

Franz Liszt, *Lettres d'un bachelier ès-musique* (Letters of a Bachelor of Music, 1837-41)

Liszt published fifteen articles under the title *Lettres d'un bachelier ès-musique* between February 1837 and September 1841, in several Parisian revues. Modelled on the *Lettres d'un voyageur* of George Sand (the dedicatee, incidentally, of the first two *Lettres d'un bachelier*), they touch on a diverse array of subjects in genres ranging from travel narrative to music criticism, by way of reflections on the place of art in society, containing numerous autobiographical passages and personal anecdotes and sweeping tableaux in an often quite lyrical tone.

The period of the letters' composition corresponds roughly to Liszt's "years of pilgrimage" with Marie d'Agoult in Italy, during which time the pianist finished his *Album d'un voyageur* (begun 1835, published 1842). Also during this period he began the pieces that would comprise the second volume of the *Années de pèlerinage* (published 1858), including the famous *Sposalizio* and *Il Penseroso*.

Liszt's reasons for choosing the title *Lettres d'un bachelier ès-musique* remain a mystery, but it seems likely that in embracing the Sandian model he hoped to lay claim to the novelty of applying it to the domain of music. It was indeed unprecedented for a musician to write on music not from the objective point of view of a music critic (as already in Berlioz, for example), but on the contrary dwelling on the subjective aspects of experience. The term "bachelor" might signify the author's novice or inexperienced state, underlining the need for him to develop his education, which takes place notably through his travels in Italy.

In the *Lettres* one finds ideas dear to Liszt and d'Agoult on the place of art and artists in society, already expressed in a different register in the 1835 series of articles *De la situation des artistes*. The *Lettres d'un bachelier* however constitute a more voluminous collection. Written and published over a longer timescale, they also show greater freedom in the handling of the discourse: without limiting the scope to music, Liszt evokes at length his emotional responses to other forms of art (notably painting, architecture, and sculpture), and openly reflects on his personal development as an artist. The letters also furnished opportunities to take stock of the state of musical life in the various localities through which he passed, especially in Italy (Milan, Venice, Genoa, Florence) but also in more German regions (Vienna, Hamburg, even the Danish court). In this regard, Liszt draws inspiration from the writings of Heinrich Heine, whose *Tableaux de voyage* had appeared in Paris in 1834, and who, it so happens, is the addressee of the seventh of the *Lettres d'un bachelier*. For it is indeed the other novelty of this second series of articles that the majority are addressed to Liszt's close friends, whether musicians (Berlioz, Lambert Massaert, Léon Kreutzer) or not (Adolphe Pictet, Louis de Ronchaud, Joseph d'Ortigue).

The *Lettres* address themselves in the first place to a Parisian public, lettered and musical, up to speed on the latest artistic developments and debates in the French capital. Generally written from abroad, or at least from a point of view that deliberately keeps its distance from Parisian life, they bring to their numerous subjects a sometimes contemplative openness, often philosophically inclined, and achieve a certain unity through the recurrence of romantic themes (travel, genius, fraternity among the arts).

In the absence of manuscript sources, the contribution of Marie d'Agoult is difficult to assess. If, as certain hints in the lovers' private correspondence suggest, the first three letters resulted from a truly four-hand creative process, the two letters to Ronchaud as well as the two published in *L'Artiste* and those on the Benevenuto Cellini's *Persée* and Raphaël's *Saint Cecilia* were almost exclusively written by d'Agoult and merely reviewed by Liszt, while the latter seems to have composed the bulk of the responses to Heine and Berlioz. Certain texts were also simply divided up: a letter from d'Agoult to Ferdinand Hiller of 20 April 1838 indicates that Liszt wrote the beginning of the text on La Scala, while she herself took care of the ending. Whatever the case may be, the collection was published under the sole signature of Liszt, who assumed responsibility for the contents in their entirety.

As early as 1839, Liszt conceived the idea of one day publishing the *Lettres* in collected form, "with the addition of various more intimate, more personal things" (see his letter of 28 August 1839 to Lambert Massart, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 1, pg. 480), but this project was never realised during his lifetime, even if certain of the letters appear already numbered (III, IV, and VII). Released individually in the press, the *Lettres d'un bachelier* nevertheless enjoyed a considerable celebrity in France and across Europe: within the author's lifetime, some were disseminated in Germany and Italy but also in England, Hungary, and as far as Russia, often with a considerable time lag.

Overview of the *Lettres*

The first article published with the phrase *Lettres d'un bachelier ès-musique* in its title was addressed to George Sand, by way of the formula "to a poet-voyager". This text is not to be confused with the [Lettre d'un voyageur à M. George Sand](#) published by Liszt beginning 6 December 1835, which however does amount to a kind of precursor to the *Lettres d'un bachelier*, so close is it to the first articles published under that title in its formulation of its themes. Written from Paris and the Alpine town of Chambéry in 1837, the first three letters contain numerous autobiographical passages: notably, Liszt opens up on his relationship to the French capital (first letter) and the importance of the piano in his artistic life ([third letter](#)). From 1837, therefore, he was articulating a self-critique aimed at what we today would call "empty virtuosity", to which he had abandoned himself in his youth. From the first letter onwards he equally articulates a plea on behalf of explanatory prefaces to musical works. Also touched on are the theme of the artist-voyager and an account of his retreat to George Sand's estate in the Berry region ([second letter](#)).

The next three letters form a relatively cohesive ensemble, although chronologically out of order, the [sixth](#) having been published ten months after its composition (whereas the average time to publication for the letters was two or three months). This delay in no way impedes the text's intelligibility, representing as it does a sort of parenthesis outside of time, constituting almost entirely of a romantic description of the couple's retreat to the shores of Lake Como. The [fourth letter](#), likewise addressed to Louis de Ronchaud, proffers reflections on art and religion, on genius and the romanticism of Chateaubriand, before tarrying over descriptions of Alpine landscapes and the entry into Milan. The [fifth letter](#), dated 10 March 1838, concerns La Scala and the state of musical life in Italy.

The [seventh letter](#) was drawn up in Venice on 15 April 1838 in response to the second of the "Lettres confidentielles" of Heine, written from Paris in the spring of 1837 and published on 4 February 1838 in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*. Before responding point by point to Heine, who had accused him of being "a man of wavering character" though "noble, disinterested and plainspoken", and a sectarian of Saint-Simon, Ballanche, and Lamennais in turn, Liszt reflects on the practice of these public letters between artists, deploring what we would now call "buzz": "This publicity given by the press to the feelings and thoughts of private life is one of the misfortunes of our time; we artists do a great wrong in judging each other [...]. Most of us are not too irritated by publicity which, whether laudatory or critical, at least keeps our names in the papers for a few days."

The last of the letters published in 1838 more resembles the first of the whole set in tone and structure, but is considerably more developed. After an opening consideration of the figure of the "musician-voyager", Liszt treats in this [eighth letter](#) of the material difficulties entailed in concert organisation. He reflects on his practise of improvisation, taking the occasion to reflect on the relation between artist and public, between the amusement of crowds and artistic seriousness. He recalls a concert attended in Milan, the Carnival festivities, a dream about Schubert's *Wanderer*... Finally, he appends a very long postscript on his sojourn in Vienna where he had given a series of benefit concerts for the victims of flooding in Pest in March 1838. Insisting on the virtues of concert programming in the Austrian capital by comparison to Italian musical life, of which he had already painted a very bleak portrait, he mentions the *Lieder* of Schubert (of which he was then finishing a transcription for solo piano, published in Vienna the same year).

Published in five instalments in the summer of 1839, the ninth letter ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), and [5](#)), concerning Venice, is the longest of the set. It forms a more homogeneous whole by comparison to the others, with a highly literary style including, besides various passages of music criticism, numerous descriptions of places and artworks. The [tenth letter](#) offers scathing remarks on the quality of musical life in Genoa, notably on the performance of church music and on the city's dilettantes ("patrons of the semiquaver"). In Florence, Liszt recounts a visit to the atelier of the sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini (1777-1850), creator of a bust of the composer finished in 1839, to whom Liszt hoped to confide the realisation of a monument to Beethoven in Bonn. Sculpture continues as the heart of the [eleventh letter](#), which compares the figures of Cellini's *Perseus* and of Berlioz, recalling certain articles from *De la situation des artistes*.

Written like its predecessor from Florence in November 1838, the [twelfth letter](#) is addressed to Maurice Schlesinger. This highly disillusioned report of the state of music in Italy, complete with reviews of several Italian operas and artists, turns a distanced regard on the activity of criticism itself and on the *Lettres d'un bachelier* as a whole. Liszt refers to various of the preceding letters in order to reflect on the quality of their style and on the "programme" of the journal for which he was writing, the *Revue et Gazette*.

The [thirteenth letter](#), written from Bologna in October 1838, is brief but famous. It contains the description of Raphael's *Saint Cecilia*, the account of the emotion experienced in the presence of this painting providing an opportunity to reflect on the nature of genius (which resides, in keeping with a very Lisztian idea, in infinite possibilities for re-appropriation). The theme of genius again suffuses the [fourteenth letter](#), though written a year later, in response to a [letter of Berlioz](#) published 11 August 1839. Situated at some distance from the latest musical happenings (the "mêlée"), Liszt reflects instead on the experience of the aging artist and on intimacy with the works of the great geniuses (Dante, Beethoven), and recounts his meeting with Ingres in Rome. The [fifteenth letter](#) dates to almost two years after the previous: notably, it recounts Liszt's visit to the festival of Hamburg in July 1831, and then his voyage as far as Denmark and to Nonnenwerth for the first of his stays on this island in the Rhine with Marie d'Agoult. One finds a most melancholic paragraph on the Rhineland landscapes, and an expatiation on the affinities between music and architecture.

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Further reading

Franz Liszt, [Sämtliche Schriften](#), vol. 1.

Charles Suttoni, *An Artist's Journey. Lettres d'un bachelier ès musique 1835-1841*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago et Londres, 1989.

Anita R. Hall-Swadley, *The Collected Writings of Franz Liszt, vol. 2, Essays and Letters of a Traveling Bachelor of Music*, The Scarecrow Press, Plymouth, 2012.

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