

Program Notes

Text by Robert Markow

Liszt:

Après une lecture de Dante, from *Années de pèlerinage*:
Second Year, "Italie"

In his time, Franz Liszt probably traveled as much as any jet-set conductor or soloist does today. His journeys across the length and breadth of Europe included “pilgrimages” (as he called them) to Switzerland and Italy, voyages of artistic and spiritual discovery that he later translated into musical expression in the form of three books of piano pieces called *Années de pèlerinage*. To Richard Freed, the three books of *Années* constitute “the most vast and fascinating series of works by Liszt to be collected under a single title. ... The respective installments follow Liszt’s ever-expanding stylistic range over a period of more than 40 years, from the age of 23 to 66, thus tracing the composer’s own pilgrimage from the state of virtuoso to that of prophet.”

Book II is devoted to Liszt’s impressions and reminiscences of the art and literature of Italy, absorbed while traveling there with the Comtesse Marie d’Agoult between 1837 and 1839. The seven component pieces were written between 1837 and 1849, but not published until 1858. The final number is “Après une lecture du Dante”: Fantasia quasi sonata, or the “Dante Sonata” for short. The title translates as “after a reading from Dante” (not “after a lecture by Dante”!), and was adopted from a poem by Victor Hugo. It is generally considered to be the most substantial, ambitious, impassioned and harmonically far-reaching work of the entire *Années*. (Some years later, Liszt was also to produce a *Dante* Symphony.)

The work is laid out in a single, extended movement in several connected sections, numerous changes of tempo, and three main motivic/thematic ideas. The first of these is heard in the opening measures, a descending series of stentorian octaves spaced a tritone apart (this being the “devil’s interval”). The second is a restless, ominous motif that slithers chromatically up and down the scale of D minor, a key composers

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often associated with the underworld (parts of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" Quartet, Liszt's own *Totentanz* and *Dante Symphony*, etc.). This is heard at first quietly, and later in various manifestations and volume levels. The third is a broadly lyrical theme in F-sharp major (a favorite key of the Romantics, especially to depict beatific scenes) set at first to a rippling accompaniment, and later to a backdrop of thundering octaves. The work ends with a last glimpse of Paradise.

FRANZ LISZT: Born in Raiding, Hungary (today in Austria), October 22, 1811; died in Bayreuth, Germany, July 31, 1886

Work composed (Liszt work): 1837 / 1849 Work composed (Battistoni work): 2021 World premiere (Liszt work): 1839 in Wien with the composer as soloist World premiere (Battistoni work): September 15, 2022 in Tokyo

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, suspended cymbal, cymbals, tam-tam, tubular bells, glockenspiel), 2 harps, strings

Andrea Battistoni on *Après une lecture de Dante*

Text by Andrea Battistoni / Translated by Flavio Parisi

Connoisseurs of Liszt know very well the Hungarian-born composer's quest for unusual sonorities, unprecedented nuances and imitation of orchestral textures in his keyboard works.

Fascinated by the so-called "Dante Sonata", I decided to depict these qualities in an orchestration that was in vogue until the 1950s. My aim, therefore, is not an orchestration in the style of Liszt and his contemporaries, but rather a free transcription for large orchestra in the manner of Ravel, Respighi and Stokowski.

Every transcription is in itself both a homage and a betrayal. In my orchestration, the accentuation and expressive indications by Liszt are all retained, in order to respect the composer's original content and to provide the most complete image of this adaptation. However, the metronomic indications as well as all the timbral combinations are my own, as I considered them more suitable for the symphonic performance of this work. In today's musical world, so focused on philology, written sources, and loyalty to the

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text, I hope this work will nevertheless find a place as a heartfelt homage to a great composer of the past without upsetting purists too much. I am comforted by the fact that Liszt himself made numerous transcriptions and paraphrases of music by other composers, music in which he reworked the enchantment of the original works by weaving together personal interpretation with acknowledged tribute. What fascinates me the most about this Dante Sonata are its atmosphere, both mystical and heart-breaking, and its combination of contemplation and virtuosity that characterizes Liszt's music, which can be angelic and demonic at the same time.

It is not clear from which canto of the *Divine Comedy* Liszt drew inspiration while composing these pages, but it is not difficult to imagine the infernal flames among the waves of terrifying sounds, or the tale of the unfortunate lovers Paolo and Francesca in the *cantabile* passage midway through. To the ominous opening motto it is almost possible to sing "Abandon all Hope, ye who enter here," as inscribed on the gate of Hell. From here, a dark descent into the abysses of the orchestra, or Dante's circles, awaits the listener in sinuous chromatic spirals similar to serpents' coils.

As already mentioned, one of the features of Liszt's music is how he combines the sacred and profane. It is not difficult to sense, on the one hand, a heavenly breeze in the tremolos accompanying an angelic chorale, and on the other a sulphuric stench in the can-can-inspired dances that portray the descent into Hell. In the final pages my orchestration, I have highlighted with triumphant bells the transition from Dante's journey into the abysses of evil to the highest reaches of heaven and hope for a better world.

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Mahler: Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor

Concertgoers familiar with Mahler's Fourth Symphony may recall that the first movement contains a trumpet call remarkably similar to that which opens the Fifth. This fact may be regarded symbolically as Mahler's conscious effort to move ahead in a new direction in the Fifth, yet at the same time to show that the new must build on the foundations of the old. Mahler's new-found and deep acquaintance with Bach probably had much to do with his new compositional style, a style that conductor Bruno

Walter called “intensified polyphony.” The orchestral fabric becomes more complicated – more instruments playing more different lines at the same time. His style becomes generally less lyrical, more angular and hard-edged. Hymns of love, childlike faith and quasi-religious messages tend to be replaced by moods of tragic irony, bitterness and cynicism. Mahler conducted the first performance with the Gürzenich Orchestra of Cologne on October 18, 1904.

The Fifth Symphony is in five movements, further grouped into three large units, with a huge scherzo serving as the fulcrum to a pair of movements on either side. The work opens with a funeral march, a type of music found in every one of Mahler’s ten symphonies except the Fourth and Eighth. To the ponderous, thickly-scored tread of the march is added a gentle lament in the strings. Suddenly the music erupts in wild, impassioned strains. The ever-changing, kaleidoscopic aspect of Mahler’s orchestration is heard in its fullest expression. Eventually the funeral march music reasserts itself, and after a nightmarish climax, the movement disintegrates in ghostly echoes of the trumpet call.

The second movement shares many qualities with the first, both emotionally and thematically. Easily identifiable variants and transformations of the first movement’s melodic material can be found. The turbulent, stormy mood continues and is even intensified. Paroxysms of violent rage race uncontrolled in some of the most feverish music ever written. Quiet interludes recall the funeral lament of the first movement. Towards the end of the movement gleams a ray of hope – the brass proclaim a fragment of a victory chorale, an anticipatory gesture that will find its fulfillment in the symphony’s closing pages.

The despair and anguish of Part I are abruptly dismissed by the life-affirming Scherzo (Part II) – the longest and most complex scherzo Mahler ever wrote. The tremendous energy that infuses the scherzo segments alternates with nostalgic and wistful interludes in waltz or *Ländler* rhythm. Though the movement is not meant to be programmatic, one is tempted to imagine Mahler’s Austrian landscapes, the peasant dances and the bustle

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and joy of life. The role of the principal horn becomes nearly that of a concerto soloist.

Part III consists of the *Adagietto* and the Finale. In the *Adagietto*, scored only for strings and harp, we return to a romantic dream world familiar from Mahler's earlier works, a world of quiet contemplation, benign simplicity, inner peace and escape from harsh reality. The *Adagietto* is surely the most famous single movement in all Mahler, a phenomenon dating back to its prominent use in the popular film *Death in Venice* (1971).

A single note from the horn dispels the romantic mood, and the merry Rondo-Finale is on its way. The interconnectedness of the final two movements is seen not only in the first four notes of the rondo theme (an exact inversion of the first four notes of the *Adagietto* theme), but in the use of the *Adagietto* theme as the subject of a fugal episode. Some of Mahler's most vibrant, exuberant, wildly extroverted music is found in this Finale. Near the end the brass chorale is recalled, heard previously in the second movement but now bursting forth in full glory and triumph. The metamorphosis from grief and death to joy and life is complete.

GUSTAV MAHLER: Born in Kalischt, Bohemia, July 7, 1860; died in Vienna, May 18, 1911 **Work composed:** 1901-02 **World premiere:** October 18, 1904 in Cologne, by the Gürzenich Orchestra of Cologne conducted by the composer

Instrumentation: 4 flutes (3rd and 4th doubling on piccolos), 3 oboes (3rd doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (2nd doubling on Es(E♭) clarinet, 3rd doubling on bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (3rd doubling on contrabassoon), 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drums, bass drum, bass drum with attached cymbals, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, slapstick, glockenspiel), harp, strings

Formerly a horn player in the Montreal Symphony, **Robert Markow** now writes program notes for orchestras as well as for numerous other musical organizations in North America and Asia. He taught at Montreal's McGill University for many years, has led music tours to several countries, and writes for numerous leading classical music journals.

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