

## 7 Liszt's piano concerti: a lost tradition

ANNA CELENZA

In 1898 Ferruccio Busoni presented a series of four concerts at the Sing-Akademie in Berlin on the history of the concerto. In the programme notes printed as an accompaniment to Busoni's performances, another pianist, José Vianna da Motta, explained that the goal of the concerts was to renew respect for the concerto and to show that, at least in its modern form as represented by the works of Liszt, the concerto was no longer a genre designed simply for virtuosic display. At the first concert, Vianna da Motta began his essay with the following observation:

In most textbooks of musical composition (e.g. Marx's *Kompositionslehre*) the concerto form is described as inferior because the preference for one or more instruments and the obligation to give the performer the opportunity to display his skilfulness hinders the composer from letting his art develop freely.

In reference to the latter point, i.e. letting the soloist's technique shine by piling up diverse difficulties, this indeed was the original purpose of the genre. Even Mozart treated the concerto in this manner . . . Of course now the concerto has long since outgrown the aim of mere musical games. Beethoven added the poetic content conferred on his sonatas, quartets and symphonies to his piano concertos, as is undoubtedly evident in his last two works in this genre, and Liszt followed him in this endeavour . . . [In the modern concerto] the piano and the performer are no longer the purpose, but rather the means to an end.<sup>1</sup>

Why was such a defence of the concerto, in particular those by Liszt, needed at the end of the nineteenth century? A possible response is revealed in the following overview of Liszt's lifelong interest in the genre and its reception after his death.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the piano concerto served as a pivotal genre in musical culture – the portal to the age of the virtuoso. During the second half of the century, however, conflicting tendencies within audiences' preferences and the ambitions of composers and performers alike played themselves out through these compositions. The concerto, unlike any other concert genre of the era, served as a synthesis of the soloist and symphonic styles, of compositional traditions dating back to the Baroque and Classical eras. It was ideally suited to expressing the creative talents of composer–performers such as Thalberg, Chopin, and Liszt. But

[152]

its early tradition as a soloist-dominated showpiece made it equally susceptible to condemnations from critics who viewed the genre as little more than virtuosic fluff. Such was the fate of the concerto in August Reissmann's popular *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexicon* in 1880.<sup>2</sup> Lamenting that the widespread misuse of the concerto was responsible for hindering the spread of a 'refined aesthetic taste', Reissmann claimed that the contemporary concerto repertory was dominated by works empty of content and that it had become a prisoner of salon-style artifice and formulaic virtuosity. The concerto was seen as having failed to live up to the highest ideals of form and spirit associated with instrumental music.<sup>3</sup>

Reissmann's dismissal of the concerto was only one of many in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the effect of such criticism, especially in connection with the concerti of Liszt, was no doubt felt by virtuosic pianists such as Busoni, who sensed that respect for their most coveted genre was slowly ebbing away. Busoni and Vianna da Motta tried to 'save' the piano concerto at the end of the nineteenth century, but their efforts had only a short-lived effect. For most of the twentieth century, music scholars shied away from the concerto, preferring to focus their attention instead on what were viewed as more serious instrumental genres – the symphony, string quartet, and sonata. Although the last decade has witnessed a growing interest in the piano concerto of the nineteenth century, in general it can be described as a 'lost tradition' in musical scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to show how the piano concerti of Liszt fit into the concerto tradition of the nineteenth century and, in many ways, reflected its evolution and eventual disregard.

By the time Busoni and Vianna da Motta presented their history of the concerto concert series in 1898, the genre could roughly be divided into three distinct types: the virtuoso concerto, the symphonic concerto, and the programmatic concerto. Although some concerti contained characteristics associated with more than one of these categories, in general the lines of division between the three types were fairly clear. As Vianna da Motta explained in the excerpt above, the purpose of the earliest form of the genre, the virtuoso concerto, was to show off the talents of the soloist. The structure generally followed that inherited from the Classical era, i.e. three movements arranged fast – slow – fast, and the layout of at least the first movement usually adhered to sonata form. In the second style of the genre, the symphonic concerto, the dominance of the soloist was lessened, making room for a more involved orchestral presence and greater interaction between the soloist and other instruments. In this style, the structural form varied substantially. For example, some composers, most notably Brahms, continued to use sonata form and follow the traditional multi-movement structure. These concerti are symphonic in that they present a prominent

role for the piano and orchestra together. In fact, Brahms's concerti were generally considered to be little more than 'disguised' symphonies. Other symphonic concertos, such as Weber's *Konzertstück*, and the final versions of Liszt's Piano Concerti Nos. 1 and 2, consisted of several movements linked together or one movement made up of contrasting sections. The technique of thematic transformation played a major role in many of these works, and the inherent dramatic character created through this technique soon led to the development of the third style of the concerto, the programmatic concerto. Following the lead of the symphonic concerto, the programmatic version made greater use of the orchestra and abandoned the confines of sonata form. Its structure tended to be determined by a pre-conceived programme and/or extra-musical ideas.

Of all the composer-performers of the nineteenth century, Liszt appears to have been the only one who composed works in all three concerto styles. Beginning his career as a flamboyant performer and ending it as a well-respected composer of serious orchestral works, Liszt used the piano concerto as a bridge between these two sides of his musical identity. His numerous autographs of the concerti reveal that he returned to them time and again, making comprehensive revisions as his conception of the genre changed. As one scholar recently noted, the piano concerto served as Liszt's 'laboratory' wherein he 'tested and refined' his compositional techniques.<sup>5</sup> Liszt only published three piano concerti during his lifetime (Piano Concerto No. 1 in E♭ Major in 1857, Piano Concerto No. 2 in A Minor in 1861, and *Totentanz* in 1865), but he worked on these pieces throughout his career and preceded them with a considerable number of unpublished works including two piano concerti in 1825 and two quasi-programmatic pieces for piano and orchestra in 1834. In addition to these, Liszt composed numerous fantasies and transcriptions for piano and orchestra of other composers' works. For example, the *Niobe* Fantasy was first conceived for piano and orchestra, and there was a concerto version of the *Puritani* Fantasy as well as *Hexaméron* (Table 7.1).

### The virtuoso concerti

Liszt's first attempt at writing piano concerti took place in 1825, when as a fourteen-year-old prodigy he was trying to make his mark as a virtuoso pianist. In a letter dated 14 August 1825, Adam Liszt wrote to Czerny about his son's most recent accomplishments:

Franzi has written two good concerti, which will be heard in Vienna . . . he knows no other passion than the compositions, only these grant him joy

Table 7.1 *Chronology of Liszt's piano concerti and related works for piano and orchestra*

Date started	Title	Revisions	Date completed/published
1825	Two piano concerti		lost
1832	Piano Concerto No. 1 in E♭ Major	1834/35, 1839, 1849, 1853, 1855,	1855/7
1833	<i>Malédiction</i>	1840	unpublished
1834	<i>Grande fantaisie symphonique</i>		1834/1981
1834	<i>De profundis, psaume instrumental</i>		incomplete/1989
1835	Concerto? (uses themes from 3 solo piano pieces published in 1825: 'Huit Variations', 'Allegro di bravura', and Rondo di bravura')		incomplete/1989
1837	<i>Hexaméron</i>		published 1839
1839	Piano Concerto No. 2 in A Minor	1849, 1853, 1857	1861/3
1839	<i>Totentanz</i>	1849, 1853, 1857, 1864	1864/1865
1841	<i>Grand paraphrase de concert 'God Save the Queen' 'Rule Britannia'</i>		unpublished
1848	<i>Fantasia über Motive aus Ruinen von Athen</i>	1852	published 1865
1849	<i>Polonaise brillante von Weber</i> [op. 17]		published 1851
1849	<i>Fantasia über ungarische Volksmelodien</i>		1852/4
1851	<i>Franz Schuberts grosse Fantasia</i> op. 15		published 1857
1880	Concerto No. 3		incomplete

and pleasure . . . His concerti are too severe, and the difficulties for the soloist are monstrous; I have always considered Hummel's concerti difficult, but in comparison these are very easy.<sup>6</sup>

Except for a few brief sketches identified several years ago,<sup>7</sup> the above description is all that remains of Liszt's first two concerti, despite the fact that contemporary sources indicate that at least one of them, a concerto in A minor, was performed in London on 9 June 1827.<sup>8</sup> Adam Liszt's description of the works indicates that their primary purpose was to display his son's technical skills, and so it is safe to assume that they fell under the category of the virtuoso concerto.

The same can be said for Liszt's next attempt at the genre several years later. In January 1832 Liszt jotted down several themes for what would later become his Concerto No. 1 in E♭ Major. Scattered across several pages of a composition notebook dating from the early 1830s, these sketches reveal Liszt's first conception of the piece.<sup>9</sup> Music from the opening bars of the concerto is presented in the first sketch, where the key and much of the rhythm and harmony appear in a manner similar to the final version. The rest of the sketches notated under the heading 'concerto' appear to continue in the keys of E♭ and B♭ major and carry descriptive labels such as 'Trompe', 'Chant', and 'Marche Finale'.<sup>10</sup> These sketches are all that exist of Liszt's first concept for the E♭ Major Concerto, but he obviously worked on the composition consistently for several months, for at the end of the year, in a

letter dated 12 December, he wrote: 'I have laboured at length and prepared many instrumental compositions, among others... a Concerto after a design that I think is new, and for which the accompaniments remain for me to write.'<sup>11</sup>

No sources for this first draft of the concerto are known to exist, but an idea of what Liszt described as 'new' can be determined by studying a manuscript copy of the work prepared in 1834/5.<sup>12</sup> Although several pages are missing from this manuscript, enough exists to get a sense of the work's overall structure and unique features. Echoing the scope and key structure of Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto*, op. 73, Liszt's work is scored for a relatively modest orchestra of double winds and brass (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, and trumpet), timpani and strings and cast in three separate movements: *Allegro*, *Adagio*, and *Vivace*. The second movement is in B major and, as in Beethoven's concerto, linked to a scherzo-like finale. Although the technical demands on the orchestra are not great in Liszt's concerto, those put on the soloist are immense. For example the opening measures of the piano part contain rapid leaps covering two octaves. These are followed by the introduction of numerous new motives, which are later expanded upon in a fantasia-like manner, and an excessive amount of performance indications (e.g. *Marcato deciso*, *Vigoroso*, and *Delicato*). Throughout the exposition, the piano guides the orchestra through numerous modulations: E $\flat$  major, E major, F major, and B minor. A measured cadenza then leads to the development, which instead of expanding upon thematic material from the exposition introduces three new themes, the last of which is written in fugato style. In the lengthy retransition to the tonic, Liszt introduces another new key, C $\sharp$  minor, before presenting what appears to be a loose recapitulation based on the first two new themes of the development and a return of the opening motive marked *fortississimo*. Unfortunately, the manuscript breaks off at this point, leaving one to speculate how the movement might have concluded.<sup>13</sup>

The second movement has a rather unusual form. Approximately seventy bars in length, it is punctuated throughout with recitative-like interruptions marked *Recitando*. The opening theme is the same one that appears in Liszt's final version of the concerto. Marked *Adagio* in the 1834/5 version, its clear, lyrical structure betrays the influence of Italian *bel canto* tradition. That being said, one cannot help but wonder if Spohr's Violin Concerto No. 8 in A Minor, op. 47 (1816), entitled *Gesangsszene* ('in modo di scena cantante'), served as a model. Although Spohr's concerto is rarely performed today, it was popular during the first half of the nineteenth century and likely familiar to Liszt. Liszt's use of descriptive labels such as 'Trompe', 'Chant', and 'Marche Finale' in his 1832 sketches for the piano concerto indicate that from the beginning, he envisioned some sort of dramatic structure for the

work, and a comparison of the 1834/5 version with Spohr's concerto reveals several telling similarities. The structure of Liszt's second movement borrows much from the 'Gesangsszene' structure of Spohr's ground-breaking concerto, and in both the soloist takes on the role of a virtuosic singer in aria and recitative, while the orchestra offers little more than an accompaniment. Yet another model for the second movement could have been Ignaz Moscheles's Piano Concerto in G Minor, op. 60 (completed in 1820), which also employs elements of recitative.

The principal theme of the third movement is the same one that appears in the E $\flat$  minor scherzo (*Allegro vivace*) in the final published version of the concerto. Perhaps the most interesting feature of this movement is the return of the second movement's *Adagio* theme. Instead of facilitating the entry of a second key area and subsequent move to a recapitulation, the interpolation of this theme halts the movement's forward drive and moves directly into an extensive coda that reaffirms the major key and features a return of the original scherzo theme.

As the above description reveals, the structure and technical difficulty of the 1834/5 version of the Piano Concerto in E $\flat$  Major places it squarely in the category of the virtuoso concerto. Still, there are elements of the composition that fall outside this category – elements that Liszt himself described as 'new'. The avoidance of strict sonata form, the fantasia-like opening movement, the use of instrumental recitative, the linking together of the second and third movements, and the unity of structure created by a free and continuous restatement of themes – Liszt's innovative use of these features suggests that he was striving to create something more than just a virtuosic showpiece when he composed the original version of his piano concerto. Liszt was taking the first steps toward a new style of concerto writing. To better understand the direction in which he was moving, it is worth examining two additional works composed for piano and orchestra in 1834/5.

### ***Grande fantasia symphonique and De profundis***

Around the time Liszt completed the 1834/5 version of the Piano Concerto No. 1 in E $\flat$  Major, he composed two quasi-programmatic works for piano and orchestra that reveal his earliest attempts to construct large, unified single-movement structures. Although these works do not fall squarely under the category of concerto, they nonetheless represent an important stage in Liszt's conception of the genre, for they contain many of the compositional characteristics and poetic qualities that would ultimately define the final versions of Liszt's three piano concerti.

The first of these, the *Grande fantaisie symphonique*, is a paraphrase of two of the six numbers from Berlioz's *Le retour à la vie, mélologue en six parties* that was later retitled *Lélio, ou Le retour à la vie, monodrama lyrique* (Liszt's adaptation is sometimes listed as the *Lélio Fantasy*). Formally, the *Grande fantaisie symphonique* consists of one long movement (670 bars) divided into two halves – the first, *Lento* (bars 1–184), and the second, *Allegro vivace* (bars 185–670). The piece represents Liszt's earliest experimentation with a format consisting of a slow introductory section followed by a bravura *Allegro*, and it is likely that he looked to several models for this form, the most obvious being Weber's *Konzertstück* and Mendelssohn's *Capriccio brillante*, op. 22. Clara Wieck's Piano Concerto, op. 7 is another possible model, since she performed two of the movements, the 'Romanze' and 'Finale', as a pair in many of her concerts.<sup>14</sup>

The first half of Liszt's *Grande fantaisie symphonique* serves as a long introduction to the second half. Primarily in A minor, it is a paraphrase of the opening song, 'Le pêcheur', from Berlioz's composition. The second half of Liszt's piece begins and ends in F major and is based on the third song from *Lélio*, 'Chanson de brigands'. But Liszt does not draw his thematic material from this song alone; in an effort to create structural unity, he recalls a theme from the first section of the piece. Further unification of the two parts is created by the incorporation of a similar rhythmic motive in both halves taken from 'Choeur d'ombres', yet another song from Berlioz's composition.

The second of the two concerted works, *De profundis (psaume instrumentale)*, was dedicated to the Abbé de Lamennais and, like the *Grande fantaisie symphonique*, is a single-movement work. In a letter to his mother dated 26 July 1835, Liszt referred to *De profundis* as a *concerto symphonique*.<sup>15</sup> This differentiation in name supports the assumption that Liszt was striving towards the creation of a new genre for piano and orchestra in the mid-1830s. Cast in large-scale sonata form, *De profundis* consists of an exposition, lengthy development, scherzo-like interlude, and a recapitulation that serves as a segue into a concluding section that contains the first traces of Liszt's experiments with thematic transformation. In this work, Liszt's aptitude for constructing a large, unified movement has progressed noticeably. In addition to demonstrating his ability to resolve a tonal dichotomy efficiently, the work displays an effective use of thematic duality and a convincing recapitulation. Liszt never completed *De profundis*, despite the fact that the autograph score – the only known source for the work – contains at least two layers of revision. But he did hold on to the score and in later years incorporated a large section of it into an early version of his *Totentanz* – a topic to which we shall return.

Liszt never published *Grande fantaisie symphonique* and *De profundis*, although he did perform the former on at least two occasions: the premiere on 9 April 1835 with conductor Narcisse Girard and a performance on 18 December 1836 with Berlioz on the podium. Reviews of these performances were mixed. Although the magnificence of Liszt's virtuosic talent was universally praised, his skills as a composer were often dismissed without comment or harshly criticised.<sup>16</sup> Unable to separate his identity as a performer from his activities as an orchestral composer in the eyes of reviewers, Liszt apparently became frustrated with the concerto genre and subsequently abandoned it for several years. Only in 1839, with the prospect of a new concert tour looming before him, did he turn his attention to the genre once again.

### The symphonic concerti

After leaving Paris in 1834 and living with the Countess Marie d'Agoult in Switzerland and Italy for five years, Liszt decided to resume his concert career in the fall of 1839. In preparation for the tour, he spent the month of September in Italy preparing a number of works for his upcoming tours. Among these compositions were his Piano Concerto No. 1 in E $\flat$  Major and the Piano Concerto No. 2 in A Minor.

Liszt drastically revised his E $\flat$  Major Concerto when he returned to it in 1839, and his own works from 1834/5, namely the *Grande fantaisie* and *De profundis*, served as his most important models. Intent on turning his three-movement virtuoso concerto into a more serious symphonic work, Liszt cut the concerto's length by one third, simplified several of the more technically challenging sections in the soloist's part and completely restructured the work, turning it into a single-movement concerto constructed of four contrasting sections: 'Allegro', 'Quasi adagio', a scherzo-like 'Allegretto vivace', and 'Allegro animato'.<sup>17</sup> In its new form, the Concerto No. 1 in E $\flat$  Major looked more like a symphonic concerto than a virtuoso concerto. It is tempting to view Liszt's revisions of the work as a replication of, if not an actual reaction to, some of Robert Schumann's musings about the genre published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. For example, in a review published in 1836 Schumann criticised the structure of Moscheles's Piano Concerto No. 6 in B $\flat$  Major, op. 90 (the *Concert fantastique*), and then proposed a new one-movement structure for the concerto:

The *Concert fantastique* consists of four movements, continued without pause, but in different tempos. We have already declared ourselves opposed to this form. Though it does not seem impossible to construct an agreeable unity in it, the aesthetic dangers appear too great in comparison with this



possibility. Still, there is a lack of smaller concert pieces, wherein the virtuoso can simultaneously give us his presentation of an allegro, adagio, and rondo. It would be good to invent a new form that consists of one large movement in a moderate tempo, wherein the preparatory part might take the place of a first allegro, the cantabile that of the adagio and a brilliant conclusion that of the rondo. Perhaps this idea will inspire something that we would gladly see embodied in a peculiarly original composition.<sup>18</sup>

Liszt no doubt took these ideas to heart and responded to them the following year in a review of some of Schumann's piano music, in particular his sonata entitled 'Concerto without Orchestra'. In his review, Liszt contemplated the history of the concerto, explaining that although the genre had originally conformed to the structure of three separate movements, Moscheles had recently united the various movements into one in his *Concert fantastique*, op. 90 and thus laid the groundwork for the future. According to Liszt, the best concertos were those that presented a free treatment of traditional form.<sup>19</sup> Weber's *Konzertstück* and Mendelssohn's *Capriccio brillant* had already made progress in this direction, and as Liszt's 1839 revision of his own Piano Concerto in E♭ Major would soon show, he intended to follow along a similar path.

Although Liszt was not the first to compose a single-movement piano concerto along the lines of Schumann's description, his continued interest in this form led to some of the most innovative uses of it in the nineteenth century. Shortly after completing the 1839 version of his Concerto No. 1, Liszt composed the first draft of another single-movement concerto, his Concerto No. 2 in A Minor – an even better example of the symphonic variety.

The second concerto is less brilliant, less virtuosic than the first concerto, but far more original in form, and in this respect it reveals a closer link to the style and structure of Liszt's more popular tone poems. Similar in structure to Carl Maria von Weber's *Konzertstück* (1829), a work Liszt performed regularly in concerts,<sup>20</sup> the Concerto in A Minor comprises six sections, each of which presents a contrasting mood created by what can only be described as 'ingenious thematic transformations'.<sup>21</sup> This technique of thematic metamorphosis – creating themes of highly diverse character through the use of a single melodic shape – is quite similar to that found in Schubert's *Wanderer* Fantasy, and it is likely that Schubert's work also served as a model. Liszt no doubt knew the work by 1839, for Schubert completed it shortly before his first encounter with Liszt in 1822. By 1846 Liszt was performing the *Wanderer* Fantasy in concerts on a regular basis, and in 1851 he even went so far as to make an arrangement of it for piano and orchestra – yet another indication that he viewed Schubert's solo piano work as a model for the concerto genre.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of the soloist's role, the Concerto in A Minor is quite different from its predecessor. Whereas the revised version of the first concerto could still be considered a soloist's showpiece, the second reflects Liszt's attempt to confirm his talent as a composer and distance himself from his performance origins.<sup>23</sup> In the second concerto Liszt is sparing with technical devices such as scales in octaves and contrary motion, making the soloist a responsive accompanist to the woodwinds and strings rather than an overbearing virtuoso. In addition, the soloist does not dominate the thematic material. After the opening, the pianist never has the theme again in its original form. Instead, his duty is to create – or at least appear to create – inventive variations that lead the listener through a series of thematic transformations. As the pianist Alfred Brendel once noted, in the second concerto there is a fragmentary openness to the form that gives the work as a whole a poetic sense. The various pauses and silences are not envisioned as breaks in the musical flow, but rather transitions in the musical argument. 'Organic unity' gives a structure to the entire work.<sup>24</sup>

In manuscript, Liszt called his Piano Concerto in A Minor a *concerto symphonique*, the label he had previously applied to *De profundis*. In the past, Liszt's use of this term has been attributed to the influence of Henry Litolff (1818–91), a performer–composer he met in 1840 and the eventual dedicatee of his Piano Concerto No. 1. Litolff published four *concertos symphoniques* between 1844 and 1867, which has led to the assumption that he was the first to envision such a genre. But as we have seen, Liszt was already using the term regularly in the 1830s, and his early drafts of *De profundis* and the Concerto in A Minor show that he designed a general layout for the *concerto symphonique* several years before Litolff did. Although Liszt did not publish or publicly perform the early versions of his concertos, he likely showed them to Litolff, or at least discussed them with him at some point during their friendly interaction in the 1840s. In later years, Litolff earned a reputation as a respected interpreter of Liszt's piano works. In fact, Liszt himself praised the pianist's performance of his Concerto in E♭ Major after hearing it at a private gathering in 1853, an event that likely influenced Liszt in his decision to dedicate the work to Litolff. Liszt's influence on Litolff is undeniable, as a comparison of the two composers' works reveals: both make use of repeated themes and thematic transformation, both often feature difficult octave passages at the conclusions of sections, and both incorporate the triangle and piccolo into the orchestra (as first seen in the 1839 draft of Liszt's Concerto No. 1 and used by Litolff in his *Concerto symphonique* No. 4 in D Minor composed in 1851/2). There are, however, several differences between the two composers' approach to the genre, and these differences might have influenced Liszt in his decision to drop the designation *concerto symphonique* from his own works when he finally began publishing them

in the late 1850s and 60s. In general, Liszt's works are more closely tied to a four-movement structure and traditional use of sonata form. In addition, he gives the piano a much less important role. In fact, Liszt's concerti, like those of Brahms, are really nothing more than disguised symphonies with a piano accompaniment, a characterisation that could never be applied to Liszt's concerti.

For reasons still unknown, Liszt decided to shelve both of his concerti when he resumed touring in the fall of 1839. In fact, ten years passed before he returned to the works and completed another set of revisions.<sup>25</sup> As Jay Rosenblatt explains, these manuscripts reveal 'how close the 1849 versions brought the concertos to their final form, especially with regard to tonal layout and the use of thematic transformation'.<sup>26</sup> In the 1849 version of the Concerto No. 1, Liszt cyclically unified the first and last movements in a manner similar to that found in the 1839 version of the A Minor Concerto, and in later years he went one step further, recalling thematic material from every movement in the concerto's finale. By the time the Concerto in E♭ Major was published in 1857, it had undergone five revisions, in 1835, 1839, 1849, 1853 and 1855. The Concerto in A Minor went through a similar process, in 1849, 1853, 1857 and 1861. Faced with so many revisions, one cannot help but ask: why? Was Liszt really such a perfectionist? The answer to this question is yes and no. Liszt knew that winning the support of critics would be an uphill battle, and he was wary of presenting the 'final' versions of his concerti for public scrutiny, as is reflected in the anecdote that he and Hans von Bülow once set the words 'Das versteht ihr alle nicht, haha!' (This none of you understand, ha! ha!) to the opening two bars of the Concerto No. 1. But Liszt's primary purpose in writing the concerti was not to win public favour, but rather to grow as a composer. With each step of the revision process, Liszt tightened the relationship between the soloist and the orchestra, and in doing so refined his conception of what a piano concerto should be. His revisions were not the result of a quest for the perfect concerto, but stemmed instead from his quest for creative growth.<sup>27</sup> Liszt's ideas about the piano concerto changed drastically over the years, a phenomenon that is fascinating to follow and perhaps best shown through the evolution of his final concerto, the programmatic work entitled *Totentanz*.

## The programmatic concerto

The programmatic dimensions that the piano concerto took on in the nineteenth century, including the appropriation of visual and theatrical effects as compositional devices, are clearly displayed in Liszt's *Totentanz*.<sup>28</sup> Using as inspiration two works of visual art, Holbein's *Todtentanz* woodcut series and a thirteenth-century fresco in Pisa called *Trionfo della Morte*, Liszt composed two musical sketches in 1839 that he called 'Comedy of Death' and 'Triumph

of Death'. It is not clear if Liszt originally envisioned these sketches as separate compositions; a memo in one of his notebooks dating from the mid-1840s reveals that he considered using them in an early draft of *Années de pèlerinage*.<sup>29</sup> Liszt soon abandoned this idea, however, and in 1848 the sketches were used in a large concert work for piano and orchestra called *Totentanz*. Liszt edited this draft considerably in 1849 and again in 1853. The 1853 version was then bound in leather, an indication that Liszt considered *Totentanz* to be complete at the time.<sup>30</sup> But the concerto was never performed in this version during Liszt's lifetime, and in 1864 Liszt returned to the work and edited it heavily, changing the orchestration and deleting several sections. In this state, the concerto was premièred by Hans von Bülow in 1865 and finally published under the title: *Totentanz, paraphrase über 'Dies Irae'*.

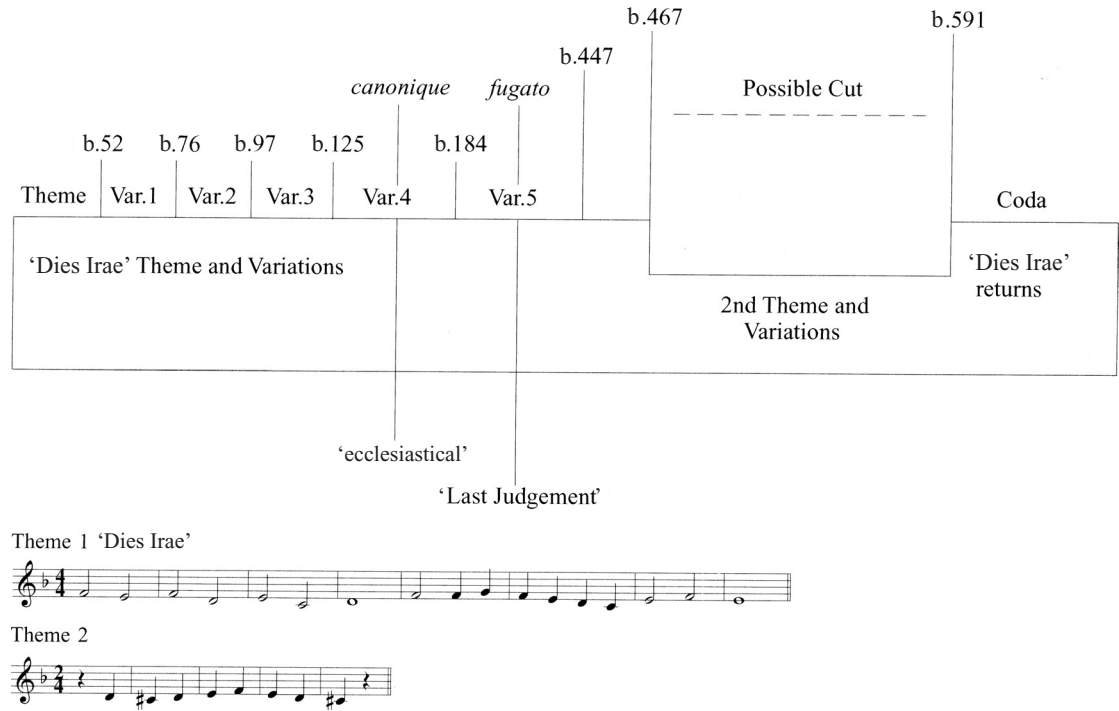
In its final form *Totentanz* is an elaborate set of free variations based on the liturgical plainchant 'Dies Irae' and an excerpt from the opening of Mozart's *Requiem*. Following a short orchestral introduction and a statement of the theme by the piano, a set of five numbered variations begins. Variations 1–3 are not labelled, but the fourth and fifth are classified as 'canonique' and 'fugato'. Approximately three-quarters of the way through the piece the 'Dies Irae' drops out and a new eight-note theme taken from the opening of Mozart's *Requiem* appears and serves as the basis for an unnumbered second set of variations. In the third and final cadenza the original 'Dies Irae' theme returns and remains the dominant force until the end of the piece (Fig 7.1).

A look at the primary sources for *Totentanz* reveals that the evolution of the piece was long and arduous. In each stage of revision, Liszt was careful to preserve the unique characteristics of the two artworks that inspired his composition. To fully understand how he accomplished this preservation, we must turn briefly to the artworks themselves. Hans Holbein's woodcut series *Todtentanz* presents a pictorial version of a theme and variations. The formal theme of the series – the Equality of Death (Plate 7.1) – is presented by a ghoulish band of skeletons who declare to humanity that death will surely come to all:

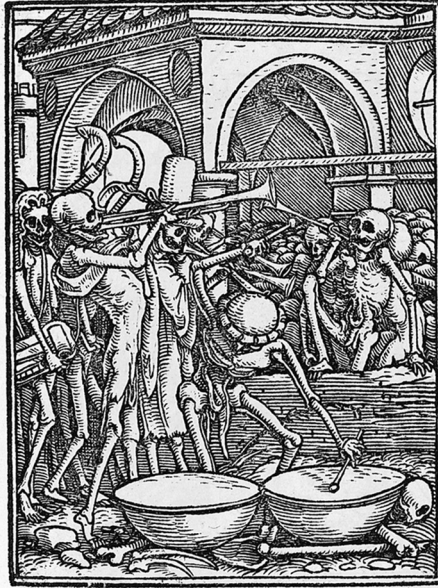
Woe! Woe! Inhabitants of Earth  
Where blighting cares so keenly strike,  
And, spite of rank, or wealth, or worth,  
Death – Death will visit all alike.<sup>31</sup>

Holbein's variations on this theme are presented in the remaining thirty-five woodcuts. Here the skeletons fulfil their declaration of death by seizing individuals from all walks of life and ushering them to their forewarned demise. Figures from the Church are particularly susceptible to the bony hand of death: pope, priest, cardinal, abbot, monk, nun, etc. are punished

Figure 7.1 Outline of Liszt's *Totentanz*



Væ væ væ habitantibus in terra.  
A P O C A L Y P S I S V I I I  
Cuncta in quibus spiraculum vitæ est, mortua sunt.  
G E N E S I S V I I



Malheureux qui uiuez au monde  
Tousiours remplis d'aduersitez,  
Pour quelque bien qui uous abonde,  
Serez tous de Mort uisitez.

Plate 7.1 'The Equality of Death' from Hans Holbein's *Todtentanz*.

for the sins of humanity. The final two woodcuts show the Last Judgement, where all the figures from the previous images return to hear God's final decree, and the Escutcheon of Death.

The *Trionfo della Morte* fresco located in Pisa's Campo Santo has three primary scenes (Plate 7.2). The left side of the fresco shows a representation



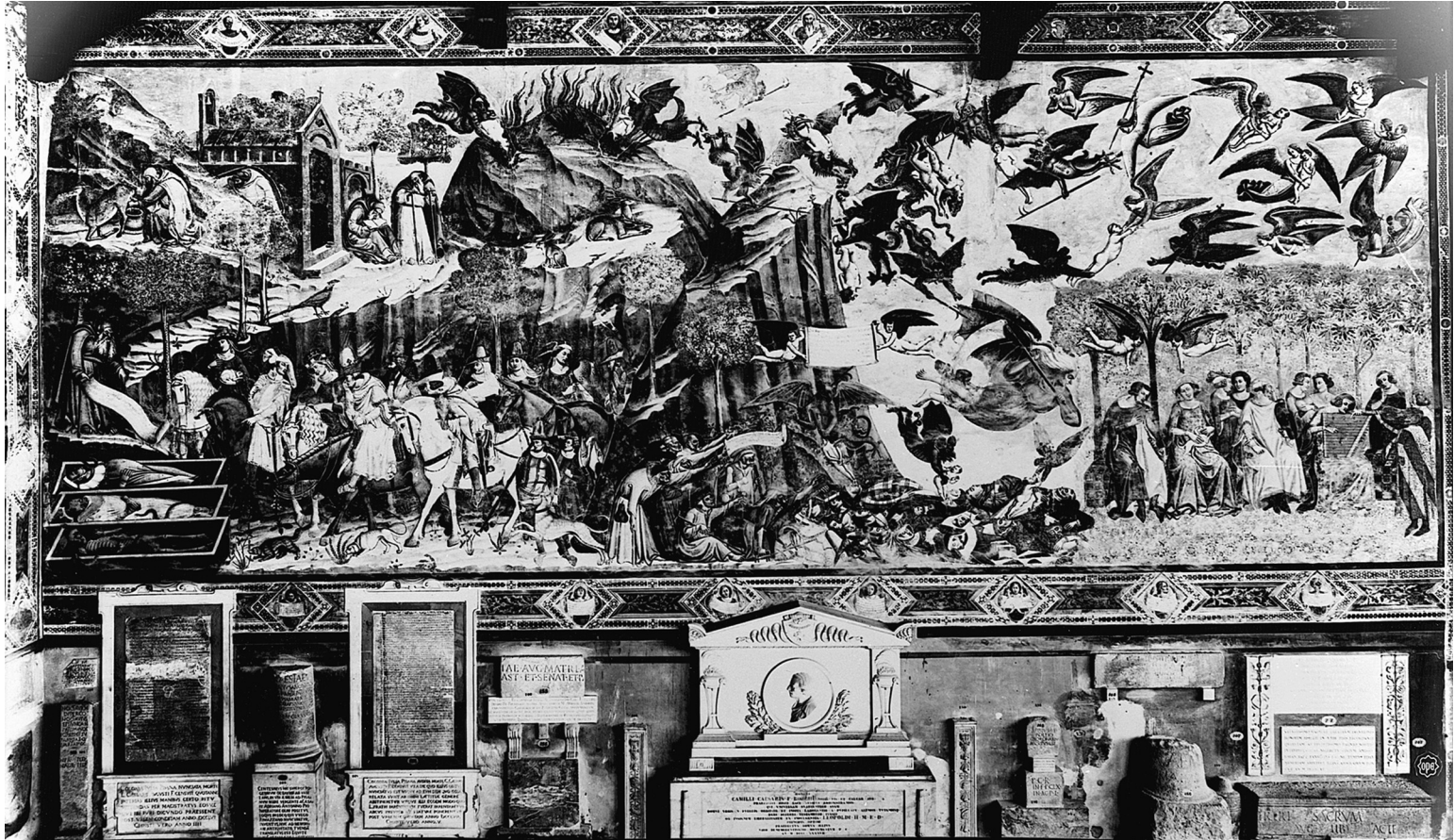


Plate 7.2 *Trionfo della Morte*, by Orcagna [sic] (Francesco Traini or Bonamico Buffalmacco).

of the medieval legend of 'The Three Dead and the Three Living'. According to this story, three noble youths were hunting in a forest when they were intercepted by three images of Death. Here the dead are displayed in their coffins in varying stages of decay. The dead pheasants and hunting instruments reveal the pastime of the noblemen and their servants. On the right side of the fresco is a *memento mori* image symbolising the ephemeral quality of life. Here a group of young lovers play musical instruments in a lush and flowering garden. The scene in the centre of the fresco represents humanity's fate after death. A witch-like depiction of Death flies through the air, wielding a scythe over her victims below. As life leaves each human, swarms of angels and devils descend on the bodies and battle over their souls. Here humanity's fate is both certain and horrific.

Although a theme and variations structure was not one commonly used by Liszt for orchestral works, its application in *Totentanz* seems logical when compared to the woodcut series by Holbein. Just as skeletons represent Death in Holbein's work, the liturgical sequence 'Dies Irae' served as the haunting theme for Liszt. A look at the various versions of *Totentanz* reveals that Liszt quoted directly from Holbein's woodcuts at every stage of the concerto's evolution. Close examination of Holbein's theme woodcut shows skeletons playing a variety of instruments (cornemuse, busine, hurdy-gurdy, shawm), but the sackbut and kettledrums are given the most prominent positions. I emphasise this point because if we look at the opening of Liszt's 1849 version of *Totentanz*, we find an accurate quotation of this striking orchestration. Here Liszt replaced the sackbut and kettledrums with their nineteenth-century equivalents, the trombone and timpani (Plate 7.3). In the final version of *Totentanz*, completed in 1865, Liszt reorchestrated the opening, amplifying the timpani and trombones with clarinets, bassoons, violas, cellos and contrabasses. In this revised version, the timpani play F, G $\sharp$ , B, G $\sharp$  – a figure framed by the interval of a tritone, the 'diabolus musicae'. The piano emphasises this tritone motive, which appears in two forms: linearly as a motive and horizontally as a diminished seventh chord: G $\sharp$ , B, D, F. These two tritone manifestations, linear motive and horizontal chord, appear throughout the composition and serve as unifying devices as well as symbols of the diabolical.

Paying close attention to Holbein's satirical treatment of religious figures, Liszt adopted a similar approach when writing Variation 4. Liszt labelled the variation 'canonique', and this indication, along with the music's sacred style, reveals a direct connection to contemporary church music. On the surface, Variation 4 appears quite benign, but a close look at its harmonic structure reveals malevolent elements, the most obvious being Liszt's blatant use of the tritone.





Variation 5 might also be considered an imitation of Holbein. Labelled 'fugato', it is the longest and most complex variation. Although it contains no direct quotations of the previous four variations, the 'fugato' does make use of the various rhythmic motives that characterise them. Like the 'Last Judgement' in Holbein's woodcuts, Variation 5 presents a conclusive combination of all the preceding variations.

Despite the striking similarities between Liszt's *Totentanz* and Holbein's woodcuts, there are several contradictions that imply an additional source of extra-musical inspiration. For example, why did Liszt interrupt Variation 5 with a new set of theme and variations? The answer lies in the *Trionfo della Morte* fresco in Pisa's Campo Santo. In a letter to Hector Berlioz, Liszt once made a comparison between the Campo Santo and Mozart's *Requiem*, saying that he was reminded of the *Requiem* when he entered the Campo Santo. Consequently, when Liszt began to compose music inspired by the *Trionfo della Morte* fresco in 1839 he used an excerpt from Mozart's *Requiem*. Liszt clearly recognised the similarity between the opening melody in Mozart's *Requiem* and the melody of the seventeenth-century *folia* – sometimes called 'Farinelli's Ground'. In an effort to create what he believed to be an 'early music' sound, Liszt used the harmonic structure of the *folia* when creating aural depictions of the thirteenth-century fresco. The hunting scene displayed in the legend of 'The Three Dead and the Three Living' is represented by horn calls in the opening statement of the second theme. Likewise, the group of lovers playing instruments in the garden is depicted in the first variation of the second theme. Perhaps difficult to interpret at first, Liszt's decision to insert a second theme and variations set in *Totentanz* was an outstanding manipulation of programmatic material. Within the climactic presentation of the 'Last Judgement' in Variation 5, Liszt included his second programme, the 'Triumph of Death', and thus intensified the composition's dramatic conclusion and final descent into Hell.

In the earliest complete versions of *Totentanz*, those created in 1849 and 1853, the second theme and variations was followed by a third theme, the 'De profundis' plainchant from his 1834/5 composition. If we can rely on the liturgical texts that usually accompanied these three themes as an approximate programme for *Totentanz*, then it appears that the 1849 and 1853 versions depicted a more benevolent vision of God's Last Judgement. The text to 'Dies Irae' set the scene: 'Day of anger, day of misery, when the world turned to ashes.' This was followed by the Requiem theme: 'Give them eternal rest, Lord.' Finally the redemptive text of the 'De profundis', Psalm 130, concluded the programme.

After completing the 1853 version of *Totentanz*, Liszt set the work aside for eleven years. When he finally returned to it in 1864 at the request of his son-in-law Hans von Bülow, his vision of the concerto's programme had

darkened considerably. Liszt had suffered numerous personal tragedies during the intervening years, and these had temporarily changed his view of the world, making him depressed and introspective. In 1863 Liszt moved into the Dominican residence, Madonna del Rosario, in Rome, and it was there that he revised *Totentanz* for the last time, transforming it into a cynical condemnation of mankind. He did this by making four fundamental changes to the concerto: he reorchestrated the opening, added the demonic tritone motives, eliminated the benevolent ‘De profundis’ section, and rewrote the coda, making it more malevolent in character.

Liszt’s disparaging view of the world around him was not permanent, however. And one gets the sense that shortly after publishing *Totentanz*, Liszt began to regret how much it reflected his own struggles and private thoughts. Vladimir Stasov’s description of an encounter he had with Liszt in 1869 elucidates the situation:

In vain I implored him to play something from his *Totentanz*. . . . To no avail I asked him to explain the principal variations in *Totentanz*, for which no programme is given (contrary to the practice Liszt has followed in all his symphonic works). He flatly refused to play this piece, and as for the programme, he said only that it was one of those works whose content must not be made public. A strange secret, a strange exception, the strange effect of his life as an abbé and his stay in Rome!<sup>32</sup>

After the publication of *Totentanz*, Liszt realised that the personality cult associated with the concerto made it a losing enterprise for him. He had struggled most of his career to remove his identity as a performer from his piano concerti – but with little success. Although he could downplay the virtuosic role of the soloist as he did in Concerti Nos. 1 and 2, and refrain from performing the works himself as he did in Concerto No. 2 and *Totentanz*, he could never fully separate his personality from the genre. Performers such as Busoni and Vianna da Motta lamented the abandonment of the concerto at the end of the nineteenth century, but an understanding of the genre’s tradition reveals why composers such as Liszt were left with no other choice. Although Liszt made sketches for a new concerto in 1880 after Reissmann blamed misuse of the genre for hindering the spread of a ‘refined aesthetic taste’, nothing came of these plans. Thus we are left to conclude that, intent on becoming a great composer in the eyes of critics and audiences, Liszt was forced to separate himself from the concerto – a genre that would always remind listeners of his glittering, virtuosic past.