

FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886) BY COSMO BUONO Edited by Johanna Roman



Liszt was born on October 22, 1811 in Raiding, Hungary to Adam and Anna Liszt. His father, a musician, was employed in the court of Prince Nikolaus II Esterhazy. Liszt began piano studies at age seven, started composing at eight and made his first tour at nine. He received financial support from patrons to continue his music education in Vienna where he worked with the great pianist and pedagogue, Carl Czerny. In 1823 he applied to the Paris Conservatory but was denied entry due to his foreign birth. In 1826, Liszt's father died and this loss had a profound effect on the 15-year-old. He began to question a career in music and turned to reading, concentrating on art and religion, both of which had significant influence on his composing. He also read many of the great writers of the time including Heinrich Heine, Victor Hugo and Alphonse de Lamartine. He sought spiritual counsel and even considered joining the clergy. In 1830 he met the composer Hector Berlioz whose music, particularly the "*Symphonie Fantastique*" influenced him greatly. He began to compose with vigor. The return to composition grew even greater after he attended a concert by the great violin virtuoso, Niccoló Paganini. Chopin and Liszt had a relationship that was at times friendly and at others competitive.

In 1833, Liszt truly came into his own as a composer and virtuoso. He began a relationship with Countess Marie d'Argoult who left her husband and family to live with Liszt. She inspired him to compose, perform and teach. Together, they had three children: Blandine, Daniel and Cosima (later the second wife of Wagner). As touring virtuoso, Liszt took Europe by storm, presenting more than 1,000 recitals in a period of eight years. Liszt wrote compositions not only as works of art but to dazzle as well, such as his "Trois Études de Concert". He became a Freemason and was awarded a doctorate from the University of Königsberg.

Returning to Hungary in 1839, Liszt immersed himself in the culture and rich heritage of folk music, particularly that of the gypsies, which is clearly heard in his "Hungarian Rhapsodies." They were also written as virtuoso works to close his recitals with great bravura. In 1847, Liszt played in Kiev and met Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein. His relationship with Marie d'Argoult being over, he and the Princess soon became lovers. She encouraged him to give up touring and focus on composition. In 1848 he accepted

an offer to become Kapellmeister in Weimar where he taught, wrote articles and composed many of his finest compositions. Weimar was a city of modern music and the “New German School” welcomed composers like Liszt and Wagner. Liszt became an advocate of Wagner’s music and the two men had a deep friendship that lasted until Wagner’s death in 1883. In fact, Wagner once said of Liszt, *“I feel thoroughly contemptible as a musician, whereas you, as I have now convinced myself, are the greatest musician of all times.”* High praise, coming from someone who had quite an ego about his own musical ability.

The next few years were especially difficult for Liszt. Princess Wittgenstein’s husband would not release her from their marriage, and Liszt had to endure the loss of two of his children – Daniel in 1859 and Blandine in 1862. He retreated to a monastery near Rome and joined the Order of Saint Francis. But the draw of music was too strong and he returned to Weimar in 1869 and later to Budapest to teach. Liszt was a very complicated man. Though intensely spiritual, he had a love/hate relationship with the Catholic Church, probably due to his conflict with spirituality and a life of pleasure. He was generous and humanitarian and taught many students without remuneration. His transcriptions of other composers’ works not only added to the piano repertoire but helped bring the music to the attention of the public. Liszt is often criticized as a showman and there is a certain element to that, but the music is enhanced by the virtuosity, color and ambience it brings. In 1881, Liszt’s health started to deteriorate and he died on July 31, 1886 in Bayreuth, Germany.

LISZT THE PIANIST

Liszt was clearly one of the greatest pianists and made enormous contributions to the scope and technique of playing. In his studies with Carl Czerny (Beethoven’s student and confidante), he continued Beethoven’s style, playing with close fingers and a pressure touch which contributed to the quality and volume of sound. Hector Berlioz said of his playing: *“He had accents and nuances which were seen as impossible until now.”* He innovated additions to standard piano technique. His “Transcendental Etudes” were considered to be playable only by him when they first appeared. His friendship with Chopin and knowledge of the great composer’s works provided an inspiration for the lyrical, expressive nature of Liszt’s music. When a literary work is referenced, as in the “Petrarch Sonnets”, it should be studied.

RUBATO

From the quotes of those who heard him play, it seems clear that this was a major consideration for Liszt as an expressive pianist. In fact, he referred to the tyranny of the bar line, suggesting that his playing was rhythmically quite free. He is one of the most

romantic of all pianists and the music requires the freedom that continuous rubato provides.

TONE COLOR

From the accounts of his listeners, he played with a very wide array of nuance from a delicate *pianissimo* to thunderous *fortissimo*. Liszt was a compositional visionary and he anticipated the color of the Impressionist school with his writing, particularly “*Le Jeux d’Eaux a la Villa d’Este*”, “*En Rêve*”, “*La Lugubre Gondola*” and “*Nuages Gris*”, among others. Subtle color variations controlled by the fingers and pedals are essential to a successful performance of his works. If you are studying a transcription, it is essential to be thoroughly acquainted with the original work. This is especially true if it is an operatic scene or an art song.

QUOTES ABOUT LISZT

“Every day Liszt appears greater to me. Today he played again in such a way that we all trembled with emotion and delight.” —Felix Mendelssohn

“We have heard Liszt. He can be compared to no other virtuoso. He is the only one of his kind. When I heard Liszt for the first time, I was overwhelmed and sobbed aloud, it so shook me...how heavenly it is when he plays tenderly. My own playing seems so boring and haphazard to me now. After hearing and seeing Liszt’s bravura, I feel like a student.” —Clara Schumann

“I have never found any artist, except Paganini, to possess, in so high a degree as Liszt, this power of subjugating, elevating, and leading the public... We are overwhelmed by a flood of tones and feelings. It is an instantaneous variety of wildness, tenderness, boldness, and airy grace.” —Robert Schumann

“I should like to rob him of his way of rendering my own Études.” —Frédéric Chopin

“In comparison with Liszt, all other pianists are children.” —Anton Rubenstein

“Liszt performed marvels of power or precision and of soul. The translation was as beautiful as a poem. We have heard nothing greater.” —Ernest Legouve from *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*

“Chopin carried you away into a dreamland, in which you would have liked to dwell forever. Liszt was all sunshine and dazzling splendor, subjugating his hearers with a power that none could withstand. Never harsh, never suggesting thumping.” -Sir Charles Halle

LISZT QUOTES

“A person of any mental quality has ideas of his own. This is common sense.”

“My piano is to me what a ship is to the sailor, what a steed is to the Arab. It is the intimate personal depository of everything that stirred wildly in my brain during the most impassioned days of my youth. It was there that all my wishes, all my dreams, all my joys, and all my sorrow lay.”

“I did not compose my work as one might put on a church vestment...rather it sprung from the truly fervent faith of my heart.”

“Music is never stationary; successive forms and styles are only like so many resting places—like tents pitched and taken down again on the road to the Ideal.”

“Music is the heart of life. She speaks love; without it, there is no possible good and with it everything is beautiful.”

“For the virtuoso, musical works are in fact nothing but tragic and moving materializations of his emotions; he is called upon to make them speak, weep, sing, and sigh, to recreate them in accordance with his own consciousness. In this way, he, like the composer, is a creator, for he must have within himself those passions that he wishes to bring so intensely to life.”

EDITIONS

The [Editio Musica Budapest](#) is quite fine and easy to work from, and the [Peters Edition](#) edited by Liszt’s pupil [Emil von Sauer](#) is also recommended.



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FURTHER STUDY

There are a number of biographies. Alan Walker has written extensively about Liszt, and Franz Liszt by Oliver Hilmes is a good account. Some great performers of Liszt's music would include: Georges Cziffra, Claudio Arrau, Lazar Berman, Martha Argerich, Krystian Zimerman, Benno Moiseiwitsch, Vladimir Horowitz and Arthur Friedheim (who was a Liszt pupil. The recording quality is poor, but the playing great).