Liszt

His Life and Music

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by Malcolm Hayes

Liszt

His Life and Music

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Author's Acknowledgements

Anyone writing about Liszt today is fortunate to be doing so after the appearance of Alan Walker's monumental three-volume biography of the composer. The outcome of many years of research into French, German, Hungarian and Italian sources, Professor Walker's work has set a new standard of accuracy in Liszt scholarship. This was needed, given the amount of biographical misinformation, wilful or otherwise, that had bedevilled so much earlier writing on Liszt – the aberrations of which reach back to the composer's own lifetime (sometimes, it must be said, with his misguided consent). Given this background, it would have been irresponsible not to have relied on Professor Walker's study as a central source of material on Liszt's life. However, it has been far from my only one, and its author's views on the music diverge quite widely from mine in certain areas, such as the consistent success-rate or otherwise of Liszt as an orchestral composer. I hope that readers will take their cue from these differences, and will feel encouraged to form their own conclusions about the composer's life and work.

I would also like to acknowledge a debt to the information in the notes, written by Keith Anderson and Victor and Marina Ledin, which accompany Naxos's edition of Liszt's Complete Piano Music; and to Leslie Howard's notes to Liszt's Complete Music for Solo Piano, performed by him on Hyperion Records.

For intriguing conversation on Liszt's life and work I would like to thank Anthony Burton, Bryan Free, my fellow authors Stephen Johnson and Andrew Stewart, and particularly Lucy Parham, whose outside-the-box thoughts on the composer and his music are mirrored in the artistry of her piano-playing. Appreciative thanks are also due to the team at Naxos: to Genevieve Helsby, most patient of editors, and to Ingalo Thomson, most meticulous of copy-editors. Above all I must thank my partner Sally, who has benignly supported both the book and its writer from start to finish.

M.H.

Track Lists

CD 1

1 Ouverture de l'opéra Guillaume Tell (S552/R237) 12:46
Rossini, transcr. Liszt
Kemal Gekič, piano 8.553961

Lieder von Schubert (S558/R243)
2 No. 2: Auf dem Wasser zu singen 4:59
Schubert, transcr. Liszt
Oxana Yablonskaya, piano 8.553062

3 Ave Maria (S20/R496a) 4:05
First version, for chorus and organ
Choir of Radio Svizzera, Lugano; Paolo Crivellaro, organ; Diego Fasolis 8.553786

4 W Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 in C sharp minor (S244/R106, No. 2) 10:44
Lento a capriccio – Lassan: Andante mesto – Friska: Vivace
Jenő Jandó, piano 8.554480

W Années de pèlerinage, première année: Suisse (S160/R10a)
5 No. 4: Au bord d'une source 3:48
6 No. 9: Les Cloches de Genève 6:25
Jenő Jandó, piano 8.550548

Ⓦ Années de pèlerinage, deuxième année: Italie (S161/R10b)

7 No. 1: Sposalizio — 8:24
Jenő Jandó, piano — 8.550549

Ⓦ Étude en douze exercices (S136/R1)

8 No. 4 in D minor: Allegro grazioso — 1:08
William Wolfram, piano — 8.557014

Ⓦ Études d'exécution transcendante (S139/R2b)

9 No. 4 in D minor: Mazeppa — 7:38
Jenő Jandó, piano — 8.553119

Ⓦ Harmonies poétiques et religieuses (S173/R14)

10 No. 3: Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude — 16:30
Philip Thomson, piano — 8.553073

TT 76:34

CD 2

Sonata in B minor (S178/R21)

1 Excerpt, from beginning: Lento assai – Allegro energico 9:17
Jenő Jandó, piano 8.553594

2 Orpheus (S98/R415) 11:34
New Zealand Symphony Orchestra; Michael Halász 8.553355

3 Rigoletto: Paraphrase de concert (S434/R267) 7:38
Liszt, after Verdi
Alexandre Dossin, piano 8.557904

Two Legends (S175/R17)

4 St Francis of Assisi: the Sermon to the Birds 10:07
5 St Francis of Paola Walking on the Waters 8:56
Jenő Jandó, piano 8.553594

6 Urbi et orbi, bénédiction papale (S184/R69) 6:39
Philip Thomson, piano 8.553659

Via crucis (S53/R534)
Excerpts

7 Vexilla regis prodeunt (Andante maestoso) 3:46
8 Station I: Jesus is condemned to death 1:03
9 Station II: Jesus takes up his cross 1:53
10 Station III: Jesus falls for the first time 1:28
11 Station IV: Jesus greets his holy mother 1:42
Choir of Radio Svizzera, Lugano; Diego Fasolis, conductor/piano 8.553786

12 In festo transfigurationis Domini nostri Jesu Christi (S188/R74) 2:20
Philip Thomson, piano 8.553659

From the Cradle to the Grave (S107/R424)
13 Movement 1: The Cradle 4:47
New Zealand Symphony Orchestra; Michael Halász 8.553355

14 Hungarian Rhapsody No. 17 in D minor (S244/R106, No. 17) 3:06
Lento – Allegretto
Jenő Jandó, piano 8.554481

15 Nuages gris (S199/R78) 3:09
Arnaldo Cohen, piano 8.55385

TT 77:35

For more information on these tracks, see page 209.

website **Works marked (W) may be heard in full by logging onto the website (see page 12).**

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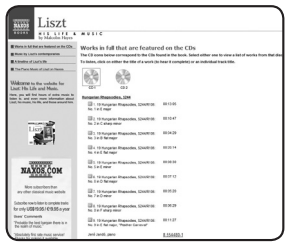

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Preface

Génie oblige.
– Franz Liszt

'How is it possible for you *not* to be a pianist?' In his mid-thirties Liszt effectively retired as a professional concert pianist, and from then on this question pursued him to the end of his life. A stream of concert promoters remained unable to understand how one of the greatest keyboard performers of all time could not be coaxed back onto the recital platform – or not, at least, for money. In 1874, well into his sixties, Liszt replied to one of these hapless queries in the wearily ironic tone that had by then become typical of him.

> *Dear Sir, Your friendly communication rests upon a harmless mistake. You do not seem to know that for twenty-six years past I have altogether ceased to be regarded as a pianist; hence I have for a long time not given any concerts, and have only very occasionally played the piano in public, for some very special reason, to aid some charity or to further some artistic object, and then only in Rome, Hungary (my native country), and in Vienna – nowhere else. And on these rare and very exceptional occasions no one has ever thought of offering me any remuneration in money. Excuse me therefore, dear Sir, that I cannot accept your invitation to the Liverpool Music Festival, inasmuch as I cannot in any way think of wearying the public with my 'erstwhile' piano-playing.*

By that time Liszt was used to being misunderstood. He probably would not have been surprised that the situation persisted for so long after his death. Even today, among the great composers, Liszt is one whose music it is still considered smart to despise (the word is not too strong) in many academic, critical and pianistic circles. Happily that view is not held by general listeners, who have avidly purchased the cascade of Liszt recordings that materialised with the advent of the CD era. But even allowing for arbitrary and conformist fashion, the anti-Liszt mood that prevails in much of the professional musical world is puzzling, even bizarre. How can it have come about?

Liszt was a startlingly prolific composer, whose many original works were only one part of a much larger output. He was also an impulsive and brilliant arranger and transcriber of his own and of other composers' music. Almost all his early piano music was later revised, some of it radically. And dozens of his own works exist in different arrangements. There are choral pieces arranged for piano (for example, in *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, or extracted from the Coronation Mass); piano works arranged for orchestra (some of the Hungarian Rhapsodies); orchestral works arranged for piano (*From the Cradle to the Grave*); a cantata overture revised as a symphonic poem (*Les Préludes*); many piano transcriptions of songs by Liszt himself (the Petrarch Sonnets) and others; alternative versions of choral works with organ or piano accompaniment (*Via crucis*); organ music recomposed for piano (the Prelude and Fugue on the Name B–A–C–H); complete works within complete works (the *Christmas Oratorio* and *The Beatitudes*, both incorporated into *Christus*); orchestral works by others transcribed for piano (Beethoven's symphonies, Rossini's *William Tell* overture, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*); piano music by others transcribed for piano and orchestra (Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*); piano-duet arrangements of Liszt's own orchestral works; and numerous virtuoso 'paraphrases' based on popular operas of the day.

The first comprehensive catalogue of all this was compiled early in the last century by the German scholar Peter Raabe, curator of the Liszt Museum in Weimar. Raabe listed some 1,300 individual

items, and grouped these into 674 numbered works, ranging from two-minute piano pieces to the oratorio *Christus*, whose complete performance lasts just under three hours. Such a large output – or at least a good portion of it – must have been written quickly. And this in turn means that its level of inspiration is bound to be uneven. But critical opinion does not berate Haydn's music, for instance, for displaying a similar deficiency. If the standing of other composers is rightly assessed on the basis of their finest music, one wonders why the same approach is not taken more readily with Liszt.

Here was a composer who, like Bach or Mozart, really did live the lives of several great musicians rolled into one. The documentary consensus is that Liszt was one of the most astonishing piano-playing prodigies ever. During his years as a touring virtuoso in his twenties and early thirties, he broke new ground in terms of what was possible at the piano keyboard; his achievements as a performer of the utmost power and brilliance, one graced also with a uniquely magical musicianship, remain legendary. At the age of thirty-five he chose to settle down (relatively speaking) in the Thuringian town of Weimar. There he composed orchestral and piano music, conducted, and taught his piano pupils, but without resuming his own career as a pianist. In his fifties he lived for several years in Rome, where he took minor orders in the Roman Catholic Church, and consolidated his position as one of the nineteenth century's great composers of choral music. Increasing old age saw him living a wandering life (Liszt never owned his own home) as a teacher and conductor; he played the piano in public for charitable purposes only, and helped to set up a new musical conservatory in Budapest in his beloved Hungary. Meanwhile he was composing in an idiom so advanced that the results bewildered later generations as much as his own.

These later generations, failing to understand the magnitude of the Liszt phenomenon, seem to have responded by trying to cut it down to size. The composer is supposed first of all to have sold out his high ideals to the applause of his listening public, and then to have sold out that same public by abandoning the concert platform and entering the Church. The facts offer a different

perspective. Liszt found his religious faith during childhood, and it never left him during his years as the Romantic era's musical hero *par excellence*: even among his early works, secular barnstorming rubs shoulders with religious subject matter. Decades later, the Abbé Liszt's output was continuing to present devotional choral works alongside some of the most hedonistic and brilliant piano music ever written. If a composer defies the categories into which his work is supposed to fit, then the reasonable assertion has to be made that there is something wrong with the categories themselves.

In any case it is hard to understand why attempts to pigeonhole this supremely free spirit among composers should be thought necessary at all. The process seems to relate to an underlying sense that somehow Liszt 'had it too easy'. It is considered intellectually respectable for a composer to struggle for most of his life – as Wagner did, for instance – to achieve his ultimate artistic goals. Liszt had already achieved some of his by his mid-thirties; and (a greater heresy, perhaps) he had earned a lot of money in the process. Fortunate in his multiple talents, he also had the gift of being able to handle those talents so that they enhanced rather than diminished one another. For all his image – self-styled to some extent – of the definitive wild Romantic artist, a kind of musical Byron, Liszt had a sane and balanced personality, at least by the standards of genius. Until his physical health began to decline, he was on the whole free of the destabilising manias that brought such unhappiness to, for instance, Schumann or Tchaikovsky. From his earliest days as a prodigy to his journey in old age through the early stages of musical modernism, Liszt the composer seems always to have known and understood (perhaps with momentary exceptions) exactly what he was doing.

There is room here only to scratch the surface of the achievements of such an extraordinary artist – Liszt the Romantic dreamer and lover, the prophetic composer, literary connoisseur, Hungarian patriot and unofficial musical ambassador, pianistic magician, devout Catholic, untiring teacher, gifted writer, and the exceptionally dedicated supporter of musical causes besides his own (as Berlioz and Wagner, to name just two of his fellow composers, would have warmly attested if caught in the

right mood). Such individuals are always ahead of everybody else. It is a lonely position, but one that Liszt knew how to come to terms with. He also remains the only great composer to have written a book about another. His *Life of Chopin* is one of the first and most sympathetic studies of the friend and contemporary whose music and artistic values he deeply admired, despite the temperamental differences that later forced them apart, and which might yet have been bridged if Chopin had not died at the age of thirty-nine. The words with which Liszt introduced his fellow artist to his readers could apply equally to himself.

> *If it has been often proved that 'no one is a prophet in his own country', is it not equally true that the prophets, the men of the future, who feel its life in advance, and prefigure it in their works, are never recognised as prophets in their own times? It would be presumptuous to assert that it can ever be otherwise. In vain may the young generations of artists protest against the 'Anti-Progressives', whose invariable custom it is to assault and beat down the living with the dead. Time alone can test the real value, or reveal the hidden beauties, either of musical compositions, or of kindred efforts in the sister arts.*

Liszt's life and work present a challenge when it comes to a project of this kind. The narrative of the life of most composers usually gets into its stride only when the subject has reached early adulthood. Like Mozart and Mendelssohn, however, Liszt was already a widely travelled celebrity in his teenage years. Other areas of his life, too, such as his epic concert-giving tours, are as significant in musical and historical terms as his legacy of works. These in turn are so numerous that unbroken discussion of even a reasonable selection risks becoming a non-stop worklist. In the pages that follow, therefore,

I have chosen to interleave the four main 'chapters' of Liszt's life with a parallel survey of his music.

Given such an immense and variegated output, trying to decide what constitutes 'the essential Liszt' is difficult. So I have not gone into excessive detail regarding the multiple reincarnations of many of his works, if it is sufficiently clear (as it usually is) which version represents Liszt's final thoughts. Then again, some of the preliminary versions of the piano music are more than interesting and important enough to deserve attention.

There are two widely accepted catalogues of Liszt's works: the first one by Peter Raabe (mentioned above) and the second one compiled by Humphrey Searle for his entry on the composer in the 1954 edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Both of these have since been revised and updated in the light of further discoveries and, with that proviso, both are accurate and valuable. Instead of classifying everything along chronological lines, as in Ludwig Köchel's catalogue of Mozart's works, Raabe followed the procedure of the BWV (*Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis*) numbers for Bach's music: Liszt's works are grouped by genre – piano solo, orchestra, piano and orchestra, sacred choral, secular choral, opera, and so on – and are listed more or less chronologically within those groups. Searle takes a similar approach, but his organisation is more consistent and logical, with the groups more clearly subdivided by genre (as in the piano music). Almost every work by Liszt, however, has a unique title, so I have only used catalogue numbers in the course of the text where necessary, for instance when referring to one of Liszt's several *Ave Maria* or *Pater noster* settings. The CD Track Lists and Annotations of CD Tracks, however, give both the S (Searle) and R (Raabe) numbers after each work.

Chapter 1

The Life, 1811–1847
From Prodigy to Travelling Virtuoso

The Life, 1811–1847
From Prodigy to Travelling Virtuoso

Franz Liszt was born on 22 October 1811 in a village cottage in Raiding, in the eastern Austrian province of Burgenland. The geographical heart of Europe is an appropriate birthplace for the composer whose life and work were to encompass the entire world of nineteenth-century classical music. Raiding (the Hungarian name of which is Doborján) lies where the gentle hills of lower Austria give way to the flatlands stretching away past the Neusiedlersee lake and its surrounding marshes, towards the wide spaces of the Hungarian plain to the north and east. The border between the present-day nation states of Hungary and Austria is as arbitrary, however, as any that are not conveniently demarcated by seas, rivers or mountain ranges, and in Liszt's time the dividing-line between the two lands was much less distinct than it is today. Ruled over by the Habsburg dynasty, the predominantly Roman Catholic Austrian empire in 1811 extended from Italian Lombardy to Romanian Transylvania, and, on a north–south axis, from Czech Bohemia to the Balkan lands of Croatia and Dalmatia.

At the time that a Liszt mythology was developing during his lifetime, its subject (himself not always averse to this process, or at least not enough to stand in its way) liked to believe that he had aristocratic ancestry. It is now known that, on the contrary, Liszt's family was of a humble background. And in spite of his genuine sense of identity with his Hungarian roots, these did not in fact reach as far back as he would have liked. His earliest identified ancestor is his great-grandfather Sebastian List, one of an eighteenth-century generation of German-speaking serfs who migrated from Lower Austria to look for work on the feudal estates of the Hungarian lands. Sebastian became a small tenant farmer in the village of Ragendorf, north-east of the Neusiedlersee. One of his three

children was his son Georg List, born in 1755. Georg's long life brought him three wives, twenty-five children, and a varied career in the service of the local aristocratic dynasty, the Esterházy family.

The Esterházy estates covered large stretches of Burgenland, including the scattering of villages where Georg List began his twenty-five years as a schoolteacher. A natural musician, he played the piano, violin and organ, combining his teaching duties with those of a local choirmaster. Removed from the last of his teaching posts in Pottersdorf on account of his headstrong character, he had avoided destitution by securing a job in the Esterházy timber yard at Marz. Georg's son Adam – Liszt's father – was born in 1776 in Edelsthal. Aged only fourteen when his father lost his Pottersdorf teaching post, Adam left home to get himself an education at school in Pressburg (now the Slovakian capital Bratislava). He was already signing his family name in its Magyarised form of Liszt, thus emphasising his naturalised Hungarian ancestry. After graduating from school Adam became a novice at the nearby Franciscan monasteries of Malacka and Tyrnavia, but having entered the priesthood he became restless under its restrictions and left the order.

After a year as a philosophy student at Pressburg University, Adam secured himself a post as a clerk at the Esterházy estate of Forchtenau. But what he most wanted was to move to Eisenstadt, where the Esterházy palace had its own orchestra. In 1801 he composed a *Te Deum* setting for chorus and small orchestra, submitting it to the current Esterházy ruler, Prince Nicolaus II. Four more years passed before he was granted his longed-for transfer to Eisenstadt, where he managed to combine his estate management duties with the position of second cellist in the Prince's orchestra. Thanks to Nicolaus II's father, the musical life presided over by the Esterházys had impressive credentials: in the preceding decades Prince Nicolaus Joseph had assembled a private orchestra at the family's second palace at the village of Eszterháza, and engaged Franz Joseph Haydn as court Kapellmeister. Nicolaus II, to whom the title passed in 1790, was much less interested in music, and closed down operations at Eszterháza. But the orchestra in Eisenstadt was allowed to continue.

This is the beginning of *Liszt: His Life and Music*.
The full booklet, accompanied by two CDs and a free website with more music,
is available to buy from www.naxos.com.