

Two Themes in Liszt's Totentanz

Huizi Qiu

Muyin Qinyun ART Training School in Shandong, Dezhou, China

253341562@qq.com

Keywords: Liszt, Totentanz, Dies Irae, Requiem

Abstract: There are two main themes in *Totentanz*, a work for solo piano and orchestra by Franz Liszt. The first theme is “dies irae” in the third bar of the work, which originates from *Dies Irae*, a single-voice chant in the Middle Ages. The second theme is “requiem” in the 466th bar of the work, which originates from *Introitus: Requiem aeternam*, prelude of Mozart's *Requiem in d minor*.

1. The Theme “Dies Irae”

Dies irae is the most important theme in *Totentanz*, which occupies a decisive position in the work as a whole. In the Romantic era, a new type of composition technique emerged in the operas of Weber, Schumann, and the symphony of Berlioz, and then widely used in the operas of Wagner and became one of the most important technical means in his creation, that is, the leitmotiv. It is a very short musical cell that recurs in specific occasions in an opera, in a way to symbolize or imply a certain character, a certain type of emotion, or even a certain event, place or idea in the play.¹ The first theme of *Totentanz* has the nature of leitmotiv. When it appears in various positions in the work, Liszt has altered it in various forms with the method of variation, so that it has different emotions and expressive force.

In the third bar of the work, along with the gloomy and devilish diminished seventh chord, this theme quietly appeared. (Score example 1) The fundamental form of the theme based on the d minor is as follows: starting with the third-level note, the smooth descending stepwise movement to the tonic, forming the first phrase of the theme; with the third-level tone as the initial tone, it progresses up, down, and up to the tonic, forming the second phrase of the theme. Compared with the chant *Dies Irae*, the theme dies irae stretches the penultimate and the third notes, which makes the rhythm and the melody stronger, and the language features more obvious; the diminished seventh chord that runs through the phrase has been set off behind the melody, changing the solemn and holy atmosphere of the original chanting melody, making the melody gloomy and treacherous, as if the first meeting of an angel and a devil, adding a sense of picture and dramatic conflict in the phrase.

Considering dies irae as the core theme, Liszt developed a series of thematic transformations in the music to illustrate his understanding of this theme. The thematic transformation is a technique adapting the basic elements of music, such as short motif, rhythmic pattern, and framework interval, for continuous and comprehensive changes in interval relationship, melody, rhythm, speed, mode and tonality, harmony, polyphony, orchestration and other constituent elements of the theme.² This is a new technique established by Liszt in various creations, which is also a music creation technique that has substantial and sustained contributions to later generations.³ In the thematic transformation completed by Liszt, not only does it display the structural difference between the

¹ Yu Runyang: Musical Analysis of the Prelude and Finale of the Opera "Tristan and Isolde", "Music Research", August 1993, Issue 1, p. 41.

² Stanley Sadie Edited, *The New Grove Music Dictionary Music and Musicians*, Kingsport Press, US 1980, Entry: Thematic transformation.

³ Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt*, VOLUME TWO, Faber and Faber Limited, First published in 1989, P.303.

transformation and the theme, but it also exhibits the inner logical connection.¹ Such difference and connection between the transformed theme and the main theme precisely demonstrate the unique personal style of the composer and the embodiment of rigorous logic.

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The top system is for piano, marked 'Andante' and 'marcato', with a '3^{va} basso' line. The bottom system is for strings, marked 'Andante', 'Str. Bl.', and 'f'. Both systems show a series of chords and melodic lines.

Figure 1. The orchestra played the theme dies irae under the minus seventh piano chord

Prior to the emergence of the theme requiem, the composer has carried out a total of 20 theme transformations. Among them, there are many distinctive changes, which not only inherited and developed the emotion of the previous section, but also played a role of cohesion and implication in the subsequent section. For example, the theme transformation from the 41st bar to the 50th bar of the work (Score example 2):

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The top system is for piano, marked 'Allegro moderato' and 'f pesante'. The bottom system is for strings, marked 'tr' and '3434'. Both systems show a series of chords and melodic lines.

Figure 2. Theme transformation in the form of polyphony

This is a salient example of theme transformation in polyphonic form, which is transformed from

¹ Zhang Na: "The Expressive Significance of 'Theme Deformation' in Liszt's Orchestral", "New Voices of Yuefu" 2010, Issue 4, p.58.

a monophonic theme to a four-voice polyphonic form, and the playing speed is the allegro of the mean. This is one of the few sections in *Totentanz* that clearly embodies the polyphonic style. In the first phrase, the theme dies irae is located at the upper part and lower part. The upper theme is presented in an octave form, and the lower theme appears in the upper octave lower octave and the lower third. The two voices in the middle tactfully form an octave relationship in stepwise movement. The dislocation appears immediately after each note of the theme, which enriches the original melody voice, and the coordination between voices would easily create auditory illusion is extremely easy, significantly increases the expressive force of the original melody. In the second phrase, there is a harmony connection composed of eight chords, followed by a four-voice melody, dotted with decorative sounds of the upper and lower parts, forming a new texture structure. The theme dies irae appears in two different forms in the two phrases of this transformation, which inherited the intensity and auditory effect of the previous section, and formed a sharp contrast with the passion and excitement of the previous section.

In addition, there are several transformations of theme that reflect Liszt's free and casual but confident creative characteristics, such as the transformations in the work from bars 183 to 206 (Score example 3):

Figure 3. Three consecutive theme transformations

This is a theme transformation filled with the personal charisma of the composer. It adopts the style of fugue, the speed is slightly faster, and the mood is free and cheerful. In these 24 subsections, Liszt performed three consecutive thematic transformations. The similarity of these three transformations is that the melody of the transformed theme appears in the form of single-tone repetition, that is, it is played in the "Wheeled finger" method. While the difference is that the first transformation is to repeat the theme dies irae in the form of a single-voice repetition, the second transformation is to move the theme three degrees higher, adding a new single-voice melody, the third transformation is to move the subject six degrees higher, adding a new two-tone melody part.

This kind of composition is very reminiscent of the polyphonic form of Organum in the Middle Ages. The first transformation is equivalent to the original chant part, and the final two transformations are equivalent to adding a gorgeous melody below the chant. Although it differs from the Organum melody in the form of an inverted voice and not a strict "one-tone-to-multi-tone" form, there are still similarities between the two. What's more worth mentioning is that the composer used three different key tones for these three changes, and the melody after that is a continuous transition, having each phrase played on a new key. In this transformation, Liszt has an excellent foundation in the grasp of tonalities. It is frequent but well-organized, free but not breaking the pattern, which greatly reflects the unique charm of the composer.

2. The Theme "Requiem"

The second theme *Totentanz* is requiem, which appears in the work from bar 466 to bar 483, and from bar 484 to bar 590, making a total of six transformations of the theme requiem. The form of this theme is: a total of three phrases, based on d minor, are mainly composed of chord connections. The melody part floats on top of the chord connection, and the middle part is dotted with a new melody composed of triplets. At the end of each phrase, there will be four "horn" motives.

The first phrase of the theme requiem take reference from *Introitus: Requiem aeternam*, prelude of Mozart's *Requiem in d minor*. At the beginning of *Requiem in d minor*, Bassoon played a soothing and long melody against the orchestra in the background. This melody is composed of long and short tones at upper and lower parts in stepwise movement. The first six notes are the source of the theme of requiem in *Totentanz*. Comparing the melody at the beginning of *Requiem in d minor* and the melody of the first phrase of the theme of requiem in *Totentanz* (Score example 4), it shows that Liszt further alters and develops on the basis of Mozart's, so there are many differences between the two.



Figure 4. Mozart's Requiem in d minor



Figure 5. Liszt's Totentanz

Score example 4

Comparison of the beginning melody of Requiem in d minor and the melody of the theme requiem

From the perspective of melody progress, the first phrase of the theme requiem is composed of two-tone at upper and lower parts in stepwise movement. Mozart's melody stays at the lower part of the two-tone theme, and the upper and lower notes form a third-degree relationship. Liszt ended it after six notes which is the first phrase. Mozart transposes up after six notes, allowing the music to continue to move forward. From the perspective of rhythm, the theme requiem has always been stated very smoothly, without deliberately emphasizing a specific note in the form of pitch length. Mozart assisted the melody with the length of the pitch, making the melody more stand-out. From

the perspective of texture, the theme requiem is based on the melody accompaniment of the triplet played by the orchestra, and the chord connection of the following parts is used as the support. It is more dynamic and has a fuller sound effect. While Mozart slowly introduced the orchestra in a step-by-step manner, supporting the melodic voice. Based on the first phrase, Liszt expanded the theme requiem into three phrases, which have different melody and the same texture.

The speed requirement for the theme requiem is "sempre allegro ma non troppo". After that, the speed of the six transformations is basically the same as the main theme. However, the biggest difference between theme and transformation is their music texture. In the main theme, at most three notes appear in each beat, and the chord connection of the triad and the seventh chord constitutes the main harmony texture in the theme. In the first and second transformations, four to five corresponding sound patterns appeared in each beat, and the music began to become compact. In the third and fifth transformations, each beat is divided into eight sound patterns, and these eight sound patterns appear in the upper part, adding a sense of auditory compactness. Although there are only four corresponding sound patterns in the fourth transformation, the octave progression in the low voice and the third and seventh chords in the high voice make the music more substantial, sandwiched between the third and fifth transformations but with no hollowness and procrastination. Only for the sixth transformation, there are only two chords in each beat of the melody, followed by a Cadenza composed of octaves and discordant chords. In these six transformations, except for some decorative music materials, there has not been a transposition, and the harmony of the transformation is completely consistent with the main theme.

We can therefore conclude that in the theme statement and theme transformation of requiem, the theme echoes the sixth transformed theme, giving the five transformation in the middle the space for free alterations and development. The Cadenza is presented tactfully. It not only plays a role of embellishment, but also enriches the sound effects of the work, and more naturally transitions to the repetition of the theme dies irae. All these characteristics fully reflect Liszt's grasp and control of the development of his works.

3. Comparison of the Two Themes

As the most important backbone of the music development of *Totentanz*, the themes dies irae and requiem play different roles in the work. They are independent, contrasting and complementary, perfectly supplementing each other.

From the auditory point of view, the theme dies irae is played against the background of the unresolved diminished seventh chord accompaniment. The coordination of the melody part and the accompaniment part is extremely inconsistent; the theme requiem is presented in the form of connected chord, the accompaniment pattern of triplets is added in the middle, there is no incongruous chord in the whole theme, and the main chord and the dominant chord are frequently used to make the music appear stable and solemn. Both themes are in d minor, but Liszt leveraged various methods of harmony on the two themes, providing them different styles of sound effects.

From the perspective of theme development, frequent use of transitions and deviations can be found in the transformation of the theme dies irae, and the length of each transformation is different. Some sections are not limited to the two phrases of the theme, but adapt to more free and large-scale expansion. The six transformations of the theme requiem are always carried out in the same mode, tonality and harmony as the theme, and apart from some decorative musical materials, there are only three inside the six transformation, which maintains high unity with the theme.

From the layout point of view, there are a total of 465 sub-sections of the theme and theme transformation of dies irae, and Liszt arranged twenty transformations of theme; While the theme and theme transformation of requiem have a total of 124 sub-sections, with only six themes transformed. The length of the two themes makes a big different. The theme and theme transformation of dies irae occupy the main position in the music, and are reproduced in the epilogue after the end of the theme requiem. This layout makes the work echo from the beginning to the end, highlighting the status of the theme dies irae.

By means of comparison, it reveals that the two themes and their transformations express

difference content in various ways. The theme *dies irae* has the meaning of judgment: the day of wrath, the day of mercy, when the world is reduced to ashes; when the trial comes, it will be severely criticized. The theme *requiem* has the meaning of salvation: give them eternal rest, Lord. The cooperation between the two seemingly contradictory themes forms a dual-theme duo variation. The two themes and their variations appear alternately as a group, making the boundary between the two parts more definite. In comparison with ordinary single-theme variations, *Totentanz* obviously conveys a richer meaning.

References

- [1] Stanley Sadie Edited, *The New Grove Music Dictionary Music and Musicians*, Kingsport Press, US 1980, Entry: Thematic transformation.
- [2] Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt ,VOLUME TWO*, Faber and Faber Limited, First published in 1989,P.303.
- [3] Yu Runyang: *Musical Analysis of the Prelude and Finale of the Opera "Tristan and Isolde"*, "Music Research", August 1993, Issue 1, p. 41.
- [4] Zhang Na: "The Expressive Significance of 'Theme Deformation' in Liszt's Orchestral", "New Voices of Yuefu" 2010, Issue 4, p.58.
- [5] William Wright: "Liszt and Mozart Connection", *Studia Musicologica*, vol.48, No.3/4 (Sep.,2007).
- [6] Anna Celenza: "Liszt's piano concerti : a lost tradition", *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt* , Cambridge University Press, 2005 .
- [7] Shay Loya,ed.: "The Verbunkos Idioms in the Future of the Music", *Franz Liszt and His World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2006.
- [8] Kenneth Hamilton,ed.: "Liszt's piano concerti: a lost tradition", *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005.
- [9] Zhou Xiaojing,*Liszt:The King of Piano*,Shanghai Music Publishing,Shanghai,1999.
- [10] Yu Zhigang,*A bridf History of Western Music*,Higher Education Publishing,Beijing,2006.