

## *Franz Liszt: Bicentennial Tribute*

**Recorded on Liszt's birthday, this dedication to his Bicentennial features his most profound and virtuosic compositions**

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**Franz Liszt** (October 22, 1811 - July 31, 1886) was one of the most influential and bold innovators of European Romanticism. The greatest piano virtuoso of his era and possibly of all time, notable pedagogue that taught a number of the next generation's famous pianists, conductor and writer, he was a figurehead of the 'Neudeutsche Schule' ('New German School'), a prominent composer that anticipated some 20th-century ideas and trends. Liszt experimented with thematic transformation, reformed large-scale structures, unified multi-movement works, changed traditional sonata form and invented symphonic poem. His late works are austere and impressionistic, rich with independent contrapuntal strands and advanced chromaticism, which influenced atonal music.

Most of Liszt's works are programmatic and their poetical plan is often expressed in a description, title or epigraph. The piano works are central in Liszt's legacy. He knew how to exploit the technical and artistic possibilities of the piano to their limits. 'It has been my "I", my language, my life!' 'It is the custodian of all that moved my soul in the passionate days of my youth; to it I entrust all my thoughts, my day-dreams, my sufferings and joys.' In his youth, as a 'wunderkind' he won over European capitals with his temperamental and poetic performances. During mature years, as a world-renown pianist, he searched for solitude and turned increasingly towards composition. He gave his last performance two weeks before his death. He composed some of the most difficult piano music ever written and had an extraordinarily broad repertory; he invented the modern piano recital. He enhanced piano literature with innumerable transcriptions, arrangements, variations, paraphrases, fantasies on the themes of operas, symphonies, songs of great composers and, of course, his own ingenious works.

To this day, there is still a controversy among historians and musicians regarding Liszt. His critics accuse his works of superficial glitter. His defenders state that Liszt's music by itself is not vulgar, but reveals any vulgarity in the interpretation of the performer, as written by pianist Alfred Brendel. Some seemingly virtuosic effects in his piano works were to imitate an orchestral coloring and sound range, which was the original conception for most of his compositions. Liszt's life is referred to as 'the tragi-comedy of a soul divided against itself' in the book 'The Man Liszt' by Ernest Newman. True, Liszt's personality was contradictory in its combination of romantic abstraction and other-worldliness with showmanship and elegant manners: 'half Zigeuner and half Franciscan', in Liszt's own description, or 'Mephistopheles disguised as an Abbe' as said Gregorovius, he was constantly soul-searching. Derek Watson in his book 'Liszt' writes: 'Liszt's avowed motto was "Caritas"... He believed that art is the centre of the soul's aspiration to the divine.' A generous benefactor to other musicians, and known for his broadmindedness and respect towards different nations and religions, Liszt's noble and somewhat enigmatic nature is a key to understanding his music.

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*Un sospiro* ('A sigh'), 1848, is the third of Liszt's *Trois études de concert* that were

dedicated to Liszt's uncle, Eduard Liszt (1817–1879), the youngest son of Liszt's grandfather and the stepbrother of his own father. Eduard handled Liszt's business affairs for over thirty years. This étude requires crossing hands in complex patterns to be played very rapidly. It consists of a flowing background superimposed by a melody written in the third staff. Both melody and accompaniment are alternating between hands and transition should be seamless. The melody is dramatically dynamic and Impressionistic in nature.

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*La Campanella* ('Little bells'), 1851, was originally the theme of the last movement of the second violin concerto by Italian violin virtuoso, Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840). When Liszt heard him perform in Paris, in 1831, he was determined to become the 'Paganini of the Piano'. Seven years after, Liszt rearranged six original compositions by Paganini into spectacular and elegant études for piano, of which *La Campanella* is the third one. It is a study in staccato leaps for up to four octaves and requires both delicate fingerwork and power. Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924), arranged it into even more virtuosic version.

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*Rhapsodie espagnole* (Spanish Rhapsody), 1863, was inspired by Liszt's travels Spain through and Portugal in 1845. It opens with a long cadenza which sets the mood for the ensuing variations. The first section is a passacaglia on *La Folia*, which appears already in an embellished form, but retaining the typical sarabande rhythm. The variations transform this theme with terse dotted rhythms, chromatic triplets, and sweeping sixteenth notes and chords through several octaves. Following the passacaglia is the brilliant *Jota aragonesa* - a traditional Spanish dance originated in Aragon. The section begins with a simple and charming melody appearing over an imitation of a drone bass, and grows into variations on both *La Folia* and *Jota Aragonesa* in exciting virtuosic display. This piece is fiendishly difficult technically and captivating in its beauty.

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*Sonata in B minor* (1853-1854), dedicated to Robert Schumann, is a masterpiece of 19th-century piano literature, and one of the greatest and most virtuosic piano compositions ever written. It evokes associations with a whole life span - 'from cradle to the grave'. A study by Tibor Szász (1985) suggests a possible presence of a program in the Sonata based on biblical texts, particularly a story of Garden of Eden. It is more widely believed that the piece is based on the Faust legend and suggests Faustian struggle and demonic possession.

Originally it was influenced by Franz Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasie*, which Liszt admired and arranged for piano and orchestra. Schubert also used a limited number of musical elements to create a four movement work with a fugato 4th movement. In 1851 Liszt experimented with a non-programmatic 'four-movements-in-one' form in a piano solo work 'Grosses Konzertsolo' (1849). It was published in 1856 as a 'Concerto pathétique' for two pianos and thematically related to both the Sonata and the later Faust Symphony. Sonata consists basically from five motivic units that undergo transformation, depending on the musical context, and are interlaced into grand musical architecture with roughly four connected movements. Here Liszt synthesizes symphonic and sonata forms, transformation of themes with double-function form in conjunction with chromatic harmony, which completely altered the concept of sonata construction.

The Sonata in its grandiose intellectual conception has a transcendental emotional impact.