Opera Transcribed for Piano—Four Approaches

BY

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ABSTRACT

This document surveys the genre of opera transcriptions for piano, with the historical

background and close examination of four transcriptions based on three specific operas (*Orphée*

et Eurydice, *Rigoletto*, and *Carmen*). The examination includes thorough analyses, with

comparisons to the original opera score and an emphasis on the pianistic features of the

transcriptions.

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I.   Introduction

This document examines four approaches composers use to transcribe opera for piano.

These transcriptions are an unusual part of the piano repertory, in that they represent instruments

and voices on piano. How is a large scale musical creation, which involves vocalists and an

entire orchestra, represented on a single instrument? Additionally, how can the audience get an

idea of such a large scale art work from a transcription, and appreciate it when performed on a

concert piano?

Arnold Schoenberg used a metaphor to explain piano reductions: "A sculpture can never

be seen from all sides at once; despite this, all its sides are worked out to the same degree.

Almost all composers proceed in the same way when handling the orchestra; they realize even

details that are not under all circumstances going to be audible. Despite this, the piano reduction

should only be like the view of a sculpture from one viewpoint."[1]

I will use four pieces to examine this genre: 1) *Mélodie de Gluck* by Giovanni Sgambati,

2) *Melody (Second Ballet) from 'Orpheus'* by Alexander Siloti; 3) *Concert Paraphrase of Verdi's*

Rigoletto by Franz Liszt; 4) *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen* by Vladimir Horowitz

(1968 version).

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[1] Arnold Schoenberg. Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg, ed. Leonard Stein, with translation by Leo Black. (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975), 348.
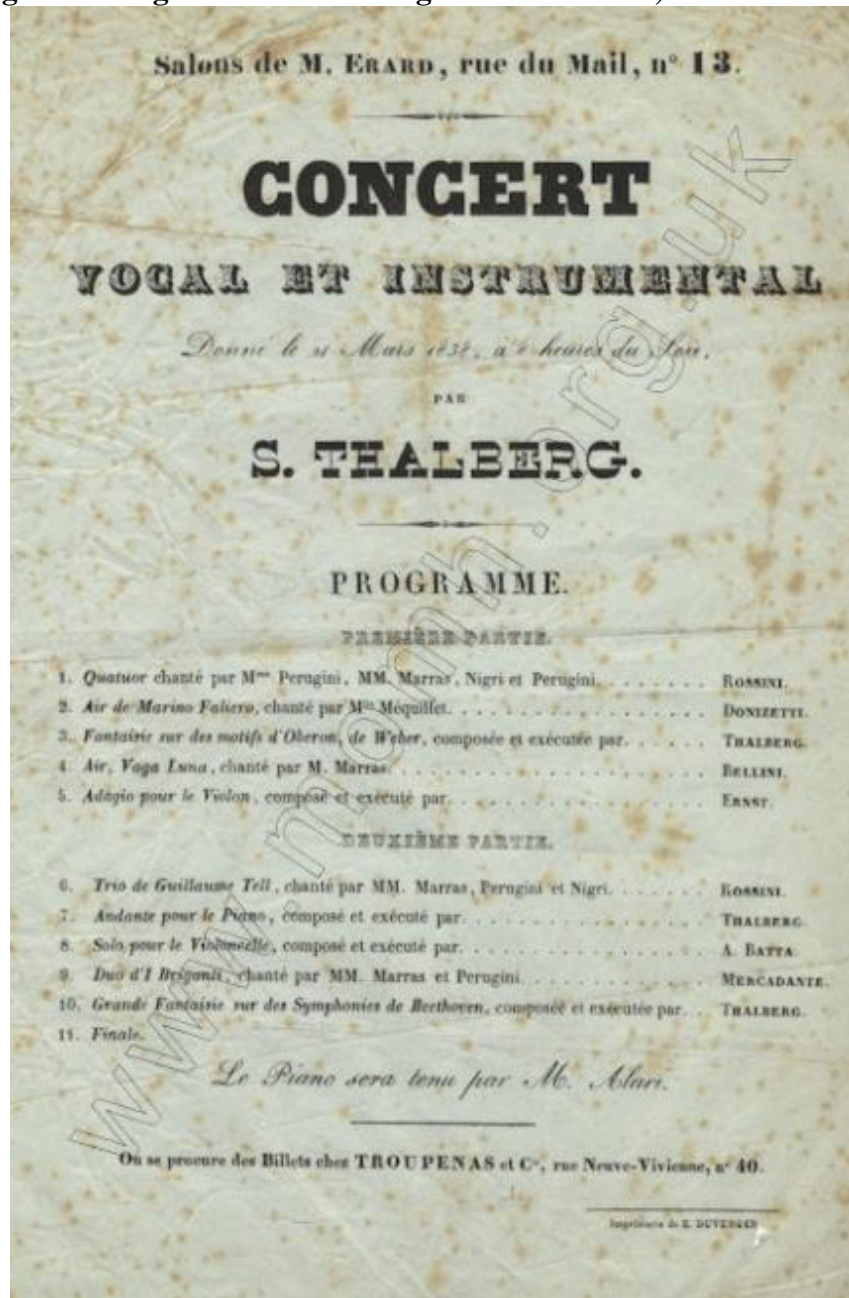
II. Historical Background of Opera Transcriptions

Opera transcriptions for piano blossomed in the 19th century. There were many reasons that contributed to this phenomenon, but chief among them are the transformation of musical life in the early 19th century, the widespread popularity of opera, improvements to the piano, and the rise of public piano recitals.

During the first half of 19th century, European musical life went through major changes. New halls and concert venues budded with a new and educated music community, along with an explosion of music publishing to serve their needs. There was an expansion in musical life and performance opportunities. Concert programs became longer, with more diverse genres to cater to all kinds of musical tastes. The various types of concerts emerged to cater to people from all social classes, and music from different periods was added to concert programs as time went on.

Despite the changes in social structure and way of life, one thing that remained constant during the 19th century was the popularity of opera. It was fashionable for pianists to present fantasies, transcriptions, variations, or improvisations on opera tunes. Due to the improvement of the piano as an instrument, musicians could perform more difficult works. In order to display their talent, pianists often performed their own works; the culture at the time favored pianists as composers instead of as interpreters, which is the opposite of our current musical culture. Figures 1 and 2 below are representative concert programs of Franz Liszt and Sigmund Thalberg, a

virtuoso pianist and composer who was as famous as Liszt in the 19th century.

Figure 1. Program for a Thalberg concert in Paris, 21 March 1838.[2]

Figure 2: Program for a Liszt concert in Stamford, England, 1840[3]:

ASSEMBLY ROOMS, STAMFORD.

GRAND
MORNING CONCERT,
On Wednesday, Sept. 16, 1840,
To commence at 1 o'clock precisely.

M. LISZT,
First appearance this Season of this Extraordinary Pianist.

Mr. LAVENU, has the honor to inform the Nobility, Gentry and his
Friends, that he has succeeded in engaging
M. LISZT
Who will, on this occasion, perform his Grand Marche Hongroise, and
his Grand Galop Chromatique; also a Grand Duet with
Mr. MORI.
Mr. RICHARDSON,
(The celebrated Flautist) will perform some of his most favorite Fantasias.

Mlle. DE VARNY,
Prima Donna of La Scala, Italian Opera, Paris, and Her Majesty's
Theatre, London, will sing some of her most popular Arias and Duets.

Miss LOUISA BASSANO
Of the Nobility's Concerts, will sing some of her admired Airs & Ballads

Mr. J. PARRY,
Will sing some of his latest and most admired Compositions.
Mr. LAVENU,
Will preside at the Piano Forte.

Family Tickets, to admit four, 21s.—Single Tickets 5s. to be had
of Messrs. ROOZ, MORTLOCK & JOHNSON.

PART 1.
TRIO—" L'usato ardir il mio," (Semiramide) Mlle. De
   Varny, Miss Bassano and Mr. J. Parry..Rossini.
ARIA—" Alfin son tua," (Lucia di Lammermoor)
   Miss Bassano ....Donizetti.
MARCHE HONGROISE—Grand Piano
   Forte—M. LISZT ....Liszt.
DUETTO—" Sappi che un rio dovere," (Bianca e Faliero)
   Mlle. De Varny and Miss Bassano ....Rossini.
BALLAD—" The Inchcape Bell," Mr. J. Parry ....Parry.
FANTASIA—Flute—Mr. Richardson.
ARIA—" L'Amor suo mi fe beato," (Roberto Devereux)
   Mlle. De Varny ....Donizetti.
FANTASIA ON FAVORITE AIRS—
   Grand Piano Forte—M. LISZT ......Liszt.
LYRIC LEGEND—" Ethelwige to Ethelred,"
   Miss Bassano ....Wade.
Mr. J. Parry will sing his new Song of " The Musical Husband."

PART 2.
DUETTO—" Colei Sofronio," (Torquato Tasso)
   Mlle. De Varny and Mr. J. Parry........Donizetti.
BALLAD—" Memory's Dream," Miss Bassano......Lavenu.
GRAND DUETT—Piano forte—introducing
   the favorite QUARTETT from Lucia di
   Lammermoor, and GRAND GALOP
   CHROMATIQUE, Messrs. LISZT and
   MORI ....Liszt.
ROMANCE—" I'm with thee," Mlle. De Varny ....Wade.
VARIATIONS—Flute—Mr. Richardson.
NEW DUETT—" The Sisters," Mlle. De Varny and
   Miss Bassano.
MORCEAUX CHOISIS—from his cele-
   brated Recitals, Piano Forte, M. LISZT..Liszt.
SONG—" Wanted a Governess," Mr. J. Parry ....Parry.
TRIO—" Soave sia il vento," Mlle. De Varny,
   Miss Bassano and Mr. J. Parry.............Mozart.
Conductor, Mr. LAVENU.

The Piano Forte is one of Erard's new patent, and is brought ex-
   pressly from London for the occasion.

These two programs are representative of piano recitals of the early 19th century. Variety

concerts were the norm during the first half of 19th century. Featured artists usually share the

stage with 'assisting' artists. A pianist might give a concert with a singer, in a chamber ensemble,

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[3] William Weber, The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Illustration 5.

or even with a full orchestra. The program featuring Thalberg in Figure 1 includes excerpts from

various operas by Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and Mercadante; two instrumental pieces by Ernst

and A. Batta; two fantasies on motives from Weber's *Oberon*, and Beethoven's *Symphonies*, and

Andante pour le piano, composed by Thalberg himself. In the left column in Figure 2, all the

assisting artists' names and brief introductions are shown. The column on the right is the

program, which includes excerpts from operas by Rossini, Donizetti, and Mozart; songs by

famous composers at the time; two flute pieces; as well as pieces by Liszt, which are in bold

fonts on the program, presents *Marche Hongroise-Grand Piano Forte*, *Fantasia on Favorite*

Arias—Grand Piano Forte, *Grand Duett-Piano forte-introducing the favorite Quartett from*

Lucia di Lammermoor, and Grand Galop Chromatique (performed with Mr. Mori), and

Morceaux Choisis-from his celebrated recitals. No specific pieces are named; supposedly Liszt

would draw from a collection of slips with tune suggestions requested by the audience and

improvise on these themes.

During the second half of the 19th century, there was a crisis in the world of opera. New

operas were not presented on stage as often as in the previous decades. Impresarios fell back on

more established works that would sell tickets without fail; namely, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and

Le Nozze di Figaro, Rossini's *Barbiere di Siviglia*, and operas by Donizetti, Meyerbeer, and

Bellini.[4] Opera transcriptions declined in popularity and pianists began looking to other genres

to show their talents. Transcriptions were still included in concert pianists' repertory; however,

they became novelties on concert programs. Even though new operatic works were presented,

the tunes became quite complicated, and that made elaborate transcriptions more difficult. In

addition, concerts featured more serious works such as Beethoven piano sonatas and works by

J.S. Bach. The 'composer' side of pianists was less emphasized, and the practice of improvising

on spot was no longer requisite. By the end of the 19th century, pieces inspired by operas were

seldom performed in public concerts.

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[4] William Weber, The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 276.

III.   Four Approaches and Analysis

I would like to present four different approaches to opera transcriptions, with in-depth

analyses of four pieces based on three specific operas. These analyses will also compare the

original score and the transcriptions, with emphasis on the pianistic features. The four

approaches are inspired by instrumental music from a ballet in opera (*Mélodie de Gluck* by

Sgambati, *Melody (second ballet) from 'Orpheus'* by Siloti), an ensemble (*Concert Paraphrase

of Verdi's Rigoletto* by Liszt), and an aria (*Variations on a theme from Bizet's Carmen* by

Horowitz).

Giovanni Sgambati : *Mélodie de Gluck* (1878)

Sgambati was an Italian pianist and composer living at the turn of 20th century. He was a

student of Liszt during the 1860s and was therefore influenced by him as both a pianist and

composer. *Mélodie de Gluck* is based on *Orfeo ed Euridice*, a tragic opera in three acts by

Christoph Willibald Ritter von Gluck; specifically, it comes from the second version of *Orfeo ed

Euridice*, which is a revised version with libretto in French adapted for performances at

L'Académie Royale in Paris in 1774. The first version is in Italian, and was premiered in Vienna

in 1762. Only in the French version of *Orphée et Eurydice* do we see the music that Sgambati

transcribed this piece; Gluck inserted ballet music in Act II Scene II. The new section is called

"Ballet des Ombres heureuses" (Dance of the Blessed Spirits). It is marked "même movement,"

the same tempo as the previous minuet "Lent très doux," a very gentle lento. It was scored for a

solo flute and accompanied by strings. The scene is set on Champs-Elysée (the Elysian Fields),

where Orfeo has just arrived after passing the Furies of Underworld. Orfeo waits for his eternal

love Euridice in the presence of the Blessed Spirits.

It is rare for an opera transcription to be based solely on an instrumental portion of an

opera. Sgambati must have really liked this particular ballet music. On the surface, he made

almost no alterations. The solo flute line stays the same, as do the bass line and the harmony;

even the D minor key signature remains the same as the original. In Gluck's score, after the flute

solo accompanied by strings, a short sequence leads back to the minuet in F major (see Example

1). As Sgambati's *Mélodie* transcribes only the middle section from "Dance of the Blessed

Spirits", he has to close the piece with additional fade-out sequence of broken chords on tonic, as

shown in Example 2.

Example 1. Gluck, "Ballet des Ombres heureuses," *Orphée et Eurydice*, m. 56
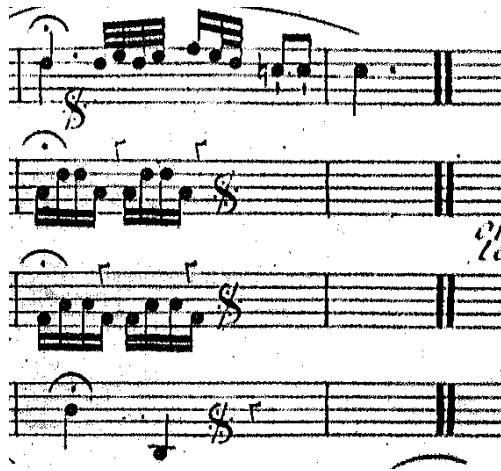
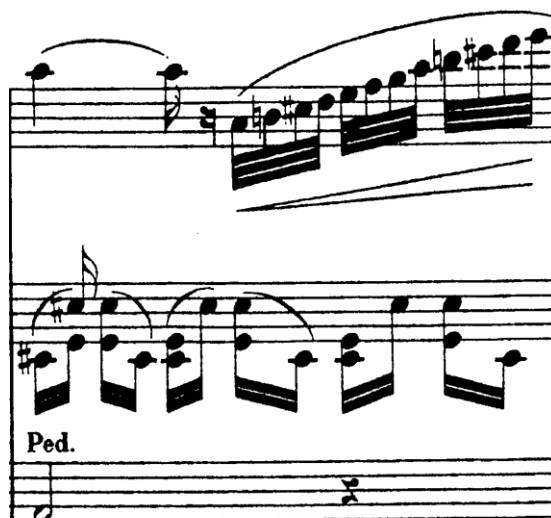**Example 2. Sgambati, *Mélodie de Gluck*, mm. 36-38**

Sgambati stays quite truthful to the original score; the music itself does not require any

further elaboration. In such cases, where no additions are desired, it is important to make sure

that every element finds appropriate place on transcription. In this case, the solo flute melody is

preserved in its entirety in the treble line. Examples 3a and 3b below reproduce the

corresponding measure in Gluck's original score and Sgambati's transcription. The only

difference is in the top of the scale in the solo flute line: Gluck uses a harmonic minor scale with

flat sixth, whereas Sgambati modifies the scale with raised sixth (B-natural). Example 3c shows

measure 9-10 of Sgambati's transcription where the scale descends with flat sixth and seventh,

making the treble line into a melodic scale.

Example 3a: Gluck, "Dance of the Blessed Spirits", m.36

Example 3b: Sgambati, *Mélodie de Gluck*, m.8

Example 3c: Sgambati, *Mélodie de Gluck*, mm.9-10

The strings are similarly transcribed without much modification. The harmonic

progression remains the same, except that the bass line is not doubled.[5] The treatment of the

sixteenth notes is modified. These were originally scored for first and second violins, with slurs

over each two-note grouping. Here Sgambati cleverly leaves out the repeated notes within slurs.

This method is used throughout the piece, and is idiomatic for the piano because he preserves the

slurred effect of strings by omitting one in every other two sixteenth notes (see Examples 4a and

4b).

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[5] In the orchestra the double basses would play an octave lower than written, doubling the cello section.

Example 4a: Gluck, "Dance of the Blessed Spirits", m.29

Example 4b: Sgambati, *Mélodie de Gluck*, m.1

The texture of Sgambati's transcription is more compact than Gluck's original setting. As

mentioned above, the lower octave originally played by double basses is omitted in Sgambati's

transcription. In addition, there are multiple string players in the orchestra; however, on the piano

we are limited to the two hands. As a result, the texture is thinner to adapt to the piano.

Alexander Siloti: *Melody (Second Ballet) from "Orpheus"* (1926)

Another transcription of the same opera excerpt is *Melody (Second Ballet) from*

"Orpheus"[6] by Alexander Siloti, a Ukrainian pianist and conductor who was born in 1863 and

died in 1945. Siloti, like Sgambati, was also a student of Franz Liszt and a cousin of Sergei

Rachmaninoff, who frequently performed Sgambati's *Mélodie de Gluck*.

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[6] Alexander Siloti, *Melody (Second Ballet) from "Orpheus"* (NY: Carl Fischer, 1926).

On Siloti's published score, it specifically states that it is "transcribed from the original score." Considering that Siloti was a well-established musician and also close to Rachmaninoff, he must have been aware of Sgambati's transcription. Siloti's transcription is very different. It is further from Gluck's original score; it includes more personal interpretation, and provides more guidance for the pianist.

First, Siloti uses the key of B-flat minor, which is a major third lower than Gluck's original score. It is perhaps too personal to suggest what kind of emotions B-flat minor provides. Certainly the B-flat minor offers a different color from the original key of D minor; however, the exact shade and mood would be different for each individual. There is a metronome marking (♪=80-84) next to Lento, followed by the expressive term *sempre molto espressivo, con dolore*. All these instructions, along with the choice of B-flat minor, in my opinion, relate to one another, and together create the atmosphere that Siloti wants.

Unlike Sgambati's version, Siloti further reduces the original string scoring into a texture manageable by left hand alone; any chord that spans more than an octave is marked as arpeggiated. The chord progression remains the same, but the pattern is modified so that it is more idiomatic to the piano (Example 5).

Example 5: Siloti, *Melody (Second Ballet) from "Orpheus,"* **m. 1**

As a result of this choice of arrangement for the left hand, where the full chord is always

placed on the third note of each group of four sixteenth-notes, in some places the melody doubles

the chord content. When this happens, Siloti omits the repeated chord tone in the

accompaniment, as can be seen in Example 6.

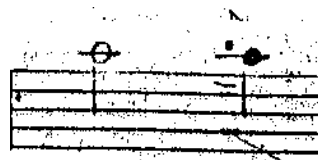**Example 6. Siloti,** *Melody (Second Ballet) from "Orpheus"* **m.5**
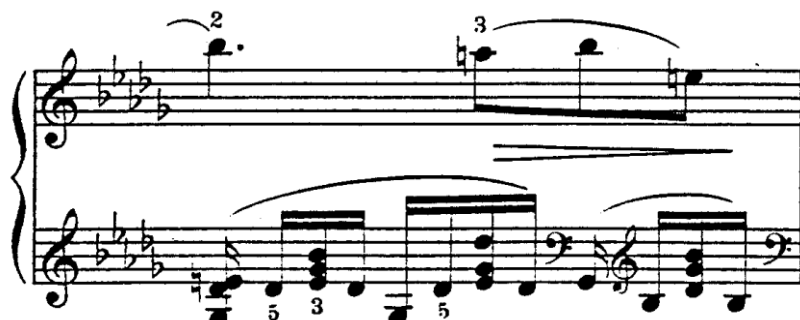
In terms of the melody, there is no elaboration of flute solo line. The only thing Siloti does

is to further explain how he thinks the small notes from Gluck's original score should be played.

On Gluck's score, the different types of ornaments are notated as small notes tied to regular-sized

notes (Example 7a). However, the performance practice of late 18th century suggests there are

different types of ornaments that are notated similarly.[7] Siloti provides guidance for performers

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[7] According to Grove, during the late 18th century and early 19th century, there were problems distinguishing
between the appoggiatura (which has harmonic function) and the grace-note (played rapidly preceding the main
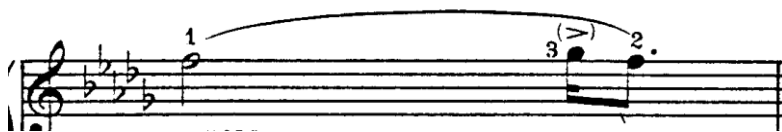
by writing out the appoggiatura in regular-sized note with accented first note (Example 7b).

Sgambati, however, does not make any differentiation by notating all the ornaments the same
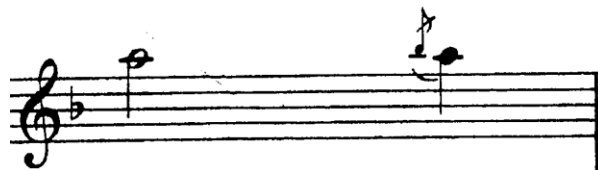
way (Example 7c).

Example 7a: Gluck, "Dance of the Blessed Spirits", m.31

Example 7b: Siloti, *Melody (Second Ballet) from "Orpheus"*, m.3

Example 7c: Sgambati, *Mélodie de Gluck*, m.3

Unlike Sgambati, Siloti retains Gluck's harmonic scale in measure 8, which has flat sixth

(G-flat) at top of scale in treble melodic line. Siloti's ending (Example 8a) also has a fade-out

sequence of three measures. Siloti starts the sequence in a higher register, to which he later

returns, whereas Sgambati (Exmaple 8b) makes a complete descent.

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note). As a result, composers began writing out appoggiatura as regular-sized notes, and using smaller notes only for grace-notes.

Example 8a: Siloti, *Melody (Second Ballet) from "Orpheus"*, mm. 35-38

Example 8b: Sgambati, *Mélodie de Gluck*, mm. 35-38

Siloti's transcription has a texture that is even more compact than that of Sgambati's,

mainly because the accompaniment is restructured to fit into the left hand alone. Nonetheless, the

harmonic progression remains, as well as the melodic line. Siloti's transcription is idiomatic for

the piano because it is designed to be played by the two hands without any redistribution in

fingering. The melodic line is handled by the right hand and the accompaniment by the left hand

alone.

Franz Liszt: *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto* **(1860)**

Rigoletto is an opera in three acts by Giuseppe Verdi, and the libretto is by Francesco

Maria Piave after Victor Hugo's play *La roi s'amuse*. Liszt's *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*

was written many years after his huge collection of larger scale operatic transcriptions, such as

Don Juan, *Robert le Diable*, and *Norma*. It is based on the famous quartet from Act III. The

quartet is scored for two pairs of characters— Gilda, Maddalena, Duca, and Rigoletto—

accompanied by a full orchestra. Rigoletto is the duke's court jester and also father of Gilda; in

this scene, Rigoletto tries to show his daughter Gilda the true character of the duke, and brings

Gilda to where she can see the duke serenading and seducing Maddalena. One can hear the

juxtaposition of the duke and Maddalena conversing light-heartedly, and the serious interaction

between Rigoletto and Gilda.

In the original score, Verdi starts the quartet with the duke singing *Un dì, se ben*

rammentomi (One day, if I remember rightly). Then the two pairs have quick exchanges of

dialogue: the duke compliments Maddalena excessively, saying that she should surrender to his

advances. Meanwhile Gilda and Rigoletto are watching him. In this E major section, Gilda has a

few words here and there calling the duke *iniquo* (traitor), and Rigoletto responds to her saying

things such as "now you know." Suddenly the music ceases, then with one A-flat (sung by the

duke) we are taken to the second section in D-flat major.

There are three main sections in Liszt's *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*: Preludio-Andante-Presto; they are separated visually by fermatas, and musically by harmonic progression. Verdi's quartet has two main sections: Allegro-Andante; they are also separated with a fermata and an enharmonic chord that links E major to D-flat major. Liszt keeps the E major from Verdi's allegro section, but the role of this section becomes the "Preludio"—an introduction with motifs from a later section of the original score. The phrases are sectionalized by fermatas. The introductory section is stated over seventeen measures, standing on the dominant.

The first two measures (Example 9a) use two motifs from the Andante section in Verdi's score; the first is sung by Maddalena in measure 64 (Example 9b), and second is sung by Gilda in measure 81 (Example 19c).

Example 9a: Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, m.1-2[8]

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[8] Franz Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase of Verdi's Rigoletto*, ed. Emil von Sauer (Leipzig: Edition Peters, 1917), 55-65.

Example 9b.   Verdi, *Rigoletto,* Act III Quartet, m. 64[9]

[9] Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*, (Milan: Ricordi, 1914), 339.

Example 9c.   Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act III Quartet, m. 81[10]

In measure 64 Maddalena sings "*Ah! Ah! Rido ben di core, chè tai baie costan poco*" (I

laugh heartily, for these tales cost little), and Gilda "*Infelice core, cor tradito*" (Unhappy heart

betrayed) in measure 81.[11] Already, in the first two measures, Liszt relates the dramatic

[10] Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*, (Milan: Ricordi, 1914), 345.

[11] Nico Castel, *The Complete Verdi Libretti: In Four Volumes. Volume IV*. (Geneseo, New York: Leyerle, 1999), 65.

opposition between two female characters. The same two motifs repeat and are fragmented in measures 5 and 6. The fragmented sequence is re-harmonized, and without further searching Liszt arrives at G-sharp in measure 7 (Example 10).

Example 10. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, mm. 5-8

The G-sharp in measure 7 is the pivotal point of the introduction, because with it Liszt leads us to A-flat, the dominant of D-flat—the key of the Andante section that opens with the duke's "*Bella figlia dell'amore*". Interestingly, Liszt transitions from E major to D-flat major with a G-sharp dominant seventh chord leading to a series of diminished seventh chords moving chromatically. When A-flat arrives in measure 11, it stays to reiterate the dominant (Example 11a) and prepare for the tonic arrival in measure 18 (Example 11b). Also, notice that at the end of Preludio (the last measures in Example 11b) Liszt brings back Maddalena's motif, marked in *pp* with *ritardando*. Dramatically, it represents Maddalena's hesitancy towards the duke's advances.

It makes perfect sense because the duke starts his love speech, at the beginning of the Andante

section.

Example 11a. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, mm.11-12

Example 11b. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, mm.15-21

Liszt's Andante section follows Verdi's original score fairly closely. In the original setting,

the duke has a full sixteen measures to himself, with light orchestral accompaniment underneath,

singing to Maddalena about his unrequited love. Liszt keeps all of it in his paraphrase. This

simple and beguiling melody consists of a D-flat major triad and can be found throughout Liszt's

paraphrase. Only one thing is changed from Verdi's score: Liszt changes one note to turn a

perfect fifth (E flat-A flat) into a diminished fifth (E flat-B double flat). Evidently, this is for the

purpose of drama (or rather, in this case, melodrama), as the text that accompanies the interval is

pene, which means pain. The complete phrase is "*le mie pene consolar*" (heals my pain). A

diminished fifth suits the projected character more without the presence of the libretto.

Example 12a. Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act III Quartet, mm. 55-56

Example 12b. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, mm. 24-25

After a complete rendition of the duke's love speech, Liszt continues to follow Verdi's

original score closely. Maddalena and Gilda take turns singing. In Liszt's concert paraphrase, this

is the second appearance of the Maddalena motif. This time the motif is more subdued, as if

Maddalena is in the background, while Gilda's despair is the center of attention; the effect is also

achieved with the help of dynamic contrast, and the different texture in both the melody and

accompaniment (Example 13). In the original score, such contrast is created naturally by the

characters singing with different instruments doubling in the background. For example, when

Maddalena sings, flutes and clarinets play the same melody; when Gilda sings, she is doubled by

the oboes and first violins.

Example 13. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, **mm. 33-36**

Now listener's focus is brought to Gilda. From measures 37 to 40, Liszt follows Verdi's

score, except that he accentuates Gilda's emotional state by using syncopation (Example 14a);

while Verdi writes a non-syncopated line, and doubled by oboes and first violins again (14b).

Example 14a. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, mm. 37-38

Example 14b. Verdi, *Rigoletto* Act III Quartet, mm. 68-69

Measures 41 - 45 is an elaborated passage that remains on the dominant, preparing for the

return of the tonic at measure 46. It uses a combination of Maddalena's motif, the harmonic

progression from the original score, and a cascade of sixths moving chromatically, as if searching

for the right chord. When it reaches dominant seventh chord of D-flat major, the melody re-

enters and brings the focus back to the duke, with his more conspicuous motif. While remaining

in the original register, the motif is now layered with Lisztian embellishments. Measures 46 to 67

consist of two passages that each begin with the duke and Maddalena's motives, surrounded by

elaborate figuration. The elaborate figuration in smaller-sized notes is one of the main pianistic

features presented in this paraphrase; it is not often written for instruments other than piano to

achieve the same effect, which requires rapid finger movements and provides a harmonic

background.

Example 15. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, mm. 46-49

One can see the clear presentation of the duke's line, which is marked *il canto ben marcato*

ed espressivo, in the middle. In both passages, a complete re-statement of the following takes

place before each trails off to other musical ideas.

Measures 53-57 and measures 65-67 are as previously mentioned, connected with measures 41-45: passages using known motives, harmonic progressions that lead to dominant sevenths, and cascades of chromatic scales.

For the remaining part of the Andante section (measures 68-90), Liszt does not digress much from Verdi's score. Verdi uses hocket—interlocking voice exchange from the Middle Ages—between Maddalena and Gilda (Example 16a). Liszt preserves this, and with the same harmonic progression (Example 16b).

Example 16a. Verdi, *Rigoletto* Act III Quartet, mm. 81-82

Example 16b. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, mm. 68-69

Interestingly, this hocket-like motif was already presented in measure 2 of Liszt's paraphrase. The second time this passage appears, Liszt elaborates on it with repeating 32nd-

notes.

Example 16c. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, mm. 76-77

At measure 88 (Example 17a), Liszt ingeniously closes the Andante section with

fragments of the motifs of the duke (Example 17b) and Maddalena (Example 17c), plus the

harmonic progression previously associated with the duke's "*Bella figlia*" line: I-vii° 4/2-V7-I.

The last section, Presto, is a declamatory conclusion, which includes one of Liszt's favorite

techniques: octaves and leaps.

Example 17a. Liszt, *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto*, mm. 88-89

Example 17b. Verdi, *Rigoletto* Act III Quartet, mm. 49-50

Example 17c. Verdi, *Rigoletto* Act III Quartet, mm. 64-65

Liszt's *Concert Paraphrase on Rigoletto* undoubtedly stands alone as a masterpiece for piano, even without the association of Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Even though it comes from a thickly textured composition for vocalists and orchestra, Liszt transforms it into a piece that can be explained only through the piano.

Horowitz: *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen* (1968)

Vladimir Horowitz was an American concert pianist of Ukrainian birth who lived during the 20th century. He composed and performed many transcriptions, but the *Carmen Variations* was the only one that remained in his repertory throughout his career. For over five decades from the 1920s to the 1970s, *Variations on a Theme from Carmen* was his show-stopping encore. The piece itself evolved throughout the years, and it was never published. There are five known recorded versions, and followers of Horowitz refer to the different version according to the year each was recorded. The 1968 version is one of best-known as it was a part of a concert televised on CBS. The fact that Horowitz never had this piece published encourages many to transcribe it

from his recordings. I found the revised second edition transcribed by Kenneth Chiu in 1998 to

be an accurate version of Horowitz's performance in 1968.

Carmen is an opéra comique in four acts by Georges Bizet. The libretto by Henri Meilhac

and Ludovic Halévy and is based on a novel of the same name by Prosper Mérimée. It was

premiered in Paris at the Opéra-Comique in 1875. Horowitz uses the theme from the first scene

of Act II, the "*Chanson Bohême*". In it Carmen sings the famous Gypsy song "*Les tringles des*

sistres tintaient" (The rods of the sistrums jingled)[12]. Many other variations and transcriptions

use the same theme, such as *Chanson Bohême de Carmen* by Moritz Moszkowski. Sistrums were

ancient Egyptian percussion instruments consisting of a U-shaped frame with loose-fitting metal

rods running through it. It is like a rattle that makes noises when shaken.[13]

Act II begins with Carmen, along with two other gypsy girls Frasquita and Mercédès,

passing time in Lillas Pastia's tavern with some officers. The gypsy girls are dancing, and

Carmen starts singing her aria to tambourine accompaniment, represented in the orchestration by

woodwinds, string pizzicato, harp, cymbals and tambourine.

The original piece by Bizet is in E minor and it has the clear-cut form of an instrumental

prelude and postlude with three stanzas in the middle. In the transcription by Horowitz, the key

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[12] Nico Castel. French Opera Libretti. Volume I. ed. Marcie Stapp.(Genesco, New York: Leyerle, 1996), 98.
[13] James W. McKinnon and Robert Anderson. "Sistrum." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed February 28, 2014.

signature is preserved and it starts with the same prelude; however the form diverges from

Bizet's version later on.

In measure 1, written for the right hand, is a motif that recurs throughout this piece. It is

made up of bouncing thirds ornamented with grace notes.

Example 18. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, m.1[14]

In Bizet's score, the prelude creates the effect of gypsy music and dance with alternating

major and minor triads. Horowitz does the same; the motif above is used and repeated three

times, as in the original score. However, after that Horowitz does not take us to a tour of keys

like Bizet (E minor- D minor- C major- B minor- A minor- G major- F major- F sharp major- F

major- E minor); instead, he stays in nearby key centers (E minor- D minor- C major- G major).

With fewer key centers, Horowitz focuses on displaying pianistic skills. Measure 4 from Bizet's

original score has two flutes playing in thirds, accompanied by harps and pizzicato in violas and

cellos, whereas Horowitz merges them by using the off beats in accompaniment as part of the

figuration in thirds (Example 19a). This arrangement preserves the four sixteenth note figuration

(B-A-G-A), and it reduces the muscular strain that would result if the originally written thirds

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[14] Vladimir Horowitz. *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*. transcribed by Kenneth Chiu in 1998, 2nd ed.

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were played by one hand.

Example 19a. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, **m.2**

Long held notes in the inner voices start appearing in measure 9. They are added in

between the doubled notes in thirds and sixths, and bouncing accompaniment (Example 19b),

and are decisive components in creating major or minor chords (Example 19c). The texture is

much more condensed because there are three lines between the two hands, and the effect is

similar to Bizet's original music.

Example 19b. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, **mm. 11-12**
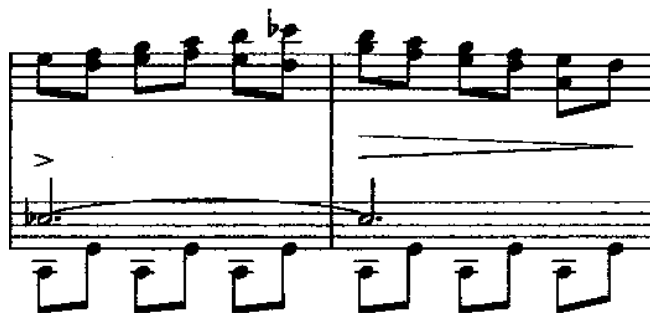
Example 19c. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, mm.13-14

At measure 23, the Carmen motif appears, and will recur later in the piece.

Example 20. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, m. 23

Once this motif appears, the piece follows Bizet's original, with many complex technical

passages woven around Carmen's aria. After all, the whole point of this piece is to parade one's

own skills via a popular melody. At measure 33, the original melody is in the right hand,

accompanied heavily by chords and the grace-note motif in the left hand.

**Example 21. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Carmen*, m. 33**

At measure 43, the melody is now elaborated with sextuplets and the bouncing

accompaniment, imitating a stringed instrument often used in gypsy music and dance, such as

violin or guitar.

**Example 22. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, m.43**

In the original score, it is here that Carmen starts the refrain "Tra-la-la-la," which is in E

major. Frasquita and Mercédès join in and sing the same material. Horowitz reflects this in his

transcription starting at measure 51, with a thicker texture that makes the piece more raucous.

Example 23. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, m. 51
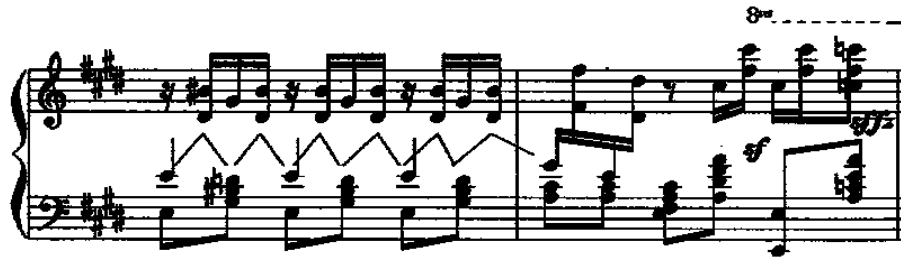

At measure 64, the second stanza begins. This time the melody is an inner voice with

ornaments on top, with an arpeggiated line in E minor and chromatic notes followed by short

series of half-steps (D sharp- D natural- C-sharp).

Example 24. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, m. 64
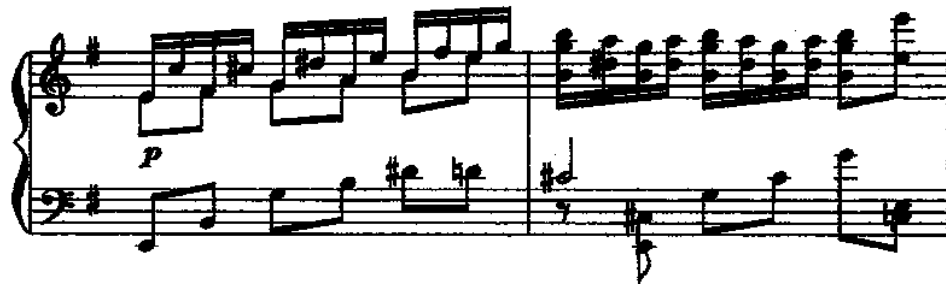
As this is the second time the melody is stated, Horowitz makes the variations even more

complicated. Starting at measure 74, fuller chords with wide leaps appear (Example 25a), along

with passages in thirds and sixths (25b), and there is a greater distance between the two hands
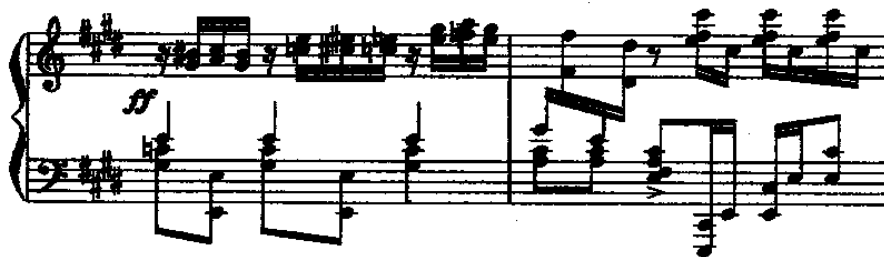
(25c).

Example 25a, Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, **mm. 74-75**
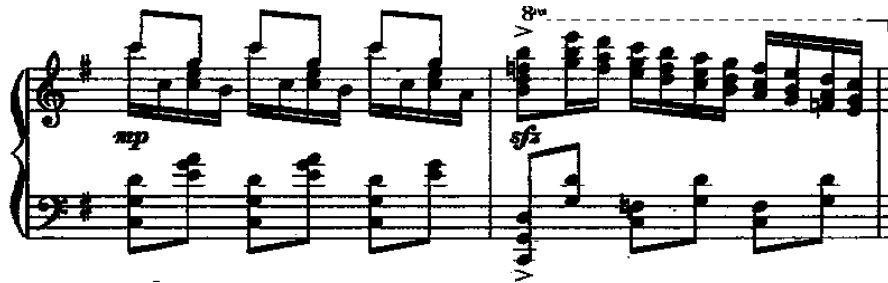
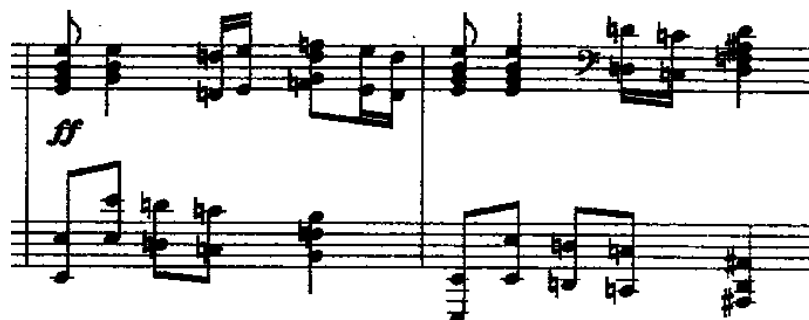**Example 25b. Horowitz,** *Variations on a Theme from Carmen*, **mm. 86-87**

Example 25c. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Carmen*, **mm. 92-93**

Syncopation is a very prominent feature in this aria, and it appears early in Bizet's score; however, Horowitz does not utilize much syncopation, it is not pronounced and emphasized until measure 99 (Example 26).

Example 26. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, mm. 99-100


At measure 101, which can be seen as a bridge before the third restatement of the Carmen

motif, Horowitz introduces the first *quasi glissando* passage in this piece.

Example 27. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, mm. 101-105

At measure 111, the last appearance of the Carmen motif takes place, combined with the

first motif. In addition, there is a layer of the bouncing thirds that initially appeared in measure 1.

Example 28. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, mm. 111-112
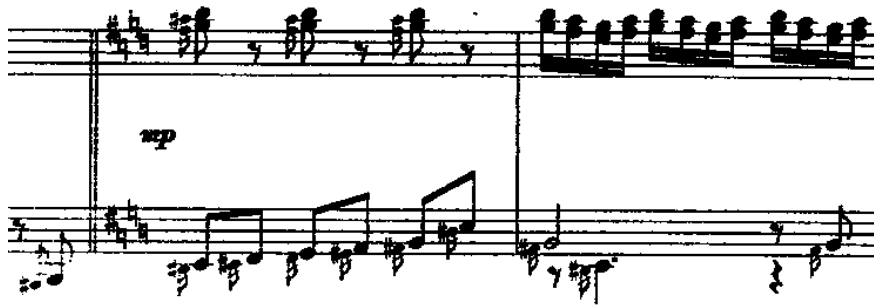
The pace seems to speed up from this point, since the two motives are presented in

opposition. It is quickly followed by a cadenza on the dominant from measure 127-130.

Example 29. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, mm. 127-130

The return of the tonic occurs at measure 131, where it synchronizes with the instrumental

postlude in Bizet's original score in a compressed form. It creates a wild and noisy ending with

full chords in extreme registers (Examples 30a and 30b).

Example 30a. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, **mm. 131-132**
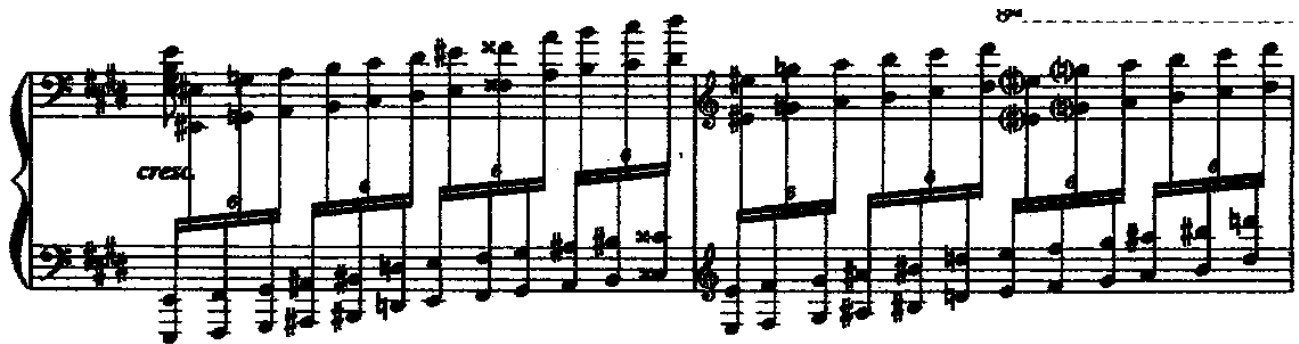

Example 30b. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, **m. 145**

The piece finishes with an interlocking octave passage.

Example 30c. Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen*, **mm.147-148**

Conclusion

The four approaches to opera transcriptions mentioned above are not the only ones that can be found in this genre. They simply present how diverse opera transcriptions can be, while still adhering to the original composition. In Sgambati's transcription, the simplicity represents Gluck's music well. His intention was merely to recreate the piece on piano. Siloti's transcription was written with more emphasis on pianistic idiom, while maintaining strong reference to Gluck's original score. In Liszt's case, his intention was not only to recreate Verdi's quartet, but also to provide his own interpretation of the story. This is almost always the case with Liszt's transcriptions. For Horowitz, his intention remained on the elaborations and making the piece as virtuosic as possible using a recognized tune which he also loved. The element of story-telling is not as important as in Liszt's transcription.

In retrospect, what Schoenberg says about piano reduction being like a sculpture is perhaps more understandable after the analysis above. We see the great amount of detail that Sgambati, Siloti, Liszt, and Horowitz put into their transcriptions. Not all the details are heard; however, there is an impression created by each transcription, which is different for everybody, depending on what aspects of music (such as melody, harmony, form, tonality, texture) are more prominent to one's ears. Just as one looks at a sculpture, only one side can be seen at a time; nevertheless, the sculpture is a completed art work as a whole.

This document presents only a few examples of the vast repertory of opera transcription. The genre is very much valuable for study and performance even though most pianists today no longer compose, as did pianists from the last two centuries.

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