

LISZT

NOT JUST FINGERS
GIL SULLIVAN



HUNNIA RECORDS



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Steinway Model D Concert Grand Piano, Hamburg

NOT JUST FINGERS

Liszt transcribed *many* songs by *many* composers; Schubert's alone number almost 60, while his list of other composers include Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Wagner and Chopin.

Widmung - "***Dedication***" is one of Schumann's most famous and beloved songs, dedicated to Clara Wieck as a wedding present. It's warmth and tenderness are sensitively captured in Liszt's arrangement until he takes flight, animating the music into something more powerful and "Lisztian", with a chordal final statement that brings this famous transcription to an exciting close.

"I assure you that people who do not travel (I mean those who cultivate the arts and learning) are indeed miserable creatures. A fellow of mediocre talent will remain a mediocrity, whether he travels or not; but one of superior talent (which without impiety I cannot deny I possess) will go to seed, if he always remains in the same place." Mozart

Reading from a catalogue of absolutely eye-watering testimonials and accounts, we know Liszt was possibly the greatest pianist in history. During those many tiresome years of travelling across Europe in horse-and-coach, he spent thousands of hours practising on his stalwart companion, a silent keyboard. À la Mozart above, it was essential artists experience all cultures, peoples, and cities, and even learn several languages.

Liszt's musical 'diary' of his travels through *Italy* is captured in seven pieces constituting his second book of the *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of pilgrimage), published in 1858. The first of these – **Sposalizio** – was inspired by Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*, a painting depicting the marriage of Mary and Joseph. It is replete with wedding bells, and suggestive references to moments of connubial bliss.

An introduction of fragmented, seemingly disjointed insinuations at future motives, preludes a quiet prayer, with the couple kneeling before God. As this prayer begins to flourish, Liszt skilfully kneads those introductory fragments in with those cascading wedding bells, which gently carries the music forward at first, then to an exciting climax, after which, the couple fall into blissful slumber, lovingly wrapped in each other's arms.

There are 3 Petrarch Sonnets in this second *années*; **Sonnet 104** is the second and most widely performed. *Francis Petrarch* was an Italian poet and scholar, born in Arezzo - Tuscany. His influence in the Middle Ages is singularly far-reaching. Often credited with initiating the 14th Cent. Italian Renaissance, and for some, the founder of the modern Italian language, it's hardly surprising Liszt fell under the romantic spell of his sometimes fervent poetry. **Sonnet 104** is the most passionate, agitated, and dramatic of the three, based on the Sonnet "Pace non trovo ('I find no peace'). The poem vacillates – at times fiercely – between positives and negatives:-

I can not find peace nor reason to make war
and I fear and hope, and burn with a penetrating coldness
and flight over the sky, lying on the ground
and I hold nothing, and all the world embrace

I see without eyes, and I have no language, and cry;
and I long to perish, and crave aid;
and I hate myself, and love others

This convulsive seesawing is spectacularly captured in Liszt's interpretation. Grammatically erroneous harmonies head-butt each other in the spirit of the poem, and yet all holds together in perfect accord within Liszt's tour de force structure and form.

Harmonies poétiques et religieuses (Poetic and religious harmonies) is a set of 10 works published in 1853, and inspired by the poetry of Alphonse de Lamartine, a French poet, author, and statesman. The seventh, and arguably the most famous, is ***Funérailles***.

Hungarian by birth, Liszt felt deeply wounded by the crushing defeat of the Hungarian Revolution of 1847 at the hands of the Hapsburgs, losing many of his compatriots and close friends. The work has the subtitle "October 1849". Many believed this was composed in response to Chopin's death, particularly with the left hand octaves imitating Chopin's last Polonaise written a few years earlier. Denying this, Liszt emphatically composed it as a tribute to his fallen comrades.

It is a colossal work of momentous, toe-curling intensity and drama. Beginning with a morbidly ominous death knell (a minor 9th to boot!), this builds to a powerful, sinewy introduction. A funereal theme enters, quietly setting a dark, chilling mood, which soon gives way to a deeply religious, lyrical, Chopinesque theme, that builds to a minor climax. Like a harbinger, a militarist theme quietly marches in accompanied by a left hand ostinato that builds to a terrifying tornado, only to be arrested without warning! The funereal theme, now with monstrous import, returns in full, wailing, screaming and gnashing fury. Seemingly spent, this gives way to an ephemeral glance back at the "Chopin" theme before the sinister left hand ostinato ominously creeps back, building like a volcano, only to *again* to be checked, giving up its last breath with three, soft, pizzicati chords.

Liszt's Deux Legends were composed in 1863 and dedicated to his daughter Cosima (later, Wagner's wife). The first is ***St. Francis of Assisi's sermon to the birds***. The second – inspired by a painting above his piano – is ***St. Francis of Paola walking on the waves***.

The first is based on the legend of St. Francis of Assisi - patron saint of animals. It tells of a walk in the forest with a friend. At one point, encountering birds in trees on either side of the road, St. Francis chose to "preach to my sisters, the birds". Before long, the birds were transfixed by the potency of his message, where not one single bird flew away.

St. Paola walking on the waves relates the legend of St. Paola wishing to cross the Strait of Messina to Sicily. Lacking sufficient funds, a boatman refuses transport for he and his friends. Stretching out his cloak on the waters, St. Paola makes a mast with his staff, steps onto his cloak, and sails across the strait, arriving ahead of the boatman! As captured in Liszt's work, the calm strength of the opening hymn-like theme throughout, is pitted against the undulating, crashing waves, and his arrival to the shores of Sicily, at which point, Liszt lends a victorious telling.

Both before and after their publication in 1865, we see Liszt performed both Legends many times; here and there in small soirees, but also in large concert halls across Europe. St. Paola is one of the most exciting and staple works in the piano repertoire.

In the 21st Cent., we take entirely for granted recorded music and it's ubiquitous, convenient accessibility. Before the advent of recordings though, and as far back as the dawn of Man and his primitive music-making, there were only 2 ways to listen to music; play it yourself, or hear it in concert! As with *Schumann's Widmung* above, piano transcriptions in the 19th Cent. were the equivalent of the modern-day recording. Liszt's transcriptions brought *hundreds* of works – occasionally as duets – from Bach organ Toccatas, Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven symphonies, Rossini Overtures, quotes from Wagner operas etc.; works that could *only* be heard in the concert halls or opera houses, into peoples' private homes. For example, in the 19th Cent., only a very tiny percentage of Europeans ever heard a live opera during their lifetime, but could nibble at them in their own home at the piano. This is one of the many inestimable services Liszt gifted not only to the 19th cent., but to music and it's composers in general, and many of these transcriptions are still performed and recorded in the 21st cent.!

In this spirit, Liszt made this virtuoso transcription of Tchaikovsky's Polonaise. *Der König von Thule*, originally a ballad for voice and piano by Liszt, was composed in 1842 as a setting of Gretchen's song from Goethe's *Faust*. Tchaikovsky orchestrated the work in 1874, and as a return gesture, Liszt made this transcription of the ***Polonaise from Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin***, which opens the 3rd act. The full "concert version" is a major concert-hall favourite.

Of Liszt's **Hungarian Rhapsodies**, some are part of music's DNA; no.2 especially is instantly recognisable in almost every part of the world, and has been commercialised, jingled, 'cartooned', & used for advertising to death for almost a century. He composed 19 Rhapsodies in total, and while some are less frequently performed, many are excruciatingly difficult to play! After No.2, this **Rhapsodie No.6** is likely the most famous.

Historically, Liszt's Rhapsodies are not all entirely "Hungarian"; they are occasionally tunes written by the Hungarian upper classes, or by composers such as József Kossovits. Embedded into many of these Rhapsodies are Gypsy themes, which Liszt erroneously understood to be genuine Hungarian folksongs. Bartók – a generation hence – was to unearth *true* Hungarian tunes and melodies!, but Liszt frequently imitated the sound of the cimbalom, a Hungarian dulcimer originating from the 14th Cent. Moreover, he utilised many of the Gypsy scale patterns plainly heard in the last, unhinged and frenzied section of this **Rhapsodie No.6**.

Gil Sullivan

RECORDING SETUP

Microphones: 2xNeumann M-149, 2xNeumann U87, 2xSchoeps MK2

AD/DA: Merging Hapi

DAW: Pyramix MassCore

EQ: Prism Sound Maselec MEA-2

Peak limiter: Prism Sound Maselec MPL2

Effect: Bricasti Design M7+ M10

Analog Mixing Console: Studer 962

TRACK LIST

1	Liebeslied, S. 566 (After Schumann's Widmung, Op. 25 No. 1)	04:32
2	Années de pèlerinage, Deuxième année 'Italie', S. 161: I. Sposalizio	09:07
3	Années de pèlerinage, Deuxième année 'Italie', S. 161: V. Sonetto 104 del	07:40
4	Harmonies poétiques et religieuses III, S. 173: No. 7, Funérailles	12:15
5	Deux Légendes, S.175: No. 1: St. François d'Assise: La Prédication aux oiseaux	14:03
6	Deux Légendes, S.175: No. 2: St. François de Paule marchant sur les flots	09:40
7	Concert Paraphrase from Eugene Onegin by Tchaikovsky, S. 429, R. 262:	07:49
8	19 Hungarian Rhapsodies, S. 244: No. 6 in D-Flat Major	08:00
	Total time:	68:34

Recorded: **ProVibe Studio, 5-16 December, 2025**

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Balance engineers: **Sándor Árok, Kevin Roper**

Recorded audio format: **Pure DSD256**

Mastering engineer: **Tom Caulfield**

Photo by: **Jun Pang**

Producer: **Róbert Zoltán Hunka**

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