

Books



Richard Bratby reads a monograph on Beethoven's cello sonatas:

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Patrick Rucker on an illuminating study of Liszt's symphonic poems:

'The more we learn about Weimar's less than ideal conditions, Liszt's tenacity seems all the more remarkable'

Beethoven's Cello

Five Revolutionary Sonatas and Their World
By Marc D Moskowitz and R Larry Todd
Boydell Press, HB, 274pp, £29.95
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Beethoven's cello sonatas Op 102 (or, as he termed them, sonatas for piano and cello) baffled his contemporaries. 'These two sonatas are surely amongst the most remarkable and strange piano works written in a long time, not only in this form but altogether for the pianoforte', wrote the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in 1818. 'Everything here is different, very different from what we have received up to now, even from this master.' A generation later, in 1854, they were still scratching their heads. Beethoven's Russian-born biographer Wilhelm von Lenz dismissed Op 102 No 2's final fugue as 'unplayable – it is a perfect scarecrow'.

So it's not just me, then. Most of us carry the scars of at least one unhappy musical encounter in our youth. As a teenage cellist, mine was an unsuccessful assault on the five Beethoven sonatas, naively (though unavoidably) attempted without a piano. One of the many incidental insights of this new book by the cellist and scholar Marc D Moskowitz and the pianist (and Mendelssohn biographer) R Larry Todd is that the virtuoso cellists of the 19th century tended to avoid the Beethoven sonatas. Instead, it took pianists like Henry Litolf and Hans von Bülow to propel them into the repertoire. 'It is not enough to have a good cellist – the situation also demands a refined individual', noted Bülow, to which I can only nod in rueful agreement.

And yet as a cycle these five experimental works – no two alike in style or form – resemble a series of geological samples from crucial points in Beethoven's creative development. The two Op 5 sonatas (1796) embody the extrovert young pianist-

composer, dazzling the court of the cello-playing King Frederick William II of Prussia. The expansive Op 69, written in 1808, represents the master at the peak of his symphonic game. And then there's that final pair, Op 102 (1817), two profoundly imaginative and sophisticated explorations in texture and musical form in which, as Steven Isserlis points out in his Foreword, 'we are ushered into another sphere entirely: the mystical, radiant, uncharted world of late Beethoven'. That 'scarecrow' fugue? It was 'in effect, Beethoven's prototype for the final visions of his transcendent late style', write Moskowitz and Todd: a powerful claim for a still-undervalued work.

That's their main argument, and they approach it with a thoroughness worthy of an academic thesis. They go far beyond the five numbered sonatas to consider practically everything that Beethoven wrote for solo cello. There are chapters devoted to the sets of variations for cello and piano (with a useful reminder that, contrary to modern fashion, Beethoven rated Handel above Bach), to the cello transcriptions of the Horn Sonata and the Op 3 Trio, and to the Triple Concerto (a cello concerto manqué): even the short cello solos in Beethoven's choral works get attention.

Each piece receives an in-depth analysis. Clearly and perceptively written, and illustrated with music examples and diagrams, these will probably prove of most interest to scholars. When Moskowitz and Todd argue that the dotted rhythms in the slow introduction of Op 5 No 1 signify 'an elevated, typically "royal" type of music' they don't expect you to take it on trust. Half a page of examples follows. But the historical context is endlessly fascinating. Personalities such as the cellists Dupont and Linke, and Beethoven's various patrons, are vividly sketched (who knew that Prince Lichnowsky was such a notorious rake?) and there are entire chapters devoted to the cellos and pianos that Beethoven actually owned – especially relevant to music whose most

revolutionary aspect is its attempt to place two performers on truly equal terms.

The authors are less surefooted when they move away from the musical world, and there are a couple of howlers: the Jacobites were not defeated by the 'Duke of Culloden', and Anna Maria von Erdödy was not Romanian in any historically meaningful sense. A pity, because Moskowitz and Todd have an eye for an anecdote. Many of the juiciest are tucked away in the footnotes (the rumour, current in the 1820s, that Beethoven was the illegitimate son of the King of Prussia, was new to me). But taken overall, it's hard to envision a more comprehensive single-volume introduction to Beethoven and the cello, and performers, listeners and researchers will all find something to engage them here, even if the different perspectives don't always blend entirely comfortably. What's clear throughout is that Moskowitz and Todd genuinely love this music, and send you back to it with renewed enthusiasm: 'a voyage', they conclude, 'for the mind, the soul, and the human spirit'. **Richard Bratby**

Liszt and the Symphonic Poem

By Joanne Cormac
Cambridge University Press, HB, 378pp, £90
ISBN 978-1-1071-8141-0



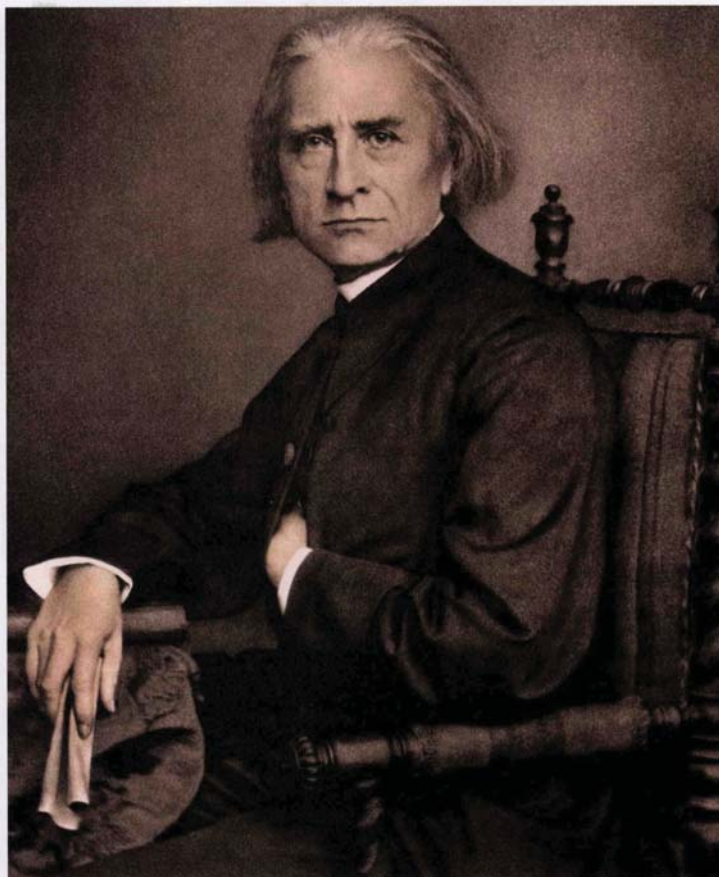
As he approached his 36th birthday, Liszt surprised musical Europe by declaring the end of his public career as a pianist following a recital in Ukraine. Few could have guessed the direction his career would take over the next dozen years. Accepting a longstanding invitation from the Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar, Liszt settled in the little town, took up the baton in earnest and started to transform his new home into a hub of modern music. He presented premieres and important revivals, most notably works by Berlioz, Schumann and Wagner, both

at court concerts and in the theatre. Along the way, Liszt himself emerged as one of the most influential orchestral composers of the 1850s, with works like the two symphonies, the Lenau Episodes, the first two Funeral Odes, a number of occasional pieces and transcriptions, and the first 12 symphonic poems. But if Liszt's achievements in Weimar are well documented, what Weimar provided him in terms of artistic stimuli and challenges is less understood.

Enter Joanne Cormac of the University of Nottingham. She contends that studies in recent decades have largely focused on demonstrating Liszt's continuity with the Beethovenian symphonic tradition. Meanwhile, his more radical innovations and reforms as both conductor and composer, often shaped by direct experience in the Weimar theatre, have been neglected. Cormac sets out to address this imbalance by mapping the symphonic poems against Liszt's own evolving artistic aims, his response to circumstances specific to Weimar, and the prevalent theatrical mores in mid-19th-century Germany. The result is a richly detailed interdisciplinary study that provides context for the symphonic poems' evolution, as well as a synthesis of Liszt's multifarious activities between February 1848 and August 1861.

At the Weimar court theatre Liszt encountered the first long-term professional theatrical milieu of his career. Despite his closeness to the Grand Ducal family, he was expected to function within the theatre's administrative structure. As 'Kapellmeister', Liszt was co-equal to the theatre's Artistic Director, who had responsibility for spoken drama and other non-musical activities. Both positions reported to the theatre Intendant, or General Director, who in turn was responsible to the court.

Opera, concerts and drama all used the same orchestra and most performances, save the occasional concert at the Grand Ducal palace or the Town Hall, were held in Weimar's only theatre. Because the theatre was entirely underwritten by the court, competition for scant resources was fierce. Liszt worked under a series of Intendants. One of them, Baron Ziegesar, proved a sympathetic and energetic colleague, working closely with Liszt on the productions of *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. Another, Franz Dingelstedt, who actually obtained his position through Liszt's influence, organised the claque which disrupted the 1858 premiere of Peter Cornelius's *Barber of Bagdad* and provoked Liszt's resignation. Though Liszt removed himself from the theatre



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after the *Barber* demonstration, he continued to conduct concerts at court until the summer of 1861, when he left for Rome.

The more we learn about Weimar's less than ideal conditions, Liszt's tenacity seems all the more remarkable. Cormac points out his innovations as a conductor, most obviously in shaping the canon by the works he chose to produce. But he also improved standards of performance through the careful preparation of singers in piano rehearsals and by insisting on sectional rehearsals for the orchestra, both novelties at the time. And he was motivated to present performances that would, so far as possible, realise the wishes of the composer. This is evident not only in his correspondence with the exiled Wagner, but with Berlioz and Schumann as well.

If the ideas for a number of the first 12 symphonic poems long pre-date Liszt's arrival in Weimar, they all attained their

definitive form there. Cormac traces the often complex genesis of each before focusing on five with the closest connections to the Weimar theatre: *Tasso*, *Prometheus*, *Orpheus*, *Festklänge* and *Hamlet*. Incidentally, she challenges several longstanding assumptions, among them the idea *Festklänge* was conceived in anticipation of Liszt's marriage to Carlolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein and that *Hamlet* was inspired by seeing Bogumil Dawison in the role. More importantly, Cormac demonstrates that, despite Liszt's use of sonata procedures in many of the pieces, as he progressed through the series his move away from sonata form was considered and deliberate.

The trenchant scholarship of *Liszt and the Symphonic Poem* is leavened with 77 music examples, reproductions of playbills and 11 helpful tables that detail, among other things, the evolution of individual symphonic poems as well as formal analyses. **Patrick Rucker**