

Franz Liszt *Symphonic Poems*

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Key Ideas and Historical Context

- With the symphonic poem, Franz Liszt invented a musical genre. It had strong roots in earlier 'programme music' such as [Ludwig van Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony](#) and [Hector Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique](#), and in Romantic overtures such as [Beethoven's Leonore III](#) and [Felix Mendelssohn's A Midsummer Night's Dream](#), as well as in Liszt's own piano music. Nonetheless, the poetic 'idea', for instance Victor Hugo's [Mazeppa](#), William Shakespeare's [Hamlet](#), or Friedrich Schiller's [Die Ideale](#), more strongly forms the narrative or 'programmatic' basis of the symphonic poem.



Die Hunnenschlacht, by Wilhelm von Kaulbach, which inspired Liszt's symphonic poem *Hunnenschlacht*. It is a depiction of an historical battle between the Romans and the Hun.

This idea need not be a poem or play; it could be a novel, a painting, or an event, but the importance of some inspiration beyond 'absolute' music is crucial.

- These works fed into nineteenth-century debates concerning 'programme music' and its validity, as contrasted with so-called 'absolute music' (sonatas, symphonies, string quartets, etc.), with no such 'poetic idea'.
- Liszt wrote the first twelve during the period 1847 to 1858, with occasional subsequent revision, and a solitary thirteenth, [Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe](#) ('From the Cradle to the Grave') was composed, aptly enough, not long before Liszt's death, in 1881 and 1882.
- Musical Romanticism's delight in the sublimity of the natural world—rivers, storms, forests, mountains—and its absorption in works of literature—poetry, drama, novels—took a further step in these works, utilising the full forces of the symphony orchestra, as well as some of the most advanced harmonic language of the mid-nineteenth century.
- Liszt's move towards orchestral writing (and conducting) and away from the itinerant career of a piano virtuoso (the most celebrated in the world) was made possible by his appointment as *Hofkapellmeister* (court conductor) to Charles Frederick, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach. Now Liszt had an orchestra at his disposal; he could try out his works, their highly original orchestration (sometimes at first assisted by Liszt's deputy, Joachim Raff), and make revisions as necessary.

Quotations, Legacy and Reception

- Franz Liszt: 'Music assimilates more and more the masterpieces of literature.' (On Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*.)
- Franz Liszt: 'New wine demands new bottles.' (I.e., new, Romantic ideas and musical language required new rather than Classical forms.)
- Hans von Bülow, a conductor who was in general a devotee of Liszt's music: 'Unperformable' (on Liszt's *Hamlet*)
- Carl Dahlhaus: 'Basically the "poetics" of the symphonic poem came about as a solution to three interrelated problems. First, Liszt attempted to adopt the classical ideal of the symphony without yielding to a derivative dependence on his traditional formal scheme. Second, he wished to elevate program[me] music ... from a base, "picturesque" genre to poetic and philosophical sublimity. And finally, he was obsessed by the thought that it had to be possible to unite the expressive gesture of his earlier piano pieces... with the [symphonic] tradition of thematic and motivic manipulation.'
- Humphrey Searle: 'Liszt was truly inspired when he wrote the Faust Symphony; it expresses every variety of mood with the utmost clarity and dramatic emphasis, yet one never feels that the music is forced or artificial. It simply poured out of him naturally; though the symphony lasts over an hour one does not get the impression that it is overlong for what it has to say, for it is all deeply and genuinely felt. Many thank, and I would agree, that in this work Liszt produced his masterpiece.'
- Alan Walker: 'Posterity may have overestimated the importance of extra-musical thought in Liszt's symphonic poems. We would not be without his prefaces, of course, nor any other comments that he made about the origins of his music; but we should not follow them slavishly, for the simple reason that the symphonic poems do not follow them slavishly either. Perhaps the most enlightened gesture that posterity could now make towards Liszt is to attend to his orchestral works as it attends to those of Beethoven or Brahms. In the final analysis, Liszt's "programme music" must stand or fall as music.'

Further Reading

Cormac, Joanne, *Liszt and the Symphonic Poem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Dahlhaus, Carl, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, tr. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 236-44

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Shulstad, Reeves, 'Liszt's Symphonic Poems and Symphonies', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liszt*, ed. Kenneth Hamilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 206-22

Walker, Alan, *Franz Liszt: Vol. 2, 'The Weimar Years: 1814-1861'* (London: Faber, 1989), 300-337

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