

*History of Music
in Letters and Documents*

Original article

UDC 781.9

<https://doi.org/10.56620/2587-9731-2026-2-045-084>

EDN [BJLWKZ](#)



**Franz Liszt and Sigismond Thalberg's piano "duel"
as perceived by their contemporaries:
A study based on nineteenth-century
French periodicals**



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Abstract. The article examines various aspects of the rivalry between two of the greatest pianists of the first half of the 19th century, Franz Liszt and Sigismond Thalberg. The virtuosos' conflict was triggered by Liszt's notorious article directed against Thalberg and his admirers. Many of Liszt's own followers, who were disappointed by his actions, also sided with Thalberg. Parisian reviewers enthusiastically compared the pianists' artistic qualities, often to Liszt's disadvantage. The piano "duel" between the two virtuosos became the central event of the 1837 Parisian concert season, attracting the close attention of the European aristocracy, the creative elite, and the press. Both pianists were declared winners, as documented in numerous contemporary accounts. Every review published before and after the "duel" contrasted Liszt's passionate, impetuous, and electrifying performance with the lyrical cantabile style of Thalberg's playing. At the same time, their artistic talent and technical perfection were unanimously acknowledged to be equal. However, 20th-century musical historiography reinterpreted this episode in Liszt's favour, for many years displacing Thalberg from the focus of musicological discourse and thereby distorting the understanding of a crucial stage in the development of piano art in Western Europe and Russia. The digital availability of numerous historical sources (newspapers, journals, eyewitness letters) allowed for a more detailed examination of the artistic individuality of both virtuosos, leading to the conclusion that Thalberg's pianism was closer to the aesthetic ideals of his era and significantly influenced the further development of piano performance.

Keywords: Franz Liszt, Sigismond Thalberg, piano art, Parisian audience, performance style, criticism, the press

Acknowledgments. The authors express their sincere gratitude to the staff of libraries who digitized nineteenth-century periodicals and other publications, as well as to the libraries (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek etc.) and digital resources that have made these materials openly accessible.

For citation: Gulaya, T. N., & Zhestkova, O. V. Franz Liszt and Sigismond Thalberg's piano "duel" as perceived by their contemporaries: A study based on nineteenth-century French periodicals. *Contemporary Musicology*, 10(2), 45–84. <https://doi.org/10.56620/2587-9731-2026-2-045-084>

*История музыки
в письмах и документах*

Научная статья

**Фортепианная «дуэль» Ф. Листа и С. Тальберга
в контексте восприятия современниками:
по материалам французских периодических
изданий XIX века**

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются различные аспекты соперничества двух крупнейших пианистов первой половины XIX века — Ференца Листа и Сигизмунда Тальберга. Борьба виртуозов была спровоцирована одиозной статьей Листа, направленной против Тальберга и его поклонников; к последним примкнули и многие почитатели самого Листа, разочарованные его поступком. Парижские рецензенты увлеченно сравнивали исполнительские достоинства пианистов — чаще не в пользу Листа. Фортепианная «дуэль» двух виртуозов стала главным событием парижского концертного сезона

1837 года и привлекла пристальное внимание европейской аристократии, творческой элиты и прессы. Оба пианиста были объявлены победителями, что зафиксировано в многочисленных исторических свидетельствах. В каждой рецензии, опубликованной до и после «дуэли», страстное, порывистое, электризирующее исполнение Листа противопоставлялось проникновенному кантиленному мелодизму игры Тальберга. При этом масштаб их дарования и техническое совершенство единодушно признавались равновеликими. Однако музыкальная историография XX столетия пересмотрела оценку этого эпизода в пользу Листа, надолго вытеснив фигуру Тальберга из фокуса искусствоведческого дискурса и тем самым исказив представления о важнейшем этапе развития фортепианного искусства в Западной Европе и России. Электронная доступность большого числа исторических источников (газет, журналов, писем очевидцев) позволила более детально рассмотреть артистическую индивидуальность обоих виртуозов и прийти к выводу, что пианизм Тальберга оказался ближе к эстетическим идеалам своей эпохи и существенно повлиял на дальнейшее развитие фортепианного исполнительства.

Ключевые слова: Франц Лист, Сигизмунд Тальберг, фортепианное искусство, парижская публика, исполнительский стиль, критика, пресса

Благодарности: Авторы выражают искреннюю благодарность сотрудникам библиотек, оцифровавшим периодические и другие издания XIX века, а также самим библиотекам (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek и др.) и электронным ресурсам, предоставившим к этим изданиям открытый доступ.

Для цитирования: Гулая Т. Н., Жесткова О. В. Фортепианная «дуэль» Ф. Листа и С. Тальберга в контексте восприятия современниками: по материалам французских периодических изданий XIX века // Современные проблемы музыкознания. 2026. Т. 10, № 2. 45–84. <https://doi.org/10.56620/2587-9731-2026-2-045-084>

Introduction

The history of musical art has preserved numerous instances of performance “duels” between the greatest virtuosos of their respective eras. In the early 18th century, George Frideric Handel and Domenico Scarlatti competed in Rome, embodying the contrast between the ecclesiastical and the elegant courtly styles. The 1781 confrontation between Muzio Clementi and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in Vienna revealed the competitive ambitions of the English and Viennese keyboard schools. The competition between Ludwig van Beethoven and Joseph Wölfl in the Viennese salon of Baron Wetzlar von Plankenstern (1799) juxtaposed an elemental, rebellious spirit with filigree classical virtuosity. The 1816 concert duel between Niccolò Paganini and Charles Philippe Lafont in Milan demonstrated the clash between the brilliant Italian violin school and the aristocratically elegant French tradition (cf. [1, p. 21]). Each of these “musical combats” was not merely a conflict of personal ambitions, but a manifestation of the stylistic and philosophical contradictions of its time. Within this lineage, a unique role belongs to the famous “duel” between Franz Liszt and Sigismond Thalberg.

The piano competition between Liszt and Thalberg, held in Paris on March 31, 1837, was widely covered in various monographs dedicated to the Hungarian pianist and composer (see for example [2, p. 237; 3, p. 174; 4, pp. 86–90; 5, pp. 131–142]). As Rosalda Agresta, the author of the latest and currently only monograph on Thalberg, points out, “Toutes les biographies de Liszt y font naturellement allusion et le ‘duel’ lui-même est devenu l’un des épisodes les plus fameux de l’histoire du piano au XIXe siècle” [1, p. 21]. Discussing the assessments of the outcome of this “duel,” she also points out that in Western European literature, different opinions have emerged on this matter:

... si des auteurs ont proclamé Liszt vainqueur, certains ont fait preuve de plus de circonspection et ont conclu à une partie nulle; d’autres encore, se référant à l’analyse des goûts du public parisien, identifié Thalberg comme le véritable vainqueur [1, pp. 21–22].

A different situation has developed in Russian literature about Liszt. The hypnotic charm of the famous composer and pianist was so great that nearly all biographers portrayed him as the undisputed victor. Although historical evidence offered no grounds for such a definitive conclusion, many authors disregarded these testimonies, dismissing them as “nonsensical,”¹ as merely reflecting the tastes of “Parisian high society,”² or, at best, “insignificant.”³

The sympathies of many Russian musicians and composers also lay with Liszt. César Cui, having heard Thalberg perform in St. Petersburg in 1839 and Liszt three years later, became an unconditional admirer of the latter. Cui’s views were shared by Vladimir V. Stasov, Alexander N. Serov, Mily A. Balakirev, and Anton G. Rubinstein. According to Ivan S. Kuligovsky, they favored the Hungarian pianist due to “Liszt’s deep connection with Russian culture” and his relentless promotion of works by the composers of the Balakirev Circle [6, p. 106].

Clearly, their judgments also influenced Russian researchers. As a result, Thalberg’s figure and legacy were overshadowed, and perceptions of his historical role in the development of piano art became distorted. The purpose of this study is to reconstruct a multifaceted picture of how contemporaries perceived the performances of Franz Liszt and Sigismond Thalberg, to identify the key differences in their performance styles, and to analyze the artistic and aesthetic significance of the 1837 piano “duel.”

Historical Background

Since the early 1830s, Liszt had been renowned in Paris as the greatest pianist of the era (*Illustration 1*). Characterizing his playing, reviewers in Parisian newspapers spared no eloquence, awarding him the palm, even in comparison

¹ Alexandrova, V. N., & Meilikh, E. I. (1963). *Liszt 1811–1886: Kratkii ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva* [Liszt 1811–1886: A brief sketch of his life and work]. Muzyka. (In Russ.), p. 57.

² Andrei E. Budyakovsky acknowledged that the sympathies of the Parisian public lay with Thalberg, yet implied that this was true only for high society, which remained detached from the “most advanced and progressive part of Parisian society.” See Budyakovskii, A. E. (1986). *Pianisticheskaya deyatel’nost’ Lista* [Liszt’s pianistic activity]. Muzyka. (In Russ.), p. 19.

³ Milshtein, Ya. I. (1956). Liszt (Vol. 1). Muzgiz. (In Russ.), p. 132.

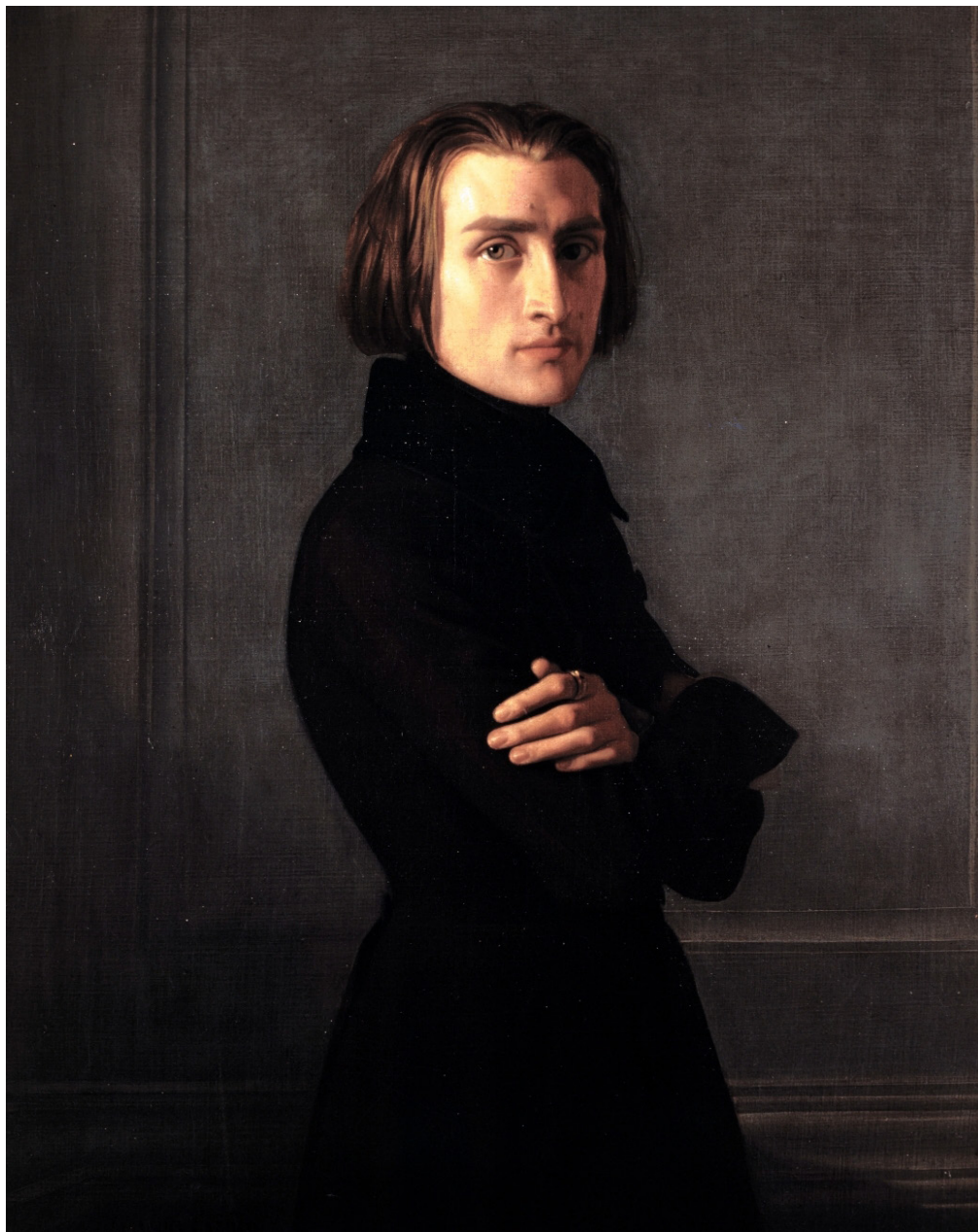


Illustration 1. Lehmann, H. (1839). *Portrait of Franz Liszt* [Painting].
Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France. Retrieved April 24, 2026, from
<https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/en/node/152744#infos-principales>

to Frédéric Chopin, Ferdinand Hiller, and Henri Bertini.⁴ However, critics were far from unanimous. The influential music theorist, historian, and critic François-Joseph Fétis, while paying due tribute to Liszt's talent and diligence, periodically a lack of self-control in performance:

Nous avons exprimé à plusieurs reprises notre opinion sur la nature du talent de M. Listz; depuis il ne c'est pas modifié, et notre manière de voir est demeurée la même. Il serait de tous les exécutants le plus extraordinaire s'il savait mieux être maître de lui; mais il lui arrive souvent de se laisser emporter plus loin qu'il ne le voudrait, et son jeu manque alors de couleur au lieu d'être pittoresque comme il pourrait le croire. Dans quelques passages du beau morceau de Weber qu'il a exécuté, il a fait preuve du talent le plus élevé; mais il n'a pas tenu constamment notre enthousiasme au même degré...⁵

In 1835, when Liszt was only twenty-four years old, his first biography was published in the *Gazette musicale de Paris*. It was penned by Joseph d'Ortigue, a talented publicist and passionate Liszt's admirer. Although written in an enthusiastic and poetic style, the essay portrayed the musician in an exceptionally favorable light. Nonetheless, even d'Ortigue could not ignore the artist's performance flaws, noting an exaggerated emotionality that had provoked accusations of "charlatanism," and a rhythmic freedom that the critic deemed unacceptable in the works of Beethoven. The author referred to the first issue as a "un beau défaut puisqu'il naît d'une grande chaleur d'âme et d'une disposition à relever par une exécution véhémence une composition souvent froide," while explaining the second by the fact that Liszt "il se livre trop à son impétuosité."⁶

The image of the passionate, impulsive piano virtuoso was further enhanced by his spiritual connection to Beethoven, whose works the musician inspiringly performed and arranged. His journalistic writings also played a significant role in shaping his reputation. Shortly before the appearance of d'Ortigue's biographical sketch,

⁴ Guémer, A. (1834, January 5). Exécution musicale: Liszt, Ferd. Hiller, Chopin et Bertini. *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, 1(1), p. 5.

⁵ Fétis, F.-J. (1833, March 16). Concert donné au bénéfice des indigens du 2 arrondissement, par MM. Liszt et Garcia fils. *Revue musicale*, 13(7), p. 55.

⁶ d'Ortigue, J. (1835, June 14). Études biographiques. I. Franz Listz. *Gazette musicale de Paris*, (24), p. 203.

the article *De la situation des artistes*, penned by Liszt himself, was published in the pages of the same periodical. In this essay, Liszt addressed the burning issues of social injustice and the condescending attitude of bourgeois society toward creative artists. Furthermore, the pianist maintained warm friendships with leading literary figures of the era, including Alphonse de Lamartine, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Victor Hugo, Alfred de Vigny, and George Sand. The soulful and passionate execution of Beethoven's music, his integration into literary circles, and his own journalistic writings lent Liszt a romantic aura that completely harmonized with the "impetuosity" of his pianism. Despite isolated critical remarks, Liszt's authority in France remained unassailable.

In January 1836, Sigismond Thalberg (1812–1871) performed for the first time in Paris—a Viennese pianist completely unknown to the Parisian public (*Illustration 2*). A near contemporary of Liszt, Thalberg was born in Geneva as the illegitimate son of the Austrian Prince Franz Joseph von Dietrichstein and Baroness Wetzlar von Plankenstern. At the age of ten, his mother brought him to Vienna, where the young man received a brilliant musical education and acquired worldly sophistication. In addition to his mother, his mentors were Heinrich August Mittag (1795–1867), an excellent pianist and bassoonist in the Austrian Emperor's Court Orchestra, and Simon Sechter (1788–1867), a composer and music theorist; furthermore, he is believed to have taken piano lessons from Ignaz Moscheles, Carl Czerny, and Johann Baptist Cramer [7]. From the age of thirteen, Thalberg began performing in the aristocratic salons of the Austrian capital. Over the subsequent decade, he earned a reputation as a respectable gentleman and a gifted artist who conducted himself with modesty yet with great dignity. It was precisely in this status that he arrived in Paris at the end of 1835.

Thalberg's concert took place at the Paris Conservatoire and was widely covered by music reviewers from various newspapers and journals. The performance was attended by Hector Berlioz, a close friend of Liszt who had already written a number of enthusiastic articles about him. Nevertheless, in his review, Berlioz characterized Thalberg's playing as an inexplicable, supernatural phenomenon:

M. Thalberg, dès les premières mesures, s'est montré un des trois ou quatre grands pianistes de l'Europe; après quelques développements, il s'est emparé complètement de l'assemblée et l'a promenée haletante,



Illustration 2. Sigismond Thalberg à 24 ans [d'après la lithogr. de Grevedon]:
[estampe], by P. L. H. Grevedon, 1880–1914, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Retrieved April 24, 2026, from

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/services/engine/search/sru?operation=searchRetrieve&version=1.2&query=%28dc.title%20all%20%22Sigismund%20Thalberg%20%20d%27apr%C3%A8s%20la%20lithogr%22%29&keywords=Sigismund%20Thalberg%20%20d%27apr%C3%A8s%20la%20lithogr&suggest=1>

de merveilles en merveilles, jusqu'au dernier accord où cet immense enthousiasme, si péniblement contenu, a enfin éclaté. La salle en tremblait. Je n'ai jamais vu que Listz produire un effet pareil. Ces deux talents, cependant, n'ont point ensemble de rapports sur lesquels il soit possible d'établir une comparaison sérieuse.⁷

Reviews by other critics were similar in style and content; however, it was Berlioz's commentary that contained the pivotal argument regarding the inappropriateness of comparing the performance manners of Liszt and Thalberg. Yet, the counterposition of the two virtuosos, which originated with this concert, became an indispensable feature of every musical review in the Parisian press. Whenever an article was dedicated to one pianist, the other was almost invariably mentioned or implied. Critics frequently evaluated Thalberg alongside other contemporaries. For instance, an anonymous author in *Le Ménestrel* noted:

Moscheles, Kalkbrenner, Chopin, Listz, Hertz, sont et seront toujours pour moi de grands artistes, qui, chacun en leur genre, ont imprimé à leur art un mouvement de progrès incontestable. ... mais M. Thalberg est le créateur d'un nouvel art que je ne saurais comparer à rien de ce qui existait avant lui.⁸

In the very same publication, Thalberg was hailed as "le premier pianiste du monde.

Liszt was staying in Geneva when Thalberg made his debut on the Parisian stage. Rumors reached him regarding a new virtuoso who had caused a sensation in the capital of piano music of that era. The artist's anxiety was heightened by the fact that among the reviews of his colleague, there were no negative or ambiguous accounts; Thalberg was admired even by the most devoted followers of Liszt's own style. In May 1836, Liszt returned to the French capital, intending to hear his unexpected rival perform, but by that time, Thalberg had already departed.

Liszt gave two concerts for a select audience at the Salle Erard, including in the program, alongside his own pieces, Beethoven's *Große Sonate für das Hammer-Klavier*, Op. 106. By positioning himself as a champion of Beethoven's music and contrasting his "serious" repertoire with Thalberg's opera transcriptions, the pianist issued a kind of artistic challenge to his rival. He adhered to this strategy even after the "duel," incorporating not only large-scale but also lesser-known works by the Viennese master into his concert programs. However,

⁷ Berlioz, H. (1836, January 31). Premier concert du Conservatoire. *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, (5), pp. 38–39.

⁸ M. Thalberg. (1836, March 13). *Le Ménestrel: Journal de musique*, (15), p. 1.

Thalberg was not to be outdone: from 1837 onward, he regularly performed both Beethoven's piano sonatas and his own transcriptions of the composer's symphonies.

Berlioz wrote a separate article on Liszt's May performances. Its core premise was that this time, a "new" Liszt had appeared before the public—one who had matured significantly as a performer and had surpassed his former self: "...à tous ceux qui ne l'ont pas entendu en dernier lieu, on peut dire hardiment: Vous ne connaissez pas Liszt."⁹ Berlioz modestly added that it was not his place to pass judgment on the technical perfection of the playing, since he himself "...n'ayant jamais pu parvenir à faire seulement de la main droite la gamme d'ut sur le piano."¹⁰ Concluding the article, he hailed Liszt as the "le pianiste de l'avenir." While this statement has been cited in dozens of monographs, it has only rarely been quoted in its entirety. Berlioz was deeply moved by the magnificent, profound interpretation of Beethoven's sonata—"ce poème sublime qui, pour la presque totalité des pianistes, n'était jusqu'à ce jour que l'énigme du Sphinx":

Nouvel Œdipe, Liszt l'a expliquée, de manière à ce que l'auteur, s'il a pu l'entendre, a dû frémir de joie et d'orgueil dans sa tombe. Pas une note n'a été omise, pas une note n'a été ajoutée (je suivais des yeux la partition), pas une altération n'a été apportée au mouvement qui ne fût indiquée dans le texte, pas une inflexion, pas une idée n'a été affaiblie ou détournée de son vrai sens. Dans l'adagio surtout, dans la reproduction de cette hymne inouïe que le génie de Beethoven semble s'être chantée à lui-même en planant solitaire dans l'immensité, il s'est constamment maintenu au niveau de la pensée de l'auteur. On ne peut rien dire de plus, je le sais, mais on ne doit rien dire de moins, parce que c'est vrai. C'est l'idéal de l'exécution d'une œuvre réputée inexécutable. Liszt, en reproduisant ainsi une œuvre encore incomprise, a prouvé qu'il était le pianiste de l'avenir. Honneur à lui!¹¹

While sincerely admiring the performance of Beethoven's sonata, Berlioz neither compared nor contrasted Liszt with Thalberg, and he certainly did not associate the "future versus past" dichotomy with their respective performance styles. At the same time, the greater part of the article was dedicated to analyzing Liszt's artistic temperament: it was as if the author were attempting to justify the flaws in his playing to potential opponents as a result of "inspiration fébrile" and "trembler de l'émotion passionnée qu'il se propose d'exciter chez autrui."¹²

⁹ Berlioz, H. (1836, June 12). Liszt. *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, (24), p. 198

¹⁰ Berlioz, 1836, p. 199.

¹¹ Berlioz, 1836, pp. 199–200.

¹² Berlioz, 1836, p. 199.

Liszt's Article and Its Aftermath

After these concerts, Liszt left Paris and returned only in December 1836, on the eve of the winter concert season. This season featured the most prominent pianists of the era. Thalberg arrived in Paris in early February 1837 and attended at least one of Liszt's four chamber concerts, which were organized jointly with the violinist Chrétien Urhan and the cellist Alexandre Batta.¹³ The programs of these evenings consisted primarily of Beethoven's instrumental works, drawing the most discerning audience.

For his part, Liszt also attended one of his rival's performances, which took place on February 19 at the studio of Pierre Zimmermann, a professor at the Paris Conservatoire. According to Liszt's recollections, he was in the hall alongside Chopin and remarked to him that Thalberg was "un grand seigneur manqué qui fait un artiste encore plus manqué."¹⁴ This phrase may appear relatively mild against the backdrop of other descriptions that Liszt bestowed upon his colleague in almost every letter to Marie d'Agoult¹⁵ throughout February 1837.

This skeptical attitude toward his rival is clearly reflected in the tone and content of Liszt's article¹⁶ published on January 8, 1837, in the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*. The text was formally presented as a review of Thalberg's *Grande fantaisie*,

¹³ In one of his letters to Marie d'Agoult, Liszt described his rival's reaction to his performance: "Thalberg a été stupéfait d'étonnement. Il a dit tout haut, devant plusieurs personnes qui se trouvaient là, qu'il n'a jamais rien entendu de pareil. Il a ajouté même 'qu'il serait incapable de jouer quatre lignes de mon morceau.' Si je ne me trompe il doit être assez attristé. Toutefois, je ne veux pas donner carrière à mes suppositions à cet égard." Liszt, F., & d'Agoult, M. (1933). *Correspondance de Liszt et de la comtesse d'Agoult* (M. D. Ollivier, Ed.; Vol. 1). B. Grasset, p. 180.

¹⁴ Liszt & d'Agoult, 1933, p. 190.

¹⁵ In his private correspondence, Liszt was even more categorical. For instance, on February 13, he wrote: "Thalberg est un jeune homme très faible et très influençable. Ses amis sont fort médiocres; tant pis pour lui" (Liszt & d'Agoult, 1933, p. 187). In a subsequent letter, Liszt remarked: "Je viens d'entendre Thalberg: en vérité, c'est une mystification complète. De toutes les choses déclarées supérieures, c'est assurément la plus médiocre que je sache" (Liszt & d'Agoult, 1933, p. 190). In his final letter of February, he concluded: "Le concert de Thalberg est remis, dit-on! Mon Dieu, que cela est bête. Cet imbécile commence à m'ennuyer violemment. Mais il faudra bien que la partie finisse un beau soir" (Liszt & d'Agoult, 1933, p. 196).

¹⁶ Some researchers believe that the article was written by Countess d'Agoult [5, p. 131] or with her participation [1, p. 23].

Op. 22, and Caprices Op. 15 and Op. 19. While conceding that “M. Thalberg est un pianiste fort remarquable,” Liszt nonetheless implied that the true reason for his success lay in his “d’une parenté indirecte avec une noble famille” and his privileged status as the “pianiste de S. M. l’empereur d’Autriche.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Liszt caustically compared his opponent to “fous de cour” who, unlike Thalberg, “Jadis au moins les fous de cour réussissaient parfois à distraire de majestueux ennuis.”¹⁸

The central focus of Liszt’s article was his critique of Thalberg’s *Grande fantaisie*. The author characterized it as “... non-seulement c’est là une des œuvres les plus prétentieusement vides et médiocres que nous sachions, mais encore c’est là une chose souverainement monotone.”¹⁹ Indeed, the *Fantaisie*, Op. 22 was not Thalberg’s finest composition. At that time, the virtuoso more frequently performed his *Fantaisie* on themes from Rossini’s opera *Mosè in Egitto* (Op. 33). Built upon the melody of Moses’s prayer, *Dal tuo stellato soglio*, this piece appeared remarkably innovative both in its structure (the author abandoned the traditional brilliant finale) and its textural solutions. It marked the first implementation of the thumb technique, where the thumbs alternately carried the melody in the middle voice, enveloped by arpeggio passages in the upper and lower registers. Whether intentionally or not, Liszt failed to mention this composition. It should also be noted that, by that time, Liszt himself had composed only a few early works—specifically, the *Grande fantaisie de bravoure sur la clochette de Paganini* (1834)²⁰ and fantasies on themes from Halévy’s *La Juive* (1835) and Pacini’s *Niobe* (1836).²¹

Perhaps Liszt’s primary error was his sharp attack on the audience that had welcomed Thalberg. As previously noted, this audience included even Liszt’s own adherents, Berlioz among them. One of the article’s passages was particularly caustic in mocking the tastes of the French public and all those who sympathized with Thalberg:

¹⁷ Liszt, F. (1837, January 8). M. Thalberg. Grande Fantaisie, Oeuvre 22. 1er et 2e Caprices, Oeuvres 15 et 19 (Revue critique). *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, 4(2), p. 18.

¹⁸ Liszt, 1837, p. 18.

¹⁹ Liszt, 1837, p. 19.

²⁰ In 1851, Liszt revised this fantasy into the étude *La Campanella*, which was included as No. 3 in the cycle *Grandes études de Paganini* (S. 141). Searle, H. (1954). *The Music of Liszt*. Williams & Norgate, p. 165.

²¹ On the genre of the piano fantasy in the oeuvre of Liszt and Thalberg, see [8].

Le goût, ou, pour dire plus exactement, la prédilection exclusive du public pour les choses médiocres, nous sont connus d'ancienne date, il est vrai; toutefois nous avons pensé bien à tort, jusqu'ici, qu'à défaut d'art il se faisait au moins besoin d'un certain amusement, et que des productions appartenant directement et absolument au genre ennuyeux ne trouvaient jamais grâce auprès d'un auditoire français. Nous confessons humblement nous être trompés.²²

Thus, even before the “duel” took place, Liszt had alienated a significant portion of the Parisian audience. His disparaging remarks about Thalberg were deemed ethically unacceptable, and his criticism of his rival prompted reviewers to scrutinize the originality of the author's own compositions more closely. Although the juxtaposition of the two artists in Parisian reviews had already set the stage for their rivalry, it was precisely this tendentious article that provoked the future “duel.” While Thalberg refrained from responding publicly to these attacks, Liszt continued publishing articles until July 1837 in which he condemned the poor taste of his contemporaries.²³ Nonetheless, the venues for Liszt's numerous concerts invariably remained full. This circumstance indicates that, contrary to the pianist's reproaches, the Parisian public continued to appreciate both his talent and the music of Beethoven that he performed.

Since Liszt's attacks had long remained unanswered, Fétis apparently deemed it necessary to intervene on Thalberg's behalf. In April of the same year, he published an extensive article titled “Liszt and Thalberg.” As an erudite music historian, Fétis began with an overview of piano art, in which he distinguished two traditions: the *cantabile* tradition, represented by Chopin, and the *brilliant* tradition, which viewed the piano as “une arène pour l'adresse et la dextérité”²⁴ Liszt, for whom no technical limitations existed, indisputably belonged to the latter. Thalberg, conversely, was a pioneering pianist who had managed “de réunir en un seul système les avantages des deux écoles chantante et brillante du piano.”²⁵

²² Liszt, 1837, p. 18.

²³ Liszt's third and final article from the series of open letters to George Sand, later compiled under the collective title *Lettres d'un bachelier ès musique*, was published on July 16, 1837, after Thalberg had already departed from Paris. See: Liszt, F. (1837, July 16). Lettre d'un voyageur à M. George Sand. *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, (29), pp. 339–343.

²⁴ Fétis, F.-J. (1837, April 23). MM. Thalberg et Liszt. *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, (17), p. 141.

²⁵ Fétis, 1837, p. 140.

Fétis emphasized that he considered Liszt to be “le plus fort des pianists pour l’exécution de quelque difficulté donnée que ce soit” and repeated Berlioz’s observation regarding the error of comparing Liszt’s and Thalberg’s styles: “Personne que je sache ne songea à établir de parallèle entre le talent de ces deux artistes, et certes il n’y en avait point à faire, car ils suivent des voies absolument différentes.”²⁶ Caustically criticizing the pianist’s journalistic immoderation and dismissing his review as “d’inévitables effets des faiblesses humaines,” Fétis concluded his response by addressing Liszt directly:

Vous êtes un grand artiste; votre talent est immense, votre habileté à vaincre les difficultés de tout genre, incomparable; vous avez poussé aussi loin qu’il était possible l’exécution dans le système que vous avez trouvé établi par d’autres; mais vous êtes resté dans ce système, en le modifiant seulement par les détails. Aucune pensée nouvelle n’a donné à ces merveilles de votre jeu un caractère de création et de propriété. Ce n’est pas à dire que quelque heureuse idée ne viendra un jour illuminer votre esprit sur un emploi nouveau de vos rares facultés; mais enfin jusqu’à ce jour il n’en est point ainsi. Vous êtes l’homme transcendant de l’école qui finit et qui n’a plus rien à faire, mais vous n’êtes pas celui d’une école nouvelle. Thalberg est cet homme: voilà toute la différence entre vous deux.²⁷

However, Fétis’s article was published after the “duel,” which took place on March 31, 1837. The chronology of the events preceding the confrontation deserves closer examination. On March 12, Thalberg gave a concert at the Paris Conservatoire, in a hall with a capacity of about four hundred people. The pianist performed his most spectacular works: the *Grande fantaisie sur l’air “God Save the King”* (Op. 27), the *Fantaisie* (Op. 22), and the *Fantaisie sur des motifs de “Moïse” de Rossini* (Op. 33). Liszt, on the other hand, rented the hall of the Paris Opéra, which accommodated nearly two thousand listeners. On March 19, he included the most successful works from his repertoire in the concert program: his own *Réminiscences de “Niobe” de Pacini* (Fantasia on Themes from Pacini’s *Niobe*) and Carl Maria von Weber’s *Konzertstück*. As before, both performances drew a widespread response from the press.

²⁶ Fétis, 1837, p. 141.

²⁷ Fétis, 1837, p. 142.

The Duel: Accounts of Eyewitnesses

Although Fétis argued that comparing Liszt and Thalberg as both pianists and composers was inappropriate, comparisons came naturally: every review of a concert by one artist either mentioned or implied the other. During the opening months of 1837, each artist had already gathered a group of adherents who published articles and exchanged opinions in Parisian salons. One such center of social life belonged to Princess Cristina Trivulzio di Belgiojoso (1808–1871). A close friend of Liszt and one of the most charming socialites in Paris at the time, she was an ardent Italian patriot who maintained friendships with Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini, supporting them in their struggle for the independence and unification of their homeland.²⁸ In late March, the Princess organized a three-day series of charity evenings at her mansion to raise funds for Italian political refugees. It was during the final concert of this series that the famous “duel” between Thalberg and Liszt took place.

Initially, Franz Liszt, Sigismond Thalberg, Frédéric Chopin, Henri Herz, Carl Czerny, and Johann Peter Pixis were announced as participants; it was intended that each would present their own variations on a theme from Bellini’s opera *I Puritani*. However, this portion of the program was canceled, leaving Liszt and Thalberg as the sole participants of the evening.²⁹ The Princess succeeded in selling tickets for 40 francs—an exceptionally high price, affordable only to the highest aristocracy.³⁰ That evening, Thalberg performed his *Grande fantaisie sur des motifs de l’opéra “Moïse” de G. Rossini*, Op. 33, while Liszt played his *Grande fantaisie sur des motifs de l’opéra “Niobe” de Pacini*, S. 419. In the opinion of the assembled audience, neither pianist gained the upper hand, and both were declared victors.

²⁸ For further details on the personality of Cristina Trivulzio di Belgiojoso, see [2, pp. 238–239].

²⁹ The collaborative efforts of the six musicians, however, were not in vain: in 1839, their variations were published under the title *Hexaméron, morceau de concert: Grandes Variations de bravoure sur la marche des Puritains de Bellini / composées par MM. Liszt, Thalberg, Pixis, Henri Herz, Czerny et Chopin*. Wien: Tobias Haslinger, 1839. (S. 392).

³⁰ For comparison: in those years, the monthly wage of a male worker in Paris ranged from 30 to 60 francs, while a ticket for a performance at the Opéra cost between 3 and 10 francs. See Zhestkova, O. V. (2017). *Frantsuzskaya bol’shaya opera kak khudozhestvenno-esteticheskoe i sotsial’no-politicheskoe yavlenie (1820–1830-e gody)* [French grand opera as an artistic, aesthetic, social, and political phenomenon (1820–1830s)] [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Kazan State Conservatory, p. 70.

This “duel” became, perhaps, the most thoroughly documented piano competition of the nineteenth century. All eyewitnesses unanimously recognized both participants as outstanding masters and virtuosos who, however, represented entirely different artistic traditions. Below are two of the most representative accounts from the Parisian press: the first belongs to Jules Janin, a correspondent for the *Journal des Débats*, and the second to the critic and playwright Ernest Legouvé:

Jamais Liszt n’a été plus retenu, plus sage, plus énergique, plus passionné; jamais Thalberg n’avait chanté avec plus d’entraînement et de tendresse: chacun d’eux s’est tenu prudemment dans son domaine harmonique, mais aussi chacun d’eux a usé de toutes ses ressources. C’était une joute admirable. Le silence le plus profond entourait cette noble arène. Et enfin Liszt et Thalberg ont été proclamés tous les deux, deux vainqueurs par cette brillante et intelligente assemblée. Il est de fait qu’une pareille lutte ne pouvait avoir lieu qu’en présence d’un pareil aréopage. Ainsi donc deux vainqueurs et pas un vaincu...³¹

I had the rare good fortune to hear these two great artists on the same day, in the same salon, at an interval of a quarter of an hour, at a concert given by the Princess Belgiojoso for the Poles. There was then revealed to me palpably, clearly, the characteristic difference in their talent. Liszt was incontestably the more artistic, the more vibrant, the more electric. He had tones of a delicacy that made one think of the almost inaudible tinkling of tiny spangles or the faint explosion of sparks of fire. Never have fingers bounded so lightly over the piano. But at the same time his nervousity caused him to produce sometimes effects a trifle hard, a trifle harsh. ... Thalberg never pounded. What constituted his superiority, what made the pleasure of hearing him play a luxury to the ear, was pure tone. I have never heard such another, so full, so round, so soft, so velvety, so sweet, and still so strong! How shall I say it? The voice of Alboni. At this concert in hearing Liszt I felt myself in an atmosphere charged with electricity and quivering with lightning. In hearing Thalberg I seemed to be floating in a sea of purest light. The contrast between their characters was not less than between their talent.³²

Beyond these commentaries, there were hundreds of others; it is unnecessary to cite every statement, given that the central conclusion remained the same:

³¹ Janin, J. (1837, April 3). Feuilleton du Journal des Débats. *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, p. 1.

³² As cited in Huneker, J. (1911). *Franz Liszt*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, pp. 286–287.

despite the disparity in their temperaments and performance styles, both virtuosos were equally deserving of the title of victor. The remaining nuances in the reviews merely reflected the authors' aesthetic preferences and the extent of their literary talent. Nevertheless, examining this vast body of source material is of paramount importance, as it allows us to trace the most persistent characteristics of nineteenth-century performance practice. While both virtuosos possessed flawless piano technique, eyewitnesses consistently noted a distinctly cantabile quality in Thalberg's playing, whereas Liszt captivated audiences with his expressive power and unparalleled dramatic intensity.

Thalberg's "novelty" lay in his ability to project the melody through a turbulent flow of arpeggios and figurations. He was not the pioneer of the "singing tone," a technique mastered by Johann Baptist Cramer, John Field, and Frédéric Chopin, and achieved through legato, precise fingering, and phrasing. Rather, judging by the dynamic markings in his own compositions, Thalberg emphasized the main melody using *bien marcato*. Furthermore, he was not the inventor of the so-called "three-hand technique,"³³ as noted by Fétis (1837) in the aforementioned article "MM. Thalberg et Liszt." Overall, following the pianist's first Parisian concert, critics focused on the general impression of his unconventional tone—often compared to the human voice—rather than on specific technical devices. As Blanchard (1836) remarked, "...qu'on oublie la sécheresse de cet instrument mécanique et qu'on est tout surpris de l'entendre filer des sons, chanter, pleurer comme Grisi, Malibran-de-Bériot ou Rubini ... Nul n'a jamais chanté sur le piano comme Thalberg."³⁴ In Legouvé's (1837) previously cited commentary, Thalberg's tone was similarly compared to the voice of the opera singer (contralto) Marietta Alboni.

The ability to "sing on the piano," to which Thalberg later dedicated his didactic work,³⁵ became the defining characteristic of his artistic individuality. It was achieved not only through finger dexterity and masterful pedaling,

³³ The creator of this textural model is considered to be the English virtuoso harpist Elias Parish Alvars (1808–1849), whose performing activity was aimed at establishing the harp as a solo concert instrument. Thalberg, impressed by Parish Alvars's innovative findings, adapted and developed them in his piano compositions. Evidence of the creative ties between the musicians is the Fantasia, Op. 35 (1838), dedicated by Parish Alvars to Thalberg.

³⁴ Blanchard, H. (1836, May 8). Thalberg. *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (19), p. 153.

³⁵ Thalberg, S. (1853). *L'art du chant appliqué au piano: Op. 70*. Heugel & Cie, Préface.

as noted by many of his contemporaries, but also through the richness and density of the multi-layered texture in his own fantasies. Cantabile operatic themes were never lost within the dense layers of piano figurations cascading across the entire range of the instrument.³⁶ Like human voices, they could resonate in any register, not in opposition to the passages, but as if emerging from their very depths. In characterizing Thalberg's "vocal tone," critics consistently employed such epithets as "full," "bright," "mellow," "powerful," and "sonorous." Consequently, the pianist's performing style was inextricably associated with opera and operatic singing.

The connection to opera was evidenced not only by the vocal themes underlying his piano fantasies but also by his profound practical interest in the art of singing. For several years, Thalberg took singing lessons from Manuel García Jr., who taught at the Paris Conservatoire.³⁷ In his treatise, being conscious of the metaphorical nature of the title itself—*L'art du chant appliqué au piano*, Op. 70—the pianist clearly articulated the true artist's objective:

Comme le piano ne peut, rationnellement parlant, traduire le chant dans ce qu'il a de plus parfait, c'est-à-dire la faculté de prolonger les sons, il faut à force d'adresse et d'art détruire cette imperfection, et arriver non-seulement à produire l'illusion des sons soutenus et prolongés, mais encore celle des sons enflés.³⁸

Furthermore, Thalberg urged pianists to learn a sense of melodic line and dynamic balance from vocalists: "La partie chantante devra *toujours* être clairement et distinctement articulée, et ressortir aussi tranchée qu'une belle voix humaine sur un accompagnement d'orchestre très doux."³⁹ Such instructions encapsulated the core principles of the pianistic aesthetics of Thalberg. The concept of a "qu'une belle voix humaine sur un accompagnement d'orchestre très doux" is embodied in each of his compositions, although this by no means implied that all music should be treated as an aria with accompaniment. The pianist recommended varying the types of touch depending on the character of the melody:

³⁶ An analysis of Thalberg's performing style, based on his *Fantasy for Piano on Favorite Themes from Meyerbeer's Opera 'Robert le Diable'*, is presented in article [9].

³⁷ Hominick, I. G. (1991). *Sigismund Thalberg (1811–1871), forgotten piano virtuoso: His career and musical contributions* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Ohio State University, p. 45. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/etd/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10accession_num=osu1487687959965789

³⁸ Thalberg, 1853, Préface.

³⁹ Thalberg, 1853, Préface.

broad, dramatic themes should be “chanter de poitrine” (that is, played with a full, strong, and “chaleur” tone, but never by roughly striking the keys), whereas simple, tender, and graceful melodies should be performed as if with “avec une main désossée et des doigts de velours.”⁴⁰

Liszt’s artistic persona was grounded in entirely different aesthetic principles. While reviews of Thalberg mentioned technical perfection as a quality subordinate to the primary artistic objective—namely, the vocal quality of melodic delivery—accounts of Liszt emphasized vividness, agility, and the deft overcoming of performance difficulties as the virtuoso’s main virtues. Judging by eyewitness reports, Liszt did not possess a beautiful or deep tone. Henry Chorley, a fervent admirer of Liszt, could not ignore this shortcoming: “In uniform richness and sweetness of tone he may have been surpassed.”⁴¹ An anonymous critic for the English newspaper *Norwich Mercury* similarly noted that Liszt’s tone “is inferior to Thalberg’s, whose means are all adapted to the one end of making the most of his instrument.”⁴²

The fundamental difference between the performing styles of Thalberg and Liszt can be illustrated by comparing their respective fantasies on themes from Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni*. As early as 1834, a Viennese correspondent for the Parisian *Gazette musicale* wrote about Thalberg’s astonishing manner of imitating the human voice: “Lorsqu’il joue au piano le thème: *la Ci darem la mano*, on ne peut s’empêcher de croire entendre chanter le même air; les sons enflés, la passion intime et l’esprit des paroles, la résistance apparente de Zerline, sa défaite prochaine, le piano exprime tout cela comme le ferait la voix la plus.”⁴³

In contrast, in Liszt’s interpretation of his *Réminiscences de Don Juan*, contemporaries were struck by the pianist’s ability to embody the characters in such a way that the theatrical images seemed to come alive before the audience. The German diplomat Kurd von Schlözer, upon hearing Liszt play in 1841, noted: “Everything he did on the keys was mirrored in his features, flashed in his eyes and electrified by all his movements; especially in the duet between the Don and Zerlina,

⁴⁰ Thalberg, 1853, Préface.

⁴¹ Chorley delicately placed this comment in a footnote. Chorley, H. (1844). *Music and Manners in France and Germany* (Vol. 3), p. 45.

⁴² The concerts. (1840, September 26). *The Norwich Mercury*, p. 2.

⁴³ A. X. (1834, October 26). Correspondance particulière. *Gazette musicale de Paris*, (43), p. 347.

in which at one moment he looked timid and the next leapt from his seat into the air for joy” (as cited in [10, p. 29]). To some, it appeared that Liszt conveyed the dramatic intent even more expressively than in the operatic original: “Non, jamais vous n’avez entendu chanter avec plus d’âme et de tendresse le motif du duo: *là ci darem la mano*, avec plus de folie et de gaieté, celui de l’air: *fin ch’han d’al vino!*”⁴⁴ Paul Smith remarked in 1844.

While Thalberg created the illusion of a “dramatic voice” through his playing, Liszt transformed himself into the operatic characters. Many observers noted the significant role of facial expressions, gestures, and stage presence in his performances. This trait characterized not only his execution of operatic fantasies and transcriptions but also his overall stage manner. Heinrich Heine described Liszt as a “volcanic, fiery” artist, emphasizing the immense, overwhelming power of his visual impact:

... il se jette souvent avec furie sur les touches d’ivoire; alors surgit une forêt de pensées cahotiques, à travers lesquelles les fleurs des plus doux sentiments répandent leur parfum. Il vous oppresse et vous enflamme tout à la fois, mais la part de l’oppression est la plus forte. Je vous avoue que, quelle que soit mon amitié pour Liszt, sa musique n’affecte pas agréablement ma sensibilité, d’autant plus que malheureusement je suis un voyant, et que je vois les spectres que d’autres ne font qu’entendre.⁴⁵

Divergences in stage presence marked a far more pronounced boundary between the performing styles of Liszt and Thalberg than the character of their sound. Contemporaries were unanimous in describing the “electrically charged” performances of the former and the academic restraint of the latter. Thalberg’s platform image presented a blend of restrained inspiration and Apollonian serenity, whereas Liszt’s temperament was inextricably associated with the Dionysian, ecstatic principle:

L’attitude différente de chacun d’eux indique manifestement la différence de leur nature. Vous vous rappelez la violente contraction du visage et du corps de Liszt, emblème du plaisir fougueux, parvenu jusqu’aux angoisses de la douleur. Thalberg, au contraire, est assis tranquillement, carrément: son large front s’incline vers les touches,

⁴⁴ Smith, P. (1844, June 30). Concert au bénéfice de Mme Bérton. *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (26), p. 223.

⁴⁵ Heine, H. (1838, February 4). Lettres confidentielles II. *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (5), p. 42.

que ses yeux ne perdent pas de vue: c'est le symbole de la conviction profonde, mais calme, de l'enthousiasme ardent, mais concentré, du feu sans fumée, mais non sans chaleur.⁴⁶

Joseph d'Ortigue was similarly fascinated by Thalberg's "cette force calme, cette puissance tranquille, cette exaltation à la fois modérée et sereine."⁴⁷ Thalberg's outward composure did not imply cold indifference or a lack of inner emotion; the artist's creative fire, as the critic aptly remarked, was devoid of "fumée" but not of "chaleur." Thalberg never allowed emotions to influence his body movements, consistently maintaining a perfectly poised and majestic posture at the instrument. By contrast, in Liszt's performance style, the dynamics of his gestures and facial expressions did not merely complement the impact of the music but became an inherent component of his stage persona. A curious observation regarding this visual contrast was recorded by Ernest Legouvé, who witnessed the legendary duel at the salon of Princess Belgiojoso:

Liszt's attitude at the piano, like that of a pythoness, has been remarked again and again. Constantly tossing back his long hair, his lips quivering, his nostrils palpitating, he swept the auditorium with the glance of a smiling master. ... There was nothing of the kind about Thalberg. He was the gentleman artist, a perfect union of talent and propriety. He seemed to have taken it for his rule to be the exact opposite of his rival. He entered noiselessly; I might almost say without displacing the air. After a dignified greeting that seemed a trifle cold in manner, he seated himself at the piano as though upon an ordinary chair. The piece began, not a gesture, not a change of countenance! not a glance toward the audience! If the applause was enthusiastic, a respectful inclination of the head was his only response. His emotion, which was very profound, as I have had more than one proof, betrayed itself only by a violent rush of blood to the head, colouring his ears, his face and his neck.⁴⁸

This distinction is clearly reflected in the portraits and caricatures of the pianists published in various journals. Liszt was invariably depicted in

⁴⁶ E. M. (1836, May 29). Thalberg. Expliqué par Dantan. *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (22), p. 180.

⁴⁷ d'Ortigue, J. (1837, March 19). Concert de M. Sigismond Thalberg. *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (12), p. 98.

⁴⁸ As cited in Huneke, J. (1971). *Franz Liszt*. AMS Press, p. 285. (Original work published 1911).

an ecstatic pose—either with his head thrown back or, conversely, bent low over the keyboard. In a caricature titled *Galop chromatique*, the artist captured Liszt's eccentric performance movements in a grotesque exaggeration (*Illustration 3*). A stark contrast is offered by the depiction of Thalberg, who avoided all unnecessary movements of the torso, head, or hands (*Illustration 4*). The caricaturist drew him with eight hands (two of them in the pockets of his coat) instead of two, as many noted that the virtuoso's playing created the illusion of a harmonious and full-toned performance by an ensemble or an entire orchestra. The French sculptor Jean-Pierre Dantan represented Thalberg with two hands, but with ten fingers on each (*Illustration 5*).

Thalberg's technical mastery, which allowed him to play with two hands as if with six, appeared almost supernatural to his contemporaries. When he performed his transcription of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, listeners compared his playing with that of the Orchestra of the Paris Conservatoire:

Nous ne saurions exprimer avec quel charme la mélodie si mélancolique, si passionnée de l'andante s'exhale du piano de Thalberg. Nous nous demandions si l'orchestre du Conservatoire, si la voix humaine, auraient plus d'éloquence intime, plus d'accent vrai, pénétrant.⁴⁹

Notably, the Orchestra of the Paris Conservatoire under the direction of François-Antoine Habeneck became renowned for its profound interpretations of Beethoven's symphonies and was recognized as the finest in Europe, even by such demanding critics as Richard Wagner.⁵⁰

Liszt's playing was similarly associated with the sonority of an entire orchestra, albeit for entirely different reasons. The pianist frequently performed his own transcriptions of the final movements of Beethoven's Sixth ("Pastoral") Symphony, striking listeners with his fantastic ability to render orchestral timbres on the piano:

...écoutez Liszt, orchestre sur son piano! voyez dans chacun de ses doigts la capacité de toute une association d'hommes! ... comme il fait apparaître successivement dans leur magnificence toutes les figures, les monologues grandioses des instruments à vent, les pizzicato démoniaques des basses; depuis le frémissent du pianissimo jusqu'à la tempête des fortissimo! et vous

⁴⁹ E. M. (1838, March 25). Concert donné par S. Thalberg. *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (12), 131. https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_sr5CAAAAcAAJ/page/n141/mode/2up

⁵⁰ For a more detailed account of the Orchestra of the Paris Conservatoire, see [11].



Illustration 3. Le Galop chromatique, exécuté par le diable de la musique
(The Chromatic Galop, Performed by the Musical Devil). Anonymous caricature of Franz Liszt. April 18, 1843. Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, Paris. Retrieved April 24, 2026, from https://classes.bnf.fr/essentiels/grand/ess_2479.htm



Illustration 4. Unknown artist. Portrait of Sigismond Thalberg. Engraving. Circa 1840. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Gallica. Retrieved April 24, 2026, from <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84271679.r=Sigismond%20Thalberg%20caricature?rk=42918;4>



Illustration 5. Jean-Pierre Dantan (Dantan le Jeune).

Portrait-charge de Sigismond Thalberg. Statuette. Circa 1836. Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris. Inv. S1013. Retrieved April 24, 2026, from <https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/musee-carnavalet/oeuvres/portrait-charge-de-sigismond-thalberg-1812-1871-pianiste-allemand>

conviendrez que Liszt a transformé le piano, qu'il l'a métamorphosé en orchestre, qu'il a centuplé sa puissance.⁵¹

Théophile Gautier explained the “orchestral” nature of Liszt’s style with even greater precision: “Non pas qu’il ait fait sortir de la caisse de son piano un volume de sonorité égal au bruit de tous les instrumens, mais il en a dit toutes les mélodies, fait ressortir les nuances les plus délicates, les intentions les plus fugitives avec un charme, un relief et une pénétration incroyables.”⁵² From such accounts, it becomes evident that Liszt treated the piano not as a vehicle for a powerful, homogeneous sound, but as an instrument capable of conveying the colorful contrast and dramatic expressiveness of various orchestral timbres, as well as dynamic and textural layers.

Pianists’ Perspectives

To gain a multifaceted understanding of the performing art of both artists, the reviews of other pianists who repeatedly attended the performances of Liszt and Thalberg prove to be the most valuable. Robert Schumann, whose own pianistic career was abruptly cut short by a hand injury, was a fervent champion of Liszt’s music, though he occasionally mildly criticized his early works for an excess of virtuoso devices that weakened the integrity of the form. In the context of performance mastery, one of Schumann’s observations confirms the immense role of outward, physical expression in Liszt’s playing: “...Aber man muß das hören und auch sehen, Liszt dürfte durchaus nicht hinter den Coulissen spielen; ein großes Stück Poesie ginge dadurch verloren.”⁵³ In other words, Liszt appealed not only to the auditory but also to the visual perception of his audience.

Schumann maintained a sharply critical attitude toward Thalberg’s compositions. Even when acknowledging certain successful ideas, as in the *Grande fantaisie sur des motifs de l’opéra Moïse de G. Rossini*, Op. 22 or the *Trois Nocturnes pour le Piano*, Op. 21, he did so with clear irritation,⁵⁴ particularly

⁵¹ Franz Liszt: [après son premier concert du 19 décembre 1839, à Vienne]. (1839, December 12). *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (67), p. 531.

⁵² Gautier, T. (1844, May 13). Feuilleton. *La Presse*, p. 1.

⁵³ Schumann, R. ([c. 1890]). *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker von Robert Schumann* (H. Simon, Ed.) (Vol. 3). Philipp Reclam jun., p. 18.

⁵⁴ Thus, Schumann began one of his 1837 reviews with the following words: “Beim Durchgehen der Kompositionen von Thalberg war ich von jeher immer in einer gewissen Spannung ...” Schumann, R. ([1889]). *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker von Robert Schumann* (H. Simon, Ed.) (Vol. 2). Philipp Reclam jun., p. 94.

in the late 1830s during the height of the rivalry between Thalberg with Liszt. By 1843, having become somewhat cooler toward Liszt's music and more sympathetic toward Thalberg, Schumann began to mention them together more frequently: „wie sie durch Liszt und Thalberg verireten werden, von denen dem ersteren niemand Genialität in Kombination mechanischer Schwierigkeiten, Ersindung wirklich neuer Instrumentaleffekte etc. absprechen kann, ebensowenig sie dem andern eine Salongrazie, eine Berechnung und Kenntniss des Effektes etc., daß er überall einnehmen und entusiasmieren muß.“⁵⁵

Friedrich Wieck and his daughter Clara genuinely admired Liszt's artistry, and their meeting in Vienna in April 1838 marked the beginning of a fruitful creative relationship. The following day, Wieck recorded his impressions in his diary: “He can be compared with no other player, for he is unique. He startles and astonishes, and is a very amiable artist. His appearance at the piano is indescribable—he is original—forgets himself at the instrument.”⁵⁶ However, as an experienced pedagogue, Wieck could not help but note Liszt's excessive affectation: “He sets no limits to his passion and not infrequently does violence to one's sense of beauty by torturing the melodies and by too frequent use of the pedal.”⁵⁷

Clara Schumann herself spoke of both pianists with equal respect. In December 1838, in a letter to her husband from Leipzig, she noted: “Thalberg arrived yesterday, and played here for 2 hours, carrying us from one state of amazement to another; he can do much, more than all of us (except Liszt), you are right in that, and if I were not a woman I should long ago have said good-bye to virtuosity.”⁵⁸

While Chopin's warm friendship with Liszt is a widely known fact, deciphering his attitude toward Thalberg's playing on the basis of a single reliable statement remains challenging. In an 1830 letter to a friend, the composer noted:

...*Thalberg* ... plays excellently, but he's not my man. Younger than I, pleases the ladies, makes *potpourris* from the Dumb Girl,⁵⁹ gets his piano by the pedal, not the hand, takes tenths as easily as I octaves,—has diamond shirt-studs,—

⁵⁵ Schumann, R. ([c. 1890]). (Vol. 3), p. 151

⁵⁶ As cited in Burk, J. N. (1940). *Clara Schumann: A Romantic Biography*. Random House, p. 149.

⁵⁷ As cited in Burk, 1940, p. 149.

⁵⁸ Litzmann, B. (1913). *Clara Schumann: An Artist's Wife. Based on material found in diaries and letters* (G. E. Hadow, Trans.; Vol. 1), Macmillan, p. 179.

⁵⁹ Auber, D.-F.-E. (1828). *La muette de Portici* (E. Scribe & G. Delavigne, Librettists) [Opera].

does not admire Moscheles; so don't be surprised that only the *tutti* of my concerto pleased him.⁶⁰

Setting aside the irony regarding the diamond shirt-studs and Thalberg's popularity among women, what essentially remains is an acknowledgment of technical superiority in executing tenths, an indication of specific pedaling techniques, and Chopin's subtle resentment over the fact that Thalberg appreciated only the orchestral sections of his piece.

Felix Mendelssohn attended the concerts of Liszt and Thalberg on multiple occasions and more than once paid due tribute to each of them. Following the Parisian "duel," when nearly all musicians who had heard the two virtuosos play felt it their duty to express their views, Mendelssohn summarized his opinion as follows:

Liszt war 14 Tage hier und hat einen Heiden-Scandal verursacht, im guten und schlechten Sinn. – Ich halte ihn für einen guten, herzlichen Menschen im Grunde, und für einen vortrefflichen Künstler. Daß er von Allen am meisten spielt, ist gar kein Zweifel; doch ist Thalberg mit seiner Gelassenheit und Beschränkung vollkommener, als eigentlicher Virtuose genommen, und das ist doch der Maßstab, den man auch bei Liszt anlegen muß, da seine Compositionen unter seinem Spiel stehen, und eben auch nur auf Virtuosität berechnet sind.⁶¹

All these reviews confirm that preferences for one pianist over the other were by no means based on a contrast between the "old" and the "new," the classical and the romantic, or the "profound" and the "superficial." Furthermore, the majority of these judgments cannot be explained merely by individual artistic or personal biases. For instance, Berlioz sympathized with Liszt, yet this did not prevent him from paying due tribute to Thalberg's mastery. Similarly, while Fétis emphasized the scope of Liszt's talent, he also considered it necessary to point out certain deficiencies in his performance.

The Social Profile of the Pianists' Audience

Several Russian and foreign researchers have attributed Thalberg's formal victory primarily to his affiliation with the secular elite. For instance, Andrei E. Budyakovsky wrote:

⁶⁰ Chopin, F. (1931). *Chopin's letters* (H. Opieński, Ed.; E. L. Voynich, Trans.). Alfred A. Knopf, p. 133.

⁶¹ Mendelssohn Bartholdy, F. (1861). *Briefe aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1847* (P. Mendelssohn Bartholdy & C. Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Ed.). Hermann Mendelssohn, p. 224.

...in the singular artistic competition between Liszt and Thalberg in 1837, Parisian high society sided with the latter. ... Chopin, Heine, Berlioz, and other artists, who expressed the tastes and opinions of the most developed and progressive segment of Parisian society, sided with Liszt and offered a completely different evaluation of Thalberg.⁶²

Vera N. Alexandrova and Evgeny I. Meilikh expressed similar views, though they linked the “high society” of Paris with the bourgeoisie rather than the aristocracy.⁶³ In turn, Ralph Locke argued that “Liszt’s short-lived but violent resentment of Thalberg was clearly tinged by issues of social class” [12, p. 67]. The only plausible basis for such a conclusion might be the benefit concert for the unemployed held in Lyon on August 3, 1837, which, in addition to Liszt, featured performances by various other artists.

In her multifaceted study, Dana Gooley presented a more profound, socially oriented concept of the rivalry between Thalberg and Liszt. She classified the former as an artistic symbol of the “aristocracy by birth,” and the latter as an exponent of the “aristocracy of talent” that united writers and artists [10, p. 59–70]. This view seems well-founded, considering Liszt’s close ties with Romantic writers, as well as his friendship and collaboration with Berlioz, Schumann, Chopin, and Meyerbeer. Regarding Thalberg, this concept also appears highly convincing: his aristocratic origins, virtuoso playing, and ability to behave naturally and with dignity evoked deep sympathy among the nobility, while the patronage of the Austrian diplomat in Paris, Count Rudolf Apponyi, opened the doors to the most prestigious salons.

Closer examination reveals, however, that Liszt’s most influential support came not from the artistic elite (although they played a vital role in shaping his reputation), but rather from women of noble birth—socialites belonging to the aristocratic caste of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré and Faubourg Saint-Germain: Christina Belgiojoso, the Marquise Le Vayer, the Duchesse de Rauzan, and Countess d’Agoult.

⁶² Budyakovskiy, 1986, p. 19. (In Russ.).

⁶³ Alexandrova & Meilikh, 1963, pp. 57–58. (In Russ.).

Princess Belgiojoso was not merely the musician's patron but also his passionate defender, particularly during the climax of the rivalry. The "duel" in her mansion was evidently designed to provide Liszt with a psychological advantage by allowing him to perform within a familiar environment of his admirers. This was directly pointed out by the author of an article in the newspaper *Vert-Vert*, which had maintained neutrality toward the two pianists and responded to the "duel" with only a brief note:

Les applaudissemens ont été frénétiques et pour l'un et pour l'autre. M. Liszt n'a pas trop fait de folies. M. Thalberg a été calme comme à son ordinaire. Il serait difficile de dire de quel côté a penché la balance. Une partie du public a préféré M. Liszt, le reste de l'assemblée se prononçait en faveur de M. Thalberg, de telle sorte qu'il y a eu égale répartition de bravos.

Et ici nous ferons remarquer que si l'avantage a été d'un côté, c'est de celui de M. Thalberg, qui ne devait pas attendre une grande bienveillance d'un auditoire presque entièrement composé d'admirateurs exclusifs de M. Liszt.⁶⁴

Apparently, Liszt was in dire need of such support due to the barrage of counter-criticism that overwhelmed him following the publication of the ill-fated article. Christina Belgiojoso is credited with an aphorism, allegedly delivered as a verdict at the conclusion of the contest: "Thalberg est le premier pianiste du monde, Liszt est le seul." Although this statement was frequently cited by Liszt's biographers as proof of his superiority, they invariably omitted the princess's own admission in a letter to him written in November 1841: "Je me suis souvent laissé dire que j'étais injuste à l'égard de Thalberg, et que mon admiration pour vous troublait mon jugement."⁶⁵

Between 1832 and 1833, Liszt performed frequently in the salon of another patron of his, the Marquise Le Vayer. It was precisely in her luxurious mansion in the Faubourg Saint-Germain that the pianist met Countess d'Agoult. The Duchesse de Rauzan also regularly invited Liszt not only for piano performances but also to participate in literary and philosophical discussions. All this demonstrates that Liszt, who positioned himself as a representative of the "aristocracy of the spirit" or "aristocracy of talent," preferred to move within the circles of the "aristocracy by birth," rather than among the bourgeoisie or, even less so, the proletariat.

⁶⁴ Concert de bienfaisance. (1837, April 1). *Vert-vert: Gazette de Paris*, (91), p. 2.

⁶⁵ As cited in: Ollivier, D. (Ed.). (1941). *Autour de Mme d'Agoult et de Liszt (Alfred de Vigny, Émile Ollivier, Princesse de Belgiojoso): Lettres*. B. Grasset, p. 184.

This is further indicated by the unprecedentedly expensive tickets for his concerts.⁶⁶ The high prices served as a social filter, screening out even wealthy Parisians. While in 1837 a ticket for a chamber music evening cost twelve francs,⁶⁷ which was considered a barely acceptable sum, Liszt set a fee of twenty francs for admission to his concert on March 27, 1841. Maurice Schlesinger, the publisher of the *Revue et Gazette musicale*, suggested lowering the price,⁶⁸ but as a result, he merely lost the artist's favor.⁶⁹

Thalberg was a protégé of the influential Apponyi family and performed repeatedly at soirées in their home. In the midst of the rivalry, Liszt complained to Marie d'Agoult: "Les Apponyi cabalent (le mot est exact) pour Thalberg et contre moi."⁷⁰ This bitter reproach seems to be yet another severe moral consequence of Liszt's article, in which he publicly ridiculed not only his competitor but also his audience. It is worth adding that Count Rudolf Apponyi, the Austrian ambassador to Paris, had favored Liszt, frequently inviting him to his salon. Once the controversy surrounding the "duel" subsided, Apponyi facilitated the conferral of the Legion of Honor upon Liszt (see [10, p. 63]).

On the other hand, in 1837, Thalberg performed frequently at the soirées of Émile and Delphine de Girardin—representatives of the artistic elite whose "Wednesdays" were considered exceptionally prestigious. At the height of the rivalry, their newspaper *La Presse* (with É. de Girardin serving as its editor-in-chief) adopted a staunchly pro-Thalberg stance and harshly criticized Liszt,⁷¹ who, however, later became a welcome guest in their home.

⁶⁶ Perhaps Liszt's pricing strategy was shaped with Thalberg in mind. At the very least, his letters to Marie d'Agoult reveal how closely he monitored his rival's earnings. Even three years after the "duel," in May 1840, he wrote: "Thalberg n'a pas gagné le tiers de ce que l'on croit en general. Je sais les chiffres exacts. Ils sont loin d'être aussi élevés que je le pensais. Il n'avait que vingt guinées (au plus) par concert. On m'en donne trente, chose inouïe ici." Liszt & d'Agoult, 1933, p. 439.

⁶⁷ Baungarten, Ch. (1837, February 8). Douze francs par billet. *Gazette des salons: Journal de musique, de littérature et de modes*, pp. 497–498.

⁶⁸ Nouvelles. (1841, March 21). *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (24), pp. 183–184.

⁶⁹ For a more detailed account, see [13, p. 11].

⁷⁰ Liszt & d'Agoult, 1933, p. 198.

⁷¹ For instance, in the article by the writer Frédéric Soulié, see Soulié, F. (1837, April 10). Feuilleton. *La Presse*, p. 1.

The presented facts contradict the concept of Liszt as an exponent of the ideals of the “progressive strata of society” in contrast to Thalberg as the favorite of the aristocracy alone. Both virtuosos performed for high society, and Liszt possessed no fewer influential patrons than his rival.

The designation “pianist of the future” was employed by Berlioz as a compliment to Liszt following his brilliant execution of a Beethoven sonata, rather than in the context of contrasting a classical past with a romantic future. Overall, descriptors such as “novelty” or “new” occur more frequently in commentaries regarding Thalberg’s pianism than that of Liszt. The same applies to the characterization of their respective artistic individualities as “romantic.”

The article criticizing Thalberg’s compositions exposed the vulnerability of Liszt’s own works, written and performed by him by early 1837. As a result, some of Liszt’s admirers defected to his rival’s side for moral and ethical reasons, though they later restored their favor toward the artist and continued to attend his performances. Liszt’s letters to friends demonstrate how zealously he monitored the support of his adherents in the subsequent years. For instance, following a series of successful concerts in Vienna in 1838, he wrote:

Je suis adulé, cajolé, et fêté par tout le monde, à l’exception d’une demi-douzaine d’individus assez influents du reste qui enragent de mes succès. ... Thalberg va mieux à ces gens-là. Mais ils ne savent comment faire. Il y a une telle masse qui s’est prononcée unanimement pour moi.⁷²

Notably, Liszt continued to speak of his competitor in a negative light even after Thalberg made a step toward reconciliation, admitting: “... en comparaison avec vous, je n’ai jamais eu que des succès d’estime à Vienne.”⁷³

By 1839, the hostile feelings toward Thalberg began to fade; Liszt immersed himself in composition and was seriously considering ending his career as a virtuoso. The admission made in one of his letters to Marie d’Agoult underscores a re-evaluation of his artistic status: “C’est déjà beaucoup pour moi, qui ne prétendais à rien, d’être de l’avis de tous au moins le second, une moitié de premier; entre Thalberg et moi, il y a un premier prix partagé.”⁷⁴

⁷² Liszt & d’Agoult, 1933, p. 228.

⁷³ Liszt & d’Agoult, 1933, p. 225.

⁷⁴ Stern D. [Agoult M. d’]. (1927). *Mémoires (1833–1854)* (D. Ollivier, Ed., Vol. 1). Calmann-Lévy, pp. 233–234.

Subsequent developments in French pianism demonstrated that Thalberg's aesthetics, rooted in a deep connection with operatic cantabile, proved more attuned to the ideals of the era than Liszt's "orchestral" concept. The most talented and successful young pianists performing in Paris in the following years—such as Theodor Döhler, Clara Schumann, Émile Prudent, and Alexander Dreyschock—were described by critics as representatives, followers, or successors of the Thalberg school, a designation that carried the weight of high artistic status. However, when Henry Litolff debuted on the Parisian stage in 1840, reviewers noted not only his technical perfection but also clear signs of imitating Liszt: "Monsieur Litolff is a young, talented pianist who, unfortunately, has a habit of exerting himself too much in public. Why these rolling of the eyes, these turns of the head, these tossings of the fair hair that conceals his face?" (as cited in [10, p. 58]). Thalberg's significance remained recognized decades later. For instance, an anonymous correspondent for the *Revue et Gazette musicale*, responding to the pianist's London performance in 1862, wrote:

Thalberg a été en effet imité comme nul autre; sa manière a été parodiée, exagérée, retournée, torturée, et il a pu nous arriver à nous tous de maudire plus d'une fois cette école thalbergienne qui nous valait cette avalanche de notes, ces arpèges en haut et en bas, avec, ou le plus souvent sans le moindre chant au milieu. Les apôtres ont altéré la parole du maître. Mais lorsqu'on revient à la source, on est réconcilié avec lui et on se prosterne de nouveau, comme il y a vingt ans, comme au temps de la jeunesse et de l'enthousiasme.⁷⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is necessary to delineate the historical and artistic role of the rivalry between Thalberg and Liszt. Numerous accounts demonstrate that Liszt was not the victor of the piano "duel" in March 1837; eyewitnesses recognized the talents of both artists as entirely divergent yet equal in magnitude. Following the Parisian encounter, Thalberg continued his brilliant performances across major cities in Europe and the United States, whereas Liszt did not appear in Paris until 1840. This evidences his successful overcoming of his irritation and jealousy, he clearly re-evaluated his attitude toward the remarks of Parisian critics, particularly the constructive advice of Fétis.

⁷⁵ B. S. (1862, June 15). Correspondence. *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (24), p. 195.

Liszt immersed himself in composition and gradually began to shed purely superficial brilliance, developing his own style of piano writing, which was already partially manifested in the *Album d'un voyageur* and the *Douze études d'exécution transcendante*.⁷⁶ Although the rivalry with Thalberg left a bitter aftertaste in the artist's soul, it played a positive and perhaps fateful role in his life. On the one hand, it demonstrated the fragility of a pianist's fame, whose admirers can be fickle in their allegiances and susceptible to external opinions. On the other hand, the experience lent depth, scope, and a capacity for self-criticism to the artist's creative explorations.

Thalberg's artistic destiny unfolded in the opposite direction. While continuing to tour the globe as an unsurpassed virtuoso, he exhausted his creative energies on maintaining an impeccable performance form, yet failed to evolve as a composer. In his pieces, he endlessly repeated the same textural devices, which gradually began to tire the public and attract criticism. In other words, Thalberg did not become a composer in the full and profound sense of the word, as Liszt did. However, this fact provides no grounds to dispute or diminish his historical role in the development of pianism, including the Russian pianistic school.

Thalberg's influence on the oeuvre of many of his contemporaries is undeniable. Aesthetic parallels with his art can be traced in the compositions of Robert Schumann (*Drei Romanzen für das Pianoforte*, op. 28), Felix Mendelssohn (*Praeludium und Fuge e-moll*, WoO 13; *Etüde b-moll*, op. 104b, Nr. 1), Frédéric Chopin (*Études*, op. 25, № 1 As-dur, № 5 e-moll), and Franz Liszt himself (*Trois études de concert*, S. 144: № 3 "*Un sospiro*"). Furthermore, a number of virtuosos—such as Émile Prudent, Henri Herz, Theodor Döhler, and Leopold Godowsky—crafted piano fantasies and transcriptions imbued with the distinctive characteristics of Thalberg's style of writing.⁷⁷ Examples of the "three-hand technique" can be found in the works of Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy, while echoes of his textural innovations can be discerned in Sergei Prokofiev's First Piano Concerto.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ F.-J. Fétis warmly welcomed these compositions by Liszt and "the revolution that has taken place in his creative talent during the few years he spent in retirement." Fétis, F.-J. (père). (1841, May 9). *Études d'exécution transcendante pour le piano, par F. Liszt. Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, (32), p. 263.

⁷⁷ For a more detailed account, see Hominick, 1991, pp. 84–90.

⁷⁸ For a discussion on Thalberg's influence on the music of Russian composers, see [6, p. 107].

Thalberg's compositions were included in the repertoire of prominent nineteenth-century masters, such as Clara Schumann, César Franck, Bedřich Smetana, Johannes Brahms, Anna Esipova, William Mason, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, and, naturally, Franz Liszt himself. Thalberg's students performed in major concert halls across Europe, Russia, and the United States, becoming composers, music critics, and successful pedagogues, thereby laying the foundations for numerous national pianistic schools.⁷⁹

Beniamino Cesi, one of Thalberg's last students, directed a piano class at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire from 1885 to 1891, transmitting to Russian students "the spirit and ideas of his teacher—nobility, restraint, and refined taste" [6, p. 104]. It was precisely these artistic qualities that were inherent to the greatest pianists of the twentieth century, including Sergei Rachmaninoff, Emil Gilels, Yakov Flier, and Sviatoslav Richter.

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⁷⁹ Among the most prominent were Tito Mattei, Costantino Palumbo, Alfonso Rendano, Alexander Gorla, Heinrich Ehrlich, Aloys Tausig (the father of Karl Tausig), Ludwig Rackemann, Eduard Ganz, Arabella Goddard, Wilhelm Kuhe, Marie Pleyel, Paul Bernard, Charles Poisot, and Beniamino Cesi.

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The article was submitted 06.03.2026;
approved after reviewing 29.04.2026;
accepted for publication 13.05.2026.

Статья поступила в редакцию 06.03.2026;
одобрена после рецензирования 29.04.2026;
принята к публикации 13.05.2026.