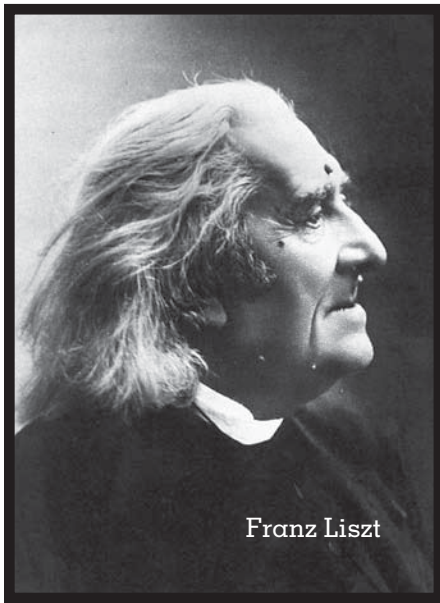


After Bach

Franz Liszt: Via Crucis

The concert public at large and even most musicians habitually and exclusively associate Franz Liszt with piano music of transcendental technical difficulty, an accurate assessment of only the first half of the long-lived composer's career. But after he formally renounced public performance as a virtuoso in



1847, he first became a court music director in Weimar, where for 14 years he composed avant-garde orchestral works, conducted contemporary music and wrote essays on aesthetics, and then entered the seclusion of a Roman monastery, where he took minor holy orders and tackled the sorely needed reform of Catholic liturgical music, a project that induced him to write well over 50 sacred choral works ranging from large-scale oratorios to simple plainchant harmonizations. He gradually reentered public musical life to serve as the inaugural director of the National Conservatory in Budapest, offer master classes to generations of pianists in Weimar, and compose and meditate in Rome – activities entailing annual journeys among the

three cities for the rest of what he called his “trifurcated life.”

Liszt's religious motives have often been questioned, since his virtuoso lifestyle was sometimes profligate. But his faith was long-standing and resolute. His father was a Franciscan novice until his dismissal for an “inconstant and changeable nature,” and Liszt himself planned to enter a monastery as a teenager. The influence of the Abbé Félicité de Lamennais and other social utopians, however, caused him to view art as an agent of social change and develop his musical talent toward that end. His Weimar companion, Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, was a devout (some would say fanatical) Catholic whose strongly argued opinions prodded Liszt to reexamine his faith. After preparing diligently to enter the Lower Orders in 1865, he claimed he made his vows “without effort, in all simplicity and uprightness of intention,” and that his actions “agreed with all the antecedents of his youth.”

Liszt repeated the last assertion in 1874, mentioning a “little work I have been thinking about for a long time: *Via Crucis*,” which would not be “learned or ostentatious,” but instead consist of “simple reflections on my youthful emotions – which remain indestructible across all the trials of the years!” By 1877 Princess Wittgenstein had selected and assembled the texts, allowing Liszt to complete the music in Rome in 1878. The score was rejected by a Regensburg publisher in 1884, premiered in Budapest only in 1929, and not published until 1936. Part of the reason for such neglect is that *Via Crucis*, though scarcely “learned or ostentatious,” is far from “simple.”

In narrating the 14 events of the Crucifixion that have been depicted in

paintings or carvings on or near the walls of Catholic churches since the Middle Ages, *Via Crucis* employs a wide variety of styles. Some movements are choral; some feature soloists in the roles of Pontius Pilate and Christ; and others are organ or piano interludes that allow listeners to reflect on previous or impending actions. Straightforward unison or triadically set plainchants are juxtaposed with passages of dissonant chromaticism or futuristic, incipient atonality. Abstract, ethereal melodies like the one repeatedly associated with Saint Veronica alternate with vivid musical evocations: a repetitive trudging motive suggests Jesus carrying the Cross; excruciatingly harsh, staccato discords correspond to the nails piercing Christ's hands; and a whole-tone scale – long associated with operatic deaths – coincides with the moment He expires. Latin plainchants such as the introductory *Vexilla regis* (*The Banners of the King*) and the third movement's *Stabat mater dolorosa* (*The Sorrowful Mother Stood*) coexist with Protestant chorales – *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* (*O Head full of Blood and Wounds*) and *O Traurigkeit O Herzeleid* (*O Sorrow, O Grief*). These specific allusions and other musical symbols (especially Liszt's recurrent three-note “Cross motive”) not only attest to the composer's highly personal and deeply felt approach to a subject central to the Catholic faith, but also offer rich rewards for listeners who exert the necessary effort to decode them.

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