MUSICAL ALLUSION IN THE 19TH-CENTURY: A MIRROR AND A HERALD

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As a music transcriber in the twenty-first-century, I have always been interested in the historical evolution and significance of the practice. In relation to music, the term *transcription* has been used to describe different things over the course of history and, perhaps, this has contributed to the practice having a somewhat nebulous if not mysterious image. While the origin of transcribing can be traced as far back as the fourteenth-century, with the practice of transferring vocal music to instruments known as intabulation, it was not until the early nineteenth-century that music transcription reached its apex in popularity.[1]

Perhaps the most important and successful transcriber at that time was Hungarian pianist and composer Franz Liszt (1811-1886), who produced about seven-hundred transcriptions (nearly half his total output) over the course of his life.[2] Yet, while Liszt is today regarded as one of the most prominent and influential composers of the nineteenth-century, his transcriptions are still largely dismissed by musicologists as less worthy of attention. In this paper, I will try to show how this inclination may have more to do with our cultural, economic and ideological dispositions rather than with any objective aesthetic inferiority of the works in question. In addition, I will argue that the roots of such ideological dispositions coalesced at the same historical juncture when the art of transcribing reached its widest audience. Then, I will look at the reasons behind the subsequent decline of the practice by looking at historical changes in the perception of the work of art, originality and intellectual property. And finally, I will propose a reassessment of the practice based on its historical, societal and technological implications.

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[1] Boyd.
[2] Walker, 51.

As mentioned above, the term "transcription" has been used to describe different things, particularly over the past two centuries. Arnold Whittall gives perhaps the most succinct summary in this regard:

> A term often used interchangeably with *arrangement*. It is however possible to make a distinction between transcribing, as copying a composition while changing layout or notation (for example, from parts to full score), and arranging, as changing the medium (for example, from piano quartet to full orchestra, as in Schoenberg's arrangement of Brahms's op. 25). Transcription is also carried out by ethnomusicologists when they attempt to capture in staff notation a performance recorded in the field.[3]

Basically, transcription today has been relegated to "a subcategory of notation."[4] In Liszt's time there was no such distinction as evidenced by the composer utilizing both terms interchangeably, as Whittall dutifully acknowledges. This semantic shift began to take place at the turn of the twentieth-century, due in part to the advent of recording technology and the concomitant rise of ethnomusicology. Such distinction is rooted in the mistaken assumption that the process of transcribing can be somehow be regarded as a scientific endeavor where the transcriber strives for the highest degree of accuracy and fidelity in order to create as close an approximation to the original as possible. From an ethnomusicological standpoint, this idea stems from a conception of recorded music as a form of mediation, a representation of sound encapsulated onto a recorded medium. In *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne writes that sound reproduction technology

> …mediates because it conditions the possibility of reproduction, but, ideally, it is supposed to be a "vanishing" mediator – rendering the relation as transparent, as if it were not there. Inasmuch as its mediation can be detected, there is a loss of fidelity or a *loss of being* between original and copy. In this philosophy of mediation, copies are debasements of the originals.[5]

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[3] Whittall.
[4] Ellingson.
[5] Sterne, 218.

This, in a nutshell, is the philosophy at the basis of the classification of transcribing as a subcategory of notation, itself a technology. In fact, in his entry on transcription in *Grove Music Online,* Ellingson reports how at the turn of the twentieth-century, Harvard music psychologist Benjamin Ives Gilman suggested that "automatic mechanical-graphic transcriptions might provide more objective and accurate notations."[6] What we have here then is a technology (transcribing) mediating another technology (recording) whose final product is a copy of a copy, a debasement of a debasement of the original. In Sterne's view, this philosophy stems from people's desire to capture and reproduce things as they supposedly are, which then "yields a theory of correspondence between mediation and that which is represented."[7]

We can see this type of philosophy at work as Alan Walker tries to distinguish between Liszt's *transcriptions* and *paraphrases* (i.e., *arrangements*).[8] Here, I am not trying to dispute the fact that there are major differences in approach between, for example, Liszt's transcription and Schubert's *Erlkönig* and his *Reminescences* of Bellini's *Norma*. What I am arguing is that while on the surface these two transcriptions may seem to be on two opposite ends of some kind of fidelity spectrum, they are, instead, ontologically the same in the sense that they share the same representational desire. In this regard, while discussing Liszt's arrangements of Chopin's songs, Charles Rosen writes that "some of Liszt's most extravagantly free paraphrases have, in fact, an unsuspected fidelity, a genuine and often

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[6] Ellingson.

[7] Sterne, 218.

[8] Walker, 52. Walker writes that while a transcription "seeks to unfold the original work as accurately as possible, down to the smallest details," a paraphrase "is a free variation on the original," a metamorphosis.

successful attempt to enter into the original composer's skin."[9] For this reason, the idea of imposing an arbitrary division between *transcriptions* and *paraphrases* based on some purported degree of fidelity to the original obfuscates their shared ontology, which Joanna Demers calls "musical allusion" or "a filtered version of an original work."[10]

Insofar as a *paraphrase* can be seen as a less faithful form of *transcription*, it can be easy to understand why musicologists such as François-Joseph Fétis would write that with his operatic *paraphrases,* Liszt

> set about improvising fantasies on the works of the most celebrated composers, not regarding them in any other way than as themes he could modify and vary at will, changing their character, their tempo, and even the melodic and harmonic structure of their phrases.

In other words, according to Fétis, the more a transcription departs from the original the more it should be regarded as some sort of narcissistic exercise. Thus, the more visible the medium, the less faithful the reproduction. In this respect, it is then plausible to say that the philosophy of mediation may have inadvertently contributed to the creation of a hierarchy of debasement, a sliding scale with which to measure the degree of faithfulness to the original. According to this theory, we can construct a diagram which shows the varying degrees of debasement depending on the source (Fig. 1).[11]

In her 2006 book *Steal This Music*, Demers offers the following description of *arrangements*:

> Arrangements are the oldest and most common form of musical allusion. At one extreme, arranging can entail strict adaptation of a preexisting composition to a new instrumentation (for example,

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[9] Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, (Cambridge: 1995), 512.

[10] Demers, 41.

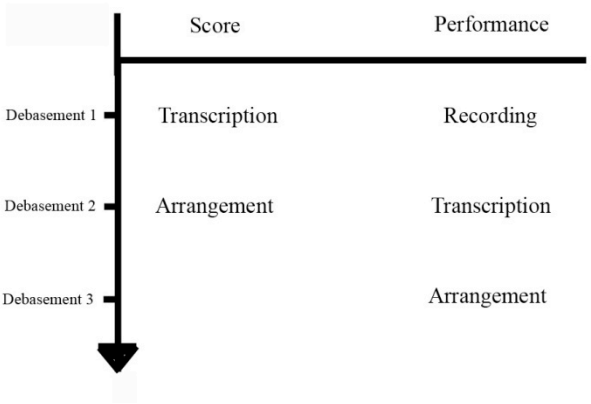
[11] To Walker's credit, Grimpo cites a 1988 essay by him titled "In Defense of Arrangements" (The Piano Quarterly 143, 26) where he writes that "the most familiar criticism against the arrangement is that it harms the original," and that "all the arrangement does is to create an *alternative*." Grimpo, 1.

> adapting a symphony movement for wind quintet). At the other, arranging implies substantial departures from the original work (for example, using the melody of an opera aria to construct an instrumental fantasy).[12]

As we can see, Demers goes full circle and puts both *transcriptions* and *paraphrases* under the umbrella term *arrangement*. To avoid confusion, I will be using Demers's definition from now on.

Another aspect that contributed to the perception of arrangements as a second-class art form is, incidentally, a consequence of the practice's increased popularity in the

Figure 1: Philosophy of mediation.



nineteenth-century. As the listening public's demand for arrangements increased, publishers sought to extend copyright laws to the performance of musical compositions. While music publishers had been receiving the same rights accorded to literary publishers since 1527, up until the turn of the nineteen-century copyright laws did not deal with compositions or performance, only with reproduction.[13] Authors' ownership over their works was first

[12] Demers, 41.
[13] Attali, 52.

recognized in France in a 1786 court decision and then enacted as law in 1791.[14] In the United States, the Copyright Act of 1831 first established the rights for compositions in traditional notation,[15] and then in Britain, copyright laws were revised to extend protection to music performance.[16] Finally, the rights of works as intangible intellectual property was recognized in the British Copyright Act of 1911.[17] As this brief history of copyright law illustrates, in slightly over a century the modern concept of intellectual property was established in part to stave off the proliferation of unauthorized arrangements.

Among the consequences of intellectual property laws was the development of the idea of originality. As publishers began to exercise their newly established rights, the concept of plagiarism begun to arise. Up until the end of the eighteen-century, when the term "plagiarism" was first applied to music, substantial borrowing among composers was considered part and parcel of music composition.[18] Demers called this process "transformative appropriation," or "the act of referring to or quoting old works in order to create a new work."[19] Linda Goehr writes that as the demand for originality increased,

> a distinction emerged to differentiate two sorts of composition, 'original' and 'derivative' composition. In addition to the composition of original works, new activities emerged conceived under the banner of composing versions of pre-existing works. Transcriptions, orchestrations, and arrangements were the names given to such activities. Each was described as being bound and limited by the presence of an already existing work and, therefore, as not being as strictly creative.[20]

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[14] Attali, 54.
[15] Demers, 42.
[16] Goehr, 219.
[17] *Ibid.*, 219.
[18] *Ibid.*, 220.
[19] Demers, 4.
[20] Goehr, 222-3.

Thus, what was considered until the nineteenth-century an historically important aspect of music composition, transformative appropriation, increasingly fell out of favor and acquired the status of a second-class art form.

One last aspect that might have contributed to the near neglect within the musicological community of Liszt's arrangements and those of other nineteen-century composers, might have to do with the improvisatorial, rhapsodic character of many of these pieces. As a piano virtuoso, Liszt routinely improvised on popular opera themes such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Bellini's *Norma*. These improvisations where then crystallized by Liszt in his operatic arrangements (or fantasies), which he routinely revised over the course of his life as he streamlined his pianistic approach.[21] In this respect, he also made extensive use of *ossia* to suggest not necessarily easier or more difficult approaches but, rather, alternate readings of the text.

Mostly because of the apparent lack of formal structure or internal cohesion, critics and musicologists have generally dismissed improvisational fantasies as mere vehicles for self-aggrandizing display on the part of the performer. In this regard one need only read composer Pierre Boulez:

> I believe that Bach wrote on the basis of what he had improvised, and that what he wrote was the more interesting of the two. Often, these improvisations are nothing more than pure, sometimes bizarre, samplings of sound that are not at all integrated into the directives of a composition. This results in constant arousal and appeasement, something I find intolerable. . . . The dialectic of form takes precedence over the possible; everybody arouses everybody else; it becomes a kind of public onanism.

[21] Clark, x.

Not even Beethoven was spared criticisms for the presence of "disunity, diversity, illogicality, inconsistencies, and contradictions" in his Fantasy in G minor Op. 77.[22]

According to Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, such criticisms of improvisational practices as emblematically expressed by Boulez help localize

> the fear of randomness, the privileging of the logocentric (written) over the phonocentric (aural), the lack of submission to compositional directive, the unachieved mastery that only true composition allows, the arousal of contradictory emotions, the interactivity that produces a public (let alone an *onanistic* public), and sublimated throughout, the erotics of a discourse that plays with the possible.[23]

In addition, this purported superiority of composition over improvisation may be ultimately rooted in a kind of historical prejudice stemming from some sort of elitism, given that the history of Western music is, for the most part, the history of those composers who wrote for the enjoyment of the aristocracy, religious institutions and, subsequently, the bourgeoisie. In fact, in 1849 when copyrights in France were extended from original works to all musical works, *La France Musicale* wrote that "if you create operas, symphonies, in a word, works that make a mark, then royalties shall be yours; but taxing light songs and ballads, that is the height of absurdity!"[24]

Up to this point, I have tried to provide a framework in order to show how modern aesthetics and theories of music have evolved during the course of the last two centuries, and how this evolution is closely interrelated with the establishment of intellectual property rights in Europe and the United States. In other words, since our musical aesthetics have

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[22] Hugh Macdonald, Fantasy and Order in Beethoven's Phantasie Op. 77," *Modern Musical Scholarship*, ed. Edward Olleson (1980), pp. 141-50. As quoted by Elaine R. Sisman, "After the Heroic Style: Fantasia and the 'Characteristic' Sonata of 1809," *Beethoven Forum 6*, ed. Glenn Stanley (University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 68.

[23] Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, (Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2004), 21.

[24] Attali, 78.

evolved as a result of socio-economic trends that have privileged certain types of creativity over others, it is only natural that as we look at musical traditions that fall outside this mold, our models will inevitably be rendered inadequate. It is for this reason that in regard to the music of the seventeenth-century, Susan McClary wrote:

> Why does musicology avoid taking the seventeenth century seriously? Precisely because the ideological struggles that put tonality, opera, and solo instrumental music (and their economic, philosophical, and political counterparts) in place by the eighteenth century are distressing to witness especially if one wants to hang onto the belief that tonality (and capitalism, parliamentary democracy, Enlightenment rationalism) are inevitable and universal. Only when the dust of the seventeenth century settles and the new ideological structures are sufficiently stabilized to seem eternal can we begin to perform acts of canonization and the kind of analysis that seeks to confirm that ours is truly the only world that works. The seventeenth century reveals the social nature and thus the relative status of tonal music's "value-free" foundation.[25]

Based on the above, rather than trying to measure the 'value' of nineteen-century arrangements by simply pitting them against the musical practices from which our current analytical models originated, in the remaining pages I will try to look at possible explanations for the rise in popularity of these improvisational works, as well as their historical significance.

Aesthetic considerations aside, what makes the arrangements of the nineteenth century particularly interesting to me is their social and cultural significance.[26] The practice of arranging gained widespread popularity at a particular historical juncture, not simply by coincidence. The figure of Franz Liszt is, in this respect, particularly enlightening. While Liszt's talents as a pianist and performer are beyond dispute, the type of extreme popularity that he and other virtuosos of the period, such as Paganini, Gottschalk and Thalberg,

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[25] Susan McClary, "The Politics of Silence and Sound," 1985. Afterward to *Noise: the political economy of music*, by Jacques Attali. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[26] As described by James Grier who, following in the footsteps of Jerome J. McGann, argued that the work of art is not some kind of autonomous archeological artifact but, rather, a "social phenomenon." See James Grier, *The critical editing of music: history, method, and practice*, (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 16.

enjoyed was a direct result of a society in transformation. In fact, a rising musically literate bourgeoisie had created such a demand for performers that *Le Ménéstrel*, a Parisian musical journal of the time, could not keep up with the number of concerts taking place.[27]

In addition to the increased demand for performers, this period also witnessed the beginning of widespread demand for music from the past. As we have seen, at over seven-hundred arrangements, Liszt was one of the most prolific arrangers of his time; and while he might have been ultimately driven by the need to be taken seriously as an original composer, his sheer arranging output seems to suggest that he was having a hard time resisting the pull exercised by his audiences.[28] In this regard, Demers writes that "the popularity of arrangements in nineteenth-century concert music may seem counterintuitive given the growing belief in the sanctity and inviolability if the composition."[29] This, perhaps, may help explain Liszt's ambivalence between composing and arranging, something that is also exemplified by the roughly 50-50 split between arrangements and compositions in his *oeuvre*.

If Liszt and other arrangers were then responding to the needs of the nineteen-century bourgeoisie, a question on the reasons behind this demand automatically arises. Here, the theory advanced by Attali in his book *Noise* becomes most relevant. In the book, Attali argues that music holds a special place in society because it not only mirrors it, but also heralds its future. In his view, this is possible because "change is inscribed in [music] faster than it transforms society."[30] He writes:

> Music is prophecy. Its styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It

[27] Attali, 71.
[28] Gooley, 12-14.
[29] Demers, 42.
[30] Attali, 5.

> makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things; it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future.[31]

In this light, we could say that Franz Liszt's arrangements are a mirror of society insofar as they denote a shift in the way society sees itself: no longer anchored in the present and looking toward the future but gazing at its past. Society was becoming self-reflexive, shaped by the radical economic and social revolutions of its time and, for this reason, in search of an identity.

Most importantly, nineteenth-century arrangements can also be seen as a herald for the future as they anticipate the not so distant reproduction technologies, from photography to sound recording to filming. In this regard, Jonathan Sterne writes that

> technologies are repeatable, social, cultural, and material processes crystallized into mechanisms. Often they perform labor that had previously been done by a person. Their mechanical character, the ways in which they commingle physics and culture, can tell us a great deal about the people who build them and deploy them.[32]

In other words, sound reproduction technologies can be seen as a response to society's emerging reflexivity, which crystallized the manual labor of arrangers such as Liszt into mechanisms.[33] Already under siege by encroaching copyright laws, nineteen-century arrangers were given the *coup de grâce* by the advent of the gramophone which, together with radio, quickly replaced the piano as the main source of home entertainment.

In this essay, I have tried to reevaluate the arrangements of Franz Liszt from a specific historical and cultural perspective. In doing so, I have come to the conclusion that

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[31] *Ibid.*, 11.
[32] Sterne, 8.
[33] In this respect, the transcription work of the ethnomusicologists becomes circularly reflexive.

Liszt's work as a transcriber is of fundamental importance to the understanding of nineteen-century society and what followed it. His arranging work not only mirrored the desires and aspirations of his contemporaries, but also heralded the technological innovations that would shape society to this day. In addition, with his work, Liszt, as well as the rest of nineteen-century virtuosos/arrangers, contributed to the fostering of the intellectual property framework that has shaped contemporary musical aesthetics as well as the current conception of "the work of art." Ultimately, rather than "a mere footnote in the history of Western classical music,"[34] the arrangers of the nineteenth-century should be viewed as instrumental to the development of many aspects of today's society.

[34] Demers, 43.

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