

Why the Virtuosi Stopped Playing

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During the most active years of his life as a traveling virtuoso, 1839-47, Franz Liszt gave more than 1,000 concerts. This remarkable episode in his life began in mid-November 1839 in Vienna with a series of six concerts, attended, in total, by thousands, for the benefit of the proposed Beethoven Memorial in Bonn. Immediately thereafter came the tumultuous and politically-tinged visit to Budapest, followed in 1841 by the even more sensational series of performances in Berlin —21 of them—where audiences reacted in ways, some thought, verging on the pathological.

The next few years saw him repeating his triumphs from St. Petersburg to Madrid, from Bonn to Constantinople. Only the British Isles, where his reception had been tepid in 1840, remained conspicuously outside his itinerary. Then, in September 1847, just short of 36 years of age, and at the pinnacle of his fame, he simply stopped. He settled down as a conductor, impresario—and composer—at the rather isolated Thuringian court in Weimar.

Sigismund Thalberg, Liszt's formidable rival in the later 1830s, stopped playing more gradually, progressively slowing his pace during the time he spent in the Americas just after he turned 40, and at his retirement home in

Posillipo near Naples. The virtuoso pianist Theodor Döhler, who rose to prominence throughout Europe at the same time as Liszt and Thalberg, toured for a scant ten years and then (somewhat Liszt-like), married a Russian princess, settled down in Florence and played no more. Döhler's almost exact contemporary, Adolph Henselt, toured extensively and with great success in Europe during the 1830s, then settled in St. Petersburg in 1838; from there he launched one more concert tour in the early 1850s, after which he gave up playing in public at the age of about 40.

Virtuoso violinists did much the same. The most spectacular of them, often seen as the very model of the 19th-century virtuoso, Niccolò Paganini, had a longer career as a travelling player than most, extending from his Italian tours just after 1810 to his triumphant appearances in Austria, Germany, France, and Great Britain from 1828 to 1832. Thereupon, at the age of almost 50, and in failing health, he gave up his itinerant life to spend his final 8 years rather more peacefully in Northern Italy and France.

Paganini's worthy predecessor Giovanni Battista Viotti retired from the concert stage twice. After touring Germany, Switzerland, Poland, and Russia in 1780-81, he was celebrated as a solo player in Paris, until in 1783, at the age of 28, he abruptly quit to enter the service of Marie Antoinette. The Revolution six years later was a bit kinder to him than to his employer: Viotti managed to

escape to London, where he was a featured soloist in the Salomon Concerts for a couple of seasons before he once again left the concert stage and, now in his mid-30s, devoted himself mainly to another honorable calling, the wine business.

Viotti's successor, the Belgian violinist Charles-Auguste de Bériot, made a sensation in the 1830s touring Europe and Russia, first with the famous soprano Maria Malibran, and later with her younger sister, Pauline Garcia. In 1842, at the age of 40, he exchanged this life for a much more settled existence as professor at the Brussels Conservatory.

Before thinking about why the travelling virtuosi tended to stop playing relatively early in life, perhaps we should think about what we mean by a "virtuoso." That Italian word, virtu, or (as an adjective) virtuoso, deriving from the Latin virtus, i.e. "manly excellence" or "worth," had long referred to the masterly investigator or connoisseur in some field, to the savant.

A telling example of the term's earlier application in music can be gathered from the famous Bach-Scheibe controversy of 1737-38. Johann Adolph Scheibe, a former (and rather ungrateful) student of J. S. Bach, criticized his teacher's music as "turgid, and confused," lacking in amenity.¹ Thereupon the Leipzig professor of rhetoric, Johann Abraham Birnbaum, leapt to Bach's

¹ Johann Adolph Scheibe, Critischer Musicus (2d. ed., 1745), 6th Stück, p. 62.

defense. One of his complaints was that Scheibe had referred to Bach as a “Musikant,” a word, he said, that suggests a plebian practitioner, something like a beer-hall fiddler. A much more proper name for Bach would be “virtuoso.”²

Musical dictionaries from the early eighteenth century to about the 1810s bear out this broader application of the term; Brossard’s Dictionnaire de musique (1st ed. 1703) defines virtuosi as those who excel in the theory or practice of the fine arts;³ Walther’s Musikalisches Lexikon of 30 years later says much the same;⁴ and as late as 1802 H. Chr. Koch recognized as virtuosi simply those musicians who particularly distinguished themselves as artists.⁵

Then in the earlier 19th century the term came to be used mainly to designate a particular sort of musical performer: one with prodigious technical skills who amazed large audiences with technical feats of motion and sound that were often their own particular specialties. One such specialty was Thalberg’s middle-register melody (often played with the thumbs) festooned with arpeggios above and below—leaving the clear impression of playing with

² In Lorenz Mizler, Neu-eröffnete musikalische Bibliothek I, 4. Teil, pp. 62-73.

³ Sebastien de Brossard, Dictionnaire de musique, 2d ed. (Paris: Chr. Ballard, 1705), pp. 321-2. Brossard says this name is given to “excellens musiciens, et entre ceux là, plutôt à ceux qui s’appliquent à la theorie, ou à la composition de la musique.

⁴ Johann Gottfried Walther, Musikalisches Lexikon (Leipzig: W. Deer, 1732), p. 638.

⁵ Heinrich Christoph Koch, Musikalisches Lexikon (frankfurt a/M, 1802), p. 1699.

three (or maybe four) hands.⁶ Another was Liszt's astonishing chromatic runs in octaves achieved with interlocking thumbs.⁷

The nineteenth-century virtuosi's repertory, too, was highly specialized; they played, for the most part, their own compositions (though they were very often based on tunes the audience might recognize), music tailored to exhibit their own technical wizardry. Paganini's variations on Le Streghe, for example, portray those witches with the world's first double harmonics. Virtually all of Thalberg's Fantasies and Variations on current operatic excerpts include at least one variation with the multiple-hand technique.

Another distinctive and essential factor in the trajectory of the 19th-century virtuosi's careers was their dependence upon publicity or (in the modern sense) promotion. The success of a virtuoso's appearance in a particular place depended in essential ways upon advance notices and favorable reports and reviews in the expanding and increasingly influential European periodical press. Virtuosi worked to build a public image or persona that they cultivated in their deportment on and off stage. Thus Paganini left in his trail a distinct whiff of the diabolical; Liszt was a super-human visionary, a magnanimous

⁶ Joseph Mainzer, Paris correspondent for Schumann's Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, claimed, "Anyone sitting where he can see Thalberg's fingers cannot but be astonished; those not so lucky must believe they are listening to the performance of a four-hand composition. Neue Zeitschrift für Musik VI (1837), 185.

⁷ See Alan Walker, Franz Liszt (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983) I, 300-01.

supporter of good causes and worthy nationalist struggle; Thalberg's elegant and courtly manner reminded audiences of his noble—if illegitimate—parentage.

In the pursuit of image and reputation performers courted publishers and critics, often entering into mutually beneficial commercial agreements with them. This was true particularly of the virtuosi's dealings with musical journals, which were typically put out by music publishers. Thus the Paris firm of Maurice Schlesinger published the piano music of Thalberg and reviewed that music—and the composer's performances of it—in its house organ, the Revue et gazette musicale.

A famous episode in the chronic hostilities between Schlesinger and the pianist Henri Herz shows something of the special flavor of the virtuosi's entanglements with the publishing world. Meyerbeer's Les Huguenots, first performed at the Opéra in February, 1836, was immediately a wild success, and those in the musical publishing world hastened to capitalize on its popularity. Schlesinger, who held all publishing rights for the music, enlisted Berlioz to write an enthusiastic review of the opera in his Revue et gazette musicale. And he sold exclusive rights for piano transcription to Thalberg,

who, he announced, would perform, at the Italian Theater, “un grand morceau très brillant, de sa composition sur des motifs des Huguenots.”⁸

But before either the publication of the music or Thalberg’s concert, Herz published, as his Op. 89, a “Fantasie dramatique sur le choral protestant chanté dans l’opera des Huguenots de Meyerbeer.” This protestant chorale was scarcely something for which Schlesinger could claim exclusive rights: it was Luther’s hymn “Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott.” So Herz’s appropriation of this music was apparently perfectly legal. But Schlesinger was incensed that Herz should use those magic names of the opera and its composer for his own promotional purposes.⁹

This distinct aura of commercialism among the piano virtuosi was reinforced by their business connections with piano manufacturers. (Herein they followed in the footsteps of one of their illustrious forbears, Muzio Clementi, who in the 1790s stopped playing in public and devoted the second half of his career to selling his firm’s pianos and publications.) In 1824 Kalkbrenner became a partner in the firm of Pleyel; shortly thereafter Herz

⁸ *Revue et gazette musicale*, 1836, p. 104.

⁹ In his announcement of the publication of Thalberg’s piece he added, “the public will easily understand the motives which prompted M. Herz to attempt this deception, in putting in the title, in large letters, the Huguenots and the name of M. Meyerbeer.”

entered into partnership with the Parisian piano factory of Klepfer, and subsequently founded his own.

Liszt's career-long association with the Érards and their pianos began when he was still a child prodigy; in 1823 or 1824 his father apparently concluded a business arrangement with Sebastian Érard, obligating his firm to provide pianos for the young Liszt's coming appearances in England, and requiring that he should play none other.¹⁰ For the rest of his performing career Liszt proved himself an invaluable source of favorable publicity for Érard & Cie. And Érard's 7-octave grand piano with repetition action long remained Liszt's favored proving ground for his musical and gymnastic feats.

Thus the 19th-century virtuosi belonged very much to the new urban scene of their time: a heady new world of manufacturing, commerce, advertizing, mass communication, and image making. And there was another way in which these musicians were part of this new world. They belonged to the recently evolved species of artists who addressed their efforts for the most part to the new and expanding public audience.

They were, by-and-large, self-employed. Cut loose from the demands for varied fare that noble or churchly patrons had always exacted of musicians, they were free to specialize to an unprecedented degree in the mastery of their

¹⁰ Walker, op. cit., I, 93.

own instruments. Liszt's daily regime (reported in a letter from 1832) of "four to five hours of trills, sixths, octaves, tremolos, and repeated notes, cadenzas and the like" was a luxury available only to the un beholden.¹¹ And prolonged periods of travel too, of course, are much more available for those without steady employment; the travelling virtuosi belonged almost exclusively to the new and growing ranks of the free-lance artist.

Some parts of this composite portrait of the nineteenth-century virtuoso, of course, could already be observed in the previous century. We have mentioned the extensive European tours of Viotti in 1780-81. Clementi toured in France and Austria at just that time. And there was the special category of the touring prodigy: the child Mozart is the best known example, but there were others such as the blind Viennese pianist and singer Maria Theresia Paradies, who toured Europe and England in the 1780s. The boy Beethoven, too, was subjected to a tentative tour of Rhineland cities in 1783.

In her article of 1993, "Le Virtuose international: une création du 18e siècle," Sylvette Milliot argued that the enduring pattern of the "international virtuoso" was firmly established in the 18th century.¹² Her prize exhibit is Corelli, followed by other violinists from north-Italian centers, the Vitalis

¹¹ La Mara, ed., Franz Liszts Briefe (Leipzig, 1918), I, 7.

¹² "Le Virtuose international: une création du 18e siècle." Dixhuitième siècle XXV (1993), 55-64.

(father and son), Tartini, Locatelli, and the French violinists Jean-Marie Leclair and Gabriel Guillemain. Other musicians she adds to her roster of “virtuosi” include Johann Stamitz, J. C. Bach, and even Handel. But it is only in the eighteenth-century sense of the term that most of these people could have qualified as virtuosi.

Some 18th-century performers appeared on occasion in the few public venues available to them in the leading urban centers; three such were the Concerts spirituels in Paris and the competing Bach-Abel and Pantheon series in London. But instrumental soloists in the eighteenth century, in the overwhelming majority of cases, appeared at private venues, offering their services to patrons just as European musicians had done for centuries.

Those few who travelled widely, like Viotti in the 1780s, usually proceeded from one court to the next. They tended to remain for some months or years in a particular location (such as Viotti in St. Petersburg, or Locatelli in Munich and Berlin) typically attached to a particular noble establishment. By contrast, in his German tour of 1829-30 Paganini gave more than a hundred public concerts in 40 different towns. And most of Mme. Milliot’s 18th-century virtuosi actually traveled little; as in the case of Corelli, it was their compositions that made the rounds, and it was principally thus that their European reputations were made.

So in essential ways the travelling virtuosi of the earlier nineteenth century were a new breed, a part of a new social order in western Europe spawned by the political revolutions and the burgeoning industrial revolution; and they addressed themselves to the newly empowered urban public that followed in the wake of these social upheavals.

What drew audiences to the virtuosi of the new century, first of all, were their unprecedented feats of technical prowess. There were unimaginable tempos, as in Paganini's reported performance, in Paris, of the continuous 16th notes in his "Perpetuela" at the rate of 11 notes per second (quarter=165). The pianists served up crackling octaves together with amazing and varied new textures that sounded at times like the human voice, at others, even like a full orchestra.

But such thrills don't well bear repetition; once an audience has seen and heard these amazing feats, they want to see something else. In his recent book on Liszt, Dana Gooley compares the virtuoso to the magician: once he has satisfied the audience that he can pull a rabbit out of a hat, there is little point to doing it again.¹³ Similarly, the virtuoso must constantly come up with new

¹³ Dana Gooley, The Virtuoso Liszt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 1.

marvels, or forever go in search of new audiences: travel was a necessity in this line of work.

But if the virtuosi of the first half of the nineteenth century lived in a world newly modernized, their means of travel—of crucial importance in their lives—was not in the least modern. When Paganini set out to conquer Paris in 1831, he travelled just as Julius Caesar, on a similar mission, had done in 58 BCE: by horse-drawn conveyance. (In the frozen landscape of Ukraine in January of 1846, Liszt was once even forced to revert to a dog sled.)

The roads in western Europe, and particularly in England, were gradually improving in the early years of the century, but the quickest means of travel, by post coach, nonetheless rarely averaged faster than about 8 kilometers (5 miles) per hour—barely twice the speed of walking.¹⁴ This puts into perspective Paganini's report that in the course of his tour of England, Scotland, and Ireland in 1831-32, he gave 151 concerts and traveled 5,000 miles in less than a year: his travel alone would have consumed more than 80 twelve-hour days.¹⁵ We can easily understand that toward the end of their traveling careers both Paganini and Liszt were in poor health.

¹⁴ Bishop's Stortford Tourist Information Centre, retrieved 5/18/2012.

¹⁵ Paganini Epistolario, ed. Edward Neill (Genova: Commune di Genova, n.d.), p. 153.

The unending quest for new audiences frequently led the virtuosi to the outer fringes of Europe; St. Petersburg and Moscow, however distant, became favorite destinations. Liszt went as far east as Constantinople. And some, especially in the latter half of the century, extended the search—and in some cases, surely, their careers—by crossing the Atlantic. Henri Herz toured extensively in South America and the United States from 1845-51; about five years later Thalberg did the same. Later in the century, in 1872, Henryk Wieniawski and Anton Rubinstein together toured widely in North America; now with the vast advantage of rail travel, they managed to give 215 concerts in one year.

If the technical marvels of the virtuosi can be compared to those of the magician, their extreme and exacting physical requirements also bear some resemblance to the skills of professional athletes. Everybody expects a professional tennis player, say, such as Roger Federer or Francesca Schiavone, to begin losing their edge after they turn thirty. For the virtuosi, somewhat analogous physical demands, together with the ceaseless search for new audiences and the hardship of the attendant travel, particularly before the advent of the railroad, tended to make for short careers. Most ended by about the age of 40.

But sheer exhaustion was probably not the only factor that led virtuosi to stop playing. Especially in Germany of the 1830s and 1840s they came under a mounting chorus of criticism. As early as 1802, in a long and verbose article, “Ueber reisende Virtuosen,” in the Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, Wilhelm Triest put the difference between the virtuoso and the artistic musician into philosophical terms: “Sinnlichkeit” (appealing to the senses) as opposed to “Verstand” (addressed to the understanding).¹⁶ In 1810 E. T. A. Hoffmann expressed a “real aversion” for the piano concerto as a mere vessel for virtuoso performance.¹⁷ In Paris, in the course of the Liszt-Thalberg struggle, Liszt himself seemed for a moment to join the anti-virtuoso forces. In his Revue et gazette musicale of 1837 Schlesinger published under Liszt’s name (together with his own vigorous demurrals) a scathing indictment of Thalberg’s music that ridicules the kind of promotional devices all the virtuosi used. (it should be added that it was likely Liszt’s companion, Marie D’Agoult, who wrote this review, not Liszt himself.)¹⁸

Meanwhile Heinrich Heine, long a resident of Paris, applied the edge of his acerbic wit to the cult of piano virtuosi as they competed in that city for recognition and for commercial advantage. Referring to Kalkbrenner’s

¹⁶ Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung IV (1802), 737-49.

¹⁷ See E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Musical Writings, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 101.

¹⁸ Revue et gazette musicale IV(1837), 17-20.

entanglements with the marketplace, Heine called him “a bon-bon that has fallen in the mud.”¹⁹ While he ridiculed the excesses of Liszt’s audiences (inventing the term “Lisztomania” for the behavior of his Berlin admirers in 1840) his warm admiration for Liszt’s playing was unwavering: for Heine there were three great pianists, Liszt, Chopin, and Thalberg. As for the rest, he wrote (addressing his fellow Germans):

“These artistic apprentices know the proper way to exploit every scrap of praise that they have begged or swindled from the feuilletons, and consequently the advertisements in Germany announce that the famous genius, the great Rudolph W. [Rudolf Willmers] has arrived, the rival of Liszt and Thalberg, this pianistic hero who aroused such excitement in Paris. . .The credulity of the public is very amusing, and the shamelessness of the virtuosi is disgusting.”²⁰

But the most sustained attack on the virtuosi issued from Leipzig, beginning in 1834, from Robert Schumann and his circle at the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik. One of Schumann’s main interests in founding this journal was to combat what he saw as the pernicious influence of the virtuoso pianist in the musical life of Germany. Like almost everybody else, the young Schumann had

¹⁹ Heinrich Heine, Sämtliche Werke (Leipzig, 1915) IX, 280.

²⁰ See Rainer Kleinertz, ed., and Susan Gillespie, trans., “Heinrich Heine on Liszt,” in Christopher H. Gibbs and Dana Gooley, eds., Franz Liszt and his World (Princeton: Princeton University Press (2006), p. 456.

been dazzled by Paganini, whom he heard in Frankfurt in 1830. But the ensuing flood of piano virtuosi he saw as a corrupting agent.

A favorite target of his was that staple of the virtuoso pianist's repertory, their "second-hand" compositions: i.e. fantasies and variations on popular operatic tunes. In 1836 he wrote:

"For surely in no genre of our art has more bungling mediocrity been perpetrated—and it is still going on. One could scarcely imagine such wretchedness springing up on every side, such vulgarity that no longer knows any shame. Before, at least, we had good, boring German themes. But now one has to swallow the most hackneyed Italian tunes in five or six successive states of watery decomposition [Zersetzung]. And the best are the ones that stop there. But just let them come from the provinces—the Stroh Müllers, Genserts, or whatever their names happen to be. Ten variations, with double reprises. And even that would be all right. But then the minore and the finale in 3/8 time—gad! One shouldn't waste one's breath over it."²¹

Like Heine, Schumann always offered a certain somewhat grudging support for both Liszt and Thalberg. But, again like Heine, he had no use for their lesser imitators; an example, once again, was the unfortunate Rudolph Wilmers. This is from the Neue Zeitschrift of 1843:

²¹ Neue Zeitschrift für Musik V (1836), 63.

“No one can deny Liszt’s genius for combining mechanical difficulties, for inventing really new instrumental effects, etc. Similarly, Thalberg has an undeniable salon-grace, and a sure ability to calculate effect so that he is bound to captivate and excite his listeners. To Herr Willmers’ compositions there adheres a special insipidity and Philistinism . . . influenced by the manner of Liszt and Thalberg, they feature the same difficulties, but with none of their charm.”²²

At the same time other writers in Schumann’s circle took up the cudgels against the virtuosi. In a series of articles in the Neue Zeitschrift in the early 1840s, Carl Gollmick, Eduard Krüger, and August Kahlert all deplored the pernicious influence of Paris—that great incubator for all aspiring virtuosi who spoke German—on the musical life of their homeland. They come home with French manners and morals, to amaze their gullible countrymen with superficial glitter.

But for the writers of the Neue Zeitschrift there was a deeper issue: a growing recognition of a gulf between art—with all the transcendental weight recently accorded it in German philosophy—and mere entertainment. Schumann once said there was no harm in music for simple amusement, except that it became confused with, and tended to crowd out, the genuine article.

²² Neue Zeitschrift für Musik XVIII (1843), 209.

For the most part, Liszt managed to evade the strictures of the virtuosi's German critics: one of the most grumpy of them, Ludwig Rellstab of Berlin, even joined the throng of Liszt's admirers. But in many quarters, by the early 1840s, the bloom was off the rose for the virtuosi: to be the finest of virtuosi, it seemed, was simply to be the best of a bad lot. In a review of 1839 Schumann explicitly regretted the course Liszt's career had taken to date:

"If Liszt, with his eminently musical nature, had devoted to himself and to composition the time he has given to his instrument and to other masters, he would be, I believe, a significant composer. We can only speculate as to what can be expected of him."²³

Liszt, who in Paris had mingled with leading literary and artistic figures of the day—Balzac, Hugo, Vigny, Heine, and Delacroix—always entertained artistic aspirations of a high order. Such an observation from his admired colleague must have given him pause. And the accumulated weight of disapproval from critics in the late 1830s and the 1840s, in Germany and elsewhere, must have helped shorten the careers of many of the virtuosi.

When they stopped being virtuosi, these people did various things. Many taught, as we have seen; some went into business—often, as in the case of Kalkbrenner and Herz, a business related to music—and some few, like Liszt

²³ Neue Zeitschrift für Musik XI (1839), 121-2.

and the previous occupant of his position at Weimar, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, devoted themselves to conducting and composition. And Hummel, for one, was able for a time to combine a settled job with touring as a performer.

There was one alternative available to the solo performer: to exchange the role of the virtuoso (playing music mainly of one's own composition tailored to emphasize one's own technical specialties) to that new role, as interpreter of the compositions of others. This change, of course, opens a vast new realm for the discerning musician. And it offers a welcome relief from those twin obstacles in the virtuoso career: the interpreter might for a sustained period interest a single audience in varied fare—obviating the need for incessant travel—and the interpreter was much less subject to the drumbeat of opprobrium from the critics.

In his career as a virtuoso Liszt made a gesture toward this transition by occasionally playing the music of Beethoven, compositions of his contemporaries such as Hummel and Chopin, and even the occasional Scarlatti sonata. Clara Schumann began her career playing standard virtuoso fare (for the most part composed by others, as she was both young and female). But that all changed after her marriage to Robert; now her programs were dominated by music of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Mendelssohn, and of course,

Schumann. The Schumann's friend, the violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, devoted his later years to performing chamber music, especially as leader of the Joachim Quartet, which for almost forty years presented a great variety of music each season to the same Berlin audiences.

The early nineteenth-century virtuoso was distinctively a creature of the early nineteenth century. As the times changed, some of them did as well. But most simply stopped.