

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Flat Major

Allegro maestoso

Quasi Adagio

Allegretto vivace – Allegro animato

Allegro marziale animato

As we celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of his birth we are reminded of the towering contribution that Franz Liszt made to music as well as to musicians of his age. Firstly, we must remember that he met with Beethoven and Czerny in his early youth and even if he had not become one of the greatest pianists of all time - that alone would have been enough to provide a link with the modern era. But as it happens, Liszt was a piano mega-star providing an unbroken link in piano pedagogy from Beethoven to the modern day pianist. He was fêted from the very beginning and afforded a place that even few contemporary musicians have enjoyed. If today we wanted to equate the effect that Liszt had on his fan club one would have to look to Hollywood/Bollywood pin ups. Shrieking women, paths cleared through crowds by adoring henchmen, cliques and claques to cheer one on, heaped with considerable riches, the preferred invitee at all the fashionable soirées....Liszt had it all.

Franz Liszt's grandfather was overseer to several Esterhazy estates and played the piano, organ and violin. His son Adam naturally came by this musical talent adding cello and guitar to the list of instruments and getting himself into the employ of Prince Nicolaus of Esterhazy. Here he had a chance to rub elbows with Hummel and Haydn at the Esterhazy palace, one of the known centres of musical Europe. It was into this environment that young Franz was born.

His extraordinary talent shown at a concert aged 9 propelled him into a circle of intimacy with Czerny, who taught him, and Beethoven, Schubert, Hummel and others in a very exclusive musical coterie. By the end of his illustrious life he had become an influential figure in the lives of several great composers, including Brahms, Bruckner, Saint-Saens and of course Richard Wagner, who married his daughter Cosima. With his acquired wealth and status, he started giving the proceeds of his concerts to charity and Wagner, Berlioz, Saint-Saens, Grieg and Borodin were the object of considerable financial help.

But more remarkable than all of these was his meeting with Niccolò Paganini, the violin virtuoso, in the 1830's. It was the era of the star performer – and it was in emulation of Paganini's lifestyle that Liszt was determined to become concert pianist. The greatest pianists

of the day were in Paris – who were part of a whole new school of piano playing. They set out to create dazzling new techniques, with equally dazzling names like the “flying trapeze”, which expanded the language of piano playing and composition into something almost orchestral in range. It is no surprise then, that some of the most famous works from this period are orchestral transcriptions, played and composed by a great number of virtuosi of the day. They had finally developed a technique to match their imagination. Liszt set about mastering every new technique put forward by a rival pianist – adding several of his own, like the famous Liszt octaves, creating an absolutely impregnable platform for his performing career. The *Lisztomania* could now begin. Ladies would rip articles of his clothing into shreds to keep mementos of his dazzling concerts, where audiences were supposedly transported to mystical ecstasies.

So what form would Liszt’s First Piano Concerto take? It is interesting to note, that like Brahms, there was a huge period of gestation for this ‘first’ work, some twenty six years culminating in the final edition of 1849. It was premiered on February 17th, 1855 in Weimar with Liszt at the piano and Berlioz on the podium. The through composed nature of the work, moving without breaks from movement to movement is entirely characteristic of the pianistic new world order.

Caroline Boissier’s Diary, written as she heard Liszt give lessons to her daughter Valerie is as close an eye witness account as any of this extraordinary genre of piano performance.

"M. Liszt's playing contains abandonment, a liberated feeling, but even when it becomes impetuous and energetic in his fortissimo, it is still without harshness and dryness. [...] [He] draws from the piano tones that are purer, mellower and stronger than anyone has been able to do; his touch has an indescribable charm. [...] He is the enemy of affected, stilted, contorted expressions. Most of all, he wants truth in musical sentiment, and so he makes a psychological study of his emotions to convey them as they are. Thus, a strong expression is often followed by a sense of fatigue and dejection, a kind of coldness, because this is the way nature works."

Whether Madame Boissier was mesmerized by *Lisztomania* or whether one can actually equate her words to his music is a matter for one to decide personally. I imagine it is a bit of both.

Zane Dalal.