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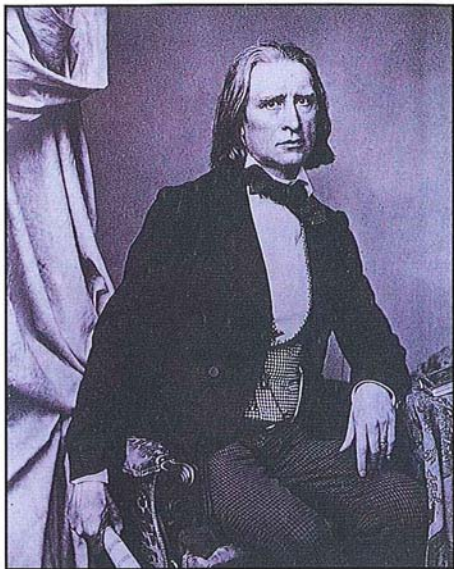
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VOLUME
2

FRANZ LISZT



Études d'exécution transcendante
(Transcendental Studies)
1851 Version

Jenő Jandó

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) Complete Piano Music, Volume 2

However opinions may diverge about Franz Liszt, he will always be regarded as a phenomenon. No other artist has ever achieved so great a success, or has fixed public attention for so long a period.

— Ernst Pauer (1826-1905), Austrian pianist,
teacher, editor and composer

Franz Liszt, the brilliant pianist and conductor, the picturesque hero of a romantic age, has been a legend for almost two centuries. Eclipsed by that brilliant figure, Liszt the composer and contributor to his own art has often stood half-hidden in the shadow of obscurity. Even today, at the end of the twentieth century, Liszt's piano works are rarely heard at concerts. The exceptions to this are, of course, his monumental *Sonata in B minor*, a few of the *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, and a very select group of concert études, operatic and song transcriptions. It is not difficult to see how this could happen. With an artist seated at the piano or waving a magic wand over an orchestra, seeing and hearing is believing. Thrills may be had for little or no effort. But a composer's score, its music hidden in a maze of little black notes, as gold is hidden in the earth, takes hard digging on the part of a pianist before it will come to light and shine. During his lifetime, Liszt lacked diggers. Today, there are more diggers, but the music still presents so many technical and musical obstacles that many pianists avoid the difficulties and opt for easier avenues of musical expression. And so, as American music critic and essayist, James Gibbons Huneker (1857-1921) once said, "The true history of Liszt as a composer has yet to be written!"

No matter where one looks for contemporary comments on Liszt's piano compositions, all seem to agree that his writing for the piano can only be described as orchestral. He managed to extend the sonorities of the instrument to orchestral proportions. But the writing is above all highly pianistic. Liszt would often compare these "orchestral effects, as a painting is to a steel engraving without colours." Liszt was an extreme Romanticist in devotion to colour and

poetic content in music. He was less a builder than a painter. Liszt also had a fluent gift of melody, which he explored through his incredible keyboard technique. In the variety and virility of his rhythms, he ranks with the greatest composers.

Liszt was always impressed by Niccolò Paganini's miraculous feats on the violin. He resolved to transfer them to the piano. Beginning by expanding the great violinist's wizardry in his own pianistic version (the six Paganini Etudes), he later took an independent path in the twelve *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*. According to one of Liszt's greatest students, Arthur Friedheim (1859-1932), "Liszt, by nature, was a rhapsodist and improviser," and as a result, Friedheim concludes, "the difficulty which Liszt's interpreters run into, even today, is the flexibility demanded of them." The music always glitters in such iridescent colors and expands in so many directions that even the best of pianists have to "live" with the music in order thoroughly to understand Liszt's construction, as it unfolds smoothly and without interruption. As a lifelong student of piano technique and colour, Liszt's pianistic studies (his "études") are perhaps some of the best examples of a complex mind, conforming to its own strict discipline.

Liszt's compositional years, 1835-1839, were spent mainly on the *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* (Transcendental Studies), the *Etudes d'exécution transcendante d'après Paganini* (Paganini Studies) and the first two books of *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage). However, the *Transcendental Studies* had the longest history. There are actually three different versions of these études. The first, published under the title *Étude en douze exercices* in 1826, was apparently planned as a set of forty-eight pieces. It was published originally as Opus 6 and later as Opus 1. These were clearly youthful works (Liszt was only fifteen when these were published), according to pianist Gunnar Johansen, "the cocoon form" of the better known 1837-38 and 1852 versions. "The 1826 version," Johansen continues, "cannot even be said to hint at what was to come... They are in the manner of Cramer, Weber, and of course, Czerny, Liszt's teacher during his Vienna study years." In 1837, the new edition of the twelve studies, this time without opus number, appeared in print almost at the

same time in Paris, Vienna and Milan. Ferruccio Busoni, in his introduction to these pieces in 1910 wrote, "The Liszt whom we meet here has shot up to an unexpected height." Apparently a grand metamorphosis was taking place. According to Busoni, "Apparently without transition, Liszt surpassed all available and imaginable possibilities of the piano and he never made such an immeasurable stride again." Once again, Liszt announced more études than he published. The Haslinger edition states: *24 Grandes Études pour le piano composées et dédiées à Monsieur Charles Czerny par F. Liszt*. Only twelve were ever written. Robert Schumann, who compared the first version to the second, stated, "that most of the pieces of the later work are only a revision of that youthful work which had already appeared; many, perhaps twenty years ago." In the new version, "we are often uncertain whether we do not envy the boy more than the man, who seems unable to arrive at any peace!" Peace, indeed! The technical prolixity of this second version must have been quite vexing for Schumann (and to most other pianists of the time), leading Liszt once again to rewrite his études for the third time. He published the final version in 1852. It is the version most often performed today. This third and final version is the one Jenő Jandó performs on this disc.

Although Schumann had labelled the second version of the études as "*studies of Sturm and Drang* for, at the most, ten or twelve players in the world," Liszt must have finally recognised that he had indulged his own unique powers in creating complexities that few others, if any, found manageable. The third edition of the études remained difficult, but became even more refined and poetic. In listening to these works, we are once again reminded that Liszt was the pianist par excellence; not only the unequalled virtuoso, but also the visionary poet, ardent dramatist, and boldest of romantic innovators. Abram Chasins says it best, "In writing music that would display all these characteristics, he created piano works that are as relentless in their physical demands as they are in their lyrical and imaginative demands upon the performer. To all but players of the very first calibre they are inexorably cruel, merciless in their immediate exposure of deficiencies in musicianship, taste, tonal control or technical command!"

The *Etudes d'exécution transcendante* begin with a short study called simply *Preludio* (Prelude in C major). It is one great crescendo and forms an imposing introduction to the series. According to Busoni, "the *Preludio* is less a prelude to the cycle than a prelude to test the instrument and the disposition of the performer after stepping on to the concert platform."

The second (*Molto vivace*, in A minor), Busoni believes is "one of those Paganini devilries similar to those in the *Fantaisie sur la Clochette* and the *Rondo Fantastique sur un Thème Espagnol*." The indication of this étude, "a capriccio" suggests its fantasy-like character, shimmering and radiant.

The third étude is entitled *Paysage* (Landscape). Against a rocking accompaniment, a graceful melody is tranquilly spun out. Busoni writes, "this is a calm renunciation of everything worldly — taking breath during the contemplation of nature, a self-contemplation but not quite without passion."

In *Mazeppa* Liszt was moved by Victor Hugo's 1828 poem, *Les Orientales*. Mazeppa, a Cossack chief and notorious Ukrainian separatist (born, they say, in 1644 and dying in 1709), was a page in his youth at the court of Jan Casimir, King of Poland. It is said that after Mazeppa made advances to a Polish noblewoman, her irate husband tied him naked to a wild horse, which carried him to the Cossacks of the Ukrainian steppes. This incident was immortalised by Lord Byron in his poem, *Mazeppa* (1819) and later by Victor Hugo. It was also the subject of Tchaikovsky's opera based on Pushkin's poem *Poltava*. Liszt revised this particular étude additionally in 1840, and in 1850 orchestrated it with the help of Joachim Raff. He then revised the orchestration in 1855, eventually also publishing it in a four-hand version in 1875. William Foster Apthorp provides the following summary-translation of the Victor Hugo poem:

"So when Mazeppa, roaring and weeping, has seen his arms, feet, sabre-grazed sides, all his limbs bound upon a fiery horse, fed on sedge grass, reeking, darting forth fire from its nostrils, and fire from its feet.

" — a cry goes up —

" — and suddenly horse and man fly with the winds over the plain — filling with

noise a whirlwind of dust, like a black cloud in which the lightning winds like a snake.

“ — They go on. They pass through valleys like thunder storms — and herds of reeking mares follow with great noise — the sun with his prow turns upon his forehead like a wheel of golden-veined marble — his blood reddens the yellow sand and thorny brambles as the cord winds round his swollen limbs, and like a long serpent, tightens and multiplies its bite and folds — and if the hapless man struggles, the horse rushes with still more affrighted bound into the vast, arid, impassable desert.

“ — the horse feeling neither bit nor saddle, fled onward.

“ — three crows, the great horned owl, the wild eagle of battlefields, the osprey, monster unknown to the daylight, the slanting owls, the great fawn-colored vulture, who ransacks the flanks of dead men — all come to augment his funeral flight to their cries of joy.”

After three days the horse falls dead. The cloud of birds turns a circle around Mazeppa's prostrate form “redder than the maple in the season of blossoms... many an eagle beak longs to gnaw the eyes in his head all burnt with tears.”

Mazeppa drags himself away, and to safety.

“His savage greatness shall spring from his punishment — so, when a mortal, upon whom his God descends, has seen himself bound alive upon thy fatal croup, oh Genius, thou fiery steed, he struggles in vain —

There follows a terrifying initiation into the realm of genius — he runs, he flies, he falls, and arises King!”

This fourth étude, in D minor, begins with an imposing cadenza which leads into the single theme of the study, a strident march/gallop-like motif. This theme is developed in a series of free variations characterised by the galloping rhythms of the wild horse. There is a sudden change to major at the end, where Liszt quotes Hugo's words, “*Il tombe enfin! ... et se relève Roi*” (...he falls, and arises King!).

The fifth étude is entitled *Feux Follets* (Will-o'-the-wisps). It is a fanciful

Allegretto, in B flat major, light in tone throughout. Abram Chasins calls this étude, "angelic to hear and devilish to play." This study in *leggierissimo* (lightness, nimbleness) is one of Liszt's most beautiful works in which he united colour with ornament.

The sixth étude is subtitled *Vision*, in G minor. It is sombre and mysterious, building up to an imposing conclusion with thunderous chords. According to Busoni, it is a musical painting "of the funeral of the first Napoleon, advancing with solemn and imperial pomp."

The seventh, in E flat major, is entitled *Eroica*. This étude is more defiant than heroic. There surely is no coincidence that the key is E flat, although there is no further allusions to Beethoven's famous symphony. As a work, it is a march of Titans, celebrating a somewhat youthful conception of a heroism which knows no doubt.

The eighth, *Wilde Jagd* (Wild Hunt, in C minor) is the romantic chase of the old German ballads. The *presto furioso* suggests a hectic ride and offers formidable problems to the pianist, who must strive to preserve the clarity of rhythm and harmony despite the furious pace. Busoni feels that this étude displays the strongest orchestral colouring and the foundation for the symphonic poem as it was later realised in César Franck's *Chasseur Maudit*.

The succeeding *Ricordanza* (Remembrance, in A flat major) is of a very different character — elegiac, lyrical, and delicate. Busoni likens this étude to "a bundle of faded love letters from a somewhat old-fashioned world of sentiment."

The tenth étude is untitled (marked *Allegro agitato molto*, in F minor). It is a violent and tempestuous study clearly deserving the title, "appassionata".

In the eleventh étude, *Harmonies du Soir* (Evening Harmonies, in D flat major), Liszt creates a tonal landscape of great delicacy and softness. Abram Chasins calls this étude, "a mysterious dream of poetic fancy, harmonic luxuriance and impassioned flight."

The set ends with *Chasse-neige* (Snow-storm, or Snow-Whirls, in B flat minor). Busoni called this étude, "the noblest example, perhaps, amongst all

music of a poeticizing nature — a sublime and steady fall of snow which gradually buries landscape and people." The "chasse-neige" is a term which today is used solely to mean "snow-plow", but in the early nineteenth-century it indicated a violent, swirling snowfall. The étude begins *Andante con moto* with a suggestion of lulling motion, eventually building increasingly in complexity and tempestuousness.

Taken as a whole, the twelve *Études d'exécution transcendante* are powerful moods in music, of tremendous inner stir and cohesion. These works, in any historical consideration of études, emerge as sovereign triumphs.

**Notes by Victor and Marina A. Ledin,
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Jenő Jandó

Jenő Jandó was born in Pécz, Hungary, in 1952. He started to study the piano at the age of seven. Later he continued his studies with Katalin Nemes and Pal Kadosa at the Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music. Following his graduation in 1974 he became assistant to Pal Kadosa. Jenő Jandó has been awarded a number of prizes at piano competitions in his native Hungary and abroad, including the First Prize at the Hungarian Piano Competition in 1973, and a first prize in chamber music at the Sydney International Piano Competition in 1977. In addition to his many concerts in Hungary, he has appeared throughout Western and Eastern Europe, in Canada and in Japan. He has recorded for Naxos all the piano concertos and sonatas of Mozart. He has also recorded the complete sonatas of Beethoven and is finishing his complete cycles of sonatas by Schubert and Haydn. Additionally, he has recorded many other works, including the three Bartók concertos, and music by Grieg, Schumann, Rachmaninov and others.

