

# Franz Liszt and Johann Gottlob Töpfer

## A Fruitful Relationship in Weimar

By Jens Korndörfer

### Introduction

During the travels of his virtuoso years, Franz Liszt liked to try out and even perform on various organs throughout Europe.<sup>1</sup> However, it was only after his move to Weimar in 1848 that he was in regular contact with other organists<sup>2</sup> and began to compose for the “pope of instruments”<sup>3</sup>—in fact, as Alan Walker points out, it is “unthinkable that Liszt would have written his two organ masterpieces *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam* and *Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H* in any other environment than . . . Weimar.”<sup>4</sup>

As the Catholic Church in Weimar was small and the organ—as well as ‘modern’ music (e.g., chromaticism)—unwelcome in the liturgy, Liszt became acquainted with a circle of Protestant organists, known as the *Weimarer Organistenkreis*.<sup>5</sup> The leading figure among the organists in Weimar was Johann Gottlob Töpfer (1791–1870), organist at the Stadtkirche, professor at the *Lehrerseminar* in Weimar and—perhaps most importantly—a leading authority in organ building in Germany.

In this article, I will explore the professional relationship between Liszt and Töpfer. The mutual influence between the two relates to four different areas: 1) Their direct relationship, including knowledge and performance of and influence on each other’s compositions; 2) Mutual students; 3) Organs that were built according to Töpfer’s ideas and well known to Liszt; 4) Indirect influence on each other’s registrational practice.

### Professional relationship between Liszt and Töpfer

When Liszt first arrived in Weimar, the older Töpfer was “first skeptical and hostile towards the progress instigated by Liszt. . . . Later he was honest enough to admit that much nice and great music has been created by the new direction.”<sup>6</sup> That there was indeed a significant improvement in their mutual esteem can also be witnessed by Liszt dedicating two of his arrangements for organ to Töpfer (*Aus tiefer Not*, BWV 38, in 1856 and *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, BWV 21, in 1860), Töpfer’s first performance of two compositions by Liszt (*Psalm 23* for soprano, harp, and organ, and *Psalm 137* for soprano, violin, harp, and organ in October 1859, on the same program were two pieces by Töpfer: his *Sonata in D Minor* and the *Nachspiel in C*, performed by Gottschalg and Buckel),<sup>7</sup> Liszt’s contribution of two pieces for Töpfer’s ‘Jubelalbum’ in 1867 (*Consolation No. 4 in D-flat* and *Hosanna: Choral for Organ and Trombone*),<sup>8</sup> and other premieres of Liszt in Töpfer’s church (*Seligkeiten* in 1859 and *Psalm 18* in 1861). In 1870, Liszt even led Töpfer’s funeral procession.<sup>9</sup>

Liszt owned several of Töpfer’s compositions, including the *Choralstudien* (edited and published by Gottschalg in 1871), a collection of Intonations, Preludes, Trios, and ‘Konzertsätze’, which

he liked.<sup>10</sup> Milton Sutter believes that two of Töpfer’s early works for organ (the *Fantasia in C* and the *Sonata in D*, of which the latter had been performed in a recital with Liszt’s and Töpfer’s works!) “influenced Liszt to a certain extent in that the first version of the *Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H* (1855) contains some material that seems to be an expansion of some of Töpfer’s ideas as expressed in the *Fantasia* and the *Sonata*.”<sup>11</sup>

Whereas Töpfer’s influence on Liszt’s organ compositions cannot be ascertained, there is more evidence for an influence in the other direction. Töpfer’s three *Choral Fantasies* (1859) can be considered the precursors of Reger’s compositions in the same genre: the increased chromaticism in these three pieces (compared to earlier works by Töpfer), the quotation of the chorale in *pianissimo* just before the hymnic final in major in *Jesu, meine Freude* (in exactly the same position as in Liszt’s “B-A-C-H”), and the connection of the different variations with thematic interludes in all three fantasies (similar to Mendelssohn’s *Sonata No. 6* and Liszt’s “Ad nos”) point towards an influence of Liszt’s oeuvre on Töpfer’s late works.<sup>12</sup> As Bähr points out, Töpfer did maintain his conservative style throughout his lifetime, but he also was open to new influences from eminent colleagues like Liszt.<sup>13</sup>

### Töpfer’s students and Liszt

During his 53-year-long tenure as city organist and professor for organ at the seminary, Töpfer taught numerous German organists: three of them also became students of or collaborated with Liszt. We can assume that through their playing and in their discussions, they further familiarized the pianist Liszt with Töpfer’s ideas.

The most important organist in Liszt’s life, his editor and link to other organists as well as his close friend, was **Alexander Wilhelm Gottschalg** (1827–1908).<sup>14</sup> A student of Töpfer, Gottschalg became the great pianist’s disciple when Liszt accidentally overheard Gottschalg practicing one of Liszt’s organ arrangements in Tiefurt and had technical difficulties. His low technical level also prevented Gottschalg from playing Liszt’s large-scale organ works, but Liszt would teach him nonetheless (*Orgelconferenzen* in Denstedt and Tiefurt in 1860) and rework many of Gottschalg’s arrangements (for example, the *Pilgerchor* from Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*).<sup>15</sup> Gottschalg’s *Repertorium* (1869–75),<sup>16</sup> a compendium of mostly nineteenth-century organ music (original compositions and numerous arrangements), contains twelve works by Liszt that exhibit the ‘new spirit’: pianistic virtuosity, orchestral registration, and constant connection to Bach are essential for Liszt’s view of the ideal organist<sup>17</sup> and his music.

The virtuosity that Gottschalg lacked was **Alexander Winterberger** (1834–1914) strength: Winterberger, one of the first students of Liszt (since



Altenburg, artist unknown, after C. Hoffmann, original 1859 (copyright Klassik Stiftung Weimar)



Alexander Winterberger, by Sergey Lvovich Levitsky

1848), premiered both “Ad nos” and “B-A-C-H”.<sup>18</sup> Thus, he was Liszt’s most important performer and was instrumental in disseminating Liszt’s organ works with his recitals in Germany and Holland.<sup>19</sup> Winterberger’s beginnings as an organist are not entirely clear: Hintzenstern claims that he studied with Töpfer in Weimar (but does not give proof for his claim), whereas Holloway suggests that he probably studied with Carl Ferdinand Becker (1804–1877) in Leipzig and maybe also with Töpfer in Weimar.<sup>20</sup>

**Christoph Bernhard Sulze** (1829–1899) studied with Töpfer and became his successor in the Stadtkirche in Weimar.<sup>21</sup> He arranged some of Liszt’s works and developed—together with Liszt—a new system of pedal notation (notes for the right foot beamed up, for the left foot beamed down).<sup>22</sup>

### The organs in Weimar (Stadtkirche) and Denstedt

“Töpfer’s credentials as a teacher were impeccable, [but] his real claim to fame was as an organ builder, a field over which he exerted great influence.”<sup>23</sup> Two of the instruments that were built according to Töpfer’s ideas<sup>24</sup> were very important to Liszt as he used them for performances and teaching: the Trampeli/Schulze organ (1812/1824) in the Stadtkirche in Weimar and the Peternell organ in Denstedt (1859/60).<sup>25</sup>

#### Peternell organ in Denstedt (II/19)

##### Hauptwerk C–f'''

- 16' Quintatön
- 8' Principal
- 8' Hohlflöte
- 8' Viola da Gamba
- 4' Octave
- 4' Hohlflöte
- 3' Quintflöte
- 2' Octave
- Mixtur IV

##### Oberwerk C–f'''

- 16' Lieblichgedackt (from Co)
- 8' Geigenprincipal
- 8' Lieblichgedackt
- 8' Harmonika
- 4' Geigenprincipal
- 4' Flauto dolce

##### Pedal C–d'

- 16' Subbas
- 16' Violon
- 8' Principalbass
- 8' Gedacktbass

##### Couplers

- II/I
- I/Ped

Calcantenwecker (wind signal)

#### Weimar, Stadtkirche (III/49)

##### Hauptwerk

- 16' Principal
- 16' Quintatön
- 8' Octave
- 8' Gedackt

- 8' Spitzflöte
- 8' Gamba
- 4' Octave
- 4' Spitzflöte
- 4' Gamba
- 2' Octave
- Cornet IV
- Mixtur IV
- Cymbal III

##### Oberwerk

- 16' Bordun
- 8' Principal
- 8' Schweitzerflöte
- 8' Hohlflöte
- 8' Flauto traverso
- 4' Octave
- 4' Gemshorn
- 2' Octave
- Mixtur V
- Scharff III
- 8' Vox humana

##### Unterwerk

- 8' Principal
- 8' Gedackt
- 8' Salicional
- 8' Flauto dolce
- 8' Harmonikaflöte
- 4' Octave
- 4' Flauto dolce
- 2' Octave
- Cornett III
- Mixtur IV

##### Pedal

- 32' Untersatz
- 16' Principal
- 16' Violon
- 16' Subbas
- 8' Principalbass
- 8' Octave
- 8' Violon
- 8' Bordun
- 5 1/2' Quint
- 4' Octave
- Cornett V
- 32' Posaune
- 16' Posaune
- 8' Trompete
- 4' Clarine

The Weimar organ is considered to be the “earliest example of [a] German romantic instrument,”<sup>26</sup> and is characterized by its full, warm sound (dominance of foundation stops), the ‘thunderous’ pedal, its quick response, and its expressive and poetic voices, which were praised for their *Lieblichkeit*; however, it had neither a swell box nor playing aids.<sup>27</sup>

The organ in Denstedt was designed for service playing and not for concert. However, the essential—and poetic—foundation stops are there, and some of Liszt’s works can be performed on such a smaller instrument.<sup>28</sup>

### Liszt’s registrational practice

These two instruments (as well as the Ladegast organ in Merseburg), together with the organists Gottschalg and Winterberger, were of vital importance to Liszt, as he would explore his (new) ideas for registration with them. As we shall see, this had repercussions for Töpfer, as he was either present at recitals that Liszt had prepared or—in the case



Liszt and his students

of Gottschalg—would hear his former student play in a different way.

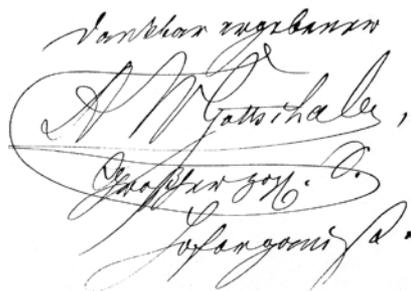
Numerous contemporary sources, like Gottschalg and von Bülow, tell us that Liszt had “little knowledge of local organ practice [and] was willing to experiment with registration,” that he was praised for his “brilliant registration, [and] his rich range of nuances in creating only soft tone colors,”<sup>29</sup> and his amazing skill in the combination of stops and choice of registration, as well as in the alternation of the four manuals in Merseburg.<sup>30</sup> In short, “Liszt enjoyed using the full resources of the instrument and . . . had no time for the cautious, colourless renderings of Bach’s works which then prevailed in Germany,”<sup>31</sup> to the extent that—after the performance of “Ad nos” in Merseburg in 1855—“other organists, who grew up in the old tradition, and who used to play a quarter of an hour long on the same registration, ranted and raved about this deconsecration of the church organ.”<sup>32</sup>

When Gottschalg played Bach’s *Dorian Toccata* and *Passacaglia* in accordance with the teachings of Töpfer, Liszt answered: “Do you really believe that Bach played these two compositions continuously on the full organ? Never! He was a far too great and sensitive artist!”—and they reworked the piece, making use of Liszt’s “fantastic sense for sound.” Gottschalg reports exactly the same chain of events for his playing of the *Toccata in D*. He later played all of these pieces in the ‘new way’ for Töpfer, who endorsed the new approach wholeheartedly and urged Gottschalg never to play in the old-fashioned way again.<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, Töpfer indicates a crescendo by adding stops in two of the final movements of the three chorale fantasies.<sup>34</sup> This could very well be another influence of Liszt and his novel usage of the organ on the older Töpfer.

## Conclusion

During the thirteen years that Liszt spent in Weimar, Töpfer and Liszt gradually overcame their initial skepticism and learned to appreciate each other. Common students and the usage of the same instruments provided a fruitful platform for mutual exchange in their ideas on organ composition and registration. Especially in the latter area, there can be little doubt that Liszt’s new approach to the organ’s dynamic and expressive possibilities—“guided by the spirit, not the letter of the law”<sup>35</sup>—convinced the representative of the old “Thuringian *Organo Pleno* tradition for the works of Bach”<sup>36</sup> to reconsider his position and to incorporate a gradual crescendo in his later works. ■



Gottschalg’s signature (copyright Feijoo)

## Notes

1. Hermann J. Busch, “Die Orgel Mendelssohns, Liszts und Brahms,” in *Proceedings of the Göteborg International Organ Academy 1994*, ed. Hans Davidsson and Sverker Jullander (Göteborg: Göteborg University, 1995), 237. For a list of Liszt’s performances on organs in Europe between 1823 and 1847, see James Dale Holloway, “Performance Convention and Registrational Practice in the Weimar Organ Works of Franz Liszt” (Seattle: University of Washington, D.M.A. dissertation, 1998), 36.

2. Holloway, 40.  
3. Martin Haselböck, *Franz Liszt und die Orgel*, in *Franz Liszt, Sämtliche Orgelwerke*, Vol. X/b (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1998), 411.

4. Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Weimar Years 1848–1861*, Vol. II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 7.

5. Michael von Hintzenstern, “Franz Liszt und der Weimarer Organistenkreis,” in *Das Weimarer Schaffen Franz Liszts und seine Ausstrahlung auf die Weltmusikultur*, ed. Uta Eckardt and et al., 140–152 (Weimar: Der Arbeitskreis, 1987), 141ff.

6. *Ibid.*, 144.  
7. *Ibid.*, 144f.  
8. Holloway, 44.  
9. Hintzenstern, “Franz Liszt und der Weimarer Organistenkreis,” 145.

10. *Ibid.*, 143f.  
11. Quoted in Holloway, 45.  
12. Hans-Peter Bähr, “Im Schatten Liszts: Johann Gottlob Töpfer,” in *Zur deutschen Orgelmusik des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Hermann J. Busch and Michael Heinemann, 209–217 (Sankt Augustin: Butz, 1986), 193ff. Holloway, 45, 275.  
13. Bähr, 195.

14. Michael von Hintzenstern, “Der Kreis evangelischer Kirchenmusiker um Franz Liszt,” *Musik und Kirche* 3, no. 56 (1986), 120. General discussion in Michael von Hintzenstern, “Franz Liszt und sein ‘legendarischer Kantor’: Zur Zusammenarbeit mit Alexander Wilhelm Gottschalg,” *Musik und Kirche* 3, no. 56 (1986): 115–120.

15. Haselböck, *Franz Liszt und die Orgel*, Vol. X/b, 311, 438.  
16. Holloway, 49ff.  
17. Michael Gailit, *Julius Reubke (1834–1858): Leben und Werk* (Langen: Günter Lade, 1995), 44. Haselböck, *Franz Liszt und die Orgel*, Vol. X/b, 436.

18. Gailit, 32.  
19. Holloway, 275.  
20. Hintzenstern, “Franz Liszt und der Weimarer Organistenkreis,” 145. Holloway, 60.  
21. Holloway, 64.  
22. Hintzenstern, “Franz Liszt und der Weimarer Organistenkreis,” 149f. Haselböck, *Franz Liszt und die Orgel*, Vol. X/b, 405.  
23. Walker, 159.  
24. Holloway, 78ff.  
25. Stoplists in *ibid.*, 105, 108.



Liszt, BACH



Töpfer, Grosse Concert Fantasie

26. *Ibid.*, 43.  
27. Hermann J. Busch, “Die Orgelwelt Franz Liszts und die Klanggestalt seiner Orgelmusik,” in *Zur deutschen Orgelmusik des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Hermann J. Busch and Michael Heinemann, 115–134 (Sankt Augustin: Butz, 1998), 104f. Busch, “Die Orgel Mendelssohns, Liszts und Brahms,” 238.  
28. Busch, “Die Orgelwelt Franz Liszts und die Klanggestalt seiner Orgelmusik,” 114f. Hintzenstern, “Franz Liszt und sein ‘legendarischer Kantor,’” 116.  
29. Holloway, 48, 160.  
30. Haselböck, *Franz Liszt und die Orgel*, Vol. X/a, 71.  
31. Walker, 159.  
32. Martin Haselböck, “Franz Liszt als Orgelkomponist,” *Musik und Kirche* 5, no. 56 (1986), 218.  
33. Haselböck, *Franz Liszt und die Orgel*, Vol. X/b, 441f.  
34. Bähr, 193.  
35. Holloway, 162.  
36. *Ibid.*, 276.

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———. “Die Orgelwelt Franz Liszts und die Klanggestalt seiner Orgelmusik.” In *Zur deutschen Orgelmusik des 19. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Hermann J. Busch and Michael Heinemann, 115–134. Sankt Augustin: Butz, 1998.  
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