

A Study of the Liszt Piano Concerto No.1 in E-Flat Major, S. 124

Zirui Peng

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow, G2 3DB, UK

Abstract: *This research provides a detailed analysis of Franz Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major, S. 124, from a practice perspective, exploring the work's historical background, technical challenges, and performance differences among various pianists. The concerto's technical complexity and its extended 26-year composition period highlight Liszt's talent as a composer. Additionally, the paper compares recordings of three renowned pianists from different eras, analyzing their stylistic and technical approaches. It discusses the relationship between the soloist and the orchestra, a key aspect of understanding concerto performance. The final section discusses specific technical challenges encountered while practicing the concerto, such as ornamentation, tone color, octave leaps, chromatic scales, and coordination with the orchestra, offering solutions to these technical issues. Through these analyses, the paper not only provides a technical understanding of Liszt's First Piano Concerto but also expands the general concept of piano performance, offering valuable guidance and inspiration for future performers.*

Keywords: *Liszt's First Piano Concerto, Recording comparison, Performance technical challenges, Piano and orchestra*

1. Introduction

The Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-Flat Major is one of only two piano concertos written by Franz Liszt, which is in the Romantic style - full of optimism, enthusiasm, and calmness, with an exhilarating call to action and a warm exuberance. The main themes of this piece were notated in Liszt's original manuscript in 1830, when he was only 19 years old, and therefore immature in his control of the details of the overall concerto, with only the general themes and framework.^[1] On 17 February 1855, Liszt gave the first performance of the work at a court recital in Weimar. It was conducted by the famous composer and conductor Berlioz, with Liszt himself playing the piano. In addition, further revisions were made before its official publication in 1856.^[1] His years in Weimar were the peak of his creative career, and his bold use of harmony and innovative arrangements for this concerto had a profound influence on the development of Romantic music of the time and on the music of later generations.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part involves with the motivation of choosing this piece and its edition, as well as recording comparison, for which This essay have selected three representing pianists to discuss their different musical processing and interpretations. The second part explores the relationship between the soloist and the orchestra. For the last part, certain technical issues that I came across during practicing would be addressed, which includes grace notes, timbre, octave jumps, chromatic scales, coordination with the orchestra, and pedaling. Importantly, this essay will reveal how to solve these technical challenges. This study aims to guide individuals planning to learn this concerto and provide valuable instructional information.

There are probably a number of reasons involved for choosing this piece. Primarily, one key motivation could be because, his compositions are full of technical difficulty, so it is an opportunity to learn a dramatic piece and improve my technique. Also, this concerto took a long time for Liszt to compose, which is about 26 years, so this piece fully demonstrates Liszt's talents as a composer. In addition, this piece is not only a physical challenge but also a mental one. Thus, this concerto can offer extensive knowledge about piano technique and Romantic music.

Choosing an edition of a score is a very important as a pianist. Some people think we do not need to worry about the score, because if it has been published, it would be appropriate. However, editions vary tremendously. The Budapest edition was chosen because it is a professional edition that focuses on native Hungarian composers.

2. Recording comparison

In my opinion, when people start to play a new piece, listening to the different recordings is one of the best ways to learn more about the new piece. Different pianists have different techniques and ideas. Three famous pianists' recordings of this concerto were selected and their characteristics and interpretations compared.

Several reasons influenced the selection of these pianists. Firstly, their recordings are from different periods. For example, Richter's recording is done in 1961, Van Cliburn's is from the same decade in 1964, while Argerich's recording is done recently in 2019. Secondly, two pianists are from the 20th century, whereas Argerich is a modern pianist. This allows for a comparison of the differences between present pianists and those from the past in their treatment of this piece. In addition, these pianists are from different countries with distinct cultural backgrounds, which can also affect their playing styles.

Recorded with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Erich Leinsdorf in 1964, the pianist is Harvey Lavan Van Cliburn (1934-2013), who is an American pianist and he is a renowned interpreter of music from the Romantic period.^[2] He has recorded many Liszt pieces. For me, his recording is very suitable for beginners coming new to this concerto. This is because, compared to the other recordings, his tempo is more comfortable. When we want to learn how to play some section, we can hear it played very clearly in his performance. In addition, his recording is very fiery and has a singing quality. Listening to his recording gives the impression that he is leading the orchestra, creating an exciting atmosphere with a profound sound, reminiscent of a captain leading his soldiers. (As shown in figure 1)

Piano

Orchestra

Piano

Orchestra

Cliburn's recording is so strong and exciting

Figure 1: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, first movement, bars 46-51^[3]

In example 1, his recording plays the piano part very clearly and strongly. Before listening to his recording, just looking at the score might lead one to think that the piano is not the main character in this section. However, when I listened to Cliburn's recording, It changes my mind.

Before listening to this edition, there was a perception that the concerto was very technical, with concerns about the tempo, as most of Liszt's pieces are known for their speed. When practiced too fast, this piece often led to numerous performance issues. It is now understood that emphasizing the melody is very important. Cliburn's recording is really delicate and his playing is very calm, that everything is under his control. Therefore, after I heard his recording, I started to stop concentrating on the tempo and put more focus on the musicality. I tried my best to play every note more delicately. In general, Cliburn's recording has had a significant influence on practice, making the piece feel more consistent when played, following his example.

Recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Kirill Kondrashin in 1961, the pianist is Sviatoslav Richter (1915-1997), who is a Russian pianist. He was born into a musical family. When he was 22 years old, he got admitted to the Moscow Conservatory and learned from Neuhaus. His technique is so superb that he can handel all difficult techniques with ease. His rhythm control is impressive, which means his rhythm makes the audience feel very imposing. In terms of interpretation, he not only followed the score, but also moved beyond the score, combining his own thinking.^[4]

Example is shown in figure 2



Figure 2: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, first movement, bar 10.

This section strikes me the most in his performance. Compare with the other recording, many pianists do some rubato here, especially Argerich. But Richter is so different that it makes me feel a strong sense of rhythm. Before I listen to this recording, i feel this section with much freedom. After listening to it, it was learned that playing in time can also beautifully bring out the melody. In addition, he not only has a lively rhythm, but also his processing of every phrase is very natural and lyrical. Also, the timbre of Richter's performance is so rational that I can hear and understand the layers of texture quite clearly. He always, through the timbre, describes the piece to the audience. What's more, Richter is skilled at distinguishing each voice part, making them be heard independently.

Recorded with the Sinfonica Nazionale della Rai Orchestra under the baton of Enrico Fagone in 1919, the pianist is Martha Argerich (b. 1941), who is a female pianist from Argentina. Argerich is distinctive in her personality and temperament, which often show in her performance. Her performance style always combines the powerful, with the delicate and Romanticism. [5] Compared to Cliburn and Richter's recordings, Argerich's is much more dynamic and lively. Her extraordinary technique and control, combined with more advanced piano-making of 21st century, I personally think it makes Argerich's version tenser with more richly layered sounds. She is one of my favorite pianists, and there are several reasons why I prefer her performance. First, her personal style is very distinct. For example, at the opening of the concerto, she creates a very fluid melody, moving the dynamics from weak to strong gradually, which means she builds up the volume in an exciting way. Her musical voice creates an image of a train moving closer, with the sound getting louder. Secondly, her technique is so wonderful that she can easily manage any difficult sections while remaining relaxed.



Figure 3: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, first movement, bar 93-96.

In figure 3, argerich plays this section very softly. She not only manages the fast finger runs, but also

the voice is very clean and musical. When I listen to this section, I feel that her playing is effortless. In addition, she is very good at using her body to play the piano. For example, she always uses her arms to play the piano in a circular action, which helps her to relax her wrists.

When she plays some louder sections, this method can make the sound fuller and the timbre more colorful. In other words, when she uses her arms to play the chords, she always can make the sound very powerful but not jarring.

This method is especially helpful for me to study. When starting to play this piece, it was played very fast. However, mistakes often occurred in technically difficult sections, such as fingers locking up. After learning from Argerich's video, her method of relaxation was imitated, which proved to be very useful, improving fast runs.

3. Piano and Orchestra

For any concerto, playing with the orchestra is an important and special part, which is different from playing solo piece. When we play solo, we only concentrate on our own music. But when we play concertos, we not only need to concentrate on ourselves, but also on the orchestra with which we need to cooperate. When playing with the orchestra, three methods of cooperation are used. First of First, listening to the music and connecting with the orchestra through auditory cues is essential. It sometimes feels like a conversation with the orchestra.

The image shows a musical score for Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1, first movement, bars 34-35. It features two staves: the piano part (I) and the orchestra part (II). The piano part is marked 'piano' and 'p'. The orchestra part is marked 'orchestra' and 'espressivo'. The tempo is marked 'poco rall.'. A red annotation 'This is the melody' points to the orchestra part.

Figure 4: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, first movement, bar 34-35

In figure 4, the main theme is in the orchestra, the piano part is the accompaniment. So when we play with the orchestra, we need to listen to the orchestra and follow it. If one does not listen and focuses only on their part, mistakes are easily made. Secondly, counting the beats in the heart. Aside from listening to the orchestra, counting the rhythm is helpful. Some sections may be too technical that we cannot pay attention to the orchestra. If the rhythm is not counted very clearly, it is easy to lose count. Figure 5 demonstrates the above instance.

The image shows a musical score for Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1, third movement, bars 249-256. It features two staves: the piano part (I) and the orchestra part (II). The piano part is marked 'Piano' and 'sempre f e string.'. The orchestra part is marked 'Orchestra' and 'sempre f e string.'. The tempo is marked 'sempre stacc.'.

Figure 5: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, third movement, bars 249-256.

Thirdly, communicating with the orchestra using our eyes. In some sections, it is very difficult to play accurately.



Figure 6: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, second movement, bars 154-155.

For example (as shown in figure 6), this section has the main theme in the orchestra, and the piano section has a long tremolo. But at the orchestral entrance, the piano part has a chord. If we do not play together accurately, it would sound wrong and negatively impact the next chord. Thus, for this chord, I would make eye contact with the conductor or the second pianist to ensure that these entrance are together.

4. Technical problems

The first technical problem discussed is the grace notes, which this piece has many of them. When people play grace notes, we not only need to play the them cleanly, naturally and evenly, but also we cannot let the grace notes dominate the main phrase.

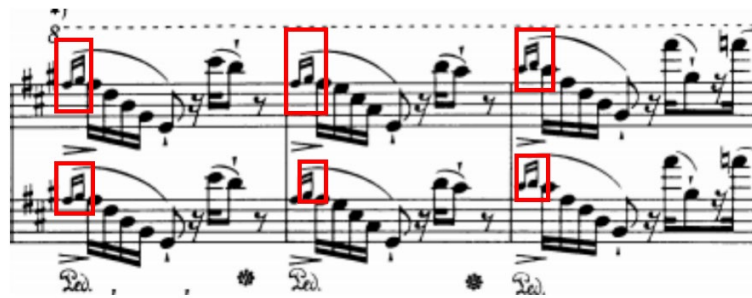


Figure 7: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1 third movement bars 197-199.

For example (as shown in figure 7), when I practice this phrase, I spend more time on the grace notes. When I started, the rhythm was messy. Then, I began practicing this phrase slowly, making every note even. After that, I gradually move up the tempo, and made the phrases livelier according to the directions.

The next technical issue involves with timbre. The goal was to create rich and colorful tones. As everyone knows, Liszt's pieces are very technical and showy, but I think the varying tones are what make his music charming.



Figure 8: Liszt Piano Concerto No.1, fourth movement, bars 442-447.

For example (as shown in figure 8), in this section, if we only regard it as a technical one, it would be very boring and difficult to play fast. So we need to try to combine the technical and musical. This section sounds bell-like, delicate, and very ingenious. Firstly, when I practiced this section, I relaxed my wrists through rotating my wrists and hands. Secondly, I controlled my fingertips and made the tones quieter and more delicate. In general, working on how to create the tone is essential for this concerto.

For the next challenge, the technique of long-distanced octave jumps is one of the most difficult technical spots, which is technically demanding in terms of accuracy.



Figure 9: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, first movement, bars 7-8.

For example (as shown in figure 9), the opening of the movement is very difficult, and we have to ensure the accuracy in order to have an integral performance. I spent a lot of time on this phrase when I started learning this piece. Firstly, only the soprano voice was played, followed by practice on the alto. And then, the speed was slowly increased, alternating between the two voices.

After that, Practice was conducted without pressing down the keys, meaning quick movements were made from octave to octave on the surface of the keys. This method helped me to build the muscle memory and enhance accuracy, which is an effective method to practice octave jumps for every piece.

In this concerto, there are many chromatic scales, which are technically demanding very for the performers.



Figure10: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, first movement, bar 13.

For example (as shown in figure 10), when we play the chromatic scale, aside from the accuracy, we need to play it delicately and musically. Some piano students start to play this section, they play very slowly. During practicing, their hands could not play accurately together. Therefore, two methods were used to solve this problem. Primarily, this phrase was played without any rhythm at a free speed. Secondly, the long phrase was divided into short phrases. Once each short phrase was played well, they were combined into one large phrase. Moreover, as this section ascends to a peak, player can try playing it crescendo. Therefore, if we want to play chromatic scales well, we can practice them regularly before our daily practice.

For the coordination with the orchestra, I write a reflection and journal after every rehearsal. One difficult spot was the counting part in the following example (as shown in figure 11), especially before I enter.

One

rinforz. quasi trillo

Two

Three

Fiat f

Vln sola

ardito

dim.

marcato

Tig. 8va

Figure 11: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, third movement, bars 219-226.

For practice, Firstly, the process begins by following the metronome at a slow tempo and counting the rhythm aloud. Secondly, the second piano part is recorded at a slow tempo and played along with using headphones. Thirdly, while familiar with the piano part, attention is shifted to the orchestral part by listening to a pianist's recording and reviewing the score simultaneously. This involves envisioning oneself as a conductor, conducting along with the recording. After a week of such practice, playing again with the second piano shows no issues in coordination.

Lastly, Pedaling is a frequent challenge for almost all repertoire. When we deal with different musical emotion, we use different pedaling methods in order to achieve a certain acoustic effect. Sometimes we need cleaner sounds, where we would only step down about 1 mm. But when we need more reverberation, we would put the pedal down deeper. For me, pedaling has been a task that always troubled me. In this concerto, there are various pedal markings, if someone want to play this concerto with more profundity, more attention needs to be paid to pedaling.

pp

ppp

dim.

Timp.

p

we need to control the pedal at this section, keep it sounds

Figure 12: Liszt Piano Concerto No. 1, first movement, bars 95-98.

As shown in figure 12, this section has a long chromatic scale. We not only need to have both hands aligned, but also keep the volume down and play gently as the score is marked *pp* and *ppp*. In order to achieve such acoustic effect, our pedaling must not be heavy, which means we can only apply a thin layer with frequent changes.

5. Conclusion

Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 has an important place in the history. This concerto both inherits the techniques from predecessors and opens up new paths for the following generations. This concerto is not only rich in virtuosity, but also in musical colour and timbre. In this research, I revealed several aspects. Firstly, through comparing the recordings of several pianists from different periods, Argerich's interpretation is carried through her extreme emotions; Richter's approach incorporates with his rhythmical taste; Van Cliburn focuses on more nuances, and the overall fashion could be considered in between the other two pianists. Secondly, the relationship between orchestra and piano was discussed, concentrating on the pianist's ensemble skills and rhythmic sense. Thirdly, as the concerto is very virtuosic, I have provided detailed instructions and suggestions on solving various technical difficulties.

By analysing and studying these aspects, it is not only possible to gain a technical understanding of the piece, but also to broaden the ideas of how to play piano in general. The solutions to the problems of this concerto have all been worked out through many attempts, and eventually some methods have been summed up. Therefore, I hope this study will inspire people to learn this piece, and to solve the technical problems more scientifically and quickly. Even though the process of exploring the problems was very difficult, but the gains were very rewarding.

References

- [1] Robert, Doran. *Liszt and Virtuosity (NED-New: Boydell & Brewer Press, 2020)*, 287-288.
- [2] Van Cliburn, pianist. *Piano Concerto No. 1 by Franz Liszt. Conducted by Erich Leinsdorf. Boston Symphony Orchestra. Recorded November, 1964. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/RmZpXQIT-Io>.*
- [3] Franz Liszt, *Piano Concerto No. 1 E-Flat Major, edited by Rados Ferenc (Budapest: Editio Musica, 1991)*.
- [4] Sviatoslav Richter, pianist. *Piano Concerto No. 1 by Franz Liszt. Conducted by Kirill Kondrashin. London Symphony Orchestra. Recorded July 18, 1961. YouTube. https://youtu.be/3A8_Mmhdgcc.*
- [5] Martha Argerich, pianist. *Piano Concerto No. 1 by Franz Liszt. Conducted by Enrico Fagone. Sinfonia Nazionale della Rai Orchestra. Recorded January 29th, 2019. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/FQqQc WoTPaU>.*