

SALVE REGINA – DEVOTION AND REFINEMENT IN THE MUSIC OF FRANZ LISZT

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SUMMARY. Franz Liszt is one of the most diverse composers in music history. His faith and devotion to the church always played a central role in his life, as evidenced by his efforts to reform the church and its music. The large-scale, virtuoso works he composed in his youth stand in sharp contrast to his later works, which, with their clarity, reveal a mature personality and a rich, eventful life. The aim of my study is to analyze one of Liszt's most extraordinary late works, the choral piece titled *Salve Regina*, in light of the composer's relationship with religion and his sacred compositions, presenting his late style as well.

Keywords: Liszt, *Salve Regina*, sacred music, late style

Introduction

Franz Liszt, the celebrated pianist, composer of virtuoso études, was one of the outstanding creators of symphonic poems and program-music in general. At the same time, the refined style and simplicity of his late compositions shed light on his creative personality from a completely different perspective. It is perhaps no coincidence that in the later period of his life he turned increasingly to church music. His strong faith and his desire to play a role in reforming church music played a major part in this.

The composer had always been interested in the church and had been a devout believer since childhood. His father contributed significantly to this, while also steering him decisively toward a career in music. Although he took up the cassock in the last stage of his life, he never gave up composing.

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In addition to his monumental masses, oratorios and organ works, Liszt also composed numerous significant choral pieces, mostly with accompaniment. His late a cappella work, *Salve Regina* may seem unusual, captivating the listener with its simplicity and unique sound world. The composition bears some of Liszt's important late stylistic features, which will be discussed later.

The purpose of this study is to examine the choral work *Salve Regina* through the lens of Franz Liszt's religious faith, sacred musical output and his late musical style.

Franz Liszt and Spirituality

"From the outset, he was a deeply religious, mystical child."² His father, Ádám Liszt, entered a monastery as a Franciscan novice in 1794, and although he ultimately chose a career in music for his son, he raised him in a deeply religious environment.

Despite their sudden success and fame, Liszt and his father did not turn away from religion in Paris, but lacking contemporaries, Liszt suffered from loneliness, which he tried to compensate for by reading. However, his immersion in ecclesiastical literature led to a serious "religious mania." The young Liszt often longed to become a priest, but his father did not want the young talent to follow the same path he had once taken.

He was most influenced by the writings of Lamennais, the rebellious French theologian, who eventually became his mentor. Under his influence, Liszt composed numerous sacred works and began writing polemical treatises as a form of reform activity.³

The young talent was shaken by the death of his father, and then severely affected by his banishment from Caroline de Saint-Cricq, which led to him becoming obsessed with religion. He spent most of his time in church, visiting the confessional every day.

Several clergymen influenced his life, and he joined various religious movements, but strangely enough, his faith was renewed in Weimar, a Protestant city. After 1847, he returned to orthodox Catholicism with the support of his partner, Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein.

Later in his life he finally decided to take up minor ecclesiastical orders. He gave up piano concert performances but did not stop composing.

² Walker, Alan. *Franz Liszt: The virtuoso years, 1811-1847*. Cornell University Press, 1987, p.97.

³ *On the Future of Church Music* (1834) and *On the Position of Artists and Their Place in Society* (1835)

In addition, he played a role in the Cecilian reform movement, which sought to renew and restore church music, when he came into contact with them in May 1869. Although the composer had numerous church works to his credit, the conservative movement did not want them, arguing that it could not identify with Liszt's style.

Liszt and Sacred Music

Liszt's corpus of sacred works is very rich, including masses, oratorios, smaller choral works, and organ pieces.

His early sacred works, the cycle *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (*Poetic and Religious Harmonies*) and *Psalm 129 (De profundis)*, were followed by numerous smaller choral works—twenty-nine in total—and larger-scale compositions: oratorios, legends, and masses, as well as psalm arrangements. He had already begun writing some of these in Weimar and took them with him to Rome, such as the *Ave Maria* and *Pater Noster* prayers.

The period between 1860 and 1886 can also be considered productive, as it was during this time that such pivotal works as the *Missa choralis*, the *Ungarische Krönungsmesse* and a *Requiem*, a composition based on three psalm texts, as well as *Via crucis*, *Septem sacramenta* and *Rosario*, choral pieces based on biblical texts, and *Responsorien und Antiphonen*, a homophonic composition for male choir based on Gregorian melodies. His works inspired by the figures of St. Paul and St. Francis of Assisi also date from this period.

In 1879, Liszt turned to Saint Cecilia once again, resulting in his next works: *Cantantibus organis* and *Antiphone zum Feste der hl. Cäcilie*. Finally, we also know of an unpublished work for female choir, accompanied by piano and harmonium, with optional harp, entitled *The Legend of St. Christopher*. Liszt composed twenty-nine minor church works between 1860 and 1886. Some were written for specific occasions or events. A significant portion of this collection consists of choral works setting texts from prayers to music, but there are also arrangements of Marian antiphons, Christmas motets, responsories, and hymns.

Despite his work and efforts in church music, Franz Liszt's music was not well received in Cecilian circles. Thus, only the *Ave Maria* and the *Pater Noster* survived "censorship," appearing as Liszt's first church choral works in the cycle *Poetic and Religious Harmonies*. Liszt's church music was also greatly influenced by the Cappella Sistina, thanks to which a cappella works occupy a significant place in the composer's church music, although they are accompanied, in most cases by the organ, *ad libitum*. Nevertheless, his style differed from that of the Italian masters, in contrast to whom Liszt boldly used

strong harmonic changes and unison passages, and the expressive use of intervals is also a characteristic feature of his works.

Liszt's Late Musical Style

The composer's style is generally characterized by experimentation with form and the use of theme transformation, which stems from the fact that Liszt's music is mostly monothematic.

The most characteristic element of his late style is his play with tonality and his endeavor to extend, even stretch, its boundaries. The tools he used to achieve this were unusual scales, chords built from fourths and sevenths, chains of functional tones, chromaticism, and various intervals. The shift towards atonal music was influenced, among other things, by a lecture given by Belgian musicologist François Joseph Fétis about the idea of *ordre omnitonique* (a chromatic modulation system that loosens the foundations of tonality). As a result, to illustrate the essence of the theory, Liszt wrote his *Prélude omnitonique*, the manuscript of which has unfortunately been lost. This would then have been followed by a modern study of harmony, which was also never published.

Liszt often broke out of the confines of tonality by using a series of functional chords, a technique that actually characterizes Debussy's works, in such a way that the internal structure of the chord remains constant, only the pitch changes. This is illustrated by the following excerpt from the piano piece *Unstern*:

E.g. 1



Franz Liszt, *Unstern*, bars 63-67

Until 1870, his harmonic approach was similar to that of Chopin and Schubert in their later styles, and the influence of Italian opera *cantilena* can also be detected. Over the years, there was a growing tendency towards the

use of chromatic harmonies, with frequent use of augmented and diminished chords, especially the tritone, which appears strikingly in the first bars of the composition quoted above.

E.g. 2



Franz Liszt, *Unstern*, bars 1-7

Another characteristic technique of the composer is the use of unusual scales, such as the whole-tone scale, on which the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* series is also based:

E.g. 3



Franz Liszt, *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses: Funérailles*, bars 7-8

The grand *Mephisto Waltz* clearly illustrates the composer's bold and unique chord-building techniques, one of Liszt's distinctive means of expression, whereby he derives chords from a single interval, in this case the fourth:

E.g. 4



Franz Liszt, *Mephisto Waltz no. 3*, bars 1-10

In addition to all this, one of the most distinctive and - in light of the composer's musical background - most surprising features of Liszt's late style is his economical use of musical elements.

His works often fall into monody, then into deep silence, as if they were disappearing into nothingness, leaving the end of the composition open, such as in the *Mephisto Polka*:

E.g. 5



Franz Liszt, *Mephisto Polka*, bars 217-223

However, the primary aim of his piano music was not to push the boundaries of tonality, but rather to exploit the full capacity of the instrument to the performer's advantage, achieving various effects, such as an orchestral effect in his transcription of the *Tannhäuser* overture, or in the *Mazeppa* étude, which gives the impression of being a three-handed piano piece.

His late style did not, of course, extend solely to his instrumental music. The elements listed above can also be found in Liszt's vocal works and compositions specifically intended for choir, a significant proportion of which are a cappella, with alternative organ or orchestral accompaniment.

Salve Regina

One of the most unique pieces in his collection of twenty-nine minor church choral works is *Salve Regina*, as it is one of the few choral works that does not have instrumental accompaniment.

Although we find dynamic markings in the work, its title and Gregorian-style melody structure require a restrained volume and slow tempo even without them. The dynamic range thus extends from pianissimo to mezzo piano, with minor increases and tempo changes reflecting the intimacy of prayer.

In his treatise entitled *The Future of Church Music*, the composer placed great emphasis on a return to Gregorian roots and sought to put his principles into practice. During this period, a common practice in church music composition – as seen in the Cecilian movement and the practices of the *Cappella Sistina* – was the harmonization of Gregorian melodies. We can observe the application of this method in his organ piece, also titled *Salve Regina*:

E.g. 6



Franz Liszt, *Salve Regina*, bars 1-9

Unlike the instrumental version, the choral work does not contain any Gregorian melodies, which is unusual. In the case of the organ work, in the absence of any actual text, the use of melodies seems more justified, as the vocal composition already evokes the antiphon through its text.

It is quite unusual in the musical setting of this text that the composer uses only the first line of the antiphon: the address. He repeats this in various ways throughout the work in an extremely personal and intimate tone. According to Dolores Pesce, the frequent Marian theme in Liszt's late works is a sign of the composer's deepening devotion to the Virgin Mary.⁴

The work is therefore not a narrative piece. Instead of the programmatic nature often found in his oeuvre, it conveys a mood, which is why the melodies used radiate the intimate, simple, ethereal atmosphere characteristic of Gregorian chant.

⁴ Pesce, Dolores, *Liszt's Final Decade*. University of Rochester Press, 2014.

Liszt associates the short text passage with four different melodies, which return with minor modifications and repetitions along with the text. While most of the melodies convey the same lyrical mood as the accompaniment, the musical unit corresponding to the word "misericordiae" forms a significant contrast in terms of harmony and texture. This is what gives the work its internal tension.

With few exceptions, the parts mostly move in steps, with frequent melismas. We can discover the same Gregorian roots in the small-range parts from which Palestrina's music also grew. At the same time, the texture of the work is fundamentally different from Palestrina's imitative polyphony. The soprano can be considered the leading voice, but the other parts also retain their relative independence.

The work has its own unique breathing. Thus, similar to Palestrina, the musical process takes place in musical arcs larger than the beat. At the same time, Liszt divides the text passages with caesuras in places. This is particularly true of the musical setting of the word *misericordiae*, which always begins with a pause falling on a heavy beat.

E.g. 7

ma - - - - - ter mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae, mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae,
ma - - - - - ter mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae, mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae,
ma - - - - - ter mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae, mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae,
ma - - - - - ter mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae, mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae,

Franz Liszt, *Salve Regina*, bars 7-12

At the parts with the word *misericordiae*, Liszt creates a tense, sighing motif from alternating notes separated by a minor second. At the end, as the harmony clears, this melodic turn dissolves into a diatonic arc in the soprano, as we see in the musical example, bars 38-41:

E.g. 8

cor di ae, mi se ri cor di ae, *pp* mi se ri cor di ae, mi se ri cor di ae,
 cor di ae, mi se ri cor di ae, *pp* mi se ri cor di ae, mi se ri cor di ae,
 cor di ae, mi se ri cor di ae, *pp* mi se ri cor di ae, mi se ri cor di ae,
 cor di ae, mi se ri cor di ae, *pp* mi se ri cor di ae, mi se ri cor di ae.

Franz Liszt, *Salve Regina*, bars 35-41

In addition to diatonicism, Liszt also uses chromaticism for melodic and harmonic purposes, to create tension or color. In measure 15, the tenor part's melodic figure features an F sharp passing note in a dominant seventh chord, which lends a distinctive color to the chord.

E.g. 9

Franz Liszt, Salve Regina, bar 15

Finally, in the last bars, the soprano melody opens and, rising step by step, reaches the highest note in the work, a D5. Then it truly settles down and the piece clears up. This can be seen as a kind of culminating point.

The key of the composition is F major, but there are relatively few cadences reinforcing the key throughout the piece. While listening to the work, we can rightly sense its modal character due to the plagal cadences. For example, we encounter several passages ending on the submediant. At the same time, before the last chord, we do not encounter dominant harmony, we go from the mediant to the tonic.

43

diminuendo - - - - - pp

ter mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae.

diminuendo - - - - - pp

ter mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae.

diminuendo - - - - - pp

ter mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae.

diminuendo - - - - - pp

ter mi - se - ri - cor - di - ae.

Franz Liszt, *Salve Regina*, bars 46-49

The most characteristic detail of the composition is the harmonies accompanying the text *misericaordiae* beginning in the 9th bar. The composer uses extremely simple means to create an intensely dramatic atmosphere. He contrasts the bass and soprano parts with mirror-image minor seconds, “compressing” the harmonic structure and then stretching it apart in the repetition. Both chords are altered: the first is a subdominant minor chord in second inversion, and the second is a dominant seventh chord in third inversion with a diminished fifth (see e.g. 7).

In the 20th bar, we encounter another surprising harmonic progression, namely in the musical setting of the text *misericaordiae*: while the bass moves around the subtonic of D minor, the three upper voices move to a high chord (F major), and for a moment the C sharp in the bass sounds together with the C in the tenor. The extraordinary tension of this musical unit is resolved with a single sigh-like note.

E.g. 11

un poco ritenuto

19

-se - ri - cor - - di - ae,

-se - ri - cor - - di - ae,

-se - ri - cor - - di - ae,

-se - ri - cor - - di - ae,

Franz Liszt, *Salve Regina*, bars 19-21

In the 22nd bar, when the opening material returns, we encounter several minor modifications: the F sharp in the soprano is the raised third in D minor prepared in the previous measure (with a coloring and expressive effect), which changes back to a minor third after an upper passing note (inverted chromaticism) in the melody; for harmonic reasons, in the tenor part the note does not appear as B flat in the next bar, but functions as a seventh. Finally, the descending chromaticism of the bass further colors the sound.

E.g. 12

un poco ritenuto *A tempo*

19

-se - ri - cor - - di - ae, sal - - - ve Re - gi - - -

-se - ri - cor - - di - ae, sal - - - ve Re - gi - - -

-se - ri - cor - - di - ae, sal - - - ve Re - gi - - -

-se - ri - cor - - di - ae, sal - - - ve Re - gi - - -

Franz Liszt, *Salve Regina*, bars 19-23

We could even perceive that the composer prepared a D minor resolution in the previous measure, but instead, similar to the opening material, it surprisingly sounds in a major key. This is essentially a D minor resolution with a raised third, which is supported by the fact that the rest of the phrase resolves the third and closes in D minor.

This section is repeated, but this time with a dynamic marking of *pianissimo*, which acts as an intensification in the opposite direction. This lends the work a particularly loving tone, expressing sincere admiration for the Virgin Mary. The musical material is repeated in the following bars.

When the *misericordiae* part returns, the composer repeats the text over eight bars, so four times, but the melodies and harmonies are modified: he uses "multiple exit routes" for the same musical phenomenon.

From the 42nd bar, the relatively long-sounding conclusion of the work begins, in which there is an intensification compared to what we heard before. The soprano melody opens up and reaches the highest note of the work, then calms down over several long bars, while harmonically we move from a subdominant sound to F major with the help of basic seventh chords and plagal chord progressions.

From the perspective of musical form, the work is divided into two large sections, each with a closing section. The musical form is divided according to the text. Liszt strings together four musical themes, which are repeated with some expansion in the second section. The division is particularly interesting. The four materials show an arched structure in succession: A (4 bars), B (2+2 bars), C (2+2 bars), D (4 bars).

Since *Salve Regina* is a vocal piece, it raises questions of intonation: the ethereal beauty and harmonic tensions of the work are fully realized when the chords are executed with pure intonation.

The most intense passages of the work consistently coincide with the text *misericordiae*. For the dramatic effect to be fully realized, the bass voice must intonate the G-flat with a raised pitch, while the soprano must sustain the E with a lowered intonation (see e.g. 7).

From the perspective of vocal production, however, it is the measures 19–21 that demand the most attention. The bass voice is tasked with sustaining the C-sharp at a lowered pitch, despite the upward pull exerted on the harmony by all the remaining voices (see e.g. 11).

The primary consideration in the subsequent section — the varied recapitulation — is that the soprano arrives on a lowered F-sharp, to which the bass later responds by producing a raised B-flat following a lowered B-natural.

Following the recapitulations, additional tension emerges in the closing section, specifically on the third and fourth beats of measure 46, the

realization of which requires the soprano to sustain a raised B-flat. The sustained A in the subsequent measure, however, presents an intriguing challenge. The A must be lowered at the end of measure 47, yet despite the note being held for two further measures, its intonation does not necessarily remain constant. Although the deviation amounts to barely a single cent, it nonetheless illuminates the task of adjusting pitches relative to one another, as well as their inherent flexibility (see e.g. 10).

Conclusion

Franz Liszt is perhaps one of the most controversial figures in music history. When studying his biography, we encounter numerous episodes that justify his attachment to the church.

He always considered the church to be his calling, but he was only able to fulfill this desire in his old age. Of course, he did not give up composing, and, in fact he composed such significant ecclesiastical works as *Christus Oratorio* and *Missa Solemnis*. His late style equally pervades his sacred musical output.

Although his late music still bears traces of romantic traditions, it has a new tone; he produced a considerable number of works that verge on atonality. His church music is particularly restrained and refined. This can be seen in his short-mixed choir composition *Salve Regina*, which uses melodies reminiscent of Gregorian chants with a small melodic range and, unusually for the composer, no accompanying music.

Intimacy is also expressed in dynamics. Even without the composer's instructions, the message and the music demand restraint. However, this does not detract from the energy and intensity of the piece, as the colored harmonies, especially in the setting of the part with the text *miserericordiae*, create tension. This is how the contrasting nature of the work is expressed. The chord progressions lend a modal character to the composition, which may also be a reference to Palestrina's traditions.

Salve Regina is a unique and brilliant work in every aspect. However, the performance plays a central role in bringing this to fruition. This raises various questions of intonation, above all the importance of clear, acoustic principles of voice production.

In conclusion, *Salve Regina* occupies a unique place among Franz Liszt's sacred works in every aspect. We can discover in it the fundamental characteristics of his late style, which made the prayer set to music even more intimate. Through the composition, the composer's life is also seen in a different light. We see the composer with his difficult life behind the celebrated piano virtuoso, and beyond that, his musical confession of his faith.

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