

## Foreword

by Eric Wen

In 1831, the twenty-year-old Franz Liszt was bowled over upon hearing Niccolò Paganini perform in Paris. This encounter inspired the Hungarian pianist to attempt the same effects on the piano that Paganini produced on the violin. Following Liszt's lead, other pianists, such as Sigismond Thalberg and Alexander Dreyschock, did the same, and by the middle of the nineteenth century, piano technique was raised to new heights. Ironically, because no other violinist has ever managed to go beyond what Paganini achieved, Paganini actually had a greater influence on the subsequent development of piano technique than that of the violin.

One of the compositional genres that flourished out of this virtuoso tradition was the transcription. Not surprisingly, Liszt's earliest transcriptions were of some of the Paganini caprices, and his arrangements of organ works by Bach and *Lieder* by Schubert and Schumann are still heard in the concert hall today. Liszt also made solo-piano transcriptions of all nine of Beethoven symphonies, Weber overtures, Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. And from the world of opera, he drew from the works of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Meyerbeer and Gounod, as well as the two giants of the late-nineteenth century, Verdi and Wagner.

Sadly, Liszt's transcriptions have often unjustly been denigrated as empty displays of virtuosity. Liszt's arrangements were not only highly imaginative translations of different mediums on the piano, but also helped disseminate the works to a wide audience before the existence of the medium of recording. Through his transcriptions, Liszt promoted works by his contemporaries Robert Franz, Joachim Raff and Peter Cornelius, and also revived lesser-known choral works by Orlando di Lasso and Gregorio Allegri, as well as movements from Mozart's unfinished *Requiem*.

Although the piano, with its ability to articulate many parts, would seem to be the most versatile medium for transcriptions, the solo violin has also been capable of a variety of imaginative arrangements in the hands of virtuoso violinists. Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst transcribed Schubert's eerie *Erkönig*, and Léon de Saint-Lubin made a paraphrase of the sextet from Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* for solo violin. But these are short pieces lasting under five minutes. Noam Sivan's transcription of Liszt's monumental Piano Sonata in B Minor offered here is gargantuan by comparison.

It is not only the scope of the original work that makes Sivan's transcription so significant, but the material itself. Liszt's Sonata in B Minor, composed in 1853 after the pianist had retired from the concert stage, is arguably his greatest single work. Unlike the piano sonatas by his contemporaries Mendelssohn, Schumann and Chopin that keep within the formal boundaries of classical sonata form, Liszt created a new kind of sonata. His B-Minor Sonata binds together widely different sections through the recasting of the same thematic material in different forms. In fact, this structural treatment of thematic transformation became the stimulus for Wagner's development of the leitmotif in his operas.

Sivan's translation of Liszt's pianistic figurations onto the violin displays remarkable imagination. There is novel use of half-positions, and the intricate broken chords express sonorities that are very different from those in the solo-violin sonatas of Bach and Ysaÿe. Perhaps the most fantastic passage in Sivan's transcription is the fugue, played completely pizzicato. While the employment of Bartók-like pizzicati within a nineteenth-century Romantic idiom may be anachronistic, it nevertheless captures the essence of Liszt's writing.

Noam Sivan's transcription of the Liszt Sonata is a valuable addition of a substantial, nineteenth-century Romantic work to the solo-violin repertoire. It is also a daring challenge; even those who do not choose to feature it in concert performance will benefit from mastering its intricacies in private. In this remarkable, innovative transcription by Noam Sivan we have the counterpart to Paganini's stimulation of Liszt. The original effects achieved by Liszt on the piano are now recreated in a wholly fantastic way for the solo violin.

—Eric Wen

## Notes

Franz Liszt's Sonata in B minor, a masterpiece of piano literature, is offered here for the first time in a version for solo violin. Attempting to liberate the solo-violin medium, this transcription of a large-scale sonata in one movement exploits numerous instrumental possibilities in order to create a distinctive sound world, including: melodic independence of the four strings, wide-range polyphony, unusual use of harmonics, and a fugue in pizzicato.

The performer is advised to consult the piano version regarding thematic structure, chromatic harmony, and voicing. This is a stimulating source but should not be a direct guide to interpretation, since the violin version has to retain its own unique character.

Many technical challenges of violin playing have to be overcome in the process of studying this sonata. The task, therefore, is to clarify the musical meaning of each passage, giving shape to what might seem like a sea of notes. The dramatic concept and the expressive qualities should be convincing enough, so that performing the piece does not become a mere display of virtuosity, but a true statement of artistic honesty.

—Noam Sivan, August 2006

## About Noam Sivan

Noam Sivan is an original and versatile musician, combining composition, piano performance, improvisation, and conducting. His compositional output includes works in most instrumental and vocal genres, among them the opera *Fruits of Folia* premiered by the Mannes Opera, *Homage to Ravel* premiered by the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, and the Piano Concerto which Mr. Sivan premiered himself in the double role of soloist and conductor. As a pianist he has performed the Asian premiere of the Ullmann Concerto with the Philippine Philharmonic Orchestra, and Bach's *Goldberg Variations* for TV broadcast on the *New Israeli Cultural Channel*. Known for his "fanciful improvisations" (Washington Post), Noam Sivan is attempting to link performance and composition through his improvisations and transcriptions—some of which have been recorded for Koch International Classics—and thus to offer a new meaning to musical creativity and interpretation. Born in Israel in 1978, Mr. Sivan currently lives in New York City. He is on the faculty at Mannes College, where he founded the Improvisation Workshop, and is a C.V. Starr doctoral fellow at the Juilliard School.