

Songs of sorrow and consolation

Late piano pieces by
Franz Liszt

László Borbély



HUNNIA RECORDS

The purpose of this compilation cannot be much more than giving an insight into the subversive world that Liszt's last works represent.

*As we listen to these works, we must look inwards continuously;
their transcendental nature is only revealed if we let ourselves be surrounded by this
almost otherworldly silence.*

The juxtaposed works interact in a peculiar, unrepeatable manner, which is unique to each listening. The compilation therefore does not follow (and cannot follow) any kind of chronological order. The selection is spearheaded by the *Mephisto-Walzer No.3* (1883), whose very beginning is already shocking. The Man of the World, the Artist, the prominent figure of salons, the celebrated personality of his time, the great romantic composer starts his work with such harsh, assertive, dare we say, blasphemous chords? Although this may sound strange, even after repeated listening, it stems from the puritanical simplicity that is a characteristic of almost all of his late works. The tone of the piece (only seemingly contradicting this) is symphonic; it might even be one of a number of symphonic poems not prepared for an orchestra. The spirit of the work is almost prophetic. In it, Liszt is very laconic, strictly focused on the essence.



The following three pieces are relatively short, but their content is in inverse proportion to their length. Their composition is perhaps even more picturesque. (In this respect they evoke the voice of the former Liszt). *The Impromptu* (1877), in F-sharp major, belongs to the more well-known works. It is a sketch with characteristic accompaniment resembling a harp, somewhat written in the style of the former Liszt; almost like a single, unprompted stroke of a pen (that is also referred to by the title of the piece, which originally means: "to be on standby, stand in readiness"). *Sancta Dorothea* (1877) is again written in the such favoured and frequently used, in Liszt's world symbolic and „sacred“ F-sharp major key. It evokes the Saint herself, looking at us from a distance, from an icon.

The next work is *Schlaflos! Frage und Antwort – Nocturne für Pianoforte nach einem Gedicht von Toni Raab* (In sleeplessness! Question and Answer – Nocturne for Piano after a poem by Toni Raab). Genre designation: nocturne. But, as Marianne Pándi remarks, this nocturne "has earmarks of the broody loneliness of Bartók's night-music rather than Chopin's nocturnes". From the very first note, this composition is burning brightly, it is swept away by flaming, inexhaustible passion, till suddenly we hear a distant choral melody – this is the answer itself – flanked by heavy, sinister chords, all the way to the conclusion, on a single note. In accordance with this reduction (we may safely regard its structure as if it were self-dismantling), our sense of harmony becomes very uncertain as well. The piece eventually disappears into the distance.

Then we hear a *Mephisto-waltz* again, the fourth in the series (*Mephisto-Walzer No.4*, 1885). Its dramatic power, uncompromising bass, its mystical mid-section make it one of Liszt's most perfect (and, at the same time, most modest) compositions. As in the composer's other late works, here one can observe the oftentimes seemingly strange (almost rootless) juxtaposition of chord sequences, many a time obsessive repetition, often torn out of their traditional functional order.

Liszt opens a gate with every single chord. He opens, but never closes them.

The *Resignazione* (Resignation, 1877) is barely a few bars long, and can be performed on a harmonium or an organ. No more than a snapshot – perhaps the imprint of a desolate, gloomy day. The *Two Csardas* (1884) again, displays a more powerful, elemental voice; in this piece (especially in *Csardas Obstinée* – meaning Stubborn Csardas) Gypsy music, many times evoked by Liszt with great pleasure, appears in the background as a source of inspiration. Let's consider, for example the octave-recurrences imitating the dulcimer, just before the piece ends. The stubbornness of this composition lies in the defiant, unending repetition of the basses, which is almost maddening – this also explains Liszt's choice of title.

The *Romance oubliée* – *Vergessene Romanze* (Forgotten Romance, 1880) and the *Vierter Vergessener Walzer* – *Quatrième Valse Oubliée* (Fourth Forgotten Waltz, 1883-84) are strangely melancholic pieces. The former is perhaps one of the composer's most moving works. Some melodies fade away, often dissolving into memory without continuation. The latter is a large-scale waltz; its tone can be compared to the firm elegance of the Mephisto-waltzes. And its 'forgottenness' stands in that the initial momentum is reduced by the end of the piece, it evaporates.

*Although these works offer many paths, we can never know for sure where we need to go.
Nevertheless, in the ever-dazzling light, we reach more and more
sublime and dizzying heights.*

The Fourth Forgotten Waltz is followed by the composer's probably best-known late work, *Trübe Wolken* – *Nuages Gris* (Grey Clouds, 1881). The two closing chords open a vast gate – allowing entrance to the twentieth century, with all its horrors. The tragedy of these late works, and the personal tragedy of Liszt himself, perhaps mostly lies in the fact that for a 19th century audience, or generally, for a man of romanticism, distressed by all kinds of crises and suffering from unspoken anxieties, Liszt's late music is incomprehensible and out of the ordinary. As Bence Szabolcsi writes, "this world of harmony is fueled by a feverish, consuming impatience, that impatiently hammers the boundaries of old structures and frames; more than anything it wants to break, to tear apart the classic order; and constantly we have to feel how it denies its validity, and having outgrown, wriggles out of it." Perhaps we need to redefine even for ourselves, what romantic music and romanticism in general means. For me, it is like rivers of lava that sooner or later will not be able to evade conventions, and will conquer them as a result of its internal incandescence.

The next work, though created earlier, seems to present a sequel to the previous. (*Sospiri! Fünf Klavierstücke, No.5 – Sighs! Five Piano Pieces, No.5, 1879*). A continuation or an interruption? The beginning of the composition is rather unsettling and we gradually lose our footing; in addition, our hearing abilities are destabilised by motifs crawling up one quarter note at a time, and finally we completely forget the starting chord. Therefore this is the music of oblivion, forgetting and being made forgotten; a collection of Liszt's forgotten melodies. Yellowing leaves or pressed flowers in a treasured journal. This is the music of not being understood, of desolation and loneliness.



The beginning of *Mephisto-Walzer No.4, Bagatelle ohne Tonart – Bagatelle, sans tonalité* (Fourth Mephisto-waltz, Bagatelle without tonality, 1885) is almost tense against the last two, sigh-like gestures of the previous work. Behind its strangely distorted exclamations a distant waltz transpires. This is an other forgotten romance, as in the next piece, *Carrousel de Madame P-N* (Madame P[elet] – N[arbonne]'s Carousel, 1875-81?). This few-bars-long miniature genre painting of a musical composition always reminds me of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's famous rococo painting (The Swing, ca. 1767), whose message to me is clearly that an era on the brink of passing will, in time, „shed“ its own age, outgrow it. The carousel itself is a symbol of childlike thinking and delving into the past. But carelessness soon ends; the charming image becomes a memory,

frozen in infinity.

The fifth piece of the third volume of the *Années de Pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage) offers us an immense contrast (*Sunt lacrymae rerum, En mode hongrois – In ungarischer Weise / In Hungarian Style*, 1872). The title of the work is also a quote from Virgil's Aeneid. We might be able to recognise the tone of the Hungarian rhapsodies or the Two Csardas. However, the cadence of the piece may vaguely remind us of the grand piano music of Mussorgsky or Rachmaninov.

*We have arrived at the steepest part of our journey. The air is getting thinner. The sky is crystal clear.
From here on, only "yes" and "no" exist.*

Wiegenlied – Chant du Berceau (Lullaby, 1880) foreshadows Béla Bartók's *Microcosmos*, its musical successor, conceived in the same year. Just like Bartók's epic masterpiece, this work is made up of just a few notes, as short as a journal entry - yet the entire Universe radiates through it. *Unstern! Sinistre* (Misfortune! 1886): Only the structure, only the skeleton remains. This piece is almost like an X-ray. It's a music of status, though stagnant and block-like, it is still moving forward unstoppably, much like hot lava pouring out of a volcano. The intensification till unbearable proportions reaches climax in a pair of brutally scratchy chords. As Bence Szabolcsi writes, "hammering dissonances pursue each other, like a prisoner banging on the walls of his prison, though he is fully aware that no one can hear him".

As if the acoustic space was cracked, and the listener fainted through the hole.

En rêve – Nocturne (Asleep – Nocturne, 1885): We are no longer on the ground of reality. We only perceive fragments of fragrance and sound around us.

The final piece of the album is *Sursum corda – Erhebet eure Herzen* (Lift up Your Hearts! 1877), also the closing piece of the third volume of *Années de Pèlerinage*. This composition, the title of which is a quote from the preface of the Order of Mass, has its organ-like, rich chords sounding as if all the bells of the world were ringing at the same time.

There's a feast on Earth.

That's how Bence Szabolcsi writes about Liszt: "An artist who has been able to open the gate of a century is not expecting the harmony of homecoming, (...) but the new century, which he helps to give birth to and which completes his work."

László Borbély

Translated by: Ágnes Paszabi

Bibliography:

Pándi, Marianne: Hangversenykalauz IV., Zongoraművek. Budapest, Hatágú síp alapítvány, 1995.

Szabolcsi, Bence: Liszt Ferenc estéje. Budapest, Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, 1956.



I have had the opportunity to hear László Borbély's piano-playing several times. In his person, I was able to meet an extremely mature artist with an individual voice. His playing of Liszt is characterized by dramatic power, depth, the ability to create an atmosphere and superb instrumental skills. His interpretation, program composition and explanation of the performed pieces always leads me to further reflection. I heartily recommend the album to the listeners' attention.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Vásáry Tamás', with a long horizontal flourish extending from the end of the name.

Tamás Vásáry
pianist, conductor

Programme

01. Mephisto-Walzer No.3 (1883)	08:44
02. Impromptu (1877)	03:34
03. Sancta Dorothea (1877)	02:12
04. Schlaflos! (1883)	02:38
05. Mephisto-Walzer No.4 (1885)	03:00
06. Resignazione (1877)	01:47
07. Csardas (1884)	01:22
08. Csardas Obstinée (1884)	03:08
09. Romance Oubliée – Vergessene Romanze (1880)	03:17
10. Vierter Vergessener Walzer – Quatrième Valse Oubliée (1883-84)	02:26
11. Trübe Wolken – Nuages Gris (1881)	02:54
12. Sospiri! (Fünf Klavierstücke – Five Piano Pieces, No.5, 1879)	02:03
13. Mephisto-Walzer No.4, Bagatelle ohne Tonart – Bagatelle, sans tonalité (1885)	02:40
14. Carrousel de Madame P-N (1875-81?)	01:07
15. Sunt lacrymae rerum, En mode hongrois – In ungarischer Weise (1872)	05:26
16. Wiegenlied – Chant du Berceau (1880)	04:01
17. Unstern! – Sinistre (1886)	06:14
18. En rêve (1885)	02:08
19. Sursum corda – Erhebet eure Herzen (1877)	03:11

LÁSZLÓ BORBÉLY

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Late piano pieces by Franz Liszt

Live recording at the **Supersize Recording Studio**

Hungary, **25 September, 2021**

Balance and recording engineer: **Gábor Halász**

Piano: **Steinway & Sons Model D Grand Piano**

Piano technician: **Balázs Tóth**

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