

Echoes of Liszt: The Changing Reception of His Paraphrases and Transcriptions from Premieres to Present

Xinyao Feng*

Manhattan School of Music, New York 10025, United States

* Corresponding Author Email: 1079920869@qq.com

Abstract. In the nineteenth century, opera ruled the lyric stage, producing numerous popular melodies that resonated deeply with audiences. Pianists began to borrow materials from the operas they knew, and the opera-based fantasy for the piano became popular and dominated the concert stage for much of the 19th century. Among these performers, Franz Liszt stands out for having developed the opera-based piano piece to its fullest potential. The decline in popularity of Liszt's music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries can be attributed to a confluence of aesthetic, cultural, and political factors. However, his music has undergone revivals in the later part of the 20th century, driven by both a renewed appreciation for Romanticism and recognition of Liszt's important role in the evolution of Western music. This paper examines the changing reception of Liszt's paraphrases and proposes effective strategies for curating lecture-recitals that illuminate the rich context and narrative insight of his compositions.

Keywords: Opera Fantasy; Musical Reception; Romantic Era; Piano Performance; Cultural Factors.

1. Introduction: Historical Perspective

The late 18th century marked a period of profound societal upheaval, as the French Revolution erupted, shattering the centuries-old chains of feudalism and sparking a wave of dramatic social, political, and cultural transformations across Europe. The Enlightenment, which spanned much of the 18th century, heralded a major shift in intellectual thought, emphasizing reason, empirical observation, and the rejection of traditional church doctrines. In the realm of music, the influence of the Enlightenment led to the rise of the Galant style, which prioritized clarity, proportion, and simplicity in composition [1].

In contrast, the Counter-Enlightenment arose toward the end of the 18th century, rejecting the focus on reason and logic, favoring instead the exploration of emotion, intuition, and the irrational. The German literary movement Sturm und Drang of the 1770s fed into the mainstream of Romanticism [2]. By the early 19th century, as Napoleon spread the Revolutionary ideas across Europe, composers began to move away from the structured, rational limits of the Classical era, instead turning to personal themes, originality, and national identities. This evolution marked the birth of Romantic music, a style characterized by an emphasis on melody, emotional depth, novelty, and individuality [1].

As the European economy changed and the power of the aristocracy declined, musicians adopted a freelance lifestyle, earning their livelihood through public performances, teaching, and composing on commission. Furthermore, it became increasingly common for middle-class families to own musical instruments. To attract amateur musicians, composers began writing music focused on beautiful melodies, even adapting well-known opera arias into solo pieces suitable for home performance [1].

1.1 Liszt's Role in the Romantic Movement

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) was a composer, pianist, teacher, conductor, writer, and one of the leaders of the Romantic movement in music [3]. Between 1839 and 1847, Liszt revolutionized the concert scene by giving over one thousand solo performances across Europe. In 1841, his performances sparked intense excitement across Europe, with audiences becoming nearly hysterical [4]. Eduard Hanslick noted that “the year 1846 may be regarded as the culmination of the golden age of virtuosity”

[5]. These phenomena made Liszt a superstar of his era, comparable to the cult of pop stars in the twentieth century.

Liszt was the first pianist to perform solo concerts in large concert halls, coining the term “recital,” which he used for the first time in London on June 9, 1840 [6]. He was also the first to perform entirely from memory, a practice that has since become a long-standing tradition in modern concert performance [1]. In 1848, Liszt assumed the position of music director of the Weimar Court Orchestra, marking a significant shift to composition, where he invented the Symphonic Poem.

Another essential aspect of Liszt’s role was his prolific work as a transcriber and arranger. Philip Friedheim notes that of nearly 600 piano pieces composed by Liszt, only a little more than a third are completely original [7]. During the 1830s and 1840s, transcriptions accounted for approximately forty percent of his piano compositions [3].

2. Creation, Decline, and Resurrection

2.1 The Rise of Paraphrases and Transcriptions as a Genre

While “pure” instrumental music gained greater popularity, opera and orchestral music continued to dominate the public concert scene in the 19th century. As the classic arias of operas spread widely, pianists began to recognize the inherent appeal of operatic melodies. The piano proved to be the perfect medium for reworking these vocal passages.

Liszt’s arrangements can be divided into two main types: the paraphrases and the transcriptions. The operatic paraphrase, sometimes called *Reminiscence* or *Fantasia*, consists of free fantasies on excerpts from popular operas, often retelling the story by varying and combining the borrowed themes [1]. The transcriptions, on the other hand, are strict, literal, and objective, aiming to unfold the original work as accurately as possible [8].

Liszt was committed to publicizing the works of his contemporaries as well as composers he loved and admired. His piano transcriptions promoted the reception of music by composers who were unknown at the time or inaccessible outside of major European capitals [9]. One such beneficiary was Hector Berlioz. In 1833, Liszt produced a tremendous recasting of the *Symphonie fantastique* (S470) for piano, bearing the publication expenses himself [10].

2.2 The Fall from Favor: Shifting Aesthetic, Social, and Political Forces

As Liszt’s works became increasingly overexposed, criticism followed. Some critics viewed his flamboyant performances as excessive and lacking in musical depth. Among his detractors were notable musicians such as François-Joseph Fétis and Ignaz Moscheles [11]. James Gibbons Huneker dismissed his transcriptions as “obsolete,” and Artur Schnabel asserted that performing Schubert-Liszt transcriptions constituted a disrespect to Schubert’s originals [12].

Beyond aesthetic shifts, social changes also played a crucial role. With the advent of the phonograph and radio, listeners could engage with orchestral music directly [1]. The original function of transcriptions, namely bringing orchestral masterpieces to audiences, diminished. Furthermore, the rise of Nationalism in music saw composers cultivating styles that carried associations with their own ethnic groups, further marginalizing Liszt’s cosmopolitan transcriptions.

The upheavals of the First and Second World Wars profoundly shaped musical preferences, shifting the focus away from 19th-century virtuosity toward compositions that encapsulated contemporary struggles. Works such as Prokofiev’s *War Sonatas*, Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*, and Shostakovich’s “Leningrad” *Symphony* resonated strongly with the public, further marginalizing the earlier virtuosic styles.

2.3 The Resurgence in the 20th and 21st Centuries

The 20th century saw a gradual reassessment of Liszt's transcriptions. Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni was widely regarded as the true heir to Liszt's legacy, exemplified by his six all-Liszt recitals in Berlin in 1911 [13]. Alfred Brendel published influential essays in the 1970s and 1980s that helped Liszt's music be taken more seriously. In 1986, Brendel wrote "The Noble Liszt," arguing that Liszt is the most frequently misunderstood among major composers [14].

Vladimir Horowitz expressed regret for never having performed Liszt's transcriptions of Beethoven's symphonies in public, describing them as "the greatest works for the piano, tremendous works" [15]. In the 21st century, pianists such as Lang Lang and Daniil Trifonov have brought these works to contemporary audiences, while musicologists have begun to explore Liszt's role as an innovator rather than mere transcriber.

3. The Complex Relation of Liszt's Rigoletto Paraphrase to the Original

Liszt's Rigoletto Paraphrase was composed in 1859 (first published in 1860) after Liszt had withdrawn from public performance [16]. It is based on the renowned vocal quartet *Bella figlia dell'amore* from the final act of Verdi's opera, which premiered on 11 March 1851 in Venice [17].

Unlike conventional transcriptions, Liszt's paraphrases are creative reinterpretations. The introduction opens with a musical conversation between Maddalena and Gilda. Two motives alternate: ominous staccato octaves in the bass representing Maddalena's mockery, and ascending octave leaps in the right hand conveying Gilda's helpless sigh. Notably, Liszt assigns Maddalena's motive to a lower register, diverging from Verdi's opera where her vocal line is consistently higher. As shown in Figure 1, the two contrasting motives are presented in mm. 1–2.



Figure 1. Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase, mm. 1–2

Liszt adds a bravura passage featuring rapid arpeggios, broken chromatic passages with *accelerando*, and repeated broken chords marked *velocissimo* to heighten the sense of threat and panic. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate this bravura passage spanning mm. 7–14.

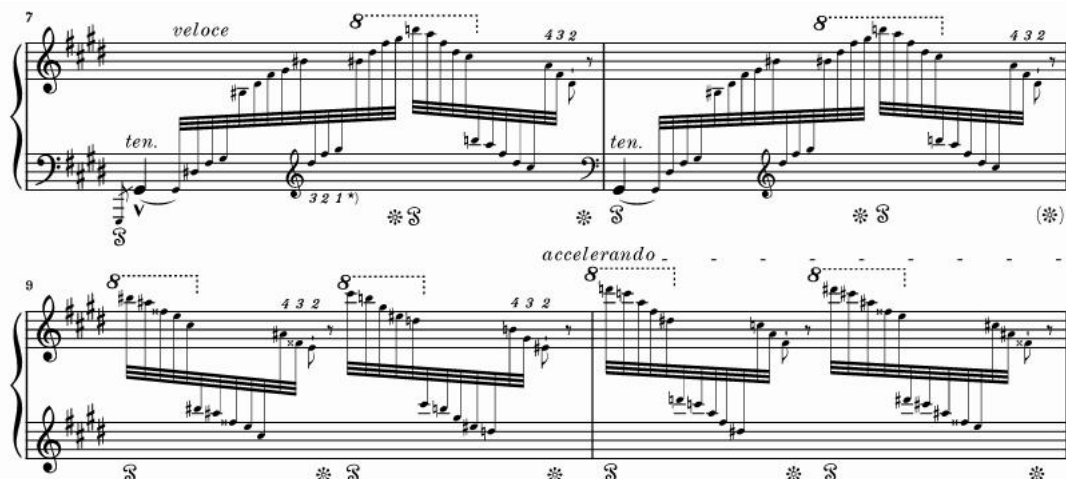


Figure 2. Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase, mm. 7–10

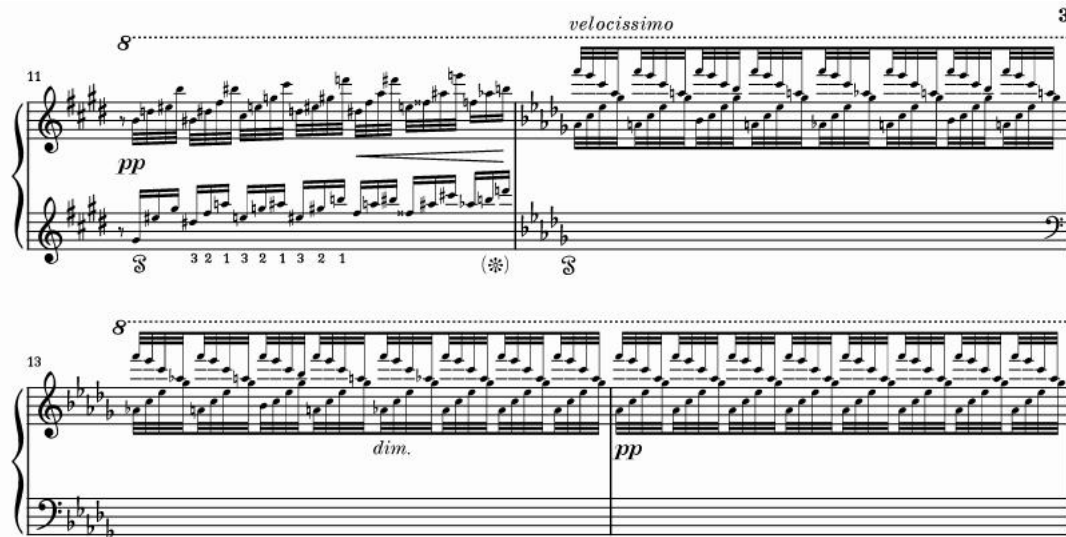


Figure 3. Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase, mm. 11–14

The introduction concludes with a dominant seventh chord marked pianississimo, creating an atmosphere of shuddering tension. The silence before the next section suggests the tranquility before the storm. Figure 4 shows this moment of shuddering tension in mm. 9–10.



Figure 4. Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase, mm. 9–10

After the introduction, the Andante section begins in D-flat major. The melody expresses the Duke’s words to Maddalena. Liszt transforms Verdi’s crisp staccato orchestral notes into expressive, Romantic rolled chords, highlighting the Duke’s gentle side while amplifying his hypocrisy from a new perspective. Table 1 provides the original Italian libretto alongside its English translation.

Table 1. Libretto of Verdi’s *Bella figlia dell’amore*: The Duke’s Lyrics

Italian Libretto	English Libretto
<i>DUCA Bella figlia dell’amore, Schiavo son dei vezzi tuoi; Con un detto sol tu puoi Le mie pene consolar.</i>	DUKE Fairest daughter of love, I am a slave to your charms; with but a single word you could relieve my every pain.

In m. 24, Liszt’s use of a tritone (E-flat and B double-flat) replaces Verdi’s perfect fifth, creating a considerable color change to highlight the devilish flavor of the Duke’s personality. He also replaces the term dolce with smorzando, aligning more closely with the lyrics’ notion of “relieving pain” rather than depicting feigned sweetness. This is illustrated in Figures 5 and 6, with Liszt’s modification shown in Figures 7 and 8.

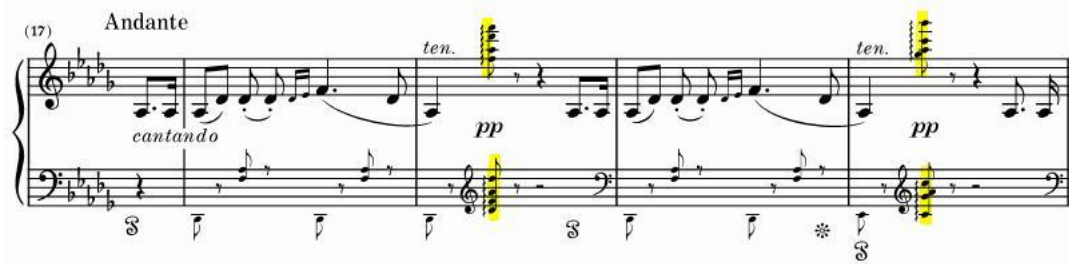


Figure 5. Liszt's Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase, mm. 17-21

Figure 6. Verdi's Rigoletto, No.12 Quartetto

Figure 7. Liszt's Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase, m. 24

Figure 8. Verdi's Rigoletto, No.12 Quartetto

3.1 The Fusion of Operatic Narrative and Virtuositic Piano Writing

Liszt's virtuosic technique in the Rigoletto Paraphrase serves a purpose beyond mere display. Where Verdi writes in homophonic texture, Liszt replaces it with continuous rapid octave leaps and descending sixth intervals alternating between hands. These passages, accompanied by crescendo and rinforzando assai markings, create a sense of looming danger while providing narrative continuity. Figures 9 and 10 demonstrate these octave leaps in mm. 41–42.

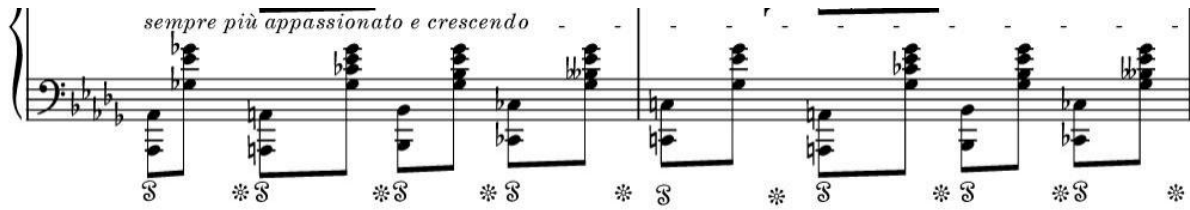


Figure 9. Liszt's Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase, mm. 41-42



Figure 10. Liszt's Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase, mm. 41-42

The last nine bars form a distinct ending with no counterpart in the original quartet. Liszt added a storm-like finale employing exhilarating octave technique on the piano. Figure 11 presents the concluding passage in mm. 90–98.



Figure 11.Liszt's Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase, mm. 90-98

4. Recordings: Interpretations by 20th-Century Pianists

4.1 Alfred Cortot's Interpretation

Alfred Cortot (1877–1962) was one of the most influential pianists of the 20th century, renowned for his poetic interpretations and distinctive approach to playing [18]. His 1920 recording of Liszt’s *Rigoletto Paraphrase* [19] reveals an interpretation full of delicate poetic expression yet not lacking in dramatic tension.

Cortot opens with a light and subdued dynamic, rendering Maddalena's mocking laughter as veiled and restrained, while Gilda's voice begins with emotional instability that far surpasses sorrow. In the

Andante section, Cortot plays at a relatively slower tempo (quarter note ≈ 58), achieving an extremely legato and lyrical quality that gives the piano “breath” and “life.” His interpretation sometimes carries a Chopin-like character, with subtle rubato and slight rhythmic displacement between hands.

One of the most striking aspects is his omission of an eleven-measure passage (mm. 52–62) in both his 1920 and 1923 recordings. This was not an oversight but a thoughtful artistic choice—Cortot remained more faithful to Verdi’s compositional intentions at this point, replacing Liszt’s added material with his own piano reduction of Verdi’s original.

4.2 Claudio Arrau’s Interpretation

Claudio Arrau (1903–1991) was a Chilean pianist who trained under Martin Krause, a direct pupil of Franz Liszt [20]. His 1972 recording [21] leaves an impression of refinement and elegance. Rather than presenting the work as mere technical display, Arrau shapes each note with thoughtful intention, performing like a storyteller unfolding a narrative with grace.

In contrast to Cortot’s strict rhythmic structure in Maddalena’s opening melody, Arrau embraces greater freedom and a speech-like quality. His handling of running thirty-second notes creates a harp-like effect, evoking imagery of sunlight flickering through leaves. Frank Dawes noted that Arrau “brings to the fore whatever there is of beauty in all the other pieces” and that “they emerge as viable works of art” [22].

5. Challenges and Solutions for Programming in a Modern Lecture-Recital

The lecture-recital combines scholarly discourse with live performance, offering an engaging platform for both musicians and audiences. When programming transcriptions and paraphrases, structuring the presentation in a clear and engaging way presents a significant challenge.

A typical lecture-recital structure includes: (1) introduction to the topic; (2) historical context and compositional background; (3) performance excerpts; (4) thematic and theoretical analysis with recordings or video comparisons; and (5) conclusion and audience engagement through Q&A.

To elevate the impact of lecture-recitals, several innovative approaches are recommended. First, the strategic integration of multimedia elements, including historical photographs, original manuscripts, personal letters, and animated analyses, can provide deeper insights into the composers’ creative processes. Liszt’s manuscripts reveal the evolution of his transcriptions, offering a direct glimpse into his compositional thought process. Figures 12–14 show pages from the manuscript of the Beethoven/Liszt Symphony No. 9 transcription.



Figure 12. Beethoven/Liszt - Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125



Figure 13. Beethoven/Liszt - Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125



Figure 14. Beethoven/Liszt - Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125

Second, connecting music to other disciplines such as literature, drama, and visual arts enriches the presentation. For opera-based fantasies, reciting poetry or performing situational dialogue before the musical performance allows audiences to comprehend the strong connection between music and its narrative source.

Regarding repertoire selection, programs can be organized around a single composer's transcriptions, or follow a thematic approach contrasting works from different periods. Alternating virtuosic pieces with lyrical transcriptions provides variety while highlighting Liszt's dual nature as both virtuoso and poet. Furthermore, presenting lesser-known transcriptions, such as his religious works or early operatic paraphrases, broadens the reach of his compositions. Table 2 summarizes the key distinctions between 18th- and 19th-century serious Italian opera, contextualizing the operatic tradition from which Liszt drew his paraphrases.

Table 2. 18th Century vs. 19th Century Serious Italian Opera

	18th Century	19th Century
Subject Matter	Mythology, Ancient heroes	Historical events, Modern history, Contemporary literature
Musical Form	Da Capo Arias, Secco Recitatives, Accompanied Recitatives	Chorus, Ensembles, Duets, Arias: cavatina-cabaletta
Endings	Happy Endings	Tragic Endings

6. Conclusion

Franz Liszt's impact on the Romantic movement was profound and multifaceted. As a virtuoso pianist, he revolutionized the concert scene; as a composer, he contributed significantly to the symphonic poem and program music; and as a transcriber, he helped publicize the works of other composers. His transcriptions and paraphrases occupied a central part of his musical career.

The trajectory of Liszt's transcriptions reveals broader patterns in the reception history of Western music. Initially met with critical acclaim and public adoration, these works gradually fell into decline as aesthetic tastes shifted, technological advances transformed how audiences experienced music, nationalist movements reshaped compositional priorities, and wartime upheavals redirected artistic sensibilities. Yet the 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed a remarkable resurgence. Modern pianists and scholars now recognize the artistic depth of these works, viewing them as significant achievements that transcend mere virtuosic display.

The detailed analysis of Liszt's *Rigoletto* Concert Paraphrase demonstrates how his creative reinterpretations go far beyond simple transcription. Through subtle modifications of harmony, articulation, texture, and dynamics, Liszt constructs a compelling instrumental drama that enriches the emotional narrative of Verdi's original. The contrasting interpretations by Cortot and Arrau further illuminate the rich interpretive possibilities inherent in these works.

As lecture-recitals grow in popularity, incorporating multimedia elements, manuscript studies, and interdisciplinary connections can transform the concert experience into a multi-dimensional artistic exploration. By embracing innovative strategies and presenting both celebrated and lesser-known transcriptions, performers can make Liszt's extraordinary legacy more accessible and engaging for today's listeners. More than a century after his passing, Liszt's compositions remain a subject of active discussion, a testament to the enduring resilience of his artistic legacy.

References

- [1] J. P. Burkholder, D. J. Grout, and C. V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 10th ed. New York: Norton, 2019.
- [2] D. Hertz and B. A. Brown, "Sturm und Drang," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.
- [3] D. Pesce, M. Eckhardt, and R. C. Mueller, "Liszt, Franz," *Grove Music Online*, 2001/2023.
- [4] P. Metzner, *Crescendo of the Virtuoso: Spectacle, Skill, and Self-Promotion in Paris during the Age of Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- [5] O. Hilmes, *Franz Liszt: Musician, Celebrity, Superstar*, trans. S. Spencer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.
- [6] A. Walker, "Liszt and the Keyboard," *The Musical Times*, vol. 118, no. 1615, pp. 717–721, Sep. 1977.
- [7] P. Friedheim, "The Piano Transcriptions of Franz Liszt," *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 83–96, 1962.
- [8] A. Walker, "Liszt and the Schubert Song Transcriptions," *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 4, pp. 248–262, 1991.
- [9] "Franz Liszt: Transcriptions of *Lieder*," *International Musician*, Apr. 2019.
- [10] A. Williams, *Portrait of Liszt: By Himself and His Contemporaries*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- [11] J. Deaville, "Critics," in *Liszt in Context*, ed. J. Cormac. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 258–270.
- [12] J. F. Penrose, "Music: The Piano Transcriptions of Franz Liszt," *The American Scholar*, vol. 64, no. 2, pp. 272–276, 1995.
- [13] J. Sun, "Busoni Rethought," *The Juilliard Journal*, Dec. 2016/Jan. 2017.

- [14] A. Brendel, "The Noble Liszt," *The New York Review*, Nov. 20, 1986.
- [15] A. Tommasini, "Shrink an Orchestra to a Single Piano, Keeping the Magic," *The New York Times*, Jul. 4, 2019.
- [16] U. Scheideler, "Preface," in *Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase*, S. 434, comp. F. Liszt. Henle, 2011.
- [17] R. Parker, "Rigoletto," *Grove Music Online*, 2002.
- [18] M. Cooper and C. Timbrell, "Cortot, Alfred," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.
- [19] F. Liszt, *Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase*, S. 434, A. Cortot, piano (1920, Victrola 74636).
- [20] R. Philip, "Arrau, Claudio," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.
- [21] F. Liszt, *Rigoletto Concert Paraphrase*, S. 434, C. Arrau, piano (1972, Philips 6500 368).
- [22] F. Dawes, *Review of Complete Concert Paraphrases on Operas by Liszt, Verdi, by C. Arrau*. *The Musical Times*, vol. 115, no. 1574, p. 308, 1974.