Sonata in B Minor

Edited by Nancy Bricard

Foreword

About This Edition

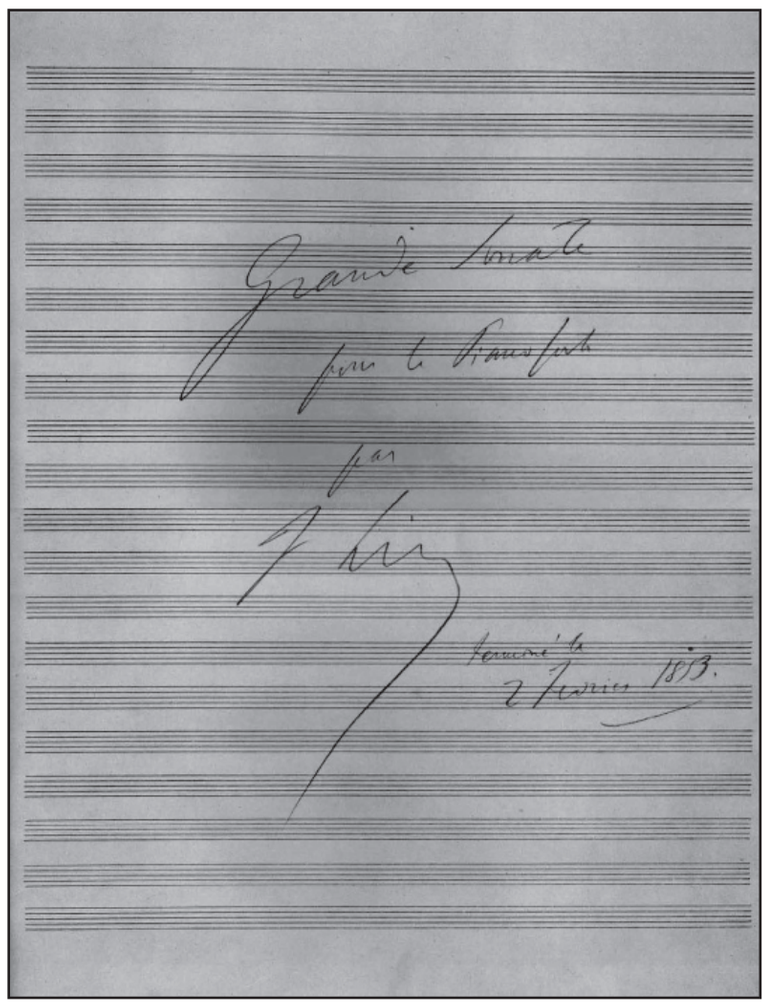
The Sonata in B Minor by Franz Liszt (1811–1886), dedicated to Robert Schumann, is an important contribution to piano literature. Composed in Weimar in 1853, the first edition was published in 1854 by Breitkopf and Härtel, Leipzig, and the first performance took place in Berlin on January 22, 1857. The pianist was Hans von Bülow.

The title page of the autograph appears as follows:

Grand Sonate
pour le Pianoforte
par
F. Liszt
terminé la
2 Fevrier 1853

English translation: Grand Sonata for the piano by F. Liszt, finished 2 February, 1853. The manuscript consists of 26 pages.

This critical edition addresses the sources and discrepancies that exist between various publications and the original autograph manuscript, as well as consideration of tempi, pedaling, fingering, and interpretation. This edition also makes reference to important historical events, the life and career of Liszt, his contributions to pedagogy and teaching, and matters of musical language and influences.



Title page of the autograph manuscript of Liszt's Sonata in B Minor

Editorial Considerations

Sources: This edition is based on the facsimile of the autograph of Liszt's Sonata in B Minor for piano, which was provided by Rigbie Turner of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, and the first edition published by Breitkopf & Härtel in 1854. These sources have been studied in depth. Also consulted were the following editions, which are based on the above-mentioned sources:

—G. Henle Verlag, 1973, *Liszt Sonate h-moll • b minor • si mineur*, Ernst Herttrich, editor, with fingering by Hans-Martin Theopold

—Dover Publications, Inc., 1990, *Sonata in B Minor and Other Works*, a republication of portions of Vols. 7, 8 and 9 (*Verschiedene Werke für Pianoforte zu swei Händen*) of Series II (*Pianofortewerke*) of Franz *Liszts Musikalische Werke*, *herausgegeben von der Franz Liszt-Stiftung*, originally published by Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1924–1927, with editorial notes by José Vianna da Motta

Liszt invented the class system of teaching, which is now common in most conservatories. As stated by Arthur Friedheim:

> *Having invented the class system of teaching, Liszt believed in it implicitly, on the ground that the teacher does not have to play the same piece over and over again for different pupils and repeat endlessly his suggestions for fingerings, phrasing, pedaling and the like; that if the pupil who is only a listener knows the work that is being played he has the same advantages as the performer, and if he does not know it he becomes better prepared to study it later. It was also Liszt's opinion that even the best teacher has his good and his off days. Its best aspect is, of course, the chance the pupils have to play for critical listeners and to rid themselves of nervousness and gain confidence.*[9]

Many great pianists studied with Liszt. Bertrand Ott,[10] a professor of piano at the Conservatoire d'Angers in France, divided Liszt's teaching into five periods, each associated with the teaching of famous pianists such as the following:

Paris Period	1827–1836	
	1837–1847	Concertizing throughout Europe
First Period at Weimar	1847–1861	Karl Klindworth (1830–1916), German
		Hans von Bülow (1830–1894), German
		Carl Tausig (1841–1871), Polish and Liszt's preferred student
Rome Period	1862–1868	Giovanni Sgambati (1841–1914), Italian pianist, conductor and composer
Traveling/Pedagogy Period	1868–1880	In Weimar, Rome and Budapest
		Amy Fay (1844–1928), American
		Arthur Friedheim (1859–1932), Russian origin
Second Period at Weimar	1881–1886	Eugen d'Albert (1830–1894), Scotch
		Rafael Joseffy (1853–1915), Hungarian
		Moriz Rosenthal (1962–1946), Polish
		Emil Sauer (1862–1942), German
		Alexander Siloti (1863–1945), Russian
		Vianna da Motta (1868–1948), Portugese

[9] José Antonio Bowen, "Liszt: The Teacher," *Journal of The American Liszt Society*, 52/53 (Fall 2002/Spring 2003): 18.
[10] Ott, 46–54.

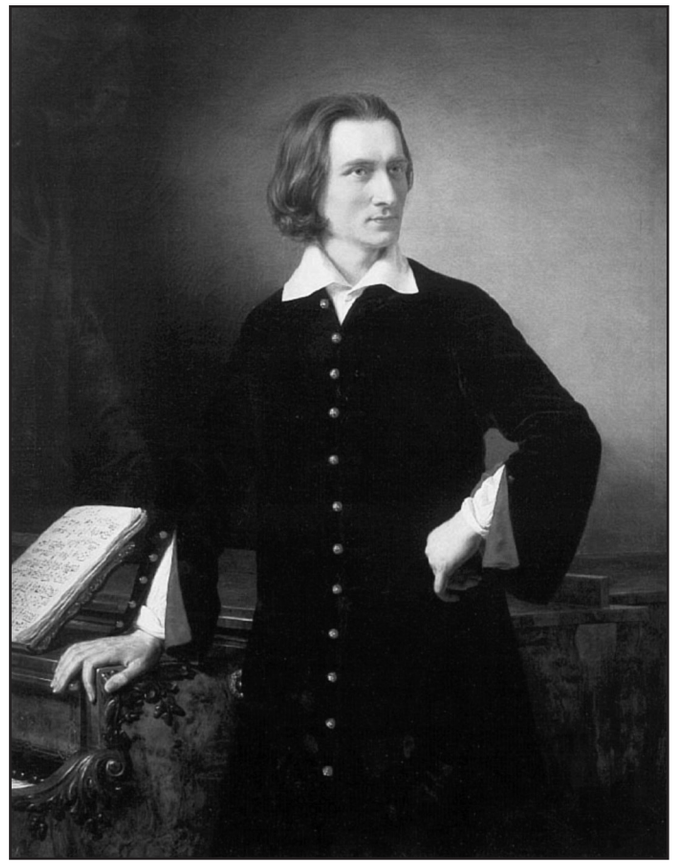
About the Sonata in B Minor

The Sonata in B Minor is a very complex work, which is held together by the development, transformation, and combination of many thematic elements. It is a fine example of the cyclic development one finds in the symphonic poem. It can be conceived as a sonata in one movement: exposition, development with an inserted slow section, recapitulation, and coda. It employs all of the techniques Liszt developed since he first heard Paganini perform. His new use of scales, arpeggios, octaves, trills, repeated notes, and massive chords were certainly equivalent to Paganini's pyrotechnical display, while outdoing Paganini in musical content. Originally, this sonata was to end with a grand bravura, but Liszt ultimately revised that in favor of a quiet ending. Biographer Ernst Burger (b. 1937), pianist and teacher at the Richard Strauss Conservatory in Munich, quotes the German pianist and pedagogue Wilhelm Backhaus (1884–1969) as saying:

> *…as a pianist I regard it as my bounden duty to show my gratitude and respect for the memory of the glorious master who gave us his Sonata in B Minor. It remains unsurpassed to this day as the most magnificent piano sonata of the post-Beethoven period. Had he written nothing else, he would still be immortal.*[18]

Despite its enduring status, the Sonata in B Minor was not immediately well-received. It was reviewed unfavorably in 1857 at its first performance in Berlin; than again in 1881 in Vienna by the Austrian music critic Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904); and yet again in 1882 by the *Musical Times* in London. Hanslick disagreed with the *New Music*, *Zukunftmus* (or "Music of the Future") whose main representatives were Liszt and Wagner.

Liszt himself refers to the Sonata as "*An invitation to hissing and stomping… as [Otto] Gumprecht [the music critic of the German newspaper Nationalzeitung] designates that work of ill odour—my Sonata.*"[19]



Liszt as painted by Miklós Barabás in 1847

However, despite these reviews, and because of its magnificence, the Sonata in B Minor was destined to become an integral part of the repertoire, including that of such diverse pianists as Alfred Brendel (b. 1931) and Vladimir Horowitz (1903–1989).

The sonata is one of the most difficult works in the current 20th-century pianists' repertoire, both technically and musically. It is full of dynamic contrasts and virtuosic design. The major challenges encountered are musical ones. The main difficulty consists of holding the enormous structure together with its countless sections and tempo modifications. A pivotal compositional technique in the sonata is thematic transformation. Many of the interpretive challenges in terms of holding the piece together can by addressed by recognizing that similar thematic materials are transformed into various manifestations throughout. There are also some dynamic markings that are difficult to project, such as the two Recitativos in the development sections marked ***f*** (measures 301 and 306). Physical endurance comes into play during the octaves in the Prestissimo section at the end of the piece (measures 682–710), which are not at all easy, especially if one feels tired by that time! Nevertheless, Liszt presents a challenge that is completely rewarding for the pianist who attempts and succeeds in conquering its complexities.

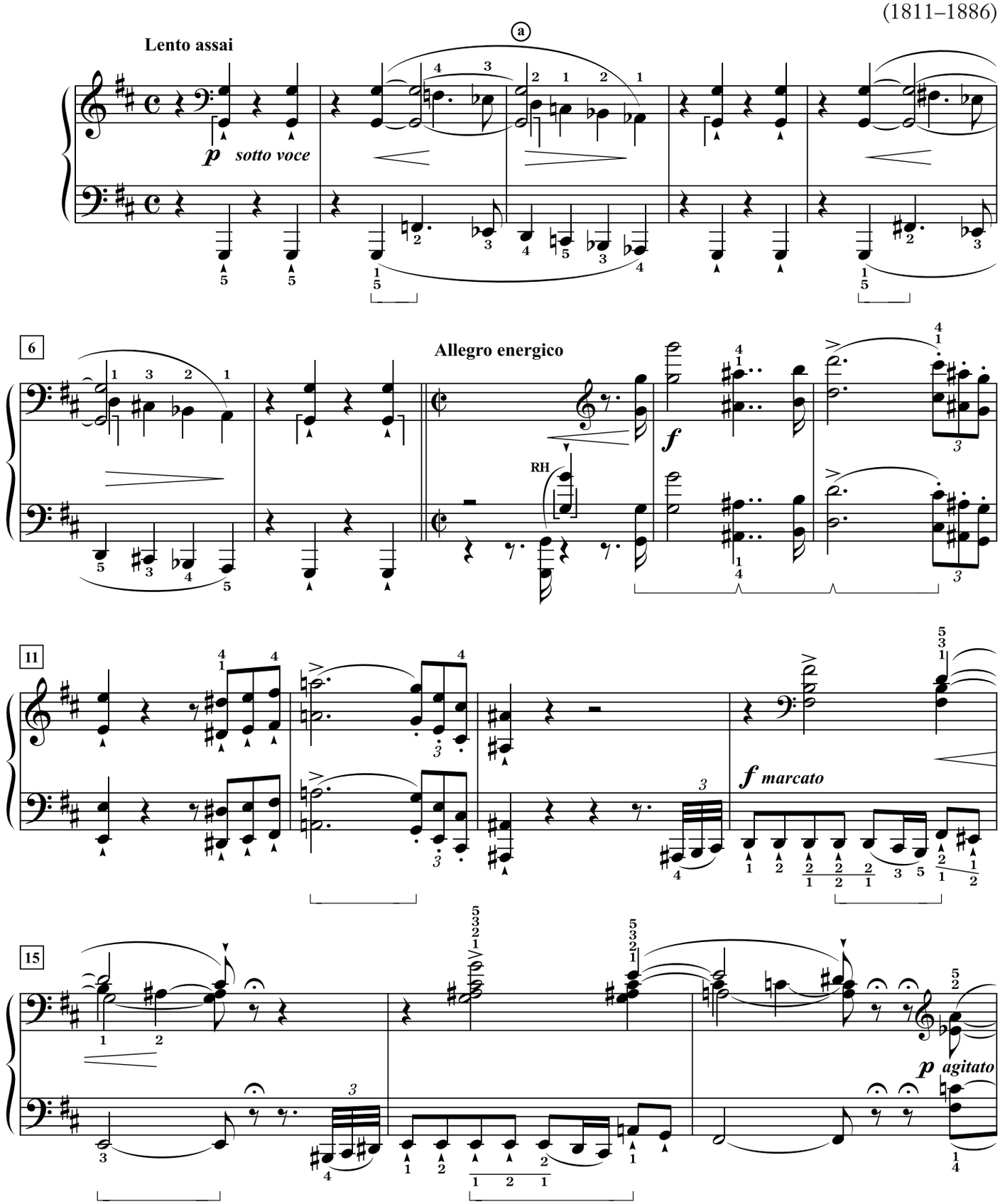
[18] Ernst Burger, *Franz Liszt: A Chronicle of His Life in Pictures and Documents*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 196.

[19] Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 323.

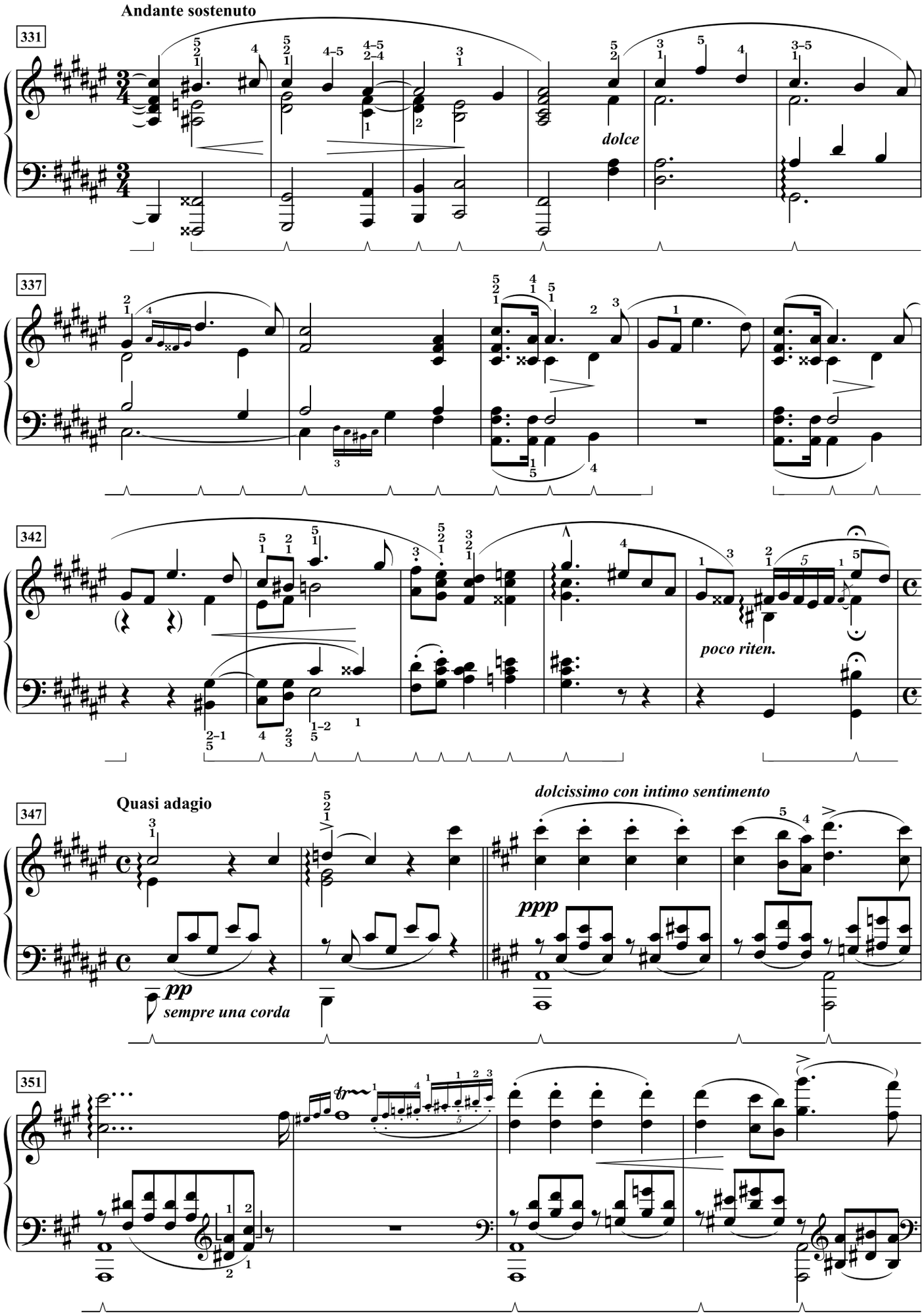
to Robert Schumann

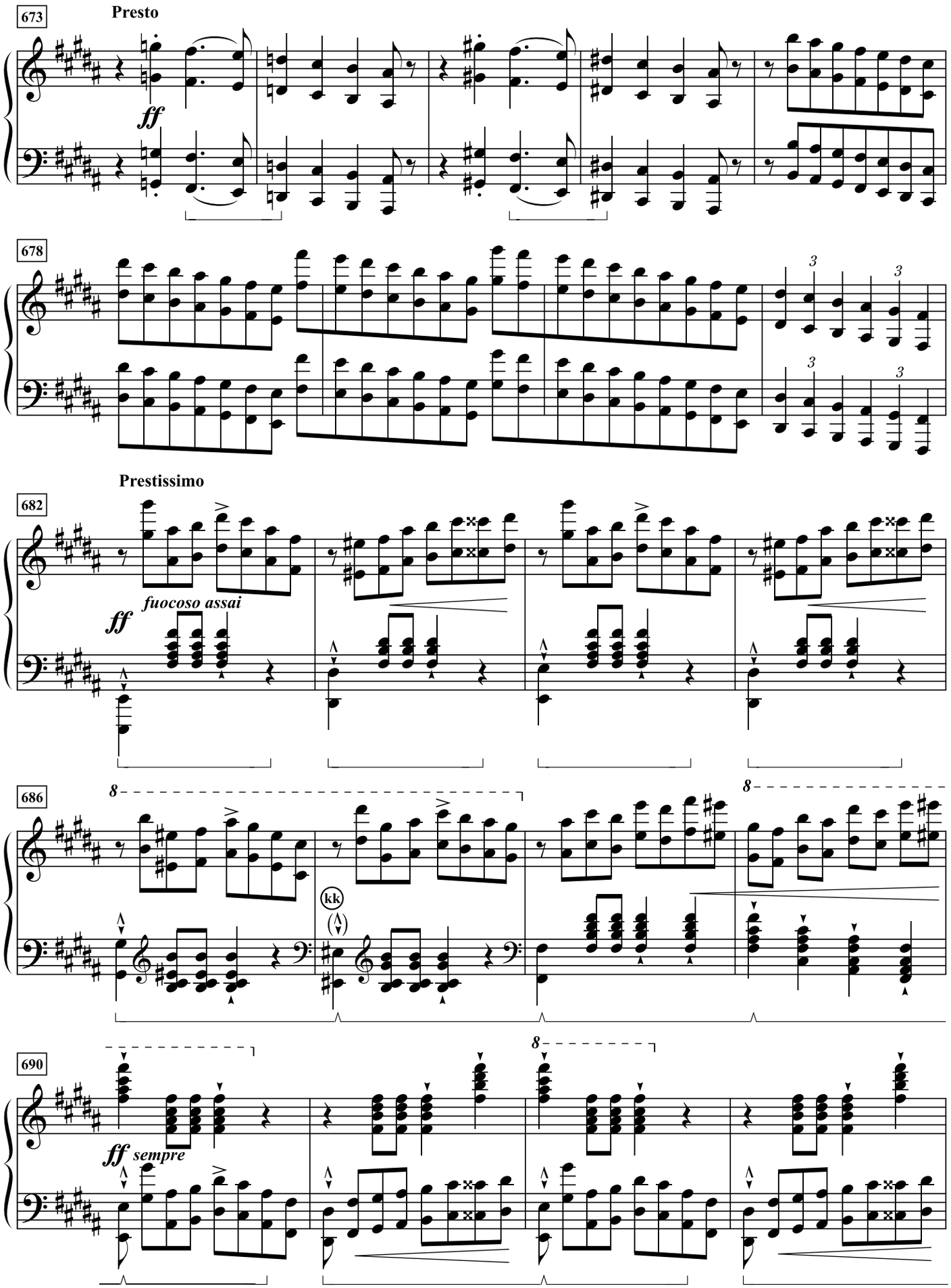
Sonata in B Minor

Franz Liszt
(1811–1886)



ⓐ The G octaves in measures 3 and 6 should sustain throughout the measure. The fact that Liszt didn't put a half rest to finish the measure might suggest that he was not aware of how long it would take for the tone to die away (see also measures 751 and 753).


Andante sostenuto
331
dolce
337
342
poco riten.
347
Quasi adagio
dolcissimo con intimo sentimento
ppp
pp
sempre una corda
351



(kk) This parenthetical articulation is missing in the autograph and first edition. Some editions also add this articulation to the same spot in measure 688; however, this editor finds that questionable there and has left it unmarked.