While one of the most overlooked orchestral composers of the Romantic era, Franz Liszt’s contributions to the development of the symphonic repertoire were significant. Known in his time primarily as a ‘rock star’ pianist, a composer of technically challenging piano works, and a conductor, Liszt nonetheless managed to leave his mark on the orchestral world as well. His twelve Symphonic Poems, written in the span of ten years from 1848-1858, burst onto the scene, breaking the mold of the symphonic genre and opening new paths for a musical world that was still struggling to escape from Beethoven’s looming shadow. For all of their ingenuity, the Symphonic Poems of Liszt are rarely performed. However, they occupy an important place in the symphonic history.

Franz Liszt was born on October 22nd, 1811 in Hungary. From an early age, he was dubbed the “Hungarian Wonder-Child”1 by the audiences that wowed with his precocious technique and style of performance at the piano. He was the son of an accountant, who happened to be employed by Nicholas Esterhazy, the same patron of the deceased Haydn. This connection proved to be vital to Liszt’s musical development, as Liszt’s father grew to be acquainted with Haydn, Hummel, who assumed the position of Kapellmeister upon Haydn’s passing, and Beethoven2. Liszt’s father had hoped to be a musician in his younger days, so upon noticing the musical aptitude of his son, he soon saw a chance to live vicariously through Franz. So, the concertizing began, and Liszt’s fate was sealed. Their first stop was Vienna. Beethoven himself attended a recital in 1823

1 Louis Nohl, *Life of Liszt*, Trans. by George Upton (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1892), 12
2 Nohl, 13
featuring the 11-year old Liszt. Beethoven, quite deaf and increasingly reclusive, was so
moved by the concert that upon its conclusion, he embraced the boy and kissed him. In
Vienna, Liszt studied under Carl Czerny, who sparked the flair for technical displays in
the young child. Liszt’s father, anxious for the best education his son could receive, could
not tarry long in Vienna, however, and quickly ushered Liszt off to Paris to study at the
conservatory. It was a blow when they were told that Liszt, as a foreigner, was ineligible
to enroll. Nonetheless, Liszt continued to give concerts and immerse himself in the music
scene of the day, while studying with Reicha.

Then, at the age of twenty, Liszt met Paganini, the demonic virtuoso of the violin.
The impressions that Paganini left on the young Liszt were eternal. The final standard
had been set by Paganini. Liszt knew he had to become to the piano what Paganini was to
the violin. “Paganini had set his brain seething,” writes James Huneker. Two more
figures were to enter Liszt’s life at this time – Frederic Chopin and Hector Berlioz. There
three, Huneker continues, “…were the predominating artistic influences in his life.”
Chopin’s influence was to be felt in his adaptations of the Polish dances, such as the
Mazurka, the Cracoviak, the polonaise. Liszt himself used many of these forms himself in
his own compositions, including the Symphonic Poems. Chopin inspired Liszt to gaze
homeward for artistic inspiration. Berlioz was an altogether different sort of influence.
Berlioz was, as Sitwell writes, “… thirty years old, and in the high fermentation of his
strange schemings. There has never been anything more individual than these; indeed,
they are without a parallel in his own art, or in any of the other arts. The blaze and
violence of his genius allowed him to achieve things to which no really sane person

\(^3\) Nohl, 26
\(^5\) James Huneker, *Franz Liszt* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 17
would have dared set his hand.\textsuperscript{6} Berlioz’s approach to composition, especially his programmatic style, paved the way for Liszt to create a new symphonic sound. The *Symphony Fantastique* in particular, was eye-opening to Liszt, and a few years later, “he had completed his piano version of the *Symphonie Fantastique*… His piano score remains one of the most extraordinary productions of his skill.\textsuperscript{7}"

At this time of Liszt’s life, his career was certainly still centered around his performing, but he dabbled in composition and arranging, laying the foundations for works that wouldn’t be published for years. Sitwell writes that “At this stage, his future as a composer did not show very much promise.\textsuperscript{8}” The foundation was being laid, however, for this “Hungarian Wonder-Child” to synthesize his diverse background and create a brand new symphonic sound. “His studies of… these composers were, indeed, a long time in maturing. Berlioz was to affect him very much later in his career, a score of years ahead of this time, when he lived at Weimar and wrote the Symphonic Poems.\textsuperscript{9}"

These Symphonic Poems were to become one of the most significant contributions to the orchestral repertoire in the post-Beethoven 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Beethoven’s 9\textsuperscript{th} Symphony threatened to overshadow all symphonies, and only a few composers dared to venture out from beneath its shadow. What could be written that wasn’t eclipsed in some way by that pinnacle of symphonic works? And, if it did manage to stand on its own, it was too radical. Thus, Sitwell writes that there “was necessarily an interval of pause. A new direction had to be given, and the person behind this had to be possessed of sufficient genius and enough force of character to make effectual this change in musical

\textsuperscript{6} Sitwell, 23-24  
\textsuperscript{7} Sitwell 25  
\textsuperscript{8} Sitwell, 18  
\textsuperscript{9} Sitwell, 25
form and material. Liszt was to be that man. Liszt’s direction was not to be one of
definition, but of expansion. He did not seek to narrow the scope of what symphonic
writing could and should be, but rather he sought to expand its vision, enhance its colors,
and broaden its possibilities. Huneker writes that “Liszt not only introduced into the
musical world the symphonic poem, he developed it himself, and in his own twelve
poems he has shown the chief forms in which it can be clothed.”

What exactly is a Symphonic Poem? The term was coined by Liszt to describe his
new expressions through the orchestral medium. The Symphonic Poem sought to join
programmatic elements, such as poetry, drama and art, with music in a way that the
music was free to describe these inspirations without concern for form or expectations
that other symphonic genres might have imposed. The Symphonic Poem is typically a
single movement, multi-thematic with several sections, expressive and it also clearly
carries connotations to its programmatic source. Huneker describes it thusly: “The
symphonic poem in the form in which Liszt has given it to us, is ordinarily an ensemble
of different movements depending on each other and flowing from a principal ideal,
blending into each other, and forming one composition.”

Liszt felt that the term symphony carried too much restraint along with it. Ideas of
sonata-allegro form, recapitulation, multiple movements and typically absolute music
were too repressive for the forward thinking Liszt. How could a poem be accurately
conveyed if it naturally didn’t follow the progression of a sonata-allegro movement?
What of the painting whose scene covered so many narratives that even the most
expansive symphony couldn’t appropriately create space for enough thematic material

---

10 Sitwell 168
11 Huneker, 106
12 Huneker 107-108
and development? These were the boundaries that Liszt sought to avoid in his creation of the Symphonic Poem. The fact that this originality would come from a concert pianist, the original rock star, and someone whose compositions had rarely ventured outside of the instrumentation of the piano, was astounding. Sitwell captures this startling symphonic development well when he writes: “The most interesting facet in this transformation of Liszt… lies in the fact that at thirty-six years of age he was almost completely inexperienced in orchestral writing. It would seem inconceivable that a man who had spent his life at the keyboard of a piano should be able to develop above that technique… into the vaster regions of a complete orchestra. Yet he was to present the future and all its possibilities in a series of symphonic pieces that, if they are very uneven in merit, show nearly every range of possibility as regards both subject and treatment.\(^\text{13}\)"

The term ‘Symphonic Poem’ itself wasn’t used by Liszt immediately to describe his new works. Alan Walker informs us that “[The term Symphonic Poem] was used in public for the first time at a concert in Weimar, on April 19, 1854, to identify Liszt’s Tasso, and the title evidently pleased him.\(^\text{14}\)” The moniker stuck, and Liszt’s compositions have been referred to as Symphonic Poems ever since. Other composers have adopted the term and the genre as well.

There was very little symphonic variety around the middle of the 19th century. There existed, of course, the symphony, the concerto, as well as the overture, a few marches and other concert pieces. Stand alone, single movement pieces were rare. Programmatic symphonies, like Beethoven’s 6th, Berlioz’s Symphony Fantastique and Harold in Italy made up the majority of the programmatic orchestral compositions prior

\(^{13}\) Sitwell, 168

\(^{14}\) Alan Walker, Franz Liszt, vol 2 (Boston and New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 304
to Liszt’s poems. And yet, after Liszt, the Symphonic Poem would go on to have a rich
and popular history. Composers like Debussy, Dvorak, Gershwin, Grieg, Rachmaninoff,
Saint-Saens, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius and, perhaps, the greatest
Symphonic Poem writer of all time, Richard Strauss, all wrote significant pieces in this
genre. Sitwell, referring to Strauss’ Symphonic Poems, says that “If indeed, Richard
Strauss’ *Till Eulenspiegel, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Tod and Verklärung, Heldenlebe*, are
not the descendants of these other Symphonic Poems of fifty years before, it can only be
said that all the originality of Strauss consisted in the greater violence with which he gave
expression to these voices of a generation earlier than his own.” ¹⁵ Not only did the genre
have a lasting influence on the symphonic repertoire, but so did Liszt’s compositional
techniques within the poems themselves. The ingenious orchestrations (coming from a
pianist) were a result of his complete inability to think inside the box. Even the simple
things, like the incorporation of his Hungarian dance forms, was one of the sparks of the
nationalist movement amongst composers. When Liszt added the Tartar March at the end
of his Symphonic Poem *Mazeppa*, little did he know of the influence it would have.
Sitwell states that “there have been Tartar Marches ever since. Tchaikovsky and Borodin
are convincing proofs of the importance that Mazeppa must have possessed in its day.” ¹⁶

Nonetheless, for all of their vision, Liszt was prepared for the Symphonic Poems
to be cast aside. He himself said of the prevailing sentiment of his time, that “to approve
of [the Symphonic Poems], or even to hear them without condemning them in advance, is
a crime.” ¹⁷ And that sentiment changed little over the course of history. Most of the
twelve Symphonic Poems have fallen out of the standard repertoire, with the exception of

---
¹⁵ Sitwell, 169
¹⁶ Sitwell 170
¹⁷ Walker, 300
Les Preludes. We know them today as curiosities, unique, extraordinary in their own time that have not aged well. Composers far more successful and knowledgeable followed Liszt and eclipsed his Symphonic Poems with ease. The Symphonic poems sound raw and unrefined. Yet, for the first compositions of their kind, it is not difficult to understand why this is so. For all of the success that Liszt had in creating new sounds with his orchestra, which he demanded to be as technically virtuosic as an ensemble as he was at the piano, there were just as many passages which unduly exposed the orchestra, were poorly conceived and difficult to execute practically. Even his orchestrating came under question in his lifetime, as his tutors claimed that they were responsible for turning his sketches into the final product. Walker says the evidence is against this claim, however, and defends Liszt. He writes, “Scholars may wrangle over the question of exactly how much help [Liszt] received from his assistants Conradi and Raff in the early days of their collaboration, but the argument is rendered academic the moment we recall one single fact: every note of the published score was penned by him.” (Walker P. 304)

Table 1 lists the twelve Symphonic Poems in their composed and published order. A thirteenth Symphonic Poem is not included in this list as it was composed at the end of Liszt’s life and does not fit with the general scheme of his Symphonic Poems.

---

18 Walker, 304
19 http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral
All of these compositions, with one exception, are extremely programmatic pieces. This was Liszt in his finest element – using the orchestra to describe in a way that no other medium possibly could. The programs are usually clearly given by Liszt himself in a preface to each work. Even without the knowledge of the details, given the titles of the works, it is no difficult task to imagine what is happening in each of the Poems.

While composers and critics of his day, and ours, sometimes looked down their long noses with a sneer, sniffed knowingly and turned away as if from a putrid smell at the slightest sound of a programmatic element, Liszt knew it was his calling. Indeed, as Huneker writes, “Liszt was decidedly at a disadvantage as a composer when he lacked a programme. Usually in composing his purpose was so distinct , the music measuring itself so neatly against the logic of the programme, that his symphonic compositions
should most easily be comprehended by an audience.\textsuperscript{20} Liszt himself didn’t shy away from the term ‘program music’. He defended it.\textsuperscript{21}

It was certainly right for him to do so. Take away the programmatic element, and these pieces are much less enjoyable. They are not meant to compare to absolute music. Liszt, at his concerts, would hand out flyers clearly detailing, almost dictating, the experience of the listener. The merits of such a practice are beyond the scope of this paper, but the program was and always should be a critical aspect of these pieces.

The very first Symphonic Poem, \textit{Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne} which translates as ‘\textit{What One Hears Upon the Mountain}’ has it’s programmatic source in a Victor Hugo poem of the same title. The subject is that of Nature’s perfection contrasted with man’s misery.\textsuperscript{22} Liszt writes: “The poet hears two voices; one immense, splendid, and full of order, raising to the Lord its joyous hymn of praise - the other hollow, full of pain, swollen by weeping, blasphemies, and curses. One spoke of nature, the other of humanity! Both voices struggle near to each other, cross over, and melt into one another, till finally they die away in a state of holiness.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Tasso: Lamento e Trionfo} was composed for the Weimar centennial celebration of Goethe’s birth. This Symphonic Poem served as an overture to a performance of Goethe’s Tasso, depicting the misery and insanity of the famed poet in his later years.\textsuperscript{24} About Tasso, Liszt has this to say: “Tasso loved and suffered at Ferrara, he was avenged at Rome, and even today he lives in the popular songs of Venice. These three moments are inseparable from his immortal fame. To reproduce them in music, we first

\begin{footnotes}
\item [20] Huneker, 126
\item [21] Walker, 305
\item [22] Huneker, 110
\item [23] http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral
\item [24] Huneker, 113
\end{footnotes}
conjured up his great shade as he wanders through the lagoons of Venice even today; then his countenance appeared to us, lofty and melancholy, as he gazes at the festivities of Ferrara, where he created his masterworks; and finally we followed him to Rome, the Eternal City which crowned him with fame and thus paid him tribute both as martyr and as poet."\textsuperscript{25}

Liszt’s most enduring Symphonic Poem, \textit{Les Preludes}, was inspired from a meditation by Lamartine. The music and the literature “only share such general attributes as the melding of warlike and pastoral themes.”\textsuperscript{26} In the preface to the work, Hans van Bülow, Liszt’s favorite student and one time son-in-law (before Liszt’s daughter ran away with Richard Wagner) added this poignant quote: “What is our life but a series of preludes to that unknown song of which death sounds the first and solemn note? The enchanted dawn of every life is love; but where is the destiny on whose first delicious joys some storm does not break? – a storm whose deadly blast disperses youth’s illusions, whose fatal bolt consumes its altar. And what soul thus cruelly bruised, when the tempest rolls away, seeks not to rest its memories in the calm of rural life? Yet man allows himself not long to taste the kindly quiet which first attracted him to Nature’s lap; but when the trumpet gives the signal he hastens to danger’s post, whatever be the fight which draws him to its lists, that in the strife he may once more regain full knowledge of himself and all his strength.\textsuperscript{27}"

\textit{Orpheus} offers a less distinct programmatic story, instead focusing on Orpheus’s philosophies, and oddly enough, an Etruscan vase depicting Orpheus. Two harps are

\textsuperscript{25} http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral
\textsuperscript{26} http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral
\textsuperscript{27} Huneker, 119
called for, suggesting Orpheus’s lyre.\textsuperscript{28} Liszt wrote that he was inspired by an Etruscan vase in the Louvre showing Orpheus singing with his lyre. the piece is about the civilizing nature of art, rather than any mystical aspect of the myth. There is a “civilizing character of music which illumines every work of art, rising gradually like the vapor of incense and enfolding the world and the whole universe as it were in an atmosphere and a transparent cloak of ineffable and mysterious harmony.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Prometheus} is the next Symphonic Poem, and it follows in the footsteps of Orpheus – depicting a figure of the past. This time, it is a hero, and the resulting music is more noble and Titanic.\textsuperscript{30} It was originally written an overture to Herder's Prometheus Unbound, and symbolizes suffering for the sake of enlightenment for mankind.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Mazeppa} in its time was one of the most disparaged of the Poems. Critics said that Liszt’s “piano music was orchestral, and his orchestral music pianistic.”\textsuperscript{32} Indeed, Mazeppa was adapted from a piano etude. It was based on the story of Ivan Mazeppa. “Mazeppa was a young Polish nobleman who had an affair with another man's wife. He was later tied naked to a horse and sent off into the Ukraine. He was found by Cossacks, rising to become their chief. Mazeppa fought with Charles XII of Sweden against Peter the Great of Russia in the battle of Pultowa, but later committed suicide.”\textsuperscript{33}

\textit{Festivalklange} is the one Poem that has no given program. It was conceived as a work for Liszt’s anticipated marriage to a long time love interest Princess von Sayn-
Wittgenstein. The marriage never occurred though. It merely remains as party music. Crowds of people in a festive situation are gathered together.

Hunnenschlacht, on the other hand, has a very clear program. Based off of a painting by Wilhelf von Kaulbach depicting a battle between Attila the Hun and Emperor Theodoric and his two sons, there is imagery galore in the music. The dead spirits, which even as they rise from their corpses still do battle in the heavens. The women lament the loss of their husbands and sons.\textsuperscript{34} The first half of the music depicts the battle, while the second half is a meditation on the chorale theme ‘Crux Fidelis’ of the Christian forces.\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{Heroide Funebre} was originally written as the first movement of a Revolutionary Symphony, which Liszt composed, again in anticipation of a coming event, in this case, of a revolution, which by the time it did take place, Liszt’s political ideologies had changed. In the revolution, a friend was killed, influencing Liszt’s adaptation of this movement into a Symphonic Poem.\textsuperscript{36} Liszt said of the program, “In these successive wars and carnages, sinister sports, whatever be the colours of the flags which rise proudly and boldly against each other, on both sides they float soaked with heroic blood and inexhaustible tears. It is for Art to throw her ennobling veil over the tomb of the brave, to encircle with her golden halo the dead and dying, that they may be the envy of the living.”

\textit{Hungaria} is partly based on the Heroic March in the Hungarian Style for piano, is rather like a Hungarian rhapsody. The funeral march is based on Kossuth's revolt of

\textsuperscript{34} Huneker, 132
\textsuperscript{35} \url{http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral}
\textsuperscript{36} Sitwell, 169
1848, and the piece has a yearning for when Hungary will finally be liberated from bondage.  

*Hamlet* was merely composed as a prelude to the play by Shakespeare, depicting the title character and the conflicts he undergoes.

*Die Ideale* was composed for the unveiling of a Goethe and Schiller monument on Sept. 5th, 1857. It was inspired by multiple passages of the poem of the same name by Schiller, which Liszt liberally rearranged to create a program to his liking. This is an example of the extreme to which Liszt went to create the programmatic atmosphere of his Symphonic Poems.

Altogether, these twelve Symphonic Poems were an integral part of the symphonic transition from Beethoven to the late Romantic. They created a new orchestral genre, introduced new tambres and colors to the ears of audiences and pens of composers, and cleared the way for a tradition of programmatic music being legitimate concert repertoire, even if it was at the sacrifice of his trailblazing music during his time. Alan Walker writes that, “With the passing of years some of these pieces have assumed historical importance – that is to say, they have changed the way in which subsequent composers have handled musical form, to say nothing of the orchestra. Their stunning originality, both as soundscapes and as structures, cannot be denied: many of Liszt’s newer orchestral effects have even found their way into textbooks on instrumentation, where they continue to absorb and influence all serious students of the topic.” Other Symphonic Poems have been written that surpassed Liszt’s, but because of Liszt’s originality and vision to break the mold, the symphonic repertoire was forever changed.

---

37 [http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral](http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral)
38 [http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral](http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral)
39 Walker, 304
Bibliography


MacDonald, Hugh. “Grove Music Dictionary - Symphonic Poem Article”
http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/27250


http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/48265pg15#S48265.15

http://lisztomania.wikidot.com/orchestral