

# International Piano MASTERCLASS

## Margaret Fingerhut shares her insights on Liszt's transcription of Schumann's passionate yet tender love song 'Widmung'

INTERVIEW BY JESSICA DUCHEN

It's a match made in heaven – the magical combination of one of the world's great love songs in a wonderful arrangement by the master transcriber. It's no wonder that Liszt's transcription of Schumann's 'Widmung' has become one of the most popular and enduring pieces in the repertoire. It has its pianistic challenges, of course, but these are not of the same magnitude as, for example, Liszt's transcription of 'Ave Maria' or his operatic paraphrases. Approach 'Widmung' with a warm, loving heart and the warmest, loveliest singing sound you can muster, throw in an equal mix of passion and tenderness, and you are already well on the way!

The account of how the song came into being has to be one of the most romantic stories of all time. 'Widmung' was the first of a set of 26 *Myrthen Lieder* that Schumann composed in a white heat of creativity before his marriage to Clara in 1840. He had a copy of the set luxuriously bound in red velvet and presented it to her as a wedding gift on the eve of their long-awaited union. His 'beloved Clara' was deeply moved – what bride wouldn't be? 'Widmung' (or 'Dedication' in English) is set to a passionate, devotional poem by Friedrich Rückert: 'You my soul, you my heart, you my joy, and O you my pain'. Schumann clearly saw this as a personal song between him and Clara, and Liszt's transcription – aside from the gloriously full-blown pianistic climax he couldn't resist adding – remains largely faithful to this sense of intimacy.

Normally, I would not advocate listening to recordings of anything you are in the process of learning, at least not until you have formed your own response to it. However, in this case, I strongly recommend getting to know the original song first. There are many fine performances on disc and on YouTube, but two of my favourites are Fischer-Dieskau (with Jörg Demus) and Peter Schreier (with Norman Shetler). Listen to the sublime way they paint the words and how they capture

the feelings of tenderness as well as ardour. Hearing a beautiful voice in this song will encourage you to summon your innermost singing voice and, most importantly, it will demonstrate how to breathe!

Liszt renames the song 'Liebeslied', but he keeps the same instructions as Schumann at the head of the score: *lebhaft* (lively) and *innig* (heartfelt). You can set the mood and tempo straightaway by how you play the three-bar introduction with the rising and falling broken chords motif that accompanies much of the song. Notice the small crescendos on this figure. Together with a spritely dotted rhythm, you can give these introductory bars a sense of propulsion and eagerness.

When the melody enters in the fourth bar, 'Du meine Seele, du mein Herz', you are presented with one of the main challenges of the piece. This radiant melody is nothing less than Schumann's declaration of his devotion and love for Clara. So how do you bring it out and shape it as beautifully as a singer, while simultaneously playing the accompaniment? *Accentato assai il canto*, Liszt helpfully instructs the pianist!

As the melody is mostly played by the so-called 'weak fingers' (3,4 and 5), it might help to think of your hand as being slanted towards those fingers. Imagining this makes it easier to channel the sensation of arm weight bearing down into the melody, creating a deeper contact with the keys while keeping your thumb and 2nd finger more lightly poised at the surface. It goes without saying that it would be greatly beneficial to play the melody on its own a few times without the physical distraction of the accompaniment, so you can focus on how you would shape it and where to breathe.

In an archetypal Romantic piece like this, you have to be super-responsive to the shifting moods. It's all about ebb and flow – the natural elasticity of phrases is what gives life to music. For example, you will find momentary changes of mood in bars 6-7 where a tiny expressive pullback can help colour the

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Margaret Fingerhut: 'It's all about ebb and flow – the natural elasticity of phrases is what gives life to music'

plangent harmony which underpins the words 'Du mein Schmerz' ('You my pain'). A more impulsive, forward flow immediately resumes, followed by a further expressive lingering in bars 11-14 ('O you my grave, into which my grief forever I've consigned').

It should be easier to bring out the melody when it moves to the left hand in bar 16 as you

are now playing it with your stronger fingers. This repetition of the melody in a lower register is an operatic device beloved by Liszt. Enjoy the richness of this tenor voice and keep the accompanying figure – now in the right hand – as light as possible, except for those moments where it gets to sing with the left hand, such as in bar 18.

Some advice about the pedal: as the goal is to keep the melodic line as smooth as possible, you will need to adjust the timing of your pedalling, especially where the left-hand melody has a rolling chord underneath. You must have a clean change of pedal where there is a distinct breath between phrases (eg bar 19), but elsewhere you don't want to hear any holes in the melody. Try to keep the pedal changes as close and as rapid as possible without the textures becoming muddy. As ever, it's a case of listening. I always tell my students to pedal with their ears, not their feet! A little trick I find useful is to surreptitiously hang on to the last note of the right hand while you change pedal if this note features in the following chord. This helps to minimise any potential hiccup in the sound, especially when the left hand has to jump at the same moment as the pedal change, for example, the E-flat at the end of bar 16 and the A-flat at the end of bar 17.

The 'ebb and flow' policy works well in the five bars of arpeggiated chords (bars 27-31) which Liszt adds to the original – this little cadenza should move forward at first before drifting off into silence to prepare for a total change of mood and key with the second verse. The question is how much gap to leave at this point? As Liszt has indulged us with this extra pianistic flourish, it could sound a little brusque to go straight on. But equally, a pregnant pause à la *Bénédiction du dieu dans la Solitude* might not work either as it risks cutting the song in two. I find I vary what I do according to the moment and the acoustic. If you do go for the pregnant pause in performance, make sure you keep your hands close to the keys so that anyone unfamiliar with the piece isn't tempted to applaud!

The next section in E major has to be one of the most beautiful passages in all music, and it's interesting that Liszt keeps the original writing here. He knew it simply couldn't be bettered. Take a slow, deep breath as there's a very long line ahead of you, and sink into the keys to radiate peace, warmth and tenderness.

Many people take this section at a slower speed, but it will depend on your original tempo. Find your most rapt legato – your pedalling will have to assist in this – and play the accompanying repeated chords in the right hand as close to the keys as possible so it's like a sustained murmuring.

A few other pointers for this section: create an extra layer of warmth with a sonorous descending bass line in bar 36, enjoy the richness of the cello countermelody in bar 37, and relish the turn in bar 38. There's a magical key change at bar 44 where you should try to conjure up the angelic, celestial sound of harps (I take the D-flat and E-flat of the melody with my left hand, and similarly the G and A-flat in bar 46). If you find yourself struggling with the cascading dominant seventh arpeggios in bars 47 and 48, try practising with different rhythms.

*'You can choose to go "the full Liszt", but it's important to keep the sound warm, affirmative and glowing'*

From this point, until the coda calms everything down, Liszt turns up the dial with big pianistic treatment for the ultimate in passionate climaxes. The original melody reappears at bar 49, now leaping between left and right hands amid swirling arpeggios. (For added strength, I take the G on the last crotchet beat of bar 52 and the A on the last beat of bar 54 with my right hand 2nd finger).

You can choose to go 'the full Liszt' – virtuoso, exultant, euphoric – but however barnstorming you are, it's important to keep the sound warm, affirmative and glowing, never harsh or hard, especially from bar 58 where triumphal chords are marked *fff*. A rich, sonorous bass will give an orchestral foundation to the sound here. Keep your wrists and arms as free as possible so the weight can come right from the base of your back. I use upward arm and wrist movements in order not to stiffen up when I play big stretchy chords. It helps to feel as if you are drawing the sound out of the instrument, rather than applying a downward blow to it.

However, there is a real problem in bars 64 and 65 for small hands to stretch the two dominant seventh chords (E-flat, F, A, E-flat). Irrespective of how I position my hand, I find that my 2nd finger will sometimes clip the G-flat. Unfortunately, if you spread these two chords or omit a note, they can sound feeble, especially as they come at the most ardent, emotional climax of the piece. I have found a compromise solution involving a little manoeuvre which might sound complicated on paper, but it works. Hang on to the F from the previous B-flat minor chord, and using a 3-2 finger substitution you are then in position over the dominant seventh chord. Keep the F held down and don't play it again as it will (hopefully!) still be sounding. It's then much easier to play just the other three notes each time. Keep the descending bass sonorous and do very close, shallow pedal changes to help disguise the subterfuge.

Schumann ends his song in a mood of quiet devotional reflection, but Liszt presents us with an interpretative conundrum by adding an extra flourish at the very end with a crescendo and stringendo. How you play it ultimately depends on the moment. Sometimes I will drift off dreamily with a diminuendo and rallentando, but if it's an encore and I want the audience to rise to its feet, I will make it much more elated. Either way, I always sing inwardly the words 'Ave Maria' to this beautiful coda. It's like a deep affirmation and giving of thanks, with Schumann, Clara and Liszt all bound together as one. **IP**



Margaret Fingerhut can be heard performing 'Widmung' on her 2014 album

*Endless Song:*

*Encores for Piano* (Chandos Records CHAN 10826). [margaretfingerhut.co.uk](http://margaretfingerhut.co.uk)

Her latest recording is the single *Memories from My Land* by Kurdish composer Moutaz Arian, now available as a digital download to raise money for refugee charity City of Sanctuary: [margaretfingerhut.bandcamp.com](http://margaretfingerhut.bandcamp.com)