TRANSFORMATION OF THEMES, CONTROLLED PIANISTIC TEXTURES, AND COLORISTIC EFFECTS IN LISZT'S HUNGARIAN RHAPSODIES NOS. 6, 10, AND 12

Silvije Vidovic, B.M., M.M.

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APPROVED:

Vladimir Viardo, Major Professor
Steven Harlos, Minor Professor
Deanna Bush, Committee Member
Steven Harlos, Chair of the Division of Keyboard Studies
John Murphy, Interim Director of Graduate Studies
James C. Scott, Dean of the College of Music
Mark Wardell, Dean of the Toulouse Graduate School
Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies are uniformly considered highly challenging in terms of technical execution. However, their artistic value is frequently questioned. This dissertation examines the compositional elements that are often overlooked in these virtuoso works, and provides a viewpoint into their interpretative characteristics. Furthermore, it pursues a claim that besides being excellent performance pieces, these works also make an intriguing contribution to Liszt scholarship, and deserve meaningful consideration in terms of their artistic quality.

Following the Introduction (Chapter 1), Chapter 2 provides a brief historical perspective of the critical affirmation Liszt the composer encountered from the musical society. It also includes a short background on Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies, as well as the general reactions these works evoked from pianists, audiences, and scholars, during the time they were composed to the present day.

As the main body of the dissertation, Chapter 3 investigates the three primary compositional concepts found in Rhapsodies Nos. 6, 10, and 12. These concepts are divided into three subchapters: Transformation of Themes, Controlled Pianistic Textures, and Coloristic Effects. Each of these subchapters provides explanatory information, as well as some of the most characteristic passages presented.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Liszt composed his early Hungarian rhapsodies at approximately the same time that he decided to withdraw from the concert stage (1847). Considering this information, one could speculate why Liszt started composing these works, typically considered his most audience-friendly pieces, at a time when he decided to renounce his ever-loving public. Up to the present, the Hungarian Rhapsodies, especially the first fifteen, have garnered wide audience appeal. Although the rhapsodies are considered highly challenging in terms of technical execution, their artistic value is frequently questioned, and from some academic minds unappreciated. This observation is reflected in the fact that a minimal amount of scholarly literature has been devoted to this part of Liszt's opus. In fact, during the last thirty years of its publication, the Journal of the American Liszt Society did not include a single critical article devoted to the Hungarian Rhapsodies. In order to understand the reasons for this omission, we have to distinguish some essential technical, stylistic, and interpretative aspects of the rhapsodies.

Firstly, if interpreted by the hands of an inadequately informed pianist, a redundant and raw expressiveness can overshadow the peculiar and delicate qualities of these pieces. In addition, since this music is often performed for the sole purpose of virtuosic demonstration, its subtlety has escaped the attention of most performers. Not

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surprisingly, these works have been perceived as superficial. Secondly, the Hungarian Rhapsodies are imbued with the essence of Gypsy stylistic elements, which is often associated with music that is unrefined, uneducated, and possibly vulgar. Such a view, however, does not hold true when we are reminded that Haydn, Schubert, Brahms, Ravel, and even J. S. Bach incorporated Gypsy melodies in their compositions.² In her book *Lateness and Brahms* Margaret Notley notes that by enclosing Gypsy elements in his late chamber music, such as the *Adagio* of his Clarinet Quintet Op.115, Brahms achieved the most notable success with these works.³ Thirdly, the notation of the rhapsodies displays a sort of transparent, homophonic, and repetitive texture, along with occasional virtuosic passages. Consequently, a shallow assessment of these works has obscured their actual value.

In opposition to the above-mentioned, and in my opinion negligently endorsed beliefs, I pursue a claim that besides being excellent performance pieces, these works also make an intriguing contribution to scholarship, and deserve meaningful consideration in every artistic account. Their simple textures and unpretentious style should not be taken easily or judged as a crucial flaw. A true aesthetic significance is hidden behind the notation, and can only be understood when observed from the perspective of Liszt's virtuosic genius. The pianistic aptitude which Liszt developed at the time the rhapsodies were conceived brought the possibilities of the instrument to a


tremendous technical level. This realization is clearly displayed in the rhapsodies.

Furthermore, the Gypsy idiom provides a great substance of natural audacity, essential for a spontaneous interpretative realization.

From a technical point of view, Liszt's rhapsodies embody a notational layout which even in the most demanding passages assumes pianistic dexterity. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear that Liszt's compositions audibly seem more difficult than they actually are. In a musical and stylistic sense, Liszt does not limit his rhapsodies to be delivered in only one correct way, but expects from the pianist to explore and find the choices that best suit the aesthetic and technical characteristics of these works. Only by adopting such an attitude does it become possible for a performer to succeed in engaging his audience.
CHAPTER 2

THE RHAPSODIES' HISTORICAL AFFIRMATION

It would be tempting to determine whether the motivation for countless publications on Liszt was the result of his fascinating personality or his dazzling virtuosic piano career. Based on his artistic achievements, benevolence, social courtesy, and his romantic-diabolic charisma, Liszt attained an impressive international recognition during his lifetime. Furthermore, despite of his youthful retirement, his pianistic mastery had maintained an unequaled preeminence, and has been idolized to the present day as quintessential. Both these biographical dimensions of his persona have been viewed by scholars with absolute acclaim. The question of Liszt as a composer, however, has not been treated with the same admiration. His works have been criticized consistently as bombastic and incoherent, both by his contemporaries as well as later post-romantic analysts.

With his publicly salient critiques, Schumann was one of the first reviewers who argued about the competence of Liszt's compositional education. Liszt, on the other hand, was not overly keen to propagate the credibility of his learning experience.4 In his observation on the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Liszt's death in 1986, Alfred Brendel remarked the disapproving status Liszt encountered from his contemporaries, and compared him to Haydn in that respect. Brendel stated that, as opposed to the

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unfortunate lives of composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, or Chopin, whose tragic ends boosted the awareness of their genius, the settled and fruitful lives of Haydn and Liszt detracted from the general acceptance of them as artfully proficient composers.\(^5\)

Charles Rosen continued with a similar interpretation and paralleled criticisms on Liszt with the ones disposed towards Berlioz. He argued that the perspective of Liszt as "cheap and flashy", and Berlioz as "incompetent" is as current today as it was during their lifetimes.\(^6\)

The portion of Liszt's works which consistently evokes scholarly consideration is sadly limited to a small selection of his opus. His name is closely associated with the creation of the Symphonic Poem, the genre which introduced single-movement structures and programatic connotations within a symphonic framework.\(^7\) Among the composer's piano works, Piano Sonata in B Minor, *Transcendental Etudes, Dante Sonata, Mephisto Waltzes*, Schubert's song transcriptions, and some late compositions such as *Années de Pèlerinage* (Third Year), receive the most notable critical attention. The Piano Sonata in B Minor, his most acclaimed piano work, has attracted the curiosity of many scholars interested in Liszt's unique one-movement sonata concept and his approach to thematic transformation.\(^8\) Liszt's late piano works, in which he breaks the boundaries of tonality, continue to be regarded as his most substantial legacy. In fact, in his theoretical survey of

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Liszt's piano opus, Allen Forte argues persuasively that an advanced chromatic language exploited by Liszt in his mature works can be traced back to some of his earlier works such as Les Préludes (1848), or Vallée d'Obermann (1855). Forte chronicles the transformation from Liszt's early "experimental" writing until his later atonal, "visionary" attempts.\(^9\) The theoretician James Baker endorses Forte's claims by stating that Liszt was "the first major composer to embark on a course of such [atonal] radical experimentation."\(^{10}\)

In the early 1840s, Liszt started collecting the music performed by gypsies in Hungary, and classified it under the titles Magyar Dallok, Magyar Rhapsodiák, and Ungarische National Melodien.\(^{11}\) By incorporating these popular tunes and rhythms into a rhapsodic, improvisatory framework, Liszt began composing a set of fifteen pieces named the Hungarian Rhapsodies several years later in 1846.\(^{12}\) From the time they were composed, these works have continuously enjoyed indisputable admiration from both pianists and audiences. This is confirmed by Joseph Banowetz's remark that in the early twentieth century most world-renowned pianists had at least three of Liszt's rhapsodies available in their repertoire.\(^{13}\) The rhapsodies' scholarly assessment, however, have


shown disparate levels of appreciation. One of the earliest authoritative judgements on the Hungarian Rhapsodies came from the legendary Russian pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein, who stated:

... he [Liszt] is the first poet of his people in music who embodied the fine Hungarian folk tunes in the brilliant, ingenious forms of his rhapsodies; if we also mention plenty of other major pieces, his vast literary practice, extraordinary, refined critical intuition, and finally his unmatched performing style, it will become clear why Liszt, more than any other contemporary, deserves the title of a "comprehensive artist."

In his book on Liszt's music, Humphrey Searle endorsed an essay by Béla Bartók written in honor of Liszt's birth centennial. In the essay, which strongly influenced perception towards the Hungarian Rhapsodies in the early twentieth century, Bartók assessed the rhapsodies as Liszt's "least successful works." He explained that these pieces exhibit some traces of genius, but that the ideas implemented in them are "too conventional." Bartók also objected to the use of "Italianisms" in the Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6, and the "complete formal confusion" in the Rhapsody No. 12.

Several decades later, Ernest Hutcheson expressed a significantly more favorable acknowledgment. He described the rhapsodies as "dazzling," and compared them with Chopin’s mazurkas with regard to their national element. In addition, he revealed that the negative appraisal of the Hungarian Rhapsodies became fashionable in order for critics to show their "superiority to public taste."


Among all Liszt's piano compositions, Charles Rosen distinctly praised works such as the second, improved version of the *Transcendental Etudes*, Schubert's song transcriptions, and his Sonata in B Minor. Rosen's assessment of the Hungarian Rhapsodies, however, reveal his questionable presumption of their aesthetic level. As an example, Rosen disclosed the excerpt from the tenth rhapsody, of which he described the harmonies as "banal," and the melodies as "nonexistent" (example 1). He continued with a scathing critique of this particular passage, stating that it presents "the zero degree of musical invention." Later he contradicted himself by saying that if "played with a certain elegance, these pages are both dazzling and enchanting."\(^{17}\) If viewed from a purely theoretical perspective, Rosen's negative comments could have merit. However, such an analysis ignores the potential expressiveness of the passage. Although Rosen's excerpt does not reflect the harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic characteristics associated with Liszt's more progressive, experimental works, it can evoke an exquisite sonority and effect if performed with care towards its idiomatic nature. Furthermore, implications generated by textural complexity are unlikely to correspond with the spontaneous stylistic nature of Liszt's rhapsodies.

In his writing, Louis Kentner argues against the most common attacks on the Hungarian Rhapsodies. He notes that many of the canonic composers have regularly used borrowed thematic material, and in the case of Liszt, this circumstance should not be taken as an anomaly.18 Also, on the accusations regarding the rhapsodies' unrefined formal structure, Kentner responds that these works are "far from formless," and that Liszt's instinct for form protects his artistic ideas of becoming discolored due to tedious formal regulations.19 The well-known Liszt biographer Alan Walker endorsed Kentner's arguments, including some of Kentner's writings on the rhapsodies.

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19 Ibid., 79-133.
In Liszt's compositional work, features such as thematic transformation are closely related to the process of improvisation.\textsuperscript{20} From Liszt's letter to Luis Köhler (July 9, 1856) we can recognize his genuinely simple view of music creation. In the letter Liszt wrote: "After all, in the end it comes principally to this—\textit{what} the ideas are, and \textit{how} they are carried out and worked up—and that leads us always back to the \textit{feeling} and \textit{invention}, if we would not scramble in the rut of a mere trade."\textsuperscript{21} The Hungarian Rhapsodies are Liszt's demonstration of this compositional method. Not one note is added with the purpose to adhere to conventional norms. The compositional features presented in this study are rather facilitated with the function of conveying the rhapsodies' interpretative potentials. Liszt was certainly not the first composer who used these features, nonetheless, as he proposed in the quote above, it is 'how' he manipulated these techniques in a new, refreshing way.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 61.
CHAPTER 3

ANALYSIS OF HUNGARIAN RHAPSODIES NOS. 6, 10, AND 12

More than any other of his contemporaries, Liszt has been considered a composer-pianist, or pianist-composer. His compositions, and here I refer especially to the works written until mid-1850s, were created not with the intention to satisfy established compositional principles, but purposely to delight the expectations of his audience. Liszt did not use traditional authoritative sources as a leading guidance, but mostly his vast performing expertise. Furthermore, the idiosyncratic result he is able to achieve by combining these techniques manifests itself in a well-balanced integration, and in its final stage, it generates a forceful, compelling reaction.

The following analysis provides examples from Hungarian Rhapsodies Nos. 6, 10, and 12. In their individual uniqueness, these three rhapsodies exhibit the main features relevant for the general understanding of the rhapsodies as a whole. My research outlines the three most essential compositional and interpretative aspects: transformation of themes, controlled pianistic textures, and coloristic effects.

Transformation of Themes

Liszt's ingenious concept of thematic transformation has been primarily associated with his Sonata in B Minor, Symphonic Poems, and other orchestral works,
such as *Faust Symphony*.\(^{22}\) As opposed to the Baroque and Classical traditions where the thematic material was modified based on rhythmical deviations (diminution, augmentation), ornamentation, and improvisation, Liszt's concept of transformation effected the thematic content to the point that it changed its original character (expression) while still maintaining its essential identity.\(^{23}\) This compositional method influenced a number of Liszt's contemporaries, but also some twentieth-century composers, including Arnold Schoenberg. In his analysis of Schoenberg's D Minor String Quartet, Walter Frisch described the main theme from the finale as "virtually a Lisztian transformation of the slow movement."\(^{24}\) It has been, however, rarely remarked that Hungarian Rhapsodies evidence a similarly skillful use of this technique. The rhapsodies' binary framework, which includes a slow section titled *lassan* and a fast section titled *frisca*, presents the basis of their structural organization. Within this format, Liszt usually incorporates three to four themes, which he rearranges in an improvisatory manner into different variants. Although these themes (and motives) typically depict widely disparate expressions, occasionally they derive from a common musical idea. By using this compositional procedure, Liszt cleverly maintains a textural integrity, but also stimulates the listener's intuitive recollections.


In order to understand the principles of thematic transformation generally associated with Liszt, is it beneficial to examine the use of this technique in his Sonata in B Minor. The main thematic (motivic) material introduced in the Sonata's opening (example 2a) is continuously used throughout the entire work. However, the new (thematic) reappearances significantly deviate from the original, and imply a wide range of characters. A theme which is initially heard *marcato* is later presented as a charming, lyrical melody (example 2b).

Example 2a, Sonata in B Minor, mm. 14-15

![Example 2a](image1)

Example 2b, Sonata in B Minor, mm. 153-160

![Example 2b](image2)

The next two examples show the transformation of a powerful and heavy introduction into a subtle theme accompanied by restless sixteenth notes (examples 3a, 3b).
We can find a comparable approach in Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12. Although in the following two instances the thematic content is nearly identical in terms of pitches and rhythm, the second imitation presents drastically contrasting character. The subject which in its first appearance is marked *sempre f e marcato*, later carries a contrasting, singing-like expression (examples 4a, 4b).
Example 4a, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 7-10, (note Liszt’s mark for *marcato* articulation)

![Example 4a, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 7-10, (note Liszt's mark for marcato articulation)](image)

Example 4b, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 21-27 (here the theme is to be played in a flexible, slow tempo, and with an *espressivo* expression)

![Example 4b, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 21-27, (here the theme is to be played in a flexible, slow tempo, and with an espressivo expression)](image)

Examples 5a, 5b, and 5c show the thematic material which is presented in three diverse characters, of which the first two deliveries include Liszt's very specific interpretational suggestions (examples 5a, 5b). Besides the obvious differences in character, this transformation sequence also applies some changes in rhythm.

Example 5a, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 35-45

![Example 5a, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 35-45](image)
The previously indicated examples demonstrated a method in which the themes greatly differ in their expression (character), but stay uniform in their basic melodic layout. The rhapsodies also reveal situations where the thematic material undergoes such modifications that the new instances (imitations) preserve some of original features, but essentially form new melodies. An example of this feature is found in Rhapsody No. 6. The theme, which first appears in mm. 73-80, carries a lyrical intonation, and it is presented in the key of B-flat Minor (example 6a). A transformed version of this theme is brought in later (mm. 96-103) as the main theme of the last section of the piece (frisca),
and it is presented in B-flat Major (example 6b). Although these two themes convey two opposite characters, and their notation is generally disparate, an attentive analysis of their pitches shows that they share the same melodic substance. The scheme shown in example 6c displays the similarity between the essential pitches of these two themes (the themes are referred as the first and the second only for the purpose of simplification).

Example 6a, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6, mm. 73-80

Example 6b, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6, mm. 96-103
Example 6c

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First/lyrical theme (ex. 6.1)</th>
<th>Pitch</th>
<th>Second/fast theme (ex. 6.2)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(m. 73)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>(m. 96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(m. 74)</td>
<td>B-flat</td>
<td>(m. 96/second part)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(m. 75)</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>(m. 97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(m. 76)</td>
<td>E-flat</td>
<td>(mm. 98, 100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mm. 77-78)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>(m. 102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mm. 79-80)</td>
<td>B-flat</td>
<td>(m. 103)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Liszt sometimes builds a whole network of associative sections based on certain motivic elements. Seen from that perspective, a brief formal analysis of Rhapsody No. 12 indicates that Liszt structured this work in two main parts. The first section (until m. 126) immediately introduces two main themes in the beginning (shown in examples 4a and 7a). As the section proceeds, the melodic substance of the first theme predominates, and it is included frequently throughout the section. The next set of examples demonstrates that the descending tetrachord motion from the first theme is used as an essential motivic resource for the following two themes (examples 7a, 7b, 7c).

Example 7a, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 1-2 (note the descending stepwise motion from F# to C#)
Example 7b, mm. 35-40 (note the descending stepwise motion from G# to D#)

Example 7c, mm. 88-91 (note the descending stepwise motion from C# to G#)

We can distinguish a similar concept in the second part of the Rhapsody (from m. 127 until the end). Here ascending and descending thirds are employed as a fundamental textural component (examples 8a, 8b, 8c).

Example 8a, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 170-172

Example 8b, mm. 184-187
Example 8c, mm. 208-209

For the ending of the Rhapsody No. 12 Liszt merged three disparate themes (marked A, B, and C) into one large phrase (example 9). Although in their originals these themes represent substantially contrasting characters, they now form one identical musical expression.

Example 9, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 269-285
Controlled Pianistic Textures

As opposed to the majority of piano literature, where textural content is primarily created for the purpose of musical or aesthetic satisfaction, the texture in Liszt's works is strongly incorporated with the composer's idea of interpretative vitality. As a result, although Liszt's compositions do not match Chopin's melodic and harmonic integrity, Rachmaninoff's polyphonic density, or Scriabin's complex harmonic sonorities, his virtuosic solutions most successfully fulfill their brilliant function. As highly 'athletic' pieces, the rhapsodies are suitable representations of this compositional phenomenon.

During the process of learning these pieces, pianists gradually adjust to and accommodate the difficulties encountered in virtuosic sections. This sensation is most closely related to the topographical accessibility of the most difficult passages, in which fingers and wrist are coordinated in such way that they can achieve appropriate smoothness and efficiency. If observed from a theoretical viewpoint, one can notice that many fast sections derive from certain chords or scales. Moreover, in order to make their execution more convenient, Liszt often shapes them so they can begin and end with the first or fifth finger (examples 10a, 10b, 10c). In this respect, we can recall a brief observation from Mme Auguste Boissier's diary on Liszt's lessons. In her notes Mme Boissier refers to composer's comment that the first, third, and the fifth fingers are the most fundamental ones, and deserve the most attention during practice time.25

Liszt does not employ dexterous pianistic approach only in typical virtuosic passages, but also in many other physically engaging textures. As one of Liszt's most favored effects, the *tremolo* layout is generally notated in such way that hands enjoy free motion and do not interfere with each other (example 11).

Example 11, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 254-255
A highly convenient feature, occasionally utilized with the aim of creating a technically convenient layout, is the reduction of notes. As an insightful composer-pianist, Liszt did not hesitate to exclude particular notes in order to make execution significantly easier. By doing this, he demonstrated that technical tasks need to be inferior to the final purpose, which is the music itself. Excerpts from Rhapsodies Nos. 6 and 12 show omission of notes in the right hand, while the left hand offers a significant reinforcement to the overall sound (examples 12a, 12b).

Example 12a, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6, m. 201

Example 12b, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 269-272.

In instances where the hand needs to change its position very quickly, Liszt normally arranges the notation in order to provide enough time for the leap (example 13)

Example 13, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 236-238
Another example of Liszt's pianistic awareness is reflected in his tendency to distribute demanding tasks between the hands. While one hand plays a challenging passage, the other hand reinforces the sound, and by employing a simpler pattern helps the performer to focus rather on more engaging difficulties (examples 14a, 14b).

Example 14a, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6, mm. 189-191

Example 14b, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, mm. 260-265

Coloristic Effects

Many scholars continuously praise Liszt's inventive achievements with regard to piano sound. Moreover, they observe that the peculiarity of Liszt's sound showcasing is in introducing various layers of resonance.\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, the Rhapsodies themselves exhibit

countless examples of resourceful audible effects. Although Liszt occasionally points out his intentions of sound coloring, he mostly leaves the freedom of choice to the performer.

The Hungarian Rhapsody No. 10 is abundant in its coloristic potentials. In its middle section, Liszt suggests the imitation of cimbalom (marked *quasi zimbalo*), an instrument commonly used by Gypsy musicians (example 15).

Example 15, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 10, mm. 82-83

![Example 15](image1)

The following section in the piece reveals a most unconventional texture. Here the right hand simultaneously produces the melody and vibrant *glissando* layers (example 16).

Example 16, mm. 89-91

![Example 16](image2)
The excerpt from the Rhapsody No. 12 is marked *quasi campanelle*, and it affirms that Liszt searched for various resources of effective sonorities (example 17).

Example 17, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12, 66-67

The final example demonstrates the possibility of creating disparate effects from the same melodic material (example 18). The first four lines of the excerpt presents nearly the same thematic content. However, proper modifications in voicing and pedaling could greatly enrich the interpretation. After a singing upper register which manifests itself predominantly in the first four lines, the last line unfolds in a contrasting, deep sonority.

Example 18, Hungarian Rhapsody No. 18, mm 88-105
Example 18 (continued)
Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies have been uniformly praised for their practical, interpretative advantages; however, their aesthetic value has been continuously questioned until the present day. The analysis demonstrated in the essay pursued a belief that these works do not exhibit only vast expressive potentials, but also consist of a unique synthesis of pianistic and compositional techniques which deserve a respectful scholarly consideration. The use of thematic and motivic transformation in many aspects resembles the thematic compositional principles found in the Sonata in B Minor. In addition, through his treatment of motives embedded within the themes Liszt creates a wide range of expressively diverse characters that form an overarching network of interrelated phrases. His arrangements of virtuosic passages are adapted to allow the most dynamic musical expression. Finally, one of the most compelling qualities of the rhapsodies is the implementation of a variety of coloristic effects. Liszt tries to explore unusual, fresh sounds in these works; at times by directly specifying his own ideas, but even more often by creating a texture which encourages diverse interpretative results.

Liszt perceived the process of composition most liberally, hence, these pieces offer an exceptional performing flexibility, and allow pianists to demonstrate their unique musical sensibilities. Moreover, if approached and apprehended diligently, the rhapsodies
will not just acquire attraction as great showpieces; they will also reveal their worth as an aesthetically valuable source of piano literature.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


