

Franz Liszt

Symphonic Poem "Hamlet"

Completed: June 1858; performed: Sondershausen 2 July 1876; published: 1861, Leipzig; dedicated to: Princess Caroline Sayn-Wittgenstein.

Hamlet, tenth in Liszt's collection of twelve symphonic poems, was composed in Weimar. Liszt explored Shakespeare's works since the 1830s, when he had joined the Romantic cult of the poet, while staying in Paris. However, a direct impetus to compose the symphonic poem was his meeting in Weimar with an outstanding actor, Bogumil Dawison (*nota bene*, he was a Jew of Polish descent and a romantic wanderer just like Liszt). It is not certain, whether Liszt had seen him on stage playing the part of Hamlet. What we do know, though, is that they corresponded with each other and discussed the character in the letters. Most probably, Liszt witnessed Dawison's "private" recitations of some of the famous monologues.

The early Romantic vision of Hamlet, whose tone was given by Goethe in his novel *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, emphasised his wavering, weakness and melancholy. Dawison, on the other hand, later on followed by Liszt, created an entirely different character: full of bitterness, irony, raging and expressionistic. It is enough to have a look at the verbal expressions included in the score: *düster, stürmisch, schaurig, aufschreiend, heftig, ironisch, wild* (grimly, tempestuously, terribly, crying out, violently, ironically, wildly). Such a Hamlet matches Liszt's ideal of a "Romantic hero:" a solitary, tragic "overman" grappling with his fate, in whom extreme emotional currents meet.

Most of the commentators believe that, in accordance with Liszt's general aesthetic tendency, the poem focuses on the portrayal of the Danish prince's psychological features. Ethereal Ophelia appears only once (*wie ein Schattenbild* – "like a shadow"). However, there are also less known interpretations which also

convincingly link consecutive fragments of the symphonic poem with specific scenes of the tragedy. At the beginning, for instance, we hear a motto whose rhythm coincides with the prosody of the phrase *to be or not to be*. The introduction which follows brings the theme of wavering and melancholy. Further on, we hear mysterious sounds and chords (the clock strikes twelve at midnight and the father's ghost appears) which have our protagonist fly into a rage. From that moment on, we are dealing with a full-blooded Hamlet. The growing agitation prepares the main theme (in B minor), which is also based on the cadence of *to be or not to be*. Its transformations (inner conflict) soon lead to an explicitly affirmative figure. Subsequently, Ophelia-mimosa appears and Hamlet sends her ironically to stay at a nunnery. Music of strong emotions returns. The next two scenes depict Hamlet's meeting with his mother (described as *disperato*) and the stabbing of Polonius (thrusts of the blade in the form of the piercing chords). The introductory motif returns in the coda (the piece has its "autonomous" arch form), where it is transformed into a funeral march (*moderato funebre*). Naturally, it is to be interpreted as the protagonist's death. At the very end, only a fragment of the motto – *not to be* – returns.

Far-fetched? Still, Lina Ramman, one of the composer's first biographers, heard it herself, how Liszt would whisper the *not to be* towards the end of the performance of two-piano version of *Hamlet*. Thus, Liszt's *Hamlet* is a child of his times. Perhaps we are one as well, if we happen to believe that music has no need of the search for such interpretation clues...

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P.S. One can get familiar with the novel and at the same time source-based interpretation of *Hamlet*, reaching for Joanne Deere's excellent work entitled "Form and Programme in Liszt's *Hamlet*: A New Perspective." The work is available on the Internet.