Mortality and Finality in Frederic Chopin's Funeral March and Franz Liszt's Funerailles

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Despite all the many differences humans of earth possess, the one common correlator between each being is their mortality. Death is a topic of conversation which is nervously dodged by the populace, and yet there is perhaps no other concept that is more intriguing to the artist. Composers, sculptors, playwrights, and artists have fantasized and even idealized the morose in their works, and while each creative individual evokes the idea slightly differently—with the emotional and philosophical range from utter despair to joyous hope—the most prevalent commonality between them all is the aspect of finality. The Romantic musical era lent itself well to this idea of mortality, and the Funeral March movement of Frederic Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor [1839] conveys not only the finality of death upon this earth, but also the spiral of inner conflict that can precede the final breath. In this paper, my aim is to dissect this work and contrast it with Franz Liszt's *Funerailles*, [1849], show how each composer portrayed this idea of inner conflict and resolution with death's finality, and suggest how Liszt respectfully borrowed from Chopin's interpretation of mortality.

Chopin: The Cultural Inspiration Behind the Funeral March

In order to understand the compositional process and decisions of Chopin in his Funeral March, it is helpful to understand a bit about not only his works up to this point, but also the cultural context Chopin finds himself in at this moment. Chopin composed this movement of his sonata in 1839 while in France. At this point in time, France was still undergoing the healing process following the French Revolution; society had been shaken, and cultural traditions had been abandoned and minimized. Lawrence Kramer notes in his article "Chopin at the Funeral:

Episodes in the History of Modern Death" that traditions regarding end of life rituals had been upended, and France struggled to re-create formal, cultural rites (Kramer). However, France gradually rebounded with three distinct conventions surrounding death, and Kramer argues that Chopin conveyed each of these in this movement of his piano sonata.

The first of these stances on death is made manifest in the physical sphere of the catacombs. Well-known to most, the catacombs are a geometric tomb made from the bones of those murdered in the Revolution. While we might observe this from our vantage point of the 21st century with a sense of normalcy or disconnect from this era, at the time this macabre monument was new and in an uncomfortably close proximity to the lives of the French. It is hard to imagine the horrific novelty of the catacombs being lost on anyone who lived in that century, and Kramer suggests that Chopin was no different. Kramer makes the case that Chopin's Funeral March is structurally reflective of the catacombs in that the three sections of the ABA form evoke first the underworld of the catacombs, followed by the lively world above, and then return to the depths. In analyzing the structure and content of the work, we see that the slow march can be considered reflective of the finality of the last resting place of the deceased within the catacombs, while the more melodic and lively middle section can be considered reminiscent of the bustling, oblivious world above (Kramer).

The second cultural tradition that wormed its way into French society was that of the morgue. Similar in concept to the modern 'operating theatre,' the morgue allowed for members of the community to gaze upon the unidentified dead. This was a social event for some, and a way to identify lost ones for others. Those who would come to observe without a connection to the deceased would sometimes create stories about them and discuss what their lives might have been like. In the march, Kramer notes that "the left-hand part of the march begins with a

meaning that it steadily loses, while the right-hand part begins by lacking a meaning that it steadily gains." This idea of meaning can be correlated with an observer's experience seeing the body, then crafting a narrative of the life of the deceased; the initial glance is one of somberness, and then gradually a meaningful tale is created in the mind of the observer. As the piece ends with the final lower ostinato of the opening segment, we can imagine the observer slowly emerging from their fantasy, recognizing the finality of the deceased's life, and perhaps even their own mortality before solemnly turning aside.

The last institution Kramer brings up is the modern cemetery, a place established post-revolution as a site not only to grieve the loss of loved ones, but also as a reprieve from the bustle of society with its pastoral atmosphere. Chopin's opening to the march emulates a funeral procession, but the middle trio section can be seen as the other side of the dichotomous nature of the cemetery: the peaceful. In this interpretation, we can see aspects of finality and solemnity in the march segments contrasted with the peaceful liveliness of the natural atmosphere of the park-like cemetery.

These three institutions support the idea of Chopin conveying finality with his march through a cultural lens, and further contribute to our understanding of how Chopin viewed mortality—especially mortality that is thrust upon a culture or society. The ABA form of the work similarly denotes conclusiveness by returning to the initial dirge following a winding spiral of what appears to be hope and meaning, which is supported by the secondary aspects of the cemetery (the peaceful), the morgue (meaning and fantasy), and the catacombs (hope of life elsewhere continuing on). Compositionally, the dotted-eighth sixteenth-note rhythm at the opening of piece is indicative of a stumbling procession to the inevitable, both in regards to those proceeding to the burial site on behalf of the deceased, and in regards to the deceased coming

slowly to terms with his own finite existence. This motive could very well be spiritual revolt in response to death. The stumbling rhythm can be visually interpreted as someone digging their heels into the earth as they're being steadily pulled towards death; the heavy ostinato represents the heavy chain of finality that unyieldingly drags this person towards death while the sixteenth-notes indicating the slight giving of ground as the person is continuously jostled from their stubborn position. Though a hopeful struggle is had in the B section of the piece by the deceased, whether a spiritual struggle or last physical one, the struggle is finally given up as the work resolves back into its initial solemnity.

Funerailles: The Struggle of Inner Conflict

At this point, it is helpful to introduce Liszt's *Funerailles* into this paper to gain an understanding of how Liszt portrays death. Written as part of Liszt's cycle "Harmonies poétiques et religieuses" in 1849, this piece, like Chopin's Funeral March, is comprised of three segments. The opening section, also similarly to the Funeral March, features a lower bass ostinato symbolizing an air of finality and a processional. The right hand uses a dotted-eighth sixteenth-note rhythm, suggesting further the hesitating walk towards or the weakened struggle to avoid the inevitability of death. Unlike the Funeral March, however, *Funerailles* explores chromaticism heavily, and focuses on alienating different registers of the piano from one another for certain melodic passages. For instance, in the *sotto voice* section immediately after the first fermata, the bass sings a growling chromatic melody as the right-hand chord accents beat 2. This pattern continues, and the bass gradually ascends linearly until the right hand finally takes over the melody in octaves. Moments and passages like these indicate that Liszt's perception of death may have been more tension-filled, and even more violent, than Chopin's somber acknowledgement of life's end. There are several moments in *Funerailles* that seem to point to

death being perceived by Liszt more as a wolf to hide from and fight with, rather than a darkness which one eventually succumbs to and is swallowed up by.

Chromaticism is not the only sign of struggle and tension between the dying and death that we see in *Funerailles.* While Chopin constantly returns to the plodding B-flat minor—G-flat major—B-flat minor progression to signal the on-going procession, Liszt rebels against a conventional progression to signal finality. According to David Allen Damschroder, the sonorities at the introduction of *Funerailles* do not "behave as traditional harmony texts would prescribe." (Damschroder). Liszt chooses to modulate slightly in the introduction, morphing from a B-flat minor 7 chord over D-flat to a C minor 7 chord over E-flat, and continuing in this step-wise fashion until we reach the first climax. By playing with chromaticism and extended chords (adding the ninth in certain cases), Liszt contributes further to the idea of death being something to rage against. Even in moments of quiet and comparative peace, such as the lyrical A-flat major section, Liszt still incorporates a dense harmonic texture and a dense texture as far as the register of the piano is concerned.

Perhaps the most interesting segment of the piece, in terms of contrast with the suspenseful, agitating opening, is the *poco a poco* section, which begins with a low triplet figure that sounds all at once triumphant and satirical. This D-flat major section comes out of the lyrical segment, and sounds nothing like a 'funeral piece.' We quickly morph into A major, then F, then E-flat, then D, and the chord progression of each key is similar: a constant I—V—I pattern. This harmonically-solid progression flies in the face of the chromatic tension Liszt has built; the right hand is extremely joyful and triumphant, and the rapid triplets in the bass are the only indicator that the fight against death is still on-going. The tone of this section is brilliant, vibrant, and lively, and shines in extreme contrast to the rest of the piece. Given the rest of the

work, however, Liszt has wisely conveyed that this victorious-sounding section cannot last; at the key change to F minor, he re-introduces chromaticism and further establishes this dominance of tension by creating chromatic octave runs. It is at this moment that death's scythe finally connects with the victim: after the fermata following the last desperate ascending chromatic octave, the *sotto voice* theme returns in full force, outlined in octaves in the right hand melody. Our stumbling dotted-eighth to sixteenth-note figure returns, and the return of this theme signifies the last struggle of the dying. Following this theme, our lyrical section returns, but this time we are in E major; this resolution and the following ending (reminiscent of the triplet section) can be thought of as a coming to terms with the finality of death.

The violent struggle and subsequent moments of respite in *Funerailles* are difficult to reconcile thematically; it is all too easy to look at these moments, especially the triplet section, as moments of satirical hope. However, it is quite possible that Liszt wished to convey the inner conflict between the idea of a final peace, and the idea of no longer existing and the fear of mortality. The struggle of one experiencing death is nearly impossible to capture, given that it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that is not easily documented by those experiencing it. Given that this work was also composed when Liszt was not yet an old man or one struggling with his health (in comparison to Chopin, who always struggled with health), this may have also influenced his decision to create a piece that fought back against the idea of mortality and endings. In fact, even the way Liszt chooses to end the piece rejects the idea of conventional conclusions: he returns to the first theme following the introduction (the sotto voice section), but rather than ending the work with this dark passage, he transitions to the lyrical section and then the rapid ending that reminds us of the triplet section. Yet, it is not that Liszt simply does not know how to end the work. Rather, he chooses to prolong the struggle and resolution, and this

return to old material appears to convey a person desperately trying not to yield to death, returning to emotions and memories that inspire life and hope. While the piece does not end victoriously, it does end having convinced the listener that the struggle was a mighty one, and that even though death won this struggle, hope did not lose.

Chopin's Funeral March and Liszt's *Funerailles* offer up two distinct, seemingly-separate takes on the idea of man's final moments. However, as we examine *Funerailles* further, we begin to notice some interesting correlations to Chopin's more somber work.

Liszt and the Elegy of a Nation: Stylistic Correlations to Chopin

Perhaps the most interesting correlation of these two works is their similar responses to culture. In addition to a potential commentary on the aftermath of the French Revolution, Chopin's Funeral March is speculated to have been written as a loving, dark elegy for his nation of Poland. In addition, Kramer has suggested that the work is also a response to the rebuilding of traditions surrounding death following the decimation of France in the French Revolution. In either case, the broad scope of the piece is a memorial to a nation or a people. Similarly, Liszt wrote his *Funerailles* in 1849, one year after the Hungarian revolution. Culturally, both composers had the inspiration of tragedy and the fatigue of society to write from, and Liszt specifically wrote *Funerailles* as a response to the Hungarian Revolution (Walker). However, *Funerailles* contains the opening left hand octaves that we have come to associate with finality, as well as stumbling sixteenth-note to dotted eighth note rhythm we saw in Chopin's Funeral March. As we begin to see these correlations between Liszt's take on death and finality and Chopin's, it is helpful to also note some other correlations between works of the two composers.

The opening of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody no. 2 is also in this slow march style. As in his *Funerailles*, the bass takes a prominent role as the 'weight' and rhythmic phrase marker between the iterations of the Phrygian melody in the right hand. However, as the piece evolves, Liszt begins to develop some suspicious similarities between his new work and Chopin's Polonaises. The octave melodies in the right hand and the leaps in the left are reminiscent not only of the later style of ragtime, but of Chopin's orchestration choices in his Polonaises, specifically his Polonaise in F-sharp minor. Rather than an ode to death's finality, this Hungarian Rhapsody may very well be not only a dedication to Hungary, but also an homage to the more aggressive and virtuosic aspects of Chopin's style. As the two were contemporaries who respected each other's work, it seems sensible to suggest that they drew inspiration from each other, perhaps Liszt from Chopin more than the converse, as Chopin passed long before Liszt. If Liszt is mimicking Chopin, it appears that he is only doing so with the highest respect, and adding to the tradition of 'death songs' as art pieces.

While we have established that Liszt may have borrowed elements of Chopin's style in some of his works, one of the most convincing points to the argument that Liszt is emulating Chopin (whether consciously or subconsciously) in *Funerailles* is the lyrical middle section in A-flat major. In this portion, as described prior, we drift away from the somber aggression of the opening segment into a melodic song. If we look carefully we can pick out several distinct elements of this section: firstly, the accompanimental style of the left hand. The left hand first plays the bass note, then ascends to create the desired harmonic support using an eighth note rhythm. The harmony changes every two beats in this 4/4 passage. While Liszt drifts from this structure in the following variation of the melody in this section, this accompanimental pattern is of note. The second element is the tuplet flourishes executed by the melodic right hand; eleven

bars into this passage, there is a quintuplet sixteenth-note figure that embellishes the melody beautifully. These two elements are of note because we see the exact same techniques used in many of Chopin's Nocturnes for piano. In his *Nocturne in B-flat Minor*, for example, there is a continuous left hand pattern of broken chordal accompaniment that generally changes every two beats; the primary role of the left hand is harmonic and slight rhythmic support, just as in this passage of *Funerailles.* In addition, Chopin appears to adore tuplet flourishes that embellish the established melody; in this same Nocturne, there is an eleven-note tuplet figure with a sixteenth-note rhythm, as well as a similar tuplet containing fifteen chromatic and diatonic notes. While Liszt certainly uses these sorts of flourishes in his music independently of Chopin's stylistic influence, it is striking that *Funerailles* incorporates two distinct techniques Chopin uses significantly in his collection of Nocturnes. Combined with the elements of the bass ostinato and the dotted-eighth sixteenth-note melodic rhythm in Chopin's Funeral March, Liszt's use of these techniques seems less and less coincidental in *Funerailles.*

Final Thoughts

While both Chopin's Funeral March and Liszt's *Funerailles* convey the finality of death, each piece conveys it in a slightly different way. Whereas Chopin's technique seems to be repetition and accentuating a droning harmonic and rhythmic pattern, Liszt incorporates chromaticism and a spiraling into old material that gets cut shorter and shorter at the coda of the work, suggesting the inevitability of the pattern of death. However, both ultimately center on the certainty and finality of death as a theme, and while it is portrayed differently in their works, the message still resonates in both. In addition, Liszt borrows elements of Chopin's march and other elements from his darker style in order to construct *Funerailles.* As a result, we may

conclude that both composers conceived of the thought of mortality in much the same way: as a final inner struggle that resulted in ultimate closure.

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