

## THE VARIANT METHOD OF COMPOSITION IN THE VOCAL WORKS BY FRANZ LISZT

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**SUMMARY.** The article is devoted to a variant method of composing music, which became widespread in the composing practice of the twentieth century and has genetic links with the work of Franz Liszt. The variant method is presented as the basis of the composer's artistic system, as a property of musical logic and form formation. During the functional and structural analysis of the songs of F. Liszt, their typological similarity is revealed, and a classification based on the variant principle of thematic development is proposed. The characteristic of variant-strophic ("An Edlitam" (S. 333; LW. 74)) and variant-phase ("Gebet" (S. 331; LW. №72)) forms is given. The relationship between monothematism and the variant method of composition is revealed. As a result, the genetic connection between the vocal miniature of F. Liszt and the musical art of the 20th century is substantiated. The variant method is presented as a system-forming method at all levels of musical and poetic composition (motif-composition-image-drama-way of thinking).

**Keywords:** variant method, variant form, vocal creativity, composition, the principle of thematic development.

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## Introduction

The problem of the creative method is eternal in literature and art. It is reborn in every individual creative act. The founder of the Kiev musicological school of the last third of the 20th century N. Goriukhina created an interesting metaphor, born in the search for the essence of the method in musical science:

*A method is a black box with the elements of “entrance” and “exit”, where the “entrance” characterizes the historical branch of musicology, and the “exit” characterizes the theoretical one*<sup>3</sup>. In her opinion, this problem focuses all aspects of the study of musical phenomena: ‘...neither the intonation theory, nor the study of the national specifics of art, style, and creative directions are considered outside the problem of the creative method. <...> The formation and manifestation of the creative method is very important for the theory of music, for clarifying the essence of the creative process’<sup>4</sup>.

Building the whole based on the sound complex (motive, series) set at the beginning of the composition is characteristic of the creative work of those composers who, striving for intonation unity, actively used the variant principle of the musical development. In the 20th century, they are I. Stravinsky, D. Shostakovich, B. Tishchenko, V. Bibik and others.

For those who consider Liszt as an artist exclusively of the romantic tradition, whose influence had only a centrifugal direction (towards the epicentre of European romanticism and the Hungarian national “branch”), the idea of his role as the composer-forerunner of the new music of the 20th century may seem controversial. If we leave aside the figurative poetics of his music<sup>5</sup>, and study its logical and constructive basis, the method of composition, we will find that Liszt is an innovator not only for his time. This is indicated using the variant method, which formed the basis of the compositional writing technique of many composers of the 20th and even the 21st centuries.

*The relevance of the topic* of the article lies in the testing of the hypothesis: the variant method for F. Liszt is the “key” to understanding his artistic system. The variant technique of writing in many of the composer`s

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<sup>3</sup> Gorukhina, Nadiya. *Essays on questions of musical style and form*, Kiev, Musical Ukraine, 1985, p.18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>5</sup> Read about it: Borshuliak, Alona. The semantics of Franz Liszt's piano threnodies within the concept of passion. *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Musica*, Issue 1/65, 2020, p.169.

works determines the specifics of thematic development and form formation in general. Let us explain this idea on a particular example – the genre of the vocal miniature, which was the composer's creative laboratory.

The attitude of vocal teachers of modern music universities in Europe to the creative contribution of F. Liszt to the genres of vocal music is contradictory. There is an opinion that the Hungarian genius, the master of symphonic music, is mediocre to the leading singers-lyricists of the era of musical romanticism, such as F. Schubert, R. Schumann, J. Brahms. In this case, the preference is given to the aria-song (bel canto) samples of F. Liszt's vocal lyrics ("Oh! quand je dors" (S. 282i; LW. №11/1); "O lieb" (S. 298i; LW. №18/3/1)). However, this point of view today seems outdated because the modern listener has heard in Liszt's vocal opuses (especially of the late style) a style of thinking that is relevant to him: a focus of subtle artistic reflection, philosophical reflection. This is facilitated by a thoughtful interpretation, without tragic "tears", exaggerated emotions, and superficial feelings. The intonation of Liszt's vocal style is restrained, noble, deeply organic to the high poetic structure of thought, it is not so much sung as pronounced from the heart. The translator needs maximum flexibility of motivational phrasing and at the same time a sense of great breath. The aristocracy of the vocal melody, 'nested' in the textured relief of the piano part, does not dominate its virtuosity, but rises like the "tip of the iceberg". Therefore, the revival of the scientific interest in vocal music by F. Liszt also has a purely practical task – to teach a modern singer-interpreter to understand the essence of compositional technique, to feel the 'intonation nerve' of his thoughts and feelings, to raise it to the level of artistic thinking of the genius musician of European culture.

**The purpose of the article** is to present a systematic description of the variant method of composition in the vocal work of F. Liszt, which is one of the proofs of the composer's innovation in this genre.

### **Analysis of the latest publications on the topic**

In Western European musicological publications, the significance of F. Liszt's late work for the subsequent development of the history of musical art is comprehended and the main features of the composer's late style are revealed. The lifetime editions were written under the direct influence of the composer's personality; they do not cover the style of the late period of creativity. The works that appeared at the beginning of the 20th century explore the composer's innovation in the field of musical language. The

works that appeared in the 30s of the twentieth century, according to Western music historians, are the second phase of the international study of the work of Franz Liszt. In the works of the 1950s and 1960s, there was a deepening of the analysis of the composer's musical language, while the flowering of the study of Liszt's writing in general and, in particular, the late style falls on the 70s and 80s of the last century. To date, there is no study that summarizes List's innovation in the full disclosure of the problem.

Klara Hamburger's individual observations revealed new facets of the composer's later creative work. In 1973 her book "Franz Liszt" was published, where she notes the connection of the composers creative work with extra-musical phenomena<sup>6</sup>, innovation in the field of harmony in the later compositions. On the pages of the work, it is emphasized: "*The texture and timbre of Liszt's late music bring it closer to ascetic dryness, make it schematic, cavitated, nakedly simplified. Themes, motives become a-melodic, formless, often greatly reduced in the volume*"<sup>7</sup>; of the stylistic characteristics K. Hamburger singles out monothematism, an increase in the role of variance, ostinato nature, the use of increased and decreased intervals, and improvisation<sup>8</sup>.

Among the fundamental studies one can single out the monograph by K. Hamburger on the life and creative work of the composer, the book by Alan Walker and the collection of theoretical studies "Actes du Colloque international Franz Liszt"<sup>9</sup>, devoted to the problems of Liszt's innovation. The problems of the interaction of arts in the context of F. Liszt's creative work (the union of words, music, acting plastic art) are highlighted in the collection of scientific articles "Franz Liszt and the problems of the synthesis of arts"<sup>10</sup>. The works of P. Bozo<sup>11</sup> and S. Gut<sup>12</sup> are directly devoted to the vocal creativity, but the variant method is not considered in them.

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<sup>6</sup> Hamburger, Klara. *Franz Liszt: Leben und Werk*. Köln, Weimar, Wien, Böhlau Verlag, 2010, p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 218

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 218–221.

<sup>9</sup> Gut, Serge. (ed.) *Actes du Colloque international Franz Liszt*. La RM triple numéro 405-406-407. Paris, R. Mase, 1987, 367 p.

<sup>10</sup> Hansburg, Grigory. et al., *Franz Liszt and the problems of the synthesis of arts*. Kharkov: RA – Caravel, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Bozó, Peter. *Liszt as a Song Composer, 1839-1861, Space, Time, Tradition*. Studies Undertaken at the Doctoral School of the Budapest Liszt Academy, Budapest, Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2013, p.149–179.

<sup>12</sup> Gut, Serge. F. Liszt. *Les éléments du langage musical*, Bourg-la-Reine, Editions Aug, Zurfluh, 2008, 376 p.

Variation as a writing technique, as a principle of thematic development and as a creative method is presented in the research of O. Verba on the example of the instrumental creative work of the composers of the last third of the 20th century<sup>13</sup>. The author comprehensively explores variation as a specific method of artistic modeling of the composers worldview in a particular musical work, studies the genesis of variation in modern music; creates a model for analyzing variant composition and justifies variant form as a typical compositional structure in the musical practice of the second half of the 20th century.

## Discussion

F. Liszt was one of the first to approach music composition from the standpoint of the compositional method, which is based on a certain set – theme-invariant and constructive work with it. This approach to the compositional process as the construction of variants based on the original ‘key’ (cipher) was called monothematism. Later, it will pass into the arsenal of compositional techniques of composers of the 20th century. However, none of the researchers noted the importance of variation as a method that is strategically important for Liszt’s vocal music.

In F. Liszt’s vocal creative work, the variant principle of thematic development gave even more radical solutions based on one-theme and two-theme forms. Among the one-theme forms there is the song called “Einst” (S. 332; LW. №73) consisting of two sentences, where the second continues the first in the variant way. The examples of two-theme compositions are: “An Edlitam” (S. 333; LW. 74) (ABA<sub>1</sub>), “Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsame” (S. 309; LW. №36/1) (the 1st edition AB – a simple two-part one with the reprise of  $\text{ea}_1$ ), “Anfangs wollt ich fast verzagen” (S. 311i; LW. №48/1) (a simple three-part ABA<sub>1</sub>), “O lieb” (S. 298i; LW. № 18/3/1) (A BA<sub>1</sub> B<sub>1</sub>A<sub>2</sub>; a double three-part one).

F. Liszt was a creator of the universal type: he knew languages, studied literature, deeply knew painting, architecture, and poetry. Hence the choice of various poets in search of the literary foundation for his vocal miniatures, including Russian (M. Lermontov), German culture (J. Goethe, H. Heine). The poetic text served as the primary foundation for the creation of the musical concept. F. Liszt is distinguished from other romantics in the

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<sup>13</sup> Verba, Oksana. On the typological foundations of the variant form, Kyiv musical knowledge, Issue 5, 2000, pp. 29–37.

vocal genre by the role of the instrumental accompaniment – extremely rich, virtuoso, with textured orchestral sound of the grand piano. The intoned word is distinguished by a refined aristocracy, and the musical-vocal composition is characterized by a figurative monolith. The sung melody, often of a declamatory, recitative type, takes the place of the “tip of the iceberg”, which should “keep” on itself all the complexity of the textured unity of canto and instrumentalist. The noted qualities of the poly-genre whole represent a rather high level of difficulty for a vocalist in terms of understanding the nature of the intonation form of a vocal composition. The style interpretation of the vocal music by F. Liszt is the aim to recreate the parity of the vocal part (melos) and the textured timbre complex (piano).

Liszt always had a certain artistic and musical idea of a composition, the integrity of which was ensured by the immanent means and principles of the music itself. The leading ones are: 1) monothematism; 2) the concentric symmetry; 3) the rhapsodic principle (a kind of contrast-composite form, tending to a continuous cyclicality); 4) the development nature. It is these principles of thematic development that are most studied in connection with the composer’s innovation – the creation of a large one-part composition in a program symphonic poem. And such a genre as a vocal miniature, a kind of “creative laboratory” of the composer, remained ‘in the shadows’. Therefore, when studying the variant method in the works of F. Liszt, we will focus on the vocal genre.

Monothematism and variance as the principles of the thematic development are in many respects similar. Both principles presuppose complex transformations of thematic constructions, in which – in one case – a group of musical themes arises that contrast with each other, and in the other – similar musical themes. However, in both cases, the themes have a common intonation basis.

Variance as a principle of the thematic development in the vocal miniature by F. Liszt can be traced at all levels: 1) within motives, phrases; 2) in the structure of the parts of the whole ( $A + A_1 + A_2 + A_3$ ); 3) there are also different interpretations of the same text, and then the variant method manifests itself at the dramaturgy level (see: the two versions of the vocal miniature ‘Freudvoll und leidvoll’ (S. 280i; LW. № 23/1) on the words by J. Goethe, the two versions – “Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsame” (S. 309; LW. №36/1) on the words by Heine).

In the process of the functional and structural analysis of F. Liszt’s songs, the typological similarity of musical compositions has been found. Let us combine them into the following groups: 1) songs written in the traditional couplet form; 2) three-part compositions (with a contrasting or developing

middle) or two-part, in which the reprise repetition does not grow to the scale of the third part; 3) stanza forms dominated by recitative-declamatory intonation; 4) detailed compositions of the poem type.

The study of one particular aspect of variance as the creative method allows one to see its role as a systemic principle of the organization of musical and poetic composition (motive – composition – image – dramaturgy – a way of thinking). For comparison, let us take two romances by F. Liszt, in which the variant method is presented in various forms: ‘An Edlitam’ (S. 333; LW. №74) (to the words by F. Bodenstedt, translated by G. Shokhman) and “Gebet” (S. 331; LW. №72) (to the words by M. Lermontov, translated into German by F. Bodenstedt). The first one is love lyrics (psychology of the soul): “*In meinem Lebensringe bist du der Edelstein und alles, was ich singe, sing ich nur dir, nur dir allein*”; the second romance is spiritual lyrics: “*In stunden der Entmutigung, gibt Trost mir und Ermutigung ein wundersüß Gebet*“. Let us dwell on the compositional stages of the musical dramaturgy of the selected compositions.

The romance “An Edlitam” (S. 333; LW. 74) is written in the variant-stanza form, with the elements of monothematism. In holistic dramaturgy, there are two plans (the 1st – in the vocal part of the canto; the 2nd – an instrumental one), which is reflected in the discrepancy between the semantic and harmonic caesura. Monothematic development is closely related to the variant transformation of the original motif: dialogicality, imitations, sequential shifts based on rhythmic variation, structural asymmetry. In the variant principle of the musical development of the theme, the stabilizing factor is the rhythm (meaning the preservation of the general ratio of durations, the absence of rhythmic fragmentation), and the intonation side undergoes active changes. The “general strengthening complex” of variant development consists of: similarity (not identity) of a rhythmic pattern, an approximate melodic contour, characteristic intonations, and a stable type of presentation. Variation preserves the figurative and genre unity (in contrast to variation, in particular from genre-characteristic variations, which are endowed with their own images and genre features).

In the piano introduction, the intonation that serves as the thematic core is born. All further development is based on its development and transformation. The second ‘swing’, based on the singing of the melodic tone and imitation, gradually forms a unidirectional sequential movement to the thematic core in rhythmic increase.



In the introduction, the main motif sounds in parallel thirds, in the second stanza – in parallel decimals (texture variation). Here, there is also a tonal variation (the transposition of a variably transformed motif into the key of G-dur). When comparing the first and second stanzas, there is a structural periodicity; and at the moment of figurative transformation, as a result of the irregularity of the variant process, there is a structural asymmetry. All these techniques are indicative of the variant method of thematic development.

E.g. 2

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 23-27) is in G major and 4/4 time. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Einst hielt ich dich um.wun - den mit ju - gendstarkem". The piano accompaniment features parallel chords in the right hand and a bass line. The second system (measures 28-32) continues the vocal line with "Arm; die Ju - gend ist ent.schwun - - - den, doch". The piano accompaniment continues with parallel chords and a bass line. The third system (measures 33-35) concludes the vocal line with "schlägt mein Herz - noch warm." and ends with a double bar line. The piano accompaniment continues with parallel chords and a bass line.

Franz Liszt: 'An Edlitam' bb. 23-35.

In the variant form, the theme is transformed according to several parameters (pitch, metro-rhythmic, timbre-texture, articulation) at the same time, while maintaining a holistic intonation-semantic quality. The nature of variant contradicts all planning, including strict uniformity in the distribution of new elements in development. This implies the absence of a regular boundary contrast between musical constructions (and even parts of the form), the continuity of variant transformations, and the unstructured (non-square, non-periodic) compositional process. The stages within the variant changes appear not as variations, but as dramatic zones.

In what are the features of monothematism manifested? One of its leading features, as it is known, is the contrast of musical themes that have a common intonation basis – the thematic grain. Monothematism is revealed through the unity of melos and harmony: VI, diminished harmony, major-minor connections and enharmonicity, as well as at higher levels of the semantic organization: *the textured one* (the dialogical nature of the texture in the exposition and their unification (combination) in the reprise); *the genre one* (the 1st stanza: the external depiction – barcarole, the 2nd stanza – narration); and *the figurative one* (the transformation in the reprise).

The romance called “Gebet” (S. 331; LW. №72), is an example of the variant-phase form. Here the development is based on the constant intonation updating of the theme segments; moreover, the intergrowth is associated with other segments undergoing a variant renewal. With the external freedom of the melodic speech, the variant-phase form has an internal fusion, the unity of textured and melodic development, which has its own phases – culminations and recessions, which means it differs by the thematic, tempo and texture homogeneity.

The mono-image presented in the introduction consists of two elements of different genres: the recitativo one and the choral one. The dramaturgy plan of the development of the initial mono-image does not coincide with the compositional one, which gives a new quality of the shaping – a variant-phase composition. This is possibly connected with the text of the Russian poet, with the images of the prayer that are characteristic of the religious attitude. Variance, which permeates all levels of composition, acts as a type of artistic modelling, which contributes to the awareness of the specifics of F. Liszt’s compositional thinking.

## E.g. 3

Langsam. (Veröffentlicht 1879.)

Singstimme.  
Mezzosopran.

In Stun.den der Ent.

Klavier.

*mp*

*una corda*

*ff* \* *ff* \* *ff* \* *ff* \*

mu - tigung, w enns gar zu trü - be geht, gibt Trost mir und Er - mu - tigung ein

*p*

*ff* \* *ff*

## Franz Liszt: 'Gebet' bb. 1-19.

Intonation, harmonic and structural variance is based on the functional similarity of the motifs-variants. Their development is represented by different phase structures (for example, the vocal part – 2+3+5), and further structural asymmetry prevails. The exposition stage of the form is characterized by active variant variation, as a result of which constant thematic elements are formed. The development is conditioned by the potential freedom of transformations of the topic within the framework of the variant method and reveals its potential.

From the point of view of interpreters of F. Liszt's vocal compositions, it is very important to emphasize the following point: the stylistic intonation should be a figurative monolith, so that the vocalist accurately fits his part into the instrumental layer, without violating the parity. The character of the phrasing and the agogic plan of the singer and the pianist should coincide: the aristocratic spirit of the composer's vocal compositions does not allow for exaggeration in nuance and sound production. Only if these conditions are met will the original magic and charm of Liszt's music arise. The romantic 'fleur' and a smile of delight will always remain with the audience after meeting with the music of a brilliant author-the creator of a magnificent vocal heritage.

## Conclusions

The vocal genre, despite its “peripheralism” from the point of view of F. Liszt’s style system, allowed, first, to see what the composer did in comparison with other romantic composers in this leading method of musical utterance of the Romantic era; secondly, it turned out to be the focus of a variant method of organizing musical composition, which was developed in music in the 20th century. Based on the analysis of the variant principle of thematic development and the characteristics of compositional patterns in the songs of F. Liszt We propose the following classification based on the typological features of the variant method in the genre of vocal miniature:

1. The couplet-variant form: a) AA<sub>1</sub>; b) AB A<sub>1</sub>B<sub>1</sub> A<sub>2</sub>B<sub>2</sub>... (‘Wie singt die Lerche schon’ (S. 312; LW. №51): AA<sub>1</sub>; ‘Das Veilchen’ (S. 316/1; LW. №45/1): AB A<sub>1</sub>B<sub>1</sub> A<sub>2</sub>B<sub>2</sub>; ‘Die tote Nachtigall’ (S. 291i; LW. №17/1): AB A<sub>1</sub>B<sub>1</sub> A<sub>2</sub>B<sub>2</sub>).

The verse-variant form is the sphere of interaction between the principles of verse repetition and end-to-end variant development. End-to-end variant development makes changes to the verse form, enriching it, but without breaking the structural basis. The discreteness of the compositional process, while preserving the possibility of multiple variant repetitions, demonstrates the primacy of the constructive principle over the procedural one. The figurative and genre uniformity is explained by the internal thematic unity. The verse-variant form has two varieties. In the first, the constant elements of the theme, in general, are the structure of the verse and its metrorhythmic basis. The melodic-intonation and tonal-harmonic sides are subject to variant changes. Minor variant changes may affect the rhythmic and structural parameters. In the second variety-from verse to verse, only the initial intonation-thematic grain is preserved, and further variant development is carried out in each verse in different ways. An essential property of this variety is the clingability of the musical material, based on the principle of promotion, when the defining element (intonation, texture-rhythmic) is introduced in the process of variant development within one part, and in the following parts acts as the fundamental one against the background of the introduction of new material. The constant elements of the theme are the articulation, timbre-register, and dynamic parameters.

2. The variant-stanza form – a kind of a varied stanza in which the principle of updating the original theme prevails.

The variant-strophic form is due to the procedural nature of variant development, based on non-square structures. In this case, a “stanza” is not a unit of a poetic text, but a section of a musical form that may cover one or

more poetic stanzas or may *not coincide at all* with the strophic division of the verse; musical 'stanzas' may be different in scale, the discreteness of the sections is ensured by the similarity of the initial constructions. Being connected with the verbal basis in its origins, in the conditions of instrumental music, the stanza still retains structural certainty.

3. The variant-phase forms – the end-to-end non-stanza forms in which the open musical constructions are formed into a compositional whole based on the variant development of the smallest thematic elements – motives, sub-motives, and rhythmic sequences. Here, variance gives an impetus to the thematic intergrowth ("Gebet" (S. 331; LW. №72), "Vergiftet sind meine Lieder" (S. 289i; LW. №29/1), "J'al perdu ma force et ma vie" (S. 327; LW. №68)). The variant-phase composition consistently develops psychological nuances and details. A free, continuously flowing and at the same time discrete melodic line is formed.

The variant-phase composition consistently unfolds psychological shades and details. In the process of thematic development, a free, continuously flowing, and at the same time discrete melodic line is formed. The variant-phase form is characterized by a large-scale asymmetry, the logic of variant and end-to-end development principles, which contradicts the compositional logic of the variant-strophic form, which preserves the size of the stanzas. The binding element is the intonational drama and the plot logic of development.

The monothematic variance unites different parts of the composition into a dramaturgic whole. Within a typified classical composition, variance gives rise to destructive processes. On the one hand, working with a theme as with a construction, and, on the other hand, the variant method as the genetic basis for Liszt's favourite improvisation nature ("overheard" by him from folk musicians of his native Hungary) – both lines lead to the approval of an a-classical composition (free and mixed forms). In other words, the individualization of the structure in the creative works of the 20th century genetically goes back to the music of the romantics of the 19th century, and it began not only owing to the poem genre, but also to the vocal miniature by F. Liszt.

It begs comparison techniques monothematism (based on variance method of work with the theme) with the twelve-tone technique (based on variant conversion of the series). Both in the first and in the second case, the form is built based on the initial intonation-constructive formation (complex), which performs the function of the theme and creates a compositional whole. The variant method of working with the theme, the variant monothematism in the vocal work of F. Liszt became the prototype of the dodecaphonic system,

the variant transformations of the series in the music of A. Schoenberg and A. Webern. Such analogies prove the historical continuity of the development of musical art and give grounds to characterize the work of F. Liszt as an innovative platform for music of the 20th century.

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