

# Franz Liszt's National Identity from Viewpoint of His Activity in Weimar Era

— Was He Actually a German Nationalist?

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## 1. Introduction

Franz Liszt, a composer, pianist, conductor, and musical writer representing the 19th century, was born on 22 October, 1811 in Raiding, and died on 31 July, 1886 in Bayreuth. In Japan, his recognition and evaluation is lower than in the Occident. Yet, in order to become a professional of music, it is unavoidable to study him. For instance, if I were a student in the piano course of Music College, I could not graduate without approaching Liszt's works. To say the least, it would be recommended.

Franz Liszt was born the only child of German-speaking parents in Raiding (*Komitat Sopron*) in an area of Hungary, in which German was the official language at the time and Raiding was, in 1921, to be relegated to the republic of Austria (Burgenland) in the context of the territorial redivision after the World War I.

## 2. Liszt and Weimar

Franz Liszt's international career as a pianist was at its peak when he first visited Weimar in 1841 at the court's invitation. During his second visit in 1842, he was appointed "*Hofkapellmeister im außerordentlichen Dienst*" ("Court Conductor Extraordinary"). After a short stay in 1846, Liszt settled permanently in Weimar in 1848, having been appointed Hofkapellmeister (Court Conductor). During the Weimar era, Liszt composed two symphonies<sup>1</sup>, two piano concerti, the piano sonata, Ballade in B-minor, "*Totentanz*," "*Grosses Konzertsolo*," "*Fantasie und Fuge über den Choral 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam'*," "*Praeludium und Fuge über den Namen B-A-C-H*," "*Missa solennis*," "*Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth*," along with 12 symphonic poems. In addition, he wrote a monograph about Frédéric Chopin and numerous lucubration about music theory. During this time, he also held many festivals and charity concerts. Because of this, this was the most fruitful era for him.

On 23 January, 1844 Franz Liszt wrote to his mistress Marie d'Agoult,

“Not destroying Carthage, but constructing Weimar. Under the fallen Grand Duke Charles Auguste, Weimar was a new Athens. Let’s dream today to construct the new Weimar. Let’s renew frankly and boldly the traditions of Charles Auguste. Let’s allow the talents to act freely in their sphere. Let’s colonize [as much] as possible.”<sup>2</sup>

Liszt regarded himself as the heir of Goethe who governed Weimar instead of the successor to Johann Nepomuk Hummel who had been *Hofkapellmeister* of Weimar from 1819 until his death in 1837. That is to say, he resided in Weimar in order to mount a new cultural initiative in the name and spirit of Goethe, to newly construct the flourishing city of arts and sciences in Weimar. In 1849, Liszt wrote to Grand Duke Carl Alexander of Weimar, proposing the establishment of a foundation to nurture German art. Liszt argued in this proposal that such a foundation

“offers a happy opportunity to bring some respite from political preoccupations that have agitated all those in Germany. It could deflect perilous questions that absorb [the German people] toward other questions, not less important, but more peaceful ones of art, poetry, aesthetics, and moral philosophy. Their influence could not be anything but beneficial in softening bitter passions that rouse visceral struggles in the people: in spreading more light, these issues may diminish the confusions of the melee.”<sup>3</sup>

It was clear that Liszt was astonished by the 1848 revolutions; they had torn people apart along social and political lines. Liszt thought that political actions had failed to effect a positive change in society; indeed, they had exacerbated divisions between people. In order to heal those rifts, he argued, people needed to be reminded of beauty and their sophisticated understanding of art. Because of this, Liszt intended to found the *Goethe-Stiftung*, so that he was to create *Kulturnation*. After Napoleon’s invasion, the project of *Kulturnation* was restored in Germany. *Kulturnation* meant that, “if laws, parliaments and assemblies could not bind the German people together, institutions, monuments and festivals would.”

Ehrhard Bahr provided us with more information about the relationship between Liszt and Weimar,

“To be sure, other notable writers had their residence in Weimar, and there were other cities that had some claim to Goethe – Frankfurt/Main, Leipzig, Strasbourg, Wetzlar – but no other city identified itself as much with Goethe as Weimar. The city’s function as the Mecca of German *Bildung* made Weimar central to the study of Germany’s ‘mentalité.’”<sup>54</sup> “[There was] the emergence of the modern *Dichterfeier* at Weimar, the public institution of festivals in honor of great writers, during these years. Such festivals became popular in Germany between the revolution of 1848 and the proclamation of the new Empire in 1871, serving as a substitute for national unity.”<sup>55</sup> “[Such festivals] proved to be an empowering practice imparting political and cultural meaning to Weimar’s function in German history with the purpose of giving Weimar a central position in literature and the arts and making it a rallying-position for German unity.”<sup>56</sup>

In 1854, “Neu Weimar Verein” (New Weimar Association) was established. The president was Liszt, the vice-president was Hoffmann von Fallersleben, and other members were Joachim Raff, Felix Dräseke, Hans von Bronsart, Peter Cornelius, Josef Joachim, Karl Klindworth, Hans von Bülow, Hector Berlioz, and Richard Wagner. And in June 1859, at the première “Tonkünstler-Versammlung” (tone-artists assembly) in Leipzig, the German music historian Franz Brendel coined the word and concept of “Neudeutsche Schule” (New German School), derived from “Neu Weimar Verein.” In doing so, he intended to dismiss the absurd name “Zukunftsmusik” (music of future). The members of “Neudeutsche Schule” were Liszt, Wagner and Berlioz. Brendel explained the criterion that their nation and birthplace were subsidiary, and what was important was whether their spiritual patria was Germany or not. For Liszt and Berlioz, “their *Ansatz* (starting point) is Beethoven. Hence their roots are German.” In 1861 “*Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein*” (All German Music Association) was also established through Franz Brendel’s initiative, deriving from “Goethe-Stiftung”, with Liszt as president. In this way, Brendel transformed Liszt’s Weimar-oriented patriotism (i.e. *Weimar-Landespatriotismus*) into all German things by the power of nationalism.

### 3.Liszt and Germany

Franz Liszt, born in German-speaking Western Hungary, had been seen as a “German” composer from his contemporaries through the disruption of the Nazis, despite his Hungarian national identity, partly because of his mother tongue<sup>7</sup>, partly because of his relationship to German artists (such as Goethe, J.S. Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven and Richard Wagner,) and partly because of his commitment to German-national activities, such as monuments to Goethe, Schiller and Beethoven, festivals for Goethe and Herder, “*Goethe-Stiftung*”, and “*Neudeutsche Schule*”, which were mostly held in Weimar, German “*geistige Hauptstadt*” (spiritual capital). For instance, Liszt transcribed some organ pieces by Bach, all the symphonies, septet and some lieder by Beethoven, and some pieces of opera by Wagner into piano works, which were played not only in concert halls, but also in domestic homes. Needless to say, Liszt himself played. In addition, he performed Beethoven’s piano sonata during his Paris era (including *Hammerklavier* sonata in his teenage years), conducted Beethoven’s symphonies and Wagner’s opera (including première of *Lohengrin*) during his Weimar era. These elements definitely made Liszt a “German” musician in those days. It is symbolic that in his childhood, Liszt played *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in front of Goethe.

Actually, Liszt regarded himself as the successor of Goethe, who governed Weimar, as mentioned above. Yet he felt his national identity was Hungarian. He very often spoke French. Even if he contributed to the creation and development of German “*Kulturnation*”, to the transformation of Weimar into a substitute and a symbol for German national and cultural unity, he was never a German nationalist. The German nationalists, including Franz Brendel, and nationalism rising toward establishing the German Empire labeled Liszt “German”. Even though Liszt never had the ideal of a unified German State, and even though he never shared the concept of German cultural oneness, Liszt’s image as “a successor of Goethe” became one of the reasons why he had been seen as a German nationalist, since Goethe had been established as a German cultural and spiritual symbol. Although the *Goethe-Stiftung* did not come true after all, Liszt contributed to the cultural discussion at the national level by attempting *Goethe-Stiftung*, and also to the construction of *Kulturnation* after the 1848 revolution. Festivals took place through Liszt’s initiatives, and monuments built by his initiatives were to form the national identity of people at that time in Germany when the literacy rate was not very

high. To that extent, he was a German national citizen, but he was oriented towards Weimar. In other words, he was attracted to Weimar as “Ilm-Athen”; he had neither the political ideology nor the all-German nationalism, represented by the question “Was ist Deutsch?” which was a common question during Liszt’s Weimar era (1848-1861).

#### **4. Liszt’s national identity**

How should we think about Liszt’s national identity? At present, national identity is a significant factor for every person. After World War II, many nations ardently carried off independence, their mother tongue and national identity, while globalization, Westernization and Americanization were spreading. In Liszt’s time, nation and nation state were indeed being built. So to speak, through the 19th century, “Germany” was created against France. Besides, what Germany and Hungary meant was being inquired of. Did Liszt identify himself with some nation? Alan Walker mentioned,

Émile Haraszti, for example, claimed that Liszt was French in outlook and feeling, and that the Gallic temperament, acquired in his youth, remained with him for life. James Huneker, on the other hand, asserted that Liszt was German, at any rate in the second half of his life. Nobert Dunkel said that Liszt was ashamed of his origins and never spoke of them. As if to complete this round of logical alternatives, Peter Raabe stressed Liszt’s “cosmopolitanism.” Hungary, he asserted, was to Liszt merely a birthplace, not his hometown. Liszt, it is true, could not even speak Hungarian. He spent his most formative years in France, and spoke French in preference to any other language. Then, at the height of his fame and maturity, he moved to Germany, a country he admired but whose language he never properly mastered, and became the leader of the “Neo-German” school. His last twenty years, his “*vie trifurquée*”, as Liszt called them, were years of endless wandering back and forth across Italy, Hungary, and Germany with frequent visits to Austria and some to France. This final period seems conclusively to prove Raabe’s assertion. Liszt did indeed live an international life.<sup>8</sup>

As for recent scholars, French Serge Gut is likely to argue with an emphasis on the influence of French Romanticism (characterized by Chateaubriand, Senancour, Victor Hugo, Delacroix, Ingre, Chopin and Niccolò Paganini) and the French language on the

young Liszt in Paris. German Detlef Altenburg is predisposed to argue with an emphasis on the heredity of the German legacy in Weimar, while current Hungarian scholars are inclined to argue with an emphasis on his Hungarian origins (exclusive of Émile Haraszti, who acted in the first half of the 20th century).

However, as Walker explained, Liszt gave many charity concerts for the people of Hungary, at which he sometimes appeared wearing the national dress. He also helped to found the great music academy in Budapest which still bears his name, and in 1848, he attempted to buy the humble farm cottage in Raiding where he was born.<sup>9</sup> For him, the prairies of Raiding were the scenery of his origin. In fact, in 1838, Liszt wrote to Lambert Massart,

It was these emotions, these feelings that revealed the meanings of the word “homeland” to me. I was suddenly transported to the past, and upon looking inside myself, I, to my indescribable joy, found there the full, pure treasury of my childhood memories. A magnificent landscape rose before my eyes: it was the familiar forest, ringing with the hunter’s cries; it was the Danube, tumbling along its course [over] the rocks; it was the vast plain where the docile flocks freely grazed; it was Hungary, that robust and fertile soil that has borne such noble children. It was, in brief, my homeland, because “ I too,” I cried, in a spate of patriotism that would have made you smile, “I too belong to that ancient and noble race. I am one of the sons of that primitive, indomitable nation, which seems destined for better days!”...

The race has always been proud and heroic. Noble sentiments have always found a comfortable place in those ample breasts. Those lofty brows were never made for ignorance and servitude. More fortunate than others, their minds have never been dazzled by false promises. [...]

Oh, my wild and distant homeland! Oh, my unknown friends! Oh, my vast family! [Y]our cry of suffering has summoned me to you! My heart has been moved with compassion, and I have bowed my head in shame for having neglected you so long... [...]<sup>10</sup>

It is the case that “the Hungarian” has so much exoticism for Western-European people, as represented by the operetta “*Fledermaus*” (“Bat”) by Johann Strauss, Jr. For Liszt, to show “the Hungarian” to the audiences was not to create propaganda,

but some kind of commercial subject. Yet the nationality and national identity have been indispensable ever since Napoleon fought and the French Revolution occurred for everyone. As represented by the case of Hannah Arendt, the deprivation of nationality is terrible. As Walker said, in the twilight of Liszt's life he wrote, "I may surely be allowed, in spite of my lamentable ignorance of the Hungarian language, to remain from my birth to the grave Magyar in heart and mind..."<sup>11</sup> The fact that Liszt didn't speak Hungarian is not so important, because a large number of 19th-century Hungarians never learned their own language.

He composed, indeed, "Hungarian Rhapsodies", "*Hungaria*", "*Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth*", "*Ungarische Krönungsmesse*", "*Historische ungarische Bildnisse*", and "*Ungarische Nationalmelodien*". Although, since from 12 years old, and throughout his lifetime, his favorite language was French – reading and self-formation during his youth were completely done by the French – there was the underlying affection for France in himself, and after his monumental return to Hungary in 1839-1840, he composed a series of "Hungarian" works as mentioned above.<sup>12</sup>

Based on this, it can be said that once Liszt tried to identify himself with Western-Europe (i.e., France), he became aware of his non-Western-European identity (i.e., Hungarian), accepted his origins as destiny, and sublimated it into his art.

Because in the 1850's Liszt saw himself as responsible for the future of German music, he insisted that he be a member of *Neudeutsche Schule*. What is more, in his 1860 will, he wrote himself to be its member.<sup>13</sup> Yet, this matter did not come from his national identity, even though he tried to take advantage of the recognition that Liszt was such a member. Besides, as long as *Hofkapellmeister* of Weimar, he had to admire the great German artists. Since, in those days, he was reading the theory of hero-worship by Thomas Carlyle, he composed many pieces and symphonic works by admiring great German literati.

As I mentioned above, Liszt's social identity was German, and his personal identity was Hungarian during his Weimar era, although anyone's identity is variable.

## Notes

- 1 If including “*Symphonie der Vierelemente*,” three symphonies.
- 2 “Non pas *Delendo [sic] Carthago*, mais *Aedificando [sic] Vimarìa*. Weymar était sous le feu Grand Duc Charles Auguste, une nouvelle Athènes, songeons aujourd’hui à construire la nouvelle Weymar. Renouons franchement et hautement les traditions de Charles Auguste— Laissons les talents agir librement dans leur sphère—*colonisons[sic]* le plus possible”  
(*Correspondence : Franz Liszt—Marie d’Agoult* Nouvelle éd. présentée et annotée par Serge Gut et Jacqueline Bellas, Paris : Fayard, 2001, p.1078)
- 3 Franz Liszt, *Denkschrift an Grossherzog Carl Alexander: Entwurf zu dem Plan einer Goethe-Stiftung*. Goethe-Schiller Archive, Weimar: Findbuch Liszt 2 1/2, 1-2, 1849. Quoted by: Quinn, Erika J. *Composing a German identity: Franz Liszt and the Kulturnation, 1848-1886*. Ph.D. diss., Davis: University of California, 2001, p92
- 4 Ehrhard Bahr, “The Silver Age of Weimar. Franz Liszt as Goethe’s Successor: A Study in Cultural Archaeology.” in *Yearbook of the Goethe Society* 10(2001), p.191
- 5 idem, p.193
- 6 ibid.
- 7 Everyone knew that Liszt was born in the German – speaking part of western Hungary, that German was therefore his mother tongue, and that he had chosen to live in Weimar, the cultural capital of Germany.
- 8 Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983 [1987], p.48
- 9 idem, pp.48-49
- 10 Franz Liszt, *An Artist’s Journey : Lettres d’un bachelier ès musique 1835-1841*, trans. by Suttoni, Charles, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp.139-140
- 11 Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983 [1987], p.49
- 12 The flood in March, 1838 was Hungary’s worst natural disaster in modern times. Villages, crops and livestock were destroyed, over 150 people drowned, and a half of Pest’s some 100,000 inhabitants were forced to flee their homes. From 18 April to 25 May, Liszt gave some charity concerts in Vienna in order to donate a large sum of money to Hungary. In one hand, in Paris he was regarded as a foreigner, in Weimar because of his poor German language he could not adapt to the life there, in other hand, in Hungary he could not speak Hungarian. He was enthusiastically welcome into Hungary, however, so that he felt this place to be his “hometown.”
- 13 Since 1860’s, his relationship to Hungary became more important.