

ROMANTIC LITURGISTS:

FRANZ LISZT'S AND CHARLES VALENTIN ALKAN'S SETTINGS OF PSALM 137

by

KATHERINE WELLS ROBSON

(Under the Direction of David Schiller)

ABSTRACT

In 1859, Franz Liszt and Charles Valentin Alkan both composed settings of Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon." Though they were composed in the same year, Liszt's *Der 137 Psalm* and Alkan's *Super flumina Babylonis* would seem to have little in common. *Der 137 Psalm* is a two-part work scored for soloist and choir with accompaniment; *Super flumina Babylonis* is a three-part programmatic piano solo that leaves out the psalm's text in the work itself. Both Liszt and Alkan bring to light in their respective settings of Psalm 137 the duality of hope and despair that is found in the psalm's text, but in very different ways. In doing so, each composer reveals something about himself that is reflected in his respective setting; for this reason, both settings are exemplary Romantic works.

INDEX WORDS: Liszt, Alkan, Der 137 Psalm, Super flumina Babylonis, Psalm 137, Romantic sacred music, programmatic music

ROMANTIC LITURGISTS:
FRANZ LISZT'S AND CHARLES VALENTIN ALKAN'S SETTINGS OF PSALM 137

by

KATHERINE WELLS ROBSON
A.B., University of Georgia, 2005
A.B.J., University of Georgia, 2005

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2012

© 2012

Katherine Wells Robson

All Rights Reserved

ROMANTIC LITURGISTS:
FRANZ LISZT'S AND CHARLES VALENTIN ALKAN'S SETTINGS OF PSALM 137

by

KATHERINE WELLS ROBSON

Major Professor: David Schiller
Committee: Leonard Ball
Martha Thomas

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2012

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my parents, without whose infinite love and unfailing support I would not be where I am today. Thank you for always encouraging me to pursue my dreams.

Per tuas semitas
duc nos quo tendimus,
Ad lucem quam inhabitas.

—Saint Thomas Aquinas

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. David Schiller: I am indebted to you for the time and effort you have taken to help me improve my paper. Thank you for helping me from start to finish, for spending untold hours with me, and for giving me endless pep talks, even from the other side of the world. This thesis would not have been possible without your invaluable insight.

I would like to extend my gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Leonard Ball and Dr. Martha Thomas for providing me with thoughtful and detailed feedback.

To Fr. James Flanagan—thank you for taking the time to answer my incessant questions. You have been blessed with a gift for explaining theology more clearly—and with more enthusiasm—than any book in any library ever could.

To Mrs. Linda Collins—thank you for fostering my growth as a writer from a young age.

I would not be where I am without the endless encouragement of my parents throughout this entire process. Thank you for your love and patience.

Finally, thank you to James for the love and support you have shown me a hundred different ways throughout this process. You never once questioned my goals. I could not have done this without you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
LIST OF EXAMPLES	ix
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Psalm 137	4
2 LISZT AND <i>DER 137 PSALM</i>	11
Minor Orders	11
Félicité de Lamennais	16
<i>Der 137 Psalm</i>	20
“Amid the Tumult”	30
3 ALKAN AND <i>SUPER FLUMINA BABYLONIS</i>	33
<i>Régénération</i>	33
Isolation	39
<i>Super flumina Babylonis</i>	44
“A Plea for Alkan”	53
4 CONCLUSION	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY	60

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Translations of Psalm 137	5
Figure 2: Eduard Bendemann, <i>Die Trauernde Juden im Exil</i> (<i>The Mourning Jews in Exile</i>), 1831	23

LIST OF EXAMPLES

	Page
Example 1: <i>Der 137 Psalm</i> , mm. 1-7	26
Example 2: <i>Der 137 Psalm</i> , mm. 75-77	26
Example 3: <i>Der 137 Psalm</i> , mm. 34-35	28
Example 4: <i>Der 137 Psalm</i> , mm. 55-61	29
Example 5: <i>Super flumina Babylonis</i> , mm. 19-22	45
Example 6: <i>Super flumina Babylonis</i> , mm. 84-87	46
Example 7: <i>Super flumina Babylonis</i> , mm. 161-164	47

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1859, Franz Liszt and Charles Valentin Alkan both composed settings of Psalm 137, “By the rivers of Babylon.” Though they were composed in the same year, Liszt’s *Der 137 Psalm* and Alkan’s *Super flumina Babylonis* would seem to have little in common. Liszt’s instrumentation includes a soloist and choir, which necessitate the inclusion of text. While text is naturally part of most psalm settings from any musical period, Alkan’s setting is for piano solo without text; the only direct reference to the psalm’s text is his translation of the psalm into French at the head of the piece. These superficial differences are only the beginning, though; it is the mood of the two pieces that most starkly lays bare the composers’ different approaches.

Psalm 137 articulates the impossibility of singing “the Lord’s song in a foreign land.”¹ As Karl Plank argues, “In counterpoint to the captors’ request for songs, [the captives] have hung up their lyres in the poplars of their foreign territory.”² Plank quotes the distinguished poet and critic John Hollander, who puts it even more strongly: “Hanging the harps . . . on the trees, abandoning familiar and consoling music, is actually a violent gesture of refusal—it is a slamming down of the piano lid, or a closing of the instrument case.”³

Of course most of the psalms, 137 included, have received numerous liturgical and devotional musical settings. However, the two Romantic settings that are the subject of this

¹ Psalm 137:4 (New Revised Standard Version).

² Karl A. Plank, “By the Waters of a Death Camp: An Intertextual Reading of Psalm 137,” *Literature and Theology* 22:2 (June 2008): 187.

³ John Hollander, *The Work of Poetry* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), 125.

thesis stand somewhat apart from the liturgical mainstream. Franz Liszt's cantata on Psalm 137 is one of just six psalm settings that he composed for various combinations of voices and instruments. Psalm 137 is scored for soprano solo, women's chorus, solo violin, harp, and organ. Alternative *ad libitum* substitutions of a piano for the harp, or of a harmonium for a church organ, suggest that the psalm is actually a dramatic piece intended for the stage rather than the church.⁴ Alkan's setting is more unusual: it is a programmatic piano solo with no vocal part at all. There is no evidence that either composer was aware that the other was setting Psalm 137 at the same time, even though they knew each other. Why then, compare the two settings here? A comparison of the two works is, after all, the main purpose of this thesis.

First, the settings are comparable in length and weight. Rather than automatically viewing *Der 137 Psalm* as a minor work by a major composer and *Super flumina Babylonis* as a major work by a minor composer, a position that ultimately does justice to neither, it is more instructive to compare the works on their own terms. Second, both composers brought a profound and heartfelt religious sensibility to their respective settings—Liszt his Catholic spirituality, Alkan his Jewish heritage—though neither piece is constrained by liturgical convention. Third, they are comparable as Romantic works that find their source of inspiration in the same text, albeit in two quite different versions. This leads to the final reason why a comparison of *Der 137 Psalm* and *Super flumina Babylonis* is so intriguing: both Liszt and Alkan bring to light in their respective settings of Psalm 137 the duality of hope and despair that is found in the psalm's text, but in very different ways. In *Der 137 Psalm*, the struggle between a sense of delight found in the memory of Zion is tempered by the anguish the alienated Jews feel in captivity; ultimately, though, the sense of hope of a return to Zion prevails. Liszt's

⁴ Franz Liszt, *Der 137 Psalm*, in *Six Psalms* (Westmead: Gregg International Publishers, 1972).

approach works well in light of the fact that the omitted last three lines of text famously call for revenge on the Babylonians; without this stanza, hope and despair are somewhat more balanced within the text. Alkan takes the opposite approach: while the elegiac mood of the first section of *Super flumina Babylonis* is occasionally mitigated by peaceful thoughts of Zion, a sense of anger and vengeance prevails in the work's explosive finale and illustrates the violent wish of the psalmist in the third stanza.

Liszt's and Alkan's divergent approaches in treating the duality of the psalm are even more fascinating when viewed in light of each composer's own faith. Liszt was a man of the world who took minor orders in 1865 without ever pursuing a higher rank; for this reason, his decision to take holy orders was questioned by those who knew him. As a celebrity within the secular world, he was never a full-fledged member of the clergy and, therefore, never completely privy to the inner workings of the Church. He toyed with the ideals of political-religious revolution in his youth, but later was a faithful follower of Pope Pius IX. Alkan was less successful as a musician than Liszt, and as a Jew living in nineteenth-century Paris, he was never wholly part of mainstream society. Nevertheless, he rejected the idea of writing sacred music for the synagogue, despite the fact that he was a biblical and Talmudic scholar in his private life. Perhaps it is in light of the dualities that Liszt and Alkan experienced in their own lives that they were drawn to Psalm 137 in particular. Each man had, in a way, lived his own version of "exile" from the life that others expected of him; the subject of exile seems a natural choice for both. Neither composer fit neatly into one singular identity when it came to balancing faith and career. Both works are deeply expressive of their composers' individuality, and in this sense, they are exemplary Romantic works.

Psalm 137

Before examining the settings themselves in the next two chapters of this thesis, it is necessary to look at the text of Psalm 137. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) will be used as the principal reference text in this thesis; the German version set by Liszt and the French translation made by Alkan himself will also be cited in discussions of the musical works. All three versions, as well as a nineteenth-century revision of Luther's translation from the Vulgate, which was the basis for Liszt's text, appear as Figure 1 on page 5. The text of Psalm 137 in the NRSV is as follows:

¹ By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

² On the willows there we hung up our harps.

³ For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

⁴ How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

⁷ Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!"

⁸ O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

⁹ Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!⁵

⁵ Psalm 137:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version).

New Revised Standard Version

1 By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

2 On the willows there we hung up our harps.

3 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

4 How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

7 Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!”

8 O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Luther (1837)

1 An den Wassern zu Babylon sassen wir, und weineten, wenn wir an Zion gedachten.

2 Unsere harfen hiengen wir an die Weiden, die darinnen sind.

3 Denn daselbst hiessen uns singen, die uns gefangen hielten, und in unserm Heulen fröhlich sein: Lieber, singet uns ein Lied von Zion.

4 Wie sollten wir des Herrn Lied singen im fremden Lande?

5 Vergesse ich dein, Jerusalem; so werde meiner Rechte vergessen!

6 Meine Zunge müsse an meinem Gaumen kleben, wo ich deiner nicht gedente wo ich nicht lasse Jerusalem mein höchste Freude sein.

7 Herr, gedente der Kinder Edoms am Tage Jerusalems, die da sagten: Rein ab, rein ab, bis auf ihren Boden.

8 Du verhörter Tochter Babel! Wohl dem, der dir vergilt, wie du uns gethan hast.

9 Wohl dem, der deiner jungen Kinder nimmt, und zerschmettert sie an den Stein.

Liszt – Der 137 Psalm

1 An den Wassern zu Babylon sassen wir, und weineten, Wenn wir an Zion gedachten.

2 Unsere Harfen hingen wir an die Weiden, Die darinnen sind.

3 Denn daselbst hiessen uns singen, Die uns gefangen hielten, Und in unserm Heulen fröhlich sein. “Des Zion's lieder singet uns doch eins!”

4 Wie sollten wir im fremden Lande das Lieddes Herrn singen!

5 Jerusalem! Vergesse ich dein, so werde meiner Rechten vergessen!

6 Meine Zunge verdorre wenn ich deiner vergesse!
Jerusalem.

Alkan – Super flumina Babylonis

1 Le long des fleuves de Babylone, Là, nous étions assis ; nous pleurions aussi,
En nous souvenant de Sion.

2 Le long des saules qui sont en elle Nous avons suspendu nos harpes.

3 Cependant, là, ils voulaient de nous, ceux qui nous tenaient captifs, les paroles d'un chant ;
Et, de nos lyres appendues, de la joie : – « Chantez-nous donc quelque cantique de Sion ! » –

4 Et quoi ! nous chanterions un cantique de l'ÉTERNEL
Sur la terre étrangère ?..

5 Si je t'oubliais, ô Jérusalem !
Que ma droite oublie...

6 Que ma langue demeure attaché à mon palais,
Si je ne me souvenais de toi ;
Si je ne devais faire paraître Jérusalem, Au début de ma joie !

7 Oh ! que tu te souviennes, éternel, des enfants d'Edom ;
De la journée de Jérusalem ;
De ceux qui disaient : – « Rasez, rasez ;
« Jusqu'à ses fondements mêmes ! »

8 Fille de Babel, la misérable,
Bienheureux qui te le rendra ;
Qui te traitera comme tu nous as traités !

9 Bienheureux qui saisira, Qui écrasera tes petits enfants contre la pierre !

Figure 1. Translations of Psalm 137.

One of the most controversial psalms, Psalm 137 is written from the perspective of the exiled Jews following the Babylonians' destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C.E. The nine verses of the psalm are divided into three parts.⁶ Verses 1-3 are a lament of the Jews' exile from Jerusalem that focuses on the impossibility of singing the songs of Zion in a foreign land. Verses 4-6 are a mandate that the exiled Jews must never forget Jerusalem; the psalmist places a curse upon himself should he forget his homeland. This self-imposed curse would render the psalmist unable to sing or play his harp should he forget Jerusalem. The psalm's controversy is found in its third section, verses 7-9, in which the psalmist asks for vengeance on his captors. Positioned between the salvation history of Psalm 136 ("O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever") and the thanksgiving of Psalm 138 ("I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise"), the despair found in Psalm 137 is startling.⁷

The Jewish residents of Jerusalem were forced to flee the city three times following its destruction (597, 587, and 582 B.C.E.).⁸ Because there was more than one exile, the precise year is up for debate. Each exiled group had to face different issues. Following the exile in 597 B.C.E, for example, the first wave of forced migrants dealt with displacement, forced labor, and the loss of prestige they had known in Jerusalem. After the 587 B.C.E. exile, the second group also faced the murder of their children, who were decapitated against the walls surrounding Jerusalem.⁹ This atrocity is referenced in verses 8-9, as the psalmist appeals to God for vengeance, specifically that of retributive violence toward the Babylonians' children. The

⁶ Plank, "By the Waters of a Death Camp: An Intertextual Reading of Psalm 137," 181-2.

⁷ Psalms 136:1 and 138:1 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁸ John Ahn, "Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 273.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 268.

question of whether the psalmist himself was exiled at the time he wrote Psalm 137 is also debated, since the Hebrew word **שָׁם** (transliterated “sham”), meaning “there,” is used in reference to Babylon: “On the willows there we hung up our harps.”¹⁰ Ahn contends that Babylon is referred to in this manner to avoid the painful reiteration of the name of the land where the psalmist is enslaved: “Imagine constantly voicing Hitler...more frequently than invoking God’s name or Jerusalem during liturgy.”¹¹ Babylon was destroyed by the Persians in 539 B.C.E. According to Plank, it seems unlikely that Psalm 137 would have been written *following* its destruction (and the consequent liberation of the Judean slaves), since the psalmist urges God to create its destruction: he “calls for rather than observes” Babylon’s ruin.¹² It is more likely that the psalmist is part of the 587 B.C.E. exile. Because he alludes to an atrocity that happened during this second exile—the killing of children—it can be inferred that Psalm 137 was not written during the first exile in 597. But what about the last of the three (582 B.C.E)? The triple devastation of Jerusalem (597, 587, and 582 B.C.E.) is referred to several times elsewhere in the Old Testament: Daniel prayed three times a day in remembrance of the three exiles, for example. Because the threefold nature of destruction is in no way alluded to by the psalmist, it is most likely, according to Ahn, that Psalm 137 was written during the 587 exile.¹³

Much has been made of the fact that Psalm 137 is one of distress and vengeance, even though it is surrounded by psalms that glorify God. Ahn argues that Psalm 137 could nonetheless be considered a psalm of praise, too, since, he says, “thanksgiving and praise arise not only from positive elements in life. Rather, the true mark of these practices is finding the

¹⁰ Psalm 137:2 (New Revised Standard Version).

¹¹ Ahn, “Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments,” 273.

¹² Plank, “By the Waters of a Death Camp: An Intertextual Reading of Psalm 137,” 182.

¹³ Ahn, “Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments,” 273-4.

courage and strength to praise and give thanks when there is nothing worthwhile or praiseworthy.”¹⁴ While the anger—as well as the vivid imagery employed to illustrate that anger—is undeniable, joy can be inferred from the psalm, along with praise to God, in the form of the memory of Zion. *Der 137 Psalm* and *Super flumina Babylonis* both illustrate this, as I have previously mentioned, though it is more predominant in Liszt’s setting.

The first two stanzas of the psalm are largely based on the refusal of song. In the first stanza, the exiled laborers refuse to give in to the Babylonians’ demands that they sing the songs of Zion. The hanging of harps (sometimes translated as lyres) on the trees by the river is a refusal to perform. Plank says this refusal is necessary for three reasons. First, to sing the sacred songs of Zion in the mocking spirit in which the Babylonians requested to hear them would profane their use. Second, the songs are characterized by joy and are therefore the wrong songs to sing in a time of exilic sorrow. To sing the joyous songs of Zion would be incongruous with the nature of forced slavery. Finally, the jubilation of the songs would be, in essence, self-denial of the workers’ plight by making light of their suffering.¹⁵ After all, anguish is the predominant sentiment of the psalm.

The second stanza reiterates the refusal of song, this time in the form of a self-imposed curse. These three verses take the place of the song that the captors have requested to hear.¹⁶ The psalmist’s desire not to forget Jerusalem is so strong that he must make an oath not to forget:¹⁷ “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof

¹⁴ Ahn, “Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments,” 275.

¹⁵ Plank, “By the Waters of a Death Camp: An Intertextual Reading of Psalm 137,” 188.

¹⁶ Adele Berlin, “Psalms and the Literature of Exile: Psalms 137, 44, 69, and 78,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, edited by Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 68.

¹⁷ Plank, “By the Waters of a Death Camp: An Intertextual Reading of Psalm 137,” 188.

of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”¹⁸ In other words, the psalmist vows that he would rather lose his ability to play the harp, by way of the loss of his right hand, than forget Jerusalem. He would rather his tongue cling to the roof of his mouth, rendering him unable to sing, than not remember his homeland.¹⁹ The psalmist has revealed through this oath that he was, according to Ahn, a temple singer and musician before his exile.²⁰

The third and final stanza contains the most shocking lines of the psalm. It is a plea for violence of the same form that the Edomites inflicted on the Judeans. The psalmist has already vowed to remember Jerusalem in the second stanza; here is a plea in the third stanza for God to remember Jerusalem’s enemies.²¹ Adele Berlin notes that in Jerusalem, songs of Zion were songs of joy performed in the Temple. Anyone who had been cut off from joy was considered to be in mourning; mourners were forbidden to participate in acts of public joy. In slavery, the captives have been cut off from Zion and from God, thus they cannot perform songs of joy. The joyous songs of Zion, then, have been replaced with a Jerusalem lament.²² Interestingly, the lament takes the form of a Beatitude: “Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”²³ Biblical scholar John Ahn has shown that “they” is a deliberate substitution for a Hebrew form meaning “the one.” A more literal translation would be “Happy is the one,” which is, in turn, an indirect way of saying “Blessed is the Lord.” This must be stated indirectly because it is such an extreme statement.

¹⁸ Psalm 137:5-6 (New Revised Standard Version).

¹⁹ Plank, “By the Waters of a Death Camp: An Intertextual Reading of Psalm 137,” 190.

²⁰ Ahn, “Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments,” 282.

²¹ Adele Berlin, “Psalms and the Literature of Exile: Psalms 137, 44, 69, and 78,” 69.

²² *Ibid.*, 71.

²³ Psalm 137:9 (New Revised Standard Version).

This paper will explore the possible reasons why Liszt and Alkan, specifically, were drawn to Psalm 137, and how each composer interpreted the contrary sentiments of joy and lament. Liszt omitted the last three verses, giving his cantata essentially a two-part form. Alkan's unsung setting utilizes the entire Psalm, resulting in a three-part form. Insight into the composer's aesthetic choices is derived not only from considering both settings in relation to the text, but to each other as well.

CHAPTER 2

LISZT AND *DER 137 PSALM*

By the time Liszt set Psalm 137 to music in 1859, it had already been set by many composers—Palestrina, Rossi, and Schütz, to name a few. Like these earlier composers, Liszt also set “Der 137 Psalm” as a vocal composition. It is scored for solo female voice and female choir, accompanied by solo violin, harp or piano, and organ or harmonium. *Der 137 Psalm* was not published until 1864, five years after Liszt started work on it and one year before he was to take minor orders within the Catholic Church. In order to better understand Liszt’s motivation for setting Psalm 137 to music, it is necessary to know something about his religious life.

Minor Orders

When Liszt decided in 1865 to take what Alan Walker describes as “the lower orders of priesthood” within the church, much was made of what appeared to the public as a complete about-face in personality.²⁴ How had a man famous for being a man of the world suddenly given up his earthly vices in favor of official duties in the Church? Liszt was known throughout Europe for being a flamboyant performer and sought-after teacher and composer who rubbed elbows with royalty—to speak nothing of his romantic transgressions that were at odds with Church teachings. The key to understanding Liszt’s decision depends on an awareness of

²⁴ Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt, Volume III: The Final Years, 1861-1886* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 85.

exactly what minor orders entailed during the nineteenth century, as well as an understanding of the role of the church in Liszt's life.

Dolores Pesce describes a caricatured Liszt conducting “with flailing arms in a black cassock . . . changing from the worldly piano virtuoso, to Wagner-championing conductor, to seemingly humble abbé, yet still seeking approbation. His spirituality is called into question.”²⁵ Yet Pesce and Walker both ultimately refute claims of insincerity made by Liszt's contemporaries.

According to *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, during the nineteenth century, the Church distinguished between minor orders (porter, lector, exorcist, and acolyte) and major orders (subdeacon, deacon, and priest).²⁶ Liszt took the four minor orders in 1865, though he had, in fact, contemplated entering the priesthood since childhood. He wrote that even “from the age of seventeen . . . with tears and supplications, I begged to be permitted to enter the seminary in Paris, and I hoped that it would be given to me to live the life of the saints and perhaps die the death of the martyrs.”²⁷ When he received his orders, Liszt was pursuing theological studies with the aim of reaching the subdiaconate, and even kept a modest home in the Madonna del Rosario, an old monastery outside Rome. He eventually changed his mind, however: one of many restrictions that being a member of the clergy would have imposed was the interference with time he needed to devote to composition.²⁸ Liszt himself said of his decision:

²⁵ Dolores Pesce, “Liszt's Sacred Choral Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, edited by Kenneth Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 223.

²⁶ Jeremiah Donovan, trans., *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (Dublin: Richard Coyne, 1829), 310; see also “Holy Orders,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 7 (Detroit: Thomson/Gale, 2003), 38. In 1972, Pope Paul VI eliminated the minor orders and subdiaconate from the sacrament of holy orders.

²⁷ Walker, *Franz Liszt: Volume III*, 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

To speak familiarly, if “the cloak does not make the monk,” it also does not prevent him from being one; and, in certain cases, when the monk is already formed within, why not appropriate the outer garment of one? But I am forgetting that I do not in the least intend to become a monk, in the severe sense of the word. For this I have no vocation, and it is enough for me to belong to the hierarchy of the church to such a degree as the minor orders allow me to do. It is therefore not the frock but the cassock that I have donned. And on this subject . . . pardon me the small vanity of mentioning to you that they pay me the compliment of saying that I wear my cassock as though I had worn it all my life.²⁹

When Liszt took his orders on April 25, 1865, only three people knew in advance what would occur—Pope Pius IX, longtime love Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, and Monsignor Gustav Hohenlohe—though several other people, mostly members of the clergy, were present.³⁰ Liszt had given a farewell performance five days earlier that did not portend the ecclesiastical journey he was about to embark on; Weber’s “Invitation to the Dance” and Schubert’s “Erlkönig” were on the program. German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius was in the audience that night at the Palazzo Barberini in Rome and later wrote in his journal:

No one suspected that he had the abbé’s stockings already in his pocket. . . . He now wears the abbé’s frock, lives in the Vatican, and, as Schlözer told me yesterday, looks well and contented. This is the end of a gifted virtuoso, a truly sovereign personality. Am glad that I heard him play again; he and the instrument seem to be one, as it were, a piano-centaur.³¹

Gregorovius was mistaken in his prediction that Liszt would cease to compose new music upon taking orders in the Church, but he was not Liszt’s only detractor. The outside world speculated cynically on Liszt’s new responsibilities, and it was not merely the public voicing their opinions; friends and acquaintances wrote of their bafflement. French statesman Emile Ollivier described Liszt’s decision as “spiritual suicide” while musicologist August Ambros

²⁹ Ibid., 89-90.

³⁰ Ibid., 86.

³¹ Ibid.

stated that the “whole cultural world” was shocked.³² Given Liszt’s reputation as a debauched performer and lover, it is telling that his sudden turn toward piety created such a scandal, rather than the other way around.

Liszt’s mother Anna had a peculiar reaction. Upon reading the news from her son that he had taken minor orders, she wrote:

People often talk of things at such great length that they finally happen, and so it is with your present change of status. There have been frequent reports in the newspapers here that you had chosen clerical status, but I have vigorously contradicted them whenever they were mentioned. And so your letter . . . upset me deeply, and I burst into tears. Forgive me, but I really was not prepared for such news from you.³³

Upon further consideration, however, she did make peace with her son’s decision: “If the blessing of a feeble old mother can achieve aught with the Almighty, then I bless you a thousand times.”³⁴

It should be stressed that Liszt only took the four minor orders, and never completed any further advancement within the Church: he did not take a vow of celibacy, perform Mass, or carry out any other priestly duties, though he did live at the Vatican for more than a year. In light of this, the reaction of so many people in Liszt’s life—to say nothing of the gossip-devouring public—might seem surprising. Those familiar with today’s version of minor orders, which are now considered lay ministries, should understand that, during Liszt’s lifetime, minor orders were regarded as stepping stones on the path to ordination.³⁵ For this reason, the shocked reaction of Liszt’s friends, family, and admirers is at least somewhat understandable.

³² Ibid., 88.

³³ Ibid., 87.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Holy Orders,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 7, 38.

Those who knew Liszt as a showman on the world stage, however, should not have been so astonished: Liszt was a performer, not a member of the audience. It was not enough for him to be a mere bystander within the Church; membership within the Church hierarchy was a natural fit for a man who had been a devout Catholic since childhood. Here was a virtuoso accustomed to pomp and circumstance; what institution possessed more grandeur than the Catholic Church? Obtaining minor orders meant that Liszt could carry out his duties on a literal stage—the altar—on a regular basis. In his book *Minor Orders*, Louis Bacuez writes that “never have the faithful a more exalted idea of the priesthood, nor greater esteem for the dignity of the priest, than when they see him assisted and served at the altar by numerous ministers, representing the various grades of the hierarchy, every one of whom is above the layman in dignity and authority.”³⁶ Bacuez’s words reflect a sense of elitism, and while it is difficult to say whether this sentiment was felt by Liszt, there was and is in the Church an undeniable divide between laypeople—bystanders—who participate in the Mass and those who have taken on an official and active role in the Church.

This is illustrated even more vividly on a grander scale. Perhaps more telling than Liszt’s daily or weekly assistance at Mass was the way that he fit into the Church hierarchy. Besides enabling Liszt to participate actively in the liturgy, minor orders also gave Liszt enhanced access to the highest levels of the church hierarchy. He had important friends, including Cardinal Hohenlohe; the pope himself, as previously mentioned, conferred the orders upon Liszt. Liszt lived in Hohenlohe’s elegant apartment at the Vatican for more than a year and did not, as Walker points out, “suffer any of the privations usually associated with a seminary, as he himself

³⁶ Rev. Louis Bacuez, *Minor Orders* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1912), 135.

was the first to admit.”³⁷ He was able to devote plenty of time to composition; his *Missa Choralis*, dedicated to Pope Pius IX, was but one of the fruits of his labor while he lived at the Vatican, though Liszt wrote non-sacred works as well. Pope Pius, himself a music lover, requested that Liszt even give a recital within the confines of the pope’s private library, which Liszt obliged in June of 1866; his piano was even transferred to the library for the occasion.³⁸ None of this is to suggest that Liszt was in any way insincere in his quest for official status within the Church hierarchy. In fact, he dedicated much of his time in Rome to the private study of theology and religious texts. But to a musician, the celebration of Mass can be likened to a *Gesamtkunstwerk*: at every Mass, the multisensory drama of the Last Supper unfolds on the altar, accompanied by sacred music.

Félicité de Lamennais

Pius IX and Hohenlohe were not the first high-profile members of clergy with whom Liszt had been associated. His relationship during the 1830s with priest and political activist Robert Félicité de Lamennais (born de la Mennais) is fairly well-documented. One of the leaders of the Catholic liberalism movement, Lamennais advocated the separation of church and state and opposed the French royal hierarchy, whose Gallicanist views directly opposed those of Catholic liberalism. Lamennais was a proponent of ultramontanism, a religious philosophy that emphasizes the pope’s supreme authority. Whereas Gallicanism promoted that the Church be led by a state-run council of bishops rather than the pope, ultramontanists like Lamennais considered state-run religion a moral conflict and called on papal authority to be the “defender of justice and

³⁷ Walker, *Franz Liszt: Volume III*, 89.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

the rights of humanity.”³⁹ Lamennais’ political and religious ideology was well-known during the nineteenth century, even in the United States; today his name recognition has mostly faded, due in part to the fact that papal authority is now a practically universally accepted concept in the Church.⁴⁰ Many of his other proposed reforms, some of which were shocking during his lifetime, are ideas that seem ordinary today. Take, for example, Lamennais’ suggestion that the Church look to lower- and middle-class men—laborers, fishermen, and shepherds among them—to recruit for the priesthood. Lamennais also desired that the Church take from the state the responsibility of education, including that of the poor.⁴¹ To Lamennais’ supporters, Catholic liberalism was not a fringe movement or a renegade faction of the Church, but simply the new way of life. It was, according to Peter Steinfels, “the very medium of human existence, the chief reality of modern life. [Catholic liberals] believed that the church could embrace this condition as an opportunity rather than denounce it as an affliction.”⁴²

But denounce it the Church did. Lamennais’ brand of politically-infused theology was enough to catch the attention of the pope—and his criticism. In an 1832 encyclical entitled “*Mirari Vos*,” Pope Gregory XVI condemned numerous doctrines proposed by Lamennais’ periodical *L’Avenir*, including freedom of the press and of conscience, as well as the union of Catholics with members of other religions for political purposes (Lamennais had suggested that Catholics join forces with Jews, Muslims, and Protestants to prevent religious persecution). The

³⁹ Thomas C. Kohler, “Modern Man,” *America* 201, no. 4 (August 2009): 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴¹ Mark P. Bangert, “Franz Liszt’s Essay on Church Music (1834) in the Light of Félicité Lamennais’s System of Religious and Political Thought,” in *A Tribute to Donald N. Ferguson at His Ninetieth Birthday*, edited by Johannes Riedel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1972), 186-7.

⁴² Peter Steinfels, “The Failed Encounter,” in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, edited by R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 32.

pope also spoke out against Lamennais' desire for a separation between church and state, stating that "both divine and human laws cry out against those who strive by treason and sedition to drive the people from confidence in their princes and force them from their government."⁴³ The Vatican's response has been criticized in recent years for its overreaction; according to Steinfelds, the Church balked at the Catholic liberalism movement's "failure to support the church's own absolute claims. Catholic anti-liberalism was based on the principle that if you are not for me one-hundred percent, you are against me."⁴⁴

Lamennais, however, had already found many illustrious followers, Liszt among them, who wrote to George Sand in reference to Lamennais, "I have only once in my life felt anything resembling a tremendously deep liking."⁴⁵ Perhaps it was Lamennais' work *Esquisse d'un Philosophie* that caught Liszt's attention, since the third volume was dedicated to the discussion of art. Lamennais wrote that "art therefore is an expression of God; her works are an infinite manifold reflection of Him."⁴⁶ Upon reading Lamennais' book *Paroles d'un croyant (Words of a Believer)*, Liszt wrote in 1834, "*Christianity in the nineteenth century*, that is to say, the whole religious and political future of mankind, lies in you!"⁴⁷ It might seem unlikely that Liszt would be drawn to Lamennais' brand of anti-royalism, given that Liszt was at the height of his career as a touring virtuoso and was, to use Walker's words, "on nodding terms with many of the crowned heads of Europe."⁴⁸ But Liszt's allegiance to Lamennais' ideas appears to be a precursor to

⁴³ Kohler, "Modern Man," 24.

⁴⁴ Steinfelds, "The Failed Encounter," 38.

⁴⁵ Paul Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7.

⁴⁶ Pesce, "Liszt's Sacred Choral Music," 223-4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁸ Alan Walker, *Reflections on Liszt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), xiv.

Liszt's own ultramontanist tendencies that would later be manifested in the years he spent in Rome.

Following a visit with Lamennais in 1834, Liszt's own writing resonates with the same philosophy: "Music must devote itself to the PEOPLE and to GOD," he wrote. "It must go from one to the other, to better, moralize, and comfort man, to bless and praise God."⁴⁹ Two years later, Liszt spent more than two months in Paris with Marie d'Agoult and George Sand writing articles in favor of humanitarian art for Lamennais' newspaper.⁵⁰ To Liszt, music of the future would combine national, religious, political, and moral sentiments.⁵¹ He referenced "the beautiful songs of the revolution" in reference to infusing religion with politics; he had already demonstrated this mind-set some years earlier when, following the 1830 revolution in Paris, he drafted a "Revolutionary Symphony" based on the *Marseillaise*.⁵² His 1842 suite *Album d'un voyageur* echoed this sentiment; the march-like piano solo "Lyon" portrayed the 1834 uprising of exploited Lyonnais silk weavers whose trade union had been squelched by the government. According to Paul Merrick, "Lyon" was one of a handful of early works that foretold Liszt's talent for original composition and the success he would find during his Weimar period.⁵³ Liszt dedicated the work to Lamennais, who had championed the workers' cause; the inscription read: "To live in work or die fighting."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Pesce, "Liszt's Sacred Choral Music," 224.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁵¹ Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt*, 19.

⁵² Pesce, "Liszt's Sacred Choral Music," 224.

⁵³ Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt*, 21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

Der 137 Psalm

If Lamennais' religious and political philosophy resonated with Liszt, it is no wonder that the text of Psalm 137 did as well, since it blends the political climate of ancient Jerusalem with a call for God to exact revenge on the Babylonians. The synthesis of religion and politics was not a new idea in the nineteenth century; the author of Psalm 137 had done so more than two thousand years before Lamennais. In *Paroles d'un croyant*, Lamennais equated oppression of workers to "wage slavery." In fact, slavery and oppression are a common theme throughout his book.⁵⁵ "God has made neither small nor great, neither masters nor slaves, neither kings nor subjects; he has made them all equal," Lamennais wrote. "I go to...deliver my brethren from oppression, to break their chains. . . . I go to combat for the poor."⁵⁶ The text of Psalm 137 clearly depicts a similar theme of slavery and oppression—the Babylonians are referred to as "captors" and "tormentors," for example—and from historical and exegetic research we know that the Jews were held in slavery by the Babylonians when Psalm 137 was written by one of the captives.⁵⁷ Ultimately, both Lamennais and the psalmist call upon God to emancipate the enslaved, whether the slavery is literal or a reference to oppression in a royalist political system.

In Liszt's setting of Psalm 137, however, emancipation is found in the hope of redemption expressed in verse 6, rather than in the violent retribution of verses 7-9. Like other composers before and after him, Liszt excluded verses 7-9 from his setting. John L. Bell, a composer of contemporary hymns, explains that he omitted them in his own setting of Psalm 137 because "[the] seemingly outrageous curse is better dealt with in preaching or group

⁵⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 12-3.

⁵⁷ Psalm 137:3 (New Revised Standard Version).

conversation.”⁵⁸ While it seems reasonable that a composer of hymns intended for group worship would omit the violent lines, it is interesting to note that Liszt would shy away from including them. He was no stranger to controversy, as evidenced by his allegiance to Lamennais, nor was he hesitant to voice his opinion on such matters. However, considering that he wrote his 1859 setting of Psalm 137 more than two decades after the principle years of his correspondence with Lamennais (and five years after Lamennais’ 1854 death), it seems that the passionate, pro-revolution days of his youth had been tempered with a more orthodox fidelity to the Vatican that foreshadowed the period he would spend in Rome. This was, after all, only six years before he took minor orders. Merrick suggests that Liszt omitted the last lines in order to preserve the music’s adherence to the ideas of lament and triumph and to exemplify “the promise of redemption.”⁵⁹ Liszt also likely left out the last lines to serve his artistic aims. The overriding sense of hope in *Der 137 Psalm* would be less convincing if Liszt had included the text that depicted the violent murder of children.

Liszt’s text is a German version based on Luther’s translation of the Vulgate Bible. His choice of German (as opposed to Latin) places Psalm 137 within the German cantata tradition. In declining to use the Latin setting, Liszt designates the work as dramatic rather than liturgical. The German text that Liszt uses is very similar to the Luther translation, but Liszt’s text takes a few artistic liberties. Verses 5-6 of the Luther text, for example, reads “Vergesse ich dein, Jerusalem; so werde meiner Rechte vergessen! Meine Zunge müsse an meinem Gaumen kleben, wo ich deiner nicht gedente wo ich nicht lasse Jerusalem mein höchste Freude sein.”⁶⁰ Liszt’s text, however, reads “Jerusalem! Vergesse ich dein, so werde meiner Rechten vergessen! Meine

⁵⁸ John L. Bell, *Psalms of Patience, Protest and Praise* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1993), 53.

⁵⁹ Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt*, 160.

⁶⁰ Psalm 137:5-6 (Luther translation [1837]).

Zunge verdorre wenn ich deiner vergesse! Jerusalem.”⁶¹ The restructuring of the syntax, particularly with the word “Jerusalem,” creates a chiasmus, a commonly-used figure of speech in the Bible; it also enables Liszt to set an especially expansive use of the word “Jerusalem.” Displacement of the word “Jerusalem” is particularly important in the second section of the work, when the choir joins in. “Jerusalem” is the first and last word of this section; the piece fittingly ends with a sense of anticipation of returning home. This is doubly poignant in light of the fact that Jerusalem is sometimes considered a metaphor for heaven.

Liszt was also inspired in part by Eduard Bendemann’s 1831 painting *Die Trauernde Juden im Exil* (*The Mourning Jews in Exile*). Bendemann’s painting (see Figure 2 on page 23) depicts the grief-stricken Jews mourning next to the Babylonian river; the lone man in the painting holds his lyre in his shackled right hand. All four figures sit motionless and despairing.⁶² The depiction of despair, the neo-Renaissance style, and the inclusion of nature via the river and the willow in reference to the psalm’s text all signify *Die Trauernde Juden im Exil* as a Romantic work of art.

A number of passing references to Liszt’s interest in Bendemann’s painting appear in the English literature on *Der 137 Psalm*.⁶³ The most informative account, however, appears in a German publication by Liszt’s pupil and later secretary, August Göllerich. Göllerich quotes Liszt as follows:

⁶¹ Psalm 137:5-6 (Liszt’s German translation).

⁶² Gilya Gerda Schmidt, *The Art and Artists of the Fifth Zionist Congress, 1901: Heralds of a New Age* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 35.

⁶³ Humphrey Searle, *The Music of Liszt* (New York: Dover, 1966), 93, and Paul Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt*, 158. Merrick cites the nineteenth-century German music teacher and writer Lina Ramann, whom Liszt allowed to be his official biographer during his lifetime.



Figure 2. Eduard Bendemann, *Die Trauernde Juden im Exil* (*The Mourning Jews in Exile*), 1831.

In Leipzig I heard Psalm 137, “By the waters of Babylon,” composed by Hiller. I did not like it, and I said to Miss Genast, I will compose for you two artworks: “Jeremiah” and “The Grieving Jews.” . . . I was inspired by them; they are by Bendemann, a painter from Dusseldorf, who was director of the Academy and died in Dresden. I would not compose the full text, the end of which is gruesome and full of hate and vengeance; I would give only the impression of a longing for home.⁶⁴

Not only is Bendemann’s painting acknowledged; Liszt’s decision to omit the last three lines is also clearly explained.

Der 137 Psalm is scored for violin, harp or piano, organ or harmonium, women’s choir, and solo voice, which Liszt wrote was designated for mezzo-soprano, though he did not indicate

⁶⁴ August Göllerich, *Franz Liszt* (Berlin: Marquardt, 1908), 170. Original quote in German: “Den 137. Psalm ‘An den Ufern von Babylon’ hörte ich in Leipzig von Hiller komponiert. Er gefiel mir gar nicht, und ich sagte zu Fraülein Genast: ‘den werde ich für Sie komponieren.’ Zwei Bilder: ‘Jeremias’ und ‘Die trauernden Juden’, die mir die Frau Fürstin schenkte—sie sind von einem Düsseldorf Maler Bendemann, der in Dresden als Direktor der Akademie gestorben ist—regten mich dazu an. Den schauerlichen Schluß des Textes voll Hasses und voll Rache, wollte ich nicht komponieren, sondern nur der Sehnsucht nach Hause Ausdruck geben.”

this on the score.⁶⁵ Michael Saffle speculates that perhaps part of the reason that Liszt's psalm settings are not performed more frequently today is due to his inclusion of the harp, which, for some, is reminiscent of the "saccharine" music of the Victorian age; Saffle makes the argument that Liszt employs the harp in a more useful way in his psalms.⁶⁶ Liszt's choice of instrumentation seems obvious: the harp refers to the text of the psalm and functions as a symbol of the Jews. The harps that the Jews hung in the trees have been given a voice again.

The work begins ostensibly in C minor, but almost immediately, a mournful-sounding raised F-sharp creates a conspicuous augmented second between the third and fourth scale degrees. This interval between the E-flat and the F-sharp sounds characteristically Jewish, and on first observation, it is tempting to label the augmented second as part of the Jewish Ahavah Rabbah prayer mode. The inherent augmented second found in the Ahavah Rabbah mode has prompted many to label it the most "Jewish" sounding mode. Cohon describes the quality of the Ahavah Rabbah's augmented second as "distinctly Oriental."⁶⁷ Upon closer inspection, however, Liszt's modified harmonic minor scale is actually a Hungarian idiom, as Klára Hamburger indicates. In fact, the scale that Liszt uses is identical to the Gypsy scale. The augmented seconds fall between the third and fourth scale degrees, and again between the sixth and seventh degrees, whereas the Ahavah Rabbah's lone augmented second falls between the second and third degrees. Hamburger notes that Liszt's Hungarian works are typically considered a separate group (a convention that Liszt himself began), even though many of his

⁶⁵ Humphrey Searle, *The Music of Liszt* (New York: Dover, 1966), 93, and Paul Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt*, 158.

⁶⁶ Michael Saffle, "Sacred Choral Works," in *The Liszt Companion*, edited by Ben Arnold (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 248.

⁶⁷ Baruch Joseph Cohon, "The Structure of the Synagogue Prayer-Chant," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1950): 19.

other works include passing references to Hungarian music.⁶⁸ In Liszt's non-sacred music, the Gypsy scale typically depicts sorrow, anguish, or mourning; the opening bars of *Der 137 Psalm* demonstrate that Liszt could use the scale effectively in a sacred work, too. Liszt employs the exotic-sounding Gypsy scale in the opening "waters of Babylon" motif to convey the remoteness of a foreign land (see Example 1 on page 26).

The pitch material of the Gypsy scale is referenced again later in the work, though it is disguised by an enharmonic respelling. In measures 75-77 (see Example 2 on page 26), the pitches E-flat, C, and A-flat, which appear prominently in the opening scalar motif, are melodically respelled as a G-sharp major chord as the soloist sings "Jerusalem!" unaccompanied. The notes of the Gypsy scale must be respelled because they now correspond to Jerusalem rather than Babylon. The two-part work is approaching the second section. The psalmist's thoughts have now shifted from the torment of exile in a foreign land, which Liszt illustrated using the C minor Gypsy scale in the first section, to the yearning of home and the hope of redemption as evidenced in the second section by C major.

The subsequent section reaches C major in noteworthy fashion. The aforementioned G-sharp major chord is followed by an E major chord; the two sonorities are united by a neo-Riemannian label of PL. The second section of *Der 137 Psalm* officially begins when the female choir joins at measure 80. This section is set predominantly in C major, a sonority that is—again—reached from E major by way of a neo-Riemannian label of PL. The new key of C major indicates a shift in mood; the text throughout the rest of the piece consists almost entirely of a reiteration of the word "Jerusalem." Gone is the exotic-sounding Gypsy scale; the work has

⁶⁸ Klára Hamburger, "Hungarian Idiom in Liszt's Sacred Works," in *New Light on Liszt and His Music: Essays in Honor of Alan Walker's 65th Birthday*, edited by Michael Saffle and James Deaville (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1997), 240-2.

Langsam, trauernd. **Frauz Liszt.**

Singstimme.

Violine.

Harfe
oder
Pianoforte.

Piano.
NB

Orgel
oder
Harmonium

Example 1. *Der 137 Psalm*, mm. 1-7.

(aus tiefster Seele.)
lung.

Je - ru - sa - lem!

Example 2. *Der 137 Psalm*, mm. 75-77.

modulated from C minor to C major, a familiar modulation employed to illustrate struggle and triumph. Far from being hackneyed, however, Liszt's modulation is formed in a characteristically Romantic manner, through the use of a modified harmonic minor scale, enharmonic spellings, and neo-Riemannian modulation.

Within this large-scale tonal progression are numerous examples of subtle and nuanced text setting. The doleful ascending melody of the solo violin in measure 61 is a precursor to the soloist's words "An den Wassern zu Babylon sassen wir, und weineten, wenn wir an Zion gedachten" ("By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion").⁶⁹ The violin weaves around the melodic line of the soloist, often doubling the line, thereby creating in the first section, according to both Merrick and Pesce, a lament aria.⁷⁰ At the first mention of the word "Zion" (measure 35), the harmony changes briefly to a striking D-flat major chord as if the psalmist is remembering his homeland before he and his people were forced into slavery (see Example 3 on page 28).

Following this reverie, arpeggiations played by the harp precede several dramatic pauses. The longest such rest, marked with a fermata, is followed by the words "Des Zion's Lieder singet uns doch eins!" ("Sing us one of the songs of Zion") in a recitative-like rhythm, marked *mit fremdartiger betonung* (with strange overemphasis).⁷¹ At this point the soloist is unaccompanied save for several short but dramatic chords by the violin, harp, and piano. The lack of accompaniment here is poignant: for the enslaved Jews, performing the music of Zion was impossible in a foreign land. Afterward, the opening violin melody returns (see Example 4 on page 29), this time based on E and marked *sehr duster und ausdrucksvoll* (very bleak and expressive).

After the return of the opening melody, the music transforms into a Baroque-like recitative, over an accompaniment marked *agitato* for the harp and *tremolos* in the piano part,

⁶⁹ Liszt, Der 137 Psalm, in *Six Psalms*, and Psalm 137:1 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁷⁰ Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt*, 158-9, and Pesce, "Liszt's Sacred Choral Music," 227.

⁷¹ Franz Liszt, Der 137 Psalm, in *Six Psalms*.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is a vocal line in C minor, 3/4 time, with the lyrics "wenn wir an Zi - - on,". The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in the same key and time, marked "pp dolce" and "Ped.". The piano part features a dense, flowing texture of sixteenth notes, with a fermata over the final measure.

Example 3. *Der 137 Psalm*, mm. 34-35.

until we reach the remarkable transformation from C minor Gypsy to C major.⁷² As described above, the female choir joins with repeated cries of “Jerusalem!” in C major. While this harmonic shift from modified minor to major gives the impression that the speaker has broken free from the chains of captivity, the chorus is in fact alternating the word “Jerusalem” with the words of the psalmist’s self-imposed imprecation “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither. Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you.”⁷³ Though it might seem unexpected that Liszt would choose the key of C major to set the text of a curse, it is a fitting key for the repeated cry “Jerusalem!” As Pesce describes, the lamenting sonorities of the earlier section contend with the choir’s optimistic references to Jerusalem, but the stability of the choral calls wins out.⁷⁴ The melodic line of these final repetitions represents the exultant memory of the psalmist’s homeland, as well as the anticipation of an eventual return. Unlike the haunting ascension of the violin melody earlier in the piece, these final ascending lines are filled with hope.

⁷² Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt*, 159, and Pesce, “Liszt’s Sacred Choral Music,” 227.

⁷³ Psalm 137:5-6 (New Revised Standard Version).

⁷⁴ Pesce, “Liszt’s Sacred Choral Music,” 228.

(mit fremdartiger Betonung) *(bitter, für sich hinstarrend)*

„Des Zi-ons Lieder *riten.* sin - getunsdocheins!“ „Des Zi-ons Lieder sin -

plss. *mf*

61

(Nicht taktiren.)

-getunsdocheins!“ *sehr düster und ausdrucksvoll*
arco

Example 4. *Der 137 Psalm*, mm. 55-61.

It is interesting to wonder how Liszt might have set Psalm 137 had he done so twenty years earlier. While he was friends with Lamennais, Liszt wrote that “God remains forever and the people are rising up.”⁷⁵ Bangert notes that, in Liszt’s vision for the future of religious music, freedom songs were the “paradigmatic forerunners”; Psalm 137 could be considered part of this paradigm.⁷⁶ In his own way, Liszt seemed eager during the 1830s for Catholic liberals to hang up their own harps and create a new political system based on Lamennais’ philosophies. The idea of a return to Jerusalem runs parallel to the concept of ultramontanism. In the deeply divided landscape of the Church during the nineteenth century, Liszt, like Lamennais, believed in a return to a unified Church with the supremacy of one pontiff. The final stanza of Psalm 137 includes the words “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!”⁷⁷ A few decades before Liszt wrote *Der 137 Psalm*, this revolutionary cry might have held more appeal for him, considering how reminiscent the words are of Lamennais’ vision of a new political structure and of his support for the rights of workers and the ideals of the French revolution. Instead, Liszt chose to exclude this stanza from his setting.

“Amid the Tumult”

Liszt lived through a tumultuous time in the history of the Catholic Church. The years he spent as a disciple of Lamennais were not the only ones rife with turmoil; his period in Rome was also marked with deep divides among Church factions. Alan Walker points out in his biography of Liszt:

⁷⁵ Bangert, “Franz Liszt’s Essay on Church Music (1834) in the Light of Félicité Lamennais’s System of Religious and Political Thought,” 209.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Psalm 137:7 (New Revised Standard Version).

There was a dark side to life in the Eternal City which today is all but forgotten, especially in the biographies of Liszt. When Carolyne and he had first taken up residence in Rome, the Catholic Church was in the middle of the gravest crisis of its long existence. The Vatican itself was hopelessly divided into factions whose manner of doing business with one another included conspiracy, violence, assassination, and suicide. Papal Rome was a battlefield in which Franciscan strove against Dominican, Jesuit against liberal, “Blacks” against “Whites.”⁷⁸

Though Liszt had aligned himself more firmly with liberalism during the 1830s, by the time he moved to Rome in 1861, he seemed to straddle the line between liberalism and conservatism amid the tumult of the Vatican. His liberalism had already been evidenced by his loyalty to Lamennais in his youth; here it manifested itself through his close friendship with Hohenlohe, who was also a liberal and controversial figure in Rome. Hohenlohe had made enemies out of the Jesuits and was at odds with Pius, whom the cardinals had elected pope in hopes that he would bring a more modern, liberal papacy to St. Peter’s.⁷⁹ But Pius proved to be more conservative than expected, as Steinfels notes:

Support for liberal freedoms of religion, press, association, constitutional and parliamentary rule and for free scientific inquiry gradually builds up—only to be repeatedly rejected by the papacy. . . . Pope Pius IX disabuses those who imagined him a liberal sympathizer. . . . The pragmatic Catholic liberalism that gained influence for the church in the 1840s is now stymied by the all-absorbing question of the pope’s temporal powers.⁸⁰

Liszt held the pope in high esteem in spite of his own liberal past. Under Pope Pius’s papacy, the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility were established; Liszt supported both: “Our Church is only so strong because she exacts total obedience,” he wrote. “We must obey, even if we hang for it. . . . That is why all the princes of the church will adhere to it: not one of them can remain outside.”⁸¹ *Der 137 Psalm* could be considered a manifestation

⁷⁸ Walker, *Franz Liszt: Volume III*, 326.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 326 and 332.

⁸⁰ Steinfels, “The Failed Encounter,” 20.

⁸¹ Walker, *Franz Liszt: Volume III*, 335.

of the polarity in Liszt's religious leanings. The defiance of the Jews' hanging up the harps perhaps appealed to the revolutionary aspect of Liszt that had been so outspoken in years past. He stopped short, however, of including the psalm's most troublesome lines: he did not set the text that called for destruction or vengeance, especially vengeance directed at children.

Ultramontanism does not seem so radical in modern times—the idea of papal supremacy is a foregone conclusion in modern-day Catholicism. The royalists' proposal of a council of bishops in nineteenth-century France, on the other hand, seems peculiar today. In light of the fact that Liszt lived and composed during such turbulent times for Catholicism, *Der 137 Psalm* can be considered a representation of the period during which he composed it. Liszt's revolutionary liberalism had been lessened with age and mitigated with a more devout obedience to the Church, though much of his fiery spirit remained.

CHAPTER 3

ALKAN AND *SUPER FLUMINA BABYLONIS*

Alkan was drawn to Psalm 137 in 1859, the same year that Liszt composed *Der 137 Psalm*, though perhaps for different reasons. The fact that Alkan was Jewish, not Catholic, is in itself an indication that his motivation to set the psalm was probably different from that of Liszt. Alkan's faith and the changing political environment in which he and other nineteenth-century French Jews grew up certainly affected his career, while developments in his professional life, in turn, directly affected his output. *Super flumina Babylonis* is one work that can be examined as a reflection of the events that occurred in both his personal and professional life. This chapter describes the reasons why Alkan was inspired to compose *Super flumina Babylonis* and how the piece echoed his life; it will also explore how Alkan's Jewish faith shaped the composition.

Régénération

Psalm 137 is, on the surface, not a surprising choice for a Jewish composer. As an observant Jew, Alkan could identify with his ancestors' exile; like other members of his community in nineteenth-century Paris, he was something of an outsider himself. While Jews in nineteenth-century France had been given much broader freedoms thanks to the revolution and the Napoleonic era, anti-Jewish hostility remained a problem.⁸² Alkan had actually been raised

⁸² For a discussion of these conflicting tendencies, see Jay R. Berkowitz, *The Shaping of Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1989), 250.

with his feet firmly planted in two separate but overlapping spheres: that of his devoutly Jewish family and heritage, and that of greater society in Paris.

During the *ancien régime*, Jewish customs had not been well tolerated; philosophers like Voltaire had suggested during the eighteenth century that Jews were incapable of making any meaningful contribution to society.⁸³ However, following the Revolution, religious tolerance had increased greatly in a relatively short period of time. Jews in nineteenth-century France were officially recognized for the first time since the fourteenth century; by 1808, Napoleon had granted Jews a specific legal status. Newfound freedom changed the artistic landscape of Paris, which proved to be more tolerant than other European cities at the time.⁸⁴ At the turn of the nineteenth century, there were very few prominent Jewish composers in Europe; in fact, Jewish musicians were regarded as a novelty and remained subject to discrimination.⁸⁵ Though not much is known about Alkan's father, who was himself a talented musician and solfège teacher, the elder Alkan undoubtedly grew up during an era in which Jewish musicians were still considered anomalous.⁸⁶ Charles Valentin Alkan was born in 1813 in the midst of this rapidly changing environment, and, by the middle of the century, was one of many Jewish composers who enjoyed success that was not yet feasible in other European cities.⁸⁷

⁸³ David Conway, "'In the Midst of Many Peoples'—Some Nineteenth Century Jewish Composers and Their Jewishness," *European Judaism* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 36.

⁸³ William Alexander Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

⁸⁴ John H. Baron, "A Golden Age for Jewish Composers in Paris: 1820-1865," *Musica Judaica* 14 (January 1999): 133-4.

⁸⁵ Emanuel Rubin and John H. Baron, *Music in Jewish History and Culture* (Sterling Heights: Harmonie Park Press, 2006), 207.

⁸⁶ Conway, "'In the Midst of Many Peoples'—Some Nineteenth Century Jewish Composers and Their Jewishness," 37.

⁸⁷ Baron, "A Golden Age for Jewish Composers in Paris: 1820-1865," 132.

Because France was the first country in western Europe to emancipate the Jews, many in the Jewish community were absorbed completely into French society (thus cutting ties, for the most part, with their Jewish heritage). The majority, however, did remain loyal to the Jewish community. According to Jay R. Berkovitz, “the deterioration of Jewish loyalties was not as severe nor as rapid as might have been expected,” though the question of modernization and assimilation at times became a divisive issue.⁸⁸ During the years leading up to the Revolution, the idea of *régénération* became central to the question of Jewish assimilation; the word implied the restoration of something that had become degraded, as well as the creation of a new and “modern” Jewish community. The term *régénération* declined in popularity during the first few decades of the nineteenth century following public discussion of the Jews’ failure to fully assimilate in spite of the freedoms they had been granted by the French government. Gentiles who weighed in on the issue began to talk of *fusion sociale*, a term that presumed that Jews would discard their religious and social customs in favor of more widespread French traditions.⁸⁹ Furthermore, the same political movement that had created the destruction of the aristocracy had also turned Jewish communal life on its head. Jewish communities were forced to yield communal sovereignty in exchange for political recognition and citizenry.⁹⁰ Perhaps the most influential element of *régénération* in nineteenth-century France was the creation of the Consistoire, a state-run assembly of rabbis and laypeople based in Paris, with smaller consistories in each *département* in France that comprised rabbis and members of the community’s wealthiest laity. The aim of the Consistoire was to oversee the *régénération* of the Jewish community, primarily by implementing religious reform, managing socio-economic

⁸⁸ Jay R. Berkovitz, *The Shaping of Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century France*, 12.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

success, supervising vocational training, caring for the needy, and modernizing both religious and secondary education. It was the Consistoire that asked Alkan to select a cantor for the synagogue on Rue Notre Dame de Nazareth in 1844. The position was significant, since part of the duties of the chosen cantor would be to integrate Orthodox and Reform musical traditions. During a period when the Jews were expected to integrate more fully into society, thereby forsaking some of their heritage, the Consistoire expected their denominations to do the same. Alkan and Frommental Halévy chose Samuel Naumbourg, who, with the Consistoire's blessing, would overhaul French synagogue music.⁹¹

After Abbé Grégoire granted Jews complete civil rights in 1791, one newfound privilege was the permission to name Jewish children with French names.⁹² Though he was born Charles Valentin Morhange—a surname derived from the Alsatian village from which the family hailed, a common nomenclature for Jews—Alkan later assumed a Francophone version of his father's first name, Elkanan.⁹³ Even in his youth, Alkan lived in the duality of both Jewish and mainstream French cultures. Though accounts of the Morhange family's affluence vary, it is known that Alkan's father ran a music school for mostly Jewish children that was also recognized as a training ground for the Conservatoire; what is not known is how or where the elder Alkan—or Morhange, as was his name—had received his musical training. In any case, the school did not require Jewish children to compromise any religious practice.⁹⁴ Significantly, Alkan's schoolmate and later rival, Antoine Marmontel, noted that students were taught French

⁹¹ Eliyahu Schleifer, "Jewish Music III: Liturgical and Paraliturgical," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., edited by Stanley Sadie, (London: Macmillan, 2001): 52

⁹² William Alexander Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

⁹³ Charles Valentin Alkan, *The Piano Music of Alkan*, ed. Raymond Lewenthal (New York: Schirmer, 1964), V.

⁹⁴ Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*, 2.

grammar in addition to music, an indication that one of the aims of the school was to prepare Jewish children to assimilate into mainstream French society. Standards within the music program at the school were, however, rigorous enough to attract non-Jewish students looking to gain admittance into the Conservatoire. At the age of six, Alkan was accepted into the Conservatoire; he won first prize in a solfège contest the following year and gave his first public performance at age eleven, not as a pianist, but as a violinist.⁹⁵ Like other talented Jewish musicians (Halévy included), Alkan was given an unbiased opportunity for professional success via the Conservatoire. Here faith was not a hindrance, since students were evaluated and admitted based on their entrance exam performances. The Conservatoire accepted boys and girls in equal numbers, and as the world's first secular musical institution, creed was not taken into consideration.⁹⁶

Following his studies at the Conservatoire, Alkan was professionally and personally acquainted with such names as Chopin, Thalberg, Rubinstein, and Liszt. In spite of his friendship with Liszt, Alkan wrote that he was threatened by Liszt's virtuosity. He told the story of a performance he gave at a salon; Alkan wrote that the satisfaction he felt following his own performance was quickly deflated when another young man took to the piano and made Alkan look like a novice in comparison. Alkan admitted that his frustration moved him to tears; he was so distraught over his newfound competition, in fact, that he was unable to sleep that night.⁹⁷ The reverence that Alkan felt for Liszt's abilities as a pianist was mutual—Liszt later admitted to his own feelings of inadequacy in the presence of Alkan's playing; he even described Alkan's

⁹⁵ Conway, "In the Midst of Many Peoples"—Some Nineteenth Century Jewish Composers and Their Jewishness," 45.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt, Volume I: The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 186-7.

technique as the greatest that he had encountered.⁹⁸ Liszt thought highly enough of Alkan to recommend him in 1836 for a teaching position at the Geneva Conservatory. Alkan was not chosen, but the fact that the greatest piano virtuoso of the century would feel intimidated by—and vouch for—Alkan’s abilities is certainly a testament to the latter’s talent as a pianist, despite the fact that Alkan did not possess the same brand of ostentatious performance style, nor was he Liszt’s equal in name recognition. Alkan was more similar in disposition to Chopin than he was to Liszt, and in fact Chopin was Alkan’s neighbor at the Square d’Orléans for awhile. After Chopin’s death, many of his former students transferred to Alkan, though Alkan had already moved away.⁹⁹ The two pianist-composers shared an aversion to Liszt’s extravagant public persona.¹⁰⁰

In fact, Alkan did not care for much of the music being written during his lifetime, nor did he approve of what were, in his mind, musical gimmicks, including the Liszt-Thalberg duel. He instead favored a more classical approach—he championed the works of Bach and Mendelssohn while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of tonality in his own music. Alkan seemed, in the 1830s, to be destined for the same success as his famous friends, despite his wariness of the self-promotion necessitated by a stage career.¹⁰¹ Léon Kreutzer described Alkan as a misanthrope and categorized him in *Revue et gazette musicale* as the type of artist who “having spent too much time on their work to spend any part of it on publicity and canvassing, become a little disgusted with a public which does not come and seek them out.”¹⁰² Alkan was mentioned in nineteenth-century newspapers with the same regard as names like Chopin,

⁹⁸ Robert Rimm, *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight* (Portland: Amadeus, 2002), 21.

⁹⁹ Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Rimm, *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*, 20-1.

¹⁰¹ Baron, "A Golden Age for Jewish Composers in Paris: 1820-1865," 144.

¹⁰² Ronald Smith, *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1976), 38.

Schumann, and Mendelssohn; he was well-known as a virtuoso before even his twentieth birthday.¹⁰³ All his life, Alkan was dedicated to composing, but he did little to promote his own work—and because he turned down opportunities to perform, the concertgoers of the mid-nineteenth century soon forgot him, despite his virtuosic abilities.¹⁰⁴ According to Ronald Smith, who founded the Alkan Society in 1977, Alkan had “that dangerous compound of authority and humility, conviction and doubt, fervent enthusiasm and basic caution which must on occasions have robbed him of the armoury so vital to those who appear in public.”¹⁰⁵

Isolation

Disappointments in Alkan’s professional life coupled with his introverted personality soon resulted in a withdrawal from public life, both professional and social. After a brilliant concert career in the 1830s, Alkan began to recede from public view off and on. His initial withdrawal came after a concert he had given triggered some negative reviews in response to the avant-garde harmonies found in his compositions. Though Alkan felt that, as an artist, his duty was to push the boundaries of his craft, his performances nonetheless became rarer.¹⁰⁶ A full retreat ensued when, in 1848, he faced a crushing blow in his professional life. Amid the turmoil of revolution in the summer of 1848, Alkan’s piano professor Joseph Zimmerman stepped down from the position as head of the piano department. His favorite student, Alkan, seemed a natural fit for his replacement, thus Alkan was in the running for the post, albeit with three other contenders. One of his challengers was Antoine Marmontel, Alkan’s former schoolmate, who

¹⁰³ Rimm, *The Composer Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma*, 97.

¹⁰⁶ Rimm, *The Composer Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*, 23.

was, in Smith's words, "a mere run-of-the-mill product of the Conservatoire."¹⁰⁷ Although Alkan was by all accounts a far more talented pianist, Marmontel worked his friendship with the head of the Conservatoire, Daniel Auber, to his advantage.

As it became apparent that Alkan was losing ground in his quest for the position, he could not remain silent. Instead, he appealed to friends like George Sand to write letters of recommendation on his behalf to the Director of the Department of Fine Arts, Charles Blanc; in a letter to Sand requesting her help, dated August 23, 1848, he wrote: "I see the 'École' [Conservatoire] threatened by the most unbelievable, the most disgraceful nomination."¹⁰⁸ Alkan did not rely merely on well-connected friends to lobby for his cause; as it became more apparent that he was fighting a losing battle, he embarked on his own letter writing campaign. In a letter he wrote to the Ministère de l'Intérieur, Alkan acknowledged the embarrassment he felt in denouncing Marmontel: "Please understand that I am breaking my silence only as a last resort. . . . My heart bleeds, my face is covered in blushes and shame to use such means, but there has never been such a battle between justice and injustice."¹⁰⁹ Just two days later, on September 3, Alkan wrote to the minister again: "If you sound out the opinion of the public, instead of that of just a small clique, I will be elected. If you collect the voices of all the leading musicians in Europe, I will be elected. If you judge the competition on three aspects—performance, composition, and teaching—I will be elected."¹¹⁰ Despite Alkan's dedicated campaign, he ultimately lost the position to Marmontel. Alkan wrote to Sand a few days later: "The Republic, for which I have a most ardent love, allows strange blunders to be made. . . . I have to give way,

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma*, 45.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

not to a worthy or even unworthy rival, but to one of the most total nonentities I can think of.”¹¹¹ Alkan’s bitterness notwithstanding, Marmontel’s position at the Conservatoire was successful and even led to a Légion d’Honneur. He continued to hold Alkan in high esteem and included Alkan in his book *Les Pianistes Célèbres*. Marmontel’s chapter on Alkan concludes, “Man of study, cultivated mind, tireless worker, Alkan is one of the highest intellects and one of the most universal spirits in the group of distinguished artists at the head of the French school of piano.”¹¹² Ironically, the information that Marmontel provides in *Pianistes Célèbres* was, for decades, the only information available about Alkan.

While other composers fled Paris in 1848 amid political unrest, Alkan created his own self-imposed exile in his home. Following his disappointment at the Conservatoire, he invited several string players to perform with him works by Bach and Mozart, as well as his own original compositions. It could be considered, in hindsight, a sort of farewell recital that he threw for himself before he went into quasi-hiding, as his social appearances soon became few and far between.¹¹³ This last recital is similar to Liszt’s final concert before receiving minor orders. Alkan isolated himself in not one but two townhomes in Paris, one on top of the other. The doorman was instructed to inform visitors that Alkan was not at home, and he was able to hide in the top apartment in order to make the bottom one appear empty. He refused visitors both professional and personal, and though the Conservatoire debacle appears to have been the catalyst for his reclusion, Robert Rimm notes that Alkan withdrew more because of “personal reticence” than out of general contempt for society. He continued to keep up with public affairs;

¹¹¹ Ibid., 45.

¹¹² Antoine Marmontel, *Les Pianistes Célèbres: Silhouettes et Médailles* (Paris: Heugel et Fils, 1878), 134.

¹¹³ Smith, *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma*, 47-8.

in fact, if anything, his interest in the affairs of the outside world became heightened.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, seclusion began to take its toll. Alkan wrote to Ferdinand Hiller: “I’m becoming daily more and more misanthropic and misogynous . . . nothing worthwhile, good or useful to do . . . no one to devote myself to. . . . Even musical production has lost its attraction for me and I can’t see the point or goal.”¹¹⁵ The few visitors Alkan allowed were often his wealthy piano students, such as the Princess Orloff; their continual patronage provided Alkan with the means to support himself, albeit barely, so that he could spend the rest of his time immersed in composition or religious studies.¹¹⁶

In 1851, Alkan was offered a position by the Consistoire to become the music director and organist at the synagogue on Rue Notre Dame de Nazareth, a position that he initially accepted and then declined.¹¹⁷ John Baron speculates that perhaps his hesitation stemmed from apprehension that his creativity would be stifled at the Consistoire: the organ had only been permitted at the synagogue relatively recently, thus possibly prompting synagogue officials to place heavy restrictions on what could and could not be played. Though Naumbourg had been slowly modernizing religious music in Paris throughout the seven years since Alkan had helped to select him as cantor, Alkan’s compositional tastes were still more avant-garde than anything he likely would have been allowed to write for the temple:

Had Alkan taken the position as Naumbourg’s organist, our repertory of great Parisian synagogue music might have been enlarged considerably. Instead, he composed extraordinarily imaginative piano music during the 1850s and 1860s. Yet, this does not necessarily bespeak any lessening of his own ties to his religion and his fellow Jews. Rather, it indicated merely that he did not want to place his

¹¹⁴ Rimm, *The Composer Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*, 17-8.

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma*, 56. Ferdinand Hiller (1811-1885) is the German composer whose setting of Psalm 137 Liszt complained about. See above, page 23.

¹¹⁶ Smith, *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma*, 54.

¹¹⁷ Conway, “‘In the Midst of Many Peoples’—Some Nineteenth Century Jewish Composers and Their Jewishness,” 54.

creativity and his Jewish identity in a confrontation that might have required or led to the diminution of both.¹¹⁸

In the continued spirit of *fusion sociale*, the Consistoire created a committee, presided over by Halévy, whose mission was to combine the Ashkenazic and Sephardic chant traditions for all the synagogues in France. Alkan served on the committee, which met from December 1858 to January 1859, but did not succeed in combining the two musical traditions, at least not permanently. Alkan composed *Super flumina Babylonis* a few months after the committee disbanded.¹¹⁹

Within his self-imposed seclusion, Alkan continued to compose. He was unique among nineteenth-century Jewish composers in that he brought his faith to his craft, though, for the most part, he was not a composer of Jewish music.¹²⁰ His devotion to his faith promulgated a rumor, only fairly recently dispelled, that he was crushed beneath the weight of his bookshelf while reaching for the Talmud.¹²¹ While Naumbourg was infusing sacred music with bits of secular and even Christian styles at the Synagogue de Nazareth, his music was composed exclusively for the synagogue and was therefore entirely sacred. Alkan was still known primarily as a Conservatoire composer who happened to be Jewish, and beyond elements in his otherwise secular works of Jewish melodies, Hebrew lettering, and the like, most of his music was secular. Alkan's œuvre for the piano is, according to Baron,

typical virtuoso piano music of the middle nineteenth century; it is better than most, and it demonstrates several characteristics of his special personality: the comic, the bizarre, the colorful, the classical, and the religious. This last applies

¹¹⁸ Baron, "A Golden Age for Jewish Composers in Paris: 1820-1865," 147.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹²⁰ David Conway, *Jewry in Music: Entry to the Profession from the Enlightenment to Richard Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 222.

¹²¹ Hugh MacDonald, "The Death of Alkan," *The Musical Times* 114, no. 1559 (January 1973): 25, and Hugh MacDonald, "More on Alkan's Death," *The Musical Times* 129, no. 1741 (March 1988): 118-20.

to some works that have no explicit Jewish connotation and even, in a few cases, evoke specifically Christian concepts and sentiments. . . . Usually, however, there is nothing particularly “Jewish” about the music itself.¹²²

Alkan did, however, compose a handful of sacred works before he set Psalm 137. In 1847 he wrote a setting for unaccompanied mixed voices of “Etz chayim hi,” or “Tree of Life,” for Naumbourg’s first volume of cantor music.¹²³ In 1857 he composed a setting of Psalm 120, entitled *Hallelujah*, or *Halelouyoh*, whose text reads: “Praise him with the harp and lyre. . . . let everything that has breath praise the Lord.” Scored for SATB with optional accompaniment by piano or organ, the style is appropriately celebratory, a far cry from the predominantly mourning and vengeful character of Psalm 137.

Alkan spent much of his time in isolation immersed in the study of Jewish literature and the Talmud. He began translating the Hebrew Bible into French, and when he finished that, he started work on the New Testament; he worked steadily, translating two or three verses each day. Scripture study had become such a fascination for him that he admitted that he was more interested in the Bible than he was in music, and that, if he could start his career over again, he would have liked to set the entire Bible to music. In a letter to Hiller, Alkan remarked that, “In starting to translate the New Testament, I was suddenly struck by a singular idea—that you have to be Jewish to be able to do it.”¹²⁴

Super flumina Babylonis

The disappearance of Alkan’s translation of the Bible is among the most frustrating mysteries of his biography. Only one portion remains: his translation of Psalm 137 into French.

¹²² Baron, “A Golden Age for Jewish Composers in Paris: 1820-1865,” 146.

¹²³ Ronald Smith, *Alkan: Volume Two: The Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1987), 211.

¹²⁴ Conway, *Jewry in Music: Entry to the Profession from the Enlightenment to Richard Wagner*, 231. Like Alkan, Hiller was Jewish.

The nine verses appear at the head of *Super flumina Babylonis*, a programmatic work for solo piano that paraphrases the psalm. Unlike *Der 137 Psalm*, Alkan's setting is not a vocal work. Rather than rely on text and instrumentation as Liszt did via soloist, choir, violin, harp, and organ, Alkan's stark solo piano gives voice to the exiled Jews. The loneliness of exile and the refusal of song are reflected in the programmatic nature of the piece and in the solo piano medium: no singing voice is heard.

The work is divided into three sections, the first of which is labeled "quasi-adagio" in G minor. Alkan marked this mournful-sounding section "lamenterole," a fitting instruction for the lament stanza of the psalm. The entire work seems to vacillate between the psalmist's dreamy recollection of Zion and the harsh reality he faces in exile. This instability is reflected in the harmonies of the first section: the minor sonorities give way briefly to G major; *pianissimo* octaves in the right hand are accompanied by harp-like rolled chords in the left (see Example 5, below), evoking the image of the harp.

The image shows a musical score for the first section of *Super flumina Babylonis*. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff for the right hand and a bass clef staff for the left hand. The right hand part is marked *ppp* (pianissimo) and features a melodic line with octaves. The left hand part is marked *Quasi-Adagio* and features a harp-like texture with rolled chords. The score includes dynamic markings such as *Suvvissimo.*, *Molto espressivo = sivo.*, and *Dolcissimo.* The text "Le due Peil:" is written below the left hand staff. The key signature is one flat (G minor).

Example 5, *Super flumina Babylonis*, mm. 19-22.

The last few lines of the first section are labeled "quasi-recitativo," and low-register octaves marked "Recit." are juxtaposed with *dolce* dotted figures marked "*A Tempo*" that finally

give way to a harmonically unstable passage. William Alexander Eddie writes these subtle harmonic changes allude to the captives' remoteness.¹²⁵

The harmonic changes come more rapidly at the start of the *vivacissimo* second section. Dissonant leaps in 12/8 time reflect the urgency of the psalmist's resolve to place himself under a curse should he forget his homeland. The intensity of his curse is mirrored in a crescendo of the hammering right-hand chords and octaves until suddenly the psalmist's frustration gives way to a return of the dreamy second half of the first section. The harp-like thrumming returns, but this time the psalmist's reverie is punctuated with the stutter of frequent rests, as shown below in Example 6:

Movimento precedente.

pp

Le due Ped:

ppp

2 Ped:

Poco cresc:

2 Ped:

Example 6, *Super flumina Babylonis*, mm. 84-87.

The psalmist's thoughts of his homeland are interrupted by the start of the final section, at measure 94. The harmony has returned to G minor but is now interspersed with primitive harmonies.¹²⁶ The fury of the final stanza of the psalm, marked *allegro feroce*, is manifested in the crashing chords and the speed at which they must be played. The psalmist's dreams of Zion are now overcome with the idea of vengeance on the captors who have forced him into slavery; frequently the chords repeat a descending motion, depicting the psalmist's slide into despair. Several of the left-hand chords are rolled to accommodate the span of a tenth, but this is no

¹²⁵ Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*, 113.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

longer the dream-like harp motion of the first and second sections. These rolled chords add to the roiling drama of the final lines, marked *fortissimo possibile* and, at the last five measures, *furiosamente*, until the final three chords mark the sudden finale to the piece. Stark contrasts and remoteness found throughout the piece reach their zenith in the final measure. The three chords, still played *fff*, are separated by three full octaves: the chords in the left hand span G1 to G2; those in the right hand span G5 to G6 (see Example 7, below):

Example 7, *Super flumina Babylonis*, mm. 161-164.

Super flumina Babylonis is sad, angry, vengeful, and wistful, but it also is interspersed with some of the hope that is so predominant in *Der 137 Psalm*. Alkan weaves in the psalmist's reverie of his former life in Jerusalem—and an implied anticipation of an eventual return—but the psalmist's desire for revenge wins out at the fiery conclusion.

Super flumina Babylonis has been received with mostly positive critical feedback. H. H. Bellaman wrote in 1924 that the work “is not exactly in the idiom of the piano. It actually gives more pleasure in a silent reading of the page than in audition . . . and requires the mental addition of contrasting timbres to place its effects in proper relief.”¹²⁷ He goes on to say, however, that “nevertheless, even in the monochrome of the piano it has some solemn and impressive

¹²⁷ H. H. Bellamann, “The Piano Works of C. V. Alkan,” *The Musical Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (April 1924): 260.

moments. A good study in expression.”¹²⁸ In Humphrey Searle’s short article “A Plea for Alkan,” in which he makes the case that Alkan be restored to the eminence he had enjoyed early in his career, Searle mentions Alkan’s “element of *terribilità*” and notes the “icy restraint...which pervades much of Alkan’s work.”¹²⁹ This “icy restraint” is most vividly displayed at the end of the second section of *Super flumina Babylonis*, in which the dreams of Zion are eerily permeated by rests that signify the psalmist’s return—a mental return, for he is still physically in Babylon—to his exile. Praise for *Super flumina Babylonis* becomes more effusive as the reviews become more recent. Ronald Smith, whose two-volume work on Alkan was one of the first definitive sources on the half-forgotten composer, wrote in 1987 that *Super flumina Babylonis* “would make a novel and arresting concert item.”¹³⁰ In *The Composer-Pianists*, Rimm writes of Alkan and Sorabji’s shared interest in mysticism: “Although [Alkan] was an Orthodox Jew, it would appear that the devil was never very far away. . . . His mysticism and asceticism drove him to produce works . . . that he felt induced a tantric state of euphoria by means of mental and physical endurance.”¹³¹ With ever-increasing critical praise, Eddie notes that *Super flumina Babylonis* “yielded up a very beautiful musical setting for solo piano which follows the pictorial imagery of the text most movingly.”¹³² Alkan performed *Super flumina Babylonis* at a concert during the late 1870s, when he made a belated return to the stage. The work was “less melodic, more austere” than many of Alkan’s other works that he had performed

¹²⁸ Ibid., 261.

¹²⁹ Humphrey Searle, “A Plea for Alkan,” *Music and Letters* 18, no. 3 (July 1937): 278.

¹³⁰ Smith, *Alkan: Volume Two: The Music*, 169.

¹³¹ Rimm, *The Composer Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*, 29.

¹³² Eddie, *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*, 113.

as of late.¹³³ To the pianist who wishes to perform *Super flumina Babylonis*, Eddie advises that Alkan's Jewish-based themes

require much intensity and emotion from the performer. . . . Marked “*lagrimoso lament*” or “*lamentevole*” in the case of Alkan's *By the waters of Babylon* op. 52, this tragic sentiment is “inherited from a traditional intonation” as Grabocz notes. For Alkan the spirit of the familiar Old Testament message is powerfully transmitted.¹³⁴

Though Alkan was not a composer of Jewish music, clearly his faith dictated much of his output. The manner in which faith shaped his music is vividly demonstrated in *Super flumina Babylonis*, perhaps more vividly than in any other work in his oeuvre, and nowhere in this piece is this better illustrated than in the third section.

In the third section of the psalm, according to Ahn, Psalm 137 becomes a poem of anguish and vindication:

There is clearly a heightened and more dramatically unrehearsed emotional outburst of pain. Verse 7 begins with imperatives. The compositional style no longer holds the lyrical poetic beauty that was present in the previous sections. It is slightly more terse, and the vocabulary, theme, and images become unilaterally children-based, war-oriented, and connected to specific locales. . . . It is no longer a comparison of past and present but an invective.¹³⁵

Alkan did not avoid these final three lines of the psalm's text. The text of the last stanza gave Alkan a creative opportunity: the psalm's last lines contrast with the rest of the poem; the last section of Alkan's setting correspondingly does the same with the music from earlier in the piece. But there was more to it than just the musical intensity these lines provided by way of a furious ending to *Super flumina Babylonis*: in refusing to omit the psalmist's controversial cry for vengeance, Alkan asserts his faith and his ancestry. He had never shied away from his faith, even during a time in which Jews were still trying to decipher how to assimilate their own

¹³³ Ibid., 191.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 210.

¹³⁵ Ahn, “Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments,” 285.

denominational customs into one another, let alone how to assimilate into French society in general. Alkan spent his days immersed in the Talmud and translating the Bible, and though he was mostly alone, he openly acknowledged his passions via correspondence with the outside world. Given his love for religious text—not to mention his willingness to confront controversy head-on, as evidenced by his letter-writing campaign to lobby for the Consistoire position—for Alkan to have omitted part of a sacred text would have been incongruous and possibly even sacrilegious.

It is also likely that Alkan felt a kinship with the psalmist; he may have wanted to avoid glossing over the pain of the Jews in light of the difficulties he had faced in his own life. Alkan had become a recluse of his own making, but his feelings of isolation may have been amplified by the Jewish people's history of oppression.¹³⁶ He also likely felt that his own seclusion was a sort of exile; for this reason, he could relate to the psalmist, despite the fact that the psalmist was enslaved and Alkan's own exile was self-imposed. His loneliness may have been self-inflicted, but he was lonely nonetheless: "My situation makes me horridly sad and wretched," he wrote to Hiller.¹³⁷ Alkan might have also felt that he had no choice; perhaps to him, his exile did not completely seem a work of his own design. Given that his personality was ill-suited for a flamboyant concert career like that of Liszt, and that he had not found a respectable teaching position following the Conservatoire fiasco, he might have felt that his hands were tied.

Psalm 137 has long been a source of solace for political and religious exiles; it is not surprising, then, that Alkan set it to music.¹³⁸ Psalm 137 likely was both a source of consolation for him as well as a reflection of the frustration he felt in his professional life, a frustration that

¹³⁶ Rimm, *The Composer Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*, 29.

¹³⁷ Smith, *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma*, 56.

¹³⁸ Hamlin, "Psalm Culture in the English Renaissance: Readings of Psalm 137 by Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, and Others," 224.

bled over into his personal life by compelling him to hide from the outside world. Hamlin points out that “the psalmist’s anxiety about the loss of memory is at the heart of Psalm 137, and the source of this danger is the forced exile of the psalmist and his people from their true home, which is another focus of interest for those translating, paraphrasing, or alluding to this psalm.”¹³⁹ Not only did Alkan likely feel a connection to this psalmist with regards to the alienation he felt in his own life, but he also must have felt a musical kinship to the psalmist, for the psalmist was himself a musician. Moreover, as Ahn has pointed out, he was, specifically, a temple musician. In fact, the songs of Zion that have fallen silent in captivity once permeated the temple in Jerusalem, thus the songs of Zion that the captives are asked to sing were part of sacred worship.¹⁴⁰ This is interesting in light of the Synagogue de Nazareth position that Alkan turned down in 1851. Had he become the synagogue music director and organist, perhaps he would have felt an even stronger affiliation with the psalmist. It seems more likely, though, that Alkan felt he was furthering the evolution of Jewish music via the career he had chosen. As Baron conjectures, Alkan might have shied away from the synagogue because his creativity might have been stymied in a sacred environment.¹⁴¹ His isolation granted him the freedom to compose what he wanted: mostly secular music with occasional Jewish overtones that pushed the boundaries of tonality. Alkan perhaps felt he was inheriting more than just the legacy of the music itself; according to Conrad, the meaning of the text in several of Alkan’s works confirms “the importance of the Jews as carrier’s of God’s message to other nations. . . . Alkan saw his

¹³⁹ Ibid., 244.

¹⁴⁰ Ahn, “Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments,” 280-2.

¹⁴¹ Baron, “A Golden Age for Jewish Composers in Paris: 1820-1865,” 147.

music as contributing to that task.”¹⁴² He might have felt a duty to spread the message of religious songs, just as his ancestors had.

Although it appears that Alkan might have felt a kinship with the Jews of ancient times, he avoided the synagogue in more than just occasions of working as music director or organist. Upon learning that his old acquaintance Liszt had taken holy orders in 1865, Alkan wrote to Hungarian composer and pianist Stephen Heller, “What do you think of the new development of our old friend Liszt? For me, if I ever became a rabbi, I would not accept a high position in the synagogue, but I would take the frock in a disinterested fashion; for if Paris is worth a mass, perhaps a high rank at St. Peter’s is worth a cassock.”¹⁴³ Alkan’s rather skeptical remark includes a witty reference to Henri IV, whose conversion to Catholicism in 1593 prompted him to purportedly say “*Paris vaut bien une messe*” (“Paris is well worth a mass”). Alkan’s observation appears to be just another criticism of Liszt’s decision to take minor orders, or perhaps Alkan was bitter toward Liszt, whether out of jealousy or out of frustration in his own career. After all, during Liszt’s days as a traveling virtuoso, there is no record that he ever played any of Alkan’s works.¹⁴⁴ This is notable, since Liszt was one of the few pianists with the ability to deftly perform Alkan’s compositions.

But Alkan’s statement seems to be more indicative of his own faith: he reveals his tendency to avoid at least some of the aspects of organized religion. He demonstrated on more than one occasion that he had no desire to become an official member of the synagogue. Though he was devout in his study of Jewish texts, in his composition of Jewish-infused music, and in

¹⁴² Conway, “‘In the Midst of Many Peoples’—Some Nineteenth Century Jewish Composers and Their Jewishness,” 54.

¹⁴³ Baron, “A Golden Age for Jewish Composers in Paris: 1820-1865,” 146; translation is my own.

¹⁴⁴ Smith, *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma*, 24.

his willingness to serve on the occasional committee on behalf of the Consistoire, Alkan was principally a solitary actor, and he avoided most social situations, even religious ones. Alkan's letter to Heller might also be illustrative of a general dissatisfaction he felt about the changes being made to synagogue music. Perhaps he agreed with many of the changes Jews had experienced in France over the past seventy years, including newfound freedoms for and recognition of French Jews. It seems possible, though, that he might have felt some of the change had veered in the wrong direction: the attempt at merging the Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions, for example, or the evolution that synagogue music was undergoing.

“A Plea for Alkan”

Humphrey Searle's "A Plea for Alkan" is an appeal to restore Alkan to the status he knew early in his career: a brilliant virtuoso who was equally blessed with the gift of composing imaginative works mostly for the piano. The title of Searle's article could, however, be the tagline of virtually every other Alkan source found in a modern library. Alkan's name seems forever linked to that of Liszt, though the same cannot be said of the converse. As Searle points out, "[Alkan's] career lacks even the sensational details which keep alive the names of Liszt and Paganini for those whose acquaintance with their works is merely superficial; it is, in fact, shrouded in complete obscurity."¹⁴⁵ He concludes: "As a past-master of piano-writing Alkan deserves consideration and respect, and it is to be hoped that enterprising pianists will not miss an opportunity of exploring what is unfortunately still virgin soil."¹⁴⁶

Searle was not the first to champion Alkan's works, nor was he by any means the last. Ferruccio Busoni included Alkan in his program when he toured Berlin at the end of the

¹⁴⁵ Searle, "A Plea for Alkan," 276.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.

nineteenth century, though he was well aware of how unpopular an unknown French composer would be among German audiences. Sure enough, the works were dismissed as “preposterous French rubbish.”¹⁴⁷ Busoni was undeterred. He described Alkan’s études as “the most significant after Chopin and Liszt”; indeed, he in turn said of Liszt’s music, “These . . . pieces alone would place Liszt in the rank of the greatest pianoforte composers since Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann, Alkan, Brahms.”¹⁴⁸ Ronald Smith echoes Busoni’s praise, but offers a possible explanation for his lack of name recognition:

At thirty-five he had witnessed the triumphs on the one hand and the adulations on the other of his friends Liszt and Chopin. Their names were already written in musical history. Although no less prodigiously gifted as a performer, accomplished as a composer or ambitious as a teacher his whole style must have lacked either the sheer autocratic showmanship of a Liszt and a Paganini or the elusive magic of a Field and a Chopin. Neither could his bluntly honest attitude to his profession have commended him to the smooth expediency of the corridors of power.¹⁴⁹

The comparisons of Alkan’s reticent, reclusive character to Liszt’s flamboyant stage persona are endless. Rimm notes that:

Liszt’s fame rests not only with his compositions, which embraced genres beyond piano music, but also upon his reputation as one of history’s greatest pianists. Had Alkan also been a flamboyant lover, bon vivant, and headline seeker, his reputation as both a composer and a virtuoso would be far greater than it is today.¹⁵⁰

The question remains—why is Alkan so underappreciated well over a century after his death? There is no single answer, but Alkan’s faith appears to play a significant role. By clinging resolutely to his faith, he resisted the stardom that more assimilated French-Jewish composers of the nineteenth century, like Halévy and Meyerbeer, enjoyed. At the same time, he

¹⁴⁷ Rimm, *The Composer Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*, 31.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma*, 47.

¹⁵⁰ Rimm, *The Composer Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*, 19.

was unwilling to take an official role in the world of sacred music as did Naumbourg. Jewish writer and philosopher Ludwig Boerne wrote in 1830, “Some people criticize me for being a Jew: others forgive me for being one: a third even praises me for it; but all are thinking about it.”¹⁵¹ Faith and identity were issues that every Jewish artist had to deal with, whether he rejected or embraced them. Certainly Alkan’s introverted personality played a role as well, but more and more musicians are beginning to promote the works of a man who rejected self-promotion. Only in relatively recent years has Alkan’s music been recognized for the originality and innovation that his peers understood during his lifetime, the composer’s personal struggles notwithstanding.

¹⁵¹ Conway, “‘In the Midst of Many Peoples’—Some Nineteenth Century Jewish Composers and Their Jewishness,” 57.

CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

Liszt and Alkan were not, as I have mentioned, the first composers to be drawn to Psalm 137, nor has the psalm only lured composers—Hannibal Hamlin notes that many Renaissance poets, for example, were influenced by Psalm 137.¹⁵² Perhaps it is the psalm’s dark mood that held so much appeal for Liszt and Alkan: the transformation from anguish and refusal in the first stanza to a self-curse in the second stanza to, finally, a plea for vengeance in the third and oft-omitted stanza creates a poem that, though short in length, is thick with possibility. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Reflections on the Psalms* that “in some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth.”¹⁵³

Liszt ostensibly did not battle as many demons as Alkan, though perhaps the psalm appealed to the side of him that had called for revolution within the Church. He was also faithful to her to the end of his life, however; the fact that he stopped short of setting the third stanza to music can be considered emblematic of his relationship to the conservative-liberal debate going on in Rome during his lifetime. Alkan, meanwhile, may have identified more strongly with the concept of struggle, given the personal and professional battles he had fought. Characteristically, he did not shy away from the final stanza. Perhaps Alkan felt a responsibility to serve the text accurately because he was Jewish; he was, in a sense, continuing the ancient Jewish musician’s

¹⁵² Hannibal Hamlin, “Psalm Culture in the English Renaissance: Readings of Psalm 137 by Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, and Others,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 224.

¹⁵³ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 20.

legacy. By all accounts, Alkan certainly wanted to assert his Jewishness, if not always publicly or socially, then at least through his music. In the midst of a changing landscape for Judaism in nineteenth-century Paris, *Super flumina Babylonis* was a link to his ancestors that was, at the same time, written in a style that was more modern than anything he would have been permitted to write had he taken a position at a synagogue.

The bleak tone of Psalm 137 is not the only element that provided Liszt and Alkan with an opportunity for creativity in their respective settings. The imagery depicted in the text had attracted composers long before Liszt and Alkan were creating their own renditions. Composers and writers during the Renaissance, whose preoccupation with setting the book of Psalms outpaced that of the nineteenth century, had already likened the waters to a river of tears and illustrated the concepts of slavery, exile, and even violence toward children.¹⁵⁴ In particular, the theme of music within Psalm 137 is possibly the most compelling aspect for composers. The psalmist mentions the harps of the enslaved and the songs of Zion that once represented joy. Besides the imagery of Psalm 137, however, perhaps composers like Liszt and Alkan felt a kinship with this psalmist-musician that they did not feel when they read the other psalms. For the psalmist, music was how he expressed his faith; the sudden exile to Babylon brought about, among countless other changes in his life, the loss of his career, possibly, and of a means of articulating his belief in God.

Each composer spoke for the tradition of his faith: Liszt set Psalm 137 from the perspective of a Catholic, while Alkan continued the tradition of the Jewish musician-psalmist. Whereas Liszt, the Catholic, was inspired by Eduard Bendemann's painting, Alkan, who shared Bendemann's Jewish heritage, approached the Psalm very differently. Both Alkan and

¹⁵⁴ Hannibal Hamlin, "Psalm Culture in the English Renaissance: Readings of Psalm 137 by Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, and Others," 226-54.

Bendemann had to reconcile their Jewish upbringings with their secular careers as artists, but they took very different paths in pursuing their respective goals. Bendemann converted to Christianity in 1832, a year after he painted *Die Trauernde Juden im Exil*.¹⁵⁵ Schmidt writes that “spiritually Bendemann remained lodged in the Jewish tradition—but . . . in an elegiac, frozen, backward-looking stance that is well visible in his art.”¹⁵⁶ While perhaps true of Bendemann, who converted to Christianity, this description certainly does not apply to Alkan. For the former, the Jewish religion belonged to his past; for Alkan it always remained an essential part of who he was. The stance that is audible in *Super flumina Babylonis* reflects Alkan's total and direct engagement with the Hebrew Bible.

On the surface then, it might seem that Alkan's decision to use the text of *Super flumina Babylonis* as a program, rather than set it vocally, is contradictory: how can a psalm be accurately set if the words are not part of the music itself? But it is precisely for this reason that Alkan was able to represent every line of the psalm so faithfully. His decision to include his own translation of the Psalm in the printed score announces his determination to set the psalm in its entirety. Liszt, like many other composers who have set Psalm 137, chose to omit its final three lines rather than set the “seemingly outrageous curse” with which it ends.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, Psalm 137 is a psalm that deals with the *refusal* to make music. Regardless of whether the text is sung or represented programmatically, setting this psalm, which is about the very impossibility of music, is paradoxical. In doing so, however, Liszt and Alkan gave voice to a musician who had been silenced and gave themselves a voice in the process.

¹⁵⁵ Gilya Gerda Schmidt, *The Art and Artists of the Fifth Zionist Congress, 1901: Heralds of a New Age*, 35.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵⁷ John L. Bell, *Psalms of Patience, Protest and Praise*, 53. For the full quote in context, see above, page 20-1.

Mahler famously wrote that he was “thrice homeless . . . as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans and as a Jew in all the world. Everywhere an intruder, never welcomed.”¹⁵⁸ In the same sense, both Liszt and Alkan could be considered twice homeless, or—phrased in terms of the psalm—twice exiled. In straddling the line between a secular life of celebrity and a consecrated life of sacred study, neither composer completely fit in anywhere. Both were subjected to skepticism and misunderstanding from the outside world. Through *Der 137 Psalm* and *Super flumina Babylonis*, both consummate Romantic works, Liszt and Alkan could each view the exile of the psalmist as a reflection of his own personal struggle.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Franklin, *The Life of Mahler* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 82.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahn, John. "Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 267-89.
- Alkan, Charles Valentin. *The Piano Music of Alkan*, edited by Raymond Lewenthal. New York: Schirmer, 1964.
- Bacuez, Rev. Louis. *Minor Orders*. St. Louis: B. Herder, 1912.
- Bangert, Mark P. "Franz Liszt's Essay on Church Music (1834) in the Light of Félicité Lamennais's System of Religious and Political Thought." In *A Tribute to Donald N. Ferguson at His Ninetieth Birthday*, edited by Johannes Riedel, 182-219. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1972.
- Baron, John H. "A Golden Age for Jewish Composers in Paris: 1820-1865." *Musica Judaica* 14 (January 1999): 30-51.
- Bell, John L. *Psalms of Patience, Protest and Praise*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 1993.
- Bellamann, H. H. "The Piano Works of C. V. Alkan." *The Musical Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (April 1924): 251-62.
- Berkovitz, Jay R. *The Shaping of Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century France*. Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1989.
- Berlin, Adele. "Psalms and the Literature of Exile: Psalms 137, 44, 69, and 78." In *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, edited by Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr, 65-86. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Cohon, Baruch Joseph. "The Structure of the Synagogue Prayer-Chant." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1950): 17-32.
- Conway, David. "'In the Midst of Many Peoples'—Some Nineteenth Century Jewish Composers and Their Jewishness." *European Judaism* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 36-59.
- . *Jewry in Music: Entry to the Profession from the Enlightenment to Richard Wagner*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Donovan, Jeremiah, trans. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*. Dublin: Richard Coyne, 1829.

- Eddie, William Alexander. *Charles Valentin Alkan: His Life and His Music*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.
- Franklin, Peter. *The Life of Mahler*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Göllerich, August. *Franz Liszt*. Berlin: Marquardt, 1908.
- Hamburger, Klára. "Hungarian Idiom in Liszt's Sacred Works." In *New Light on Liszt and His Music: Essays in Honor of Alan Walker's 65th Birthday*, edited by Michael Saffle and James Deaville, 239-51. Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1997.
- Hamlin, Hannibal. "Psalm Culture in the English Renaissance: Readings of Psalm 137 by Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, and Others." *Renaissance Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 224-57.
- Hollander, John. *The Work of Poetry*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997.
- "Holy Orders." *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 7. Detroit: Thomson/Gale, 2003.
- Kaplan, Zvi Jonathan. *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea? French Jewry and the Problem of Church and State*. Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2009.
- Kohler, Thomas C. "Modern Man." *America* 201, no. 4 (August 2009): 22-25.
- Lewis, C.S. *Reflections on the Psalms*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958.
- Liszt, Franz. Der 137 Psalm. In *Six Psalms*. Westmead: Gregg International Publishers, 1972.
- MacDonald, Hugh. "The Death of Alkan." *The Musical Times* 114, no. 1559 (January 1973): 25.
- . "More on Alkan's Death." *The Musical Times* 129, no. 1741 (March 1988): 118-20.
- Marmontel, Antoine. *Les Pianistes Célèbres: Silhouettes et Médailles*. Paris: Heugel et Fils, 1878.
- Merrick, Paul. *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Pesce, Dolores. "Liszt's Sacred Choral Music." In *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, edited by Kenneth Hamilton, 223-48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Plank, Karl. "By the Waters of a Death Camp: An Intertextual Reading of Psalm 137." *Literature and Theology* 22, no. 2 (June 2008): 180-94.

- Rimm, Robert. *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*. Portland: Amadeus, 2002.
- Rubin, Emanuel, and John H. Baron. *Music in Jewish History and Culture*. Sterling Heights: Harmonie Park Press, 2006.
- Saffle, Michael. "Sacred Choral Works." In *The Liszt Companion*, edited by Ben Arnold, 335-63. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Schleifer, Eliyahu. "Jewish Liturgical Music in the Wake of Nineteenth-Century Reform." In *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience*, edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman and Janet R. Walton, 59-83. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.
- . "Jewish Music III: Liturgical and Paraliturgical." In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., edited by Stanley Sadie, 13:51-79. London: Macmillan, 2001.
- Schmidt, Gilya Gerda. *The Art and Artists of the Fifth Zionist Congress, 1901: Heralds of a New Age*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003.
- Searle, Humphrey. *The Music of Liszt*. New York: Dover, 1966.
- . "A Plea for Alkan." *Music and Letters* 18, no. 3 (July 1973): 276-9.
- Smith, Ronald. *Alkan: Volume One: The Enigma*. London: Kahn & Averill, 1976.
- . *Alkan: Volume Two: The Music*. London: Kahn & Averill, 1987.
- Steinfels, Peter. "The Failed Encounter." In *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, edited by R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach, 19-44. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Walker, Alan. *Franz Liszt, Volume I: The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.
- . *Franz Liszt, Volume III: The Final Years, 1861-1886*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- . *Reflections on Liszt*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.