

TRIBUTE TO FRANZ LISZT IN HIS BI-CENTENARY YEAR  
LECTURE FOR THE RICHARD WAGNER SOCIETY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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[We extend our thanks to Marian Frost, a founding member of the Richard Wagner Society of South Australia, for permission to share this tribute with our readers. Numbers in boxes in the text refer to musical examples played during her lecture; they are listed at the end of the article.]

In the *New Grove Dictionary* the English composer, Humphrey Searle (1915-1982) writes: ***Liszt stands at the centre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century not only in music and the arts, but as a personality; like Mahler, he felt that music should embrace the world and he cast his net as wide as possible. Princess Wittgenstein wrote prophetically, 'He has hurled his lance much further into the future than Wagner'.*** It was Humphrey Searle who also catalogued Liszt's 768 musical works which now carry an S number - S. for Searle just as Mozart's have K. for Köchel.

Franz Liszt has relatively few biographers, at least in English; there's a rather biased 1934 version from the great Wagner scholar, Ernest Newman, who obviously had a much lower opinion of father-in-law Liszt than he did of son-in-law Wagner; in 1954 there was a small factual volume from Humphrey Searle himself; a sympathetic Sacheverell Sitwell in 1955; an eminently readable Derek Watson in 1989 and the great Alan Walker trilogy completed in 1994. My bi-centenary contribution owes something to every one of these. His 75 years divide neatly into sections.

#### EARLY YEARS

His father Adam was a steward for the Esterházy family, an overseer of their sheepfolds. Adam was musical, played piano and cello and had played second cello in the Esterházy Court Orchestra which at different times performed under the baton of Haydn, Hummel or Cherubini. Hummel, (1778–1837) an Austrian composer and virtuoso pianist, became one of Europe's many travelling virtuosos. Franz Liszt always wanted to study with him but it never happened - Hummel was always too busy and too expensive.

As a young man Adam Liszt entered a Franciscan monastery to train as a monk but was asked to leave on account of *his unsteady and inconstant nature*. He later married and lived with wife Anna on Esterházy sheep land surrounded by hills where gypsies often made camp. This was at *Doborján*, then in Hungary, now the Austrian *Raiding*, where Franz, baptised Franciscus in honour of the Franciscans, was born. We need to remember both the Franciscan and gypsy elements all through his life and music – he never forgot them. Adam noticed the boy's interest in their cottage piano and began giving him formal lessons from an early age. He showed remarkable talent and at ten won an award, which caused Adam to seek permission from his employer to move his family to Vienna. There Franz had lessons in piano technique from Czerny (*School of Velocity* fame) and counterpoint from the undeservedly infamous Salieri. Czerny was a friend of Beethoven's and persuaded the grumpy old man to make an exception and listen to his 11 year old prodigy. Reports say that he played one of Bach's *48 Preludes and Fugues* for Beethoven from memory (by then he'd memorised the whole 48) and at Beethoven's request, transposed it into a different key.

During this period a minor composer and music publisher, Anton Diabelli, conceived the idea of sending his own waltz theme to every composer he could think of, and then publishing a set of **50 Variations**. [\*1] Beethoven declined to write a Variation but later composed 33, his *Diabelli Variations* being one of the major works of piano literature. Amongst those who did respond were Czerny, Schubert, Cherubini, Weber, Hummel and 11 year old Franz Liszt... [\*2]

Czerny suggested that Franz be enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire and the family moved again, but he was refused admission to the Conservatoire on the grounds that he wasn't French, on the orders of Cherubini, its Italian director, who shared the same disadvantage. He then turned to Anton Reicha as theory teacher and the retired director of the Paris Italian Opera, Ferdinando Paer, as composition teacher and had six months tuition from each of them. This marked the end of Liszt's formal musical training: 10 months in Vienna with Czerny and Salieri and six months in Paris with Reicha and Paer. Aged 14, he wrote his only opera, *Don Sanche*, which was produced in Paris and played in 2010 as ABC-FM's Sunday Night Opera.

We have now entered the age of the travelling virtuoso pianist and Liszt soon joined the throng. His debut in Paris was a sensation even though he played Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata*, not the usual meretricious offering of these entertainers, and he toured extensively in France, Switzerland and England. Adam, who toured with him, noticed the exhausting effect on his teenage son's health and decided that they should pause and take the waters in Boulogne. Unfortunately, Adam caught typhoid fever here and died. A distraught Franz went back to his mother in Paris and began teaching to support them both. Aged 17, he fell in love with one of his students, Caroline de Saint-Cricq but her father quickly put a stop to the friendship of his aristocratic daughter and a mere music teacher. Liszt never forgot her; many years later while on tour he visited her in the south of France where, unhappily married, she and Franz re-awoke the old affair. Liszt wrote a beautiful song, *Ich möchte hingehn wie das Abendroth* with the yearning motive that Wagner would use many years later in *Tristan*.

The brutal break-up with Caroline caused a deep depression which forced Franz to retire from performing. His disappearance from the concert platform led to publication of his obituary, which he read in the Paris press. Unable to work, he used the time to fill in the huge gaps in his education, which he realised that until that time had been only music. He was now part of a city of such intellectuals as Victor Hugo, Alphonse de Lamartine, Alexandre Dumas *père*, Honoré de Balzac, Théophile Gautier, Alfred de Vigny, Alfred de Musset, Gérard de Nerval who translated Goethe, the German Heinrich Heine, and novelist George Sand. He read so much and so well that in later life he was considered to be a very cultivated man. At the end of that year he met Berlioz on the eve of the first performance of his *Symphonie Fantastique*.

The Peoples' July Revolution of 1830 brought him back to music – his mother said *it was the guns that did it* - and he wrote a Revolution Symphony which many years later became his Symphonic Poem, *Hérodiade funèbre*.

In 1831 Paganini visited Paris. For music practitioners life could never be the same again. Liszt resolved to do for the piano what Paganini had done for the violin. He was now practising 8 hours a day. He also transcribed for the piano some of the *Caprices* that Paganini had composed as technical exercises for the violin and published his set of *Paganini Études*. [\*3]

About that time, another composer who became both friend and musical influence arrived in Paris. This was Frederic Chopin. Liszt fatefully introduced him to George Sand. Mendelssohn was in town on a short visit and we can only wish that we too could have been at that pavement café in Paris having coffee with Liszt, Chopin and Mendelssohn. Wagner had also recently been drawn to Paris to seek his fortune. He met Liszt, who by then was basking in the glory of being the idol of Paris, but he didn't take to Liszt at all. *How many things would and could Liszt do - he wrote - if people had not made him a famous man. He would and could be a free artist, a little god, instead of what he is now – the slave of a tasteless, virtuoso-worshipping public!* Many years later Wagner would be much more grateful to Franz Liszt, friend and father-in-law.

The year 1833 was important for several different reasons. Love was in the air and Franz was a witness at the marriage of Hector Berlioz with Harriet Smithson. An indication of Liszt's great contribution to the music of Berlioz is his incredible piano transcription of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. [\*4] Both Mendelssohn and Schumann used Liszt's piano reduction instead of the original orchestral score when publishing their appraisal of this ground-breaking work. From Berlioz, Liszt learned *diablerie*, the fascination of the devil in music. In a mutual interchange, Liszt introduced

Berlioz to the Hungarian National Anthem, the *Rákóczy March*. When Berlioz came to write his opera *The Damnation of Faust* he sent Faust to the Danube just so he could use this stirring tune. [\*5]

In this same year 1833, Liszt began his 11-year liaison with the Countess Marie d'Agoult. In June 1835 Franz and Marie eloped to Switzerland; in December 1835 their first child, daughter Blandine, was born in Geneva. In 1837 Cosima was born at Bellagio on Lake Como and in 1839 Daniel was born in Rome. Liszt gave a musical account of their Swiss touring in his three books of *Années de Pèlerinage* [\*6]. Their travels in Switzerland were a fun-filled holiday. The children were always left behind with nannies, George Sand and her friends joined them, and their antics were not always endearing to local hotel keepers. Liszt must have found some opportunities for piano practice, as he returned to Paris for a piano duel with Sigismond Thalberg – the occasion was described as the *simultaneous appearance of two talents whose rivalry ...is like the indecisive balance between Rome and Carthage: Two victors and no vanquished*.

But Liszt went on to eclipse them all. These were Liszt's years as travelling virtuoso. Europe experienced *Lisztomania* - rock-star like adoration, gloves left behind on the piano – accidentally-on-purpose for female fans to fight over... When Liszt left Berlin he led the procession out of the city in a coach drawn by six white horses, with thirty other coaches following. Prince Felix von Lichnovsky rode at his side as *aide-de-camp*. The University of Berlin suspended its lectures for the day. King Wilhelm IV and his Queen stood at their windows and waved him goodbye... *He left Berlin not like a king, but as a king*, we are told. Marie often accompanied him. Eventually they reached Venice which Franz loved and Marie hated. It was here that he learned of Danube floods and the plight of the Hungarian flood victims. Suddenly his Hungarian background took an irresistible hold on him. He knew his worth as a fund raiser: he raised most of the money for the Beethoven memorial in Bonn and he embarked on a series of flood relief concerts. One of these charity concerts took place in Vienna where he played several of his own arrangements of little known songs of the recently deceased Viennese composer, Franz Schubert, putting him on the musical map. [\*7]

A grateful Hungarian government presented him with the Hungarian Sword of Honour. To his embarrassment he had to respond in French – he never became really fluent in Hungarian. But his return to Hungary allowed him to renew his contact with the gypsies. Unlike the Hungarian Dances of Brahms which were based on Viennese 'pop tunes', Liszt's Hungarian music was the 'real thing'!

Resuming his travels through Europe, he visited Dresden where he met Wagner and saw a performance of *Rienzi*. About this time there was a brief affair with the notorious Lola Montez, she who was also involved with Ludwig I of Bavaria and later appeared in Australia on the goldfields of Ballarat. This led to the final break with Marie. Marie, who wrote under the pseudonym Daniel Stern, rewarded him with a tell-all-true-confession novel called *Nélida*, the anagram of her pen-name, Daniel.

His intensive touring comes to an end in Kiev when he meets his unlikely partner of the next 14 years, the enormously wealthy Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein. As a coda to what proved to be the end of Liszt's glittering years of performing, we should acknowledge his innovations that we now take for granted:

- He was the first artist to give a *Solo Recital*. Previously the evening had always been shared by a pianist with either a singer or another instrumentalist.
- Liszt invented the term *Recital*, which was considered strange at the time as no one was *Reciting* anything!
- He was the first to play a recital without a copy of the music – he always memorised everything.
- He was the first to set the piano at 90 degrees to the audience: with the lid open, the sound was improved, but we should remember that the handsome young man was not unaware of his attractive profile and the effect it had on his female admirers. It was not unknown for him

to have the piano turned for the second half of the programme so that his other side was seen by the audience.

His former mistress, Marie d'Agoult, was a celebrity even amongst the 'beautiful people of Paris'. His new mistress, Princess Carolyne was described by the English novelist George Eliot as *short of stature, plumpish, the face not pleasing and the profile harsh and barbarian; her teeth blackish, stained by too much tobacco...* she was a chain-smoker of cigars. Richard Wagner called Carolyne a *monstrum in excessum* of brain and heart, but added *...one can't be cross with her for long, only it needs Liszt's matchless temperament to stand such vivacity...I can't endure the everlasting racket.* At Carolyne's estates at Woronice in that winter love-in, she persuaded Liszt to end his touring career and concentrate on composition. Never again did he accept a fee for playing in public and never again did he charge any fee for the many lessons he continually gave to the end of his life.

WEIMAR: 1848-1861

Prior to this unlikely winter love-in he had been appointed *Grand Ducal Director of Music Extraordinaire* at Weimar. In 1848 Europe was in turmoil but Weimar, where he decided to settle permanently, was a haven. There he and Carolyne lived an ostentatiously simple life of piety and humility in the Villa Altenberg. They were both very happy except for one distressing problem – Franz and Carolyne were exceedingly devout Catholics and Carolyne was still married to Prince Eugene Sayn-Wittgenstein. As well as contributing significantly to whatever prose Liszt wrote, including his book on *Chopin*, she spent a great deal of time constantly and ferociously battling the Church to recognise her (Russian) divorce and grant permission for her to marry Liszt.

For his part, he embarked on the most important musical period of his life. As director of the Court Theatre he produced many modern works including *Tannhäuser*. He gave sanctuary to the fugitive Richard Wagner escaping the Dresden police. Wagner was clutching his just-completed *Lohengrin* score and left it with Liszt, who generously provided him with money and a false passport to escape to Switzerland. Much to Richard Wagner's annoyance, however, Liszt did not concentrate exclusively on *his* works. Twice Liszt organised a Berlioz week in Weimar, possibly at the instigation of the Princess, who tried to use Berlioz as the wedge between Liszt and Richard Wagner whom she couldn't stand. He also performed works of other contemporary composers, among them Robert Schumann, Ferdinand Hiller, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Anton Rubinstein and Giuseppe Verdi. However, a high point for Wagner, Liszt, and the world was Liszt's 1850 première production of *Lohengrin*. In the spirit of being entirely faithful to the score, he diverted some of the Weimar Theatre's scant cash resources to purchasing a Bass Clarinet, which we identify as being essential in Wagner. [\*8]

In the Wagner – Liszt chronicle, there now comes a role reversal. Liszt becomes the dynamic composer and Wagner a sometime Zürich orchestral conductor and writer of prose works –he was in fact exploring the *Nibelung* saga. Liszt's catalogue contained revised versions of his piano pieces *Harmonies Poétiques et religieuses*, several of the Symphonic Poems, the Dante Symphony, the Faust Symphony, the Piano Sonata in B minor which he is said to have played to Brahms. The story goes that Brahms fell asleep, but who knows ...

Avoiding the classical structures of the old masters, Liszt was striking out to create a new form by uniting literature and art with instrumental music; *Zukunftsmusik, the Music of the Future*. Typically, this term was used to describe the endeavours of Liszt's circle in Weimar, among them Joachim Raff, Hans von Bülow, Carl Tausig, Peter Cornelius, and others. They regarded themselves as *Music of the Futurists* and counted Richard Wagner among their number. But there they were somewhat off track, as, unlike theirs, Wagner's *Music of the Future* always contained a dramatic stage element; his, after all, was a *Gesamkunstwerk* – a total work of art.

The celebrated violinist, Josef Joachim, arrived in Weimar to become leader of the Weimar orchestra, only to resign two years later in protest against the way Liszt's music was heading. Early in his appointment, Joachim recognised and greatly disliked the *Music of the Future*. He threw in his lot completely with Brahms and Robert and Clara Schumann; they published a manifesto urging that

music should return to classical models. In a letter, with pre-echoes of the name-calling in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australian politics, Schumann referred to Liszt as *Judas Iscariot*. To the critic Richard Pohl, Schumann wrote: *What are Liszt's achievements - Where are they on display? Are they in his desk? Maybe he has to wait for the Future, as no-one can understand him right now!* Finally Joachim wrote somewhat more politely to Liszt: *I am completely out of sympathy with your music; it contradicts everything which from early youth I have taken as mental nourishment from the spirit of our great masters.*

Since Wagner's escape from Dresden in 1848 he and Liszt had kept in close touch through their voluminous correspondence. In July 1853 Liszt was able to visit Richard in Switzerland. In *Mein Leben* Richard wrote with pleasure of their reunion: *Now for the first time I enjoyed the delight of getting to know my friend as a fellow composer. In addition to many of his piano pieces we went through several symphonies with great ardour, especially his Faust Symphony. My delight at everything I heard from Liszt was deep and sincere – and extraordinarily stimulating... I even thought of beginning to compose again!* Richard had not written a note since August 1847. In September 1853 after Liszt's visit he was once again at work.

In Weimar Liszt had some productive years left, including enough time to begin a discreet affair with his student, Agnes Klindworth; she too left a collection of letters. But his popularity began to wane. The Grand Duke had died and his successor was more interested in drama than in music. Funds for music were cut back; suspicion increased about Liszt's support for the exiled Wagner, and questions arose about the direction being taken by Music of the Future. Always lurking was the Carolyne question and Living-in-Sin. Much to the relief of the good citizens, Carolyne left Weimar for Rome in 1860 to make personal appearances before dignitaries of the Church to try to secure the annulment of her marriage. Several months later it appears that she was successful. In 1861 Liszt resigned his post in Weimar and he too left for Rome. All was now in readiness to celebrate the marriage on 22 October 1861, Liszt's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

On the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup>, they attended to formalities at the church of San Carlo. The altar was beautifully decorated with flowers and candles ready for the ceremony next morning. Then they went home. But, late that night, just before midnight, came the Knock-on-the-Door. It was a messenger from the Vatican to inform Carolyne that Pope Pius IX had withdrawn his permission for their marriage. Carolyne and Franz then maintained separate establishments; they never again lived together and even after Carolyne became a widow, they apparently lost interest in marriage. Carolyne remained furious with the Church and consoled herself for the rest of her life with writing her 24 volumes on *The interior Causes of the External Weaknesses of the Roman Catholic Church* – closed all her doors and windows and smoked her cigars.

Liszt now lived quietly in Rome and composed some of his great religious works. Although earlier in life he had taken little interest in his three children, he was devastated by the recent deaths of two of them. His son Daniel, aged just 20, had two years previously died of tuberculosis at the Berlin home of Hans and Cosima von Bülow; now his elder daughter Blandine died of septicaemia while breast-feeding her infant son, named Daniel after her late brother. Blandine was 27 years old and happily married to Emile Ollivier, a future premier of France. Liszt composed a great piano work, a set of variations on a theme from the Bach cantata, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen – Weeping, Wailing, Mourning, Trembling*. [9] In his grief he sought refuge in the monastery of the Madonna del Rosario and it was there that he took minor Holy Orders and became an Abbé.

News reached Liszt in Rome in 1867 that his only remaining child, Cosima, was being unfaithful to her husband, Liszt's star pupil, Hans von Bülow. The 'other man' was his great friend and protégé, Richard Wagner, which resulted in two illegitimate children. Liszt went to Wagner's home, Tribschen, near Lucerne; we aren't privy to the conversation between Liszt and Wagner, but it is reported that, as well as having serious conversation, Liszt sight-read *Meistersinger*, Act II from Wagner's manuscript and Wagner sang all the roles. Cosima later moved to Tribschen, was divorced by Hans in 1870, and married Richard in the Protestant Church in Lucerne. Then, with mixed emotions, Liszt returned to

Munich, turned his thoughts away from *Die Meistersinger*, and made a magnificent transcription of *Isolde's Liebestod*. <sup>\*10</sup>

Shock from the Richard-Cosima-Hans events was to stir Liszt out of retirement. He now began what he called his *Vie Trifurquée* – his three-pronged life. This was an allusion to summer in Weimar, autumn in Rome, winter and spring in Budapest. En route he has yet another amorous adventure. Olga Janina, the Cossack Countess who was neither a Cossack nor a Countess, threatens to kill him in his apartment and then commit suicide. The affair blows over; she publishes her story as fiction and settles in Geneva as a piano teacher.

Liszt continued teaching and composing. Relationships with the Wagners had been smoothed over and he attended rehearsals and performances of Wagner's works. He continued to give master classes in Weimar where the next generation of pianists benefitted from his example and teaching with no fees at all. The Grand Old Man of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Music, he was sought out by many composers who've become household names – Smetana, Saint-Saëns, Albeniz, Fauré, Borodin, Grieg.

By 1872 he is again on visiting terms with Richard and Cosima. They visit him in Weimar and he returns the visit in Bayreuth. Liszt attends all rehearsals and performances, including the 1876 *Ring* première in the *Festspielhaus* where he meets Tchaikovsky. Throughout his last 10 years he is travelling, teaching and composing. His compositions now sound rather strange to his contemporaries. With the benefit of hindsight, we can hear that he is foreshadowing Impressionism, Atonality and Serialism.

#### LATER YEARS

In 1881, aged 69, he fell down a flight of stairs in Weimar. This was Liszt's decline into old age, but it didn't stop him. The next year found him enjoying a long stay in Venice where the Wagners had taken a year's lease on the Palazzo Vendramin. Liszt was assigned his own suite of rooms overlooking the Grand Canal. He became fascinated with the gondola traffic, particularly the Funeral Gondolas. From Richard's state of health it was unspoken but obvious that before long his was likely to be one of them. This moved Liszt to write two piano pieces now known as *La Lugubre Gondola 1&2*. He composed them at the piano in the room next to Richard's. Richard hated Liszt's later compositions, he called them *Liszt's budding insanity*, but he may well have been listening to his own funeral music.

<sup>\*11</sup>

Although it was becoming ever more difficult, Liszt resumed his *Vie trifurquée* and in 1883 after Richard's death, conducted the Wagner Memorial Concert in Weimar on Wagner's birthday and another concert in the next year on the first anniversary of his death. In 1886 Liszt began his own farewell concert tour through the cities of his triumphs. Probably the last great composer he met was Claude Debussy in Rome, who had won that year's French *Prix de Rome*. Liszt's last concert was in Luxembourg.

From there he hurried to Bayreuth where an overwrought Cosima, directing her second Festival, was trying to build an enduring enterprise on somewhat shaky foundations. The last problem she needed was a dying father on her doorstep, and there is certainly much room for criticism of Cosima's treatment of her father. Liszt suffered horribly but died quietly on the morning of 31 July 1886.

Although the music at his funeral mass is reported to have been 'very ordinary', it was accompanied by organist Anton Bruckner. Liszt is buried, and by now I think we may say **buried permanently**, in the Bayreuth cemetery. Soon after his funeral the squabbling began: Hungarians wanted his body in Hungary; Weimar's claim was that he'd spent 13 years in Weimar and he should be there with Goethe and Schiller; the Franciscans said he belonged to them; the Church wanted him moved to Rome. The Princess produced a letter from Liszt in which he had asked to be buried where he fell and that his body not be moved. And so it has happened, but not without strong intervention from Cosima, who well knew that by keeping Liszt's grave in Bayreuth, Wagner's own city, her father would go on forever, to quote an apt phrase, playing second fiddle to her husband.

Another controversy arose similar to the one over Liszt's burial took place about his will. He died in 1886 and the will was still not settled when Cosima died in 1930. He named the Princess as his chief beneficiary but she died eight months after Liszt, putting the final touches to her 24<sup>th</sup> volume of *The Interior Causes of the External Weaknesses of the Roman Catholic Church*. Liszt's three children have died, Carolyne has died; the courts decide that the beneficiary should be Carolyne's daughter, Marie. She was now *Princess Marie von Hohenlohe*, a member of the very family involved in preventing the marriage of Liszt and Carolyne.

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#### Music List

1	Diabelli Waltz
2	Liszt's Diabelli Variation
3	Paganini Caprice
4	March to Scaffold transcription
5	March from <i>Damnation of Faust</i>
6	Années de Pèlerinage: Pastorale
7	Erlkönig transcription
8	Lohengrin Prelude
9	Weinen, Klagen...
10	Liebestod transcription
11	La lugubre Gondola