

CHAN 6629



# Liszt

Christmas Tree  
(Weihnachtsbaum)

Ballades 1 & 2

CHANDOS  
COLLECT

Rhonda Gillespie  
piano

## Franz Liszt (1811–1886)

### Weihnachtsbaum

*Christmas Tree*

1	Psallite –	2:01
	<i>An Old Christmas Carol</i>	
2	O heilige Nacht! –	4:20
	<i>O Holy Night!</i>	
3	Die Hirten an der Krippe –	3:07
	<i>The Shepherds at the Manger: In dulci jubilo</i>	
4	Adeste fideles –	3:14
	<i>March of the Holy Kings</i>	
5	Scherzoso –	2:20
	<i>Lighting Candles on the Christmas Tree</i>	
6	Carillon –	2:12
7	Schlummerlied –	3:36
	<i>Slumber Song</i>	

8	Altes provençalisches Weihnachtslied –	1:35
	<i>Old Provençal Christmas Carol</i>	
9	Abendglocken –	4:59
	<i>Evening Bells</i>	
10	Ehemals! Jadis –	3:35
	<i>Long Ago</i>	
11	Ungarisch –	2:40
	<i>In Hungarian Style</i>	
12	Polnisch	6:25
	<i>In Polish Style</i>	
13	Ballade No. 1 in D flat major	7:59
14	Ballade No. 2 in B minor	13:16
		TT 61:43

Rhondda Gillespie piano



## Liszt: Weihnachtsbaum (Christmas Tree) etc.

Liszt's transition from showman to recluse, from a predominantly active to a contemplative man, is one of music's most fascinating mysteries. What prompted the ultimate pianistic wizard, one with the world at his feet, to retreat into an increasingly twilight world? Liszt was both blessed and cursed with a supreme intelligence which allowed him to see things in their truest, most unadorned light. Within a remarkably short time the composer who celebrated a virtuoso as one 'called upon to make emotion speak and weep and sing and sigh' became aware of his debasement:

there came over me a bitter disgust against art... am I condemned without remission to this trade of buffoon and amuser of drawing-rooms?

Liszt's decision to terminate his performing career, taken under his mistress the Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein's guidance, becomes more understandable and helps to explain the nature of his 'late', freely experimental and dark-hued works. Their very titles, *La lugubre gondola*, *Nuages gris* (Grey Clouds), *Unstern* (literally, unstarred, or unlucky star) and *Elegie* etc., tell their own desolating tale, a darkening of the soul and an extreme

reaction to former excess. And this direction and economy is seen in music which, again, replaces one thing with another. Where once there were cascades of notes there is now the sparest utterance. Both actually and symbolically the glitter of *La campanella* gives way to the cloistered calm and impressionism of *Angelus!* (from *Années de pèlerinage*, Book 3).

Such a change is vital to an understanding of Liszt's *Weihnachtsbaum* (Christmas Tree), composed between 1874 and 1876 for his granddaughter Daniela von Bülow. But if the stage seems set for a quiet celebration of family affection and simple Christian piety the result is altogether more subtle and ambiguous. True, the opening 'An Old Christmas Carol' is more ceremonious than unsettling and both 'O Holy Night!' and 'The Shepherds at the Manger' suggest a child-like sense of wonder and delight. 'Adeste fideles', a familiar carol, is enlivened with stately fanfares, and 'Lighting Candles on the Christmas Tree' (one of Liszt's rare scherzos and a prophecy of Bartók) recreates a flicker of half-lights as gently sparkling as it is evocative. Suitably, the bells ring out in 'Carillon' with a kind of minimalist virtuosity, their jubilation caught in a

*giocoso* rhythmic emphasis before one of those enigmatic conclusions increasingly dear to Liszt. It is almost as if he were still aware of life's unfinished business, of the endless possibility of rain and sunshine in his intricate and always unpredictable life. Then there is the 'Slumber Song', music of outward simplicity though with enough subtly shifting and crepuscular harmonies to create a palette and mood far beyond simple notions of childhood innocence. The 'Old Provençal Christmas Carol' returns us to a more settled state, and the following 'Evening Bells' transforms 'Carillon's' earlier exuberant chimes into a nocturnal meditation.

It is at this point that the 'Christmas Tree' suite changes direction or, arguably, confirms that undertow of anxiety or uncertainty already present to one degree or another. The last three pieces have been evasively described as 'a mature person's recollections' or 'three secular pieces' which form an apt conclusion to 'some charming miniatures'. But there is nothing charming about the sense of heartache in 'Long Ago', a bitter-sweet memory of former happiness. 'Long Ago' is significantly written in waltz time, a reminder of that most nostalgic of dance forms. And here, surely, is a painful recall of what might have been, namely Liszt's aborted marriage to Princess Carolyne, reinforced, *appassionata*, by too many other regrets. The sinister tramp of

'In Hungarian Style' is like some savage aftermath: powerful, defiant, unrelenting and unresolved. Finally, there is 'In Polish Style', a mazurka held up to a distorting mirror, its basic character fragmented into an argument ranging from introspection to playfulness, from heroism to despair and, finally, to the mock-triumphant.

There is nothing quite like *Weihnachtsbaum* in music. A distant relation of Schumann's *Kinderszenen* and Debussy's *Children's Corner*, those marvels of childhood magic seen through adult eyes, it ends by ironically contradicting its sense of light, finally suggesting a thorny path to a state of grace and inner peace.

From a classic instance of *multum in parvo* we turn, in the two Ballades, to Liszt's earlier and most opulent rhetoric. The **First Ballade**, completed in 1848, is chivalric, scintillating and unduly neglected. Its opening prelude or introduction contains *espressivo* and *vivo* alternations before the announcement of an assuaging, tirelessly embellished theme and a proudly stepping march. *Rapido con bravura* ascents and *strepitoso* octave descents contribute to a virtuoso *frisson* inseparable from Liszt's earlier genius, and the First Ballade concludes in dazzling style, *vivamente* and *più animato*. The **Second Ballade** of 1853 could hardly provide a more sombre contrast. Certainly the dramatic reconciliation

of sharply opposed elements is an authentic triumph, and the climax is so cunningly delayed that its final emergence seems doubly exultant and expansive. After the storming eloquence of the principal theme's final appearance (a clear inspiration for the very

Lisztian cadenza in Grieg's Piano Concerto) the Ballade's serene close forms a subtle alternative to Liszt's original and bombastic conclusion.

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LISZT: WEIHNACHTSBAUM (CHRISTMAS TREE) etc. - Gillespie



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CHAN 6629



Franz Liszt (1811–1886)

Weihnachtsbaum 40:14  
*Christmas Tree*

- |   |   |      |
|---|---|------|
| 1 | Psallite –  | 2:01 |
|   | <i>An Old Christmas Carol</i>                       |      |
| 2 | O heilige Nacht! –                                  | 4:20 |
|   | <i>O Holy Night!</i>                                |      |
| 3 | Die Hirten an der Krippe –                          | 3:07 |
|   | <i>The Shepherds at the Manger; In dulci jubilo</i> |      |
| 4 | Adeste fideles –                                    | 3:14 |
|   | <i>March of the Holy Kings</i>                      |      |
| 5 | Scherzoso –   | 2:20 |
|   | <i>Lighting Candles on the Christmas Tree</i>       |      |
| 6 | Carillon –  | 2:12 |
| 7 | Schlummerlied –                                     | 3:36 |
|   | <i>Slumber Song</i>                                 |      |
| 8 | Altes provençalisches Weihnachtslied –              | 1:35 |
|   | <i>Old Provençal Christmas Carol</i>                |      |

- |    |                               |          |
|----|-------------------------------|----------|
| 9  | Abendglocken –                | 4:59     |
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|    | <i>Long Ago</i>               |          |
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Rhonda Gillespie piano ADD

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