

Franz Liszt (October 22, 1811 – July 31 1886)

Some members of our audience may wonder why our orchestra is dedicating an entire concert to the works of one composer. A glance at the title line above gives part of the story – Franz Liszt was born *exactly* two hundred years ago. But, far more than the coincidence of date, it is because Liszt's exceptional music and personality still have the power to fascinate us and are most assuredly worthy of our attention.

Liszt was possibly the most famous – some might add notorious – person of his time. His fame, at least initially, was a consequence of his prowess at the piano. Much that we take for granted today in the world of music we owe to Liszt. He invented the concept of the recital and was the first to apply the term to music. He was the first to turn the piano sideways (so that the audience could admire his profile). Small wonder that many scholars believe him to have been the greatest pianist the world has yet known! Writer Harold Schonberg describes Liszt's persona as a piano virtuoso in this manner: "He had everything in his favor – good looks, magnetism, power, a colossal technique, an unprecedented sonority, and the kind of opportunism (at least in his early years) that could cater to the public in the most cynical manner." Though Liszt studied and arranged the music of Bach, Beethoven and many others, his greatest influences were contemporaries: Berlioz, from whom he learned to compose with color and on a large scale, Chopin, whose musical contributions were subtlety and poetic expression, Paganini, whose virtuosity and performance style on the violin Liszt consciously and deliberately transferred to the piano, and Wagner, who formed something of a "mutual admiration society" with Liszt, each finding inspiration in the other's music.

Liszt was the "rock star" of his age. His Hungarian origin only added to his carefully cultivated and mesmerizing aura. He was a man whose sexual conquests were the scandal of Europe (becoming an abbé of the church in his later years apparently didn't slow him down a bit) but more than that, in an age of rigid class distinctions, he moved among the European aristocracy, demanded to be treated as an equal and *was*.

During Liszt's musical career, especially the early years, his reputation as a composer was overshadowed by his preeminence as a pianist. Naturally enough, most of his early compositions were written for his own performance and designed to display his formidable technique. Though of interest because they demonstrate his amazing powers as a pianist, most of these works lacked musical depth and are rarely performed today.

As the years passed, however, Liszt's compositions became more original and musically sophisticated. He did not use the classical forms but invented his own. He developed the concept of *thematic transformation* in which a theme might be altered to serve as a second subject and altered again as the subject of a *finale*. He was the originator of the "symphonic poem," a single movement work of a programmatic (descriptive) nature inspired by a poem, a painting or some other external stimulus – a musical genre that became the vogue and culminated with the works of such composers as Richard Strauss and Erich Korngold.

In his later years, Liszt began to experiment musically. He set aside the virtuoso style and his harmony became dissonant and open. These late compositions were little-known for many years and have only lately received more attention. Though often mere sketches rather than finished compositions, they hint at impressionism and even expressionism and foreshadow the music of the twentieth century.

Rákóczy March

The melody of the *Rákóczy March* dates from the first third of the 18th century. There seems to be some ambiguity concerning the origin of the tune, some sources listing the composer as anonymous and others attributing it to the little-known Hungarian Michael Barma. The tune was a lament that bemoaned the oppression of the Magyars by the Austrian Hapsburg Empire. It quickly became associated with the name of Francis Rákóczy II, who led the Hungarian uprising of 1703. Rákóczy is considered a national hero of Hungary and the tune was said to be his favorite march. The march is an unofficial national anthem of Hungary and it is often played at state occasions and military celebrations.

The Rákóczy March tune has been used by several composers, most notably Hector Berlioz who used it in his 1846 work, *The Damnation of Faust*. In addition to the orchestral version being performed for this concert, Liszt used the tune in his *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 15* for piano.

Liszt began work on this composition in 1865 but it was ten years later that it received its first performance on August 16, 1875. The work begins with the dramatic roll of the snare drum and timpani leading into a brief militaristic introduction. The melody is introduced by the lower strings and, in four bar phrases, is passed among various sections of the orchestra: the violins, the brasses, and the woodwinds with an interesting canonic treatment in the strings. Secondary themes are traded about among a solo trumpet and the trombones until strange modulations seem to interrupt and the March diminuendos, continuing softly with the rhythmic pulse in the strings. A “development” ensues with the themes modulating through a series of keys as the volume and intensity increase. The beginning of the march is recapitulated and this time the “development” leads to a stirring coda and a satisfyingly “brassy” conclusion.

Les Préludes

Though Liszt originated the symphonic poem, the majority of his works in this genre are rarely performed. This is not true of *Les Préludes*, however. It is among the most performed of all his works and is a regular part of the modern orchestral repertoire.

Like much of Liszt’s music, *Les Préludes* appeared in other guises before it evolved into the form in which it is known today. Though the exact date of Liszt’s first thematic conceptions is unknown, he composed a choral work titled *The Four Elements (The Earth, The Winds, The Oceans, The Stars)* in Paris in 1844 and 1845 that contained the first thematic material that can be identified as being related to *Les Préludes*. In 1848 Liszt

wrote an introduction to this work using themes from each movement. It was this introduction which, after numerous revisions eventually became *Les Préludes*. The first performance took place on February 28, 1854 in Weimar under Liszt's baton.

Though *Les Préludes* began as a prelude to a choral work, this is not the source of its title. *Les Préludes* refers to a poem of the same title, by the French Romantic poet, Lamartine. But the inspiration for the work is still more complicated – after the work was finished, Liszt changed his mind about its meaning, disregarding the poem (though leaving its title) and wrote this paragraph:

“What else is life but a series of preludes to that unknown hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death? Love is the enchanted dawn of all existence; but what fate is there whose first delights of happiness are not interrupted by some storm, whose fine illusions are not dissipated by some mortal blast, consuming its altar as though by a stroke of lightning? And what cruelly wounded soul, issuing from one of these tempests, does not endeavor to solace its memories in the calm serenity of rural life? Nevertheless, man does not resign himself for long to the enjoyment of that beneficent warmth which he first enjoyed in Nature's bosom, and when 'the trumpet sounds the alarm' he takes up his perilous post, no matter what struggle calls him to its entire possession of his powers.”

In simplified form, this rather dense prose would seem to tell us that the music is about various extreme and passionate emotional states, a fact that has led many scholars to believe that it is autobiographical in nature, given Liszt's own colorful personality!

Like all symphonic poems, the work is in one movement. It begins softly with a slow introduction uses rising modulations and suspensions in the strings and winds to build tension, all leading to the main theme played by the brass. A contrasting legato “love theme” follows in the strings soon joined by a horn. A hauntingly beautiful secondary theme is played by the horns. Gradually the mood is lost as tension begins to intrude. The mood becomes stormy, seeming to evoke visions of waves at sea. The love theme returns, seemingly calming the “troubled waters.” Tension again intrudes, but this time it lacks the previous sense of foreboding. Now the music becomes increasingly energetic and ends in a triumphant, martial finale.

Concerto No. 2 in A Major

Adagio sostenuto assai

Allegro agitato assai

Allegro moderato

Allegro deciso

Marziale un poco meno allegro

Allegro animato

Like the majority of Liszt's works, *Concerto No. 2* was evolutionary in nature. Liszt first worked on the *Concerto* in 1839 but laid it aside for ten years. He completed and orchestrated it in 1849 but it was revised at least three more times, the final revision taking place in 1861. The first performance (obviously of an earlier version) took place on

January 7, 1857 in Weimar, performed by Hans von Bronsart, one of Liszt's students and the person to whom the *Concerto* was dedicated. Liszt himself was the conductor.

Unlike the traditional three movement concerto form, this *Concerto* is heard in one continuous movement. The opening theme, introduced in the clarinet at the very beginning, is the basis of the entire work though Liszt transforms it through many manifestations. The beginning establishes a mood of quiet restraint. The solo piano begins, by supporting the woodwind melody with a quiet accompaniment. Melodies are heard from the flute, oboe and horn before a brief *cadenza* leads into the *allegro agitato assai*. A stormy *scherzo* section ensues featuring wave-like chromatics in the piano, rapid exchanges between the piano, and the strings, and full-blown *tutti* passages.

An expressive string melody opens the *Allegro moderato* with a moving line of the violins and violas sounding above the sustained basses and cellos. A brief *cadenza* leads the way to a lovely cello solo accompanied by the piano. The piano and strings enter into a passionate dialogue, with piano alternating between melody and accompaniment. The melody is assumed by the oboe with a flute later adding a brief ascending countermelody and this lovely section is concluded with another connecting piano *cadenza*.

The *Allegro deciso* begins forcefully with an energetic accompaniment figure in the piano underlying a forceful exchange between the brasses and the woodwinds. The strings briefly assume the melody supported by sweeping chromatic scales in the piano. The piano and strings exchange figures of increasing intensity, reaching a stormy climax with full orchestra. The volume then diminishes but the six-eight *scherzo* tempo never changes until a *sempre allegro* passage in duple meter again crescendos and the soloist's descending diatonic scales signal the transition to the *Marziale*.

The *Marziale* commences in grand march style with the melody in the strings and woodwinds and a dotted-rhythm countermelody in the brass. The melody soon evolves into a rhythmic figure in the orchestra that rests mid-bar for triumphant triplets in the piano. The pattern repeats until *un poco animato* is indicated, and the tempo increases as the piano plays rapid sixteenth's while the woodwinds play an ascending line and the strings alternate *arco* rhythmic figures with *pizzicatos*. The piano plays *fortissimo* octaves as the brass entrances carry the orchestra to a dramatic pause after a dominant chord. The mood changes once again, to a *legato* melody with markings such as *rubato*, *cantando*, *espressivo* and *dolcissimo* exhorting the soloist and orchestra to play with the greatest possible beauty and expressiveness.

A shimmering series of ascending eighth notes in the piano lead to an *Allegro animato* that opens with a brisk, staccato melody in the flutes interspersed with chromatic piano figures that establish the sense of momentum that will carry us to the end. The energy becomes greater still with a *stretto*, *molto accelerando* and, with the full forces of the orchestra and piano together, the *Concerto* comes to an end.

Totentanz

The image shows the beginning of the first trombone part of Liszt's Totentanz. It consists of two staves of music in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The tempo is marked 'Andante.' The first staff begins with a piano (Pk.) dynamic and features a melodic line starting in the third bar, marked with a first ending bracket (1) and a second ending bracket (2). The melody is marked 'f pesante'. The second staff continues the melodic line, ending with a cadence (Cad.) marked 'sf'.

The musical notation above is the beginning of *Totentanz* as it appears in the first trombone part. The melody, which begins in the third bar, is the *Dies Irae*, a Gregorian plainchant whose text comes from a thirteenth century Latin poem. *Dies Irae* translates as “Day of Wrath.” The *Dies Irae* was, for centuries, a part of the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass. It was removed from the ordinary mass in the liturgical reform of 1969 – 1970 but remains as a hymn of the Divine Office. The first stanza of the chant translates from the Latin as: *Day of wrath! O day of mourning! See fulfilled the prophets' warning, Heaven and earth in ashes burning!*

Why, you may ask, is the *Dies Irae* in Liszt’s *Totentanz*? It is not only *in Totentanz* – it is the *basis* of *Totentanz*. The work is a series of wonderfully creative variations on this melody and the listener who has familiarized him or herself with the tune will hear it throughout. The German title *Totentanz* translates as “Dance of Death” and Liszt was evidently obsessed with the topic of death, redemption, heaven and hell. While in Paris, Liszt is known to have visited hospitals, asylums and even prison dungeons to view the dying and condemned!

As with the other selections on our program, *Totentanz* is an evolutionary work. Liszt conceived the work in 1838. It was completed in 1849 and revised twice in 1853 and 1859. The first performance occurred on April 15, 1865.

The biographical notes about Liszt in the opening paragraphs above mentioned that his music presaged the musical developments of the twentieth century. A significant aspect of *Totentanz* is its remarkably modern scoring of the piano in a manner that anticipates the music of Bartok composed one hundred years later. We think of the piano as a melodic instrument. Of course it *is* used melodically and expressively but technically speaking, it is a *percussion* instrument, and Liszt fully exploits this percussive quality.

The percussive nature of Liszt’s scoring becomes evident immediately. The piano opens the work with a *staccato* pounding accompaniment figure doubled by the timpani and the ominous *Dies Irae* theme is sounded by the clarinets (in their low register) the trombones and tuba, and the violas, cellos and basses. Piano *cadenzas* follow, separated by percussive, *staccato* chords in the orchestra and the piano’s own brief quotes of a *Dies Irae* fragment in the left hand. A brief *allegro* follows with the theme traded about the sections of the orchestra scored in cut time as the piano plays a repeated eighth note pattern in six-eight time. This brief interlude soon fades away and a pause ensues.

The piano alone plays the theme's two phrases at a moderate tempo with a one bar extension of each phrase. Variation one begins with a dotted rhythm counter melody in the solo bassoon, soon joined by the second bassoon and strings. The piano plays the counter melody in the right hand while the left plays a percussive half-speed version of the theme. An eight bar interlude follows with the orchestra playing the first four bars of changing rhythms and the piano echoing.

The piano begins Variation two with the accented theme in the left hand as the left hand also plays a dotted figure and the right plays rapid scales all accompanied by the *pizzicato* strings. The horn interjects a rising call. This pattern continues with increasing intensity as the piano adds ascending *glissandi* in the right hand. The speed and intensity continue to increase in a repeated four bar *poco animato* with triplet figures in strings assuming the theme and the piano *glissandi* become bi-directional.

Variation three is in triple meter and marked *Molto Vivace*. It is a brief and very intense variation with the piano playing a driving off-the-beat dotted rhythm throughout while the strings play intense rhythmic figures; the woodwinds play a rising line. The low brass adds energy with repeated soundings of the tonic note. The entire variation gradually crescendos until the final bar when the piano alone sustains the final note.

Variation four is mostly played by the piano alone. It begins with a quiet *canon* marked *Lento* and, after a relatively simple beginning, commences an ethereal section that features rippling *arpeggiated* sixteenths in the piano's upper octaves. A *dolcissimo* triple meter section follows with both three-four and nine-eight time being used simultaneously. After eight bars a clarinet enters with an altered fragment of the theme. A sixteen bar six-eight *presto* rendering of the theme leads into variation five.

The fifth variation is a *fugato* marked *vivace*. It begins with the piano introducing the fugue subject (the theme) as rapid sixteenths. As the fugue develops and the subject "layers" upon itself the listener could momentarily believe that he or she is listening to Bach but the illusion is soon shattered as the orchestra enters and the theme is traded between the strings and woodwinds. The power increases as the strings take the theme playing energetic repeated sixteenths as rhythmic figures are played by the winds. The variation continues with the theme being treated in a succession of diverse orchestrations and *cadenzas*, each more energetic than the one previous and through it all the piano pours forth a dazzling and diverse technical display.

The sixth and final variation begins with a ringing horn call. It is essentially a set of variations itself. A sixteen bar *poco meno allegro* has the piano playing a delicate, high, triplet pattern. The piano plays the melody in eighths, accompanying itself with sixteenths as the strings play *pizzicato*, and the oboes play a rhythmic figure. A subtle triangle is heard and the violins add a spooky figure that seems to foreshadow Mussorgsky's Night on Bald Mountain. Another brief, delicate passage is followed by a section in which the melody is played broadly by woodwinds later joined by the horn as the strings play *col legno* (with the wood of the bow) on the afterbeats, the piano playing sixteenths all the while. The piano again plays alone, each phrase ending in rapid ascending chro-

matics. The orchestra and the piano exchange short phrases and then the piano plays an extraordinary section in which the left hand plays the strident, *staccato* melody while the right hand plays rapid, long scales that seem almost disassociated with the left hand's melodic duties. A brief, rapidly modulating *presto* take us to the final driving *allegro animato* that, with the full power of the orchestra including timpani, cymbals and tam tam, drives to an exciting conclusion.