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ANALYSIS OF TONAL EXPANSION IN LISZT'S *LA LUGUBRE GONDOLA*

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Abstract:

The last 15 piano works of Franz Liszt, written during the last five years of his life (1881-1886), have fascinated musicians for their harmonic radical, often associated with prophetic harmonic procedures. These works illustrate Liszt's experimental style at its most extreme associated with macabre/death, bizarre, and dreamlike. Historians have attributed to Liszt morbid obsession of death, starting from the passings of his two children in 1860s, and continuing with series of depressing events leading to his death. Specifically, four of them are related to the death of Richard Wagner (his son-in-law), including *La lugubre gondola* I and II, *Am Grabe* Richard Wagner, and R.W. – Venezia. Much of this music are articulated by various negative fantasy through within limited or lack tonal focus; hence, Liszt wrote these works clearly to the approaching exhaustion of tonality. The purpose of this writing is to analyze the two numbers of *La lugubre gondolas* and evaluate the harmonic writings, in which Liszt pointed out the music to the approaching exhaustion of tonality. The result of the analysis is the radical harmonic language: unresolved dissonant relationships, ambiguous chromatic harmonic progressions, slow-moving ostinato patterns without clear musical direction, lean and quiet textures, tremolos, many silences that interrupt the progress of the music, and monophonic recitatives. The historical-analytical method is applied to draw the conclusion that Liszt's late piano works foreshadowed new sound associated with the early twentieth century especially in the music of Debussy and Schoenberg.

Keywords: Liszt, late works, tonality, tonal expansion, *la lugubre gondola*

Introduction

Entering the nineteenth century romanticism, in which every composer was challenged to find and create his own distinctive voice, along with the obsession with originality from the artists and critics, Franz Liszt was perhaps the most modern of his time, both as a performer and a composer. As a performer, he achieved reputation as a virtuoso pianist, whose technique and

artistry seemed to go beyond sorcery. As a composer, he wrote a totally new style of composition in an unheard-of-fashion, especially those written in Paris and Weimar.

To a remarkable extend the music of Liszt reflected the most innovative features of the late nineteenth century "Romantic" period – a richly expressive chromatic harmony, including the modification of tonality through a revival of modality, an exploration of whole-tone scales, and a preoccupation with the augmented triad. The last 15 piano works, written during 1881-1886, reach the approaching exhaustion of the language of tonality as they describe Liszt's dissatisfaction with tonality. These works are often described as the cryptic works by scholars, which pushed the tonality to its brink, suggesting the forthcoming musical styles of both impressionism and expressionism. They corresponded to various depressing moments of his life starting from 1860s. As time progressed, Liszt grew increasingly isolated and depressed, often overwhelmed by sadness and despair.

The depression was reflected in Liszt's late piano music as he composed them in a radical manner illustrating his experimental style at its extremity, as stated by Humphrey Searle:

> "It is against the background of these events that the works of Liszt's last period must be viewed, for they explain the personal significance of some of these compositions, and also show the direction in which his thoughts were tending." (Searle, 68).

These works suggest improvisatory flow of materials, as though Liszt sought to mimic the thoughts experienced in dreams or introspection, illustrating death, despair, and recollections of the past. Moreover, these works were also written with the breakdown of traditional tonal functions, resulting in declining tonality and early atonality, emphasized by the lack of tonal definition and sense of cadence, the pillar on which tonality rests, explained by Jim Samson:

> "… but it is above all in the short piano pieces written in the eighties that we are made acutely aware of Liszt's dissatisfaction with a traditional means of expression. The harmonic language of these late pieces often rejects traditional diatonic functions, responding feely and boldly to programmatic suggestion of a mystical or valedictory character." (Samson, 16).

Liszt's late writing also responded to programmatic suggestion of a mystical character, especially associated with continuous premonition of Wagner's death in 1883. There are four works directly associated with the premonition of Wagner's death: two versions of *La Lugubre Gondola, Richard Wagner-Venezia*, and *Am Grabe Richard Wagner*. Both *La Lugubre Gondola* features

unresolved dissonances without clear direction/cadence, resulting in ambiguous chromatic harmony, along with slow-moving ostinato patterns, either thick or lean textures, tremolos with no musical goals, and silences that make the music fragmented.

Liszt in his late piano works was part of the rebellious composers who sought for new novelty in challenging the stability of tonal system, in which tonality could not "satisfy" the genuine expression of composer anymore. This writing style became such harmonic revolution entering the twentieth century, a style that emphasized individuality and extreme personal expression. In discussing this particular Liszt's writing style, however, many authors usually focus on Liszt being a virtuoso player rather him nurturing the most progressive tendencies of his culture. As a composer, his music was aggressively advanced, especially in his cryptic late works, which pushed well beyond the confines of traditional tonality to suggest the forthcoming musical styles of both impressionism and expressionism.

Traditional Tonality and Its Expansion in the Late-Nineteenth Century

The birth of Baroque music in c1600 was also associated with the birth of the tonal system, a harmonic language that has one specific tonal center as the organization. Arnold Schoenberg defined tonality as follows:

> "[Tonality is] the art of combining tones in such successions and such harmonies on successions of harmonies, that the relation of all events to a fundamental tone is made possible." (Dudeque, 245).

In addition, Delbert M. Beswick adds:

> "Tonality is the organized relationship of musical sounds, as perceived and interpreted with respect to some central point of reference that seems to coordinate the separate items and events and to lend them meaning as component parts of a unified whole." (Beswick, 18).

There are four characteristics for a music to have tonal function:

1. The presence of harmonic hierarchy, in which the tonic and the dominant are the most important chords that the whole music must revolve around the two polarities.
2. Clear musical materials and form that unify the composition into one cyclical structural coherence.
3. Triadic concept, in which the whole music is built upon relationship on third interval.
4. Well-defined relationship between consonance and dissonance, in which the dissonance is required to resolve to the consonance, even after a given time duration.

The highlight of nineteenth century harmony was proven through the works of composers who remained rooted in the sense of tonality, yet at the same time became increasingly chromatic to the point of obscuring traditional tonality, and ultimately breaking it. (Kramer, 191). Due to the artistic challenge which seeks for composers' distinctive voices, composers gradually felt the need of change from the conventional tonal system; hence, the traditional tonality faced a radical change which opened various new harmonic approaches, which was mainly caused by the ascendancy of chromaticism, including:

1. Parallel voice leading, which is a "type of motion in which two voices move in the same direction by the same interval." (Kostka, 651). An example of this texture can be observed in *Liszt's Unstern! Sinistre, Disastro,* S. 208.
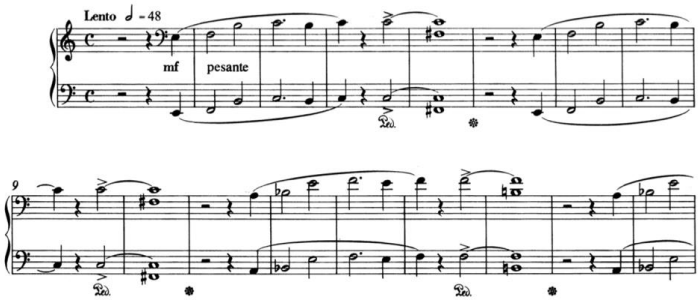


Figure 1 Liszt, *Unstern! Sinistre. Disastro*, S. 208, mm. 1-17

2. Unresolved dissonance, which quality refers to intervals including major and minor seconds, sevenths, perfect fourths, tritones, and all augmented and diminished intervals. (Kotska, 647). An example of this texture can be observed in Liszt's *Nuages Gris*, S. 199.
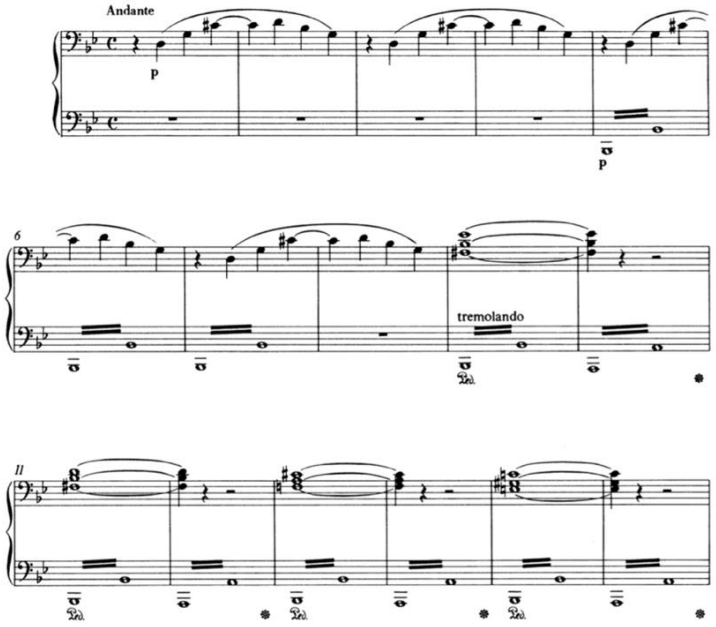


Figure 2 Liszt, *Nuages gris*, S. 199, mm. 1-16

3. Double tonic complex/progressive tonality, which is a composition technique where the music begins and ends in different keys. Music written in double-tonic complex is when two keys coexist and stand in the same importance. An example of this can be observed in Chopin's *Scherzo in B-flat minor*, Op. 31. In the work, the key oscillates between relative keys of B-flat minor and D-flat major.

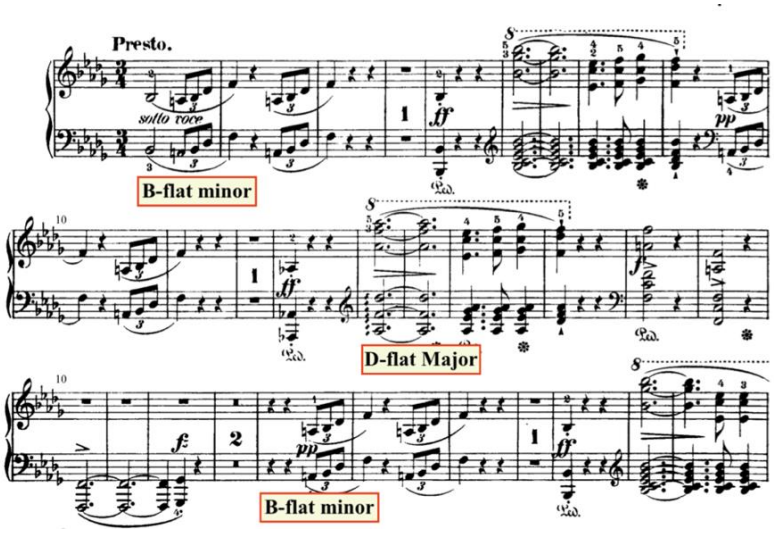


Figure 3 Chopin, *Scherzo no. 2*, Op. 31, mm. 1-11

4. Suspended tonality, a term coined by Schoenberg that refers to erasure of the sense of tonic which is commonly achieved through the use of diminished sevenths or altered chords. (Ardnt, *tonality*, University of Iowa). An example of this can be observed in Chopin's *Ballade No. 1 in G minor*, Op. 23.

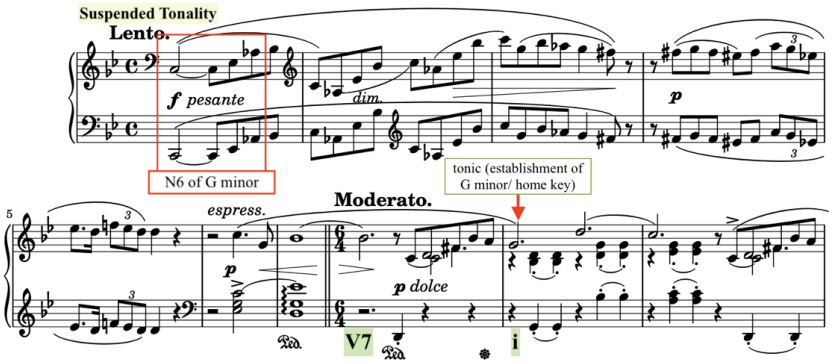


Figure 4 Chopin, *Ballade No. 1 in G minor*, Op. 23, mm. 1-10

5. Direct modulation, which uses no pivot chords to move from one key to another. (Kostka, 646). As an example, the use of direct modulation is observed in Wagner's *Prelude from Tristan und Isolde,* WWV 90.
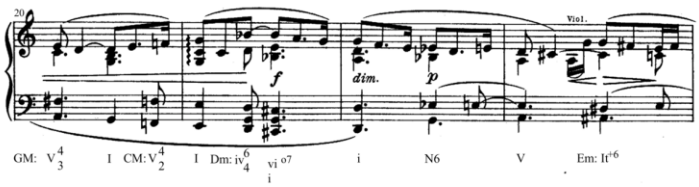


Figure 5 Wagner, piano reduction of *Prelude* from *Tristan und Isolde*, WWV 90, mm. 20-23

6. Tritone relationship and augmented-based triad, in which Liszt used it as the foundation in his late works, for example in the *La lugubre Gondola* No. 1, S. 200.
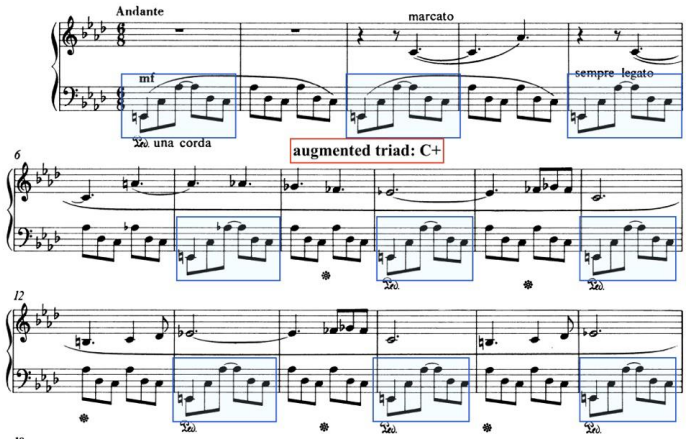


Figure 6 Liszt, *La lugubre Gondola No. 1*, S. 200, mm. 1-17

7. Floating tonality, a term coined by Schoenberg to define music that oscillates between two or more keys that results in the ambiguous sense of tonal center. (Noden-Skinner, 28). An example of this harmony can be observed in Chopin's *Prelude No. 2 in A minor,* Op. 28, in which the harmonic ambiguity is due to three reasons: the dominant opening; highly chromatic texture in the inner notes; and no clear cadential pattern due to irregular phrasing and fragmented melody.
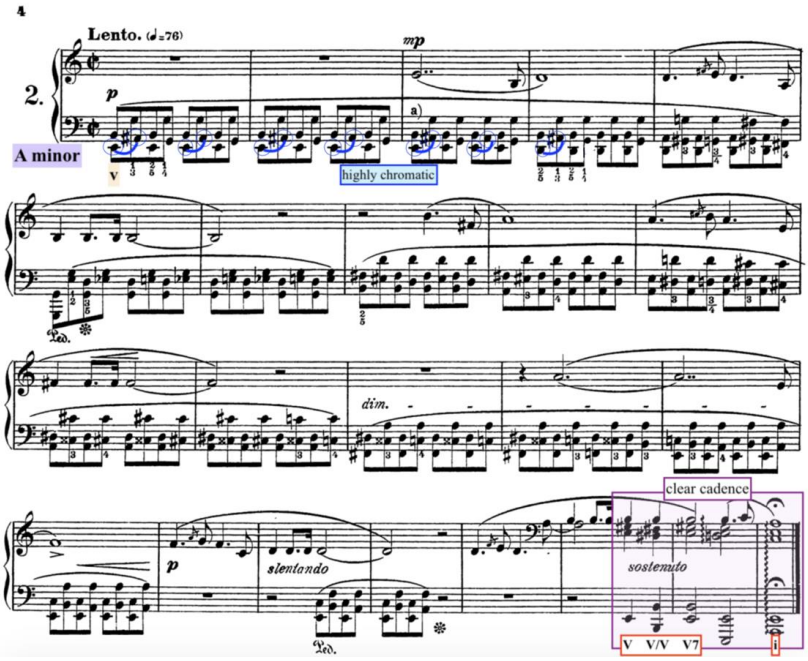


Figure 8 Chopin, *Prelude No. 2 in A minor*, Op. 28

Although Chopin greatly experimented with tonal expansion, nevertheless, Liszt experimented further with what Chopin had done to the extent of abandoning the fundamental structure of tonality (dissolution of tonality) as seen in his Bagatelle without Tonality. Liszt's contribution in tonal expansion and dissolution heavily influenced his contemporaries, as explained by Copland,

> "His influence on Wagner's harmonic procedures has been sufficiently stressed, but not his uncanny foreshadowing of the French impressionisty. One set of 12 piano pieces, rarely if ever performed, *L;Arbre de Noel*, and especially *Cloches du soir* from that set, might be mistaken for early Debussy. . . . throughout the length and breadth of Liszt's works we are likely to come upon harmonic inspirations: unsuspected modulations and chordal progressions touched upon for the first time. Moreover, his sense of spacing a chord is thoroughly contemporary: bell-like open sonorities contrasting sharply with the crowded massing of thunderous bass chords. It is not too much to say that Liszt, through his impact upon Wagner and Franck and Grieg and Debussy and Scriabin and the early Bartok, and especially the nationalist Russians headed by Mussorgsky, is one of the main sources of much of our present-day harmonic freedom ." (Copland, 121-122).

Dramatic Changes in Liszt's Life since 1860

The year of 1860 marked important changes in Liszt's life, which indirectly changed the way he wrote music. Followings are the timeline consisting of prominent events which caused instability in Liszt's life and music.

1. 1859, the year of Liszt's dismissal as the court conductor in Weimar. Also in this year was the death of his son, Daniel, at the age of 21 due to tuberculosis, which disrupted Liszt mentally.
2. 1861, the year of unsuccessful marriage between Liszt and princess Sayn-Wittgenstein due to the princess's husband, who holds authoritative power. Other than that, there was a newspaper protest against the new music of Liszt and the Weimar school, which was deemed overly dramatic under the signature of Brahms and Joachim. The brutal critics created the war of the romantics which made Liszt artistically unstable.
3. 1862, the death of Liszt's eldest daughter, Blandine (age 25) due to surgery complication.
4. 1863, the year of love affair with Agnes Street-Klindworth as the relationship with the princess was not set.

5. 1864, although the princess was officially divorced, however, there was no further talk about marriage with Liszt.
6. 1867-72, in which Liszt' daughter, Cosima (the wife of Hans vön Bulow), had an affair and illegitimate child with Wagner which led to a quarrel between the two composers.
7. 1880s, in which Liszt's health began fail, followed by a series of illness including asthma, insomnia, cataract, chronic heart disease, and depression. In 1881, Liszt suffered heart attack and died in Bayreuth.

Liszt and His Late Mystical Piano Works (1881-1886)

Due to the series of dramatic changes in his life since 1860, subsequently Liszt became experimental with the harmony, which expressed his dissatisfaction with traditional tonality and its sense of cadence, the pillar on which tonality rests. These works feature innovational expansion and dissolution of tonal function. The 15 works include:

1. *Nuages gris, S. 199.*
2. *La lugubre Gondola no. 1, S. 200.*
3. *La lugubre Gondola no. 2, S. 200.*
4. *R.W. – Venezia, S. 201.*
5. *Am Grabe Richard Wagner, S. 135.*
6. *Valse Ouibliées, S. 215.*
7. *Csárdás Macabre, S. 224.*
8. *Les jeaux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este, S. 163.*
9. *Csárdás Obstinée, S. 225.*
10. *En rêve, S. 207.*
11. *Bagatelle sans Tonalité, S. 216a.*
12. *Unstern! Sinistre, Disastro, S. 208.*
13. *Mephisto Waltz No. 2, S. 515.*
14. *Mephisto Waltz No. 3, S. 216.*
15. *Mephisto Waltz No. 4, S. 216b.*

The Writing of *La lugubre Gondola*

The compositional technique in Liszt's late piano music were written in such radical manners as he became experimental in exploring beyond the limits of tonality to the extremity of tonal dissolution, as described by Larry Todd:

> "His innovative approaches to tonal planning that led ineluctably to powerful excursions into atonality, his extension of the major-minor tonal system through a variety of non-diatonic scales, his development of progressions with quartal and non-third-based harmonies, and his striking applications of diminished seventh chords, augmented triads, and other chromatic harmonies." (Todd, 93-94).

The following seven points are the summary of how Liszt expresses his dissatisfaction with traditional tonal system to convey such depressing moments and death premonition in *La lugubre Gondola* No. 1, S. 200:

1. Total deconstruction of musical elements; mere repetitions of material with no sense of melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, or tonal goal.
2. Non-developing structure without clear syntactic plot; the sense of unresolved musical materials.
3. Ambiguous use of tonality represented by discording relationship between the key signature and the overall harmony of the music.
4. Augmented-based and diminished-based harmony replacing the major-minor system.
5. The lack of clear rhythmic impetus by the ostinato figure which creates the sense of static musical goal.
6. The lack of clear cadence, in which the pillar of tonality stands.
7. The combination of various textures, including monophonic which declines the tonal stability.

La lugubre Gondola no. 1 is written in 6/8, based on the barcarolle rhythmic figure. It is cast in three-part strophic with whole tone direct modulation in each strophic: strophic I (mm. 1-38), strophic II (mm. 39-76), and strophic III (mm. 77-120). The first and the second strophic are identical with subsections a-b-c. The whole work is based on two materials: augmented-based harmony and descending chromatic line. Due to the prominence of the augmented triad, the key signature does not correspond to the music, hence, the inability to define a tonal center.

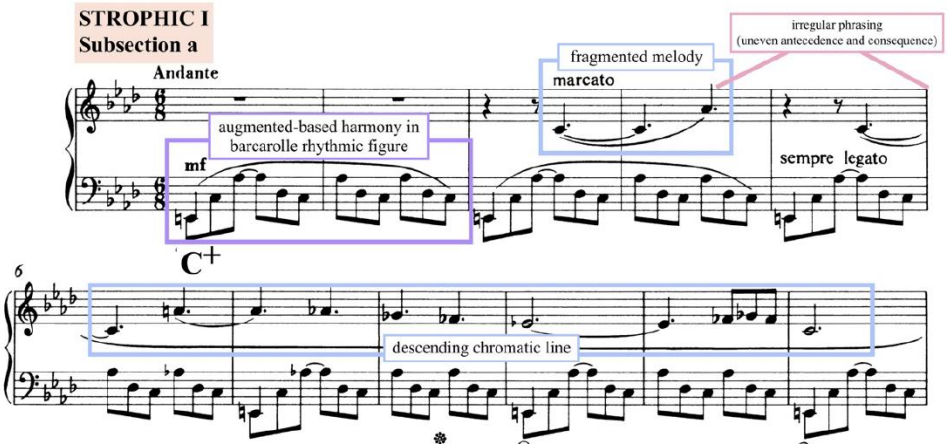


Figure 9 Liszt, *Le lugubre Gondola No. 1*, mm. 1-11

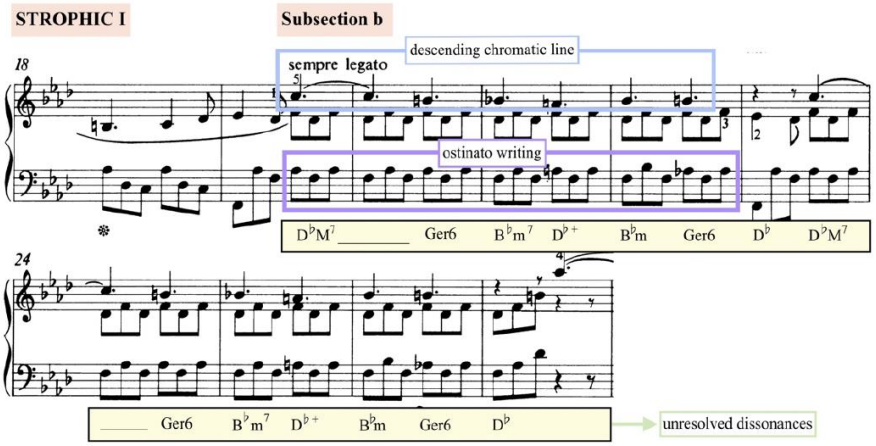


Figure 10 Liszt, *Le lugubre Gondola No. 1*, mm. 18-27

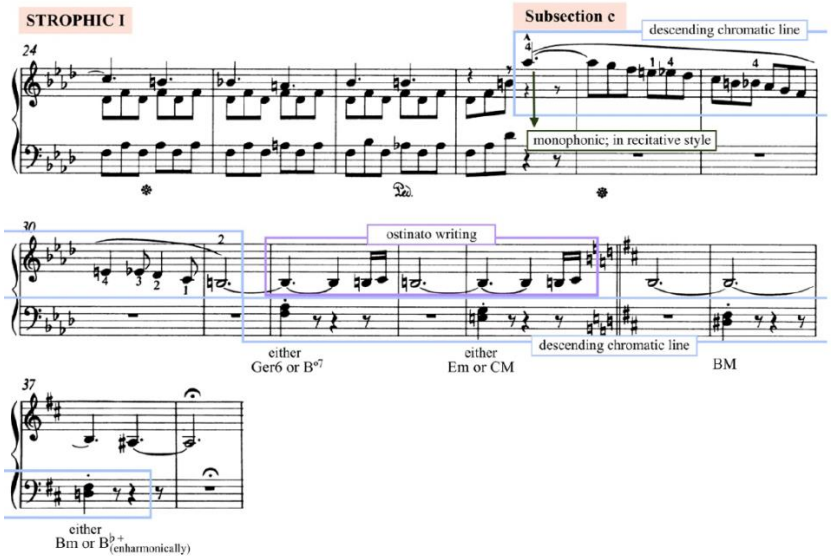


Figure 11 Liszt, *Le lugubre Gondola No. 1*, mm. 24-38

Although the third strophic looks different at first, however, the materials are essentially the same with the first two strophic with tremolo ostinato figure. Both the melody and the accompaniment are transposed an octave lower. Unlike the previous two strophic, the third strophic is based solely on the material of subsection a, repeated three times with a whole tone modulation lower in each repetition.

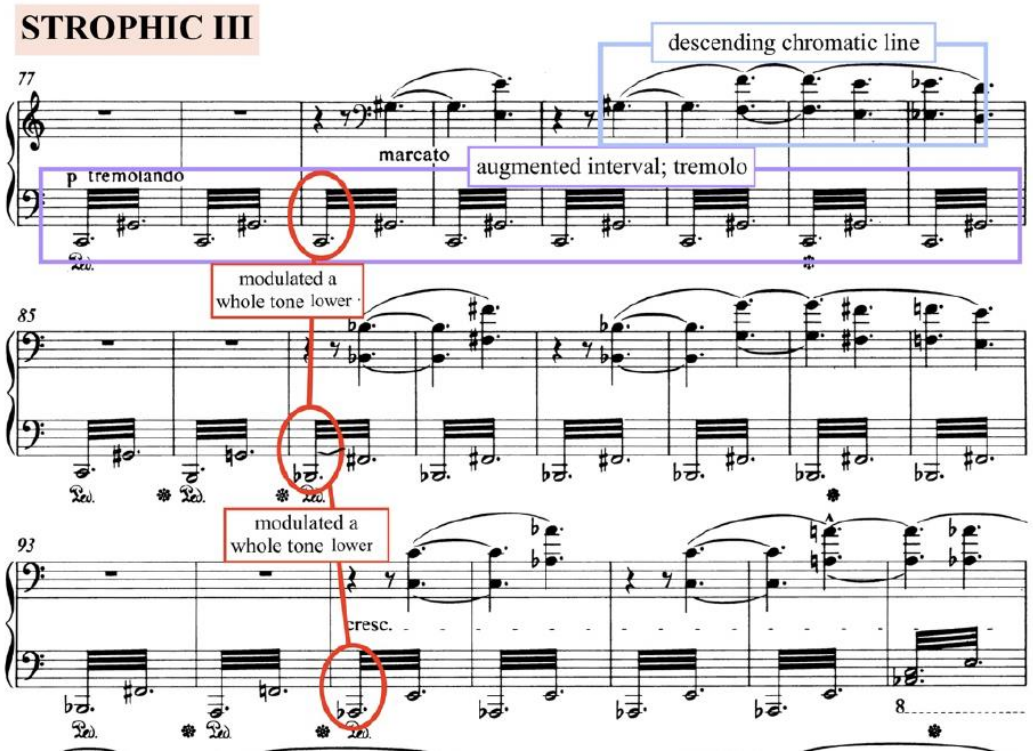


Figure 12 Liszt, *Le lugubre Gondola No. 1*, mm. 77-99

La lugubre Gondola no. 2, although sharing same materials from number one, however, there are six differences:

1. The overall longer duration.
2. The structure of the music, which is cast in arch form: A (recitative, mm.1-34), B (aria, mm. 35-68), C (episode, mm. 69-109), B (aria, mm. 109-124), A (recitative, mm. 125-139), coda (mm. 140-168), which give more structural identity rather than strophic form.
3. It has more textural changes that are equally weighted between various textures.
4. More detailed tempo markings, articulations, and personal markings.
5. It has a different perspectives of time signature for a gondola writing with 4/4.
6. Although highly ambiguous in harmony, however, the sense of tonality is more present than the first one.
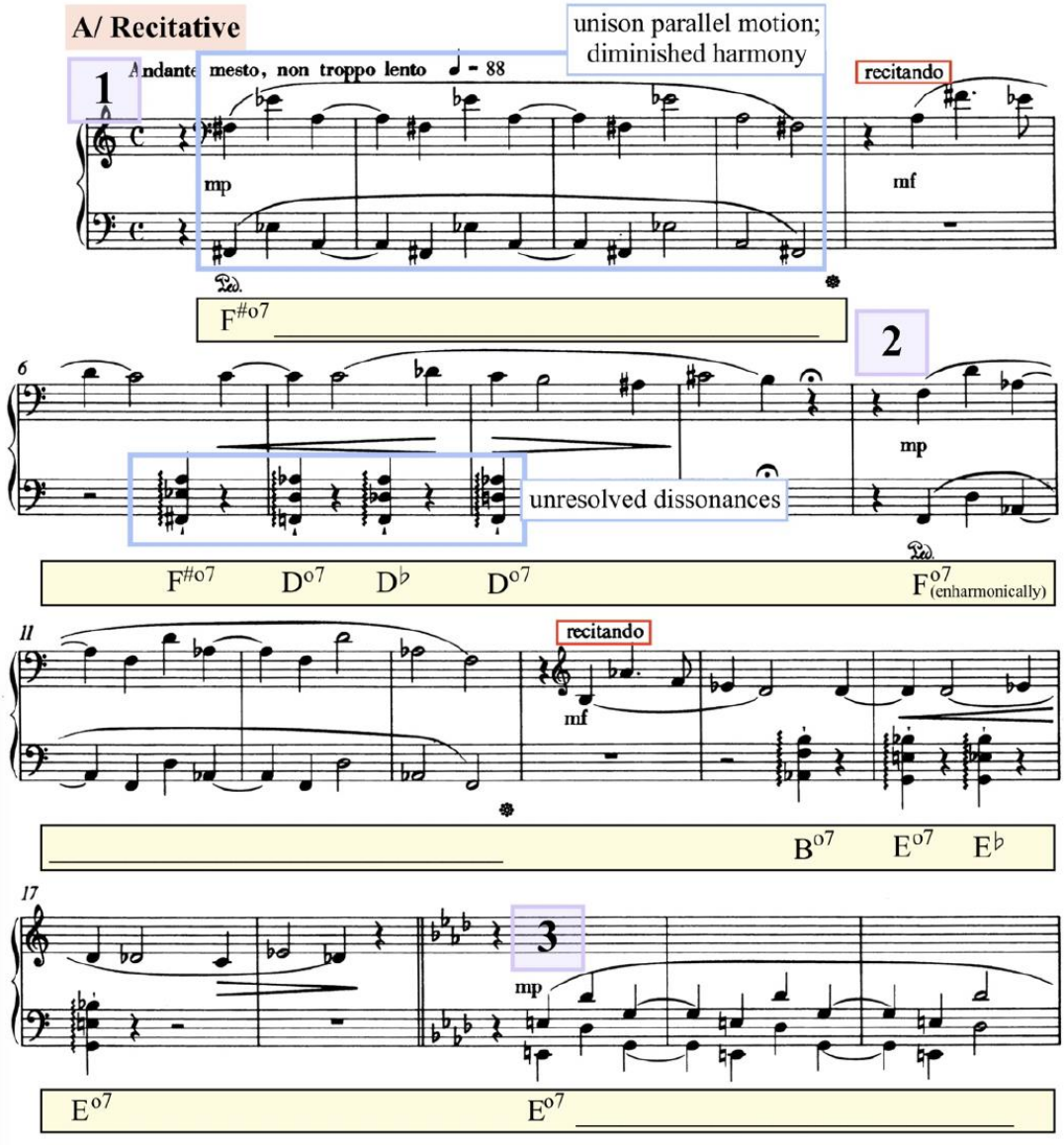


Figure 13 Liszt, *Le lugubre Gondola No. 2*, mm. 1-21
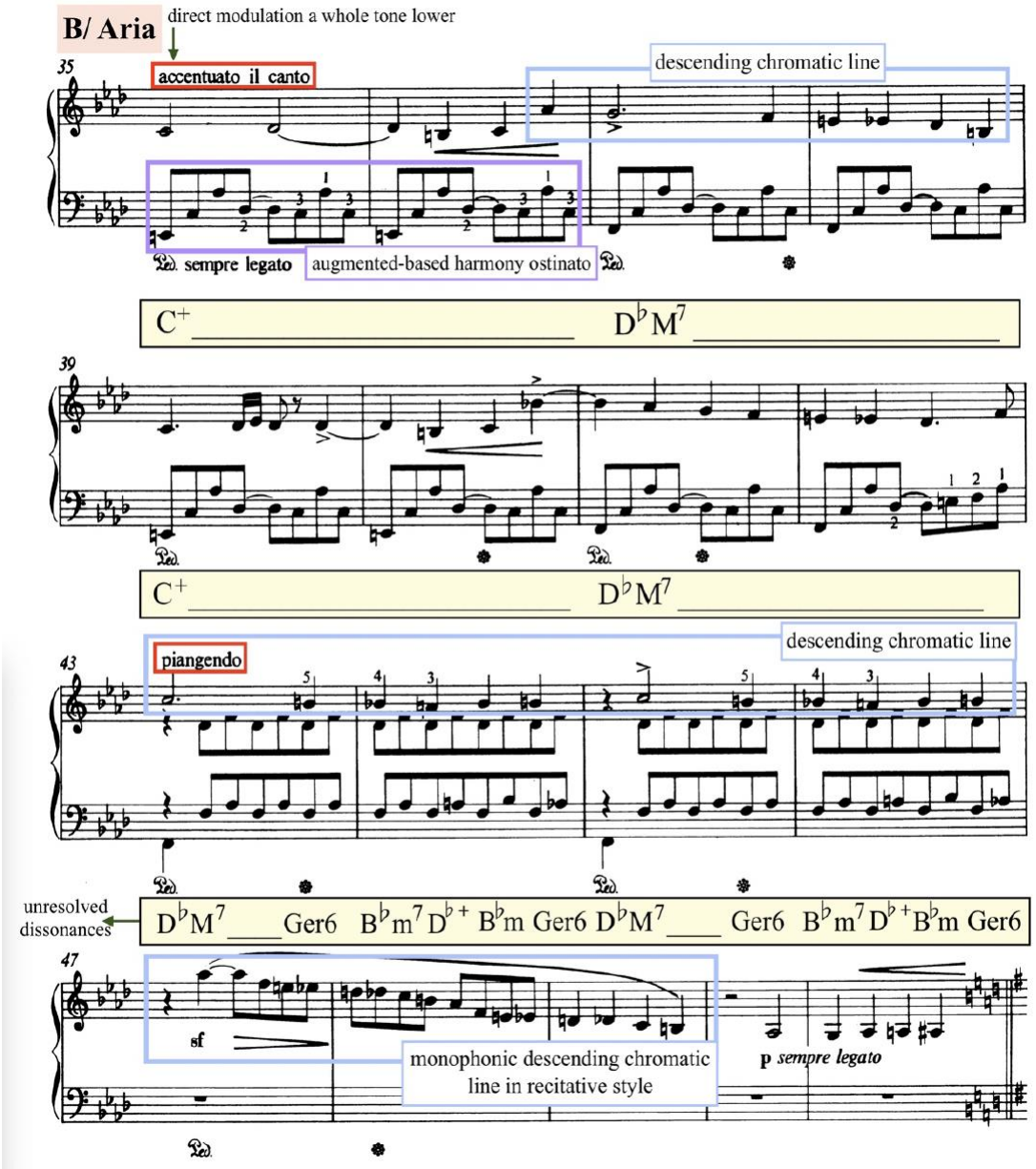


Figure 14 Liszt, *Le lugubre Gondola No. 2*, mm. 35-51
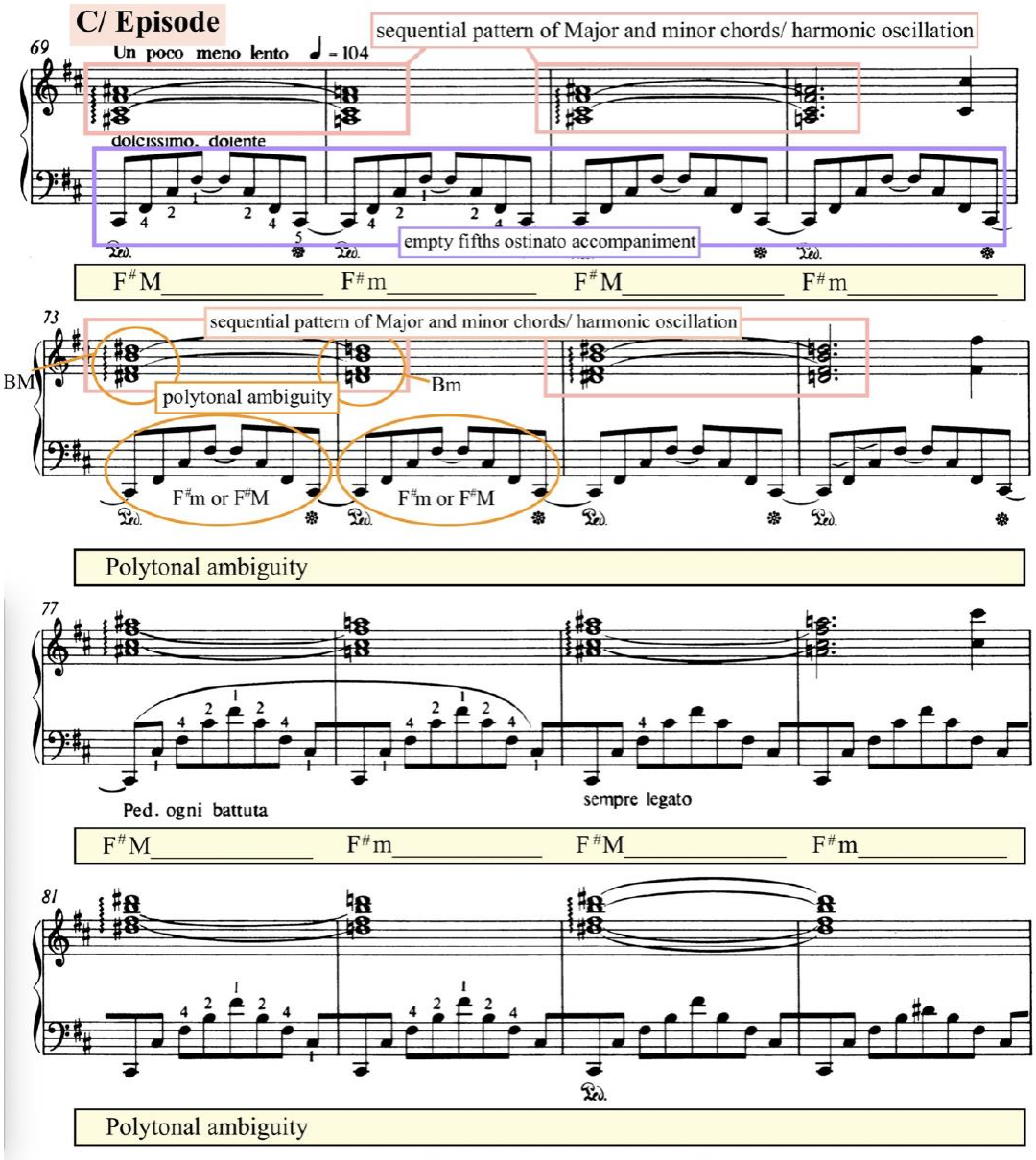


Figure 15 Liszt, *Le lugubre Gondola No. 2*, mm. 69-84

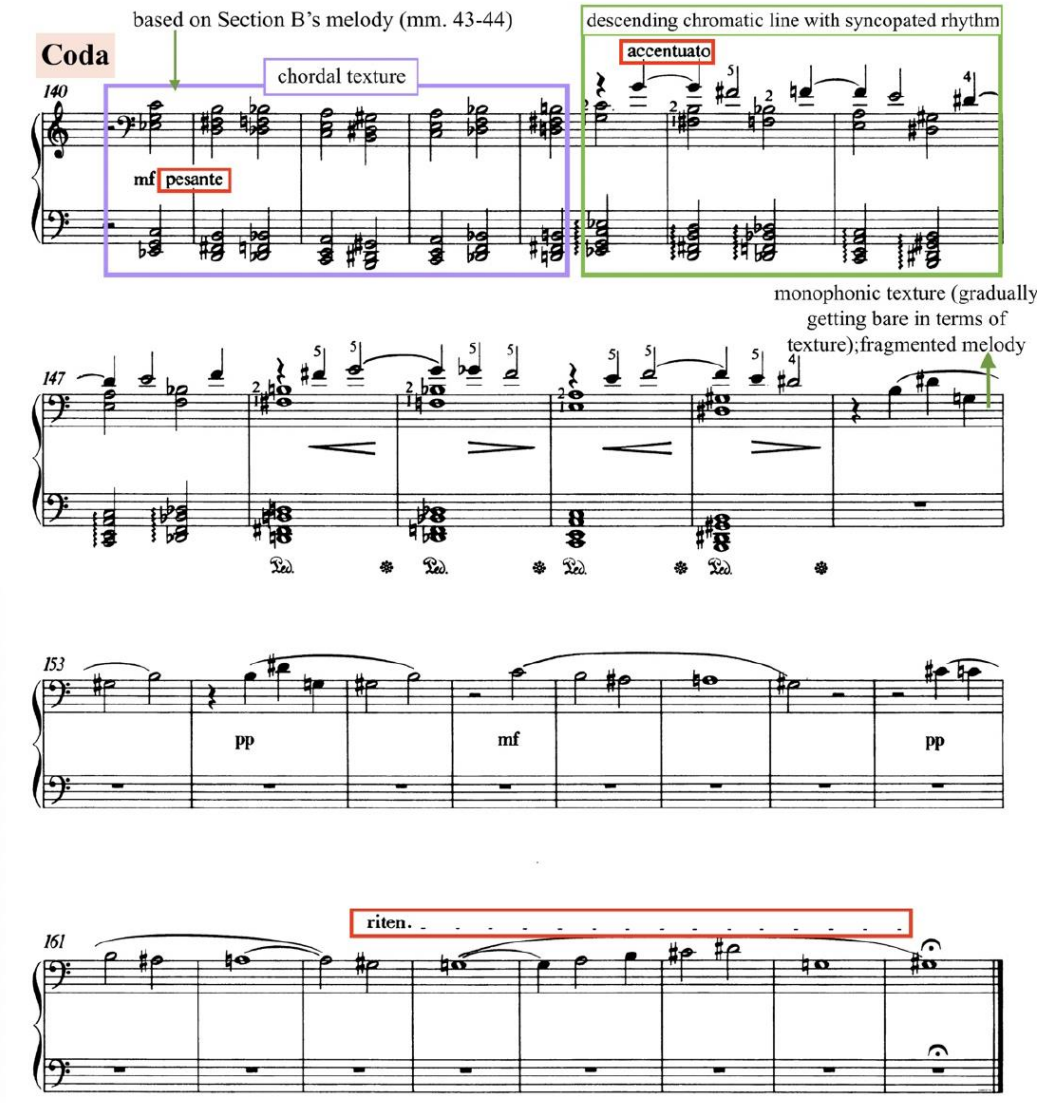


Figure 16 Liszt, *Le lugubre Gondola No. 2*, mm. 140-168

Conclusion

The elegiac late piano works illustrates Liszt's experimental style at his most extreme associated with macabre, bizarre, and dreamlike, leading to tonal dissolution. Although *La lugubre Gondolas* are often known for its association with the premonition of Wagner's death, they are also perceived as the mirror to Liszt's own griefs on the tragedy of his late life. The radical writing not only shocked the artistic world of his own time but was to have a profound influence in the next century, which gave the sense of fleeting moment rather than absolute, along with an emphasis on the deepest and darkest human emotion at core.

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