HIGH SCHOOL EDITION
Journal of Student Research
Volume 14 Issue 1 (2025)

Adoring Female Fans? Reframing Franz Liszt's Relationships with Women through the Lens of the Salon

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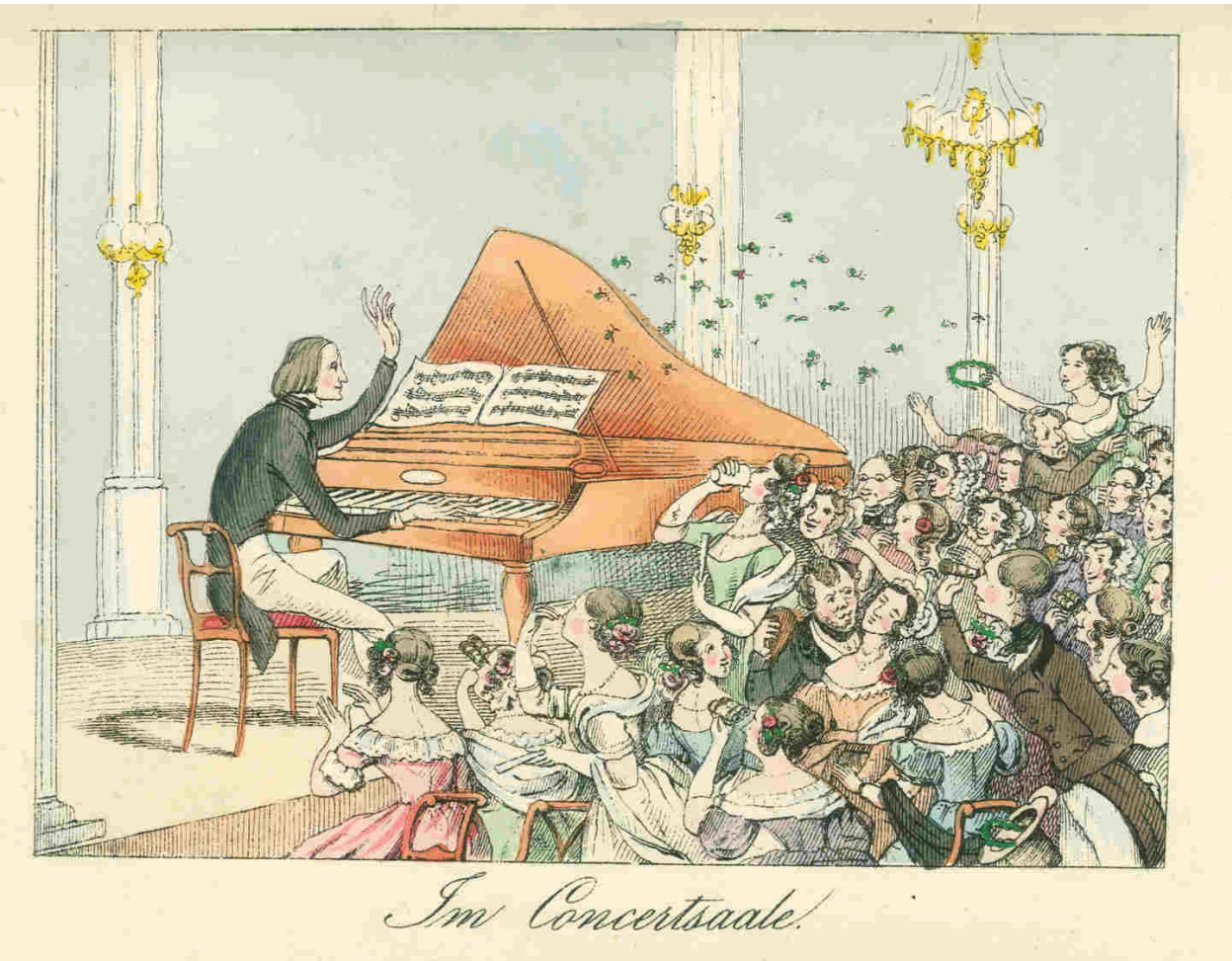

Figure 1. "In the Concert Hall," by Theodor Hosemann, 1842.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship of the well-known classical composer Franz Liszt and women. During his European tours of the 1830s and 1840s, audiences were enthralled by Liszt's charisma and dramatic musicianship, which initiated a wave of Liszt fever. Women, especially, were enthralled by Liszt's performances and later played a central role in the development of his career. With Liszt's participation in various salons, his relationships with women as interlocutors, friends or intellectual equals are further portrayed.

Introduction

More than a hundred years before musicians such as Elvis Presley and the Beatles generated numerous worldwide hysterias with their music and sexual appeal, Liszt had shocked Europe and the musical world with his brilliant performances at the piano. During his European tours of the 1830s and 1840s, audiences were enthralled by Liszt's charisma and dramatic musicianship. This initiated a wave of Liszt fever: the poet Heinrich Heine went so far as to coin the term "Lisztomania" to describe this unprecedented type of musical fandom. Apart from Liszt's incredible musicality, he was also strikingly handsome and possessed the ability to captivate audiences with his seductive body language. As portrayed in "In the Concert Hall," painted by Theodor Hoseman in 1842, Liszt's flamboyance attracted many female followers who screamed thrillingly or even passed out in their seats. They tossed flowers, used binoculars to get a better view, and fought for Liszt's belongings such as his handkerchief, gloves, and even1 discarded cigar butts. Audiences also scrambled to acquire a lock of Liszt's hair or piano strings he had broken during concerts. In the public imagination, Liszt is the dominant, charismatic musician; women are portrayed as passive, albeit hysterical, receptacles for his brilliant virtuosity. Within this dominant narrative, one hardly gets the idea that women may have played a central role in the development of his career or that Liszt ever interacted with women as interlocutors, friends, or intellectual equals.

If we hone in on another aspect of Liszt's career–namely, his participation in various notable salons–a very different picture of his relationship to the public, and particularly to women, begins to emerge. Arguably, Liszt's path to success was paved in part by various salonnieres who supported him in the early stages of his career, and it is certain that much of his non-musical education took place within salons, or at least through the networks of individuals that he met through them. In most of these salons, women were the dominant force. Multiple salonnieres–perhaps most notably, Marie D'Agoult–supported Liszt's musical career, provided him with access to the highest echelons of society, and introduced him to new aspects of politics and philosophy that would become crucial to his later views as a musician and thinker. In Liszt's time, salons functioned to blur longstanding boundaries of gender, class, and national identity. In addition, they provided a space for approaches to musical performance and listening that were distinct from the better-known sphere of the public concert hall.

Liszt's entry into the salon

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, musical culture underwent many profound changes in styles of composition, performance, and listening. Many of these changes were especially visible in the institution of the salon: spaces where professional musicians, artists, intellectuals, and noble amateurs gathered regularly to discuss ideas in various fields such as philosophy, literature, and the arts. This provided informal additional education for visitors and played a vital role in shaping "enlightened" individuals. Crucially, they were also important centers of musical culture. Salons contained musical aspects regardless of the type of the salon, and their hosts often had a strong interest in music, which led them to organize various performances by professionals and promote musicians through their patronage. Salons were normally organized and hosted by salonnieres, aristocratic women with extensive resources and social prestige. Especially during the early stages of his performing career, Liszt formed various close, personal relationships with women in salons, and they played no small part in the rapid ascension of his musical career and status as an international celebrity.

Liszt started playing the piano at an early age. He was born into a musical family where his musician father first taught him piano and discovered Liszt's potential in music. Due to Liszt's talent, he started tours at a young age, traveling around various countries in Europe such as Germany, France, and England. As a result of young Liszt's experiences with music and his later studies with Czerny, he was able to learn about music and develop a strong musical

career. Despite Liszt's early education in the musical field, he was not able to get a fuller education in other areas. This is one of the most significant ways in which the salon affected Liszt's life.

As a young man, Liszt possessed substantial intellectual curiosity, always wanting to learn more about politics, philosophy, and religion, and how these domains could intersect with music and the arts. However, he was sensitive about his lack of formal education outside of music. Thankfully, the intellectual culture of the salon provided a crucial outlet for his passion for learning (Muller, 2021). The salons that Liszt was fortunate enough to attend were culturally buoyant and populated by major figures of Romanticism such as George Sand, Hector Berlioz, and Frederic Chopin (Ellis, 2011). In the salons, Liszt became acquainted with numerous contemporary opinions on political, social, and artistic issues. For example, Liszt's encounter with Maurice Schlesinger's journal, which included Berlioz and Sand as its contributors, introduced him to the philosophy of Romantic idealism, which promoted the idea that the contemporary world was tarnished by materialism and superficial politics (Ellis, 2011). His understanding of Romanticism further developed when he was also exposed to Saint-Simonism and the teachings of Lamennais, which, respectively, promoted political and religious approaches to socialism. With all the discussions he had and ideas he heard in salons, Liszt centered on the notion of the artist as a kind of priest: one who leads the community away from decadence. Liszt's thoughts are shown in Balzac's Béatrice: "To hear him talk, art is something holy, sacred . . . The artist, he declares, is a missionary; art is a religion with its priests and must have its martyrs." (Ellis, 2011).

Other than shaping Liszt's view on the arts, religion taught through salons also influenced his outlook on socio-political movements. Liszt's concern for the masses stemmed from the Saint-Simonian doctrine which emphasized the participation of everyone, especially in the arts, to create an egalitarian society. As shown in his Lettre d'un bachelier of 1837 to Adolphe Pictet, Liszt also desired social regeneration by "[restoring] courage to the weak and [easing] the suffering of the oppressed." (Ellis, 2011). Liszt's interpretation of Romanticism, the arts, and social issues at that time reflects the opinions of those who possessed revolutionary and enlightened ideas. And, as various historians have shown, many of these ideas were first cultivated and disseminated in salons. For Liszt specifically, there is no doubt that his views on politics, philosophy, and religion–views which shaped his music in different ways throughout his life–were shaped greatly by the encounters he had in salons and with salonnieres.

Blurring Boundaries of Gender, Class, and National Identity

Compared to other institutions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European society, gender roles in the salon were not especially strict. Different from societal expectations of that time, when men had control over most everyday activities or formal meetings, salons were considered as the natural dominion of women, not least because most salons were hosted by women, better known at the time as "salonierres." Women organized everything from the seating to the events in the gathering, showing how females were the center of life in the salon and carried important responsibilities as regulators. The guests, on the other hand, were of mixed gender. Liszt, while attending these salons, came into contact with many women and was inspired by those who challenged traditional gender barriers. Salonnieres were also influenced by Liszt's views and his music. For example, the enlightened female writers Bettina von Arnim and George Sand were encouraged through their encounters with Liszt to further critical development (Muller, 2021). Liszt's communications with these salonnieres–both inside the salon and through the exchange of letters–shows that they learned from each other across a wide range of fields, including music, the arts, politics, and philosophy.

In a similar manner to the relatively relaxed approach to gender roles in salons, the social dynamics of class were somewhat ambiguous in salons. Many historians of salons have noted that they helped to blur the boundaries between different classes. Compared to earlier artistic and intellectual institutions, salons were relatively open spaces. This enabled various classes–especially the aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie– to interact, participating together in activities such as music, the reading of poetry, and the discussion of philosophy. Despite the easy accessibility of salons for some members of the public, these institutions nevertheless tended to draw sharp distinctions between people of upper and lower status. The educated and socially privileged preferred staying together as a small group, and while

visitors from higher standings were welcomed, the lower classes were not represented as much (Fuhrmann, 2018). Furthermore, guests generally needed personal connections with salonnieres, who were mostly noble women, to be invited, or they had to be introduced through an influential participant of the salon (Cypess, 2022). Liszt, who was not born in a noble family, frequently participated in salons hosted by aristocratic women, meeting numerous aristocratic females and having affairs with them. For example, Liszt once met the married French Countess Adele Laprunarede in her salon, and ultimately developed a romantic relationship with her (Muller, 2021).

In addition to bringing people of various classes together, salons also fostered relationships between people with various national identities. Exiled people and women who fled from their family commonly participated in such gatherings, investing their wealth and time in promoting salons rather than adhering to expected class and gender roles (Müller, 2021). Travelers and guests from other countries could also participate in salons comparatively easily due to its openness. In an age of rising nationalism, salons enabled cosmopolitan networks of artists and intellectuals to form and flourish. This was certainly the case for Liszt, a Hungarian-born musician who made a name for himself in salons across Europe, but especially in Paris.

In between Public and Private: Listening and Performing in the Salon

Before the widespread rise of salons, musical performances were generally held in either "public" or "private" spaces. (The term "public sphere" signifies an invitation to musical action and experience addressed to everybody regardless of gender, class, or race, while "private sphere" refers to a musical performance directed toward a clearly defined, and often small, gathering of people.) On the one hand, musical performances were often held in the households of nobility and royalty, where guests wandered around and talked freely with each other, often paying minimal attention to the music itself. In these types of performances, close listening to "the music itself" was not the norm. On the other hand, there were frequent public performances where music was used as part of bigger political and/or religious events. In these instances, historical evidence suggests that listeners mainly prioritized the political and social aspects embedded in the pieces, rather than focusing on the details of the music. In sum, both "public" and "private" styles of performance in earlier eras did not seem to encourage audiences to listen closely to the music they were hearing.

Much like their role in blurring boundaries of gender, class, and national identity, salons also complicate any clear-cut distinctions between the "public" and "private" modes of musical performance. Wolfgang Fuhrmann has recently suggested that the quasi-private, quasi-public, space of the salon led to what he has called the art of "intimate listening". (Fuhrmann, 2018) This kind of private performance was based more on feelings of trust and friendship rather than social regulations or showing off in bourgeois circles. Communication without words and rather through notes became a hallmark of these spaces, and new forms of music like chamber music were especially well suited for these gatherings.

In public spaces including concert halls and festivals, Liszt performed mostly to impress the audience and make an adequate living. He enjoyed playing pieces from major composers such as Beethoven or other famous contemporaries such as Chopin, and in these performances, Liszt commonly deviated from what was actually written on the score. He always improvised to match his mood at that instance, and when Liszt performed the same piece for the second time, he apparently felt the need to add something to make it even more entertaining, both for himself and his audience. Liszt once confessed to Gottfried Weber, a prominent musician at that time, that he "even went so far as to add a host of rapid runs and cadenzas" to secure applause for himself (Hamilton, 2008). In public concerts, Liszt was free to adjust the tempo or alternate various musical textures, even if these deviated from what was written in the score (Hamilton, 2008). He also frequently communicated with the audience by asking them to write on a strip of paper what type of sounds they wanted to hear in his music. He would then choose one randomly and improvise a piece based on that sound (Hamilton, 2008).

However, in salons, Liszt was able to focus more on communicating subtle musical nuances to his audience, not on exhibiting his virtuosity. His approach to compositions became much more strict and he interpreted music with

a sincere fidelity that was not shown in his public performances (Hamilton, 2008). Although Liszt did change certain musical aspects to match his taste, his attitude in salons demonstrates how he developed a type of intimate observation of music and closely adhered to the original composer's intentions. What was once unique to the salon has now become the norm throughout classical music culture. As Liszt once did in salons, current instrumentalists perform in a way that is strictly loyal to what is written in the score. Rather than seeking to appeal to a large audience who is expecting an exciting spectacle, musicians focus on communicating the composer's own intentions to their audience.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have challenged commonplace understandings of the role of women in Liszt's career. By focusing on the institution of the salon rather than the concert hall, we see just how much influence women had on Liszt's non-musical education, his career, and his acceptance into the upper echelons of society. Many scholars have noted that salons functioned as liminal spaces between different genders, classes, national identities, and the public and private spheres. Here, we have seen that Liszt was the beneficiary of this institutional openness in a number of ways: first, he was able to mingle with the aristocracy of the day, despite his non-noble status; second, he met important figures of various European nationalities; and third, he was granted the opportunity to meet and develop meaningful relationships with a number of path-breaking women of the time. In addition, Liszt was able to use the unique performing conditions of the salon to develop more "intimate" ways of performing and listening to music. Even if Liszt is often associated with fainting women in concert halls, this paper has shown that women, especially in the context of the salon, played an integral role in the development of his career as a musician and thinker. Indeed, without these women of the salon, Liszt may never have had his adoring female audiences in the first place.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Navon for helping me understand this topic more deeply and provide valuable insights for me.

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