

The Virtuoso Type: Cultural Representations of the Exceptional Musician

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ABSTRACT. This article explores cultural representations of musical virtuosity. In reference to a key figure in the historical development of the virtuoso as a cultural type –the Hungarian pianist and composer Franz Liszt (1811-1886)– the analysis demonstrates how cinematic representations of this figure construct and maintain the centrality of audio-visual impression in the discourse of Romantic aesthetics. By being a marker of an « exceptional » musician, the virtuoso’s potential to transcend ideologically determined systems of social ordering is rooted in their historical and aesthetic function. This highlights the fact that virtuosity –a concept rooted in 19th-century European cultural history and aesthetics– is intimately associated with modern culture in both its economic and performative aspects, and was one of the most significant cultural figures to emerge from the Romantic period. By analysing various filmic representations of Liszt –including *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Song Without End* (1960) and *Lisztomania* (1975)– this article will explore the virtuoso’s various cultural functions: from being an embodiment of the Romantic genius type –the unique and transgressive individual– to a space in which the sexual and public domains meet in order to work through cultural tensions regarding vision and power.

KEYWORDS: Representation, Virtuosity, Performance, Pianism, Romanticism

La figure du virtuose : représentations culturelles du musicien d’exception

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article explore les représentations culturelles de la virtuosité musicale. En se concentrant sur une figure-clé du développement historique du virtuose



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comme archétype culturel (ici, le pianiste et compositeur hongrois Franz Liszt [1811-1886]), l'analyse démontre comment les représentations cinématographiques d'une telle figure construisent et maintiennent la centralité de l'impression audiovisuelle au sein de l'esthétique romantique. En lui donnant les caractéristiques d'un musicien « exceptionnel », le potentiel du virtuose à transcender les systèmes d'ordre social idéologiquement déterminés est ancré dans leur fonction historique et esthétique. Ceci met en évidence le fait que la virtuosité, un concept enraciné dans l'histoire culturelle et l'esthétique européennes du XIX^e siècle, est intimement liée à la culture moderne, que ce soit par ses aspects économiques ou performatifs, et que la figure qui lui est associée est l'une des plus significatives à émerger de l'ère romantique. En analysant des représentations cinématographiques diverses de Liszt – dont *Lettre d'une inconnue* (1948), *Le Bal des adieux* (1960) et *Lisztomania* (1975) – cet article explore les fonctions culturelles variées du virtuose : d'une incarnation du génie romantique – sous la forme d'un individu unique et transgressif – à un espace dans lequel les domaines public et sexuel se rencontrent afin de dépasser les tensions culturelles inhérentes à la vision et au pouvoir.

MOTS-CLÉS : représentation, virtuosité, interprétation musicale, pianisme, romantisme

The virtuoso [...] becomes the very site through which tradition, like the musical composition, passes
(Bernstein, 1998: 86)

The virtuoso performance is a symbolic event with the potential to collapse a host of binary distinctions between private and public, original and reproduction, freedom and control, and authenticity and artificiality¹. This potential to problematize such kinds of social ordering is rooted in the essential function of the virtuoso as both a cultural and economic agent: they must embody a potential to exceed expectations. But the concept of virtuosity is more complex than this. It also has a distinct historical character, emerging as a significant cultural and economic phenomenon in Europe during the early 19th century due to the development of multiple social and economic trends, as well as technical innovations in instrument design. In addition, the audio-visual and ritualistic character of virtuosity means that it is not something possessed by certain individuals, but rather something which is historically constituted by a complex relation between perception, expectation, and judgements of personal and procedural appropriateness. Virtuosity might be thought of as something dependent upon a perceived imbalance between the visual « proof » of the human source of sound production (« only human ») and the character of the

¹ A longer version of this article appears in Will Kitchen, *Romanticism and Film: Franz Liszt and Audio-Visual Explanation*, London & New York, Bloomsbury, 2020, p. 104-114. Reproduced for *Savoirs en prisme* by kind permission of Bloomsbury Academic.

sounds heard (« more than human »), in a play of what is shown and not shown. This occurs alongside several further judgements of appropriateness: 1) that these combined audio-visual impressions are « musical », and 2) that the right person is making them in the right way and in the right place. Accordingly, virtuosity appears to be perceived, recognised and organised in the judgement of others, activating secondary schematic expectations and associations.

Along with figures such as Niccolò Paganini and Jimi Hendrix, the 19th-century Hungarian pianist and composer Franz Liszt remains today an archetypal virtuoso, one whose « cultural image » is significantly constructed and altered through audio-visual representation. Long before film biopics rejuvenated Liszt's cultural image as one of the most renowned pianists in music history, Romantic discourse had raised his musical abilities to mythic status. Among a new generation of pianist-composers to emerge in early 19th-century Europe, Liszt sought to exceed what was thought possible in terms of physical technique and sonic effect. As Jonathan Dunsby asserts, the piano music of the 19th century was « in its purely physical demands [...] more or less at the limits of possible human achievements » (Dunsby, 2001: 511). Liszt's virtuosity experienced the effects of a powerful mythologizing discourse, one which found outlets in different media. His fellow composers, the public, the critics, and even some who had never heard him play, proclaimed that Liszt's pianism was unprecedented, « absolutely overwhelming », and « almost terrifying in its intensity » (Stasov, 1980b: 121; Loesser, 1954: 367). Some contemporaries recognised that these remarkable effects were due to the extraordinary visual and theatrical characteristics of his performances, which were often rooted in powerful and easily exploited Romantic aesthetic tropes such as madness, religious ecstasy, freedom and nature; « Storms », Liszt once said, « are my forte » (Hamilton, 2008: 8, 44). The linguistic suffix « -omania » has remained one of Liszt's most evocative legacies, demonstrating the historical significance of his contribution to modern culture and musical representation.

By focusing on significant aspects of the historical discourse surrounding Franz Liszt – in many ways the symbolic « ground zero » for the modern virtuoso as a cultural type – this article will be able to explore the intimate relationship between virtuosity and audio-visual representation. This will help us to understand its most significant consistencies, functions, and ideological tendencies, as well as film's role in perpetuating some of the Romantic era's most significant value judgements, social distinctions and cognitive associations.

Stardom, Virtuosity and Audio-Visuality

Dana Gooley has summarised the curious self-fulfilling prophecy which sustains Liszt's mythic status in historical discourse: « On the one hand, Liszt's audiences applaud enthusiastically because he is a great artist; on the other, Liszt is a great artist because his audiences applaud enthusiastically » (Gooley, 2009: 4). The historical absence of audio recordings means that word-of-mouth

and written documents bear the burden of sustaining Liszt's transcendental virtuosity. Biographies have continued to mythologise Liszt by idealising the absence of his actual musical ability from modern sense perception. Films, as we will see below, also participate problematically in this discourse. Recent studies have also exposed the myth that virtuosos were unmotivated by profit, and that the supposedly sacred priority of music came before any economic imperatives (Gooley, 2004: 145-161). The fallacy that composers were singly focused on producing « art » rather than « products » –i.e. objects and services constructed for exchange and profit, demanding the maintenance of a relationship with a market– is the result of selective critical history. Throughout Liszt's life, the press, social events, biography and word-of-mouth fostered a desirable image of him as a redoubtable pianist, and a progressive and altruistic upholder of post-Beethoven Romantic artistic ideals (Kramer, 2002: 33). One key instance is the *Weiheskuss*, Liszt's legendary encounter with Beethoven in 1823. A conscious authoring of this event has long blurred the line between fact and fiction, to the benefit of Liszt's cultural cache (Walker, 2005: 155).

All this highlights the fact that Romantic virtuosity is intimately associated with the concept of modern fame or celebrity in both its economic and performative aspects, and it seems reasonable to accept that Liszt was a key prototype of the star figure. As Joshua Gamson notes, celebrity image-management was « relatively unsystematic until the growth of professional public relations and film technology » (Gamson, 2007: 144); by being conscious of their own image and its relation to market forces, celebrity virtuosos such as Liszt, Paganini and Jenny Lind set historical precedent for later developments within and around the film industry. This trend eventually led to the institutionalisation of celebrity-audience relations and the development of the star system and its associated social functions. In his lifetime Liszt's likeness even appeared on a wide variety of merchandise (Pocknell, 1997: 123; Kramer, 2002: 91). Like the Hollywood film star, Liszt's appearance before an audience sometimes created the profound emotional identifying effect that « they [the audience] were seeing a dear, beloved friend », more accessible than a great military leader or king (Kramer, 2002: 87). Lawrence Kramer has explored Liszt's cathartic effect on audiences who, by being « sutured » by the music into identifying with the body of the performer, could share his « impulsive » freedom and power whilst maintaining a certain distance by the displacement of that pleasure into the process of looking (Kramer, 2002: 85). In some respects, this process is reminiscent of modern expectations of 20th and 21st-century stardom, facilitated by modern image reproduction and broadcasting technologies. Although there can be no formally established cause-and-effect connection between these two developments, one does provide historical precedent for the other. This correlation is explicitly evoked in Ken Russell's *Lisztomania* (1975), in which 1830s virtuoso hysteria is riotously compared to 20th-century rock stardom.

The importance of visual bodily impression in virtuoso discourse is partly a result of historical limitations on recording technology. As mentioned previously, like many another Romantic virtuoso, there exist no known audio

recordings of Liszt playing the piano. Written accounts, caricatures and the musical scores themselves remain the only « proofs » of his ability. But the genius myth can be sustained as much by a visual absence as by an auditory one. As a contemporary critic wrote: « you have to see Liszt's face, Liszt's eyes when he plays »; Schumann concurred: « I wish I could capture in words a picture of this extraordinary man [...] It is not easy! » (Stasov, 1980b: 123; Schumann, 1965: 158). As Susan Bernstein noted, such accounts describe reactions rather than the playing itself (Bernstein, 1998: 120). Liszt's appearance was also compared to a « glorious, powerful eagle », « thunder and lightning », a « bird-of-prey », a « lion », and even when descriptions of Liszt are less than complimentary, they are often striking in their visual suggestions: « a freak », « a scarecrow », « a mummy » (Stasov, 1980a: 48; Lenz, 1995: 17; Gooley, 2009: 107; Stasov, 1980b: 125). It was left to caricatures, such as those by János Jankó, to utilise these « freakish » elements in communicating the more expressive « filmic » impressions of the way pianists, or any public figures, moved (Davison, 2012: 73-74). The more dynamic visual elements were expunged by single paintings and photographs. Due to its perceptual absence from contemporary subjective experience, Liszt's pianistic ability remains so entrenched in myth and sublimity that filmic representations of his playing are unfailingly liable to court judgements of insufficiency.

In accordance with the Romantic imperative of audio-visual explanation, visual stimulus remains fundamental to various attempts to give represented musical performances, filmic or otherwise, a kind of meaningful significance. Dana Gooley has suggested that Liszt's audio-visual performance articulation was determined by a combination of textual features and theatrical behaviours. When playing his own edition of Weber's *Konzertstück* (1821), for example:

Liszt's chromatic octave surge expanded the sonic and visual dramatic amplitude of the gesture that marks the appearance of the hero. The listener could no longer see *through* Liszt to the narrative, for he had *become* the hero who appears over the horizon (Gooley, 2009: 104).

This boundary-breaking visual dimension lay at the heart of Liszt's whole aesthetic philosophy². To defend Gooley's hypothesis, Rolf Inge Godøy has demonstrated that, according to the motor theory of perception, any conception of meaning in musical performance is intrinsically related to « sound-motion objects », or the simultaneousness of sonic event and visual cues provided by the gestures of the performer (Godøy, 2017: 115-118). The musical event is given sense, in part, by the visual characteristics of the performance. An imbalance between sound and vision, combined with certain judgements, may establish a musical performance as one of virtuosity and its performing individual as a virtuoso. In *The Sight of Sound* (1993) Richard Leppert similarly suggested

² See Kitchen, 2020: 55-68.

that public musical performances more generally, live or represented, present a psychological imbalance between the visually observable physical activity of the music making process and the resulting music (Leppert, 1993: xxi). Sight, and particularly sight of the body, becomes a key element in mediating this slippage. Film presents instructive instances of this process at work in various contexts, as the meaningful effect of the represented music is explained through various visual processes.

To give one example, Lawrence Kramer has suggested that one of cinema's common methods for representing diegetic pianistic performance – the pianist's bodily fragmentation into alternating shots of their face and hands (often a production necessity allowing the insertion of shots of a professional pianist's hands) – continues the reliquary fragmentation of the pianist's body for audience pleasure. The isolated, « impossible », hands fill the screen, becoming « the cinematic equivalent of the souvenir » (Kramer, 2002: 92). A part of the cinematic pleasure occasioned by a montage sequence consisting of close-up shots of a virtuoso's performing hands lies in the privileged perspective of such images as sights otherwise impossible to see. Kramer's argument finds precedent amongst the oldest theories of film, including Béla Balász's concept of micro-physiognomy – the ability of the close-up shot to reveal the phenomenal world from otherwise unavailable perspectives (Balász, 1999: 309). As well as providing pleasure in this way, the fragmentation inherent in such representational techniques has the potential to blur the boundaries between the piano and the identity of the pianist. Cinematic conventions such as these continue and enrich debates that first circulated in musical culture during Liszt's own lifetime. Liszt himself expressed the common theme that a pianist can figuratively merge with the instrument: « My piano is to me what a ship is to the sailor, what a steed is to the Arab [...] my piano is myself, my speech, my life » (Liszt, 1989: 45).

In addition to privileged perspectives, cinematic musical moments also commonly rely on representations of character reactions to confirm the authority of the musical performance being shown. Biopic of Clara and Robert Schumann *Song of Love* (1947) presents an interesting variation of this technique, whilst also subverting the cinematic fragmentation of the performance event into privileged shots. In one scene the young Brahms plays the piano whilst the Schumanns stand over the instrument, enraptured by his playing. We are shown no shots of Brahms' hands touching the keys, only his placid expression. The authority of the performance comes from the explanatory facial and bodily reactions of the two listeners. The film's « refusal » to show the performing hands might seem to decry (from the conservative side of the War of the Romantics) the fetishized display of performance through the fragmented montage technique which has, at this point in the film, been associated with Liszt. Yet the camera's refusal to confirm the sound-motion object – refusal to show the pianist's hands – fetishizes Brahms' performance in a different way. Through fragmented absence, instead of fragmented presence, voyeurism is replaced by taboo.

This varied emphasis on vision in musical performance was also a significant element in the changing values of Romantic virtuosity itself. The instrumental virtuoso was now, by being situated in a market position where they are expected to display their skills visually as well as audibly, vulnerable to accusations that the value of the visual display superseded the value of the music itself. As the Brahms example from *Song of Love* demonstrates, a certain kind of conservative formalism prejudices music to the extent that it accentuates the visual impression of its method of production. Arthur Loesser describes the changes in European musical culture c1850 that clarify this alteration in the hierarchy of sensory elements (Loesser, 1954: 422-432). A growing musical press evidenced the rise of a musically educated post-revolutionary bourgeoisie, and a gradual transformation of the virtuoso concert ensued. The informal performance styles of Liszt and Sigismund Thalberg gave way to the more solemn recitals of Anton Rubinstein and Hans von Bülow. Visual performance effects – such as Liszt theatrically brushing back his hair (Kramer, 2002: 73; Samson, 2003: 77) – were considered sites of visual excess, problematizing the reception of the music as « good » music, despite negatively reinforcing the importance of vision and individuality as being essential to the concept of virtuosity itself. Performances with a self-consciously visual dimension were seen to « submerge the music in the spectacle of the musician », an effect to which many critics objected (Kramer, 2002: 87).

For some, what « repels » about virtuosos such as Liszt is the performer's « many-sidedness, eclecticism, and over-susceptibility to all musical sensations, from the most commonplace to the most rare » (Bernstein, 1998: 93). Such value judgements privilege the purity of exclusive categorisations whilst devaluing audiences who are judged to be easily impressionable. Susan Bernstein continued this point by stating that, for such virtuosos, « stealing, the theft that devalues the origin and the original, is permitted » (Bernstein, 1998: 106) – a privilege which furthers the potential to destabilise cultural values. Despite such criticisms rooted in the critical discourse of the virtuoso type, many historical accounts also validate Liszt's capacity for genuine musical « greatness ». What is potentially disturbing is that greatness and artificiality both appear to be within Liszt's grasp, both appearing fundamental to his artistic makeup, interchangeable or equal. A great virtuoso achieved something which was problematic for cultural hierarchies: they could « imitate the inimitable », undermining the structuring distinctions between high and low, genius and vessel, original and reproduction. As Wagner put it, it was often unimportant what music Liszt played at all (Bernstein, 1998: 13; Samson, 2003: 102). It is this capacity to encompass and compress extremes of value that makes Liszt the virtuoso such a potent agent of cultural liminality, and also seem particularly modern. Mendelssohn, too, famously stated: « Liszt's way in everything [...] is a perpetual fluctuation between scandal and apotheosis » (Kramer, 2002: 69). Contemporary critics often stressed the shocking effect made by a virtuoso who, for example, sometimes « leaped onto the platform » (Stasov, 1980b: 120-121). His scandalous behaviour and private life was matched by an equally outrageous musical

output³. It is this element of obscenity –the potential to transgress the decent– which informs the representation of self-consciously scandalous virtuosity in *Lisztomania*.

Audio-Visual Performance and Sexuality

So the body of the performer and the process of looking often play central roles in musical meaning. In film, too, diegetic musical performances often appear to encourage embodied musical cognition, whereby the display of the performing musician mediates the perceptual slippage identified by Leppert above. The result is often a montage of sound-motion objects and diegetic responses to such objects which combine to enforce particular meanings. This process is often centrally accomplished by the represented performing musician being watched by other diegetic characters.

Such musical spectacles are sometimes sexualised through the evocation of a voyeuristic register. Performance activity itself can be sexualised through the combination of heightened emotion and the physical prowess required for virtuosity. Lawrence Kramer has explored how musical recitals can be read as moments of sexual connection, as a sonic « envelope » will form between performer and listener functioning as « an extension of touch » (Kramer 2002: 34; Kramer, 2014: 358). A diegetic relationship between performer and on-screen listener is often potentially sexual, particularly when the performer's body itself becomes the focus of the gaze. Desire for the music is recontextualised through the voyeuristic process as a desire displaced onto the image of the musician's body. This device turns the performance into one centrally determined by its visual element, functioning to compensate for the absence or « slippage » in value inherent to dominant cultural formations of classical music in general. The culturally determined « greatness » of classical music, and the potential absence of this recognition from the perspective of an audience, is overcome by a visual bridge. Sex provides such a bridge from the emotional absence demanded by « high » cultural values to an intuitive emotional understanding of value. In other words, films can employ a voyeuristic structure to help audiences engage with music that may otherwise alienate them. In the process of explaining « difficult » classical music to audiences, films displace it by employing a supposedly universal sexual register.

In a more specific and formal sense, the erotic potentiality of musical performance is typically displayed through an equation between digital activity and sexual touching –an effect sometimes created through montage. In *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), for example, the teenage Lisa listens in a reverie whilst the object of her unrequited affection, Stefan, practices Liszt's « Un sospiro » in an upstairs room. Lisa's friend gossips about a boy, mentioning his wandering hands; the moment is interrupted with a close-up shot of Stefan's

³ See Kitchen, 2020: 55-68.

hands playing a crescendo on the high notes. This filmic cut links virtuosic pianism with a desirous and somewhat illicit sexuality –illicit due to the element of auditory voyeurism introduced by Lisa's secret listening to Stefan's private practice. Similarly, in *Lisztomania* a nondiegetic descending chromatic run of notes accompanies a shot of Liszt passionately kissing his wife's arm from the wrist up. In such scenes the virtuosity, passion, sensitivity, and prowess of pianistic performance become allegorical of sexual performance.

Some films evoke more explicit connections between virtuoso performance and sexuality. Beginning a concert in *Song Without End* (1960), Liszt theatrically removes a pair of white gloves before sitting at the piano and casually tossing them aside. This was one of the real Liszt's many ritualised theatrical affectations (Stasov, 1980b: 121). Throughout the film this motif appears to symbolise Liszt's changing attitude to performance, and the altering relationship between his persona, his public and his music. A female audience member takes the gloves off the stage as a souvenir. The cultural significance of virtuoso souvenirs taken by audiences is well documented, serving as locations of personal contact between star and spectator (Kramer, 2002: 90; Loesser, 1954: 370). According to Chris Rojek, such souvenirs serve a religious purpose, functioning as « relics » that « diminish the distance between the fan and the celebrity »; Rojek identifies a reliquary culture dating back to « the earliest days of Hollywood », although we can see how virtuosos such as Liszt were significant early articulators of this threefold relationship between star, relic and fan (Rojek, 2007: 173). As a metonymic embodiment of a performer's being, the gloves are symbolically charged by their metaphoric relationship with their hands –the specific bodily location of a virtuoso's uniqueness. Yet Liszt's gloves are also endowed with a fetishistic quality, since they perform a visual and public game of concealment and revelation with his hands as objects of desire. *Lisztomania* contains a playfully *risqué* version of this glove motif which also explicitly emphasises its phallic interpretive potential. Before performing to an adoring audience of young girls, Liszt loosens the fingers of his garish green gloves one at a time; one finger becomes elongated with a playful and knowing gesture. As in *Song Without End*, several girls rush to secure the phallic memento.

At its most extreme, this tendency associates the piano with the female body itself, strengthening ideologically problematic schematising of male control in opposition to female passivity and otherness. According to both Gooley and Kramer, the common virtuoso motif of « blood on the keys » can suggest rape or loss of virginity on the part of a feminised piano (Kramer, 2002: 84; Gooley, 2009: 108). Again, paradigmatically, a virtuoso's performances were occasionally described in terms of romantic embrace, with the performer dominating a submissive female instrument (Gooley, 2009: 108). Such tendencies were extended and validated by sexualised discourses surrounding Liszt himself as a notorious womaniser. Some commentators went so far as to brand Liszt an « erotomaniac » (See Davison, 2014: 247). Again, this sexual dimension of virtuoso performance is intimately connected in some filmic representations to the social practice of looking. During a concert scene in *Song Without End*, Liszt

makes eye contact with a female member of his audience and, without sheet music before him to dictate what he plays, begins « La Campanella » (1838-1851). The choice of music is seemingly determined by Carolyn's presence, articulating a certain sexual dimension to the virtuoso performance. At the end of the performance, Liszt and Carolyn's eyes meet significantly. Liszt's dark, slightly downturned and masterful expression strongly suggests that the performance has been a method of proving his uniqueness or power, both musical and sexual. The intensity of emotion displayed by the characters; the power-play suggested by Liszt's momentary ignoring of the audience's applause; the orgasmic climax of the music specifically chosen to demonstrate the virtuoso's physical stamina and power; the proximity of her seemingly oblivious husband – all these points contribute to the symbolic construction of this moment as an illicit sexual encounter.

Ben Winters observes the potential for intimacy in such cinematic representations of classical concerts, whose dignified conventions place restrictions on audience behaviours which « can result in particularly charged encounters » (Winters, 2014: 94). Encounters such as that between Liszt and Carolyn in *Song Without End* flirt with the taboos concerning types of social environment which, whilst typically containing great emotion, are constituted by many restrictions on interpersonal communication. Similarly, Lawrence Kramer notes that moments of stillness in virtuoso performance can, by their sheer absence of bodily activity, become « an invitation to a still deeper intimacy » between performer and spectator (Kramer, 2002: 48). This denial of bodily activity can form a moment of visual excess in itself, through its very contrast to the expectations of virtuoso performance, which often can be interpreted to express bodily activity on emotional and eroticised terms. The moment when Liszt's and Carolyn's eyes meet after « La Campanella » is a moment charged with transgressive potential, and is made so specifically by the sudden absence of music. The embodied sensuality evoked by the virtuoso performance has, suddenly, nothing to be displaced into. The moment of meaningful eye contact between Liszt and Carolyn takes the full weight of that displaced sensuality.

On a related note, the potentially transgressive nature of this sexual dimension is also sometimes tempered by the piano's partly domestic functionality (Kramer, 2002: 42). Cinematic representations of Romantic pianism often encounter this conflict between artistic passion and sheltered homelife. Liszt's first scene in *Impromptu* (1991), for example, alternates between a dramatic piano improvisation and its effect of disturbing a baby in the next room. Interestingly, both conflicting worlds are disturbing and disturbed, communicating values between them with equal suggestiveness, comically deflating the seriousness of the music, and bringing a quality of sexualised passion into the domestic environment. In the clarity and potency of its symbolic content regarding relationships, art, society, sex and violence, the image of a pianist disturbing a crying baby and a crying baby disturbing a pianist could function as an exemplary cliché of the composer biopic.

Conclusion

Analysis of the historical discourse surrounding Franz Liszt, that prototype of the modern celebrity musician, reveals the great range and connotative potential of the virtuoso as a cultural type. Developing within a complex socio-historical context, the idea of Romantic virtuosity can be understood to have profoundly influenced modern conceptions of musical performance, as well as broader notions of creativity, genius, and the many fictive divisions between the public and the private, normality and excess, originality and aberration. Cinematic representations such as composer biopics form only a part of the expansive terrain of audio-visual discourse which constructs and perpetuates cultural schemas of virtuosity. They also contextualise these schemas in reference to important ideological connotations associated with topics such as individuality and gender. As Film Studies and related disciplines have yet to fully acknowledge, modern technological media's own various combinations of sound and vision are perhaps to be profitably understood as expansive developments of the multimedia imperative inherent to Romantic aesthetics itself⁴.

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⁴ For further analysis concerning this and related concepts, see Kitchen, 2020.

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