

**Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, No. 2 in A major  
Ferenc Liszt (1811-1886)**

Adagio sostenuto assai – Allegro agitato assai

Allegro moderato

Allegro deciso – Marziale un poco meno allegro

Allegro animato

As we know, Liszt was the greatest and most sought after concert pianist of his time. He was also sought after as a conductor - after all, he had conducted the premier of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. However, Liszt also occupies a unique role in the history of music. His harmonic language distinctly bridges the gap between Chopin and Wagner. Some of the audacious harmonies, that we automatically seem to assign to Wagner, were heard in chord progression in earlier works by Liszt. His deftness with the orchestral palette – a talent which to some extent eluded Chopin, gives him a unique position in the romantic tradition of being able to combine the forces of the piano and the orchestra without creative boundaries.

Sharing the general tendency of romantic composers to associate music with description or narration, Liszt pioneered, and some say invented, the one-movement, multi-tempo orchestral form called the *symphonic poem*, usually bearing a title or an assignation of non-musical nature. The fact that this form never bore out its promise has as much to do with Liszt's own style of writing as with the detractors of anything new – of whom there were a great many in the anti-Liszt/Wagner camp.

This format of experimental, free flowing, tempo and mood changing, single movement narratives followed him into his piano concerti now with the added benefit of his mastery at the keyboard. Most of the invective hurled at Liszt at those early concerts could never have found flaw in the piano playing or even the advanced language of the piano harmonies – so they settled for commentary on the lack of a three movement form or a sudden change in tempo. Almost all about which they wrote negatively at the time, is considered an asset to Liszt now.

Here is one such report from the 1874 concert in London which points to the venom in the reporter that comes from distrust of the new.

*“A complete novelty of the last Crystal Palace Concert was provided in the shape of a Pianoforte Concerto in A major by Liszt. The concerto consists of one movement only, but his includes within itself no less than seven changes of time and expression...A more chaotic effect could hardly have been produced had the notes been drawn, haphazard, out of the toy known as the musical kaleidoscope. Why was such trash allowed to figure in the program? Are instrumental soloists allowed to play whatever they choose?”* (Sporting News, London, November 28, 1874)

It is interesting to note that some of our reactions to contemporary music are even more dynamic and only time will tell if we are to be eternally embarrassed.

The gestation period for this concerto is quite a long one. First thoughts of it were formed in one of Liszt's spectacular virtuosic periods from 1839-1840. However, his acknowledgment that he was undertaking a special piece of historical value, especially as a '*concerto symphonique*', assured that finishing touches, amendments and editions would continue until 1861, well after the first performance. Furthermore, Liszt had closed the gap in peoples minds between whose star power was greater, his or Paganini's. It also brings to mind the fact that musical performance had moved firmly and almost irrevocably into the age of the agent/impresario, the 'fan club' audience and the publisher. For better or worse, there we still languish, perhaps rushing too quickly to judgment, fueled by report and frenzy.

As music director at the Grand-Ducal court of Weimar, Liszt directed the first performance of this concerto on 7 January, 1857 with his pupil, Hans von Bronsart, - to whom it is dedicated - as soloist. Like his first concerto, but not as often presented, it is in one continuous movement, freely constructed so as to appear a unity despite it's varying tempos and moods. As one would expect, these concerti represent the best of Liszt. The qualities usually associated with piano composition - rhapsody, lyricism and inventive bravura become prevalent in the orchestration - and in the same measure, advanced harmonies, texture and colours, usually attributed to orchestral scores become a trademark on Liszt's piano. The concept of the concerto is that it provide a vehicle for the instrument but that the two parts, solo and orchestral, should not be at odds with one another. Here it

is, finally achieved, at a time in musical history when one parameter would take the attributes of the other, without falling under the weight – a truly symphonic concerto. In many ways, Liszt's piano concerti represent new ground, the boundaries of which, on hindsight, needed to be fought and crossed in his era, to give the Prokofiev's and the Tchaikovsky's the spring board they took as their birthright.

***Zane Dalal c.2011***