

Franz Liszt, De la situation des artistes, et de leur condition dans la société (On the Situation of Artists, and Their Place in Society) (1835)

De la situation des artistes, et de leur condition dans la société (*On the Situation of Artists, and Their Place in Society*) comprises a collection of six articles first published in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* between 3 May and 11 October 1835. A seventh was added under the title "[Encore quelques mots sur la subalternité des musiciens](#)" ("A Few More Words on the Subaltern Status of Musicians") in the same journal on 15 November.

Aged 23 years, Liszt was writing his first articles for the French press. He was already famous as a piano virtuoso. A child prodigy and darling of the salons since his arrival in the French capital in 1823, he had subsequently given numerous concerts in Paris, and also in many provincial towns as well as in England and Switzerland. He nevertheless struggled to distance himself sufficiently from his performerly image to make a name as a composer: in 1825, his opera *Don Sanche* failed to obtain the anticipated success, and on the premiere of his *Grande fantaisie symphonique* for piano and orchestra ten years later his friend Berlioz was still explaining that he was considered "too capable a pianist to be a good composer" (Hector Berlioz, in the [Journal des débats, 25 April 1835](#), reprinted in idem, [Critique musicale](#), vol. II, pp. 127-33).

With the 1835 articles, therefore, Liszt was seeking to establish himself as a complete artist, beyond the mere executant. He indeed dons the guise of the man of letters, embroidering his texts with quotations from and allusions to figures from Pythagoras to Victor Hugo by way of Plato, Boethius, Bacon, Corneille, La Rochefoucauld, Bossuet, La Bruyère, Voltaire, Rousseau, Schiller, Chateaubriand, Lamartine, and de Vigny, as well as numerous passages from the Bible and sacred texts. When it comes to the ideas expounded, however, Liszt took inspiration from contemporary thinkers above all: in particular, Lammenais, Ballanche, and Saint-Simon are regularly invoked, along with Joseph d'Ortigue on questions of religious music. In the climate of bourgeois society under Louis-Philippe—a glum successor to the dashed hopes of the 1830 revolution, as far as artists were concerned—Liszt denounces what he calls musicians' "subalternity". He turns a spotlight on the precarity of their condition, and seeks out its causes. He denounces too the wrongheadedness of those musicians who make no effort to play an active role in society. Transcending mere self-promotion—even if their regular publication served to maintain a presence in Paris at the moment of the composer's Swiss exile with Marie d'Agoult—the articles propose various reforms to French musical institutions.

The first three constitute a long introduction, patiently laid out. Taking as starting point the famous maxim in La Bruyère's *Caractères*—"Everything has been said, and in seven thousand years of thinking men each has come too late"—Liszt observes: "though everything may have been said, everything is to be restated", for one can never be sure that "everything has been heard and understood": "in politics as in philosophy and the fine arts, the simplest ideas are as yet only just beginning to penetrate to the masses". It is a question, therefore, of addressing oneself to the many, even while remaining humble.

Beginning from the example of its place among the Greeks, the [second article](#) notes the immense influence of music on ancient societies. Then, drawing on the entry "Musician" in Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de la musique*, Liszt divides artists into three classes (performers, composers, teachers), and proposes a clear distinction, on moral grounds, between artists (lofty) and artisans (characterised by the pettiness of "business as usual").

The [third article](#) seeks to establish the reality of musicians' subaltern status, and raises the essential question how this state of affairs came about. The end of this sweeping introduction rises to the oratorical tone of the preacher: "Courage and hope! A new generation [of artists] is on the march [...]; it will give to art a high and powerful impetus. Let us make room for these new emissaries."

Far longer than the first three, the [fourth article](#) begins by alluding to reactions already elicited by the preceding instalments. It formulates various objections in order to refute them, before presenting a supporting series of portraits of the performer, the composer (taking the figure of Berlioz as example), and, in only a few lines, the teacher. In closing, Liszt predicts a revolution in art.

The [fifth article](#) forms the keystone of the edifice. Leaning heavily on Saint-Simonian ideas, and having established the civilising power of art, Liszt calls for various reforms to musical institutions:

- "Du Conservatoire": After recounting the opposition that he encountered when entering the Conservatoire on arrival in Paris in 1823 (due to a certain regulation denying admission to foreign students), Liszt points out the institution's weaknesses, focusing on the absence of a "true feeling for art, profound and passionate" among the students as well as the professors. He calls for, among other things, richer and more varied concert programmes (with the inclusion of chamber music) and the establishment of a class on musical literature and philosophy, as well as the publication of a specialised journal. He criticises the institution for its resistance to change: the Conservatoire ought to "initiate and direct change, rather than follow it and drag behind."
- "Des sociétés philharmoniques" concerns small provincial orchestras. Drawing on concrete examples, Liszt explains the need for these ensembles to have full complements and rehearse regularly. He propose the creation of music schools and libraries throughout the land, which would enable the circulation of numerous specialised periodicals. Finally, he judges that these efforts must be federated under a central management, with a general reunion of the philharmonic societies (perhaps on the occasion of a musical competition) every five or six years.

- In “Des concerts”, Liszt notes the generally poor quality of concert programmes, with music no more than a pretext in many matinées and soirées. He then explores the causes of this state of affairs: those who aspire to organise quality concerts in Paris face too many obstacles, he finds.
- In “De l’enseignement et de la critique” (“On Teaching and Criticism”), the tone grows more virulent as Liszt denounces the frequent incompetence of those active in these domains. He suggests that the professions of music teacher and music critic should be regulated, the right to practise subject to an examination.
- In “De la musique religieuse”, Liszt deplores the “stupid bellowing that resounds beneath the vaults of our cathedrals”, and proposes a petition for a new music, “essentially religious, strong, gripping, a music that for want of a better name we shall call humanitarian” and which “will unite theatre and church”.

The [finale article](#) begins with a summary of what has been said thus far, insisting on two central ideas: the plight of art and artists, and their responsibility to a lofty social and religious mission. By way of general conclusion, Liszt submits eight requests: the foundation of a quinquennial music competition in the principal genres of music, religious, dramatic, and symphonic; the inclusion of music education in primary schools; the reform of church music through reorganisation of the Royal Chapel and reform of plainchant; regular general assemblies of the philharmonic societies; creation of a new lyric theatre as well as of concerts and chamber music series with quality programmes; the establishment of a progressive music school to compete with the Conservatoire, which would branch out into the major French cities; the creation of a chair of music history and philosophy; the publication of an accessible and annotated collection of works by the great masters (a “musical pantheon”).

This series of articles, which today we would call “engagé”, provoked a rather lively reaction on its publication. Most notable is the essay signed Germanicus Lepic (pseudonym of Pierre Alexandre [Adolphe] Specht [1798-1874], according to the editors of Liszt’s [Sämtliche Schriften](#), vol. 1, pg. 565), entitled “De l’éducation des musiciens” (*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 18 Oct. 1835, pp. 38-40), to which Liszt furnished a response (“[Encore quelques mots sur la subalternité des musiciens](#)”, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 15 Nov. 1835) that forms a supplement to the present collection.

The articles were never collected into a volume in French during Liszt’s lifetime. They were translated into German in the first anthology of Liszt’s writings, published by Lina Ramann in Leipzig in the early 1880s (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2).

Céline CARENCO

30/08/2017

Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

To quote this article: Céline Carencó, "Franz Liszt, De la situation des artistes, et de leur condition dans la société (On the Situation of Artists, and Their Place in Society) (1835)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 01/03/2023, <https://preprod.dicteco2.ihrim.fr/article/2471>.