

Musical Characteristics and Playing Technique of Liszt's Second Narrative

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Abstract: *Liszt was born in Hungary and is a representative composer of the age of romanticism. His creative style is innovative and personalized, and his outstanding compositions throughout his life are countless. The value of "Ballade No.2 in B minor" is one of Liszt's relatively underestimated compositions. Firstly, this article analyzes the musical structure of the composition. Secondly, an analysis is conducted on the themes that occupy a significant amount of space, as well as the thematic transformation of each theme, in terms of musical image and. Finally, a more detailed explanation of the five most important musical features of the composition, namely "Symphonizing", "Nationalism", "Narrative", "Dramatization", and "Virtuosity", is provided. The explanation of these five musical features is the frontier demonstration of this article. The author hopes to further explore the musical value of this piece by analyzing its musical features and interpretation methods, thereby providing references for future piano players.*

Keywords: Liszt, Ballade No.2 in B minor, Musical features.

1. Introduction

Franz Liszt was a famous Hungarian composer, pianist and music activist during the Romantic period, and was known as the "King of Piano". [Yu Runyang, A General History of Western Music, Shanghai Music Press, 2002, p. 217]. In terms of music composition and piano performance, Liszt was committed to combining all the best elements of music and pushing the boundaries of what was possible.

The Narrative No. 2 in B minor was composed in the middle of Liszt's creative period, combining a dramatic love story with a rich mood, it is a landmark work with profound technique and grand structure.

In the process of playing and studying this work, I have developed a strong interest in the study of this work, and in the process of study, I found that: the symphonic, national, narrative, dramatic, lyrical and other musical characteristics of the work are worth exploring, and this aspect of the investigation is intended to provide a certain reference for the field of research on Liszt's works for the piano and the performers of this work.

The work combines dramatic storytelling, romantic and exuberant musical style, and superb playing skills.

Firstly, this paper will start from the compositional technique of the work, discussing the compositional background and the structure of the piece.

Secondly, this paper will deeply analyse the theme and distortion, melody, tonality, tempo, strength and harmony.

Finally, this paper will further explore and summarise the symphonic, ethnic, narrative, dramatic and showy features of the piece.

Through the interpretation of this work in musical expression and interpretation, the author aims to be able to further explore the musical connotation of this work, so as to provide useful reference for the research field of Liszt's piano works and the performers of this work.

2. Background and Structure of Liszt's Narrative No.2 in B Minor

2.1 Overview of the Background of Liszt's Narrative No.2 in B Minor

2.1.1 Background of Narrative No.2 in B minor

Compared with Liszt's early showy piano works, the Narrative No.2 in B minor is relatively less frequently performed, but the dramatic nature of the work, superb playing skills, grandiose length and conception, and fascinating musical imagination reflect the high artistic value.

After the failure of the Hungarian Revolution, Liszt wrote his Narrative No. 2 in B minor in 1833, during his Weimar period. Prior to this, Liszt's experience of touring in various countries provided a good opportunity for him to incorporate the characteristics of local musical styles into his compositions. Later, Princess Caroline, Liszt's second important female companion in life, urged Liszt to concentrate on his compositions, which ultimately led to his dedication to his music-making career.

The work was composed during a period of intellectual and creative metamorphosis, less than a year after the completion of his more influential Piano Sonata in B minor, a work of similar conception. During this period, Liszt created the title music, actively wrote commentaries promoting Romantic music and the title music, and endeavoured to create a new genre that he had pioneered - the symphonic poem. -Symphonic Poetry. The Narrative No. 2 in B minor borrows the qualities of the "symphonic poem", using the language of music to develop a narrative and lyricism around a literary story. Although he did not give the work a title, according to Liszt's grandson Arau's account [Joseph Horowitz, Arau's Discourses, People's Music Publishing House, 2000, p. 149], the composition of the narrative revolves around a literary story, the composition of the narrative piece revolves around the Greek myth of Helo and Leander, giving the work a narrative character.

2.1.2 Overview of the Narrative Song Genre

Narrative music is a musical genre that was widely used in music creation during the Romantic period. Initially, it was a dance song scripted with literary stories, and in the pre-romantic period, the lyrics of the narrative song were based on folktales, and Chopin first used the narrative song for solo piano, after which it was widely used in choral and orchestral compositions.

Liszt was influenced by his dear friend Chopin to compose the first narrative, and it is not difficult to find that it contains many of the characteristics of Chopin's musical composition. In the Second Narrative, Liszt revolutionised the genre.

2.2 Analysis of the Structure of Liszt's Narrative No.2 in B Minor

The grand scale of the work, its structural framework in the inheritance of the traditional sonata structure based on the theme and the theme of deformation to promote the development of the whole piece, but not adhere to the traditional sonata tonal connection, the internal structure of the music department, the theme of the image of the weaving.

At present, many scholars hold some controversy over the type of compositional structure of the piece, while most scholars think that the piece is in sonata form, which I agree with, for the following reasons: Liszt establishes a parallel and parallel section of minor second transposition in the presentation section, and the development section ends in the unstable genus key, while the recapitulation section ends in the major key of the same dominant, which is in line with the typical characteristics of the traditional sonata form.

In the following, I will analyse the structure of the piece, the characteristics of the composition, the compositional techniques, and the modal tonality:

2.2.1 Exposition (Bars 1~69)

Table 1

Exposition (Bars 1~69)				
	Bars	Speed	Beat	Key
Introduction	1~2	Allegro		
"Leander" Theme	3~17	Moderate	6/4	b minor
Episode	18~23	Lento assai		
"Helo" Theme	24~34	Allegretto	4/4	F # major
Introduction	35~37			
The First Variation of the "Leander" Theme	38~52	Allegro Moderate	6/4	bb minor
Episode	53~58	Lento assai		
The First Variation of the "Helo" Theme	59~69	Allegretto	4/4	F major

This part tells the story of Helo and Leander falling in love.

In terms of compositional features, the tonal difference between the two juxtaposed exposition is a small second, which is a departure from the traditional sonata style of completely repeated presentations, reflecting Liszt's innovative spirit.

In terms of compositional technique, the introduction of the opening two bars consists of a low, wave-like nine-note

chromatic scale in b minor, setting the tone of the tragedy. The

material of the introduction serves as one of the developmental materials for the lower voices of the whole piece. The first four notes of the theme melody form the thematic motive.

In terms of tonal modulation, the leander theme in b minor contrasts with the theme II in ascending F major, and the theme I in descending b minor morphs with the theme II in F major, creating a contrast of light and dark colours. The first metamorphosis of these two themes lowers the minor second repeating the content of the exposition section and highlighting the subtle changes in the protagonist's psychological activities.

2.2.2 Development Group (Bars 70~253)

Table 2

Development Group (Bars 70~253)					
	Bars	Speed	Beat	Key	
Unfolding paragraph one	70~112	Allegro deciso	4/4	D major → f # minor	
The Second variation of the "Leander" Theme	113~134			f # minor	
Episode	129~134				
"Love" Theme	135~142	A piacere		D major	
The Second Variation of the "Helo" Theme	143~161	Allegretto			D major → G major
The Third Variation of the "Leander" Theme	162~174				g # minor
Episode	175~180	poco a poco animato			
The Forth Variation of the "Leander" Theme	181~194	Allegretto			c minor
Unfolding paragraph 2	195~214				b minor
Episode	215~224				
The First Variation of the "Love" Theme	225~233	Rubato		B major	
The Third Variation of the "Helo" Theme	234~253	Allegretto		B major → Eb major → B major	

This part tells the story of Leander's encounter with a gale on his way across the strait, portraying Leander's inner ups and downs and panic at this time.

In terms of compositional characteristics, the structure of this part is characterised by a Mix. Part, with a relatively free pattern, featuring variations, pirouettes and unfoldings.

In terms of compositional techniques, Liszt pushes the development of the piece through motivic modulation and tight harmony in bars 70 to 82, and uses the "endless melody" to push the music into the connecting section in bar 128, and uses homophonic transposition to articulate to the second metamorphosis of theme 2 in bar 142. A large number of sustained notes in the middle and lower voices add to the stability of the section.

In terms of modal tonality, the section is tonally unstable and modally variable, with the unfolding passage I and the first metamorphosis of theme III built on a large number of off-key chords. At the same time, the section alternates between major and minor keys, with strong colour contrasts, adding to the narrative nature of the story.

2.2.3 Recapitulation (Bars 254-316)

Table 3

Recapitulation (Bars 254-316)				
	Bars	Speed	Beat	Key
The Fifth Variation of the “Leander” Theme	254~268	Allegro moderate	6/4	B major
The Second Variation of the “Love” Theme	269~283	in poco pic mosso	4/4	
The Sixth Variation of the “Leander” Theme	284~300	Allegro moderate	6/4	
The Forth Variation of the “Helo” Theme (Coda)	301~316	Andantino	4/4	

The recapitulation section tells of Leander’s burial at sea and Helo’s martyrdom. The tonality of the recapitulation section is all performed in the same dominant major key of the main key, a feature that was a major innovation of Liszt in his Weimar period, and which was also incorporated in works composed and revised in the same period, such as the Sonata composed and revised in the same period, such as the Sonata in b Minor and the Sonata Fantastique, after reading Dante.

In terms of compositional characteristics, the reproduction section combines the themes I and II of the presentation section and the newly emerged theme III of the development section, and alternates fragments of the three thematic distortions, reflecting the comprehensive characteristics.

In terms of compositional techniques, in the Reproduction section, the first metamorphosis of the theme doubles the time value of the theme in a tighter manner, making the metamorphosis more lucid. In the first variation, the first is indicative, so that the second variation, which is developmental, and the second, which is connective, can flow naturally. The closing aria expresses a tragic ending.

In terms of modal tonality, this section breaks away from the tradition of the recapitulation section’s return to the main key by presenting three themes in the same dominant major key, making it different from the tragic colour of the presentational section, full of reminiscence, and symbolic of the sublimation of the love between the two protagonists.

3. Analysis of Theme Image of Liszt’s Narrative No.2 in B Minor

According to the pianist Arau’s account, the three themes in the work represent “Leander”, “Helo”, and the love of the two main characters, which will be called “Leander”, “Helo”, and “Love” respectively. Love”. The author will comprehensively analyse these three themes and some of the deformed musical images in the following.

3.1 Analysis of “Leander” Theme

The theme of “Leander” and its variations appear seven times in total, which is a large length. The theme and its several variations have both commonalities and individuality. In the last two variations, Liszt greatly widens the range and acoustics of the piano, giving people a shocking and dramatic experience.

3.1.1 “Leander” Theme (bars 3-19)

**Figure 1**

The tempo of the theme is a “Allegro Moderato”, with a low, continuous b minor chromatic scale in the bass register simulating an undercurrent in the sea, which serves as material for the theme and sets a tragic tone; the melody of the theme from measure 3 onwards is marked with accents, and the passage closes with two sets of chords in a declamatory mode in bars 21, which propel the music’s narrative forward.

3.1.2 The Second variation of the “Leander” Theme (bars 113-128)

The melodic direction is basically the same as that of the theme and is presented in the key of ascending F minor. The metre is changed from the theme’s 64 beats to 44 beats, thus enhancing the dynamics of the fragment. The accompaniment consists of alternating broken chord scales and arpeggios in the outer voices, giving it a more symphonic sound, and in bar 119 the broken chord arpeggios are replaced by chordal links with big jumps to enhance the dynamics of the section.

3.1.3 The fifth variation of the “Leander” theme (bars 254-268).

This variation is built in the bright, soft key of B major, with the rhythm returning to 6/4 time and the tempo returning to the “middle-of-the-road Allegro”, with the theme melody hidden in the middle voice, and the high voice presenting a flowing broken chordal weave with the rests on the strong beat (Figure 2), which makes this part more rhythmic. Although the upper and lower phrases of this part are relatively independent, combining them into a single metamorphosis can make the structure of the metamorphosis more complete.

3.1.4 The Sixth Variation of the “Leander” Theme (bars 284-297)

The tempo of this variation returns to “Allegro moderato”. At the beginning of the section, it is indicated that three beats can be played as one (in 2/4), and gives the effect of simplicity and dynamism in the ear.

Bar 292 is the climax of the piece, with three “forte” and a very high mood. Successive big jump chords and expanding octaves of florid melody bring the sense of grandeur to the forefront, maximising the tragedy. The metrical character continues the dynamics of the previous variation - the 6/4 is played as a 2/4, which enhances the compactness and dynamics of the metamorphosis.

3.2 Analysis of the “Helo” Theme.

The theme of “Helo” and its variations appear five times in

total, with a serene image, usually alternating with the theme of “Leander” in contrast, symbolising the tightly-knit destiny of the two protagonists. Both the theme and its variations add sustained notes in the lower register, adding a sense of instability and openness to the music. The theme has fewer weaving changes than the “Leander” theme, and is mainly written in four-part counterpoint and chordal connections.

3.2.1 “Helo” theme (24-34 bars)



Figure 2

The theme is built on the F major and Allegro, with a sustained lower register, creating a bright and colourful image of Helo, in contrast to the sombre image of the “Leander” theme. Liszt’s use of four-voice counterpoint here gives the part a harmonious and layered aural effect. Interestingly, both the top and bottom phrases end with a leading chord resolving to a dominant chord, and the crescendo and diminuendo of the bottom phrase reflect the inner ups and downs of Hélène’s heart as she waits for the leander, ending with a smorz, foreshadowing the theme’s reappearance.

3.2.2 The third Variation of the “Helo” Theme (bars 234-253).

The theme can be divided into three parts according to the tonality: bars 234-241 (B major), 242-249 (E-flat major), and 250-253 (B major), with bright major colours throughout, and the musical image of the theme is more peaceful compared to the previous variations, as if it were the calm after a storm.

3.3 Analysis of “Love” Theme

The theme of “love” and its variations appear three times in total, and all of them have the stylistic characteristics of aria, with strong lyricism, and the technique of thematic modulation and musical treatment of rubato also appear in the theme and its variations each time.

3.3.1 “Love” theme (bars 135-142)



Figure 3

The main key of the part is a soft and bright D major, with constant modulations and off-key to enrich the musical colours, and the timbre resembles a collaboration between lute and soprano, depicting Helo’s expectation of the male lead. The rhythmic patterns of the outer voices enhance the

fluidity of the phrases. Finally, the part transitions to the next section with homophonic chords.

4. The Musical Characteristics of Liszt’s Narrative No.2 in B Minor

4.1 “Symphonic” Musical Characteristics

In his early years, Liszt was shocked by Berlioz’s *Symphonic fantastique*, and as one of the leading figures of the “New German School”, the symphonic poem played an important role in his musical creation. Liszt founded the symphonic poem in the middle of the 19th century, and continued to break through the old compositional techniques, exploring the path of integrating symphonic features into the composition of piano works. The following are the symphonic features incorporated into the work:

Firstly of all, the work has a wide range, with the highest note being the G of the one-lined octave, and the lowest note being the great E, which nearly encompasses the range of a full symphony orchestra.

Secondly, the work is rich in timbre. Through studying the video of the performer playing the work, the author found that the performer would play different timbres of different voices to imitate the effect of a symphony orchestra, taking the Helo theme (Figure 4) as an example: the high part of the upper line is as bright and crisp as a flute, and the high part of the lower line is as bright and delicate as a clarinet; the middle part of the voice is as full and clear as a violin; the middle part is as fresh as an oboe, and the middle part is as clear as an oboe; and the middle part is as full as an oboe. The middle voice is as full and clear as a violin playing in unison; the second middle voice is as fresh as an oboe, echoing the high voice; and the low voice is as thick and round as a cello accompaniment.



Figure 4

Last but not least, Liszt drives the piece forward with a traditional motivic development technique in which the three themes that appear in the work are heavily expanded and distorted.

4.2 “Nationalism” Music Characteristics

Liszt was in the stage of Romantic music flourishing, national music in Europe has been unprecedented attention and advancement, and Liszt since childhood by the traditional German-Austrian music school, so that his compositions were deeply influenced by the music of his native Hungary. Liszt’s composition of the Second Narrative incorporates typical Hungarian folk music characteristics:

First of all, the work coincides with the typical features of early Hungarian folk songs, such as: a large number of pentatonic scales (e.g., Figure 5), alternating between 4/6 and 4/4, flexible and free structure, and a strong narrative nature of

the musical content. These characteristics of early Hungarian folk songs enable the music to switch freely between soft images and passionate scenes, strengthening the vitality and expressiveness of the work.



Figure 5

Secondly, the work incorporates the characteristics of Hungarian national chardas —slow rhythms alternating with intense, tight beats, precise beats in fast sections combined with accents (Figure 6), and constantly changing modal tonalities, tempos, and weaves that add to the freshness of the music.



Figure 6

4.3 “Narrative” Musical Characteristics

As mentioned before: this work and the Piano Sonata in B minor are both works of Liszt’s Weimar period, and the completion of the two is less than a year apart, they have something in common in terms of narrative and other compositional techniques.

Liszt strongly promoted the development of title music in the Weimar period, which made his works in this period more or less with title colours. The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians defines title music as “a type of narrative or descriptive music, a term usually extended to music that expresses concepts other than music with the aid of lyrics” [Stanley Sadie (edited), The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (Second edition), London Musicians (Second edition), London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 2001]”.

Although I have not seen the title, lyrics and other contents directly related to the title music in the work, according to the most authoritative pianist Arau, who is the most authoritative interpreter of Liszt, the work is narrated in the story of “Leander and Hérault”, which makes the work narrative and gives the performer sufficient space for imagining the characters and plots.

4.4 “Dramatization” Music Characteristics

Dramatization is one of the typical features of music in the Romantic period, and Liszt often used dramatic techniques to express lyrical passages in narrative pieces, which made the lyrical passages more infectious. The lyrical passages of this work also contain musical-dramatic elements:

First of all, there is the recitative’s element. At the beginning of the Exposition, the declamatory element encompassed by

the recitative-like long line melody shapes a depressing, tragic colour; the four-note column in the connecting section of the Exposition (Figure 7) also uses a recitative’s progression, which transitions the tense musical mood into a serene atmosphere.



Figure 7

Secondly, there is the aria element (Figure 8). The “love” theme and its distorted melodic voices resemble an aria, mimicking Helo’s inner monologue, expressing the different emotions Helo feels each time she waits for a date.



Figure 8

4.5 “Virtuosity” Musical Characteristics

Liszt greatly broadened the range of the piano’s sound, volume and playing techniques in an attempt to achieve the effect of the orchestra. Dramatic expression in Liszt’s works needs to be supported by a high level of technique.

Liszt’s virtuosic techniques in this work are typified by the intensive up and down octaves, rapid chord runs, and the virtuosic character of the florid section, which I will describe in this section.

4.5.1 Virtuosity of the florid section

Liszt is good at consolidating the theme with florals and pushing it to the climax of the piece, and the florals in this piece (Figure 9) are particularly good at demonstrating the virtuosic character of the piece:



Figure 9

Firstly, there is a choice between scales and chords in this texture, but I prefer scales because they are more in keeping with the image of the sea portrayed in this section, and it can bring to a climax.

Secondly, during the fast scale runs in the florid section, the fingers are played quickly and as close to the keys as possible, and each scale string is treated as a whole. Avoid uneven runs caused by turning the fingers when playing the scales.

4.5.2 Intensive upward and downward octave movement.



Figure 10



Figure 11

At Figure 10, the left hand is a diatonic upward and the right hand is an octave up, and at Figure 11, both hands are an octave down, so that the forearms, wrists and palms can be considered as a whole and played close to the keys, and the power is sent from the arms to the bottom of the keyboards.

4.5.3 Fast chord runs

At Figure 12, the difficulty lies in the staggered running of the two hands to achieve an even, can be four tones as a group, with the first tone of each group as the accent to drive the running.



Figure 12

The difficulty at Figure 13 is the smoothness of the runs when the hands are staggered to play the sextuplets, which can be done by playing a single-note scale with the thumbs of both hands, and then in octaves once they are smooth.

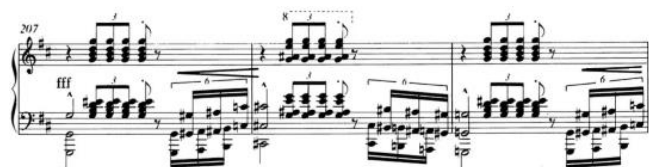


Figure 13

5. Conclusion

After analysing, Liszt's Narrative No. 2 in B minor has the following innovations and personal characteristics:

In terms of compositional structure, the work is homogeneous and heterogeneous with the traditional sonata form, which is different from the traditional sonata form in that it contains an exposition with two downward minor second transpositions before and after the work, the development group ending in the major key of the same name of the genus, and the reprise ending in the major key of the same dominant.

In the portrayal of thematic images, the work uses the portrayal of thematic images in contrast to each other and the development of thematic distortion, which makes the content of the piece richer and the development of the plot smoother. Through tonality, harmony, tempo, intensity, beat and weave, Liszt depicts a distinctive thematic image, and at the same time portrays the subtle changes between thematic archetypes and metamorphoses.

In terms of playing technique, the dramatic expressiveness of the work requires a high level of skill, and the performer needs to use the appropriate key tone and strength to express different musical images, and pay attention to the accuracy of the rhythm, and at the same time, show the layering of

multiple voices, so as to interpret the musical images and emotions more fully.

In terms of musical characteristics, the five most important musical features of the composition, namely Symphonizing, Nationalism, Narrative, Dramatization, and Virtuosity are more prominent. Musical traits of Symphonizing are reflected in the work's wide range, rich timbre, and thematic distortion development techniques. Musical traits of Nationalism are reflected in the characteristics of early Hungarian folk songs and Hungarian Chaldas dances. Musical traits of Narrative is the background of the story of Leander and Helo. Musical traits of Dramatization is the elements of recitative and arias. Musical traits of Virtuosity are reflected in the fast running scales and other techniques in the florid section.

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