

Franz Liszt's Battle Against Tonality In The Solo Piano Piece *Unstern! Sinistre, Disastro*

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Abstract

Like many of the great Romantic composers of the 19th-century, Franz Liszt (1811-1886) often embedded his own biographical context into his programmatic music. Liszt's solo piano piece *Unstern! Sinistre, Disastro* of 1885 exemplifies the height of musical innovation and personal narrative. As part of a comprehensive undergraduate project on the music of Liszt, the central purpose of this research is to identify what led Liszt to compose *Unstern* and how he musically represented that inspiration. Theoretical study of Liszt's late works, which in many ways summarize his compositional development and life-story, has shown an innovative composer far ahead of his time. Putting these innovations in a biographical context reveals the influences that led to the striking compositions of Liszt's old age. Arnold Schoenberg's "Franz Liszt's Work and Being" (1911) describes Liszt in history as "one of those who started the battle against tonality, both through themes which point to no absolutely definite tonal center, and through many harmonic details whose musical exploitation has been looked after by his successors."¹ This battle and legacy is clearly observable in *Unstern*. Structural, harmonic, and motivic analysis of *Unstern* was completed in order to identify and interpret its innovative qualities. *Unstern's* structure dismantles the predominance of the octave divided asymmetrically in music, which was the essential harmonic characteristic of music since the time of J.S. Bach in the Baroque period. A symmetrically organized tonal plan in *Unstern* shows Liszt well ahead of his time in 1885, as music historians and theorists traditionally associate the shift from asymmetry to symmetry with the music of the early 20th-century. A review of Liszt's letters and his students' diary entries from 1885 also contributed to a full view of *Unstern's* biographical context.

Keywords: Liszt, *Unstern*, Modernism

1. Introduction

In an 1883 letter to Lina Ramann, Liszt pronounced, "I am deeply mourning in my heart, and this mourning must burst forth in music here and there."² Liszt had encountered death as a central theme in literature, philosophy, and religious thought of his era, and had attempted to integrate his personal and intellectual experiences surrounding death into both small and large-scale musical works. Scholars have asserted that Liszt's preoccupation with death is reflected in his composing. Examples include Alan Walker's remark that "Liszt's obsession with the dead, the dying, and the damned was real enough and often provoked a musical response." Walker further states, "there is a whole branch of Liszt's music dealing with death, and symbolized by such titles as *Totentanz*, *La lugubre gondola*, and *Pensée des morts*."³ Ben Arnold claims that "even as a young man in his twenties, Liszt had been preoccupied with death", and "from 1860 to the end of his life his output of dirges grew dramatically."⁴ Liszt's artistic output related to death steadily increased after the passing of his children, Daniel and Blandine.⁵ Generally, Liszt's death-related works show a greater sense of freedom to express dissonance, ambiguity, and compositional innovations. These elements are not exclusive to this genre in Liszt's oeuvre, but they are generally more abundant and striking.

The years around 1860 mark an important turning point in Liszt's life. On December 15, 1859, he resigned as Kapellmeister in Weimar, two days after the tragic death of his twenty-year-old son, Daniel. On August 17, 1861 he left Weimar for Rome with no intention of ever returning. 1862 brought the death of his daughter Blandine, another severe blow. Over the next decade, Liszt's relationship with Richard Wagner, perhaps his most fruitful musical association, was also in decline. Liszt struggled with these events until his death in 1886. He retired for some time almost completely from public life and began a long-awaited career as a priest in the Catholic Church. A new compositional period in Liszt's life began around the same time with a focus on sacred music.⁶ The works that Liszt wrote shortly afterwards continue the developments already begun in the Weimar period of 1848-1861, but show a new simplicity and uniqueness. Liszt later returned to Weimar, and his "late period" works are usually connected with the last decade of his life. They are mostly short and serious with long passages of unison melodic material and a significant increase in the use of augmented triads. Liszt began to deliberately avoid tonal cadences and traditional tonality in general. Such innovations are found, for example, in his last symphonic poem *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe* (1881-1882) and in the piano works from 1879-1886, which

formed the bedrock of his final years.

Many of Franz Liszt's late works are problematic for analysts. One source of difficulty is Liszt's use of dissonance, which is often prolonged for extended periods of time. One of Liszt's signal achievements is his treatment of dissonant sonorities as contextually stable. Dissonant sonorities in Liszt's late music are often left unresolved, sometimes never achieving a true tonic resolution throughout an entire work. This is especially puzzling because Liszt's music often alludes to keys without key confirmations. In traditional tonal music, composers worked according to a system in which the octave was divided into unequal, asymmetric parts. The fundamental division was derived from the perfect fifth, which served as the basis of harmonic root function and as the primary structural interval of major and minor triads. In turn, the perfect fifth of the triad was unequally divided into major and minor thirds. Writing to his pupil Ingeborg Starck, Liszt made predictions about the organizing principles of the 'Music of the Future', sharing his ideas about an equal twelve-tone system that could form the basis of harmony for composers (Figure. 1). A comparable system did emerge in the dodecaphonic practices of the Second Viennese School with Arnold Schoenberg at its helm.



Figure. 1, Liszt's Representation of the Possibilities of the 12-tone Music of the Future in a Letter to a Pupil⁷

In traditional Western tonality where the octave is divided with a perfect fifth, tonic harmony is most important of all, and dominant harmony is its polar opposite. Tritones, musical intervals of augmented fourths or diminished fifths, divide the octave evenly, or symmetrically – dismantling the powerful tonic-dominant relationship. Instead of tonic and dominant, instead of traditional Western tonality, tritones provide the theoretical basis of Liszt's solo piano piece *Unstern! Sinistre, Disastro*. From the tritone, Liszt generates whole tone scales, diminished harmony, and augmented harmony – all very modernistic devices when applied as contextually stable sonorities. The whole tone scale is a simple series of major 2nds, and the tritone is mapped into the scale four times in one octave. All the scale tones are equidistant, making the scale perfectly symmetrical. Diminished 7th chords are constructed from a series of minor thirds but are also created from two overlapping tritones (e.g. B to F and D to A-flat). Augmented harmony is closely related to whole-tone scales, which again, are tritone-laden. The tritone, the most potent of all symmetrical musical materials, is the foundation of *Unstern*.

As Liszt applies these harmonies, augmented and diminished chords become similar in that they consist of equidistant intervals and do not have unique harmonic root notes as Liszt applied them. When several of either of these chords sounds one after the other, without resolving to a consonant chord, any sense of tonality is lost or at least greatly weakened. Liszt used this effect in his late works very often. Both augmented and diminished chords share a division of the octave into equal intervals, which later became a central organizing principal of early-20th century music.

Liszt used augmented harmony more frequently in his last years than diminished. Ernest Newman noted that Liszt's close friendship with the composer and music theorist Carl Friedrich Weitzmann contributed to his control of augmented sonorities. Liszt's strong interest in music theory treatises is well known, so it is quite conceivable that he obtained Weitzmann's music theory textbook of 1853 with information on the augmented triad. Newman admits that Liszt had already applied the harmonic concept with some sophistication as early as 1834 in the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. Liszt's friendship with Weitzmann still deserves attention. Weitzmann clearly understood the relationship between augmented and diminished harmony when he created a matrix of all 12 chromatic pitches as a byproduct of overlapping diminished seventh and augmented triads. Weitzmann developed the theoretical possibilities of symmetrical division of the octave in this context. In an 1878 letter addressed to Weitzmann, Liszt revealed his high esteem for Weitzmann's writings: "Esteemed friend, your theoretical writings are of real practical value – I recommend all my fellow musicians to study you."⁸

To be sure, as one of the staunchest advocates of programmatic music in the 19th-century, Liszt composed *Unstern! Sinistre, Disastro* with more than these harmonic concepts in mind. Translated in English the title means "Unlucky Star! Sinister, Disaster." What was Liszt referring to with such unsettling words? Unfortunately, any answer to this question must be ambiguous to some degree. The manuscript of *Unstern* remains unaccounted for in all of Liszt scholarship, and the composer never mentioned it in any of his correspondence. A general consensus has formed around the years from late 1881-1885 as the most likely time of composition.^{9,10} On July 2, 1881, Liszt suffered a disastrous fall down the stairs of his home in Weimar. At seventy years of age, Liszt had not yet shown the signs of aging that would lead to his death in 1886. After the accident, Liszt was bed-ridden for seven weeks, all the while

developing symptoms of dropsy, asthma, insomnia, a cataract of the left eye, and chronic heart disease. In the last of his three-volume Liszt biography, Alan Walker appropriately gave the title “Unstern!” to one of the final chapters tracing the path of Liszt’s declining health and career.¹¹ Over his long career as a mostly programmatic composer, Liszt had nearly perfected the ability to “invoke an appropriate ‘poetic counterpart’ in order to convey a general idea of the sort of musical expression he intended”.¹² After the accident of 1881 and rapidly developing ailments of old age, 1881, Liszt’s mind was ripe for depression, a fact on which he commented in multiple correspondences.¹³ As a whole, these conditions seem to have provided the impetus for a composition like *Unstern*, both haunting and introspective, as its musical materials shall reveal.

2. Analysis

Unstern is organized in four unique formal parts. After the exposure of the main material (Part A: mm. 1-20) and two development parts (B: mm. 21-57 and C: mm. 58-83), the conclusion (D: mm. 84-146) is chorale-like, marked “quasi organo”. In terms of programmatic outline, Parts A, B, and C are best grouped together as section 1, with Part D alone as section 2. *Unstern*’s two macro-sections are the main dividing points of dichotomous extra-musical meaning. For illustrative purposes only, sections 1 and 2 might be divided into hypothetical programmatic settings related to the title of the piece. The first section could be associated with a fear of death and hell, the second possibly revealing an acceptance of mortality and religious hope for salvation.

The tritone dominates the main theme area (mm. 1-20), melodically with two half steps surrounding each tritone in the antecedent phrases and harmonically to close each consequent phrase with a feeling of suspense (Figure. 2). Historically, the tritone is known as the *diabolus in musica*, applied as such by Liszt many times in his compositional career with explicit programmatic associations (e.g. the *Dante-Sonata*). Reflecting on this bare melodic line full of tritones, theorist Allen Forte wrote, “this opening passage, in its austerity and its economy of means with respect to the musical processes it represents, is reminiscent of the music of Anton Webern”.¹⁴



Figure. 2, Main Theme Antecedent and Consequent Phrases (mm. 1-5)¹⁵

The intervals ‘F#’ to ‘C’ (m. 5) and ‘B-flat’ to ‘E’ (m. 12) are derived from the chromatically related tritone ‘F’ to ‘B’, which Liszt uses – in a palindromic manner – to begin and end the presentation of the main theme in Part A (m. 1 and m. 20). The relationship of the secondary tritones to the primary tritone becomes obvious when each is compared vertically. Both secondary tritones are related to the primary by a half step. When either secondary tritone is inverted in relation to the primary, a basic Z-cell is formed whereby two tritones are joined with a single half step link. Z-cells are one of three symmetrical cell types observed in important theoretical analyses of the music of Béla Bartók.^{16,17,18} The Z-cell is important in *Unstern* because it reveals how Liszt foreshadowed an innovative development in the early-20th century from a composer who admired and respected Liszt’s work. In terms of musical organization, Z-cells function as the source of all other musical intervals and pitch combinations. After all, any interval beyond the tritone implies an inversion of an interval already stated within the boundary of a tritone. Since the tritone divides the musical octave symmetrically, Z-cells establish the fundamental role of symmetry in a given piece. As discussed previously, the role of symmetry in the gradual dismantling of the predominance of traditional tonality cannot be overstated in the context of musical innovation in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. (Figure 3)

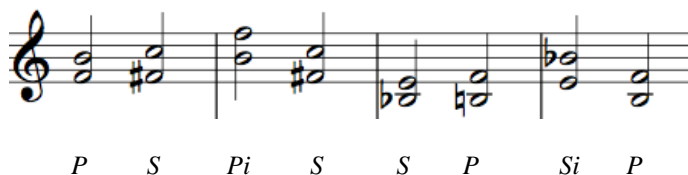


Figure. 3, Z-cell Structures in *Unstern* Part A (P = primary, S = secondary, i = inversion)

In Part A, symmetrical organization of melodic and harmonic elements is related to the exact repetition of the main theme in its original setting and its repetition in transposition at the interval of a perfect fourth. A previously noted point of palindromic symmetry

is found in the final tritone, 'F' to 'B', of the consequent phrase in m. 20. These are the same notes of the primary tritone first heard in m. 2, now inverted. Liszt shows a direct intention to apply the concept of symmetry to different compositional levels – melodic, harmonic, and structural – simultaneously.

The opening note 'A' of the main theme sequence in m. 11 foreshadows the elaboration of the main theme in Part B, beginning with a 'G-sharp' in m. 21. In the context of the theme sequence, this 'A' projects a diminished triad at the interval of a minor third from the lower note, 'F-sharp', of the preceding tritone in m. 10 (Figure. 4). 'F-sharp', 'A', and 'C' imply a diminished triad, which becomes the harmonic focal point in the beginning of Part B (Figure. 5)



Figure. 4, 'F-sharp' to 'C' Tritone into 'A' (mm. 8-11)¹⁹



Figure. 5, Diminished Harmony Structure (mm. 21-24)²⁰

Liszt's use of the tritone as the fundamental element of diminished harmony links together Parts A and B. Rather than a series of minor third intervals, the diminished seventh chord groups from mm. 21-45 are best interpreted as overlapping tritones. *Unstern's* diminished harmony never functions as a dominant substitute in relation to a tonic harmony in the traditional sense. Instead, diminished structures emerge as a motivic expansion of the primary tritone in the main theme area. The note 'G-sharp' reveals Liszt's true intent. 'G-sharp' is an augmented fourth (tritone) from 'D' in the *marcato* bass melody. The melody itself is limited in range to the notes of the primary tritone in the main theme, 'B' and 'F'. Vertically organized (B, D, F, G-sharp), 'A-flat' – the enharmonic equivalent of 'G-sharp' – would produce a traditional diminished seventh harmony built from minor thirds (B to D, D to F, F to A-flat). Liszt purposefully avoids 'A-flat', highlighting the fundamental role of the tritone. If Part A seemed at first an introductory section of only temporary tonal uncertainty and instability, Part B assures the listener that the absence of traditional tonality is the organizing principal of *Unstern*. Yet, Liszt's musical logic must not be defined simply by what it lacks. As an examination of the remainder of the piece will show, symmetrical properties found principally in the tritone appear to have usurped traditional tonality in *Unstern*, connecting Liszt's music more with the "twelve-tone tonality" of the early 20th-century than the theoretical principles of his own time.²¹

Similar to the unstable consequent phrase cadences of the main theme in Part A, each antecedent diminished structure in Part B is followed by consequent phrases ending with unresolved augmented harmony. Augmented chords begin and end each consequent phrase, continuing the model of symmetry in micro-structural events first observed in Part A. The alternation of augmented and minor six-four chords in the new consequent phrase (Figure. 6) is derived from the alternating half steps of the main theme in mm. 2-4. Liszt expands the role of the half step interval in a chromatically ascending sequence of this new antecedent-consequent structure.



Figure. 6, Consequent Phrase: Alternating Augmented and Minor Six-Four Chords (mm. 24-28)²²

The development process in Part B leads to an elimination of diminished harmony and half-step elements, as the sequence model is shortened starting in m. 41 by the deletion of the consequent augmented phrase (Figure. 7). Liszt again reinforces the significance of the tritone as an agent of organization. Two tritones (D-sharp to A and F to B) vertically coalesce to form a four note whole-tone chord in m. 45, and the antecedent diminished structure in the bass is replaced thereafter with a descending sequence of three note whole-tone scale segments (Figures. 8 and 9). The only notable feature retained from the diminished structures is the seemingly inexorable dotted rhythm pattern in the repeated, and now reduced whole-tone chord – 'B', 'D-sharp', and F.²³



Figure. 7, Shortening of the sequence model in Part B (mm. 37-41)²⁴



Figure. 8, Whole-tone Chord (mm. 45-46)²⁵



Figure. 9, Reduced Whole-tone Chord and Whole-tone Scale Segment Sequence (mm. 47-51)²⁶

As whole-tone scales and augmented harmony are closely related, Part C emerges naturally from the preceding whole-tone scale segment (F, G, A, B, C-sharp) with an augmented triad (F, A, C-sharp). In mm. 58-70, Liszt penned another chromatically ascending sequence from this opening augmented chord, now with a pedal tone on the bass note 'F'. Notably, 'F' is the lower pitch of the primary tritone in the main theme from Part A. The importance of that pitch relationship becomes clear when the main theme returns in mm. 70-77 (Figure. 10). Liszt worked out a straightforward development from the primary tritone material to derivative diminished, whole-tone, and augmented structures – finally presenting the primary and derivative elements all at once.



Figure. 10, Augmented Chord Sequence into Return of the Main Theme (mm. 68-72)²⁷

Part D, marked “quasi-organo” (in the style of an organ), presents significant changes beginning with the new key signature of B major. The ‘C-sharp’ six-four chord in m. 84, replaced with an octave ‘F-sharp’ in m. 88, acts as an anacrusis to a new eight-measure period repeated once. Antecedent and consequent phrases are separated with “breathing” space in m. 88, as would be expected for sacred music with organ accompaniment (Figure. 11). Harmonically, Liszt began to write in a seemingly traditional tonal style. Closely related to the diminished seventh chord, dominant seventh harmony becomes a focal point of Part D, particularly the dominant seventh chord built on ‘F-sharp’, which is the dominant of the new key area B major. It occurs throughout the closing of the piece like a pivot point for the surrounding harmonic movement (m. 89, 97, 117, 121, 125, 129, and 139). Rather than resolving at any point to the supposed tonic B major, it takes on significance through non-tonal means, namely repetition and embellishment. Always occurring in the relatively unstable third inversion form, the ‘F-sharp’ dominant chord is doubly weakened in terms of pure tonal function. Just as the diminished and augmented structures of sections B and C were more aptly interpreted as derivatives of the tritone, this repeating dominant chord is also an apparent derivative. The tritone creates the most active pitches in any dominant harmony on the third and

seventh notes of the given chord, A-sharp' and 'E' in this case. Liszt's continual emphasis of the 'E' in the bass voice of the chord seems to highlight the role of the tritone pitch collection.



Figure. 11, Chorale-like Period (mm. 85-91)²⁸

Mm. 100-116 recalls the dissonance of Parts A through C; diminished seventh harmony and chromatic melodic motion create this sense of flashback relative to the calm in the opening of Part D. The first phrase of this new development in the chorale (mm. 100-104) begins with a 'C-sharp' diminished seventh chord and chromatically rising bass line. The eerie unison chromatic line that follows prolongs the new harmonic tension. As in Parts A through C, the half step interval takes on renewed significance in mm. 105-108 as (1) a chromatic scale, (2) an outline of the entire consequent phrase, and (3) a "sigh" figure in m. 108 (Figure. 12).



Figure. 12, Three Roles of Chromatic Motion in the Consequent Phrase (mm. 105-108)²⁹

As the chorale texture gradually evolves, tritones in the reoccurring dominant seventh and diminished seventh harmonies further the interval's overall significance for the continuation of the musical form, just as it did in m. 21 (diminished structures), m. 45 (whole-tone chord), and m. 71 (overlap of primary and derivative tritone components). The interval's significance is reinforced with *Unstern's* final musical passage as a palindromic whole-tone scale segment outlines the tritone 'E' to 'A-sharp'. Overall, tonal sounds in Part D are subjected to manipulations that are indifferent to functional harmonic relationships because of the role of the tritone.

Recall that the symmetrical properties of the tritone were found in the palindromic symmetry of Part A as it began and concluded with the tritone 'F' to 'B'. Twenty-eight of the sixty-two measures of Part D are organized in a similar fashion. The 'C-sharp' diminished seventh chord in mm. 100-104 evolves into a dominant-seventh chord but quickly returns to itself. In mm. 117-121 the reoccurring 'F-sharp' dominant seventh follows a similar model of starting and rounding off the phrase. Melodic palindromes are found in mm. 105-108 and mm. 140-146. Just as the symmetrical properties of the tritone in the main theme enabled most melodic and harmonic developments, the initial model of these palindromic patterns is found in the alternating half steps of mm. 3-4. It was no accident that Liszt reapplied this concept in the alternation of augmented and minor six-four triads in mm. 25-28 where the bass notes are also a half step apart.

The transition from Part C to D is perhaps most important of all for Liszt's application of this symmetrical palindrome technique, as he uses it to connect the non-tonal materials of Parts A through C with the quasi-tonal elements of Part D. The bass line of the last phrase of the C-section (mm. 76-83) into the first D-phrase (mm. 84-87) is as follows (Figure. 13):

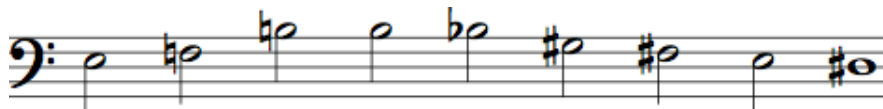


Figure. 13, Bass Line Connecting Sections 1 and 2 (mm. 76-87)³⁰

After a final repetition of the main theme's primary tritone in mm. 76-77, the fourth note restatement of 'B' in the bass line above begins the bridge to Part D. The fall from 'B' to 'G-sharp' in mm. 78-82 is a transitional extension of the main theme's return. Liszt wrote a moment of brief repose with total silence in m. 83 serving as a void between *Unstern's* two macro-sections. That brief caesura between the parts is connected with the return of 'G-sharp' in the bass, initiating a descent to 'D-sharp', which acts as a leading tone to 'E' – the bass pitch of the reoccurring 'F-sharp' dominant chord, the final note of the piece, and the first note of the main theme. Liszt created a full-scale palindromic effect by beginning and ending the piece on the same note, which ironically might be expected in a common practice period composition. In this case, the final pitch 'E' does not function as tonic or dominant but rather as the lower

boundary of the tritone interval 'E' to 'A-sharp'. The symmetrical implications and lack of tonal stability in this final note reaffirms the all-important role of the tritone throughout *Unstern*. Herein seems to be the most basic and essential meaning of Liszt's palindromic characteristics, that they form symmetrical structures that create a specific link between various levels of the composition, namely the melodic, harmonic, and structural spheres. As a result, symmetry begins to define the music itself. Rather than being a consequence of other musical techniques, symmetry is the starting point, the *sine qua non* of the piece.

3. Conclusion

Eighty-eight of one hundred and forty-six measures – 60% of *Unstern* – was built entirely from the primary tritone of the main theme, with whole tone scales, diminished, and augmented harmonies emerging as a result. When those more innovative materials were not present, Liszt relied on symmetrical structural designs and reoccurring background usage of the tritone throughout the piece. As a whole, *Unstern* travels from the lower pitch of the opening primary tritone 'F' to the new key area 'B' – a macro-structural tritone used to usurp the traditional notion of tonic and dominant definitively.

In 1911, two of the 20th century's most important composers, Arnold Schoenberg and Bela Bartók, wrote essays about Liszt.^{31,32} Both described him as an important inspiration for composers in search of a genuinely modern style. Today, the Liszt memorial museum home in Weimar, Germany has a timeline of the composer's life along the walls on the first floor. At the very end, a printed copy of *Unstern* is posted with comparisons to the music of Schoenberg and Bartók. Liszt was a fundamental figure for Bartók's stylistic evolution at least.³³ Bartók went so far as to refer to Liszt as "the real father of modern music", modern referring to the early 20th-century. In *Unstern* and other works, Liszt did indeed foreshadow 20th-century compositional techniques. As part of a larger undergraduate project, this research has found that the symbolic musical representation of death and the diabolical was directly and consistently related to the modern elements in Liszt's music, much like the display seen in the short piano piece *Unstern*.

For Liszt, *Unstern* appears to have been both a reflection on his bodily decline and a culminating development of musical innovations that had their roots in his first original music of the 1830s. More work must be done to connect Liszt's influence directly to prominent composers of the early 20th-century. Arnold Schoenberg, Claude Debussy, and Béla Bartók wrote about a direct connection with Liszt, but contemporary scholarship has not yet catalogued specific musical connections between styles and individual compositions. Whether or not future research reveals direct connections, students and scholars alike need only turn to Liszt's music itself to discover the disintegration of traditional tonality in the early-20th century budding well before its time.

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