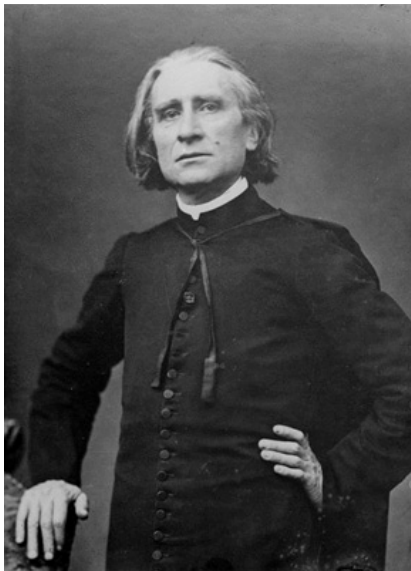


## Unwanted Liszt

by Jessica Duchen

January/February 2011



BBC Radio 3 is beginning Franz Liszt's bicentenary year with...wall-to-wall Mozart. Nothing could make clearer something that has bugged me for years: the critical, snobbish, misinformed and persistent denigration of a musician who was the very embodiment of Romanticism.

Ever since one of his Hungarian Rhapsodies featured in a Tom and Jerry cartoon, the unbelievably prolific composer and pianist, who was born on October 22, 1811, has been habitually dismissed as a shallow virtuoso, concerned merely with self-aggrandisement through the technical demands of his piano writing.

So when he has an anniversary, Radio 3's gut reaction is to turn up the corporation nose. Even the Budapest Festival Orchestra, launching Hungary's presidency of the EU at the Royal Festival Hall in January 2011, is electing to offer just a rather short piano concerto by their national musical titan, sandwiched between reliable Haydn and Beethoven.

Sex sells; Liszt has always sold on sex. Yes, he was a great virtuoso. Yes, he was a charismatic womaniser. Unfortunately, the constant sensationalising of his complicated love life, besides the tremendous difficulty involved in playing his music, has completely skewed our view of him.

In fact Liszt pursued his glamorous performing career with its associated "Lisztomania" for only about 15 years. By the time he was 37, it was all over. In 1848, he settled down in Weimar and refocused his art and his attitude. He became primarily a composer so prolific that his piano music alone, recorded complete by Leslie Howard for Hyperion, runs to a mind-boggling 95 CDs. Later still, from the early 1870s on, he visited his native Hungary for several months every year to teach at the music academy in Pest that today bears his name.

But if anything consistently obsessed Liszt, it was quite the opposite of his notorious sensuality. All his life he was a devout and mystical Catholic. And if we hear more of his fantasias on

popular operatic themes than we do of his oratorio *Christus* or his dozens of psalm settings and other sacred choral works, that says more about us than it does about him.

Born in the Hungarian village of Doborján (now Raiding), the son of a cellist in Haydn's orchestra at the nearby Esterházy court, the child Liszt became fascinated early on by the music of both the church and the local Gypsy bands. He quickly showed his exceptional pianistic talent and after studies in Vienna, where Beethoven is said to have blessed the 12-year-old prodigy with a kiss, his fame spread through Europe.

When he was 15, his father died. Liszt, living in Paris with his mother and supporting them both by teaching, fell into a deep depression, questioning the purpose of his music and of life itself. He considered becoming a priest. But in 1832 when he heard a recital by Paganini — the phenomenal violinist who did little to discourage the public's association of his image with that of the fiddle-playing devil — inspiration struck. Liszt decided to transform himself into the Paganini of the piano. The rest, as they say, is history.

Still, his assumption of a limited level of holy orders later, in 1865, and his status thereafter as the Abbé Liszt fulfilled an inclination that had been with him since adolescence. Some of his finest piano works reflect the meditative enchantment he found in legends of the saints or personal religious contemplation: the calm wonderment in *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude*, or the richly pictorial *St François d'Assise: La Prédication aux oiseaux* are just two examples. Throughout his oeuvre Liszt drew on many different extramusical sources: nature, art, poetry, travel, architecture, national pride and more, embracing a narrative approach to music which may even have fed in to his son-in-law Richard Wagner's notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* — the "complete artwork". Liszt's faith was one part of that connection of music to all around it. However, it was never less than central and is increasingly looking ripe for reassessment.

Take the ever-popular Piano Sonata in B minor. Given his internal conflicts — torn, as it were, between God and Paganini — it is no wonder that Liszt identified with the story of Faust. The B minor Sonata, supposedly an abstract work, often attracts claims of extra-musical inspiration, quite possibly Goethe's masterpiece. But another theory has emerged: the pianist Paul Barnes, in a lecture-recital on CD, suggests that the sonata is similar in shape to Liszt's overtly sacred works, notably *Via Crucis* (which is rarely heard, unlike those Hungarian Rhapsodies). He adds that some of its motifs, which also appear elsewhere in Liszt's music, may symbolise religious images, and that a motif some take to be the laugh of Mephistopheles could represent the hammering of Christ on to the cross.

The most important thing is that the sonata's power can transcend all these interpretations. It condenses and abstracts a world of extreme conflicts and seeks to work them through: whether between God and the Devil, Faust and Mephistopheles, love sacred and love profane, or the different facets of Liszt's own soul. The composer captures the polarities of the human spirit and carries to his listeners a message that each hears in an individual way.

Liszt was endowed with a quantity of energy, imagination, sensuality, spirituality and visionary creativity that could have furnished at least four normal people. To appreciate only one side of him at the expense of the others misses the point of why he matters so much. Wagner created the "complete artwork", but Liszt made himself into the complete artist: he probed virtually every parameter of life, from the most sexual to the most spiritual, from the most public to the most private, from the greatest triumphs to the most profound personal tragedies (the deaths of two of his three children in early adulthood).

Some aspects of his work are more successful than others. But he remains the ultimate romantic. Without his influence, the 19th-century musical world would have been much the poorer — and so, too, that of the 20th, for it was Liszt who created the first piano piece written without fixed tonality. His is a bicentenary worth celebrating. I just hope we emerge from 2011 understanding Liszt's full significance a little better, with the blinkers of cheap prejudice removed once and for all.