Franz Liszt and the kinsmen:
A Humean standard in nineteenth-century Paris

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Background. The public sphere of nineteenth-century Paris rarely received a single cohesive image of Franz Liszt the virtuoso. After a performance, Liszt, in one critical review, may have emerged as a musical demigod, while in another, Liszt potentially scandalized the sanctity of the pianist’s craft. The early writings of two polarized critical minds—François-Joseph Fétis and Joseph d’Ortigue—illustrate this divergence in critical interpretation. Fétis, celebrated historian, teacher, and critic, characterized Liszt as a sinful disgrace, whereas d’Ortigue, writer for the Gazette musicale de Paris, elevated Liszt to the stature of a piano-proficient Jesus. David Hume’s 1757 essay “Of the Standard of Taste,” though not historically concurrent with the surfacing of a Liszt-oriented critical spectrum, offers a basis for understanding approaches to Romantic-era music criticism. In its most simplified form, Hume’s essay on taste is a “rule”-book for aesthetic referees. By formulating a set of rules and regularities, Hume encouraged the elimination of critical relativism by defining a prescriptive standard—a standard intended to accurately and objectively assess aesthetic value.

Aims. With the consideration of Hume’s tenets in incidental relation to the critical writings of Fétis and d’Ortigue, my discussion aims to examine the presence of Humean thought during Liszt’s early virtuoso years in Paris.

Main Contributions. Hume’s essay outlines the prerequisites one must possess to become a befitting adjudicator of artist merit. Each requirement is a directional guidepost, pointing towards the same aesthetic goal: the unveiling of a normative standard by which one can judge the true nature of art. And although Hume himself admitted that “a true judge in the finer arts is . . . so rare a character” (Hume, 1757 as cited in Cahn and Meskin, 2008), my study ventures to uncover the existence of a seemingly unattainable Humean aesthetic standard. Drawing from the Revue Musicale and Écrits sur la Musique (L’Écuyer, 2003), I examine the indirect relationship between Hume’s judicial qualifications and Fétis’s and d’Ortigue’s critical methodologies. Additionally, contemporary philosopher Peter Railton’s essay “Aesthetic value, moral value, and naturalism” (Railton, 1998) will provide a final digest and application of Humean principles.

Implications. Hume’s essay relies on a confidence in a single reality constructed upon objectivity, making aesthetic rulings as definable as objective truth. Today, many music critics, as well as musicologists believe that artistic judgment exists in a purely subjective realm. With my paper, I hope to demonstrate that, in terms of aesthetic valuation, man can view his reality through empirical reasoning and man can possess a Humean “delicacy of taste.”

The public rarely received a single cohesive image of Franz Liszt (1811-86) the composer-performer. After a performance, Liszt, in one critical review, may have emerged as a musical demigod, while in another, Liszt potentially scandalized the sanctity of the pianist’s craft. The early writings of two polarized critical minds—François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871) and Joseph d’Ortigue (1802-66)—illustrate this divergence in critical interpretation. Fétis, celebrated historian, teacher, and critic, characterized Liszt as a sinful disgrace, whereas d’Ortigue, writer for the Gazette musicale de Paris, elevated Liszt to the stature of a piano-proficient Jesus.

It becomes essential, then, to pose the question: how do we comprehend, how do we qualify, and how do we come to believe or disbelieve the Romantic critic’s aesthetic judgments? David Hume’s 1757 essay "Of the Standard of Taste,” though not historically concurrent with the surfacing of a Liszt-oriented critical spectrum, offers a basis for understanding approaches to Romantic-era music criticism. With the consideration of
Hume’s tenets in incidental relation to the critical writings of Fétis and d’Ortigue, my discussion will examine the presence of Humean thought during Liszt’s early years in Paris and generate, in turn, a case study for objectivity in aesthetic evaluation.

Before focusing our attention on the critical realm of Liszt’s Parisian years, we must first consider the foundational elements of Hume’s aesthetic approach. Hume’s essay, in its most simplified form, is a “rule”-book for aesthetic referees. This set of rules and regularities upholds one foundational objective: a call for the elimination of critical relativism, defined by a prescriptive standard. Accordingly, “Of the Standard of Taste” outlines the prerequisites one must possess to espouse Humean expectations and to ultimately become a befitting adjudicator of aesthetic value. These qualifications can be condensed into four basic categories. The first concerns the physical sensibility of human organs; the second relates to the practiced mind of developing expertise; the third considers the elimination of personal prejudice unrelated to the object of contemplation; and the fourth discusses the premeditated purpose of every artistic composition.

The first of Hume’s qualifications considers the biological function of sensory organs. An individual endowed with fine-tuned sensory abilities, Hume claimed, “allow[s] nothing to escape them; and . . . [can] perceive every ingredient in the composition.” Hume defined this refinement of the faculties as the “delicacy of taste,” essential in making one “sensible of every beauty and every blemish, in any composition or discourse.” But Hume reminded us that the human race is not a species born with the scientific perfection of a mutant. Due to innate biological make-up or interfering health situations, man’s sensory organs rarely function as perfectly oiled machines. The solution is simple: practice, practice, practice. This necessity of a practiced mind, the second standard for judgment is both a safety-net for the biologically fruitless and a vital complement to an impeccably-formed “delicacy of taste.”

Subtle traces of Hume’s first two qualifications for successful aesthetic judgment seem noticeably apparent within the critical arena of nineteenth-century pianistic virtuosity and composition. In 1830, for example, Fétis, the then professor of theory at the Conservatoire de Paris and sole editor of the *Revue Musicale*, published the pseudo-art-appreciation guide *Music Explained to the World*—a work aimed to build a bridge between the musical ineptitudes of the common man and the complex realm of the musical arts. Although Music Explained fundamentally acts as a resource for understanding the rudiments of music, Fétis’s guide also represents the spirit of its author’s critical value system. Like Hume’s treatise on taste, Fétis’s work promotes the necessity of a trained mind in situations of aesthetic judgment. The introduction summarizes Fétis’s stance: “The unpractised eye cannot distinguish the qualities or defects of a painting, nor the untutored ear the combinations of harmony. Undoubtedly, the habitual use of the eye and the ear . . . enable[s] us to perceive the beauties of painting or music . . . . Every art has its principles, which we must study . . . while forming our taste.” Here Fétis constructed a connection between refined perceptual faculties and man’s ability to dictate aesthetic judgments. Most strikingly, Fétis’s observations mimic the principles from Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste.”

Fétis’s open criticisms of Liszt, we might conclude, were not unconscious manifestations of an unthinking mind, but articulations of a carefully trained ear. Fétis’s most salient attacks against Liszt, for instance, appeared in 1833 in the *Revue Musicale*. Here Fétis reprimanded Liszt’s over-emotive physical appearance, claiming such unnecessary gestures destroyed the expressive integrity of the music. Later, in 1835, Fétis belittled Liszt to the stature of a confused lemming. “You [Liszt] have carried a system which you derived from your predecessors . . . . You have remained the product of a school that has come to an end and has nothing more to do.” Fétis’s criticisms are shaded with both technical critiques—discussion of physicality and music—
and historical principles—discussion of Liszt's position in a narrative of progress. Echoing the sentiments of Humean ideology, Fétis responded to Liszt with reviews generated by a practiced sensory system. And this sensibility allowed Fétis to accurately taste the ingredients within a Lisztian composition or performance, partially qualifying Fétis as a true aesthetic judge.

Fétis's Parisian counterpart d'Ortigue, however, did not tolerate the critical methodologies of the Revue Musicale. D'Ortigue described Fétis's approach as "petty and narrow criticism," confined to the realm of musical autonomy and small-minded historicism. Unlike Fétis, d'Ortigue generated an approach that stretched analysis into the composer's socio-musico environment. His writings often look beyond singular performances and praise the artist on a personal level. In one instance, d'Ortigue characterized Liszt as both Romantic superhero and Byronian anti-Hero: "Religious aspiration and arid doubts, enthusiasm and depressions, excess of independence and the search for authority, his soul absorbs it all." But what was the aesthetic scaffold supporting d'Ortigue's encomiums? Did he, like Fétis, possess Hume's "delicacy of taste"?

Though d'Ortigue never aspired to the ranks of conservatory professors, he still found himself among the artistic circles of proficient musical craftsmen. As illustrated in his autobiography, partially written under the hand of his first daughter Marie, d'Ortigue's musical curiosity emerged at a young age: "[le jeune d’Ortigue] s’essaia à toucher l’orgue de sa paroisse d’après les conseils et les leçons." After his move away from Cavaillon, d'Ortigue’s musical life truly came into being: He continued his studies on violin, studying with a certain Ferrière and participating in the musical occasions at the Saint-Sauveur Cathedral. By the time d’Ortigue moved to Paris at the end of 1829, he possessed a technical knowledge of the string quartets and quintets of Haydn, Mozart, Boccherini, and Beethoven. Based only on a condensed biographical account, we can easily relate d’Ortigue’s capacity as an adjudicator of aesthetic value to principles of Humean thought. His early educational and professional experiences serve as a testament to his refined musical palette—a condition undoubtedly synchronized with Hume’s first two requirements.

Yet, my discussion appears to have cornered itself into a musicological blind alley. If Hume’s standard for aesthetic objectivity is a plausible reality, then why are the critical writings of Fétis and d’Ortigue—men possessive of finely-tuned sensory abilities—gross contradictions? "Of the Standard of Taste" provides an answer. For Hume, the possession of a "delicacy of taste" was not enough to crown the critic with a wreath of laurels. The true adjudicator of art is not only a knowledgeable, practiced expert, but is also mentally divorced from external influences. The righteous critic, claimed Hume, must "preserve his mind from all prejudice, and allow nothing to enter into his consideration, but the very object which is submitted to his examination." This Humean notion represents the true critic as an impartial subject, an individual who is both disinterested in peripheral predilections and engaged in a point of view presupposed by the object.

On December 4, 1830, three years prior to Fétis’s most piercing anti-Liszt articles, Liszt befriended the Fétisian anti-Christ Hector Berlioz. For Fétis, Liszt’s association with Berlioz blacklisted the piano virtuoso. In Fétis’s critical reviews, Liszt is disapprovingly presented as "a friend of Hector’s" or as a careless protégé of "imprudent friends." Death by association is, therefore, the foundation of Fétis’s non-Humean critical methodology. Fétis’s discriminatory condemnation of Liszt, however, surpasses social trivialities. Upon closer examination of Fétis’s writing, it becomes evident that Fétis renounced Liszt and championed Thalberg because of deeper and more personal aesthetic reasons. As a pedagogue, Fétis published the Méthode des méthodes de piano, a treatise focused on performance techniques grounded in traditions of the past. Emerging in this work, his battle-cry—"l'art ne progresse pas, il se
transforme”—explicates a historically-based aesthetic of music, in which superficial externalities, such as virtuosic excesses, do not represent musical progress.\textsuperscript{xiii} To return to Fétis's 1835 review of Liszt, where Fétis criticized Liszt for “only modifying [a school of thought] in small details,” (i.e. the musical surface), we can see that Fétis used Liszt as a whipping boy for indecent aesthetic procedure. In time Fétis would indirectly define a dichotomy between the proper “Old,” Thalberg, and the improper “New,” Liszt. But, in order to validate this binary opposition, Fétis colored his subjects by predetermined expectations, neglecting, in turn, the standards of Hume's true critic.

While Fétis characterized Liszt as a misfit wandering along the outskirts of historical transformation, d’Ortigue reasoned otherwise.\textsuperscript{xiv} Published on June 14, 1835—only two months after Fétis’s unapologetic critique—d’Ortigue’s biography of the 23-year-old virtuoso reveals a man whose musical soul is interwoven in both the endless flux of time and the muddled spirit of society’s present moment. D’Ortigue’s sacred reverence for Liszt, however, did not materialize in the untainted mind of a nonpartisan critic. Liszt and d’Ortigue were more than colleagues residing in the same artistic circles—they were like-minded, close-knit friends. Following the piano duel hosted by Princess Belgiojoso, Liszt was overwhelmed by a sense of disquietude and found comfort in a confidant, as explained to Lambert Massart: “I [Liszt] wrote to d’Ortigue because I feel like he is a friend.”\textsuperscript{xv} Later, in a letter dated from December 1838, Liszt wrote to d’Ortigue concerning an emotional viewing of Raphael’s \textit{St. Celia}. And in the summer of 1839, Liszt followed this letter with outpourings of graciousness: “I could not have addressed that letter to anyone but you. It was written under the inspiration of your compelling ideas.”\textsuperscript{xvi} It is no surprise then that d’Ortigue’s reviews of Liszt reach outside the limitations of the material world, delving into a spiritual and sacred realm. D’Ortigue, like Fétis, judged Liszt from a preconditioned disposition. And, in Humean terms, this personal love for Liszt was “destructive of sound judgment,” causing d’Ortigue’s “taste . . . [to depart] from the true standard.”\textsuperscript{xvii}

Although both Fétis and d’Ortigue failed to approach their object of contemplation with a clear mental palette, their license-to-judge cannot be revoked just yet. The fourth major Humean qualification, and perhaps the most significant, contends that the true judge must understand the higher objective of an artistic work.\textsuperscript{xix} Working from the axiom that “every work of art has . . . a certain end or purpose,”\textsuperscript{xx} Hume proposed that the critic must not only be aware of artistic objectives, but “must be able to judge how far the means employed are adapted to their respective purposes.”\textsuperscript{xxi} This faculty of reasoning and comprehension assumes that a true judge can peer beyond the autonomous being of an artistic entity and grasp the artist’s “delicate . . . undertaking”\textsuperscript{xxii} that expands outside of the work itself.

By revisiting Fétis’s \textit{Music Explained to the World}, we see that Fétis, like Hume, valued art as more than just art. “If there were nothing more in music,” Fétis argued, “than a principle of vague sensation . . . having for its sole result to affect the ear more or less agreeably, this art would be little worthy of public attention.”\textsuperscript{xxiii} From this notion, it is clear that Fétis sought to comprehend the “delicate undertaking” embedded in artistic creation. And, for Fétis, Liszt’s artistic creations were no exception. Although Fétis rarely responded to Liszt’s cries for mercy, it would be unfair to monochromatically color Fétis as a steadfast villain, diligently working to destroy the successes of this young composer-performer. One of Fétis’s most notable Liszt-directed accolades appeared on May 9, 1841 in a review of the \textit{Études d’exécution transcendante}. At the nucleus of the review is a brief biographical outline of Liszt during the 1830s. At this time, Fétis explained, Liszt was socially displaced by his temporary “retirement” and found his soul injured by the tactless opinions of a pleasure-seeking public. And it was, as Fétis described, “the revolution that took place in his creative imagination during the several years he spent
in ‘retirement’” that substantiated the following commendations: "Permit me to recall, in order to explain this revolution, that in one of the meetings of the course on the philosophy of music that I gave in Paris in 1832, I spoke of the future of harmony and tonality. Liszt then determined he would try to apply [this] idea to piano music. . . . he created a genre of piano music that belongs only to himself. . . . one need only cast his eyes upon this music to be persuaded it that represents the most advanced state of art in terms of piano performance. Here Fétis detangled a purposeful objective in a jungle of Lisztian virtuosity. Once again in line with Humean standards, Fétis appears as a "man of sense," guided by "sound understanding." Fétis’s clear discernment of "design and reasoning" was not a nineteenth-century singularity. D’Ortigue also aspired to understand the "means" and "respective purposes" of Liszt’s compositions and virtuosity. For d’Ortigue, however, Liszt’s artistic objective was not motivated by theoretical underpinnings; rather, Liszt’s motivation as a composer-performer emerged as a manifestation of his spiritual piety. D’Ortigue viewed Liszt as an emblem of Christian righteousness and purity. In d’Ortigue’s biography of Liszt, for example, d’Ortigue recounted an anecdote in which the altruistic Liszt positions himself on the same socio-economic plane as an impoverished street-sweeper. And it is, according to d’Ortigue, this charitable benevolence that bolsters Liszt’s musical outpourings: “His performance is his speech and his soul . . . [a] summary of all his impressions, of everything that has a hold of him.” In this sense, Liszt’s music acts as an expressive art, working towards a goal of communicating his innermost spirituality. And d’Ortigue’s inclination to explore Liszt’s pious, inner-sanctum and search for understanding beyond the sphere of aesthetic autonomy illustrates a fundamental alignment with Humean thought.

By way of conclusion, I close with a final indulgence in Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste.” Here Hume recounted an anecdote from Don Quixote: “It is with good reason, says Sancho to the squire with the great nose, that I pretend to have a judgment in wine: This is a quality hereditary in our family. Two of my kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of hogshead. . . . One of them tastes it; considers it; and after mature reflection pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather. . . . The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favor of the wine; but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. . . . On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom, an old key with a leathern thong tied to it.” The kinsmen, first, pronounce a critical judgment—the wine tastes “good”—and, then, report upon ingredients—there is a hint of leather, a touch of metal. Their “ability to distinguish all the particular flavors, amidst disorder . . . to perceive every ingredient in the composition,” as well as elicit reaction “from the observation of what pleases or displeases” is at the heart of Hume’s aesthetic philosophy. More importantly, though, Hume incorporated Sancho’s tale to demonstrate that man can view his reality through empirical reasoning and man can possess a “delicacy of taste.” Although Hume himself admitted that “a true judge in the finer arts is . . . so rare a character,” a fraction of the critical writings of the nineteenth century reveals that a Humean aesthetic standard can exist. Fétis, while at times misguided by prejudice, allowed his criticism to morph with the maturation of Liszt’s career. Fétis’s writings from 1841 actually prompted Liszt to declare Fétis “a man who has the right to judge you and by whom it is well worthwhile being understood.” D’Ortigue, as well, responded to Liszt with a similar methodological footing—suffering from prejudice, but ultimately relying on sound reasoning and a “delicacy of taste.” We see before us, then, our two kinsmen—Fétis and d’Ortigue. And while one tasted leather and the other tasted metal, both concluded that the wine was, in fact, rather good.
References


i Ibid., 107.

ii Ibid.


vi Joseph d’Ortigue, La Musique mise à la portée de tout le monde, in Franz Liszt and His World, eds. Christopher H. Gibbs and Dana Gooley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 303.


ix Ibid., 29.

x Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 108.

xi Cited in Franz Liszt, eds. Gibbs and Gooley, 427.


xiv For a more in-depth discussion of Fétis’s scientific and philosophical theories, see Katherine Ellis, Music Criticism in Nineteenth-century France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 33-45.

xv In Liszt’s biography, D’Ortigue included the following encomium: “[Liszt] has thrown his soul . . . into the chaos in which the entire age is fermenting, boiling the bones of the eighteenth century, mixed haphazardly with elements of the past in full dissolution, and the fertile but shapeless germs of the future.” D’Ortigue, "Franz Liszt," in Franz Liszt, eds. Gibbs and Gooley, 323.

xvi Cited in Gooley, The Virtuoso Liszt, 55.

xvii Cited in An Artist’s Journey, 162.


xix In regard to this final qualification, I find that Hume faltered. His argument, placing a uniform set of premises upon the ontological and philosophical being of art, over-generalizes artistic intention.


xxi Ibid.

xxii Ibid.

xxiii Fétis, Music Explained to the World, 279.

xxiv Here Fétis specifically referred to his harmonic discovery ordre omnitonique. This musical phenomenon, concerned with the relations between major and minor keys, prompted Fétis to declare the omnitonique to be the "final stage" in the development of harmony.


xxix Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 106.

xxx Ibid., 107.

xxxi Ibid., 109.

xxxii Cited in Gibbs and Gooley, eds., Franz Liszt, 430.