Liszt’s *Sposalizio*: A Study in Musical Perspective

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In his thoughtful discussion of Liszt’s *Sposalizio*, a piano piece that takes its title from Raphael’s painting of the Marriage of the Virgin, Leon Plantinga suggests that “the nature of the reference of this music to its title, to the painting, or to the subject of the painting is surely less than obvious.” Plantinga continues with a discussion of the Romantic view of the expressive potential of music, concluding that “Liszt apparently felt that Raphael’s intimate betrothal scene, leaving impressions, say, of tenderness and ardor, suggested feelings similar to those he thought his composition would convey.” This assessment is undoubtedly correct: the mood of the piano piece is certainly reflective of the calm serenity conveyed by Raphael’s masterpiece. But the relationship between the musical composition and the painting by Raphael that inspired it goes well beyond this general evocation mood.

As Plantinga himself points out, Liszt instructed that a copy of Raphael’s painting be included when the composition was first published, as part of *Années de pèlerinage, Deuxième Année, Italie* (1850). Liszt’s concern that the visual artwork be available to the musician suggests that the composer sensed and promoted a strong connection between the painting and his own musical conception. Further evidence of this association is found in one of the *Lettres d’un bachelier-ès-musique* written in 1839, around the very time that Liszt composed *Sposalizio*. In an open letter to Hector Berlioz, Liszt comments on the power of his response to Italian art.

The beautiful, in this privileged country, appeared to me in the purest and most sublime forms. The art showed itself to me in all its splendor, it revealed itself to me in its universality and in its unity. The feeling and the thought penetrated me more each day concerning the hidden relationship which unites works of genius. Raphael and Michelangelo helped me to better understand Mozart and Beethoven.

Here Liszt draws a direct connection between the shared genius of visual and of musical

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2Ibid., p. 189.

3Franz Liszt, *Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, vol. 7 (Kassel and Budapeast, 1974), p. x. Liszt commissioned the artist Kretschmer to sketch copies of both Raphael’s *Sposalizio* and Michelangelo’s *Il Parmigiano* on which the second piece in the collection is based.


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expression. Elsewhere, in another of the Lettres d’un bachelier-ès-musique, he speaks even more specifically of Raphael’s universality and artistic idealism. In an extended discussion of Raphael’s painting of Saint Cecilia, Liszt remarks to the musician Joseph d’Ortigue:

I do not understand by what secret magic this tableau suddenly presented itself to my soul under a double aspect: first as a glorious expression of the human form in that which is the most noble, the most ideal, like a marvel of grace, of purity, of harmony; then at the same moment, and without any effort of imagination, I discovered a wonderful and complete symbolism of the art to which we have devoted our lives. The poetry and the philosophy of the artwork were as visible to me as was the ordering of its lines, and its ideal beauty impressed me as strongly as did its actual plastic beauty. . . . Tell me, did you not also see in this noble figure the symbol of music in its highest degree of power?2

That Liszt should see in painting a kind of symbolism reflective of the idealistic potential of music is hardly surprising: so much of his writing on program music is bound up with the mental and idealistic prerogatives of the artist.3 Thus it seems very likely that in writing a work such as Spontini, Liszt was himself trying to capture the same “double aspect” that so impressed him in Raphael’s artwork—the dual expression of formal integrity and symbolic representation.

(Liszt, 1844, p. 296). “Le beau, dans ce pays privilégié, m’appréciait sous ses formes les plus pur es et les plus sublimes. L’art se montrait à mes yeux dans toutes ses splendeurs, il se revêtait à moi dans son universalité et dans son unité. Le sentiment et la réflexion me préoccupaient chaque jour davantage de la manière cachée qui unit les œuvres du génie. Raphael et Michel-Ange me faisaient mieux comprendre Mozart et Beethoven.”

2Franz Liszt to Joseph d’Ortigue, Gazette musicale, 14 April 1849, repr. in Pages romantiques, pp. 351–52. “Je ne sais par quelle sécrétion ce tableau se présente soudain à mon esprit sous un double aspect: d’abord comme une ravissante expression de la forme humaine dans ce qu’elle a de plus noble, de plus idéal, comme une prodige de grâce, de pureté, d’harmonie, puis au même instant, et sans aucun effort d’imagination, le cri s’élevant contre une symphonie admirable et complète de l’art auquel nous avons vu naître. La poésie et la philosophie de l’œuvre se montrèrent à moi aussi visiblement que l’ordrement de ses lignes et sa beauté idéelle me semblaient fortuites que sa beauté plastique. . . . Enfin, n’essuyez-vous pas ainsi que moi dans cette noble figure le symbole de la musique à son plus haut degré de puissance?”

3Several writers have discussed the pervasive use of variation and thematic transformation in Liszt’s music. See, for example, Berndau Hansen, Variationen und Variationen in den musikalischen Werken Franz Liszts (Ph.D. diss., University of Hamburg, 1999).

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Figure 1

Fundamental to any discussion of Liszt's programmatic music, here it becomes possible to relate a structural boundary in the musical form to a change in the progress of the evolving ideas that underlie the piece. Furthermore, such moments allow a sense of perspective on the development of the musical ideas: with each such moment of perspective, what has already been heard may in retrospect be understood quite differently. In other words, Liszt's musical procedures can allow a subtle interplay between the musical form and an external idea, a reciprocal relationship in which each contributes to the creation of a significant and expressive musical form. Spocalzo offers a particularly illuminating example of the way this concept of musical perspective functions in Liszt's music. Not only does it demonstrate several aspects of Liszt's conception of evolving form, but it also projects a remarkable sense of musical perspective that is parallel to the visual perspective of Raphael's canvas.

As a general description, Lang's evaluation is accurate enough and poetic, but the interest of the piece goes well beyond this general statement. Most fascinating is the gradual formation of the melodic ideas which appear to evolve and coalesce during the course of the piece and which—as will be shown—have a particular pictorial significance. In this process, Liszt carefully manipulates the revelation of melodic ideas through clear stages of evolution, in order to shift continually the listener's perspective. Figure 1 is a schematic outline of the overall design of Spocalzo, a design that does not conform to any conventional pattern. Immediately apparent is the underlying foundation of sonata principles, as evidenced by the clear gesture to a

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secondary key area with its new theme, and the eventual recapitulation of all themes and motives in the tonic. Also evident is the strophic structure of the central section of the piece: the theme in C major is repeated and then builds to a climax; the same basic procedure then occurs (with much greater intensity) in E major. In this kind of structure Liszt may have been influenced by the strophic nature of the three Petrarch sonnets (which are transcriptions of songs), written around the same time.

The most striking feature of the outline concerns the introductory section of the piece, which divides into three discrete sections—the presentation of motives, followed by two separate passages. In each of these stages, new aspects of the basic motivic material are revealed and defined.

At first there is little sense of total or rhythmic orientation. The opening motive (marked as motive 1 on ex. 1) is an enigmatic pentatonic arabesque, which comes to rest on the dominant of E major.11 By beginning on the second beat of the measure, Liszt avoids establishing a metric pulse, and the C3 held over the bar line destroys any sense of rhythmic regularity. Thus, the fluidity of the motivic motive is enhanced by the rhythmic freedom. This opening motive is the “sound phenomenon” which

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This kind of opening is not unusual in Liszt's music. The procedure most immediately recalls the beginning of *Harmonies poétique et religieuses* of 1833, which also presents two contrasting motives in an atmosphere of reverie. In Spoulcicau, however, Liszt gives evidence of a more refined compositional acumen by achieving the same kind of tentative and enigmatic beginning within a specific metricial and key signature. These opening motives are immediately repeated, with octave doublings and an increased dynamic level, now suggesting the dominant of G major, a third higher. Sequential repetition of this kind is a standard feature of Liszt's mature style.

Following this initial presentation, Liszt then separates the two motives, elaborating each individually. Thus, the first main section, section A, is conceived mainly with the ars-basque motive. Initially the motive merely intumesces itself into the arpeggiated texture (mm. 10, 12, etc.). As though reacting to the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic flexibility of the opening motive, the first measures of this passage respond with some remarkable harmonic gestures. Much of the effect of this passage results from the intensification of harmonic rhythm between mm. 9–15. But it is mainly the juxtaposition of harmonic colors bearing no apparent functional relationship that has caused at least one critic to call this "one of the most astonishing pages that Liszt ever wrote." As Planzinger points out, however, the harmonic progression actually arises quite naturally from the

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descending whole-tone scale in the bass (which descends from G to C in mm. 9 to C in mm. 17). By m. 19, the arabesque motive becomes more pervasive in the texture as it is repeated insistently in the bass. From this point, the harmonic motion is cadential, fluctuating between the subdominant (A major) and the dominant seventh (D minor). Rising sequences with accelerando and crescendo markings increase tension until the arabesque motive in the bass resolves firmly to the tonic, G (mm. 28–29).

Delaying the affirmation of the tonic is one of the most obvious ways of creating a sense of an emerging or evolving form. Although Liszt initially implies E major through the dominant-seventh chords of mm. 3 and 4, he then deliberately undermines the tonic by leading the tonality away from it, to G major in mm. 7 and 8, and then further afield in the first main section of the piece. Such a circuitous progression serves to increase the sense of resolution when the tonic finally returns.

With the beginning of the Andante quinto at m. 30, the second motive assumes prominence and affirms the E-major tonality. Here the melodic opening notes of the arabesque are rhythmically defined and incorporated into the melodic line (tenor voice). Instead of the two-}

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1 Plantenga, Romantische Musik, p. 199. Karen Wilson, by contrast, tries unsuccessfully to describe the progression in terms of functional harmony, as follows: "... the progression arrives logically from & minor to E minor by way of D minor, to a G-major chord (D minor, to a B-major chord [E minor] to a B major chord [G minor] to the Assumption of a B in C minor), to a B-major chord [G minor] to a B major chord [E minor] to a B major chord [G minor]."


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measure melodic fragments that characterize the first main section of the piece, this Andante quinto presents four-measure phrases that are balanced and symmetrical. Harmonically, too, there is a striking change: here the harmony is restricted to the most basic of functional chords, the only chromatic notes being those that lead to the cadence on E (mm. 36–37).

The effect of this sudden increase in sense of stability causes an important shift in the listener's perspective. Whereas the ear is initially inclined to hear section A as being expository, the dramatic arrival of the tonal and harmonic stability of the Andante quinto causes this perception to change. In retrospect, section A is heard as introductory, as a transitional passage leading to the more defined statement of the motives.

To this point, the development of the motives has followed clear stages of evolution. Each has received extended treatment in the opening sections of the piece, and the E-major tonic—accented as in the opening measures—has been strongly affirmed. Certain expectations concerning tonality and thematic treatment have thus been raised. But with the next section of the piece, the perspective again shifts as Liszt introduces a contrasting passage that appears to be completely unrelated to the carefully established motivic ideas. The B-major chord of m. 37 does not resolve to the tonic, G, but instead drops a third to C major, and Liszt introduces a dream-like dolceissimo melody (ex. 5).

This theme, which has the character of a soaring march, is best described as a processional. At the same time, it is almost static and eternal by virtue of the many repeated notes and pedal tones in the bass (initially G; then A). But in the face of the carefully developed fabric of the opening motives, the arrival of this Fiò
Inato melody sounds unexpected. As Plantinga has demonstrated, aspects of this theme have indeed been foreshadowed in the opening passage of the piece: the sustained chords of m. 9 are recalled, and the general shape of the melodic line follows that of the second motive. One might also argue that the rhythm \( \frac{3}{4} \) is a varied augmentation of the \( \frac{1}{4} \) figure that occurs in both of the opening motives.

Despite these underlying unifying features, however, the dramatic shift in tonality, harmonic rhythm, texture, and mood ensure that the processional melody is heard as something new. Against the carefully developed background, there appears a different focus, and the listener is forced once again to reevaluate the development of ideas and of musical motives. To understand this striking shift in perspective, one must reconsider the program associated with the piece.

Plate 1 is a reproduction of Sposalizio, Raphael's painting of the wedding of Mary and Joseph. The balance of the design and the sense of proportion are immediately evident, but what is most exceptional is the depth of perspective generated by the painting. This is particularly evident when one compares this version with the Sposalizio of Perugino (i.e., Pietro Vannucci) that served as Raphael's model. In Perugino's painting (plate 2), the temple dominates the canvas and tends to dwarf the wedding party in the foreground. By arranging this group in a fairly straight line around the rigidly upright figure of the priest, Perugino's canvas tends to divide into two separate halves, despite the vanishing perspective point through the open doors of the temple.

By contrast, Raphael's masterpiece creates a depth and unity of vision. Here the figures of the wedding party in the foreground are the same size as the temple, generating a much stronger sense of balance and proportion. Instead of Perugino's linear arrangement, Raphael's wedding group forms a semicircular sweep flowing back from the central figures, echoing the curvature of the temple and creating an immediate depth of perspective. This sense of depth is greatly enhanced both by the perspective lines leading back and eventually incorporating the steps of the temple and by the clusters of conversing figures in the background (both of which also appear in Perugino's version). Most importantly, much greater emphasis is given by Raphael to the three central figures, whose graceful grouping and flexible postures serve to

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give them prominence while at the same time directing the viewer's gaze back toward the temple. Thus, while Raphael suggests two areas of visual importance, each of which might stand as a strong focus of attention, the two do not remain on separate planes. Instead, they are united through a sense of perspective.

Liszt's insistence that a copy of the painting be included in the first edition of the piece has already been noted. Accepting that he did perceive a correlation between the visual artwork and its musical expression can help explain the unusual design of his Sposalizio. While there is no need to assume too literal a musical realization of the painted canvas, the parallels are evident. Liszt, for his part, uses purely musical means to create a similar quality of perspective.

As suggested above, the opening sections establish an aural background: motives reminiscent of bells are expanded and developed in the key of E major, with remarkable emphasis on pure musical "color."

Against this aural background there emerges another focus of attention—the processional theme in the new key of G major. If the opening sections can be said to evoke an atmosphere suggestive of the temple, it is this melody that announces the presence of the Virgin and her

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See, for example, the recent article by Ralph Kirwert and C. H. Ackerel ("Liszt's Italian Years: Pictorial Highlights,") *Claviers 13* (1984), 23-27, which graphically describes how "Liszt has set Raphael's canvas into musical motion." For example, the authors see the Apolline episode as a meditation on the marriage, in which "Liszt creates a remarkable tone painting of the inclining figures and the dialogue of the three principal characters by using motives of a 'bending' shape that answer each other in a circular motive corresponding to Raphael's presentation of the motif uniting Mary, Joseph, and the priest" (p. 24).
wedding party. Many years later, Liszt rewrote this piece for female chorus and organ (Spousa
tizo-Trauung, 1883). In this later version, the
corner song the words “Ave Maria” at the point
when the processional melody begins, a feature
that suggests that this stately theme is meant to
be associated with the Virgin herself.

The first half of Spousazo, then, achieves a
musical representation of the dual planes of Ra
phal’s canvas. It is in the second half of the
piece that Liszt unites them, integrating the
new melody in G major with the established
motivic work and the E-major tonality of the
opening. At first, the scannous arabesque moti
eve insinuates itself into the processional
theme (mm. 46, 48, 50–51 in ex. 3). With the
repetition of the theme (from mm. 52), the motive
becomes more integrated into the texture (a
process similar to its gradual absorption into
the texture of section A). And in the develop-
mental area, the arabesque becomes the basis of
rising sequences, culminating in an impar
ssioned climax on the second motive (ex. 6).
Throughout this tonally unstable area, the bass
note B is a constant pedal tone and solid anchor:
as the third degree of G major and the dominant
of E major, it provides the tonal pivot (as it also
does at the end of the Andante quieto).

The return of the processional theme, now in
E major (mm. 77), creates the effect of a recapitula-
tion, of tonal and thematic resolution. The
weight of this resolution is enhanced by the
combination of themes and the integration of
the background motives with the processional
theme. Just as the two visual planes of Raphael’s
canvas are united through converging perspec
tive lines, the two aural planes of Liszt’s
composition are here brought together in a recap
itulatory synthesis.

The cycle of strophes that first occurred in G
major is now reaffirmed in the tonic E major,
and at every level more sensuous, passionate,
and intense. With the repetition of the theme at m. 97, the dynamic level rises to *fortissimo* and the arabesque motive, now doubled in octaves, becomes an ecstatic cascade of chords. Once again the climax to this strophe isolates the second motive, now resounding in C# major, a sonority hinted at in the opening measure of the piece. This emphasis on C#, a minor third below the tonic, balances the secondary key of G, a minor third above the tonic.

The final measures of *Sposalizio* provide synthesis and resolution. Measures 113–30 are a reminiscence of the *Andante* quinto, with an expanded cadential progression to the tonic. In the coda, the arabesque motive is combined in yet a new way with the processional theme, now in a series of relaxed plagal cadences (mm. 121–24, ex. 7). The final cadence, an unusual vi–I progression, echoes the emphasis on C# in mm. 106–15 and in turn a reflection of the very opening measure of the piece, combines the rhythm of the second motive with the static repeated chords of the main theme.

If *Sposalizio* is a particularly striking example of the creation and manipulation of perspective in music, it is by no means an isolated case. The notion of a shifting perspective as it relates to an evolutionary conception of form is central to any discussion of Liszt’s style, particularly as it relates to program music.

In the case of *Sposalizio*, the musical design is self-sufficient, and is understandable as an abstract, “absolute” form. Underlying the developing ideas are significant tonal tensions between the tonic C major and the secondary key of G major and an impressive amount of motivic development. It is possible to consider the opening sections as representative of a first theme area, and the G-major processional as a
second theme group. The parallels to sonata form can be carried further: the recapitulation in m. 77 satisfies a basic criterion of the Classical model, as it offers tonal resolution through the return to the tonic key after an unstable developmental passage and a restatement of earlier thematic ideas.

At the same time that one can appreciate the formal cogency of such a piece, a knowledge of Raphael's painting actually contributes to an understanding of the way the music unfolds. Using Liszt's Faust symphony as an example, Carl Dahlhaus offers an elaborate and idealized definition of program music, one which allows for a true union of a programmatic idea and the requirements of cogent musical organization.

Of course Goethe's Faust is not the content of Liszt's 'Faust' Symphony but merely its subject. And a subject is no model to be imitated but rather a sort of material that the composer elaborates. A supply of tunes and a subject, if we may simplify the point, consists of two kinds of material. Only from the interconnection of subject and 'forms moved in sounding' does the musical content arise. . . . If the subject specifies meanings for musical themes and motives, the opposite is equally valid: the broad significance and import of the subject is newly muxed by the musical themes and motives. Program music rests on the interdependence of its components.19

What Dahlhaus describes is a reciprocal relationship between the programmatic subject and the purely musical parameters of a composition, each contributing to the creation of a significant and expressive musical form. In Sposalizio, this ideal of interdependence—the same ideal that Liszt found so remarkable in Raphael's painting of Saint Cecilia—is attained. Such a subtle interplay between musical form and poetic idea constitutes one of the most significant aspects of Liszt's style.


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