PROLOGUE

THE WORD 'SUPERSTAR' IS likely to put modern readers in mind of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and other pop stars like Michael Jackson and Madonna, while lovers of classical music will think of figures such as Maria Callas, Vladimir Horowitz, Herbert von Karajan, Lang Lang, Anna Netrebko and Luciano Pavarotti.

Superstars are loved by their fans for their talents, while as people they are worshipped to distraction. When Horowitz announced his comeback in May 1965 after a twelve-year absence from the concert platform, music lovers queued for days outside New York's Carnegie Hall in the hope of buying a ticket for his recital. Rioting broke out immediately before the concert, the streets around the venue had to be closed, and when the sixty-one-year-old pianist finally appeared, he triggered a reaction that bordered on religious ecstasy. The event was phenomenally successful; it is no surprise that during his lifetime Horowitz earned several million dollars. Only one classical musician was more successful in this respect: the business-minded Herbert von Karajan, whose fortune at the time of his death in July 1989 has been conservatively estimated at £350 million. According to one business magazine, his widow, Eliette, was twenty-fourth in a list of the hundred wealthiest Austrians in 2005.

Glossy magazines and gossip columns have always been hand in glove with the world's superstars. Their co-dependence is an example of

give and take, the magazines in question cultivating the superstars' image, while the latter show their gratitude by giving exclusive interviews and providing exclusive photographs. Thanks to glossy magazines, Maria Callas became a style icon of the 1960s, while Karajan enjoyed being seen as a restless, testosterone-fuelled jet-setter at the controls of sports cars and private aeroplanes. And yet this mixture of music, media and money is by no means new. In 2011 the world marked the 200th anniversary of the birth and the 125th anniversary of the death of a man who, while not exactly inventing these mechanisms, was arguably the first to deploy them with such unparalleled virtuosity: Franz Liszt.

Franz Liszt was a superstar, a genius and a European celebrity – he was utterly exceptional. Even as a child prodigy he cast a spell on audiences in Vienna, Paris and London. Later he travelled the length and breadth of Europe, taking his career to dizzying heights. The popular press of the time reported at length on his concerts and at even greater length on the numerous escapades that fuelled their feverish interest in him. There were times when the enthusiasm triggered by his public appearances bordered on delirium, and he became a figure on whom contemporaries projected all manner of erotic fantasies and secret desires.

Within a period of only eight years, Liszt gave around a thousand recitals – an incredible total. In the process he effectively invented the profession of the international concert pianist and was the first to perform the whole of the known keyboard repertory from Bach to his own contemporary Chopin – and he did so, moreover, from memory. As a composer and orchestrator, too, Liszt was a revolutionary, writing pioneering works that opened up new worlds of expression. For the music critic Klaus Umbach, Liszt was like a giant redwood among the progenitors of classical music, 'and most of those who seek to appear as his equals today and who want to be taken seriously are no more than bonsais artificially induced into seeming bigger than they are, while supported by a booming culture industry that gives the artist its blessing but for which no idiocy is beneath it'.¹

But Liszt was also a man who kept reinventing himself. In 1847 he abandoned his calling as an itinerant virtuoso and settled in the small

town of Weimar, where he made a new career for himself as a conductor, journalist, organizer, teacher and theatre administrator. If this particular change of direction still made sense to observers, they were left shaking their heads in disbelief when, only a few years later in April 1865, Liszt entered the four minor orders, becoming a Catholic abbé and for a time taking up residence within the precincts of the Vatican – not that this required him to forgo the company of beautiful women. He spent the remaining years of his life as the leading piano teacher of his age, commuting between Rome, Weimar and Budapest.

How can all these different aspects of the man be reconciled? Did Liszt himself see no contradiction between his life as a God-fearing Catholic and a man of the world whose lifestyle, embracing a whole series of scandalous love affairs, could scarcely be squared with the sexual mores of the Church of Rome?

It is difficult for us to form a picture of Liszt. Numerous photographs – several of them reproduced in the following pages – depict him at various stages in his life. The images from his years as a virtuoso have a positively iconic air to them, showing a young man with striking features, his long hair brushed carefully backwards. He is fashionably dressed, while the mysterious expression on his face is nothing if not seductive. Here the young Liszt is the very embodiment of the Romantic virtuoso. On photographs taken during his later years we see an older man whose snowy white mane of hair is in curious contrast to his cassock. All of these photographs have two things in common: not only do they give the impression that they are staged, which they undoubtedly were, but they also suggest that Liszt was a master of disguise, a man who wore many different masks.

Liszt's enigmatic ambiguity is in marked contrast to the unambiguous impression left by the man who in 1870 was to become his son-in-law: Richard Wagner. 'Mine is a different kind of organism,' Wagner insisted. 'I have sensitive nerves, I must have beauty, radiance and light. The world owes me a living! I can't live the miserable life of an organist like your Master Bach! Is it such an outrageous demand to say that I deserve the little bit of luxury that I can bear? I, who can give pleasure to thousands?'²

Liszt would never have put his name to such an expression of egoism and self-infatuation or, at best, he would have used the subjunctive in

setting forth his demands. It is no accident that he always preferred to speak and write in French: in the gallant convolutions of the language of diplomacy he could conceal his true identity in ways that avoided detection. But when were his actions 'authentic'? And when did he show the world merely another of his masks?

Liszt's music is no less fascinating than the man himself: he wrote not only masterful studies for the piano but also ravishing show-stoppers, subtle travelogues and highly virtuosic transcriptions as well as works which, composed towards the end of his life, are altogether breathtaking, ultramodern miniatures that point the way forward to the twentieth century. His orchestral works were equally important and include a number of full-length symphonic poems. But he also wrote organ music, songs, oratorios, Masses and even an opera. Their musical language is often heroic, with a dandy-like triumphalism and condescension, while in other pieces it is poetically naïve, erotic and delicate. The works of his final years are notable for their disturbing austerity.

Liszt's piano works demand an artistry that separates the wheat from the chaff, which explains why they have always figured prominently in the recital programmes of pianists of the stature of Busoni, Horowitz, Brendel, Barenboim, Martha Argerich and Arcadi Volodos, all of whom at some point in their careers have turned their hand to the B minor Sonata, the 'Paganini' Studies and the First Mephisto Waltz.

Liszt's other works have tended to be overshadowed by his piano pieces. His orchestral music, for example, is seriously under-represented in the world of music today, a situation attributable in part to the fashionable predilections of a younger generation of conductors. But there is another – historical – reason for this neglect: the wedding of Liszt's daughter, Cosima, to his friend Richard Wagner in August 1870 was to have unfortunate repercussions for him. In establishing the Bayreuth Festival, the unscrupulously ambitious Wagners exploited their eminent kinsman for their own financial ends, and even after Wagner's death in 1883, Liszt continued to play the part of their 'lapdog', as he described himself in a moment of self-mockery. As Cosima emerged from the shadows and took on the role of the all-powerful matriarch of Bayreuth, so Liszt came to be seen by Wagnerians in general

as little more than the man who had helped their idol on his way. That he was himself a composer of genius was all too easily forgotten.

‘Liszt didn’t exist in my youth,’ recalls Richard Wagner’s great-great-granddaughter, Nike:

Worse, he existed only as a figure of mild amusement who interested no one – whenever family members referred to him, it was by the ironical title of ‘the abbé’. I can still see my father Wieland falling asleep at a performance of *Die heilige Elisabeth* that he had had to attend as a family representative. If ever there were piano recitals featuring works by Liszt in the Margraves’ Opera House or the Bayreuth Stadthalle, the family was conspicuous by its absence, an absence due as much as anything to sheer ignorance.

The reasons for the Wagner family’s rejection of Liszt were entirely worldly, revolving as they did around hierarchies, vanity and, not least, money. Too much rivalry within the house would have been bad for business, Cosima would have thought. According to Nike Wagner, ‘The musical hierarchy had to be maintained in spite of the close-knit relationships. In turn, this meant securing the “top place” within the history of music.’³

In fact, Wagner owed his friend and father-in-law more than he could ever express. Liszt encouraged him whenever he could and on several occasions rescued him from the brink of financial ruin. And that was not everything, for in a private moment we find Wagner admitting to Hans von Bülow that ‘I have become a totally different fellow in matters of harmony as a result of getting to know Liszt’s compositions.’⁴ And in conversation with his second wife, Wagner even admitted to receiving stolen goods, claiming that he had ‘stolen much’ from Liszt: ‘R. calls his symphonic poems *un repaire des voleurs* [a thieves’ den], which makes us laugh heartily.’⁵

Even today many Wagnerians feel uncomfortable at the notion that their idol could have helped himself to ideas derived from the works of the much-ridiculed abbé and to have done so to such an extent. Some years ago Sir Simon Rattle took part in a platform discussion on Wagner in Amsterdam, provoking a certain disquiet when he described the

Bayreuth composer as ‘one of the great magpies. If you know *Walküre* – well, it’s a shock to listen to the Liszt *Faust Symphony* and to hear how much Wagner just stole from it.’⁶ Not everyone in the hall was keen to hear this. Ultimately, a monumental figure like Liszt needs no one to defend his honour. But it remains one of the biographer’s tasks to show him in his true light.

Liszt’s birth a little over two hundred years ago marked the start of one of the great romances of the nineteenth century. His life takes readers across the whole of Europe. We shall meet emperors, kings and other crowned heads, we shall visit the pope in the Vatican and encounter leading musicians, painters and writers, ambitious cardinals, unscrupulous spies and shady fraudsters. We shall also note with a certain amusement how Liszt became entangled in amorous intrigues. Many aspects of Liszt’s three score and fifteen years were not only grandiose, they were also scandalous, while we might find others both bewildering and disturbing. Yet others – such as those surrounding the ‘Wittgenstein Affair’ – are as gripping as any detective story.

So who was this superstar who revolutionized music and seduced women? The best stories are still those told by real life.

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Génie oblige!