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COMPOSER OF THE MONTH

FRANZ LISZT

BRILLIANT BUT ENIGMATIC VIRTUOSO

BODY

Liszt pushes physical demands on the pianist to the limits. With the quantity, speed and density of notes, not to mention his emotional and dynamic scope, he stretches player and instrument towards the near-impossible. Perhaps the peak is his 12 *Études d'exécution transcendente* – works that place 'transcendental' technique at the service of poetry and a thrilling palette of colour.

MIND

Liszt often based works on narrative or poetic sources such as Petrarch, Dante, Goethe and Baudelaire. Literary and artistic inspiration focused his fertile imagination; besides underpinning some of his best piano music, it led to his invention of the genre of symphonic poem. And even the epic struggles suggested in his abstract works, such as the Sonata in B minor, are sometimes related to narratives – in this case, Faust.

SPIRIT

The religious side of Liszt is probably his least recognised aspect – yet it underlies some of his most satisfying piano pieces, notably the ecstatic 'Bénédiction de Dieu dans le solitude', among the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. This is the private Liszt, the opposite to his crowd-pleasing *Grand Galop Chromatique*...

INFLUENCE

Liszt's harmonic explorations were in tune with those of Wagner but his late pieces, featuring destabilised tonality, point the way towards Debussy and Schoenberg. His *Bagatelle sans Tonalité* is the first known piece of music to overturn traditional tonal systems. Liszt's influence extended to Russia through his pupil Alexander Siloti, and encompassed figures ranging from Busoni to Sibelius.

Although Liszt was a showman whose legacy consists of terrifyingly difficult, impressive piano works, there was a lot more depth and variety to him than that, argues *Jessica Duchon*

Franz Liszt was a controversial figure in his day. Nearly 200 years on, he still is. As composer, performer and human being alike, he is multifaceted and paradoxical. At his concerts women swooned in the aisles – but though a ladies' man and fabled lover, he was always attracted to the Church and ultimately took holy orders; and though a public showman who wouldn't have disgraced Max Clifford's PR roster, he was also a creative visionary whose most adventurous works pointed towards those of his son-in-law, Richard Wagner, and beyond. To accentuate one aspect of him at the expense of the others is to give only a limited portrait of his genius. Liszt is a seminal figure in the musical landscapes of both the 19th and 20th centuries, but he is still maligned, misunderstood and misrepresented almost every day.

Back in the 1980s, it was fashionable to dismiss his over-the-top opera fantasies, to sigh condescendingly at the rhetorical excesses of the *Sonate: Après une lecture de Dante*, to groan over the flashy transcriptions of Schubert and Schumann songs. Some pianists tried to rescue Liszt from the impure taint of technical display, accentuating the epic, abstract qualities of the B minor Sonata but downplaying its showiness (not an easy aim). Today, though, countless pianists go overboard in the opposite

direction, crashing through the Hungarian Rhapsodies and fantasies on *Don Giovanni* and *Rigoletto* as fast and loudly as possible, paying scant attention to the wealth of colour and detail that make them worthwhile. And were it not for Liszt's passion for Schubert's Lieder and his championing of them in transcription form in his concerts, we might not have known the real things today.

Liszt was born on 22 October 1811 in Raiding, a village in the heart of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father, Adam Liszt, was a musician himself, a cellist in the orchestra at the Eszterházy court, where he performed under the baton of Haydn and even, once, Beethoven. But Liszt would later recall that his most profound musical impressions came from Gypsy bands. Liszt left his native Hungary before he was a teenager and never mastered the country's language, but his music flows with the mesmeric magic of the Gypsy players he had encountered as a child. Their music represented the spirit of Hungary in 19th-century classical compositions – partly thanks to Liszt.

The boy Liszt studied in Vienna with Carl Czerny; subsequently the family moved to Paris so that he could attend the Conservatoire, although at first the institution's director, Cherubini, did not wish to accept a foreigner, however gifted. Since the Liszts were not well off, the youthful prodigy began to



ILLUSTRATION: RSKO

give concert tours when he was 12. His compositional studies began under the tutelage of Ferdinando Paer – he started writing an opera when he was only 12 or 13 – but at 14, he underwent a profound religious *coup de foudre* and begged his father to let him become a priest. The request was refused, but the death of his father only a year later was a blow which left a lasting impact on the youngster's complex psyche.

He suffered a breakdown in the late 1820s, his disillusion with music worsened by a romantic let-down. Rescue came in two startling forms. One was the 1830 Revolution in Paris, which injected him with fresh idealism and energy. The other was a concert by Niccolò Paganini in April 1832. That evening inspired Liszt's future. He would become, he decided, as great a pianist as Paganini was a violinist.

His fire alight, this lost and confused youth began to evolve into an unstoppable artistic lion. Great composers were often great pianists – Beethoven, for one, and Chopin when he could face performing – but nobody had previously elicited the kind of reaction that Liszt drew from his crowds: not so much worshipful as hysterical. He undertook solo concert tours on a scale never seen before; the notion of the piano recital as we know it now was his invention, designed for himself, and the virtuosity of his compositions was unprecedented in the scope of piano music. The result was the fabled 'Lisztomania' which swept Europe for over a decade.

Controversy and jealousy were never far from this newly invented phenomenon, the international superstar. His personal life was

dramatic: in 1835 he eloped to Switzerland with the married Marie d'Agoult, with whom he lived for four years and had three children.

His fever-pitch recitals were condemned by many luminaries – perhaps on grounds of poor taste, but perhaps out of jealousy. Nevertheless, Liszt remained on friendly terms with many of his peers including Mendelssohn, Chopin and Schumann. He maintained his spiritual leanings, too, which emerged in compositions such as the meditative *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. Some of his finest works sprang from extra-musical inspiration, for example *Années de Pèlerinage*, a musical evocation of the landscape, art and poetry of Switzerland and Italy.

If his orchestral music never reached the same peak of inspiration as his output for solo piano, he is credited with inventing the symphonic poem. Although most of his contributions to this genre of story-telling in music are

rarely heard now – *Hungaria? Hamlet? Battle of the Huns*, anyone? – these works were hugely influential, not least on Wagner and, later, Strauss; and the ambition of his *Faust Symphony* made up for the brashness of *Les préludes*. At the other extreme, his substantial repertoire of exquisite solo songs amply displays the influence of his beloved Schubert.

Liszt abandoned Lisztomania in 1847, retiring from the concert platform aged 36 and settling in Weimar, where he had been appointed 'Kapellmeister extraordinaire'. The same year, he met the Princesse Carolyne de Sayn-Wittgenstein, who moved in with him and hoped to marry him after a tortuous process extracting herself from her previous marriage. The story goes that the pair intended to marry on Liszt's 50th birthday, but the plans fell through at the last minute. Accounts



FAMILY RIFT: Liszt with his daughter Cosima, who upset her father by eloping with Wagner

vary. Some say that this was because Carolyne's divorce was not finalised; others that she changed her mind because her would-be husband had spent her fortune and continued to indulge in countless love affairs.

Liszt's *volte face* was extreme: in 1865 he joined a Franciscan monastery in Rome, taking minor orders and transforming himself into the Abbé Liszt. From then on he divided his time between Rome, Weimar and Budapest, and between teaching and composing. When his daughter Cosima eloped with Wagner from her marriage to the conductor Hans von Bülow, having already bore the composer several children, the religious Liszt declined to speak to her for years (though one notices who had set her such an example in the first place). He continued, however, to champion Wagner's music and became a visitor to Bayreuth and its festival. Academics

familiar with Liszt's more obscure writings allege that Wagner's anti-Semitism pales by comparison.

The cross-fertilisation between Liszt and Wagner was not restricted to unpalatable philosophies. Liszt's late piano music – notably such works as *Nuages gris* and *Bagatelle sans Tonalité* – find him exploring the outer reaches of harmonic language in a way that not even his son-in-law had yet attempted. The intense chromaticism, mystical atmospheres and introverted subjectivity of these pieces puts them in line with the Symbolist movement burgeoning in French poetry – a world away from the extravaganzas of Liszt's concert career. By the time he wrote *Nuages gris* in 1881, he was ill, following a fall on a staircase in Weimar. But even his death in July 1886 has not escaped controversy: some accounts hint at medical error or malpractice.

Liszt remained, to the end, a Byronic individual of lavish romanticism – virtually the incarnation of the 19th

century. To represent him as lyrical and passionate without virtuosity is to misrepresent his nature; to display his music as shallow showmanship is to deny his massive intellectual, poetic, sensual and spiritual vitality. Perhaps we're still trying to get the measure of Franz Liszt – but that's as good a reason as any to keep on trying. ■

The 8th International Franz Liszt Piano Competition begins in Utrecht, Holland on 30 March. See www.liszt.nl

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April's Composers of the Week are:

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THE LIFE & TIMES A quick guide to the main events in the life of Franz Liszt

THE LIFE



1811 The only child of a chambermaid and a farm accountant, he is born on 22 October in Raiding, Hungary. His father is a talented amateur cellist and pianist who, as an employee of the Esterházy family, had played for Joseph Haydn in summer concerts at Eisenstadt.

1822 A talented pianist, he gives his first concert aged nine, after which his family move to Vienna so he can study with **CZERNY** and court Kapellmeister Antonio Salieri.



1833 In the salons of Paris he mingles with Delacroix, Georges Sand, Chopin, Paganini and Berlioz and begins an affair with writer Marie d'Agoult, eloping with her to Switzerland in 1835.

1839 Over eight years he establishes the solo piano recital as a new art form, giving over a 1,000 concerts of music ranging from JS Bach and Chopin to transcriptions of opera and gypsy dances, plus his own works (*Transcendental Studies*).



1848 He sets up home with new love **PRINCESS CAROLYNE ZU SAYN-WITTGENSTEIN** in Weimar, where as court Kapellmeister he introduces new music (Wagner's *Lohengrin*, 1850) and composes symphonies (*Faust*, *Dante*), pioneering symphonic poems (*Les préludes*, *Mazeppa*), the *Années de Pèlerinage* and the *Sonata in B minor*.



1858 His support of 'progressive' composers Berlioz and **WAGNER** brings hostility from supporters of 'conservative' Brahms, Schumann and Mendelssohn. He retreats to Rome where he begins the process of being ordained, composes the oratorio *Christus* (1867) and falls out with daughter Cosima when she leaves her husband for Wagner.



1870 When Rome falls to Italian troops, he stays in Hungary and gets involved in politics, accepting a seat in the legislature and founding a music academy. He divides his time between Weimar, Rome and Budapest, composing music with a darker tone (*Nuages gris*).

1886 He makes a triumphant 75th birthday visit to England where **QUEEN VICTORIA** receives this 'benevolent-looking old priest'. He is also reconciled with his daughter Cosima, before dying of heart failure in Bayreuth on 31 July.



COMPILED BY MADELINE LADELL

1811

THE TIMES

1822 French harp and piano manufacturer **SÉBASTIEN ÉRARD** patents his 'double escapement' piano mechanism, facilitating virtuosic rapid repetition of notes with precision and sensitivity. Impressed by its capabilities Liszt makes his Paris and London debuts on the instrument and dedicates his *Eight Variations* to his Érard.

1830 The July **REVOLUTION** in Paris sees Bourbon King Charles X overthrown and replaced by constitutional monarch Louis-Philippe. Liszt, sunken in a bout of depression, is suddenly filled with idealism and rushes to support the insurgents fighting at the end of his street; his mother later observes that 'the cannons cured him'.



1838 An ice-jam causes the **RIVER DANUBE** to overflow, destroying homes and crops thus bringing famine to several Hungarian towns including Pest and parts of Buda. Liszt gives ten recitals in aid of flood victims that raise 24,000 gulden, the largest donation received from a private individual.

1840 The Saint-Simonians, a semi-religious sect inspired by the late socialist utopian philosopher Henri de Rouvray, discuss free love, feminism and art in Paris salons, despite being banned by the authorities in 1832. Its ideals, which enchant Liszt, later fade amid more powerful left-wing movements that bring about the 1848 revolutions.

1853 The 'father of modern ophthalmology' Albrecht von Graefe settles in Berlin where he founds the *Archiv für Ophthalmologie* and pioneers the **SURGICAL TREATMENT OF GLAUCOMA AND CATARACT** using the recently invented ophthalmoscope. Liszt dies before undergoing planned cataract surgery by Graefe's cousin Alfred, also a distinguished oculist.



1863 After rejection by the Paris Salon, Edouard Manet's **DÉJEUNER SUR L'HERBE** causes a scandal at the *Salon des Refusés* for its portrayal of a naked woman with clothed men. With its rough brushstrokes and informal subject matter, it marks French art's transition from Realism to Impressionism.



1870 Victor Emmanuel II's troops conquer French-occupied **ROME**, soon making it the capital of a newly unified Italy. Liszt's friend Pope Pius IX is allowed to remain in residence although, unwilling to accept the papacy's loss of power and status after a 1,000 years, he declares himself a 'prisoner in the Vatican'.



1871-2 **GEORGE ELIOT** publishes her greatest novel, *Middlemarch*, a subtle psychological study of the moral choices faced by people constrained by society. The character of concert pianist Klesmer in her last novel *Daniel Deronda* is probably modelled on Liszt, whom she visits in Weimar in 1854.

