

School of Music
Faculty of Fine Arts
University of Victoria

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FACULTY CONCERT SERIES

*“Hurling a Lance Into the Future”
The Spiritual Vision of Franz Liszt
(1811-1886)*

BRUCE VOGT
PIANO

We respectfully acknowledge that the land on which we gather is the traditional territory of the WS'ANEC' (Saanich), Lkwungen (Songhees) and Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples of the Coast Salish Nation.

Saturday, March 10, 2018 • 8 p.m.

Phillip T. Young Recital Hall

MacLaurin Building, University of Victoria

Adults: \$25 / Seniors: \$20 / Students & UVic alumni: \$10

PROGRAM

i. Religious Iconography

“St. François d’Assise: la prédication aux oiseaux” from *Deux légendes*
(St. Francis of Assisi: Preaching to the Birds) (c. 1863)

ii. Aspects of Love

- i. “Sonetto 47 del Petrarca” (Sonnet by Petrarch)
from *Années de pèlerinage, Deuxième année: Italie* (1858)
- ii. **Widmung** (Dedication) Robert Schumann / Arr. Liszt (1848)
- iii. “Ricordanza” (Remembrance) from *Études d’exécution transcendante* (1851)

iii. Hungarian Resonances

Hungarian Rhapsody No. 13 in A Minor (c. 1845)

Historical Hungarian Portraits

- No. 4 *Eötvös József* (1885)
- No. 6 *Petőfi Sándor* 1877-85)
- No. 7 *Mosonyi Mihály* (1870-77)

INTERMISSION

Concession open in the lounge

iv. Darker Visions of Eternity

- i. **Valse oubliée No. 1** (Forgotten Waltz) (c. 1881)
- ii. **Mephisto Waltz No. 4: Bagatelle sans tonalité** (1883-85)
- iii. **Schlaflos! Frage und Antwort** (Sleepless: Question and Answer) (1883)
- iv. **Aux cyprès de la Villa d’Este No. 1: Threnodie** (Among the Cypresses of the Villa d’Este) from *Années de pèlerinage, Troisième année* (c. 1877)

v. Transcendental Vision

Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude (Blessing of God in Solitude)
from *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (1847-52)

vi. Postlude

Elegie: Die Zelle in Nonnenwerth (The Cell on Nonnenwerth) (1880)

PROGRAM NOTES

i. Religious Iconography

Sometime in 1863, Liszt completed *Two Legends* from Catholic tradition of the lives of Saints. The first of these is based upon the story of *St. Francis Preaching to the Birds*:

...And as he went on his way, with great fervour, St. Francis lifted up his eyes, and saw on some trees by the wayside a great multitude of birds; and being much surprised, he said to his companions, "Wait for me here by the way, whilst I go and preach to my little sisters the birds"; and entering into the field, he began to preach to the birds which were on the ground, and suddenly all those also on the trees came round him, and all listened while St. Francis preached to them, and did not fly away until he had given them his blessing..

Liszt knew perfectly well that this legend was ultimately mythological. And yet it contains much truth in the way it speaks of the beauty to be found in sympathy and sensitivity to all living things.

As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Saint Francis invited all of creation—animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon—to give honor and praise to the Lord. The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples. (Pope John Paul II, 1990)

ii. Aspects of Love

Liszt's Franciscan Catholicism was a profound inspiration throughout his life, although some have seen an amusing contradiction in the zest with which he lived his secular life. But for Liszt there was no such contradiction: his religious feelings exerted a powerful influence over all his strivings. Indeed, his polemics on behalf of art and other artists—as well as his love letters—were expressed in language of religious fervour and conviction.

The first two of these *Aspects of Love* were originally for voice and piano but were transcribed by Liszt with great skill and imagination so that the piano versions became separate works of art. With great subtlety the composer captures the sentiment of the poems which inspired the original songs.

In *Sonnet No. 47 by Petrarch*—the first of three piano settings of his own vocal settings of Petrarch Sonnets—Liszt took a very free approach to transcription. The material has been elaborated considerably, resulting in what is perhaps a more vivid illustration of the varying moods of Petrarch's Sonnet.

Sonnet 47

Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374)

Blest be the year, the month, the hour, the day,
The season and the time, the point of space,
And blest the beauteous country and the place
Where first of two bright eyes I felt the sway:
Blest the sweet pain of which I was the prey,
When newly doomed Love's sovereign law
to embrace,

And blest the bow and shaft to which I trace
The wound that to my inmost breast found way:
Blest be the ceaseless accents of my tongue,
Unwearied breathing my loved lady's name:
Blest my fond wishes, sighs, and tears, and pains:
That on all sides acquired to her fair fame;
And blest my thoughts! for o'er them all she reigns.

From his first encounter with Robert Schumann as a young man until the end of his life, Liszt remained a great supporter of Schumann's compositions. This transcription of Schumann's Lied, **Widmung**, was an elaboration on an earlier and more literal version. With this final version, composed in 1848, Liszt created perhaps his greatest song transcription, which so very beautifully suggests an ecstatic vision of fulfilled love. Yet in the end, it fundamentally changes the nature of the song. In Schumann's original setting, the contrasting middle section ("You are my repose...") is followed by a quite literal return to the opening music. Liszt, however, transforms this return into something more ecstatic before moving to a final verse in which the pulsating "peaceful" triplets of the middle section become yet a further transfiguration of the opening melody.

Widmung (Dedication)

Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866)

You are my soul, my heart,
my ecstasy and pain;
You are my world in which I live,
My heaven into which I am suspended,
My grave into which I have laid forever my sorrow.

You are my repose and my peace,
You are bestowed to me from heaven;
That you love me makes me of worth,
Your gaze transfigures me,
Lovingly you raise me above myself,
My good spirit, my better self.

Ricordanza (*Memorial*) is not a transcription of a song: it originated as one of twelve relatively simple Czerny-like studies Liszt wrote when he was 15. However, it was completely recomposed in 1837, and then again in 1852, as No. 9 of his *12 Études d'exécution transcendante* (*Transcendental Studies*). Its sentiment was memorably described by Ferruccio Busoni as evoking "a bundle of faded love letters"

iii. Hungarian Resonances

Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 13* was completed, along with the first fifteen *Rhapsodies*, in his middle years between 1846 and 1853, with four more added in the last four years of his life. It was Liszt's belief that the melodies he used for these works were genuine Hungarian folk melodies—a wilful belief, since the evidence certainly existed at the time to show that these were actually melodies composed by members of the Hungarian middle class and nobility. But Liszt valued his Hungarian roots, and his belief in the folk source of these melodies allowed him to imaginatively express an important part of his own musical lineage. The *Rhapsodies* came from his reminiscence

of the melodies he heard in Gypsy camps as a child, which he valued for their emotional directness, their generosity of spirit, their humour, and their improvisatory brilliance. Many decades after Liszt's death, Béla Bartók gently took him to task for misrepresenting these melodies but then argued for another kind of authenticity, in these and in all of Liszt's so-called borrowings: "...whatever Liszt touched he so stamped and so transformed with his own individuality that it became like something of his own...We can say he was eclectic in the best sense of the word: one who took from all foreign sources but gave still more from himself."

Liszt spoke Hungarian only haltingly: nevertheless he strongly identified with his Hungarian roots. In his last years a great deal of his music is coloured by Hungarian elements. Not only are there a number of works based on Hungarian themes or forms, but certain characteristic musical elements are found in many non-Hungarian works: pentatonic and whole tone scales, and the use of the so-called "Gypsy" scale with its augmented seconds and flattened fourths. The *Seven Hungarian Historical Portraits*, composed between 1870 and 1885, were compiled in 1885, a year before the composer's death. However, astonishingly, they were not published until 1956. These works commemorate Hungarian statesmen, patriots and artists whom Liszt had known. Jozsef Eötvös (1813-1871) was a writer and statesman who was for a time minister of education and religious affairs in 1848, and again in 1867. He also was a passionate advocate of Jewish emancipation. Sandor Petöfi (1822-1849) was a celebrated poet who was killed while taking part in the revolution of 1848-1849. Mihály Mosonyi (1815-1870) was a composer whose music was admired by Liszt. Indeed Liszt wrote a piano fantasy on Mosonyi's opera *Szép Ilonka*.

iv. Darker Visions of Eternity

Liszt's last years were spent teaching and composing. He did nothing to make his compositions known and even discouraged his students from playing them. In 1873 he wrote to Mosonyi: "Yet there still remain several things for me to say, irrespective as to whether they may be quickly understood or recognized. Sometime when I am no longer of this earth, the rest will find itself. I can calmly await the event while I go on working, and meanwhile composedly expiate my virtuoso reputation with the disapproval my compositions have excited." And so it was. It was not until the enthusiastic advocacy of Bartók, Busoni and others, that these late works were recognized for what they are—a most astounding anticipation of major new paths which music was to follow. In their radical simplicity, obsessive rhythms and strange harmonies, they take the listener to the very brink of tonality.

But if their anticipation of the future were their only distinction, they would be little more than curiosities. With art and artists, it's not who does things first that matters but who does them best. Ultimately it is the uniqueness and power of their vision that makes these works so significant. Liszt's biographer Alan Walker focusses on their expression of depression and despair. I think they are more truly an extension of Liszt's life-long spiritual strivings, a courageous and unrelenting gaze into the abyss. He finds much terror there but also much beauty.

We live our lives in full knowledge of our mortality. We know we must die and everything that we value—those we love, the things that resonate throughout our lives—will disappear, often painfully and in a protracted way. The preciousness of the things we value will not change this reality. The gap between the meaningfulness, the preciousness of life and its fleeting grain-of-sand nature cannot be closed by thought or by argument. Nor can it be ignored by what D. H. Lawrence refers to as: “the dead vanity of knowing better... the blank/cold comfort of superiority, [the] silly/conceit of being immune.”

It is a privilege of great art that it can hint at a way of closing—or at least lessening—the gap.

Liszt wrote three *Valses oubliées*, or “forgotten waltzes,” between 1881 and 1885; a fourth was left almost completed. All of them share a kind of other-worldly strangeness. The first, the most familiar of the three, has the giddiness of the waltz—yet something sinister is perhaps suggested. For the middle section Liszt instructs the performer to play in an “elegiac mood”.

The publishing history of the *Fourth Mephisto Waltz: Bagatelle sans tonalité* demonstrates both the incomprehension with which these late works were received and the composer’s listless indifference to their fate. Written sometime between 1883 and 1885, it remained unknown until 1956 when it was finally published in Budapest.

Schlaflos! Frage und Antwort (*Sleepless! Question and Answer*) was inspired by a poem by Toni Raab which is now lost.

Liszt spent a good part of each year from 1864 onward in the Villa d’Este—a 16th century castle in a park in Tivoli near Rome. It is famous for its elaborate fountains, but it is also renowned for its ancient cypresses, which became the inspiration for two *Thrénodies*, *Aux cyprès de la Villa d’Este* (*Among the Cypresses of the Villa d’Este*), two ruminations on the ephemeral nature of existence. “For three whole days, in September 1877, Liszt spent every hour of sunlight and as much of night as was made visible by the moon, in admiration of the cypresses. They obsessed his thoughts to the exclusion of all else.” (Sacheverell Sitwell)

v. Transcendental Vision

Liszt’s greatest religious composition is his *Bénédiction de Dieu: Blessing of God in Solitude*—based on a poem by Lamartine. Surely this is one of his most moving masterpieces, but also one of the few religious works of the 19th century that is not suffused with a kind of stained-glass sentimentality. It describes a mystical experience, bringing a sense of harmony with the universe, a freedom from doubt and despair.

One does not need to share Liszt’s religious convictions—or indeed, any religious conviction—in order to feel the power of this vision. Such moments of clarity seem to be found in all religions, and even among those who would call themselves atheists. Perhaps,

as Carol Shields suggests, we all have some intimation of these moments in time: "... those...rare transcendental moments when you suddenly feel everything makes sense and you perceive the pattern of the universe. I think we all get a few of these minutes."

Blessing of God in Solitude

Whence does it come to me, O my God!
this peace which floods over me?

Whence comes this faith
with which my heart overflows?

To me, who so recently was uncertain, restless,
and tossed about on the waves of doubt,

Searching for the good, for the truth,
in the dreams of sages,

And for peace in hearts resounding with turmoil.

It is but a few days that have slipped by,

Yet it seems that a century and a world have passed
away;

And that, separated from all of that by an immense abyss,

A new man within me is reborn and begins again.

(Alphonse de Lamartine)

vi. Postlude

Die Zelle in Nonnenwerth originated as a song composed in 1843. Nonnenwerth is an island on the Rhine which was the site of a ruined monastery and a chapel. Liszt used this island as a retreat during the summers of the early 1840s. The poem refers to love abandoned, with the monastery (Die Zelle) a symbol of loss and death. Liszt subsequently wrote four versions of this song for solo piano, and the metamorphosis over the years is extreme. In this last version, written in 1880, little is left of love, abandoned or otherwise; instead, there remains a sense of profound resignation, with echoes of ghostly chanting and the sound of distant bells from the long-deserted monastery.

— Bruce Vogt

BIOGRAPHY

Canadian pianist **Bruce Vogt** was born in Southern Ontario but for the past 36 years has lived and worked in Victoria, BC and taught at the University of Victoria as Professor of Piano. As a soloist he has appeared regularly in concerts within Canada and he tours yearly in many countries throughout Europe and Asia. His repertoire encompasses music from the sixteenth century to the present. In addition to having a special affinity for the music of Franz Liszt, he has both performed on period instruments and commissioned and premiered a number of new works.