2011 Summer solstice festival

LISZT: revolutionary romantic
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8 PM
CONVOCATION HALL, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

PROGRAM NOTES
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This evening celebrates Franz Liszt (1811-1886) the innovator, the composer who revolutionized music with his restless imagination. The immense impact Liszt had on music is often overshadowed by the image of the celebrity pianist and composer of diabolically difficult piano music. Liszt's impact is much more far-reaching. It would take (and has taken) volumes to describe Liszt's musical legacy. We could begin with the revolution of piano technique, the development of symphonic poems (leaving behind sonata form or disguising it), the technique of thematic transformation, and his radical harmonic innovations. Liszt composed original compositions of every variety: virtuoso études, orchestral tone poems, religious music, choral music, endless number of imaginative transcriptions or paraphrases of songs, operas, or settings of orchestral music, as well as adaptations (everything from Bach to Gounod to Saint-Saëns and Wagner). Without Liszt, the musical language of Wagner, Ravel, Debussy, Bartók and other revolutionary composers would not have been the same. Liszt, the restless creator, revised and reworked his own compositions until his final days. It is many of those works we will hear tonight. But let us begin at the beginning.

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There was no greater catalyst to Liszt's genius than Niccolò Paganini. Nothing like Paganini had been seen before. The skeletal figure producing unworldly sounds from his violin took European audiences by storm. There were rumors that one of the strings of his violin (from which he could coax unearthly sounds) had been made from the intestine of his mistress, whom he had murdered.

Paganini's performance completely captivated Liszt. Liszt was not only inspired by the violinist's technique, he was possessed by a new vision of piano playing. Half a month after first hearing Paganini, still reeling from the performance, Liszt wrote to one of his pupils: "my mind and my fingers have been working like two lost souls . . . I practice four to five hours of exercises . . . provided I don't go mad, you will find me an artist! Yes, an artist . . . such as is required today." Then Liszt turns his attention to Paganini: "What a man, what a violin, what an artist! Heavens! what sufferings, what misery, what tortures in those four strings!"

In Paganini, Liszt saw someone who realized his own romantic ideals, integrating the performance experience, the music and the inspired genius persona at once.

In the weeks and months ahead, Liszt took it upon himself not only to push his piano technique to the very limits (and beyond), transferring to the piano the challenges Paganini had posed for the violin. In paving the way for his
own growth as a pianist, Liszt also broke new ground in composition, opening doors where music had not yet
ventured by exploiting the potential for experimentation within the world that virtuoso technique introduced.

Liszt composed a number of works paraphrasing Paganini’s Caprices and "La Campanella" from the Second Violin
Concerto. These works are more than arrangements or commemorations of the violinist; they are Liszt’s attempts
to reach the strata of virtuosity and genius he witnessed in Paganini. In so doing, Liszt catapulted the possibilities
of piano composition well beyond the artist who inspired him.

"La Campanella" is the nickname for the last movement of Paganini’s Second Violin Concerto, where Paganini
employed the charming Italian tune of the same name as the basis for a brilliant finale. Not long after first hearing
the violinist, Liszt composed the Clochette Fantasy (1832) and later developed the Campanella étude.

This evening we hear the violin pyrotechnics which inspired young Liszt. The charming tune is the foundation for a
shimmering display of violin wizardry.

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The next few pieces all found their way into the collections entitled Les années de pèlerinage (The Years of
Pilgrimage). It should be remembered that Liszt traveled extensively, at times because of his touring as a pianist,
and at other times in self-imposed exile due to such factors as conducting an affair with a married woman.

“I have tried to portray in music a few of my strongest sensations and most lively impressions.” The first two
volumes are the “Swiss” and “Italian” of which we’ll hear more shortly. The third volume was composed in Liszt’s
later years, after he had received the four minor orders in the Catholic Church: porter, lector, exorcist, and
acolyte. Composed in 1877 and arranged for string quartet around 1882, Angélus! Prière aux anges gardiens
(Angeus: Prayer to the Guardian Angels) celebrates the devotion in memory of the incarnation. Liszt wrote,
“In early October, there was the holiday of the Holy Angels. I wrote a hundred or so measures for them...and wish
I could better express my intimate devotion to the divine messengers.” The work is dedicated to Daniela von
Bülow, Liszt’s granddaughter. This pious E major work opens with a lovely evocation of the Angelus bells.
The music is solid and comforting.

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The music of the first volume of the Années was composed in the 1830s while Liszt was traveling in Switzerland
with Marie d’Agoult. (One of the children Marie bore him was Cosima, who was to marry Richard Wagner.) The
works first appeared in early form with Album d’un voyageur. In this collection we first find Vallée d’Obermann
(Obermann’s Valley), a work based on a program from Sénancour’s novel of the same name set in Switzerland.
The composer returned to the work around 1850 and greatly refined it for the first volume of the Années. Initially
preceded by a large selection from the novel, Liszt provided an inscription from the novel: “What do I want? What
am I? What to ask of nature? ...” along with an excerpt from Byron’s Childe Harold:

Could I embody and unbosom now
That which is most within me,—could I wreak
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into one word,
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;
But as it is, I live and die unheard,
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.

The Belgian composer, Eduard Lassen, developed the expressive power of this piece in a transcription for trio,
renaming it Tristia (Sadness). Liszt further revised Lassen’s version of this powerful and introspective work in his
autumn years (around 1880) and intensified the emotional impact, extending some of the more recitative portions
and unlocking the chamber work within this piano composition.
The *Tre sonetti di Petrarca, S. 270* are perhaps most familiar to audiences in the solo piano version from the second *Années*, the Italian cycle. The *Sonetti* were composed first as songs in the late 1830s while Liszt and d’Agoult were traveling in Italy, reading Petrarch and Dante together. The texts for the songs all tell of the Italian poet Petrarch’s love for Laura, a married woman he saw in church on Good Friday 1327. Liszt’s settings are almost operatic in style, with recitative passages giving way to rapturous lyrical passages. The passion and agitation are conveyed by music of restless harmonic daring. “Pace non trovo” speaks of love’s paradoxes, illustrated with extreme contradictions (“I fear, I hope, I burn yet shake with chills”), vividly illustrated musically. In “Benedetto sia ‘l giorno,” the poet celebrates the moment he set eyes on Laura (“Blessed the day, the month, the year . . .”). In “I’ vidi in terra angelici costumi,” Petrarch’s vision is described in terms of an angelic vision on Earth, conveyed with an air of sweetness and devotion.

During the last years of his life, Liszt’s music explored ever darker realms with economical, even austere musical language. Perhaps one of the more haunting of these works is *La Lugubre gondola, S. 134* (Funeral Gondola) from 1883. The work was composed at a time when Liszt was living in Venice with Richard Wagner, his son-in-law who was gravely ill. Upon seeing funeral gondolas pass through Venice’s Grand Canal, Liszt experienced a premonition of his son-in-law’s death. In this work, expressive recitative declamations lead to a grim, gently rolling barcarolle or boat song. The music bears an inexorable gravity. Unlike much of Liszt’s earlier music, the texture is extremely spare but exquisitely expressive.

Probably best known in the later solo piano version, the *Mephisto Waltz, S. 599/2* is a four-hand transcription of "The Dance in the Village Inn," the second part of a tone poem for orchestra composed in 1859 (“Two episodes from *Faust* by Lenau”). The symphonic score includes a program describing Mephistopheles (the agent of the Devil) and Faust passing by a country inn. Mephistopheles grabs the fiddle from the country musician 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 work’s opening fifths recall the tuning of a string instrument. It also conveys a primitive drive upon which the headlong waltz melody twirls with reckless abandon.