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Bagatelle Sans Tonalite Analysis

 As a female freshman at Longwood University, it is understandable that classical music would not be my first choice when picking a tune to listen to. However, through this course it is evident that some sort of appreciation for this timely music has grown on me. Through the use of the expressive plane, it is possible to connect this type of music to relevant topics in my life. The relevant topics in my life at the moment are school and soccer. At Longwood, I decided to become a Kinesiology major and also become a member of the women’s soccer team. Kinesiology is a major that focuses on scientific studies of movement and performance through biomechanics, anatomy, physiology, psychology, and neuroscience. This study of the science and mechanics of the body has an obvious connection to athletics and athletes like myself. Being involved with athletics for twelve years of my life has been full of ups and downs and trial and errors; but, I would never think of altering this unpredictable experience that I have put so much work in for the world. As a freshman in college however, I see how my active, on the field role, in athletics is coming closer and closer to the end. Coincidentally, a little over a month ago while listening to a classical romantic composition named “Bagatelle Sans Tonalite”, composed by 19th century composer, Franz Liszt, I heard theses ups and downs and trial and errors within the composition. This composition presents atonality and an unpredictable tempo, unique for its time period, that was influenced by the hardships and ups and downs of the life of composer himself. Coincidentally, through perception of this composition through the expressive plane, a connection forms between the atonal unpredictability and spontaneity of the this 19th century norm-defying composition and composer and the unpredictability and spontaneity of the life of the 21st century athlete.

 Franz Joseph Liszt was born on October 22nd, 1811 in Sopron County, Hungary. His mother, Anna Liszt, was a chambermaid, while his father, Adam Liszt was an amateur musician and a clerk. As a child Franz never learned Hungarian language. Instead, he learned German but eventually became fluent in French by the time he was a teenager. There was even an Italian newspaper that referred to him as the “’ Hungarian masquerading as Frenchman’” (Hamilton 1). His father, as mentioned above, was an amateur musician. Hence, Franz became introduced and interested in music through listening to his father practicing piano. His first musical debut occurred at the age of 9 as a pianist in a concerto by Ries. He continued his performances and eventually was noticed by Hungarian noblemen that decided to finance his musical studying in Vienna. In his studies, he was a student of Czerny and Salerni. Franz worked with Czerny for over a year and was extremely appreciative for his teachings, he latter dedicated his piece “12 Grandes etudes” to Czerny. His parents saw his potential and decided to move to Paris to further his education. He applied to the Conservatoire in 1823 but was denied because he was considered a foreigner. His father then hired two teachers to teach composition and the other to teach theory to Franz. He started to become a recognizable composer due to his multiple concert appearances between 1824 and 1827. However, a halt in his career occurred when his father died in 1827. This was enhanced by other detrimental situations in his life that pushed him into a depression, that had the public thinking he was dead. Two years later during the July Revolution of 1830, Franz Liszt was awakened as if “’the cannons cured him!’” (Hamilton 2).

From this awakening, he pushed himself through rigorous self-education and new ideas as an artist. It was in this period of his life in which he became inspired by the works of Paganini, a master of the violin. He was inspired to master the piano the way Paganini played the violin. In 1832 he began a scandalous affair with the wife of a Count that resulted in traveling, three children, and a plethora of gossip surrounding Liszt’s name. Through his travels he accomplished the makings of his first piano volume, which sparked a renewal of his concert career. Through the power of this spark, “from 1839 to 1847 he toured most of Europe as the most celebrated pianist the musical world had seen” (Hamilton 2). However, he decided to settle down in Weimer where he continued his musical career and this time become his the most successful time of his musical career. But then experienced tragedy once again losing a son and a daughter and also was in bad relations with his other daughter, which forced him into solitary living and depression. When out of this phase in the 1860s he was asked to give classes at the Royal Academy of Budapest and moved to Rome, beginning his “three-fold life between, Rome, Weimar, and Budapest that would continue until his death (Cataldi 4). It was at this time where his depression and thoughts stepped across into his music and created a unique direction that continued throughout the latter years of his life. However, one accomplishment that occurred was at Lizst’s 50th anniversary as a performing musician, he rewarded a scholarship to three students at the Academy with extraordinary talent and continued this scholarship throughout his years there. The Academy was eventually changed to the name “Franz Lisxt Akademie” because of his dedication and accomplishments with the Academy. However, he did encounter struggles throughout his three-fold life, including being accused of spreading anti-Semantic ideas and also falling down the stairs in 1881 that made him immobilized for eight weeks and seemed to halt him from ever getting back to his old self. In 1883 he started to show some light into a farther life in his musical career with new piano compositions being in the making. However, his work the musical world came to an end when he died on July 11, 1886 due to a case of pneumonia at his own daughters Festival in Bayreuth.

 This sad ending to a special unforgettable musician did not overshadow the power in the originality of his work in the musical realm. His piano technique and mastery, as well as his motive to revolutionize church music, presented an innovative creation of a new type of pianists. He revolutionized pianists through “his creative imagination, despising routine, [and] gave birth to some of the most daring and progressive compositions of the era” (Hamilton 1). He influenced composers such as, Debussy, Bartok, Busoni, and Schoenberg through this deviance from the norm of structure and harmony in the 19th century composer. His influence on the world of music began in the 1830s and 1840s when Liszt’s technicality of the piano advanced tremendously. Within this time, he created the Liszt octaves. The Liszt octaves are played “with alternating hands, thumbs overlapping, creating the illusion of regular double octaves at unattainable speeds” (Walker 2). Nonetheless, Liszt had a couple of physical advantages that made these advances possible. The physical advantages were the “lack of webbing between his fingers allowed him to take wide stretches with comparative ease […] his fingertips were blunted rather than tapered, they gave maximum traction [… and] his fourth fingers were unusually flexible, and this made it easier for him to play shimmering textures with several things going on inside the same hand simultaneously” (Walker 2). Because of these psychical attributes, Liszt had a specialty in leaps and glissando, in which Liszt would impress the crowd. A decade later in his career, his music is said to be unrecognizable because of the influence of Beethoven in his music at this time of his career. This period however, came to an end due to the unfortunate events in Franz’s life in the 1860s. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the above paragraph, Liszt endeavored in numerous hardships in his life that in the 1860s showed over in his compositions for the rest of his career. Matthew Cataldi, words this occurrence perfectly by stating,

“One cannot simply view his musical advances and so-called ‘experiments’ as natural, pre-disposed evolutions of a musical style he set forth in his youth with the intention of completing, but rather as the language of outcries and asides of whispers and laments that stemmed from his personal hardships” (Cataldi 4)

It is perfectly said because as a typical 19th century composer did not write outside of the major and minor key, as Liszt followed this norm at beginning of his career. Consequently, it was the death of his father, the loss of multiple lovers, the death of two of his children, the loss of a connection with his only living child, and injury that seems to influence the absence of key and the addition of “augmented chords and unresolved sevenths” (Ross 43); and also “whole tone harmonies, acerbic dissonant clashes and tritons, chords built on 4ths, and the avoidance of tonal stability” (Hamilton 3). Liszt’s latter life compositions were influenced by the occurrence and situations that happened throughout his career. Death was significant in his hardships throughout his life. Through his music, in blank key signature, and his ‘sans ton’ concept, Liszt portrayed death in his compositions. His works showed that, Liszt “seems to have associated the idea of no tonality with death” (Merrick 299). This significance of death in the life and music of Liszt is portrayed by the 84 compositions by Liszt where key signature is removed, as reported by the research of Paul Merrick. Through these unique leaps in the music scenes old friends of Liszt’s even questioned if he “was showing signs of ‘budding insanity’” (Ross 43). However, for this Liszt is regarded to as a” true Romantic icon” (Hamilton 4). Franz was definitely the first to write music in this manner, however, he would not be the last, instead he was just the spark to endless possibilities. One of Liszt’s final piano compositions, “Bagatelle sans tonalite”, is the most notable composition in which, “Liszt’s harmony comes unmoored from the concept of key” (Ross 43).

 “Bagatelle sans tonalite” was composed by Franz Liszt in 1885, just one year before his death. Originally this piece was supposed to be of something much larger. It was contained manuscript on the page reading “Fourth Mephisto Waltz”. However, this was never fully finished so it took the name “Bagatelle sans tonalite” as it appears as a subtitle on the document. Author, Matthew Cataldi states, “this piece is an extended binary form with introduction and coda material to frame each section” (40). Found within this piece where eleven themes, some of which were repeated. Within these themes, a connection to the life of the 21st century athlete is drawn. Theme A presents discordant notes played on the piano that portrays the feeling of being lost, and wondering what to do. Theme B presents ascending and descending notes played on the piano played at a fast and elongated tempo and is repeated two times before Theme C is presented. The first presentation of theme B represents the first instance with sports, the trial and error with multiple sports to see what fits best. The second presentation portrays the ups and downs within that one sport. Then Theme C is presented on the piano as an upbeat tempo containing ascending notes that start from a lower key but are building up to the climax of the piece. This is representing the athlete becoming very good at the sport he or she does. Theme D however. Theme D presents a majestic sounding, dramatic tone on the piano of high pitched ascending notes. This theme is representing an injury happening within the athlete’s career. The Theme then returns back to A. Thus, the athlete is feeling lost, and contemplating what to do next. Theme

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