Franz Liszt Symphonic Poems

by Dr Mark Berry, Department of Music, Royal Holloway University of London

Key Ideas and Historical Context

With the symphonic poem, Franz Liszt invented a musical genre. It had strong roots in earlier 'programme music' such as Ludwig van Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and Hector Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique, and in Romantic overtures such as Beethoven's **Leonore III** and Felix Mendelssohn's A Midsummer Night's Dream, as well as in Liszt's own piano music. Nonetheless, the poetic 'idea', for instance Victor Hugo's Mazeppa, William Shakespeare's <u>Hamlet</u>, or Friedrich Schiller's Die Ideale, more strongly forms the narrative or 'programmatic' basis of the symphonic poem.



Die Hunnenschlacht, by Wilhelm von Kaulbach, which inspired Liszt's symphonic poem Hunnenschlacht. It is a depiction of an historical battle between the Romans and the Hun.

This idea need not be a poem or play; it could be a novel, a painting, or an event, but the importance of some inspiration beyond 'absolute' music is crucial.

- These works fed into nineteenth-century debates concerning 'programme music' and its validity, as contrasted with so-called 'absolute music' (sonatas, symphonies, string quartets, etc.), with no such 'poetic idea'.
- Liszt wrote the first twelve during the period 1847 to 1858, with occasional subsequent revision, and a solitary thirteenth, <u>Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe</u> ('From the Cradle to the Grave') was composed, aptly enough, not long before Liszt's death, in 1881 and 1882.
- Musical Romanticism's delight in the sublimity of the natural world—rivers, storms, forests, mountains—and its absorption in works of literature—poetry, drama, novels—took a further step in these works, utilising the full forces of the symphony orchestra, as well as some of the most advanced harmonic language of the mid-nineteenth century.
- Liszt's move towards orchestral writing (and conducting) and away from the itinerant career of a piano virtuoso (the most celebrated in the world) was made possible by his appointment as Hofkapellmeister (court conductor) to Charles Frederick, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach. Now Liszt had an orchestra at his disposal; he could try out his works, their highly original orchestration (sometimes at first assisted by Liszt's deputy, Joachim Raff), and make revisions as necessary.

- Whereas we often think of the nineteenth century as marking a move away from composers in service to royal courts, Liszt had discovered and partly renounced the vagaries of the commercial markets of performance and publishing. Royal patronage enabled him to experiment, to attain leadership alongside Richard Wagner (at that time in exile) of the German musical avant-garde. Liszt, Wagner, and (somewhat oddly) Berlioz became known as the 'New German School', opposed to more aesthetically conservative composers such as Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms, as well as their journalistic supporters (e.g. the critic Eduard Hanslick). Weimar, not long since home to poets such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Schiller, once again became a centre of artistic experimentation and controversy.
- In these works, Liszt often used sonata and other traditional forms, but rarely unchanged; for instance, the traditional four movements of a symphony were often compressed into a single movement form (e.g. <u>Tasso: lamento e trionfo</u> or <u>Hunnenschlacht</u>).
- Traditional musical oppositions, for instance, between 'masculine' and 'feminine', found new expression in works such as *Hamlet* or the closely-allied *Faust Symphony*, in three movements: 'Faust', 'Gretchen', and 'Mephistopheles'.
- Liszt's technique of transformation of themes, inspired by works such as Franz Schubert's Wanderer Fantasy, again came into its own. The same theme, transposed, modulated, inverted, augmented, diminished, fragmented, or otherwise transformed, could not only form the basis of a sonata-form movement, but have a poetic, narrative reason for doing so.
- Liszt and his partner Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein provided written prefaces to
 elucidate the poetic idea. For <u>Prometheus</u>, we read of the 'soul' of the ancient myth: 'boldness,
 suffering, endurance, and redemption. ... Suffering and apotheosis! ... a sultry, stormy, and
 tempestuous mode of expression. Grief of desolation, triumphing at last through energy and
 perseverance, constitutes the musical character of the piece...'.
- Liszt later admitted that his concern was 'to guard the listener against false interpretation', i.e. more to prevent the listener from going wrong than to present a single, 'correct' idea. Note how generalised the description is; it is more concerned with mood, with general trajectory, than with detailed portrayal of a story's events. When dealing with a person, e.g. Hamlet, the programme would tend towards the character's psychology rather than events, the composer having been highly impressed by a portrayal he saw in Weimar,. Writing of the prefaces always followed writing of the music rather than preceding them. Perhaps we might do better to attend to the titles and to the music itself.
- These works were mightily influential. Wagner recognised their importance for his own operatic writing, especially his technique of using 'leitmotifs' to represent characters, objects, ideas, which would then be transformed through the course of the opera. Composers such as Bedřich Smetana, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Richard Strauss, Arnold Schoenberg, Béla Bartók, Paul Dukas, Leoš Janáček, and many more right up to the present day have found inspiration in the idea of the symphonic poem and developed it to meet their own artistic needs.
- For all the historical importance, we hear these pieces less often than one might expect. Why?
 Some dispute Liszt's artistic achievement as opposed to his radical intentions. Others impute
 malice and envy to his detractors, accusing them of failure to accept that a great pianist could
 also be a great composer. It is always best to find out for oneself, to listen with an open mind,
 and to recognise that taste and fashions change—and will always do so.

Quotations, Legacy and Reception

- Franz Liszt: 'Music assimilates more and more the masterpieces of literature.' (On Berlioz's Harold in Italy.)
- Franz Liszt: 'New wine demands new bottles.' (I.e., new, Romantic ideas and musical language required new rather than Classical forms.)
- Hans von Bülow, a conductor who was in general a devotee of Liszt's music: 'Unperformable' (on Liszt's Hamlet)
- Carl Dahlhaus: 'Basically the "poetics" of the symphonic poem came about as a solution to three interrelated problems. First, Liszt attempted to adopt the classical ideal of the symphony without yielding to a derivative dependence on his traditional formal scheme. Second, he wished to elevate program[me] music ... from a base, "picturesque" genre to poetic and philosophical sublimity. And finally, he was obsessed by the thought that it had to be possible to unite the expressive gesture of his earlier piano pieces... with the [symphonic] tradition of thematic and motivic manipulation.'
- Humphrey Searle: 'Liszt was truly inspired when he wrote the Faust Symphony; it expresses
 every variety of mood with the utmost clarity and dramatic emphasis, yet one never feels that
 the music is forced or artificial. It simply poured out of him naturally; though the symphony lasts
 over an hour one does not get the impression that it is overlong for what it has to say, for it is all
 deeply and genuinely felt. Many thank, and I would agree, that in this work Liszt produced his
 masterpiece.'
- Alan Walker: 'Posterity may have overestimated the importance of extra-musical thought in Liszt's symphonic poems. We would not be without his prefaces, of course, nor any other comments that he made about the origins of his music; but we should not follow them slavishly, for the simple reason that the symphonic poems do not follow them slavishly either. Perhaps the most enlightened gesture that posterity could now make towards Liszt is to attend to his orchestral works as it attends to those of Beethoven or Brahms. In the final analysis, Liszt's "programme music" must stand or fall as music.'

Further Reading

Cormac, Joanne, Liszt and the Symphonic Poem (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Dahlhaus, Carl, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, tr. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 236-44

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Shulstad, Reeves, 'Liszt's Symphonic Poems and Symphonies', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, ed. Kenneth Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 206-22

Walker, Alan, Franz Liszt: Vol.2, 'The Weimar Years: 1814-1861' (London: Faber, 1989), 300-337

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