

Années de pèlerinage II (Italie)

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|----|--|-------|
| 1 | <i>Sposalizio</i> | 8:28 |
| 2. | <i>Canzonetta del Salvatore Rosa</i> | 3:05 |
| 3. | <i>Sonetto 47 del Petrarca</i> | 6:20 |
| 4. | <i>Sonetto 104 del Petrarca</i> | 7:00 |
| 5. | <i>Sonetto 123 del Petrarca</i> | 6:33 |
| 6. | <i>Ballade No. 2 in B minor</i> | 15:34 |

Années de pèlerinage III

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| 7 | <i>Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este I: Thrénodie</i> | 7:36 |
| 8. | <i>Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este II: Thrénodie</i> | 10:06 |
| 9. | <i>Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este</i> | 8:10 |
| 10. | <i>Sursum corda</i> | 3:14 |

Total Time: 76:01

Recorded June 2014 in Daniel Recital Hall,
Furman University, Greenville, SC

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Back cover (piano frame) photo: Hailey Darnell

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Graphic design: Michael P. Tanner

Funding for this recording was provided by Furman University and
the South Carolina Arts Commission

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Liszt: The Poet Inspired

EQUILIBRIUM

Derek Parsons, piano

“The more instrumental music progresses, develops, and frees itself from its early limitations . . . the more it will cease to be a simple combination of tones and become a poetic language, one that, better than poetry itself perhaps, more readily expresses everything in us that transcends the commonplace, everything that eludes analysis, everything that stirs in the inaccessible depths of imperishable desires and feelings for the infinite.”

- Franz Liszt, *Album d'un voyageur*, 1842

Hungarian composer Franz Liszt (1811-1886) offered a prediction for the future of instrumental music in the preface to his *Album d'un voyageur*, a precursor of the *Années de Pèlerinage*. Through his own emotionally rich and deeply personal compositions, Liszt approached his vision of music's expressive potential and exemplified the spirit of the Romantic movement. Liszt's understanding of music as a communicative force was deepened by his sense of the interconnection and transcendence of all works of creative genius. For Liszt, great art served as a vehicle for spiritual enlightenment. The artist was not merely an entertainer, but also a missionary.

Following the death of his father in 1827, the young Liszt, already an accomplished performer, had retreated from the concert stage in search of intellectual growth and spiritual fulfillment. He immersed himself in the writings of great poets and historians and engaged with the emerging social movements and religious theories of the day. As a devout Catholic, Liszt was particularly drawn to the writings of liberal priest and philosopher Hugues-Félicité Robert de Lamennais (1782-1854). Lamennais became a spiritual mentor for Liszt and profoundly influenced the composer's personal aesthetics. In his *Esquisse d'une Philosophie* (pub. 1840), Lamennais describes the world, the creation of “the highest artist,” as a reflection of the perfect and eternal nature of God, seen, however, as if through a dusty mirror, as the finite forms of the visible world. Lamennais goes on to

explain that art “makes comprehensible to us the harmony of all orders of being, their mutual connection, their common tendency and the oneness of creation, the image and reflection of the unity of God Himself.”

Liszt's writings, both musical and literary, echo Lamennais' belief in the moralizing power of the arts and the priestly responsibility of the artist to lead humanity back to God. In an 1835 essay on the future of music, Liszt writes, “As in the past, and even more so today, music must concern itself with PEOPLE and GOD, hastening from the one to the other, improving, edifying, and comforting mankind while it blesses and glorifies God.” This recording presents a thought-provoking musical timeline of Liszt's artistic and spiritual evolution. Each composition, dating from early to late in Liszt's career, demonstrates the composer's efforts to fulfill his understanding of the artist's purpose: to bridge the divide between the worldly and the eternal and offer all people a pathway toward an experience of the divine. Through his use of extra-musical associations, thematic transformation, and progressive harmonic language, Liszt searches for new ways to express his own devotion to God as well as his hope for the edification of humanity.

In the fall of 1837, Liszt and the Countess Maria d'Agoult began a two-year tour of Italy, seeking solace and inspiration from the ancient, yet vibrant culture. Liszt's travels around the peninsula inspired his *Années de pèlerinage, Deuxième année: Italie*, a collection of character pieces written between 1837 and 1849 and published as a set in 1858. Liszt disapproved of the triviality and extravagance of the *bel canto* style popular in contemporary Italian opera but was captivated by the country's older tradition of literary and visual arts. In an 1839 letter to Hector Berlioz, who had himself found inspiration in Italy, Liszt reflected, “The beautiful in this special land became evident to me in its purest and most sublime form. Art in all its splendor disclosed itself to my eyes. It revealed its universality and unity to me. Day by day my feelings and thoughts gave me a better insight into the hidden relationship that unites all works of genius. Raphael and Michelangelo increased my understanding

of Mozart and Beethoven; Giovanni Pisano, Fra Beato, and Il Francia explained Allegri, Marcello, and Palestrina to me.” *Sposalizio*, *Canzonetta del Salvator Rosa*, and *Tre Sonetti del Petrarca* can be heard as Liszt’s musical testimonies to this idea. Each reflects both the uniqueness of the artistic work to which it refers and the essence of the divine flowing through and unifying all great art.

Sposalizio, composed in 1838, was inspired by Raphael’s painting *Lo Sposalizio*, also known as *The Marriage of the Virgin*, found in the Brera museum in Milan. The painting, completed in 1504, depicts the marriage of Mary to Joseph in the courtyard of an ivory temple. Liszt captures the sense of depth in Raphael’s work by assigning distinct motives to represent the two focal areas of the painting. The fluid pentatonic statement in the opening bars creates an ethereal atmosphere suggestive of the dreamlike background of the temple and surrounding landscape. Liszt develops and expands this motive, maintaining the harmonic and rhythmic ambiguity found in its initial expression. Following a moment of silence, Liszt introduces the wedding party through a noble processional march. This new chordal motive expresses the serenity of the foreground figures and offers a sense of stability and grounding absent from the earlier material. Finally, Liszt unites the two areas of Raphael’s work in a glorious restatement of the chordal theme over the flowing pentatonic motive. In his integration of these separate musical elements, Liszt both communicates the dualism of the painted scene and points to his understanding of music’s ultimate character, described in a manifesto from 1835: “Essentially religious, powerful, and stirring It will be at once both dramatic and sacred, stately and simple, moving and solemn, fiery and unruly, tempestuous yet calm, serene and gentle.”

Though Liszt did not complete his *Canzonetta del Salvator Rosa* until 1849, he had begun work on the piece while still in Italy a decade earlier. The *Canzonetta* is a lively transcription of the song “*Vado ben spesso*,” which Liszt attributed to the Italian painter Salvator Rosa (1615-1673). While Rosa was a poet and musician, “*Vado ben spesso*” was later found to have been written by another Italian composer, Giovanni Bononcini (1670-1747). Though Liszt’s setting is for solo piano, he includes the original lyrics above the notes in his score. In translation, the text reads, “Although I try going to many different places, I cannot seem to change my desire. Full of passion, always the same, so shall I always remain” [translation courtesy Dr. Bruce Schoonmaker]. While Liszt’s decision to set this particular text was likely based on the song’s popularity during the time of his Italian tour, Liszt may also have heard the lyrics as an expression parallel to his own impassioned and constant pursuit of inspiration.



Liszt's *Tre Sonetti del Petrarca*, originally conceived as songs for tenor voice, were inspired by sonnets from *Il Canzoniere*, a book of poems by Italian humanist and poet Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374). Adapted for piano solo and published in 1846, they were revised for inclusion in the 1858 publication. The songbook is filled with verse expressing the poet's passionate love for the beautiful Laura, the identity of whom remains a mystery. While Laura may have been a real person, some suggest that she served as a symbol for glory, victory, or honor. The grand romantic gesture of the opening bars of *Sonetto 47* captures the poet's joy as he reflects on the moment he first saw his beloved. The gentle, flowing melody that follows represents Petrarch's ardent prayer for blessings on his blossoming love for Laura. In his dramatic setting of *Sonetto 104*, Liszt mirrors Petrarch's effective pairing of opposing statements within the text. The rhapsodic character of the work expresses the emotional extremes of a tormented lover. Petrarch's Sonnet No. 123 describes Laura as an angel, more perfect than any worldly form. The harmonic instability and textural variation found throughout Liszt's *Sonetto 123* conveys this sense of transcendent beauty. In putting music to Petrarch's verse, Liszt seeks to express the brilliance of the poet's words and the sublime beauty of the woman who inspired them, communicating the divine essence manifest in them both.

The Petrarch Sonnets (Translations © A. S. Kline)

Sonetto 47 del Petrarca

Blessed be the day, and the month, and the year,
and the season, and the time, and the hour, and the moment,
and the beautiful country, and the place where I was joined
to the two beautiful eyes that have bound me:

and blessed be the first sweet suffering
that I felt in being conjoined with Love,
and the bow, and the shafts with which I was pierced,
and the wounds that run to the depths of my heart.

Blessed be all those verses I scattered
calling out the name of my lady,
and the sighs, and the tears, and the passion:

and blessed be all the sheets
where I acquire fame, and my thoughts,
that are only of her, that no one else has part of.

Sonetto 104 del Petrarca

I find no peace, and yet I make no war:
and fear, and hope: and burn, and I am ice:
and fly above the sky, and fall to earth,
and clutch at nothing, and embrace the world.

One imprisons me, who neither frees nor jails me,
nor keeps me to herself nor slips the noose:
and Love does not destroy me, and does not loose me,
wishes me not to live, but does not remove my bar.

I see without eyes, and have no tongue, but cry:
and long to perish, yet I beg for aid:
and hold myself in hate, and love another.

I feed on sadness, laughing weep:
death and life displease me equally
and I am in this state, lady, because of you.

Sonetto 123 del Petrarca

I saw angelic virtue on earth
and heavenly beauty on terrestrial soil,
so I am sad and joyful at the memory,
and what I see seems dream, shadows, smoke:

and I saw two lovely eyes that wept,
that made the sun a thousand times jealous:
and I heard words emerge among sighs
that made the mountains move, and halted rivers.

Love, Judgement, Pity, Worth and Grief,
made a sweeter chorus of weeping
than any other heard beneath the moon:

and heaven so intent upon the harmony
no leaf was seen to move on the boughs,
so filled with sweetness were the wind and air.

Liszt composed the *Ballade No. 2 in B minor* while living in Weimar, having retired from the concert stage in order to focus on composition. *The Ballade*, written in 1853 soon after the completion of his monumental *B minor Sonata*, is often viewed as a reconsideration or further development of Liszt's ideas from the *Sonata*. A connection with the mythological tragedy of Hero and Leander has been suggested, but neither this nor any other programmatic association has been clearly established. The tumultuous *Ballade* is a study in contrast. The rumbling bass line in the opening bars creates a stormy atmosphere as an appropriate introduction for the first, brooding theme. As the melody strengthens, the chromatic bass emerges from the thick texture as a single line. This sudden change creates a sense of disquiet which is heightened by the enigmatic cadence that follows. In a moment of suspenseful anticipation, a new theme appears. This warm, unassuming melody offers a sense of relief and hope, like a sliver of sunlight shining through a clearing in a clouded sky. The two opposing motives introduced in the exposition of this adapted sonata form permeate the piece, developing and transforming throughout the composition. The dramatic transformation of the opening motive from a troubled lament to a joyous exclamation tells of a journey from darkness to light.

In the *Ballade*, Liszt offers his own interpretation of the eternal struggle between these two opposing forces. As a devout Catholic as well as a perfectionist, Liszt likely experienced this conflict most deeply in striving to fulfill what he saw as his role as a composer. In a letter from his youth, Liszt wrote of the torturous creative process: "How wretched, how truly wretched we artists are! We experience momentary flashes when we seem to have an intuitive grasp of the divine, when we can sense its presence within us, like a mystical insight, a supernatural understanding of the harmony of the universe; but as soon as we want to flesh out our sensations, to capture these evanescent flights of the soul, the vision vanishes, the god disappears, and a man is left alone with a lifeless work, one that the crowd's gaze will quickly strip of any last illusions it held for him." Liszt speaks here of failing to

capture this divine essence and communicate it through his creative works. In the *Ballade*, though the glimpses of light begin as humble, short-lived melodies, these glorious themes grow to full chordal expression by the conclusion of the piece. Perhaps Liszt, who himself thought highly of this composition, sensed that he had finally captured the divine glory he sought within this work.

The final works presented here, all composed in 1877 are taken from *Années de pèlerinage: Troisième année*, the third book of Liszt's "Years of Pilgrimage." Unlike the compositions within the first and second books, the works within the third do not bear any specific national associations. Though several of the pieces within this book were inspired in part by Liszt's stay at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, the pilgrimage implied is one of a spiritual nature rather than a physical one. *Troisième année* was composed during a period of great depression and frustration for the aging composer. His letters from this time are filled with sentiments of hopelessness and self-loathing. Following the death of his daughter Blandine in 1862, Liszt retreated to the monastery of the Madonna del Rosario and, while there, was encouraged to take orders in the Catholic Church. He did so in 1865 and was known from then on as Abbé Liszt. The works within the *Troisième année* contain a depth and complexity of musical and personal expression that sets this collection apart as one of the most significant from the composer's late period.

The second, third, and fourth pieces within the third book, *Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este* Nos. I and II and *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* were inspired by Liszt's regenerative retreat in the Villa d'Este. The elegant palace and impressive gardens were commissioned by Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este (1509-1572) as a remodeling of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore. The gardens, with their monumental cypresses and dramatic fountains, are wonderful examples of the evocative beauty of the natural world celebrated within the Romantic ideal. Liszt dedicated two compositions to the ancient cypress trees. He wrote, "I shall call them *Thrénodies*,

as the word *élégie* strikes me as too tender, and almost worldly.” The gravity and substance of this pair of works expresses the grandeur of the noble trees, while the progressive and at times dissonant harmonies suggest their mythical power. In a letter to Princess Carolyn, Liszt spoke of being overwhelmed by the stately totems: “These three days I have spent entirely under the cypresses! It was an obsession, impossible to think of anything else, even church. Their old trunks were haunting me, and I heard their branches singing and weeping, bearing the burden of their unchanging foliage!” Liszt reflects the divine splendor of the trees which so overwhelmed him and communicates their majesty in his pair of compositions.

With its shimmering textures and experimental coloristic effects, Liszt’s *Les jeux d’eau à la Villa d’Este* (“The Fountains of the Villa d’Este”) foreshadows the Impressionist style of Debussy and Ravel. The technically challenging composition gives life to the fountains, symbolizing the freedom of water with experimental harmonies, unrestrained by the rules and conventions of classical form. The brilliance of the piece creates a light and radiant mood that is dramatically different from that of the two *Cypresses*. Liszt elaborated upon the title of the piece with a passage from the Gospel of John: “But the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up into eternal life.” Having struggled through the darkness of self-doubt and depressed isolation, Liszt emerges with a renewed hope for vocational and spiritual fulfillment. Freed from his own limitations, Liszt, in turn, helps further release harmony from the confines of tradition.

Liszt concluded his Third Book of Pilgrimage with a benediction inspired by the Latin Catholic Mass. *Sursum Corda*, meaning “Lift up Your Hearts,” conveys the acceptance, sense of closure, and peace of a weary traveler having arrived home after a long journey. Liszt’s lifelong pursuit of the Ideal within the limitations of the imperfect world led to depression as he struggled to become the consummate artist. The unwavering tonic pedal recurring throughout the piece suggests this steadfast and ardent pursuit of perfection. The powerful conclusion of this cathartic work suggests salvation, be it the peace of spiritual fulfillment, enlightened understanding, or the ultimate relief from suffering and reunion of the soul with the divine through death. In a letter from 1883, Liszt wrote, “Ever since the days of my youth I have considered dying much simpler than living. Even if often there is fearful and protracted suffering before death, yet is death none the less the deliverance from our involuntary yoke of existence . . . ‘Sursum corda!’”

Mary McArthur

