

PROGRAM NOTES AND TEXT TRANSLATIONS: FRANZ LISZT

Franz Liszt's Bicentennial is being observed this year in concerts and recitals worldwide. He was born in Hungary on Oct. 22, 1811, lived a long life of amazing creativity (over 700 works) and died in Bayreuth, Germany on July 31, 1886. He traveled widely as the foremost piano virtuoso of his time and spent many years in Paris, Rome, and Weimar.

To the disappointment of his legion of fans, he stopped performing at the height of his powers in 1847 and devoted himself to composition. Although he was known primarily as a composer of piano music, he also wrote in many other genres. In this respect, he was far different from his friend and contemporary Chopin, who wrote almost exclusively for the piano, and to whom he has been often compared. Liszt invented the form symphonic poem, which was enthusiastically adopted later on by many late 19th Century composers. He also wrote songs and innumerable transcriptions, evolving out of his penchant for improvisation. It was said that oftentimes performers would not show up and Liszt would oblige by sitting down at the piano and playing his own transcription of something popular at the moment, a Schubert or Schumann song, for example. He is credited with "inventing" the solo piano recital, performed by memory.

In 1832, he heard the astounding Paganini and vowed to emulate the violinist's technique and complete mastery of his instrument on the piano. In fact, he composed a set of piano etudes based on Paganini's famous violin etudes for unaccompanied violin. Liszt was revered as a consummate composer and virtuoso. The estimable pianist Moscheles wrote: "In its power and mastery of every difficulty Liszt's playing surpasses anything previously heard".

For today's program, I have chosen three representative works to illustrate his versatility. The first, "**Sonetto del Petrarca 104**" is from his second set of "Années de pèlerinage" (Years of Pilgrimage). The set of three suites includes some of his most provocative and stirring pieces. The second book includes a resetting of his own song transcriptions once separately published as "**Tre sonetti di Petrarca**" (Three sonnets of Petrarch). Composed in 1858 after much re-working, the second song transcription is perhaps the most beloved; its translation appears below. It is marked Adagio, after an Agitato introduction, yet it moves in a lyrical and passionate setting, possessing a beautiful melody that Liszt develops with just the right amount of *fioretta* that makes the work ineffably his own. **The Etude in D-flat Major**, composed in 1857, belongs to a set of **Three Concert Etudes**. The nickname ("un sospiro" translates as a sigh) was not his, but has remained. Its almost magical beauty of delicately-interwoven melodic and harmonic lines disguises the "study" aspect of the piece: almost continuously rolling arpeggios accentuated at times with some rather perilous hand-crossings.

There is no disguise whatsoever in Liszt's "**Mephisto Waltz No. 1**". The **Mephisto Waltzes** are four waltzes composed during the years 1859-62, 1880-81, 1883 and 1885, near the end of his life. Numbers 1 and 2 were composed for orchestra, later arranged for piano, piano duet and two pianos, whereas 3 and 4 were written for piano only. Of the four, the first is the most popular and is frequently performed in concert and recorded. Based on Nicolaus Lenau's "**Faust**", it is program music at its most impressive technically and wildly fantastic. The following program note, which Liszt took from Lenau, appears in the printed score. There is a departure from the text in the solo piano version; a cascade of blind octaves ends the work in a fiery and exciting flurry.

There is a wedding feast in progress in the village inn, with music, dancing, carousing. Mephistopheles and Faust pass by, and Mephistopheles induces Faust to enter and take part in the festivities. Mephistopheles snatches the fiddle from the hands of a lethargic fiddler and draws from it indescribably seductive and intoxicating strains. The amorous Faust whirls about with a full-blooded village beauty in a wild dance; they waltz in mad abandon out of the room, into the open, away into the woods. The sounds of the fiddle grow softer and softer, and the nightingale warbles his love-laden song."

Translation of Sonnet 104: Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374)

WARFARE I cannot wage, yet know not peace;
I fear, I hope, I burn, I freeze again;
Mount to the skies, then bow to earth my face;
Grasp the whole world, yet nothing can obtain.
Pris'ner of one who deigns not to detain,
I am not made his own, nor giv'n release.
Love slays me not, nor yet will he unchain;
Nor life allot, nor stop my harm's increase.

Sightless I see my fair; though mute, I mourn;
I scorn existence, yet I court its stay;
Detest myself, and for another burn;
By grief I'm nurtured; and, though tearful, gay;
Death I despise, and life alike I hate:
Such, lady, do you make my wretched state!

Notes: Barbara Speer