

Amy Fay's Reunions with Franz Liszt: 1875, 1876, 1885

By MARGARET W. McCARTHY

The enduring popularity of Amy Fay's *Music Study in Germany*¹ derives in great measure from its colorful and engaging glimpses of Liszt. Although Fay studied with Liszt only briefly during 1873, her gifted pen captured her experiences with the Master. Consequently, her book has remained one of the most durable of musical memoirs. Shortly after its publication in Chicago in 1881, Liszt himself recommended that *Music Study* be translated into German.² *Music Study* is comprised of the letters Fay sent "home" during her student years in Germany (1869-1875), where she studied with Carl Tausig, Franz Kullak, and Franz Liszt. Fay herself never ceased to be surprised by the popularity her book enjoyed.³ On 18 September 1912, she wrote a letter to her sister Zina⁴ remarking that "I would never have known I had a talent for letter writing if you had not the discrimination to discover the fact . . . without you the letters would have gone into the wastebasket and nobody would ever have heard of Amy Fay."⁵

The renown of *Music Study*, especially the Liszt sections, has deflected attention from subsequent meetings Fay had with her famed teacher and friend. Yet, in the course of her association with Liszt, Fay developed a personal and lasting relationship with the Master.⁶ She managed to meet with Liszt on several occasions following 1873. During her final visit in 1885, it became clear how much Liszt enjoyed and valued the company of his illustrious student.

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The first of the Fay-Liszt reunions occurred in August 1875, just before the completion of Fay's six-year German sojourn. Enroute home, she returned to Weimar to say

¹ Cf., *Music Study in Germany, from the Home Correspondence of Amy Fay*, ed. Mrs. Fay Peirce (New York: Macmillan, 1913; and earlier editions). Hereafter generally referred to as *Music Study*.

² See Madeline Smith, *Aunt Amy*. Fay Collection. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

³ During her lifetime *Music Study* appeared in over twenty editions, including translations into German and French.

⁴ Melusina Fay Peirce (1836-1923), a nineteenth century feminist and writer, and the first wife of the eminent philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who divorced her in 1883. Zina became "Sister Amy's" surrogate mother after their real mother's death in 1856; she also edited the letters for Fay's book.

⁵ Quoted in Margaret W. McCarthy's *More Letters of Amy Fay: the American Years, 1879-1916* (Detroit: Information Coordinators [now Harmonie Press], 1986), p. 131.

⁶ See a designation given Fay by the composer Vincent d'Indy in his Preface to the French edition of *Music Study*—i.e., *Lettres intimes d'une musicienne americaine* (Paris 1907), p. 14.

good-bye to her teacher in the company of her sister. No actual descriptions of the visit have surfaced, no doubt because the one person to whom Amy would have written about the trip was an eye-witness. But Peirce family letters and papers corroborate that the visit with Liszt took place. Zina had accompanied her husband, Charles Sanders Peirce, during his travels in Europe in conjunction with his work with the United States Coast Survey.⁷ Upon their arrival in Berlin, Zina immediately left Charles to accompany her younger sister to Weimar. Fay's excitement at having her older sister join her in her farewell visit to Liszt was tempered when Zina fell victim to influenza and nervous exhaustion. At the end of the visit Zina accompanied her sister home, instead of returning with her husband.⁸

Back in Cambridge, Fay set about establishing herself as a performer, making her debut there on 19 January 1876. There was great interest on the part of the hometown audience in hearing the young woman whose Weimar letters about Liszt had first appeared in 1874 in the *Atlantic Monthly*. John Sullivan Dwight, Boston's most important music critic, attended Fay's concert and praised her brilliant technique and energetic touch.⁹ The illustrious critic also attended Fay's April concert at Mechanics Hall in Boston and commended her "sure, free hand," stating that "this lady, in whom Liszt had taken so much interest," would "take a high place among our pianists."¹⁰

Armed with such good reviews, Amy returned to Weimar in the summer of 1876 for a reunion with Liszt. Again she was joined by her sister, who had also travelled abroad that summer to gather material about cooperative housekeeping¹¹ and, ultimately, to rejoin husband Charles,¹² with whom she sailed to the United States in August 1876.

Using the pseudonym "ZERO,"¹³ Zina described her travels in five articles published in the Boston *Daily Advertiser*. The articles describing the musical hours with Liszt in Weimar appeared in the *Advertiser* issues of 28 April, 3 June, and 20 July. It is interesting to glimpse Fay's reunion experiences through the eyes of Zina, who had been the

⁷ Sylvia Wright Mitarachi, *Melusina Fay Peirce: Partial Curriculum Vitae*. Peirce Papers. Institute for Studies in Pragmaticism, Texas Tech University. The chief purpose of Charles Peirce's trip was to obtain in Hamburg a reversible pendulum apparatus suitable for absolute determinations of gravity and to make such determinations at so-called "initial stations" in Europe: Berlin, Geneva, and Kew.

⁸ Norma P. Atkinson, *An Examination of the life and Thought of Zina Fay Peirce, an American Reformer and Feminist* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1987), p. 140.

⁹ Cf., *Dwight's Journal of Music* (8 January 1876), p. 159.

¹⁰ *Dwight's Journal of Music* (15 April 1876), p. 214.

¹¹ In 1884 Zina's book *Co-operative Housekeeping: How Not To Do It and How To Do It* was published in Boston by James R. Osgood and Company.

¹² Peirce was still abroad in conjunction with his second European tour of duty (1875-1876) for the United States Coast Survey.

¹³ Previous allusions to the pseudonym have inaccurately identified "ZERO" as Fay. But Fay's grand-niece Sylvia Wright Mitarachi has identified "ZERO" as Zina. In 1876 Zina wrote a political tract entitled *The Democratic Party by a 'Political Zero'*. This use of the pseudonym, evidence contained in six *Boston Advertiser* articles, and the research of Mitarachi convince this writer that "ZERO" was Zina.

recipient of the major portion of Fay's German letters from her student days. In the travel notes Zina refers to herself as "the companion of a former [Liszt] pupil" and identifies her sister as "her friend."

Together the sisters attended three Sunday matinees in Weimar, at which Liszt gave no instruction. Only such artists played as he invited to do so. As "ZERO," or Zina, put it:

At the first [matinée], when we entered, music was already going on. The "Meister," as he is always called, was seated at the piano playing the bass of a four-handed composition of Weitzmann's, of which some young man was playing the treble, and most of the class was serried so closely round the instrument that we could not see him. So, fearful of making an interruption, we slipped into the nearest chairs and waved. It has been said that no one can enter Liszt's salon without being affected by it, and that the assertion has some truth in it I can testify in my own case . . . As the piece concluded we rose, the circle opened, and Liszt saw and greeted us. His figure is a little bent, and he begins to show his sixty-five or more years, but there was never a more noble and wonderful head, or a more singular, tragic, and changing face, or rather mask, than his.¹⁴

To be in the presence "of such palpitating musical company" excited Zina. Of Liszt she wrote:

Liszt rarely plays now, not even to this high-strung and appreciative audience. The whole range of accepted music is such a worn-out emotion to him, that his only pleasure seems to be in reading over new compositions, for four hands, of which he takes one part, or for two instruments. As the discoverer of current literature glances at every book and magazine that comes in his way, so does Liszt skim through the reams of new music that are sent to him, in the hope of coming across a gleam of original talent—of something new—in short of a musical "sensation." Never was there a man who so gives one the impression of vitality and commanding energy which has not found an adequate scope. Like a caged lion he walks up and down restlessly among his pupils, all of whose "eyes wait upon him," and makes here a little jest, there a trivial remark, yonder a sly sarcasm, until we wonder how much of real earnestness there is behind that face with the Voltarian smile, which is at such variance with its powerful, tragic features and square, iron jaw.

Amy and Zina observed closely the interplay between Liszt and his students. Zina wrote how

Liszt always looks at his listeners himself, and that is one of the things he makes his pupils do. 'Throw me a look' he will say, as he sees their eye-lids drop too fixedly over the keys. It is not such an easy thing to learn, they say, and requires just a little more 'cheek' than most of them first possess.

¹⁴ Boston *Daily Advertiser* (28 April 1876), p. 2. The quotations that follow were also taken from this article.



Amy Fay (upper left) and her sister, Melusina Fay Peirce

facility & readiness without having
to practice. All the artists, of
which there were a good many in
the room, stood round the Piano
while Liszt played, & there was
a general shout when he finished.
"Je ne joue plus de Piano, moi,"
he said to me negligently. After
that no one ventured to play a
solo on the Piano, but there
was singing, & Larenbaki &
M. Tubay, violin professor at the
conservatory of Brussels played
some of Larenbaki's compositions
for violin & Piano. Tubay or Tubi,
(I do not know his name exactly)

Toward the end of that first matinée, Liszt apparently became annoyed by something or someone. He passed by the chairs of Fay and Zina and muttered, alluding either to them or to other late-comers: "They come in here as if to a hotel, and do not even salute me." This "cut" Amy, who jumped up, rushed after him, seized his hand and said: "Why, Herr Doctor, it was only because we were afraid of interrupting you that we waited until the music was over. We were afraid of interrupting you." Liszt quieted down after that remark, patted Fay's shoulder, smiled, and said in German "All right! All right." But the exchange upset the sensitive Fay, causing her to cry quietly for the next half-hour. "She could not bear it that on this first day Liszt should ever seem to misunderstand her." According to Zina, "the incident was Liszt all over . . . if anything puts him out, he must find a victim immediately, guilty or innocent. When he has drawn blood, he is appeased."

Fay was upset with herself, knowing how Liszt hated tears and loved "smiles and jollity." At the conclusion of the matinée Liszt played what Zina considered a dull piece in tandem with the leading flute player from the local Weimar orchestra. The performer kept breaking down, but

Liszt with a smile and an "Oaf" would cover it with one of his marvelous cadenzas. "No one will ever equal Liszt with his rolling basses and his flowery trebles," said my friend afterward of him with a sigh.

At least two other matinées during the summer of 1876 provided Fay and her sister with opportunities to see Liszt. One was hosted by the American musician S. G. Pratt, the other given by Liszt himself.¹⁵ Although she admired Liszt, Zina noted that, despite his greatness, he was "that most tragic of spectacles—a great nature which had not found or been able to make for itself, an adequate career." She felt that the very wealth of his gifts prevented "that concentration of the energies which is the price of all sublime achievement." Yet Zina admitted that Liszt was truly "a phenomenal being, whose like will probably never appear again."

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Nine years passed before Fay's next meeting with Liszt in the summer of 1885. By then, Fay had moved to Chicago,¹⁶ where she set about immediately to make her way in her profession as a performer, writer, clubwoman, and teacher.¹⁷

Fay's initial performances in her newly adopted city elicited lukewarm replies from Chicago critics. The *Chicago Tribune* reviewer (probably George P. Upton) lamented that Fay lacked "the requisite repose and concentration of a virtuoso."¹⁸ Frederic Grant Gleason, another eminent critic, remarked in his diary that Fay had "make quantities

¹⁵ *Boston Daily Advertiser* (20 July 1876), p. 2. The quotations below were also taken from this article.

¹⁶ Amy and her sisters Zina, Rose, and Lily established residence at 43 Bellevue Street at the home of their brother Norman, future founder of the Chicago Symphony and then General Manager of the Bell Telephone Company of Illinois.

¹⁷ One of Fay's Chicago students was the composer John Alden Carpenter.

¹⁸ *Chicago Tribune* (18 May 1879), p. 11.

of blunders all the way through"¹⁹ a performance of the Mendelssohn Fantasia in f-sharp minor, although a few months later he was happy to observe that her "terrible pound"²⁰ did not seem to show so much on the Steinway as it had on the Weber piano, upon which she had played earlier.

As a performer Fay peaked in 1882, with the inauguration of "Piano Conversations," recitals in which she said a few words before performing each piece. The Chicago press corps turned out in large numbers for these novel concerts; the *Chicago Tribune*, *Herald*, *Evening Journal*, *Inter-Ocean*, *Times* and *Indicator* were among the publications represented. Each paper praised the concept and the contents of Fay's concerts, which no doubt led to the Amusement Bureau's Company's decision to become her "authorized agents," as announced in a flyer to that effect released just after the 1883 series.²¹

Meanwhile *Music Study* had been completed, and Fay had written to Liszt in 1880 to alert him of its imminent publication:

At Christmas I hope to have a book published. It is entitled *Music Study in Germany* and has been compiled by my sister, Mrs. Peirce from my letters. Since she is clever with a pen, she has put the letters together very skillfully. Mr. Longfellow was very interested in them and did me the great honor of going through the book himself and recommending it to his own publisher. In this book I have written very much about you, Master, and if it is finally published I will do myself the honor of sending you a copy. I believe that I have the correct concept of you. I have so often thought that I would like to write your biography! And then I would have to hear everything from your own lips!²²

Liszt obviously was interested in Fay's literary efforts. In 1882, the year following its publication, Liszt recommended that it be translated into German, a suggestion taken up by the publisher Robert Oppenheimer, who provided the Preface for the first German edition. Meanwhile, Fay had gained international recognition for her book. She continued as a musical activist in Chicago, all the while nurturing her ambition to get back to see Liszt again. Her wish came true in 1885, during another of her European vacation interludes.

¹⁹ Diary entry for 20 February 1880. Frederic Grant Gleason Collection. Newberry Library, Chicago.

²⁰ Diary entry for 22 May 1880. Frederic Grant Gleason Collection. Newberry Library, Chicago.

²¹ The idea of a lecture recital apparently first occurred to Fay's uncle Jerome Hopkins. In a diary entry dated 3 July 1866, he wrote that "today the idea occurred to me to write a musical lecture illustrated by my piano performances and to deliver it all over the country." (Diary of Jerome Hopkins. Houghton Library, Harvard University). Other pianists soon adopted Fay's format—including William Sherwood in 1884, Edward Perry in 1887, and John Orth in 1912.

²² "La Mara" [pseud. Marie Lipsius], *Briefe hervorragender Zeitgenossen an Franz Liszt* (Leipzig 1904), p. 373. I am grateful to my colleague Althea Wolpkopf for her assistance with the translation.

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Fay's 1885 travel itinerary included several stops on the continent and a visit to London. In June she stayed for an extended period in Brussels and was delighted to be in the city that Liszt so admired:

They are awfully knowing here in Brussels on art! I don't wonder Materna was so proud of her success here. Liszt said once that the order he had received from King Leopold was one of the few he cared about as it was one which is rarely conferred.²³

During her visit to Europe Fay attended the Liszt musical celebrations held in Antwerp in conjunction with the 1885 Universal Exhibition. Following the 7 June concert directed by Servais,²⁴ Fay joined several of Liszt's friend's gathered for revelry and music making with the Master:

All the artists, of which there were a good many in the room, stood round the piano while Liszt played, and then there was a general "shout" when he finished. 'Je ne joue plus du piano,' moi, he said to me negligently. After that no one ventured to play a solo on the piano, but there was singing, and Zarembski and M. Hubay, violin professor at the university of Brussels played some of Zarembski's composition for violin and piano. Hubay . . . is a most exquisite artist, and he plays with the greatest finish and expression. Zarembski's compositions were charming — poetic — but not especially original. I was rather sorry I did not get a chance to play myself as it was such a distinguished company. The next day there was to be a celebration of a mass by Liszt at the Church of St. Joseph at ten in the morning. He wanted me to stay for it, though I was in a hurry to get back to Brussels because I was expecting to give this Recital at the Fishes this week, which fell through, as I said, owing to several complications. He made such a point of it, however, that I said I would stay. He said jokingly "et puis qu'il faut être très précis avec vous, je vous attendrai à la grande porte de l'église en sortant." I stayed over, of course, and on going out I tried to get near him, but there was such a crowd that the people fairly fought to get a look at him. He was hurried into a carriage by Mahlig and her husband and wheeled off to luncheon, and I saw him no more. I think he probably and intended to take me with him.²⁵

While in Brussels, Fay mused about the possibility of going to Weimar:

I like living as I am at present, and have two funny little rooms connected by a big doorway but very artistic, and exquisitely kept, though cheaply fitted up. I am in perfect solitude all the time except when Gurickx comes to see me, and read and write and practice . . . If I go to Weimar I need a light silk suit and bonnet, because I [might] be invited to the Grand Duke's, and if I were I should have to go.²⁶

²³ Unpublished fragmentary letter of Amy Fay. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

²⁴ See Ernst Burger, *Franz Liszt: Ein Lebenschronik in Bildern und Dokumenten* (Munich: Paul List, 1986), p. 304. I am grateful to my friend Christa Petrak of the Goethe- und Schiller-Archiv, Weimar, for alerting me to this documentation of Liszt's 7 June appearance at Antwerp."

²⁵ Unpublished fragment of a second letter of Amy Fay. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

²⁶ Unpublished fragment of a third letter of Amy Fay. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

Fay did get to Weimar, but not before stopping over in London, where she made an unannounced call on Sir George Grove, at the time a Professor at the Royal College of Music. He was not at home at the time, but wrote Fay a note inviting her to come the following Monday:

I take it very kind of you to have called on me and am dreadfully sorry to have been out. Would be delighted to see you, and hope you can come on Monday next [day] [at] [twelve] and pay me another visit. Would like you to hear a lesson or two. It is very bad manners of me not to go to you, but my college gives me no time. So you must forgive . . .²⁷

Unquestionably the contact with Grove provided Fay with an opportunity to bring *Music Study* to his attention, for Grove read the book himself in October of that year, recommended it to Macmillan for publication, and wrote its Preface a few days before the year's end.²⁸

Fay's trip to Weimar took place in August 1885. There, on the days between 12-20 August, she was on several occasions in the company of Liszt, in the famous Hofgärtnerei, the home where Liszt spent his summer months.

By 1885, Liszt had institutionalized the custom of holding summer musical reunions with his disciples on Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On those days, at about four o'clock, about twenty Liszt disciples would gather round the piano of his salon, where they might be asked to play or sing. The atmosphere was one of warmth and conviviality as the master delighted his guests often by tossing off witty remarks that would keep them in continual laughter. On one such occasion a young lady played the Adagio movement from the Beethoven C-minor concerto so wretchedly that Liszt commented that the playing was "as uneven as the Weimar pavements."²⁹

Another time Liszt created an atmosphere of much merriment on the anniversary of American Independence Day (4 July 1885) by assigning Arthur Friedheim to compose a set of Variations on "Yankee Doodle," and later to play his work with the pianist Ansgore at the second piano. During the performance the music grew wilder and more complicated, finally concluding in a fusion of Beethoven's Finale from the Ninth Symphony and the "bell" theme from Wagner's *Parsifal*. The preposterous development of the theme proved most humorous and evoked amusement among the guests, and Liszt himself "shook with laughter."³⁰

Gurickx was Fay's Belgian friend from her student days in Weimar with whom she maintained a life-long correspondence. In 1891 Gurickx became a professor of piano at the Conservatoire in Brussels.

²⁷ Original Letter from George Grove to Amy Fay, 16 July 1885. Newberry Library, Chicago.

²⁸ See George P. Young, *A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 33.

²⁹ See A. B. Bagby, "A Summer With Liszt in Weimar," *The Century Magazine* (September 1886), p. 661. NB: Quotations from this article and other contemporary accounts of Liszt's activities reappear in Robert Stevenson, "Liszt's 'Favorite' California Pupil: Hugo Mansfeldt (1844-1932)," *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 21 (1987), pp. 42-58; and 22 (1987), pp. 27-45.

³⁰ Bagby, p. 661.

While in Weimar Fay belonged to the charmed circle that included Fräulein Aus der Ohe, Arma Senkrah, August Göllerich,³¹ and Fay's own compatriot, Morris Bagby. Fay played in the piano classes and also spent recreational time with Liszt. On 12 August she played the Beethoven "Pastoral" Sonata, Op. 28, at the afternoon session,³² and at a later selection gathering she and Miss Senkrah played a piece for piano and violin written by her uncle, Jerome Hopkins.³³

In the evenings Fay had many hours of pleasant relaxation with Liszt, joining in the frequent whist parties that he would have after the lessons in the company of his favorite pupils who would be invited to stay. Liszt invariably entertained with interesting talk as the cards were being dealt. In the words of Morris Bagby, "These games, free from restraint, were to us all the most enjoyable hours spent in his company."³⁴ Liszt spoke both German and French during the parties. He understood English, but he would not converse in that tongue:

One day Miss Fay glanced distinctly at a card he had let and said quietly, "I don't like that," before playing. The Master thought it quite amusing and would repeat, "I don't like that" when at a disadvantage.³⁵

Other subjects also entered their conversation, one of which Fay described in an article on Liszt that she wrote for *Etude* magazine:

I don't wonder he manifested a sort of revolt against Beethoven the latter part of his life. The very last conversation I had with him, in 1885 when I returned for a short visit to Weimar, Liszt said "I respect all that, but it no longer *interests* me," referring to Beethoven's works.³⁶

By the time of her last visit to Liszt in 1885, Fay had become famous in the world of music. As her own life unfolded she came to interact with many contemporary artists: Ignace Paderewski, John Knowles Paine, and Theodore Thomas,³⁷ to mention but a few. Among her most cherished accumulated memories, though, must have been those of hours spent in the presence of her beloved idol and teacher.

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³¹ See Wilhelm Jerger, *Franz Liszts Klavierunterricht von 1884-1886, dargestellt an den Tagebuchaufzeichnungen von August Göllerich* (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse, 1975), p. 95.

³² Jerger, p. 93.

³³ *Chicago Indicator* Vol. VI, No. 39 (26 September 1885), p. 787.

³⁴ Bagby, p. 664.

³⁵ Bagby, p. 664.

³⁶ *Etude* (July 1908), p. 427.

³⁷ Fay's sister Rose became the second wife of Theodore Thomas in 1890.