

From Ritmico Journal No 90 October 2011

Franz Liszt – The Man who had Everything

By Rod Biss



Franz Liszt Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres

In Ingres' beautiful pencil drawing we see Liszt as a soulful young man. There are also countless portraits, plaster casts of his hands, medals cast in his honour, caricatures, photos of him surrounded by famous pupils, at his desk, his piano, as a grand old man of the church dressed in his long black coat with flowing white hair, even a photo of him on his death bed. Always he looks impressive, his profile aristocratic, his bearing noble.

Franz (Ferenc) Liszt was born on 22 October 1811 on an Esterházy estate at Raiding, near Vienna – then part of Hungary, but since 1920, Austria. He died on 31 July 1886 in Bayreuth having had to abandon, before the end, a performance of *Tristan and Isolde* several days earlier – reputedly the last word he spoke was a scarcely audible “*Tristan!*”

Into those 75 years, Liszt crammed what seemed like much more than 75 years of living.

When he was born, Beethoven and Schubert still had 16 and 17 years respectively to live. Beethoven was working on his Seventh Symphony; Schubert was a teenager composing songs but was yet to write his first symphony. By the time Liszt died, Wagner had been dead for two years, *Tristan and Isolde* written 26 years before, and *Parsifal* was already six years in existence.

Liszt's musical development seemed to stretch even further; his first pieces were a set of studies that looked like Czerny, his last pieces anticipated atonality, looking as though they belonged to the 20th century or even our own 21st century.

Liszt was given his first piano lessons by his father, Adam, who quickly realised that his son's talent was extraordinary – perhaps he gave a thought to Mozart's father and wondered if there might be a similar future for young Franz. Certainly he knew that with some help from Prince Esterházy, he had to take him up the road to Vienna where he begged Czerny – then the most prestigious teacher there was – to take him on. Czerny said he was far too busy (which was true) but he agreed to listen to the young 10-year-old and what he heard was, in Czerny's words, “as if nature herself had intended him as a pianist”.

He gave him the lessons he craved, teaching him the importance of technique and the values of discipline. Liszt proved to be a model pupil staying with Czerny for 18 months.

News of this amazing new talent reached Beethoven who was reluctantly persuaded to attend one of his concerts. Although he was deaf, when he saw the audience reaction Beethoven went up on the platform and kissed the young Liszt on the forehead. Liszt took considerable encouragement throughout his life from being ‘blessed’ in this way by Beethoven, his ultimate, godlike hero.

After 18 months in Vienna, Czerny said, with what was now genuine affection, that there was nothing more he could teach him. Father and son set off, like the Mozarts, to conquer the world travelling through Germany, on to Paris where he had more lessons, and then to London.



Young Liszt 1839 **Henri Lehmann**

Paris became his base for a number of years of study, reading, listening, and absorbing the atmosphere of the city. As a 19-year-old he heard Paganini perform – it was, for Liszt, a revelation. With Paganini as his model, Liszt set out, knowingly, on a similar career in which showmanship and virtuosity were almost as important as his innate musicianship.

Paris fell at his feet, and not just Paris, there were legendary tours of all the European capitals, where he dazzled audiences with his technical displays, and charmed the ladies who had to reach frantically for their smelling salts.

There was, however, much more to his playing than mere display; Schumann told Clara that it was the greatest artistic experience of his life to have heard Liszt and that he was astonished and spellbound by his own music as though he had never heard it before. Chopin dedicated his Twelve Studies of Op.10 to Liszt – to a friend he wrote: “. . . Liszt is playing my studies and putting honest thoughts out of my head: I should like to steal from him the way to play my own studies.”

A young but literate American, Amy Fay, studied with him and wrote glowingly of his effect on her: “. . . The more I see and hear Liszt, the more I am lost in amazement! I can neither eat nor sleep in the days that I go to him . . .” She sees him as an actor who “subdues the people to him by the very way he

walks on stage. He gives his proud head a toss, throws an electric look out of his eagle eye, and seats himself at the piano with an air.”

He had some famous rows but tried to patch them up (except with Brahms who managed, unforgivably, to fall asleep as Liszt was playing his B minor Sonata to him). In 1884, a young Debussy heard him play *Les jeux d’eaux à la Villa d’Este*. Debussy’s reaction is not recorded but he certainly didn’t fall asleep; the effect on his, and Ravel’s, music was clear for the entire later world to hear.



Franz Liszt 1858 **Franz Hanfstaengl**

There were many affairs. The first was with Caroline de Saint-Criq, a 16-year-old who was having lessons with Liszt, lessons that seem to have been more than just on the piano. Then at the wedding of Berlioz to Harriet Smithson (where he was a witness) he met the Comtesse d’Agoult who was attractive and interesting, but alas, married. They eloped to Geneva. They spent time with George Sand. Then Madame d’Agoult took Liszt to Italy to read Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe and Tasso and to visit the galleries. On Christmas Day, when they were at Bellagio on the shores of Lake Como, their second daughter, Cosima, was born – Cosima, a footnote to this story, yet one who would change the history of music almost as dramatically as her father. She first married Liszt’s pupil, the conductor Hans von Bülow, and then Richard Wagner, and after Wagner’s death she ran the Bayreuth Festival,

and only by remaining in her room as an 84-year-old, did she avoid meeting Hitler – but those are other stories!

In 1847, aged just 35, Liszt abandoned concert-giving entirely and accepted an offer from the court at Weimar, where the Grand Duchess Marie-Pavlovna was energetically supporting the arts. It was a position that placed an opera house and a concert hall under his command, giving him time to compose, and providing a house, the Villa Altenburg. There was a new affair too, this time with the Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, also unhappily married, and though not divorced she was already separated. The Princess and Liszt lived together for the next 12 years, but were never to marry.

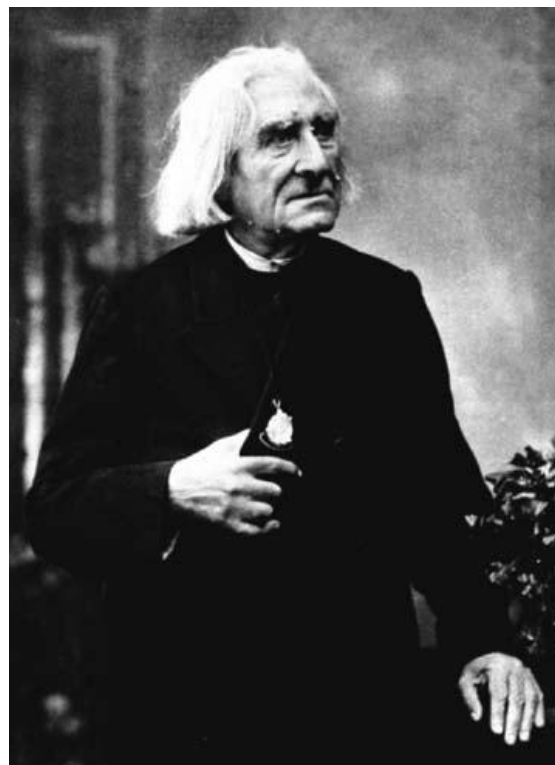
It was during his years at Weimar (1848-61) that Liszt wrote the monumental B minor Sonata. Michael Houston, you might remember, travelled to Weimar in 1997 to find out more about Liszt before he performed it and took a TV crew with him who filmed his every step.

Liszt also wrote a number of orchestral works in his years at Weimar. In effect, he invented the form of 'symphonic poem', works which looked beyond music for a literary subject or poem as a starting point.

It was during this period that his friendship with Wagner flourished, and then ran into almost unsolvable problems. Liszt had supported Wagner in every way, performing his operas, helping him financially, even hiding him from the law. But their friendship could not survive Wagner's affair with Liszt's daughter, Cosima, now married to von Bülow, and for almost a decade the two composers did not see each other. The rift was healed only when Wagner wrote a moving letter to Liszt asking him to come and witness the laying of the foundation stone at Bayreuth in 1872. Liszt responded positively: "Dear and Noble Friend, I am too deeply moved by your letter to be able to thank you in words." He continued by saying that he would come, and ends, "Herein is heaven's pardon for me: God's blessing on you both, and all my love."

There is so much about Liszt that would fit our century; his celebrity status with all the attendant scandals and gossip, his virtuosity which we all so easily respond to, his ability to write for both popular and serious markets, his

interest in what other composers are doing, his warmth and generosity as a teacher.



The Abbé Liszt Gaspard-Félix Tournachon

So it's surprising how little notice the 200th anniversary of his birth has been taken in this country. The New Zealand String Quartet brought out Martin Roscoe for the Adam Chamber Music Festival at the beginning of the year to play the B minor Sonata and a complete Liszt recital. Several other visiting pianists have paid homage: Sergio Tiempo, Nicolai Demidenko and Natasha Vlassenko (later in October). But no singers have looked at his superb Lieder, no choral societies have tackled any of his choral works, and as far as all the orchestras and Chamber Music New Zealand are concerned Liszt just does not exist.

The most exciting Liszt performance I've heard was a thrilling encore from organist Cameron Carpenter who had been soloist with the NZSO National Youth Orchestra. Carpenter played his arrangement of the first Mephisto Waltz on Auckland's newly restored organ with extrovert showmanship that might have had organists shuddering, yet seemed to me to match Liszt's own flair for transformation of music and brilliant presentation.

To end, I cannot do better than quote the final few words from G.B. Shaw's Liszt obituary in 1886. Shaw had heard Liszt play in London and reviewed the performance glowingly; he

was less sure about Liszt's compositions. But of Liszt, the man, he had no doubts: "Whether the symphonic poems live or die, [the world] will preserve a niche for him in the history of music as a man who loved his art, despised money, attracted everybody worth knowing in the 19th century, lived through the worst of it, and got away from it with his hands unstained."

Rod Biss has worked in music publishing in both London and New Zealand. He is a music journalist writing for a number of journals including the *New Zealand Listener*.