

Recorded on Franz Liszt's birthday, this dedication to his Bicentennial features his most profound and virtuosic compositions, including Rhapsodie Espagnole and the monumental Sonata in B minor.

Franz Liszt (October 22, 1811 - July 31, 1886) was one of the boldest and most influential innovators of European Romanticism. He was not only the greatest piano virtuoso of his era—and possibly of all time—but a notable pedagogue who spawned a generation of famed pianists, a conductor, writer, figurehead of the ‘Neudeutsche Schule’ (‘New German School’) and prominent composer whose work foreshadowed 20th-century ideas and trends. Liszt experimented with thematic transformation, reformed large-scale structures, unified multi-movement works, changed the traditional sonata form and invented the symphonic poem. Austere and impressionistic, his later works are rich with independent contrapuntal strands and advanced chromaticism, inspiring 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.” As a ‘wunderkind’, he won over European capitals with his temperamental and poetic performances, but later, longing for solitude, the world-renowned pianist increasingly turned towards composition, yet continued to perform until two weeks before his death. Liszt composed some of the most difficult piano music ever written and had an extraordinarily broad repertory. He invented the modern piano recital, and 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.

The controversy among historians and musicians regarding Liszt’s compositions, however, continues to this day. Detractors accuse him of superficial glitter while proponents—such as pianist Alfred Brendel—argue that any perceived vulgarity is a reflection of the interpretation and character of the performer rather than of the composition itself. Without an appreciable understanding of Liszt, the man, his orchestral coloring and sound range—characteristic of many of his piano compositions—can appear to be little more than virtuosic effects. In his book ‘The Man Liszt’, Ernest Newman refers to his life as “the tragi-comedy of a soul divided against itself.” True, Liszt's personality was a contradictory 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 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.

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 later, Liszt completed his own arrangements of six original compositions by Paganini into spectacular and elegant etudes for piano, *La Campanella* third among them. A study in staccato leaps spanning four octaves, it requires both power and delicate finger work. A subsequent version by Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) is even more virtuosic.

Rhapsodie espagnole (Spanish Rhapsody), 1863, was inspired by Liszt's travels through Spain 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.

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 grave'. A study by Tibor Szász (1985) suggests the possible presence of a program in the Sonata based on biblical texts, including the story of the Garden of Eden in particular. It is more widely believed, however, that the piece reflects the Faust legend—suggesting 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). Published in 1856 as a 'Concerto pathétique' for two pianos, it was thematically related to both the Sonata and the later Faust Symphony.

Liszt's Sonata consists of five motivic units that undergo transformations that depend on the musical context, and which are interlaced into a grand musical architecture with roughly four connected movements. Here Liszt synthesizes transformation of themes with double-function form in conjunction with chromatic harmony, which completely alters the concept of sonata construction. The Sonata in its grandiose intellectual conception has a transcendental emotional impact.

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