

Through Triumph and Disaster (1881-86)

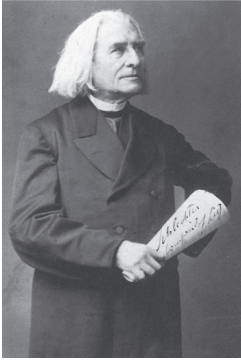
A Fall in Weimar and an Unnecessary Accusation

Liszt appeared to be in relatively good physical health as he entered his seventieth year. For many years he had maintained rather well the slender body of his youth. He had no problems with mobility, and his eyesight and hearing were good. Indeed, observers had commented on how his sight-reading from musical scores was exceptional. However, his face had changed. The American sculptor Moses Ezekiel, who had acquired a studio in Rome and produced a bust of Liszt at the end of 1880, provides evidence of this in his memoirs. He had last met Liszt ten years earlier in Weimar and been impressed then by both Liszt's height and slim build. Now he was struck by how his face appeared heavy and deeply lined, although at the same time 'jovial and lion-like'. He reproduced these features in the bust he sculpted of Liszt.¹

More significantly, Liszt was expressing feelings of extreme fatigue on a regular basis. This was understandable in terms of the huge distances he regularly travelled by train and coach, which were quite exceptional for the time and even more so for a person of Liszt's age. Yet, he continued with this exhausting schedule of activity. As Walker has calculated, the distances he covered in the spring and early summer of 1881 were exceptional, even by Liszt's recent standards.² In addition to his regular movement between Rome, Budapest and Weimar, he travelled an additional two thousand miles in just a few weeks between

1. Walker, *The Final Years*, p. 396.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 401.



Franz Liszt.
Photograph by
H. von Langsdorff,
Freiburg 1881. With a
dedication in Liszt's
hand on the rolled-up
sheet of music. 'Poor
composer. F. Liszt.'

April and May, mainly to attend concerts of his own music, in Berlin, Freiburg, Karlsruhe, Baden-Baden, Antwerp and Brussels.

All these concerts seem to have been successful. As Liszt wrote to Carolyne from Antwerp, he sensed that he was at last being recognised as a composer. He contrasted the reception of the *Gran Mass* with his disastrous experience with the same work in Paris in 1866:

Rarely have I encountered such lively and general goodwill as here in Antwerp. It takes my work more seriously and is not limited to my *liebenswürdige Persönlichkeit* ['amiable personality'], esteemed in several countries – nor to my celebrity as a pianist, which I have not yet had occasion to display here. The *Gran Mass* was performed and heard with enthusiasm yesterday – I dare use this word, which is the appropriate one!

In Paris, in '66, this same work failed – it was brilliantly revived in Vienna last year, and even more brilliantly here in Antwerp, before an audience of at least 3,000. I am sending you the programme of the Liszt Festival of Antwerp, and will shortly write some details.

In Brussels tomorrow, for another big Liszt concert, will be your most humble old Sclavissimo. (Antwerp, 27 May 1881)

From 9 to 12 June he attended the annual German music festival which in 1881 was held in Magdeburg. There, he met again the Russian composer Alexander Borodin who was grateful for Liszt's advocacy of the inclusion of his own work in the previous year's festival. In appreciation for Liszt's help, he had dedicated to him his own 'orchestral picture', *In Central Asia*, which has become one of the most popular examples of the symphonic poem genre which Liszt had originated.

However, the many journeys may have weakened Liszt's general health and mobility and could help to explain a serious accident he incurred a few weeks later. On 2 July he fell down the steps of the Hofgärtnerei, his residence in Weimar, while his granddaughter Daniela von Bülow and her father Hans were visiting him. Although Liszt did not break any bones, and he himself minimised the importance of his fall in communications

with both Olga and Carolyne, it was to have major consequences. His mobility was permanently impaired and he was never able to return to the Villa d'Este and his beloved cypresses because of the difficult terrain and problems of access to the building. Liszt remained in bed for nearly two months and he was forced to limit his activities, although he tried to continue composing and giving music lessons. Apart from regular letters to Carolyne and brief notes to Olga (who, of course, would have been a regular visitor), his only surviving other correspondence appears to have been short letters of condolence to Géza Zichy (on the death of a brother) and to Émile Ollivier (on the death of a son).

Liszt continued to work at his compositions. A main concern as always was his need to respond to so much correspondence, as he wrote to Carolyne:

You know my aversion to advice and condolences about my health. These last two weeks I have been overwhelmed with both – I am touched by them, but very tired. Fifty or more letters and telegrams are on my table. How to cope with the replies! I should find it more expedient to quit this earthly existence! All the same, I shall never be guilty of ingratitude. And so I shall remain as I am, with all the defects of my nature – which, I venture to say, is not an ungrateful one. (Weimar, 4 August 1881)

Liszt also told her that he was putting the finishing touches to his *Cantico del sol di San Francesco d'Assisi*, which reflected his own devotion to the saint, 'God's great madman':

I have just done some more work on 'Messer il frate sol, suor luna, suor acqua, frate vento e frate fuoco'.³ How happy the world would be if we were living in it as in a monastery, in loving communion with St Francis – under the sweet and gentle yoke of Our Lord Jesus Christ!

However, he did not post this letter to Carolyne until eight days later when he added a postscript detailing all the tasks that faced him: music to dispatch, pupils to teach, other visitors, and many letters to send off. He admitted that he was in a difficult situation and lacked the 'aptitude for living like this'. It appears that it was during this month that Liszt

3. 'Sir Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Sister Water, Brother Wind and Brother Fire.'

composed the short piano piece, *Nuages gris* ('Grey Clouds'), since the manuscript has the date 24 August 1881, but he seems to have told no one about it. Sinister and full of foreboding, it may reflect something of his mental state at the time, although it is also much more than this. Liszt, as he often did at difficult moments of his life, was experimenting with new forms of music. Although put aside as an unpleasant oddity in Liszt's lifetime, it has come to be recognised as the 'gateway to modern music',⁴ as a result of its keyless character and impressionistic use of augmented triads.

A month later he wrote to tell Marie that his 'silly accident was still dragging along'. For an older person a major fall can herald the beginning of physical decline, and this seems to have been the case with Liszt. Alan Walker has examined⁵ the reports of the doctors involved, including a surgeon in Halle consulted by his local physician. These show that Liszt suffered two fractured ribs, possible bruising of the lungs and pleurisy. However, the investigations also revealed that, in addition, he was suffering from oedema (or dropsy)⁶ and associated heart disease, as well as a cataract of the left eye.

Nevertheless, as Liszt prepared to make his long-delayed trip to Bayreuth, his correspondence with Carolyne shows that he was in a creative and optimistic mood:

This last fortnight I have been working enthusiastically at my *Cantico di S. Francesco*. Such as it now finally is, improved, expanded, ornamented, harmonized, and finished in full score, I consider it one of my best works. I shall have it performed again at some *Musikfest* next year – despite the antipathy of the critics, and of the public influences by them, to religious works outside the conventional forms. I am going to write the arrangement for piano and organ of the new definite version of the *Cantico di San Francesco* – and at Bayreuth shall finish scoring the symphonic poem *From the Cradle to the Coffin*. ... Just imagine, Monseigneur, to whom I played my Second Mephisto Waltz, sketched at the Villa d'Este and finished here, finds it a masterpiece, filled with spirit, originality and youthful vigour! I am dedicating it to my friend Saint-Saëns. ...

4. Walker, *The Final Years*, p. 440.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 403-4.

6. Swelling of the ankles, feet and legs.