

## Performing Byron: Alongside Liszt, Chopin, and Keats

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Article abstract

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## PERFORMING BYRON: ALONGSIDE LISZT, CHOPIN, AND KEATS

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### Résumé

Que se produit-il quand *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* est présenté à voix haute ? Quels effets produit une juxtaposition des *Années de pèlerinage* de Liszt et des passages de *Childe Harold* qui l'ont inspiré ? Quelles caractéristiques partagent « l'Ode to a Nightingale » de Keats et la *Nocturne op. 9 no 3 en si majeur* de Chopin ? Voilà autant de questions que soulève un récital de poésie et de musique au piano par les professeurs Janet Hammock et Robert Lapp de l'Université Mount Allison. Hammock et Lapp collaborent depuis 2002, unis par un désir de partager leur expertise en musique et en littérature de l'ère romantique avec un public plus vaste. Le résultat : un répertoire formé de juxtapositions thématiques, dont deux qui seront présentées le 16 août 2005 : les pèlerinages parallèles de Byron et de Liszt, puis les « nocturnes » de Keats et de Chopin. Le récital sera suivi de réflexions sur les conséquences de cette collaboration interdisciplinaire, qu'il s'agisse de découvertes interprétatives faites au cours de la mémorisation ou du rôle du contexte de la représentation.

*Nota : Le texte qui suit est une transcription du commentaire qui accompagnait des extraits de musique au piano et de poésie de l'époque romantique lors d'un récital auquel ont eu droit les délégués du 30<sup>e</sup> colloque international de la Byron Society, le lundi 16 août 2004 en soirée, au Pavillon des beaux-arts de l'Université de Moncton. Idéalement, ces remarques auraient été accompagnées d'un enregistrement en direct du spectacle. Faute de cela, le lecteur pourrait se*

*replier sur le théâtre de son imaginaire avec, à ses côtés, les textes de Childe Harold's Pilgrimage de Byron, chant 3, et « d'Ode to a Nightingale » de Keats et, si possible, un enregistrement des Années de pèlerinage de Liszt et de la Nocturne op. 9 no 3 en si majeur de Chopin.*

*Note: the following is a transcript of the commentary that accompanied a recital of Romantic piano and poetry given before the delegates of the 30<sup>th</sup> International Byron Congress on Monday evening, 16 August, 2004, in the Pavillon Beaux-Arts, Université de Moncton. Ideally, the reader would have a live recording of the music and poetry performed that night to accompany these remarks, but short of that, one can always turn inward to the "theatre of the mind," drawing nearby a copy of Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage canto 3, of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," and, if possible, a recording of Liszt's Années de Pèlerinage and Chopin's Nocturne Op.9 No.3.*

ROBERT LAPP: Welcome to our presentation tonight of poetry and piano music of the Romantic era. Janet and I bring the greetings of the English and Music Departments of Mount Allison University, the sister institution of l'Université de Moncton in south-eastern New Brunswick. Our programme tonight began as a project Janet and I developed three years ago when we were looking for new ways to share our expertise in Romantic music and literature with the wider community.

JANET HAMMOCK: Yes; we began with a concert programme designed to interest young, high-school aged students in the study of the Romantic era, and then developed it as a showcase of Romanticism in a variety of venues from the Indian River Festival in Prince Edward Island to the Glenn Gould studio in Toronto, Ontario. As we developed the programme, however, it often struck us that it would be beneficial to share with a more academic audience some of the discoveries we have made in the process of aligning the poetry and music of the Romantic era. Thus from the repertoire we have developed over the last three years, we have selected for you tonight two thematic juxtapositions that we felt were

relevant to the themes of this conference: the pilgrimages of Byron and Liszt, and the nocturnes of Keats and Chopin. We also want to offer you some of our observations on what happens when we place Byron alongside Liszt, Chopin, and Keats.

ROBERT LAPP: First, then, let me share with you some of the ways my understanding of *Childe Harold* canto 3 has been altered by taking on the challenge of memorizing a portion of it. In the nineteenth century, of course, this poem would have been read aloud in reading circles, and even perhaps performed publicly in some contexts, but certainly in the last hundred years we have understood it to be intended for silent reading only. This morning, for example, Ian Balfour shared with us Charles Lamb's perspective that such texts should not be performed publicly because they seemed designed to represent "the internal workings and movements of a great mind," and should thus be staged only in the "theatre of the mind." More recently, too, we have come to regard the poem as a text in the theoretical sense of the word — as a discursive object that (unlike an oral reading in real time) requires the full text to be simultaneously available to what we might call the spatial order of critical reading, including an openness to those forms of post-structuralist analysis that would call into question the very kind of coherence that is assumed by the performance of a text in real time.

Indeed, I have found that by committing such a text to memory, and taking on its performative dimension in earnest, I had to put most of the more abstract textual and critical issues *sous rature*, while some of them — such as the issues surrounding Byron's construction of persona in his works — I had to consider from an entirely new angle. Simply put, I found that memorization forced me to exchange a hermeneutics of suspicion for a hermeneutics of belief. That is, in order to mount a creditable performance of the "Lac Lemman–Storm Sequence" of *Childe Harold* 3 (stanzas 85-98), I had to assume a principle of coherence, of integrated intentionality — in short, some analogue of the notion of "character" that actors usually take for granted in a play script, but which is not the first thing sought out in a text thought to be designed for silent reading or for the scrutiny of theoretical analysis. More particularly, it involved imagining a character capable of two very different and perhaps even contradictory experiences. On the one hand, as the ostensive speaker

of the poem, Childe Harold experiences what we have been variously calling the “Burkean beautiful,” the “Wordsworthian sublime,” or the “sublime of plenitude,” captured in the phrase “Then stirs the feeling infinite” (CHP 3. 90). On the other hand, he also undergoes a vivid epiphany of the more familiar Burkean or Byronic or Manfredian sublime, epitomized in Childe Harold’s desire to become “a portion of the tempest” (93). It meant assuming that Byron, in writing the first part of this passage, had taken no merely tentative dose of “Wordsworth physic,” but that (on the contrary) his philosophical and metaphysical urges are to be taken seriously, and that stanzas 86-91 reflect a genuine quest for spiritual healing on the part of his alter ego Childe Harold. It meant ignoring the longer trajectory of biography in order to fix on a particular moment and a particular persona, and yet at the same time paying close attention to biography in order to fix on and develop appropriate aspects of that persona.

I also had to look more closely at some of the lines in this segment of the poem that we might otherwise consider less important, and to discover in them new clues to a revised interpretation of the poem. But I will leave these aside for the moment, till after my performance, so we can turn now to some of Janet’s comments on our decision to pair it with works by Franz Liszt.

JANET HAMMOCK: Yes, one of the things that most attracted us to this section of Byron’s *Childe Harold* 3 as a performance piece was the fact that it is closely linked with a set of works by Franz Liszt. Liszt was the quintessential Romantic, a superb composer and brilliant pianist — in all probability the greatest pianist who has ever lived. He played with such fire and passion that women swooned and smoke was said to curl up from the piano keyboard as a result of his pyrotechnics!

Liszt freed the piano and the pianist both physically and spiritually. During the Classical era, pianists encountering the newly-invented forte-piano were trained to play very much like harpsichordists of the Baroque period with hands and fingers held close to the keyboard. But by the time of Chopin and Liszt, the early piano of Mozart’s time had developed enormously, becoming an instrument which offered a tremendously extended tonal and dynamic palette, rivalling that of a symphony orchestra. The development of radical new playing techniques was

essential if the full potential of this glorious instrument was to be realized. Liszt and Chopin were leaders in this regard. Liszt's free arm movements, his power, and his flamboyant dazzling style overwhelmed everyone who heard him play.

His long life was one of romantic turmoil, swinging between tempestuous love affairs with powerful, creative women, and the austere life of a priest. As Harold Schonberg, for many years the music critic for the New York Times, wrote: "[he was] a complicated man — a mixture of genius, vanity, generosity, lust, religion, snobbery, democracy, literary desires and visions: part Byron, part Casanova, part Mephistopheles, part St. Francis. He spent his life restlessly looking for something, torn between the demands of art, religion, and the flesh . . ." (163).

As a young man, Liszt was ambitious to become learned, to make up for what he perceived as an inadequate education. Like so many young men of Europe at the time, he affected a Byronic manner in both his dress and in his behaviour. At the age of 24, he embarked on a tempestuous love affair with the Comtesse Marie d'Agoult, who left her husband and family to accompany Liszt in four years of travelling throughout Switzerland and Italy. It was a pilgrimage sparked in large part by Liszt's intense interest in Byron's poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and his desire to follow in Byron's footsteps. The creative outcome was the first two books of the *Années de Pèlerinage*. Liszt wrote of these works:

Having in recent times travelled in many new countries, through different landscapes and places consecrated by history and poetry; having felt that the varied phenomena of nature, the processes taking place in nature, did not pass before my eyes as empty images but produced deep emotions in my soul; and that between us a vague but immediate relationship had established itself, an undefined but real rapport, an inexplicable but irrefutable communication — I have tried to present in music some of my strongest sensations and my more lively impressions. (qtd. in Sulyok x)

The two pieces that we have chosen to frame Robert's reading from canto 3 — "Au Lac de Wallenstadt" and "Eglogue" — are the second and seventh pieces of the nine-piece set, *Book One*, entitled *Première Année: Suisse*. The direct source of his inspiration for "Au Lac de Wallenstadt" is four lines from stanza 85 of the poem, which appear as an epigraph at the top of the score:

thy contrasted lake,  
With the wild world I dwelt in, is a thing  
Which warns me, with its stillness, to forsake  
Earth's troubled waters for a purer spring.

The programmatic music captures the atmosphere of this clear mountain lake nestled in the Alps with Swiss Alpine horn melodies echoing faintly from the peaks. Marie later wrote in her memoirs: "The shores of the lake of Wallenstadt kept us for a long time. Franz wrote there for me a melancholy harmony, imitative of the sigh of the waves and the cadence of oars, which I have never been able to hear without weeping" (qtd. in Searle 6-7). "Eglogue" bears the epitaph which you will hear from the last stanza of Robert's reading:

The morn is up again, the dewy morn,  
With breath all incense, and with cheek all bloom,  
Laughing the clouds away with playful scorn,  
And living as if earth contain'd no tomb, —  
(CHP 3. 98)

Here again, Liszt's intention, as stated in his preface to the set of pieces, is simply to depict in music his impression of a pastoral mountain meadow at early morn.

By extracting the music and poetry from their original contexts we have, in essence, created a new work — a work in three movements: music, poetry, music. "Au Lac de Walldenstadt" establishes the atmosphere of location, gently drawing the listener into the image to be seamlessly extended in Byron's words. I think "Eglogue" helps listeners to dissipate the intensity of their feelings along with Byron's hero, who

breathes more freely as morning is delivered to him after his long night of struggle.

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[Performance of Liszt, “Au Lac de Walldenstadt,” Byron, *Childe Harold*  
3 stanzas 85-98, and Liszt, “Eglogue.”]  
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ROBERT LAPP: Before proceeding to the second part of our programme, we thought we might take this opportunity to add a few more observations on the experience of juxtaposing Byron and Liszt in performance.

Certainly one thing that emerges in aligning poetry and music is a renewed appreciation for form. In my case, it led to a reversal of a long-held view of how to handle line endings when performing poetry aloud. I had always told my students that it was preferable to treat enjambment freely, regarding it as one of the ways a poet creates larger rhythmic patterns in counterpoint to the base metre and line length. So I began by treating Byron’s use of enjambment in this way, thinking of it in terms of what Ian Balfour was pointing out this morning — as the “sublime in style,” as Byron’s way of toying with the limits of the Spenserian stanza, pitting Romantic spontaneity against Baroque formality. Now this is undoubtedly true, but the result in oral performance seemed to me unsatisfactory, analogous perhaps to a pianist whose excessive use of *tempo rubato* destroys the underlying rhythmic structure, the crucible which holds the shape of the music. It was as if the performative sublime of the text needed some curbing or curtailing. It struck me that one way to solve this problem, and to register the difference on the ear between poetry written in lyric measure and poetry written for theatrical performance, was in fact to reverse my previous position and to mark all line endings with a slight pause. My aim was in part to recover the riches of Byron’s use of rhyme, but also to help sketch out for the ear an aural analogue of the shape of the Spenserian stanza on the page.

Another useful by-product of preparing a poem for performance is the necessity to take a position on certain lines that present interpretative cruces, or even, dare we say, lapses in the poet’s skill, especially when



Byron's notoriously rapid composition practice is taken into account. Two examples will suffice. First, take the strange moment in stanza 86 where we move from the beautifully onomatopoeic lines "on the ear / Drops the light drip of the suspended oar" to the line "Or chirps the grasshopper one good-night carol more." Now, the question arises — does this latter line constitute a lapse in diction that punctures the mood of the sublime? Does the lowly grasshopper with his "good-night carol" create a kind of bathetic plunge at odds with the sonorous alexandrine that usually concludes the Spenserian stanza? Or is it perhaps intentionally so? — a piece of wit that anticipates some of the antics of *Don Juan*? Even so, it seems all the more puzzling that Byron goes on to devote two more lines of the next stanza to this unlikely subject: "He is an evening reveller, who makes / His life an infancy, and sings his fill." Now what does one do with this in performance?

Well, my decision was to treat these lines as embodying what Jane Stabler was referring to this morning as the "protean sublime," as a Shakespearean mixing of the grave and gay, and thus to offer them as a welcome moment of comic relief — "*He is an evening reveller!*" At the same time, however, I also aimed to lend them more weight than I otherwise would have in a silent reading of the poem, in an attempt to uncover in them a telling kind of metaphorical displacement. Childe Harold is trying at this point to dissociate himself from the "distraction[s]" of "stern delights" — which included being an "evening reveller" himself, and in this context it is interesting to regard the grasshopper's desire to "make[] his life an infancy" as more than a toss-off image of natural innocence, but instead as a kind of moral failure, a deliberate self-infantilization that involves the possibly culpable hedonism of "sing[ing] [one's] fill" — and of singing too (presumably) in a different register than that of Harold's meditative measures.

Another example of an interpretative crux in performance is the stanza about the "early Persian" (91). It begins with the oddly awkward construction, "Not vainly did the early Persian make / His altar the high places" and concludes with the finger-wagging injunction: "Nor fix on fond abodes to circumscribe thy prayer" — a line that seems especially to disturb the tone of this particular passage. Now, it could well be argued that it is in keeping with other parts of the poem as a whole — as, for

example, a deliberately iconoclastic affront to the Anglican establishment back home who have been seduced into buying up thousands of copies of this latest canto of the poem. But, faced with the demands of performing this stanza only within the context of an isolated segment of the poem, I came to treat it as a crucial consolidation of Childe Harold's brief but epiphanic glimpse of the Wordsworthian sublime, and as consistent with the soliloquizing tone of the rest of the passage, thus turning the phrase "thy prayer" into a self-directed injunction to turn away from fetishizing "Greek" "columns and idol-dwellings" in order to rely instead on the salvific wholeness promised by "Nature's realms of worship, earth and air."

Similarly — and to conclude this set of reflections — I came to regard the final stanza of this section, addressing the "dewy morn," as more than a rather abrupt transition within the larger poem (leading directly to "Clarens! sweet Clarens!"), but rather as a form of closure or conclusion — another moment of crucial consolidation in which Lac Lemane becomes a kind of magic space or room in which both forms of the sublime — a Wordsworthian sense of one-ness with Being that has the power to "disarm / The spectre Death," and a Manfred-esque identity with precisely those forces of chaos and inner turmoil that reinscribe death — are given space to coexist in creatively unresolved tension. And thus, both are (in this sense) indicated in the last line as comprising the "*Much*, that may give us pause, if pondered fittingly" [my emphasis].

JANET HAMMOCK: For me, one of the most exciting aspects of our collaboration continues to be the process of listening to the ways in which the changes engendered by Robert's ongoing study of the poem find their way into his oral performance, and of allowing the music, in response, to find new resonances. Similar to Robert's changed delivery of the line endings in his aural presentation of Byron, I, too, have been continually changing my approach to the Liszt, particularly "Eglogue."

In our early performances, I had the impression that the grandeur of the Storm sequence in *Childe Harold 3* cast an enormous shadow over this relatively light-weight piece, threatening to engulf it. I still find it extremely difficult to play the happy, carefree "Eglogue" after vicariously experiencing the gut-wrenching histrionics of the "night from hell" that preceded it! When "Eglogue" is heard in the context of the entire set of

Liszt's pieces, directly preceded by his dramatic musical representation of a wild mountain storm, "Orage," and the gloomy mystical vision of "Obermann," its light, pastoral mood produces quite a different effect. The problem I was experiencing was created by the altered context. In subsequent performances, I decided to free the music as much as possible from the programmatic constraints and emotional intensity of the poem. This meant that I had to consciously fight against being caught up in the emotional peaks and valleys of the poem as it unfolded. This seemed easier to do tonight because Robert's recent decision to foreground the structure of the poem has rendered it less melodramatic. I find it interesting that we both moved independently towards freeing the music from the poem, allowing those resonances that do exist between the two forms — those things that originally drew us to juxtapose them — to remain more subtle and implicit.

A similar process of freeing has been at work in our most recent study, pairing the Keats "Ode to a Nightingale" with Chopin's Nocturne Opus 9 No. 3 in B Minor. From the beginning, Robert and I were surprised to discover astonishing similarities between the lives of Keats and Chopin. Both wrote these works at very early ages (Chopin was 20 and Keats 24) and both died of tuberculosis at tragically young ages, Chopin at 39 and Keats at 26. The "Ode" and the Nocturne resonate with a similar tone. Their sounds cascade delicately, ever downwards, through a magical twilight, before the darkness — which lies like an unspoken presence behind the mask of music and poetry — descends.

ROBERT LAPP: Yes; I was intrigued by the possible resonance between the musical genre of Nocturne and the tradition in British Literature of the Night-Thoughts poem that developed out of such precursors as Milton's "Il Penseroso," Anne Finch's "A Nocturnal Reverie," and of course Young's much longer *Night-thoughts; or, The Complaint*. Literary history, it is generally agreed, is somewhat ahead of musical history, so it seemed not overly anachronistic to examine parallels between the Romantic night-poem in particular, such as Coleridge's "Dejection" and Keats's "Nightingale," and certain elements of the musical Nocturne developed later by Chopin in the 1830s and 40s — such elements as the strongly etched lyric voice, and the tension between an apparent spontaneity of emotional expression and strong adherence to

formal structure. This parallel, of course, is further promoted by the centrality of the metaphor of music in Romantic lyric, one which works to align the so-called inexpressibility topos with the non-referentiality of music, drawing on such Romantic notions as the source of music in pure, transpersonal emotions.

JANET HAMMOCK: Yes, Robert, that's absolutely right. Many composers of this period sought to express in music that secret tone which was deemed to be inexpressible in words. Anyone acquainted with the piano Phantasie of Robert Schumann, for example, will recall the epigraph published in the first edition: four lines by Friedrich Schlegel:

Among all the tones that sound  
Through Earth's many-coloured dream  
A soft tone comes forth  
For the one who listens in secret  
(qtd. in Hutchinson 194)

The nineteenth-century piano nocturne was a perfect vehicle for the expression of the secret tone. As some of you may know, the title "Nocturne" first appeared on a published piano piece by the Irish-born composer and pianist John Field in 1812. Chopin's development of this new form sprang from his tremendous love for the singing voice, the *bel canto* style, which he emulated on the piano. The new English-action pianos (and later the French Pleyel pianos) were capable of producing a much more beautiful, sustained, singing tone than could earlier keyboard instruments. Furthermore, these pianos had an effective damper pedal which enabled Chopin to write accompaniments for lyrical vocal lines using wide leaps joined with the pedal to create a harmonic cushion upon which the melody floated.

Chopin's Nocturnes, though, are not dreamy lullabies. Their strong underlying structure reflects the influence of the music he most deeply admired: that of Bach, Mozart, and Schubert. In fact, he abhorred the term "Romantic," and did not apply it to his work, preferring instead the elegance of classical forms imbued with the glorious *cantilena* melodies of the *bel canto* Italian opera style of Bellini.

ROBERT LAPP: You get a sense of how we can educate each other in these interdisciplinary exchanges — Chopin's preference for classical forms, and distrust of the term Romantic, came as a complete surprise to me! But with this in mind, I returned to Keats's "Nightingale," and gained a renewed appreciation for the elegance of its structure: — its carefully invented and sustained stanza form, and its relative lack of enjambment (by comparison with Byron). And, like Chopin's *Nocturne*, Keats's "Nightingale" has a much more restrained and coiled dynamic range than Byron's *Childe Harold*.

A final point of resonance that we'd like to point out is that both the *Nocturne* and the *Ode* were written at moments of intense personal crisis in the lives of their respective artists.

JANET HAMMOCK: Chopin had just left his native Warsaw for Vienna and Stuttgart. Long letters to his friend Tytus in Warsaw reveal the deep depression suffered by the nineteen-year-old composer due to intense loneliness, coupled with the pain of his recently contracted venereal disease. An excerpt from his diary reveals the depths of his despair:

but what makes me any better than a corpse? Like a corpse, I have no news of my father, mother, sisters, of Tytus! Nor do corpses have lovers! Corpses are pale like me, cold like my feelings. A corpse has ceased living, and I have lived enough . . . Why does one go on living this miserable life? (qtd. in Zamoyski 87)

ROBERT LAPP: And, of course, as is well known, Keats, in the spring of 1819, had just nursed his brother Tom to an untimely death from tuberculosis, and had recently discovered the first signs of his own affliction with this fatal disease . . .

JANET HAMMOCK: Yet Keats and Chopin were able to transform the bleakness of their immediate personal landscapes into deeply meaningful poetic and musical revelations.

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[Performance of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Chopin's *Nocturne Opus 9 No. 3 in B Minor*.]

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