

Exploring the Legacy of a Nineteenth-Century Virtuoso Pianist: Sigismund Thalberg

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Abstract: This paper is dedicated to Sigismund Thalberg, a giant of the piano virtuoso of the Romantic era: his life track, his pioneering pianistic novelties, and his important historical impact on music and his deciphering of the artistic value of his famous piano contest with Franz Liszt. Being now less known than his contemporaries such as Liszt, Thalberg enormously extended the tonal range of the piano, its capabilities of the timbre of the orchestra and its expressive power of the narrative of the piano, with his original three-hands effect and cantabile legato technique, with his pioneering work on the pedal, and with his operatic transcription fantasy. His legendary piano duel of 1837 with Liszt in Paris showed their very different performing aesthetics; it engendered a great interest among the public in pianistic virtuosity, and it changed the public persona of the Romantic pianist. His technical approaches have been part of the core curricula of music conservatories in Europe and America for a very long time, and his compositions are important texts to study the transition from Classical to Romantic pianism. It shows that Thalberg has an irreplaceable historical merit to revolutionize the pianistic technique of the Romantic, to advance the vociferated piano expression and to refine the genre of the operatic piano transcription, and to show his long-forgotten, but ever-echoing musical legacy.

Keywords: Sigismund Thalberg; Three-hands Effect; Virtuoso romanticism

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1. Introduction

In the culturally and musically rich period of the Romantic era, the piano is an important instrument that experienced substantial transformations in both technique and expressive capacity. Sigismund Thalberg, who was not as well-known, is obviously one of the well-known pianists and composers among all the well-known in this flourishing era. In spite of contemporaries like Franz Liszt, his contributions were also important and necessary in the development of piano music.

This paper aims to find Thalberg's important contribution to the development of piano virtuosity in the Romantic era. Apart from being a virtuoso of technical virtuosity, Thalberg was also known for the new compositional approaches he introduced. These techniques provided a new way for the expressive style of the

piano. The most important innovation, the so-called three-hand effect, was not only an example of technical development, but also of a deep knowledge of the expressive possibilities of the piano.

The purpose of this study is to show, by looking at his life, his technical inventions, and what his creations have had an impact on in the field of piano music, that Thalberg is a fact of the story of Romantic music. By studying the reports of the time and his works and placing his presence in the context of his rivalry with Liszt, this paper will also point out in which way his art has contributed to the knowledge of the Romantic piano music today and of its lasting influence. In the end, this paper will show how he has impacted and contributed to the piano music of the Romantic period.

2. Mysterious origins and early musical career of Sigismund Thalberg

Thalberg's story is as interesting as his music. Starting with his interesting beginning. Thalberg was born in 1812 in Geneva, Switzerland. Sigismund Thalberg. His birth parents are pretty mysterious. What is written in official records is Joseph Thalberg and Fortunée Stein as his parents. However, there is the rumor that he was the illegitimate child of Count Moritz von Dietrichstein and Baroness von Wetzlar. This aristocratic connection, however, gave him from a young age some educational and social opportunities ^[1]. For example, thanks to this privilege, he was given his primary education in Vienna. He studied piano with Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Simon Sechter and took composition lessons from Ignaz Moscheles ^[1]. These years were very important in order to lay the base for his future innovations in his own piano performance and his own composition.

Thalberg's professional debut was in 1826 in Vienna. His first work was published shortly after, a Fantasy on Weber's Euryanthe. He was soon recognized, and his performances all over Europe brought him fame. Moreover, Thalberg was known for his very good technique and his ability to make the piano sing a very rich and melodious sound. Thalberg developed the "three-hand effect", meaning "when bigger was better," in which it seemed as if three hands were playing the piano at the same time (as shown in **Figure 1**) ^[2]. In the 1830s, Thalberg was at the peak of his fame and was in Paris, where he met Franz Liszt. This rivalry is legendary and was underlined by a piano duel in the salon of Princess Cristina Belgiojoso in Paris, which ended without a winner declared. This event shows that Thalberg was very famous during the Romantic era and what was the difference in their style and skills ^[1].

Moreover, Thalberg's impact went even beyond his performances. His compositions, in particular his operatic fantasies, were also original in the way in which he used the capacities of the piano, both in the degree of technical virtuosity and in the expressive side of them. They influenced both his contemporaries and, of course, later generations of musicians, if we think about the piano, in which form Thalberg's works used to be played. Nevertheless, a music scholar like Bomberger said: the key to Thalberg's importance almost certainly is not in his compositions, but in his contribution to piano technique ^[3].



Figure 1. Sigismund Thalberg in an early contemporary caricature. Iconographic Collection, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Center.

3. Thalberg's revolutionary innovations in piano technique

As mentioned before, Thalberg's contribution to piano technique was very important in the Romantic era, as the piano was able to achieve an enhanced ability of expressiveness. His piano techniques that we can mention are the "three-hand effect", the playing style called *cantabile*, the innovations in the use of pedaling, and also the operatic transcriptions, which in fact impacted the piano playing style and the technique. Of all the contributions, we can say that the most well-known and celebrated innovation is the three-hand effect, as it is the one that revolutionized piano performance and the composition of the Romantic era.

At first, Thalberg developed this technique - the "three-hand effect" to create the illusion of three hands playing simultaneously on the piano. This was mainly achieved by playing the melody in the middle register with alternating thumbs, while the other fingers managed accompaniment patterns above and below the melody. This technique allowed for a richer and more orchestral sound from the piano, which was revolutionary at the time. His operatic transcriptions, especially his *Fantasia on Rossini's Moïse*, Op.33, are considered prime examples of how piano technique can enhance the narrative and emotional depth of operatic themes ^[4]. It reflected the idea of implementing such technique in his piano playing and music writing (shown in **Figure 2**). The effect was so convincing that audiences were often left in awe, trying to understand how only two hands could produce such a sound.



Figure 2. Sigismund Thalberg, *Fantaisie sur des thèmes de « Moïse »*, extrait.

Thalberg was also innovative in popularising a cantabile, or a popular singing style of piano playing. He thought that the piano should imitate as much as possible the human voice, so that it could have a smooth and lyrical quality which is very expressive. In order to lend the melodic line a singing quality over the accompaniment, he used lots of seamless legato techniques and subtle pedaling. Thalberg influenced not only his contemporaries but also future generations of pianists who tried to link the piano music to vocal qualities expressively. He also used the damper pedal in quite an advanced way for his time. He extended the use of the pedal, which was not used in his day. Instead, he used the pedal to blur or clarify textures and to sustain the notes even when the fingers were no longer in contact with the keys, in order to have more continuity in the melodic line and richer harmonic textures ^[5].

Last but not least, Thalberg's operatic transcriptions could be regarded as another testament to that. The works he transcribed were the vocal and orchestral parts of operas, which he made into solo piano pieces by keeping the opera as a whole as dramatic and emotive as possible. At the same time, the transcriptions showed how the piano could be used to imitate the varied timbres of an orchestra and the expressiveness of the opera singers, that is, how the very possibilities of the piano as a solo instrument could be expanded ^[5].

Therefore, Thalberg's innovations were not only technical approaches, but also somehow the utmost conception of the possibilities of the piano as a narrating and expressive instrument. In fact, his techniques have definitely left a mark on piano performance, which is still influencing how pianists play the piano to this very day. In this way, Thalberg has a lasting but less-known legacy in the world of classical piano music through his mixing of virtuosity with expressiveness.

Despite all his contributions above, Sigismund Thalberg was much more than just a pianist; he was one of the important figures of the Romantic era, who affected the music (and the musicians near him) in some deep ways.

4. The legendary artistic rivalry with Franz Liszt and its cultural influence

One of the most well-known stories of Thalberg's career was his rivalry with Franz Liszt. It was not just a showcase of their incredible talents, but also of their different styles. This was a famous piano duel at the salon of Princess Cristina Belgiojoso in Paris in 1837 ^[6]. This was also a very important spectacle which attracted attention from the Parisian musical elite. During the duel, each of the pianists played his best operatic fantasies. Liszt played with drama and flamboyance, while Thalberg was known for his elegant and controlled style. The outcome was very diplomatic, with both being praised and no clear winner declared. This was just a balanced result that showed how different their artistic styles were and also helped to solidify both of their reputation as leading musicians of the Romantic era. This rivalry drew public attention and helped to make piano concerts extremely popular. It also helped to define the image of the pianist as a cultural hero during the Romantic period. More importantly, the duel between Thalberg and Liszt helped to set the status of pianists as celebrated artist-heroes of their time ^[6].

It is absolutely worth recognizing that Thalberg's techniques and the emotional depth of his music influenced many pianists of his time. His operatic transcriptions, where he tried to make vocal music sound on the piano, showed how the piano can just as well tell a story as a singer could. His way of making the piano sound almost vocal made many pianists of his time experiment with the expressive possibilities of the piano. These works influenced not only pianists, but also composers who aimed to integrate into their

compositions something similar ^[7]. For example, after the great success of the *Fantaisie sur des thmes de “Moise”* in 1835, many virtuosi of the time began to imitate Thalberg’s three-hand technique, which showed that, at that time, there was a widespread fascination with this. Robert Schumann, in 1839, used the three-hand skill in the second of his *Drei Romanzen Op. 28* (shown in **Figure 3**). Too, Felix Mendelssohn was so inspired by Thalberg’s technique that he later used it in his *Etude in B flat minor Op. 104 No.1*, which is a beautiful piece and very highly recommended for its emotional depth and technical intricacy. Moreover, his “rivalry” with Franz Liszt’s *Réminiscences de Norma*, S. 394 contains many elements of Thalberg’s style. In the third étude, *Un Sospiro*, from *Trois études de Concert*, S.144, composed between 1845 and 1849, Liszt attempted a different elaboration of the three-hand technique (shown in **Figure 4**). The innovation of Thalberg has a lasting impact on the subsequent compositions by other major composers ^[3].



Figure 3. Robert Schumann, *Drei Romanzen Op. 28, No.2*, excerpt.



Figure 4. Franz Liszt, *Un Sospiro*, from *Trois études de Concert*, S.144, excerpt.

His impact also went into how piano was taught. Thalberg’s techniques and his compositions became part of the curriculum in many music schools and conservatories in Europe and America. He advocated a style of playing where the whole point was to have very melodious and expressive sounds. This also affected the way in which he was taught and the way in which the piano techniques that he developed are still taught today ^[8].

5. Conclusion

All in all, even though Thalberg is not as widely recognized today as some of his contemporaries, his influence on piano music is for sure. Even now, the years that have been affecting how pianists approach the piano and how to do it, in a way, have lasted through his contributions to piano techniques and performance practices. His compositions are not often performed in concerts now, but they shall be studied for how they use the techniques and their expressive qualities. They are important educational materials for understanding how we evolved from the classical to the romantic piano music.

To conclude, the influence of Sigismund Thalberg on the classical piano music is mainly marked by innovations like the so-called three-hand effect and his expressive cantabile playing. All these, as we said before, enriched the piano performance of the Romantic era much, as well as how the current piano playing style is influenced, and set new standards for pianistic playing. His well-known rivalry with Franz Liszt not only was shown in skill but also helped to raise public interest in piano virtuosity. Both important figures, in a way, contributed to the development of the piano and the concerts of the Romantic period.

Thalberg's techniques and musical philosophies still influence the way the piano is taught and performed nowadays. Though his popularity is not as recognized now as before, his legacy is still in the way pianists are approaching the instrument and hopefully is in the way we still study and appreciate what he has written for the piano repertoire.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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