

TRANSCRIPTION, PARAPHRASE, CREED IN FRANZ LISZT'S VARIATIONS ON „WEINEN, KLAGEN, SORGEN, ZAGEN”

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SUMMARY. Franz Liszt created a new tradition by playing transcriptions and paraphrasing the most well-known operas and works of his time on his fabulous concerts. This habit created new genres like Transcriptions (Reminiscences de Norma S. 394, Grandes études de Paganini S. 141) and Paraphrases (The Rigoletto Paraphrase S.434, The Ernani Paraphrase S. 432). The Variations on „Weinen Klagen Sorgen Zagen” fits into both categories: On the one hand Liszt paraphrases J.S.Bach's Crucifixus and the 12th Cantata. On the other hand, he transcribes with a great craftsmanship his piano work for organ. The historical and private background of this work testifies to an extraordinary faith.

Keywords: Liszt, Bach, Transcription, Paraphrase, Creed.

Short biographical overview

Franz Liszt was born on October 22, 1811, in a village called Doborján, as the first and only child of Ádám Liszt (cattle-keeper of the Eszterházy estate) and Maria Anna Lager (daughter of a baker from Krems). His musical talent was evident at an early age, therefore in 1922 the family moves to Vienna to let little Franz learn piano from Carl Czerny, music theory and counterpoint from Antonio Salieri. In 1823 the family moves to Paris, so that Franz could study at the famous *Conservatoire de Paris*. Unfortunately, he is rejected by the then director, Luigi Cherubini, on the pretext that foreigners are not allowed to enter. In 1835 he meets Marie d'Agoult, his first love, the wife of Count Charles d'Agoult. The lovers flee to Geneva, where

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Liszt becomes professor at the newly founded Conservatoire. Their first child, Blandine was born in December 1835, after that Cosima in December 1837 and Daniel in May 1839. During his concert tour in Kiev, he meets his next love, another married woman of noble birth, Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein. From 1848 to 1861, he dedicated his art to the court of Weimar, serving as director and conductor, making Weimar one of Europe's leading musical centers. In 1861 he moves to Rome with the intention of devoting his life to the Church. Many of his religious works were composed there: Andante religioso for organ, The Legend of Saint Elizabeth, Christus Oratorio, Hungarian Coronation Mass in honor of the coronation of Emperor Franz Joseph I, Two legends for piano (St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the birds, St. Francis of Paola walking on the Water), Weinen Klagen variations for piano and organ. The last years between 1870-1886 represents the defining triangle of his last creation period in Weimar, Budapest, and Rome.²

Variations on „Weinen, klagen, sorgen, zagen” for piano, S. 180

The so-called Variations on „Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” is preceded by a Prelude on „Weinen Klagen Sorgen Zagen”, composed in 1859. The piano work we know today was composed in 1862, its organ version appears one year later (1863). The original title mentions two works of Johann Sebastian Bach: *Variationen über ein Motiv (basso ostinato) aus der Kantate „Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen”, und dem „Crucifixus”, der h-Moll Messe von Johann Sebastian Bach.*³

The title „Weeping, Crying, Sorrow, Sighing” suggests a deep sorrow. As the famous Czech-born pianist, Alfred Brendel quotes Liszt: “The exuberance of heart gave way to bitterness of heart” – bitterness resulting from the death of two of his children, bitterness at having been unable to marry the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein, bitterness at the disappointment in his friendships with Wagner and Hans von Bülow, and the lack of appreciation of his works.”⁴

Klára Hamburger describes this work highlighting the greatest virtues of the composer: “Even if this work is more compact and organic than most of Liszt's piano works, the brilliant harmonic and instrumental imagination opens up new paths. As a result of the genre, its material is extraordinary

² Michels, Ulrich. *Music-Atlas*. Ed. Athenaeum, Budapest, 2000.

³ Liszt, Franz. *Variationen über ein Motiv (basso ostinato) aus der Kantate „Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen”, und dem „Crucifixus”, der h-Moll Messe von J. S. Bach*. In *Neue Liszt-Ausgabe*, Serie 2, Band 12, Editio Musica, Budapest, 1993.

⁴ Brendel, Alfred. *Alfred Brendel on music: collected essays*. Ed. Robson books, London, 2001.

and exceptionally homogeneous. This work ignores any sweetness or showcase. It is neither too short nor too long. It is a genuine, highly effective, Liszt-centered, technically demanding concerto work with a sincere, deep feeling and pain.”⁵

The work starts with a short introduction/prelude. This is followed by the theme, the nine variations and the coda. This short conclusion follows the original concept: after all of the pain and sorrow comes the comforting by Bach’s famous Choral “Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan”. Liszt didn’t delimitate the variations by numbering them, but he marks the end of each with double bar lines.

The structure of the work recalls the classical cyclic form. The reminiscence of this grand form shows up by the VII-VIII variations, which represents the slow, recitativo movement. (E.g. 1)

E.g. 1



Fr. Liszt, Variations on “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” S. 180, bars 217-224

The main theme constituted by the four-beat long Bach-ostinato, is constantly present throughout the work. This chromatic, descending motif is an excellent material to express weeping and sighing, but it is also suitable for Liszt’s compositional practice of the twelve-tone technique. (E.g. 2)

E.g. 2



Fr. Liszt, Variations on “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” S. 180, bars 18-21

⁵ Hamburger, Klára. *Liszt*. Ed. Gondolat, Budapest, 1980.

Liszt freely modifies the meter of the variations; however, this aspect doesn't fit the baroque compositional tradition (in variations I-II 3/4, in III-VII 4/4, in VIII 6/4, in IX 3/4; in the coda again 4/4).

The structure is built up by sequences and counterpoint, which represents the reminiscence of the baroque forms like the passacaglia or chaconne.

Variations on „weinen, klagen, sorgen, zagen” for Organ, S. 673

The two sets of variations are very similar to each other, however there are minor differences, caused by the characteristics of the two instruments. The percussion effects and the grandiose arpeggios of the piano version serve to sustain the melody and the dynamics. The organ version omits these tools because they are impossible and unnecessary on this instrument. The dynamics of the piano version serve the major construction. The organ version is built up by articulation and space.

These differences are born by the differences between the two instruments, and the genius of Liszt transforms the limits of the instruments into something organic and brilliant. First, he obliterates all the ornamentation and decorative elements of the piano version. While in the piano version are plenty of bravura elements, in the organ version he strives for simplicity since these cadenzas would blend together because of the acoustics. (E.g. 3)

E.g. 3

The image shows a musical score for Liszt's Variations on "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen" for piano, specifically bars 14-17. The score is written for two staves (treble and bass clef). It features complex rhythmic patterns, including trills and arpeggios. Dynamic markings include "rinforz.", "trinu", "ritenuto", and "dim.". There are also some performance instructions like "tra" and "6" at the bottom of the staves.

Fr. Liszt, Variations on “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” S. 180, bars 14-17

The image shows a musical score for Liszt's Variations on "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen" for organ, specifically bars 10-15. The score is written for three staves (treble, middle, and bass clef). It features a melodic line in the upper staves and a bass line. The score includes the text "do - - -", "ritenuto", and Roman numerals "II" and "III". There is also a small note "Ul Gemahon Pléamour e" in the upper right corner.

Fr. Liszt, Variations on “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” S. 673, bars 10-15

In the first two variations of the piano work, the trills serve to sustain the melody. In the organ version there is no need for such a technic since the sustained note does not fade away. (E.g. 4)

E.g. 4



Fr. Liszt, S. 180, bars 49-50



Fr. Liszt, S. 673, bars 45-46

While in the piano work, the repeated notes emphasize a melody, in the organ transcription the notes are played with their value to create a hierarchy (repeated notes, crying motive before recitativo).

The greatness of Liszt is shown by the fact that, although the piano work is the original, the organ transcription contains a nevertheless excellent solution which develops in the organ work: the best example could be the extended recitativo, which, thanks to the organ's characteristics, can be expressed in more extensive melodic lines. He thus plays with time, using *fermatas* to create greater freedom and tension. The organ version works with greater dynamic contrast as well, making up for the lack of bravura components.

Johann Sebastian Bach: Cantata “Weinen, klagen, sorgen, zagen” BWV 12

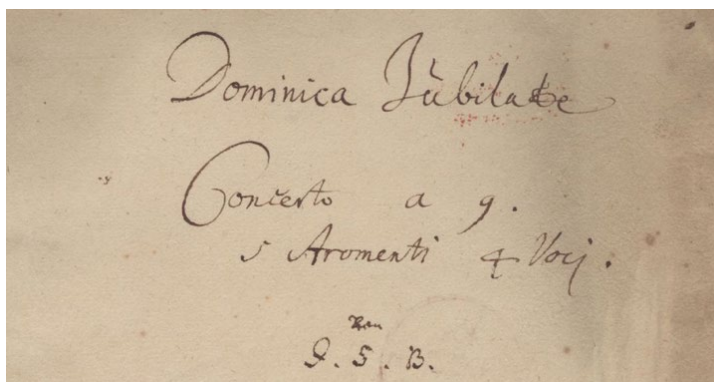
Bach composed his 12th Cantata during his career in Weimar (1714). Weimar represents a great connection between Bach and Liszt: both served several years at the famous ducal court. Liszt composed the two sets of Variations on Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen (first the piano version, one year later the organ transcription) during his stay in Weimar.

The inscription ‘Dominica Jubilate’ (Figure 1) on the cover of the manuscript refers to the third Sunday after Easter. *Dominica Jubilate*, or *Sunday of joy*; nevertheless, begs the question: how is it possible that Bach titled his cantata ‘Weeping, Crying, Sorrow, Sighing’?

The answer can be found in the Gospel of John, Chapter 16: 16-23, the designated biblical read of this special Sunday:

„Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me’? Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”⁶

Figure 1



First page of Johann Sebastian Bach's Cantata BWV 12

Bach had to compose a whole cantata each month, which was performed by the court orchestra in the church of the castle. The Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen Cantata was the second in this series of cantatas, based on the text written by the court poet Salomon Franck. (Table 1)

The whole unit has an interesting tonal palette – after almost each movement take place an ascendant tonal shift. John Eliot Gardiner, one of the most important baroque conductors of our time compares the upward curve of the tonalities of the movements to a ladder. This ascendant direction symbolizes the reward after suffering, the joy that follows sorrow, to which the Gospel of John refers.⁷

⁶ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+16&version=CSB> (11.09.2023)

⁷ Gardiner, John Eliot. *Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) / Cantatas Nos 12, 103, 108, 117, 146 & 166*. Ed. Hyperion Records, London, 2019.

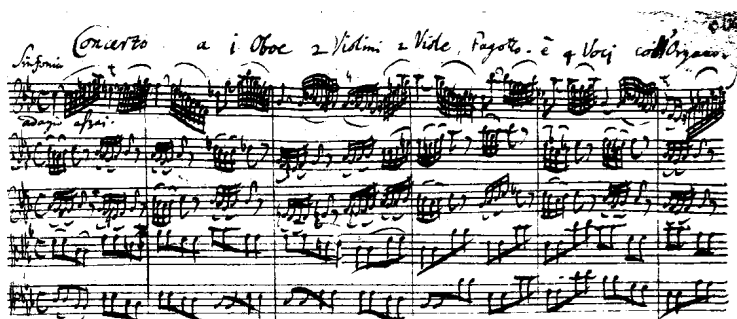
Table 1

	Title	Genre	Lyrics	Orchestra	Key	Meter
1	-	Sinfonia	-	oboe, strings, continuo	F minor	C
2	Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen Die das Zeichen Jesu tragen	Chorus	Salomon Franck	SATB bassoon, strings, continuo	F minor	3/2
3	Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal	Recitative	Bible	ALTO strings, continuo	C minor	C
4	Kreuz und Kronen sind verbunden	Aria	Salomon Franck	ALTO oboe, continuo	C minor	C
5	Ich folge Christo nach	Aria	Salomon Franck	BASS violin, continuo	E flat major	C
6	Sei getreu, alle Pein	Aria	Salomon Franck	TENOR trumpet, continuo	G minor	3/4
7	Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan	Chorale	Samuel Rodigast	SATB oboe/trumpet continuo	B flat major	C

Johann Sebastian Bach: Cantata “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” BWV 12

1. The opening movement called Sinfonia is also nicknamed “Concerto” by Bach himself (Concerto for oboe, 2 violins, 2 violas, 2 bassoons, mixed choir for 4 voices with organ continuo (E.g. 5)). It’s structure and orchestration lead the audience to recognize a slow, adagio movement of an oboe concerto.

E.g. 5



J.S. Bach: Cantata “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” BWV 12, bars 1-6

2. This chorus-movement entitled “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” is in a ternary da-capo form. This part is built up on ostinato bass – so called *passus duriusculus* (a chromatically descendent fourth, which represents pain and sorrow in the Baroque era). The choir enters in turn while the chromatic ostinato appears twelve times during the movement (number of twelve suggest the imagine of the twelve apostles). Regarding to John Eliot Gardiner, this movement is a “tombeau - one of the most impressive and deeply affecting cantata movements Bach can have composed to that point”.⁸

3. The only recitativo movement of the cantata summarizes the message of the whole work in only one biblical verse: “It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships in order to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).⁹

4. This movement is the first aria of the next three. “Cross and crown are bound together” sings the soloist. This ternary da capo form operates with the vocal solo counterpointed by the oboe, illustrating the intertwining power of either the cross or the crown.

5. The major key together with the ascendant line of the melody represents light in the darkness. The opening motif of the aria foreshadows the melody of the final movement. The instruments enter one after the other: first the violins, after that the continuo and finally the vocal soloist, thus illustrating the title: ‘I follow Christ’.

6 “Be faithful, all sorrows will soon be relieved”, says the text of the third aria. The vocal part is counterpointed by a cantus firmus overtaken from the famous choral “Jesu, meine Freude”, played by the trumpet.

7. As an irrefutable conclusion, comes the final movement - “Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan”. The lyrics were written by the German pietist poet, Samuel Rodigast. The melody belongs to Rodigast’s former schoolmate and friend, the protestant cantor, Severus Gastorius.

Paraphrase – elements that Liszt takes over from Bach

Even if the organ version is a demanding transcription of the piano work, which keeps the main construction, adapting itself to the characteristics of the instrument, the piano work does not recall the complete Bach cantata,

⁸ Gardiner, John Eliot. *Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) / Cantatas Nos 12, 103, 108, 117, 146 & 166*. Ed. Hyperion Records, London, 2019.

⁹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2014&version=NCB> (11.09.2023)

neither in structure nor in mood. The piano work is a classical cyclical form: after a short introduction comes the nine variations and a coda: the choral part overtaken from the Cantata of Bach. The cantata is less homogeneous, contains several movements with different genres and varying instrumentation.

Liszt adopts the full title of the cantata: *Variationen über ein Motiv (basso ostinato) aus der Kantate "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen", und dem "Crucifixus", der h-Moll Messe von Johann Sebastian Bach*.¹⁰

The Crucifixus movement takes part as the fifth element of the Credo from the monumental B minor mass. In our case it becomes a 'citation in citation' cause the B minor mass appears 35 years later than the 12th Cantata, using its entrie structure and musical text. (E.g. 6)

E.g. 6

Lente

The image shows a musical score for the first system of Liszt's 'Variationen über ein Motiv'. The score is in G minor (three flats) and 2/4 time. It features a 'Lento' tempo. The instruments listed on the left are Violino I, Violino II, Viola I, Viola II, Fagotto, Soprano, Alto, Tenore, Basso, and Continuo/Organo. The vocal parts have lyrics: Soprano: 'Wei - nen,'; Alto: 'Kla - gen,'; Tenore: 'Sor - gen,'; Basso: 'Za -'. The Continuo/Organo part is marked 'Cont.' and provides a basso ostinato accompaniment.

J.S. Bach: Cantata "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen" BWV 12, bars 17-18

¹⁰ Franz, Liszt. *Variationen über ein Motiv (basso ostinato) aus der Kantate "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen", und dem "Crucifixus", der h-Moll Messe von J. S. Bach*. In *Neue Liszt-Ausgabe*, Serie 2, Band 12, Editio Musica, Budapest, 1993.

Both work contains a recitativo part. By Bach the soloist is accompanied by instruments, by Liszt the solo part is counterpointed by the chorus with chromatic cadences (as an imitation of crying).

Liszt adopts in full the 7th movement of the Cantata and publishes the text in his manuscript as well. (E.g. 8)

E.g. 8

Choral.
Lento.
 Was Gott tut, das ist wohl - ge - tan, da - bei will ich ver - blei - ben. Es

Fr. Liszt, Variations on “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” S. 180, bars 321-324

It is a unique moment when the composer offers text to his instrumental work, to highlight the musical message for both the listener and the performer. While Bach takes a long way from the opening F minor to the closing B flat major, Liszt uses the parallel major (F major) of the original key.

Creed

The Weinen Klagen Variations were written to commemorate Liszt’s first-born daughter, Blandine, who died at age 27, during childbirth. Two years earlier Liszt had already lost his son, Daniel, whom he commemorates and mourns with the First Funeral Ode.

It is an unbearable pain, an abnormal life situation to lose a child. Life is not constructed like this: in a normal way, older people die first, their life goes on with children, grandchildren.

I believe that an artist is defined through his art and performance, reflecting his characteristics and personality. This fact results that each performance is unique, filtering art through own memories, life experiences.

Saying ‘What God does, that is well done’ in such a hard moment of life shows a very deep faith. This limitless, deep Creed makes the Weinen Klagen Variations one of the most powerful and valuable piano work of Franz Liszt, cause at the end of the day we all should bow our heads saying: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke, 22:42)¹¹

¹¹<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+22%3A42&version=NCB>
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