ben Arnold finds that ‘Liszt greatly lightens the piano texture in several songs, particularly the Hugo songs, in effect making them better resemble French *mélodies*’.⁷

In spite of the quite important place of vocal lyrics in the music work of Franz Liszt, it is difficult to find a separate comprehensive study on the subject.⁸

R. Irwin, *Two Versions of Tre Sonetti di Petrarca by Franz Liszt (1846/1883). A Literary and Comparative Musical Analysis*, PhD diss. Indiana University, 1987, 41. It should also be noted that the first attempts to catalogue Liszt’s works – with active participation of the composer himself – resulted in two issues of *Thematisches Verzeichniss der Werke* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1855 and 1877). In the 30’s of the 20th century a two-volume work by Peter Raabe was published, see Peter Raabe, *Franz Liszt*, (vol. 1: *Liszt’s Leben*, vol. 2: *Liszt’s Schaffen*) (Stuttgart and Berlin: Cotta, 1931).

² Christopher Headington, “The Songs”, in: *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*, ed. Alan Walker (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1976), 233.

³ Irwin, *Two Versions of Tre Sonetti di Petrarca*, 39.

⁴ An additional difficulty, pointed by Irwin, is the fact that the publication of Liszt’s works from 1907–34 edited by Peter Raabe for Breitkopf & Härtel includes songs in chronological order (except for the cycle *Lieder aus “Wilhelm Tell”*) according to the date of creation or first publication and not according to the music-accompanied texts. Therefore, it often happens that the further versions of songs to the same poetic text are published not only apart from each other, but in separate volumes of the mentioned edition.

⁵ Cf. Arnold, “Songs and Melodramas”, 414: “On several occasions [Liszt] set previously used texts to completely new music, creating independent settings”.

⁶ Randall Umstead, *A New Perspective on the Italian Songs of Franz Liszt: an Italian Perspective*, PhD. diss. University of Cincinnati, 2009.

⁷ Arnold, “Songs and Melodramas”, 415. Reference to French character of Franz Liszt’s songs may be also found in Shin-Young Park, “Franz Liszt’s Songs on Poems by Victor Hugo”, PhD. diss. The Florida State University, 2007.

⁸ As a kind of curiosity it might be noticed that most authors start their papers from the thesis that “song-related issues become a subject of interest of theorists only occasionally”. Therefore, one may only hope for a detailed work devoted to vocal lyrics of Franz Liszt.

Liszt’s vocal lyrics are discussed either in the context of the composer’s whole work⁹ where they are rather superficially treated, or in single articles, in which the authors treat the research material selectively or only point at possible fields of searching.¹⁰ This situation may be caused by a wide variety of source materials or by a slightly deprecating attitude of musicologists towards vocal lyrics of Liszt, resulting indirectly from the ambiguous place of the composer’s songs in the history of the genre.¹¹ It seems that the only common denominator for all the critics is a broadly understood problem of revisions made by the composer. The analysis of further versions of music-accompanied texts and alterations of compositions presented from the angle of Liszt’s biography and issues related to his composer’s technique constitutes today the basic form of the presence of vocal miniatures of the author of *Faust Symphony* in theoretical considerations. However, in my view, taking into consideration the performative concept of a music piece, a significant supplement to the discourse on Franz Liszt’s songs should be to see them (as well as vocal lyrics in general) from the perspective of a broadly understood performance analysis.¹²

Franz Liszt composed his songs in the time when Europe was at the peak of the development of the Romantic form – *das Lied*.¹³ This could not have been without a noticeable influence on his work. A key issue in this context is the selection of texts to be set to music, in this case mostly poems by outstanding writers such as: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Heinrich Heine, Friedrich Schiller, Ludwig Uhland, Ludwig Rellstab, or Victor Hugo. Liszt composed his songs for texts by poets from various countries and therefore written in various languages. The most numerous groups of music-accompanied texts – German and French – have already been

⁹ Most popular contemporary analyses include undoubtedly books written and edited by Alan Walker.

¹⁰ As in the already mentioned texts by Rena Charnin Mueller, Ben Arnold or in Monika Hennemann’s “Liszt’s Lieder” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, ed. Kenneth Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 192–205.

¹¹ Also in publications discussing general or even local history of vocal lyrics, Liszt’s songs are mentioned very rarely. However, as Alan Walker notices, these compositions constitute “a missing link between Schumann and Mahler, without which the history of German *Lied* is incomplete”. Alan Walker, *Reflections on Liszt* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 150–152.

¹² As ‘performance analysis’ I understand not only considerations resulting directly from the fact of performing a certain piece and implying inquiries related to, e.g. technical aspects of realization of some of its parts, but also – or even above all – raising certain aesthetic aspects underlying reception of an art work.

¹³ Franz Liszt’s first songs were created around 1838–39 and the last ones at the beginning of the 80’s of the 19th century. At the same time, the so called ‘Robert Schumann’s year of song’ (1840) had place, Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner became popular composers and at the end of this period the song work of Gustav Mahler, Hugo Wolf and Richard Strauss emerged. Even though some authors compare Franz Liszt’s compositions to Hugo Wolf’s lyrics, it seems highly interesting to compare Franz Liszt’s songs to works by Richard Strauss in the field of tone color.

discussed by some scholars.¹⁴ Among the remaining songs there is a set of *Tre sonetti di Petrarca* – to my mind – an uncommonly interesting research material, especially in terms of a certain dependence between an autonomic creative thought and perception of the present. The set,¹⁵ and particularly its second version, reflects not only some changes in the composer's technique or style, but above all, constitutes an evidence of certain tendencies in perceiving vocal technique and the development of Italian and European vocal aesthetics.

At this point, it might be finally assumed that, despite the fact that the first version of the *Sonnets* (more virtuoso and allowing for a more spectacular vocal show), is more willingly performed by many vocalists, it is the author's revision that gave the songs a unique atmosphere, opening the idea of the German *Lied* to European vocal aesthetics.

In other words, even though the music construction of the second version of the *Sonnets* – particularly in the layer of melody of the vocal part¹⁶ – brings to mind the Italian operatic aria in its almost purest form, the deeply emotional musical interpretation of Petrarch's most beautiful love lyrics seems to strongly derive from the already shaped German Romantic song. On the whole, the masterpiece is a bit eclectic, which in the light of Liszt's reference to the past (*belcanto* form of an Italian aria, Renaissance lyrics) constitutes – as it could be called today – the author's postmodern reinterpretation.

Tre sonetti di Petrarca, compositions marked № 270¹⁷ according to Searle's classification (position 578 according to Raabe's register), though not commonly performed on stage, more and more often arouse interest of performers and vocal literature theorists.¹⁸ The composer's interest in Petrarch's texts had, as it seems,

¹⁴ Apart from the already mentioned works, there are also: Frits Noske, *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc: The Origin and Development of the Melodie*, transl. by Rita Benton, vol. 2, (Mineola-New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1988), 125–136.

¹⁵ I deliberately do not use the term 'cycle', since these songs do not constitute a cycle in the typical meaning of the word. Actually, the only real cycle are songs *Lieder aus "Wilhelm Tell"*, which were intended by the composer as an integral piece. Petrarch's sonnets – though showing all features of a cycle – were not, at least at the beginning, treated as a cycle by Liszt. An evidence for that is lack of proper information in the first issue of the *Sonnets*. Only the second version of the songs was provided with a collective title *Tre sonetti di Petrarca*, and the sonnets were put in order similarly to their place in Petrarch's work.

¹⁶ On melody in Franz Liszt's songs see Rossana Dalmonte, "Liszt's Lieder. An Essay in Formalization", in: *Liszt and His World: Proceedings of the International Liszt Conference held at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 20–23 May 1993*, ed. Michael Saffle (Pendragon Press, 1998), 271–294.

¹⁷ This numbering is related only to the vocal version of the works. Two piano versions arranged by Franz Liszt have numbers R. 10b or S.158 and S.161 (as parts 4–6 of *Années de pèlerinage. Deuxième année. Italie*) and are definitely more often present in concert repertoire.

¹⁸ Suffice it to say that the cited here PhD dissertations are a kind of particular form of scholarly view. What is important from performance point of view, these dissertations were written by singers, so by the performers.

dual background. On the one hand, it was the fascination with the Renaissance poet¹⁹ and the character of Laura²⁰ under the influence of Hugo’s poetry,²¹ on the other hand – enchantment with the culture and atmosphere of Italy during his trip there in the second half of the 30’s of the 19th century.²² From among 366 poems from the *Canzoniere* collection, Liszt chose to set to music only three, marked with the numbers 47, 104 and 123.²³ The first version of the *Sonnets*, regardless of numerous attempts to determine a more precise date, was created at the beginning of the 40’s. Although initially it was assumed that these compositions were written in 1838–39 (and these dates are given by some authors), in the light of the analysis of some source materials it seems more likely that the songs were probably composed in 1843–44, or at the earliest in 1841.²⁴ Irrespective of the actual date of creation, the songs were published for the first time in 1846 and intended for a tenor voice.²⁵ It is highly probable that the first performer of the

¹⁹ Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) is considered to be the creator of Renaissance love poetry, especially in the form of the sonnet. The texts that inspired Franz Liszt were taken from the collection *Canzoniere* or *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, which might be translated as pieces in ‘ordinary’ language in opposition to Latin as the obligatory language of Renaissance literature.

²⁰ Franz Liszt’s inspiration by the phenomenon of Laura – a phenomenon that can be treated as a symbol of perfect love, that is in modern terms, of virtual emotions – provokes one more context of considerations. The songs in the first version were written in the time when Franz Liszt experienced several raptures of love. It is interesting, however, that Franz Liszt returned to Francesco Petrarca’s texts when, being in a platonic relationship, he could nearly identify himself with that ‘virtuality’.

²¹ Information on Franz Liszt’s inspiration by Victor Hugo’s poetry might be found in, among others, letter of the composer from 1842 to Marie d’Agoult; Charmin Mueller, “The Lieder of Liszt”, 170.

²² Franz Liszt’s Italian fascinations may constitute a whole new sphere for considerations. Beginning from the already mentioned journey with Marie d’Agoult and his love for Italian opera, to the return from Rome in the 60’s and in consequence taking holy orders, we can see that Italian culture and Renaissance influences had always been present in the composer’s field of interest.

²³ It has to be noticed here that the numbering of the sonnets is not quite clear. Sometimes different versions and editions of the works have different numbering. The cause of the confusion with the numbering of the sonnets might be the fact that some publishers, translators or even modern literary historians number Francesco Petrarca’s poems consecutively in the whole collection while others use different numbering for each of the forms used by the poet. It is difficult to say clearly whether such choice should be accounted for by enchantment with particular poems or by a pure chance.

²⁴ See Charmin Mueller, “The Lieder of Liszt”, 170–171: letters dated 18th September 1843 and 22nd July 1844 source: *Liszt Letters in the Library of Congress*, ed. and transl. Michael Short (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2003), 28 and 38. A similar supposition is made also by R. Larry Todd, who notices that the composer describes usage of increased chords in the *Sonnets*, dating that fact for 1841, see: R. Larry Todd, “The ‘Unwelcome Guest’ Regaled: Franz Liszt and the Augmented Triad”, *19th-Century Music* 12 (1988/2), 93–115.

²⁵ It has to be noticed that in the same year, a few months in advance, the first version of piano transcription of these songs was published. However, all authors agree that, although the piano version was first to be published, the songs intended for voice and piano were created

sonnets was Adolphe Nourrit,²⁶ famous for powerful high tones delivered in the head register, in contrast to what had hitherto been the popular technique – the *false* technique. Perhaps it was he for whom the optional notes reaching twice D flat² were written.

Aesthetics of the first version of *Petrarch's Sonnets* from the performing point of view brings to mind clear associations with the Italian opera of the first half of the 19th century, when on all European stages the masterpieces of Gioachino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti or Vincenzo Bellini were most popular. The music of the first two authors influenced Liszt to a large extent. A number of arrangements and paraphrases of fragments of Rossini's, Donizetti's and also Bellini's operas (among others fragments of *Norma*) were made by Liszt. A detailed music analysis (with particular consideration of the melody line of the vocal part) proves unquestionable analogies between *Petrarch's Sonnets* and typical Italian arias written in the 19th century *belcanto* style. Taking into consideration such elements as music phrases in cantilena style, a big number of figurations, a number of cadence fragments, recitative fragments, melismatic treatment of some words, culminating points based on elements of vocal virtuosity, numerous repetitions of words or whole phrases and fragments imitating orchestral sounds appearing in the piano part (e.g. string tremolos, broken chords imitating the sound of harp, simple harmonic and metrically stable chord accompaniment supporting the vocal line), we can observe a significant similarity to popular opera fragments.²⁷ Comparison of certain fragments of the *Sonnets* and Italian operas of that time evokes numerous analogies concerning the structure of the compared citations.²⁸ Operatic origins made Liszt treat metrics, characteristic of the form of the sonnet, quite freely. Although in the music layer (also in key sequences) the division resulting from two quatrains and two triplets (in the form abba abba and cdc dcd) is preserved, the usage of numer-

earlier. Rena Charnin Mueller even suggests that Franz Liszt worked almost simultaneously on both versions, making a kind of creative dual study contrasting the piano forms with the vocal ones, see: Charnin Mueller, "The Lieder of Liszt", 171.

²⁶ Adolphe Nourrit died in March 1839 so he could not perform Liszt's sonnets, which Thomas Forrest Kelly suggests, see Thomas Forest Kelly, *First Nights at the Opera* (Anna Arbor-Michigan: Yale University, 2004), 164. Adolphe Nourrit certainly performed Franz Schubert's songs (and popularized his music in France) and was highly appreciated by Franz Liszt as a vocal lyrics interpreter (see also: *infra*, citation from letter referred to in footnote 36). A probable performer of the first version of the *Sonnets* was Franz Götze – a tenor in Franz Liszt's ensemble during the Weimar years, often singing his compositions.

²⁷ An extensive music analysis from the angle of analogies to Italian *belcanto* aria might be found in Christian Savage's study – one of the participants of a seminar in the historical musicology class at Florida State University, held in 2011. The result of the participants' work is, among others, the website devoted to Franz Liszt, see: Christian Savage, <http://lisztomania.wikidot.com>, accessed October 11, 2011.

²⁸ Volume limitation of this text makes it impossible to present certain comparisons. Some of them may be found in Umstead, *A New Perspective on the Italian Songs*.

ous repetitions of whole verses as well as single words and expressions indicates undoubtedly Liszt's reinterpretation of Petrarch's poetry.²⁹

At this point, one more fact should be noticed: Petrarch's *Canzoniere* were created as a result of a deliberate break off with the strictly observed Renaissance standard of writing in Latin, in favour of a 'colloquial' language – Italian – a language that later became, and in a way still is, the national language of opera, even though the 19th century brought the vogue for localizing opera masterpieces. It is thus highly probable that, drawing on the style of the Italian opera while setting Petrarch's Italian poetry to music, Liszt clearly wanted to emphasise some cultural continuity and consequence. His deliberate intension to achieve this effect can be also seen from the significant number of preserved drafts showing that Liszt arranged melody to each of the sonnets several times. Therefore, it should be agreed that these songs were not written on impulse or in a flush of enthusiasm, but constituted for Liszt a kind of composer's study³⁰ – a study which did not come to an end together with the publication of the first version of the songs.

Weimar years and the subsequent journey to Rome was the time when Liszt made numerous revisions of his earlier compositions. The composer's critical attitude embraced also *Petrarch's Sonnets* which from that moment evolved into a set with a common title *Tre sonetti di Petrarca*. Liszt worked over this new version from the beginning of the 60's and completed the work most probably in 1864, though finally the altered songs were not published until 1883. Similarly to the case of the first version, also a number of drafts presenting consecutive steps of adaptation of the existing compositions have been preserved until now. In the manuscripts owned by Netherlands Music Institute³¹ one may find not only numerous deletions and insertions but also, for instance, fragments pasted on previous versions, which to some extent enables the critic to reconstruct the process of adaptation.

Among the number of alterations that may be observed while analyzing both versions of the songs, two basic ones seem to dominate: intending songs for a baritone voice and a significant reduction of the music layer, both in the solo voice and piano parts.³² The changes in the score in a number of places were closely linked to the changes in the text. Regardless of a meaningful reduction of repetitions of words or whole lines, Liszt also made some, though not all, corrections related

²⁹ A thorough analysis of Franz Liszt's songs in reference to the arrangement of text may be found, among others, in: Stanley R. Irwin's study (Irwin, *Two Versions of Tre Sonetti*), or in the mentioned above analysis by Christian Savage.

³⁰ See: Charnin Mueller, "The Lieder of Liszt", 171 and http://www.nederlandsmuziekinstituut.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&lang=en&id=620&Itemid=207, accessed October 12, 2011.

³¹ In 2011, on the occasion of the composer's 200th birthday, manuscripts of two of the discussed sonnets were available on the above website.

³² A more detailed comparison of both versions in a strictly music sphere may be found in the already cited works, among others, by Rena Charnin Mueller, Ben Arnold, Stanley R. Irwin and others.

to the initially improperly read metro-rhythmics of Petrarch's poems.³³ Thus, we must agree with Andrew Fowler, who notices that "for Liszt, whose revisions were logical sequels to his unfailing search for the perfect union of literary and musical art, the Petrarch sonnets posed a persistent problem".³⁴

The fact that the composer intended the second version of the songs to Petrarch's poems for a baritone voice requires also a comment here. In the edition published in 1883 sonnets 47 and 123 were described as works for a baritone or mezzo-soprano. This, however, seems to be slightly incorrect. First of all, since the lyrical "I" in Petrarch's poems is undoubtedly a male, an attempt of love declaration performed by a female voice – irrespective of the possibility of treating the human voice as a music instrument – must be handled with extreme care.³⁵ As it seems, Liszt himself suggested male performance of these songs, which may be confirmed by his note on the manuscript of sonnet 47 – *canto baritono*. It is difficult to guess why this note was ignored by the publisher. In the context of the intended male performance of the songs, it should be clearly noted (and here the publisher also did not have any doubts) that writing the voice part of the sonnet 104 in F-clef – suggesting not only verbally or intentionally but also using distinct convention of musical notation – means that Liszt did intend the songs for a low or medium male voice.

Moreover, in one of his letters the composer explains:

I've tried to give the *canto* of these sonnets a finishing touch – and to make it as crystalline, transparent and adequate to the poetry as I could. If they come into the hands of some *amoroso* tenor who is not vulgar, but gifted with a certain ideal of the heart –

³³ Without a detailed analysis of the overemphasis in Liszt's interpretation of Francesco Petrarch's poems (a very detailed study on this problem is presented in the dissertation by Stanley R. Irwin) it might be stated that, while writing the second version of the sonnets, Liszt had already known (probably made on his request) a German translation of the songs written by Peter Cornelius and this text most probably was a basis to make changes in the vocal part. An evidence for that is the high compliance of spreading accents characteristic of a German text. However, the preserved character of Italian *cantilena* (and also the place where he worked on this piece) allows us to assume that the *Sonnets* were meant to be performed in Italian. After all, Liszt's problems with proper accentuation, even in songs written to German originals, constitute a matter often discussed by the already mentioned authors.

³⁴ Andrew Fowler, "Franz Liszt's Petrarch Sonnets: The Persistent Poetic Problem", *Indiana Theory Review* 7 (1986/2), 58.

³⁵ The problem of performing songs by male and female voices in the context of the literary text was already brought up many times by several authors. In Polish literature I may enumerate two publications: Małgorzata Komorowska, "Od gramatyki do estetyki, czyli pieśni męskie, żeńskie i uniwersalne" [From a Grammar to the Aesthetics, or Male, Female and Universal Songs], in: *Wokalistyka i Pedagogika Wokalna. Zeszyt Naukowy PSPŚ nr 77* [Vocal Performance and Pedagogy. Scientific Papers of Polish Association of Teachers of Singing No 77] (Wrocław: Akademia Muzyczna, 2000) and Doda Conrad, "Sztuka Pieśni" [The Art of Song], *Ruch Muzyczny* 31 (1987/18), 32 (1988/2), *passim*.

maybe they will meet with some success. I hardly count on it, knowing how rare a sense of the ideal is – particularly among tenors, who are keen on theatrical acclaim. Far and apart noble exceptions may be found – above all Adolphe Nourrit and Schnorr. Both have died in the effort, still rather young!³⁶

In the light of the above facts, it seems that the only appropriate performer of the *Sonnets*, both in the first and second version, may be only a male voice. At the same time, the cited fragment of the composer’s letter clearly shows that, although Liszt intuitively felt the need to intend the passionate love lyrics, such as Petrarch’s sonnets, for a voice conventionally reserved in the opera theatre for a lover, that is for a tenor, he could not leave unnoticed certain changes on the Italian opera stage of the second half of the 19th century. After a period of an absolute domination of virtuoso singing, Giuseppe Verdi’s works appeared. At the time of creation of the second version of Liszt’s *Sonnets*, most important works of Verdi (including *Nabucco*, *Macbeth* or *Rigoletto*) had already had their world premiers. In the opera theatre, these masterpieces shifted, to some extent, the responsibility from a tenor voice onto a baritone, whose tessitura is the closest to the sound of the human speech. As a consequence, the baritone voice came to be perceived as the most natural expression of emotions used for stage dramaturgy.³⁷ It was also a time of the appearance of the first works which, towards the end of the century, led to the emergence of the *verismo* style. *Verismo* was characteristic of *belcanto* cantilena as a base of the vocal part, but almost completely without any virtuoso part, leaving place for a possibly most realistic – as for the opera conventions – verbal message. It seems that the adaptations of Liszt’s sonnets not only perfectly merged into the trend of aesthetic operatic transformations of the end of the 19th century, but even – in the field of vocal lyrics – preceded and foreshadowed them.

A number of musicologists and performers claim that the second version of the *Sonnets* is simpler, not to say simplified, against the issue of 1846.³⁸ Thus, seek-

³⁶ From a letter to princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein (family name Iwanowska) dated 15th August 1882, see: La Mara, *Franz Liszt’s Briefe*, vol. 7 (Leipzig: Breitkopf&Härtel, 1902), 353–354, transl. from the Nederlands Muziek Instituut Website. Adolphe Nourrit, dissatisfied with his own performance and hearing about the successes of his opponent, committed suicide at the age of 37, while Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld – the first performer of *Tristan* in Richard Wagner’s opera – died at the age of 29 from a stroke, though it is commonly known that his death was a result of exhaustion caused by rehearsals to *Tristan and Isolde*.

³⁷ Giuseppe Verdi created also a new stereotype of a baritone hero – the character of a father – always deeply loving his child though being sometimes harsh. It is not impossible that the mature, at that time, Franz Liszt willingly identified himself with Francesco Petrarch’s poetry through more ‘paternal’ and matured feelings rather than through full of young courage and virtuosity raptures demonstrated in the first version of the *Sonnets*.

³⁸ Generally understood reduction is a characteristic element of almost all revisions made by Franz Liszt. Actually, all further versions of his songs are shorter. They have definitely fewer repetitions of words; introductions and piano interludes are limited to a minimum necessary for emotional basis; vocal and instrumental virtuosity gives way to complete subordination to the

ing for a virtuoso stimulus, singers more often choose the first version. Strangely enough, this version is also chosen by performers with medium voices who have to make necessary transpositions. Even though I have no doubts about the acceptability of song transposition in general (as one of the elements forming a piece) in this specific case – taking into consideration the *Sonnets*' ambitus, the structure of the melody line and the fact of having another version intended for a medium voice – such procedure seems to me pointless.³⁹ Despite the 'singers' preference' for the first version, the above 'simplification' is for me rather an evidence of Liszt's awareness of altering vocal stylistics, both in opera and in chamber singing. And the composer claimed:

I hesitate to publish the second original version (much modified and refined) for voice, for to express the feeling that I tried to breathe into the musical notation of these *Sonnets* would call for some poetic singer, enamoured of an ideal of love... *rarae aves in terris*⁴⁰.

Therefore, it might be assumed that Liszt, after many attempts, did succeed – deriving from Weimar classics and at the same time approving of the emerging *verismo* – in finding an almost perfect ground to combine *belcanto* cantilena and the united verbal and music layers included in the idea of *das Lied*.

Taking into consideration the above findings and referring to the earlier stated thesis, we must again emphasize that it is the second version of *Tre sonetti di Petrarca* that is the very masterpiece into which Liszt put – drawing abundantly on his own experience – the intensity of feelings of a Renaissance perfect love and bits of vocal opera virtuosity flavoured with a dose of Romantic piano passion. Mixing, with his music genius, all these ingredients in, what we might call today the melting-pot of the author's postmodern reinterpretation, Liszt created an unusual dish which, when properly served, may be enjoyed even by the most demanding music fans.

Translated by *Marzena Hans*

semantic expression of the lexical layer. Development of piano construction made Franz Liszt, while working on the second version of the *Sonnets*, intentionally simplify the piano part in a number of places, assuming that the sound of new instruments was so rich that it needed no support in thickening the texture. See also: Charnin Mueller, "The Lieder of Liszt", 182.

³⁹ A particularly drastic example is, for instance, lowering the *Sonnets* by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau by a fourth, only to reach – intended for a completely different voice structure – optional fragments, not minding the too heavy sounding piano part. Another example is Thomas Quasthoff's performance of the first version of the *Sonnets*, completely lacking any kind of real 'Italian flavour'. The only baritone performance of the song that I am familiar with, remaining in harmony with aesthetic expectations of Italian *belcanto*, was realized by Renato Bruson.

⁴⁰ From a letter to G. Ferrari from May 1880, see: La Mara, *Franz Liszt's Briefe*, vol. 8, (Leipzig: Breitkopf&Härtel, 1902), 368, transl. from Hennemann, "Liszt's Lieder", 200.