

SIGISMOND THALBERG 1812-1871

L'ART DU CHANT APPLIQUÉ AU PIANO, OP.70

1er Serie		2e Serie	
1. Quatuor de I Puritani - (Bellini's "I puritani")	5'39	8. Bella adorata incognita (Mercadante's romance	
2. Tre Giorni (Air Pergolesi)	4'55	"Il Giuramento")	5'36
3. Adélaïde (Beethoven's Op.46)	6'29	9. Le Meunier et le Torrent (Schubert)	5'16
4. Air d'Église, du célèbre chanteur (Attrib. Stradella)	6'13	10. Il mio tesoro, Air de Don Juan (Mozart)	4'08
5. Lacrimesa (Mozart's Requiem K.492)	3'47	11. Choeur des Conjurés de Crociato (Meyerbeer)	3'34
6. Duo des Noces de Figaro (Mozart)	2'11	12. Ballade de Preciosa (Weber's J.277)	4'26
7. Perché mi guardi e piangi, duetto de Zelmira (Rossini's "Zelmira")	6'22	13. Duo de Freischütz (Weber)	5'40

Alessandro Commellato *piano Érard (1843)*

...with boneless hand and velvet fingers

There's a famous anecdote regarding a soirée held in Rossini's residence in Paris. **Sigismond Thalberg** had been performing on the piano and, as soon as he finished, Rossini turned to the singers Marietta Alboni, Giulia Grisi and Erminia Frezzolini, who were in the audience, and declared: "I'm sure you'll agree that Thalberg has just given you an unparalleled lesson of *belcanto*". The statement contains a concept essential to Thalberg: *cantabilità*, in other words expressive touch and melodious refinement.

Only recently have Thalberg's own compositions begun to feature anew in concert programs. His works and particular compositional style suffered a long period of relative oblivion, and comparisons with his rival Liszt, «the only pianist in the world» - the epithet is attributed to Countess Belgioioso - certainly didn't help.

Yet Thalberg unquestionably had a special relationship with the vocal arts. Much of his oeuvre consists of paraphrases, fantasies and variations on the main opera themes, works that feature what were known as "sound illusions à la Thalberg". Audiences greatly admired his skill at the keyboard and the way he invested his instrument with "vocal" sound, while maintaining all due composure and elegance, even in the most demanding virtuosic passages. One expedient he adopted was to share the melody with both hands, which went against

the classic arrangement whereby the left hand was used for the accompaniment and the right hand for the melody. With his new approach, Thalberg managed to extend the range of the keyboard, engaging the strength of the thumbs to give the impression that there was a “third hand” entrusted with the melody, surrounded by the accompaniment provided by the outer fingers of the hands. The foremost concert piece comprising the technique is his famous *Fantasia sul Mosè*, whereas the most important “theoretical” contribution describing his “vocal art” and the way to achieve it, is *L’art du chant appliqué au piano* Op.70. The aim of this latter collection is explicit in the title: to teach musicians how to reproduce on the piano the expressiveness, breath and warmth of vocal art. The work consists of twenty-four transcriptions based on «the operas of the most famous early and modern composers», Italian and otherwise, published from 1853 in four series, each containing six items. Given the didactic intent, in the preface the author explained what he had in mind and provided a number of technical principles relating to performance.

The first reflection concerns the very nature of singing, conceived as a need intrinsic to the art of music:

The art of singing well, said a famous woman, is the same for any instrument played, [...] it is up to the performer to bend the needs of the art to the given mechanism.

Because the piano cannot, rationally speaking, reproduce the lovely art of singing in its most perfect feature, that is in the

possibility of prolonging the sounds, it makes sense to use skill and certain expedients to eliminate this imperfection, achieving not only the illusion of sustained and prolonged sounds, but also of reinforced sounds. Feelings make us artful and the need to express what we feel can create means that transcend what is mechanical.

So Thalberg decided to transcribe some «of the most melodious opera arias» that he considered typical of the vocal compositions «of the great masters, early and modern». Next he added a series of technical hints divided into twelve points. First came general advice regarding muscular relaxation, for which he adopted terms pertaining to vocal technique:

1. *One of the conditions for achieving breadth of performance, lovely sound and variety in sound production, involves eliminating all hardness. It is thus essential that the forearm, and in particular the wrist joint, hand and fingers have all the flexibility and the various inflections that a good singer has in the voice.*
2. *In ample, noble and dramatic melodies the chest voice is necessary [...] without ever striking the notes [...] you must somehow soften the keyboard, pressing down on the notes with boneless hands and velvet fingers.*

Next comes more practical advice: sobriety of movement (5), the importance of the right fingering (6), respect for markings (7) and the correct use of the pedals (8).

Thalberg also expressed his interest in melody by adopting typographical contrivances to emphasize the line visually.

3. *The part that plays the melody should always be clearly and distinctly articulated, so that it stands out like a beautiful human voice above a light orchestral accompaniment. To make this entirely clear to pupils in our transcriptions we have written the melody [...] in notes that are larger than those of the accompaniment.*

And lastly

The best advice we can give is to learn, study and interpret the lovely art of belcanto. To this end no opportunity should be missed for hearing great artists [...] mainly great singers.

This encouragement is reminiscent of what Chopin said to his pupil Vera Rubio: «*Il vous faut chanter si vous voulez jouer du piano*» («You have to sing if you want to play the piano»).

In France the publications met with acclaim, and in Thalberg's wake, in 1865 George Bizet published twenty-four transcriptions of Italian arias under the title *Le pianiste chanteur*, intended as an «introduction à *L'art du chanteur* de S. Thalberg». In Italy the publisher Francesco Lucca acquired the copyright, and the edition immediately drew

the attention of the critics, with lengthy reviews in the main Italian music periodicals. Thalberg's relationship with Italy was indeed deep, and not only on account of music. In 1844 he had married the daughter of the famous bass singer, Luigi Lablache, and from 1858 established his residence at the singer's luxurious villa in Posillipo, thereafter also devoting his time and energies to viticulture. Many were the well-attended musical soirées featuring the famous pianist and his Erard piano, which was almost identical to the one used for this recording.

The entire Neapolitan musical élite took part in these events, echoes of which probably found their way into *Les soirées de Pausilippe* Op.75. It was here at the villa that Thalberg received, taught and advised Beniamino Cesi, Costantino Palumbo and Alfonso Rendano. Little wonder that today he is still considered the forefather of what is known as the "Neapolitan piano school".

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Translation by Kate Singleton



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Producer and Sound Engineer: Claudio Vandelli
Assistant Sound Technician: Noé Vandelli
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