
TOCCATA
CLASSICS
LISZT
The Complete
Symphonic Poems
transcribed for solo piano
by August Stradal
Volume Two:
Orpheus
Tasso, Lamento e Trionfo
Hungaria
Hamlet
Risto-Matti Marin, piano
INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

# LISZT SYMPHONIC POEMS TRANSCRIBED BY AUGUST STRADAL, VOLUME TWO

by Malcolm MacDonald

The pianist, composer and writer August Stradal was born on 17 May 1860 in Teplice, Bohemia. His father was a lawyer and a member of the town council. Stradal attended the grammar school in Litoměřice and then studied at the Vienna Conservatory, where his teachers were Anton Door, Theodor Leschetisky, Gustav Nottebohm and Anton Bruckner. In September 1884 he went to Weimar to become a disciple of Franz Liszt, whom he also accompanied to Budapest and Bayreuth in 1885 and 1886. After Liszt's death Stradal returned to Teplice, where he was active as a music teacher until 1893, when he joined the staff of the Horak School of Piano Studies (later the Horak Konservatorium) in Vienna. He also toured extensively.

In later life he wrote copiously about both Bruckner and Liszt, for whom he is an important biographical source, and published a memoir of the latter (*Erinnerungen an Franz Liszt*, 1920) as well as an autobiography. He received the Czechoslovak State Music Award in 1928. Stradal died on 13 March 1930 at Krasna Lipa, north of Prague.

Stradal was considered a leading interpreter of Liszt's music and made many transcriptions – some sources reckon over 250 – of orchestral and chamber works for the piano, in repertoire stretching from the Baroque era to the late nineteenth century. Notable among these are his transcriptions of Bruckner's First, Second, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Symphonies and his String Quintet (he also made a two-piano version of Mahler's Fifth Symphony). Stradal also arranged a huge number of Bach's works, many excerpts from Wagner's operas[1] and most of Liszt's orchestral works, including the *Faust* and *Dante* Symphonies and the thirteen symphonic poems, his versions of which were published about the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

[1] The first of a scheduled three volumes of Stradal's Wagner transcriptions has been recorded by Juan Guillermo Vizcarra on Toccata Classics TOCC 0151.

It is a feature of Liszt's essential genius that he inhabits in his music a multitude of *personae* which range from Mephistopheles to St Francis of Assisi, as in his life he ranged from Byronic wanderer to the apparently pious and orthodox man of the cloth who wrote the late choral works. The forms cultivated by the great Classical composers gave Liszt scant precedent for this free play of imaginative affinity. His new forms – notably the thirteen symphonic poems – sprang from his desire for a more immediately dramatic conflict and interconnection of ideas, at the surface, than allowed by the fundamentally architectural, tonal contrasts of classical sonata-structures. He found instead in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* the principle of the *idée fixe*, the symbolic idea recurring in different guises in different movements, which led him (and Wagner after him) to develop leitmotivic technique. In Schubert's 'Wanderer' Fantasy (which he orchestrated) he discovered the concept of transformation applied to the rhythmic and expressive characters of entire sections. From these hints he evolved his own structural principles of thematic metamorphosis usually combined with a programmatic element derived from literature or painting.

Liszt's musical forms did not ape those of his extra-musical models: rather, the model provided him with what he called psychological motives which he then worked out in his own terms. These motives are seen at work in the symphonic poems, and especially in his supreme achievements in of orchestral music, the *Faust* and *Dante* symphonies.

Twelve of the symphonic poems were completed in the decade 1848–58, when Liszt was living in Weimar with the honorary position of court Kapellmeister,[2] and some of them have remained among his most famous and most characteristic works. All twelve were dedicated to the Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein. Taken together they give a graphic impression of the sheer versatility and many-sidedness of Liszt's personality, as well as his astonishing creative range.

Liszt himself routinely made four-hand transcriptions of his symphonic poems, either for two pianos or piano duet, but he tended not to make solo-piano versions, adding to the interest and value of Stradal's efforts. Even so, Stradal's solo-piano versions of the Liszt symphonic poems were not the first of their kind, for eleven of the Weimar twelve had previously been arranged by Carl Tausig (1841–71), sometimes referred to as the greatest of Liszt's pupils. A child prodigy, Tausig was born in Bohemia and in his short life he showed a remarkable talent for transcription. His versions of the Liszt symphonic poems were made by 1858, when he was seventeen years old. These

[2] The thirteenth and last, *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe*, is a much later work dating from 1881–82.

remained unpolished drafts, unpublished in his lifetime, and some of them have been lost, though others have been performed and recorded with success in recent years. Stradal's versions were, by contrast, both polished and published. They have not enjoyed wide currency due to their truly fearsome difficulty, but they are fascinating 'readings for the keyboard' of some of Liszt's boldest orchestral inventions.

In his transcriptions Stradal scrupulously indicates the instruments playing in the full score at any given time, and devises many ingenious solutions to representing their sound in terms of the keyboard. He also, in some passages, will give a simpler *ossia* alternative. But there is no doubt that he intended his versions only for players of transcendental technique, and some passages – for example, his liking for very rapid parallel octaves, rather than the broken octaves that less demanding transcribers might have opted for – seem virtually unplayable. On the present disc, in a few spots in each of these transcriptions, Risto-Matti Marin has seen fit to make changes in the texts where, as he has written, 'sometimes Stradal seems to use a little bit monotonous textures and sometimes his thinking of human physical capabilities is what I would call "optimistic" – meaning some quite impossible things'.[3] Nevertheless Stradal's versions do transform these revolutionary orchestral compositions into viable and effective piano works, faithfully preserving their masterly musical substance.

Like many composers of his era, Franz Liszt was profoundly impressed by the poetry and plays of Goethe, and they formed the inspiration – sometimes openly, sometimes less so – for many of his most important works: for example, the symphonic poem he entitled ***Tasso, Lamento e Trionfo*** (G96) [2]. It was completed in 1849, though Liszt had already been sketching it for two or three years, as *Ouvertüre de Tasso von Goethe* and was first performed in Weimar on 28 August of that year to mark the centenary of Goethe's birth at a performance of his play *Torquato Tasso*. Goethe's drama about the celebrated sixteenth-century poet is principally focussed on his position as a court poet within the dangerous politics of the d'Este family's court in Ferrara. Liszt found himself more in tune with Tasso's inner conflicts: for seven years the poet was imprisoned in an asylum, where he wrote the epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Eventually Tasso's suffering had a triumphant outcome when he was brought to the Capitol in Rome and symbolically crowned. Liszt was also inspired by Lord Byron's 'Lament of Tasso', about the poet's imprisonment.

[3] E-mail to Martin Anderson, dated 2 December 2007.

The slow, lamenting first part of the work is followed by the faster triumph section, ending with his death in Rome and his immortal posthumous fame. Notwithstanding this two-part division, the entire work is cast as variations on a single theme, a folk hymn that Liszt had heard sung by a gondolier in Venice in the 1830s; he had originally intended to incorporate variations on this melody into his piano cycle *Années de pèlerinage* but decided they were more appropriate to a symphonic poem. The overall tonal plan of the work is a move from the C minor of the first part to the victorious C major of the second. At this stage in his career he was still uncertain of his powers of orchestration, and the first ('*Ouvertüre*') version of *Tasso* was partly orchestrated for him by his secretary and amanuensis August Conradi. A second version, prepared in 1850–51, was orchestrated by Joachim Raff (as Symphonic Poem No. 2), and it was only in 1854 that Liszt made the third and final version, wholly orchestrated by himself, in which he added the central *Allegretto mosso con grazia* section depicting Tasso at the Ferrarese court. Finally in 1864 he composed an epilogue, 'Le triomphe funèbre du Tasso', which is generally performed – when it is performed at all – as the second of his *Odes funèbres* for voices and orchestra; though theoretically it could function as an extended conclusion to the symphonic poem, it is almost never heard in this role and it does not appear in Stradal's version.

After arriving at the 1854 version Liszt subsequently arranged *Tasso* for two pianos (c.1854–56) and for piano duet (1858), the year in which Tausig made his solo transcription. Stradal's version, like most of his transcriptions of the symphonic poems, dates from the late 1890s. As mentioned above, he is careful throughout to indicate Liszt's orchestration to give the player an idea of the sonorities aimed at: his approach is to achieve pianistic recreations of orchestral sonority, in the tradition of Alkan, rather than to re-cast them as 'pure' piano music. Stradal's occasional interpretative footnotes tend to reference what conductors have done with the music – mostly misguidedly, in his opinion; clearly he imagines the pianist in that role, controlling the piano as the conductor controls an orchestra. For example, in his note on the *Allegretto mosso* section, he protests that conductors have taken Liszt's qualifying expression-mark *quasi Menuetto nobile* as an excuse to treat the music merely as a dance, whereas Liszt had no intention of writing a minuet as such, but rather 'a calm movement in 3-4 time to be played without excessive rubato. This movement has nothing to do with a Minuet; it shows us Tasso as poet'. Likewise at the start of the 'Trionfo' section Stradal stresses that the music should always be played *Maestoso*, not – as too many conductors have done – too fast and as an excuse for mere bravura. Even in the *ffff* culmination of

the coda he stresses the importance of interpreting the music with 'proud calm'.

***Orpheus*** (G98) [1], which Liszt numbered as Symphonic Poem No. 4, was composed in 1853–54, originally as the prelude to a production of Gluck's *Orfeo* which Liszt conducted in Weimar. In a remarkably impassioned preface to the score Liszt recounted how had been enormously impressed by an Etruscan vase which he had seen at the Louvre,

> which represents the first poet-musician, clothed in a starry robe, his head bound with the mystical royal fillet, his lips open for the attendance of divine words and songs and his lyre resounding under the touch of his long and graceful fingers. With all the force of reality I fancied that I saw the wild beasts of the field standing around him and listening enraptured to the brutal instincts of man hushed and vanquished; stones becoming soft; hearts, perhaps still harder, watered with burning and unwilling tears: […] laughter and pleasure respectfully yielding themselves before these accents which reveal to Humanity the beneficent power of Art, its glorious light and civilizing harmony.

Liszt's preface continues in this ecstatic vein as he likens Orpheus' weeping for the loss of Eurydice to humanity's grief at the effects of its own 'ferocity, brutality and sensuality', and he concludes with a fervent prayer that humankind should 'never see a return to those times of barbarism'. Some knowledge of this preface (which Stradal reproduces at the start of his transcription) helps one understand Liszt's intentions in this serene and noble work, which is quite without dramatic interruptions: unlike any of the other symphonic poems, it eschews conflict in favour of a calm stream of invention.

As orchestrated by Liszt, the tones of the harp (Liszt uses two) mimic Orpheus' lute. The songful main theme, on horns and cellos, is eventually taken up by full orchestra; there is a more melancholy contrasting idea, and a radiant coda with a magical chordal sequence on strings, answered by woodwind. In this, the shortest of the symphonic poems and the most unanimous in mood, Stradal is always resourceful in finding pianistic equivalents for the prevalent harp figurations, and a model of discretion in discovering ways to spread the chordal writing across the keyboard.

In contrast to this superbly unified demonstration of Liszt's art, ***Hungaria*** (G103) [3], the ninth of the twelve Weimar symphonic poems, is one of the most discursive and episodic.[4] It dates from 1854 and, unlike most of the others, it has no specific poetic basis or programme but is a generalised

[4] Even Stradal sanctions, if absolutely necessary, a substantial cut in the central development section of the work.

evocation of the composer's native land, especially in the happier times before Hungary's defeat in its 1848 war for independence. It takes its place, therefore, along with Liszt's other patriotic works, including the *Hungarian Fantasy* for piano and orchestra, the oratorio *Saint Elisabeth* and the symphonic poems *Héroïde funèbre*[5] and *Hunnenschlacht*, not to mention *Funèrailles* and the many *Hungarian Rhapsodies* which he developed from his early collections of *Magyar Dallók* and *Magyar Rapszódiak* for piano.

Liszt provided no preface to *Hungaria*, but Stradal remedied the deficiency by including his own lengthy one to his piano transcription: it is dated 'Vienna, August 1903' although he talks in it of Liszt having been dead for thirteen years, which suggests it was largely written around the time of his work on the transcription in 1899. Stradal's preface is a polemical piece in support of Liszt's powers as a composer and of this work in particular, bewailing its neglect by conductors. He suggests that Liszt should be seen as a counterpart to Berlioz: the latter as a great romantic pessimist, Liszt by contrast as a mighty optimist, which is reflected in the emotional progression of *Hungaria* from sorrow to triumph. He also links *Hungaria* with the poet Mihály Vörösmarty's ode of 1840, *Liszt Ferenchez* ('To Ferenc Liszt'), which calls upon the composer – 'Renowned musician, freeman of the world, / And yet our kinsman everywhere you go' – to make a music that will awaken in the present a love of the Fatherland equal to that of contemporary Hungarians' great ancestors:

> Great Universal Master, make for us
> another song about days gone by, […]
> Sing out a song so in their deepest graves
> our ancestors are compelled to stir,
> so each immortal soul awaking proves
> new life to descendants, made aware
> of blessings in their Magyar fatherland.[6]

For Stradal, *Hungaria* is Liszt's specific answer to this appeal.[7]

[5] Recorded on Volume One of this series, TOCC 0035.

[6] Translation by Alan Dixon from http://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/V%C3%B6r%C3%B6smarty_Mih%C3%A1ly/Liszt_Ferenchez/en/2130-To_Ferencz_Liszt.

[7] Liszt also composed a musical tribute to Vörösmarty as the third of his *Hungarian Historical Portraits* for solo piano (g205).

In fact the main themes of the symphonic poem originated precisely in 1840, the year of Vörösmarty's poem, in Liszt's piano work *Heroic March in the Hungarian Style*. It opens *Largo con duolo* with a motif which Stradal says brings the 'lonely, sad, immense Puszta' before our eyes. Almost at once the theme of the March appears, which Stradal associates with knightly riders galloping over the Puszta.[8] It is interrupted by a cadenza-like passage (given by Liszt in the original to solo violin) but dominates the first part of the symphonic poem. As the work unfolds, Stradal points out a 'storm over the Puszta', a burial song for fallen heroes, and a contrasting *Allegro trionfante* leading to a wild Czardás and a concluding Victory Hymn. Throughout, Stradal counsels the pianist against adopting too-fast tempi in this work, even in such a section as the *Presto giocoso* of the Czardás.

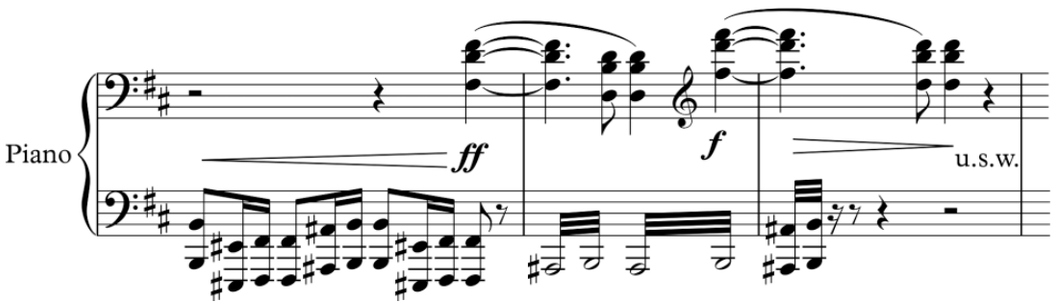
Chronologically the twelfth and last of the Weimar symphonic poems to be composed, in 1858, and given its first public performance only in 1876, ***Hamlet*** (G109) [4], has remained one of the least known of the series. Yet it must be considered one of the finest examples of musical character-study from the Romantic era. It originated in a project to compose an overture to Shakespeare's tragedy, intended for a production in Weimar in 1856, though it took Liszt two years to develop his ideas into a symphonic poem. In the tradition of Beethoven's *Egmont* and *Coriolan*, as of his own *Faust Symphony*, Liszt preoccupied himself not so much with the incidents of the play as with a character-portrait of Hamlet himself, swinging between the extremes of irresolution and existential doubt on one side, and decisive and princely on the other. Liszt's original sketch did not include the 'feminine element' of Ophelia, but he later worked in two very short gentler interludes which he referred to as 'shadow portraits' (*Schattenbilder*) to the principal *Allegro* in order to represent her and import some much-needed contrast.

Stradal's piano transcription was published in 1905, and as in *Hungaria* he was moved to write a short preface in which he bewailed the neglect that had befallen *Hamlet*, which he regarded as one of Liszt's greatest achievements:

> Just as Liszt in his Faust Symphony completely felt Goethe as a unique tone-poet and transposed his gigantic work into imperishable tones, even so he has here been deeply imbued with Shakespeare's spirit and upon 'Hamlet' raised an everlasting monument. One can truly say that Liszt here, in the gloomy tones of sorrow and desperation, in a similar manner to his work 'Der

[8] '*einsame, traürige, unermessliche Puszta*' – Puszta being the Hungarian term for the treeless grasslands of the country's great central plains. The word is formed from an adjective meaning 'bare, empty, bereft'.

nachtliche Züg nach Lenaus "Faust"',[9] has created a tone-painting of his very own, of a kind that we cannot find anywhere else in the history of music. How like a beautiful vision appears the shadow-picture of Ophelia, which sounds like a shaft of sunlight amid the murky night of sorrow and desperation. And how spine-chillingly does the end die away:




It is as if we hear a wild outcry, by which the tragedy of the eternal problem of wretched humanity 'To be or not to be, that is the question' is dissolved in the sombre, negative reply of Death: 'Not to be'.

One needs add little to Stradal's encomium. The brooding opening, *Sehr langsam und Düster*, is already haunted by threatening drum-rolls. Along with a hint of funeral-march, the clock of Elsinore is heard striking. Hamlet himself is then portrayed in two related *Allegro* themes, the first marked *appassionato ed agitato assai* and the second, taking up the dotted-rhythm hints of the introduction, more martial and decisive and is dramatically developed until the appearance of the first Ophelia interlude, *dolce ed espressivo*. This fleeting vision of beauty is rudely thrust aside by a laconic recurrence of Hamlet's themes, here marked *ironico* (can one hear the line 'Get thee to a nunnery!'?). Her second interlude is a pale shadow of the first that seems to hint tangentially at her madness and death.

The Hamlet music breaks out furiously anew and drives to a raging climax only to splinter and break up, as if destroyed from within by its very intensity. In the remarkable final section, the *Sehr langsam und Düster* introduction is recalled, and Liszt reviews his *Allegro* themes in slow motion as the subjects of a sombre funeral march, its end the despairing outcry that Stradal mentions in his preface.



[9] Stradal refers here to the rarely-performed first panel of Liszt's orchestral diptych *Zwei Eipsoden aus Lenau's Faust*, whose second part is the famous *Mephisto-Waltz No. 1*.

*Malcolm MacDonald is the author of* The Symphonies of Havergal Brian *(three vols., Kahn & Averill, London, 1974, 1978 and 1983) and the editor of the first two volumes of* Havergal Brian on Music *(Toccata Press, London, 1985 and 2009); further volumes are in preparation. His other writings include books on Brahms, Foulds, Schoenberg, Ronald Stevenson and Edgard Varèse.*

Risto-Matti Marin (born in Kuopio in 1976) graduated with a doctorate in music from the Sibelius Academy in Finland in 2010, with the piano transcription as his particular focus. He had already obtained a master's degree in performance from the Academy in 2004, as a student of Erik T. Tawaststjerna and Teppo Koivisto. Winner of the first prizes in the Kuopio and Helmi Vesa Piano Competitions in 1996 and 1999, Risto-Matti Marin was awarded the third prize in the international Franz Liszt Piano Competition in Weimar in 2003. He has appeared as soloist with the Weimar Staatskapelle, the European Union Chamber Orchestra, the Kuopio Symphony Orchestra, the Sinfonia Finlandia Jyväskylä and other orchestras and at the Mänttä Music Festival, Musica Nova Helsinki, 'Time of Music' in Viitasaari, the Tampere Biennale and other festivals. His solo CDs, with programmes which range from Baroque and Romantic music to contemporary compositions, have received high acclaim both in Finland and abroad. Risto-Matti Marin also appears regularly in a duo with saxophonist Olli-Pekka Tuomisalo. He has received major support for his artistic and doctoral studies from the Cultural Fund of North Savo, the Pro Musica Foundation and the Alfred Kordelin Foundation. In 2011 he was given a three-year artist grant by the Finnish Cultural Foundation.

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Producer: Risto-Matti Marin
Piano technicians: Matti Kyllönen (*Hamlet*) and Vesa Solje

Booklet text: Malcolm MacDonald
Design and lay-out: Paul Brooks, Design & Print, Oxford

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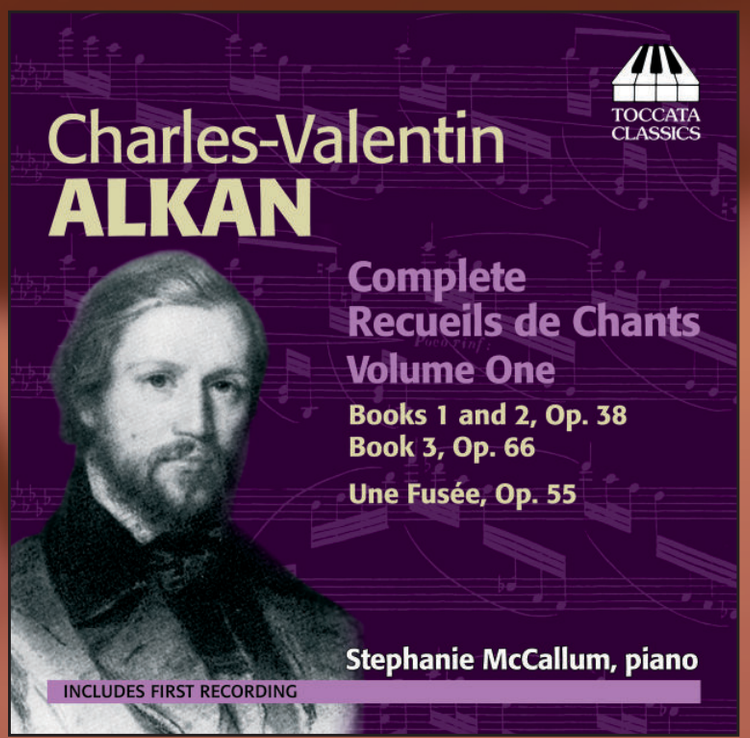


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Although Liszt's thirteen symphonic poems exist in two-piano transcriptions prepared by the composer himself, it was his Czech student August Stradal (1860–1930) who was to transcribe them for solo piano – versions which demand almost superhuman virtuosity. As Malcolm MacDonald writes in his booklet essay, Stradal's versions 'transform these revolutionary orchestral compositions into viable and effective piano works, faithfully preserving their masterly musical substance'. A *Fanfare* review of Vol. 1 in this series had high praise for Risto-Matti Marin's pianism: 'One marvels at the stamina that can keep such a plethora of detail in place with such relentless élan; at his narrative shaping, which can turn up an already withering heat, so to speak, at climactic moments; at his overarching persuasiveness'.

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# LISZT Symphonic Poems, transcr. Stradal, Volume Two

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | *Orpheus*: Symphonic Poem No. 4 (1853–54)* | 12:36 |
| 2 | *Tasso, Lamento e Trionfo*: Symphonic Poem No. 2 (1854)* | 21:00 |
| 3 | *Hungaria*: Symphonic Poem No. 9 (1854)* | 21:17 |
| 4 | *Hamlet*: Symphonic Poem No. 10 (1858) | 16:56 |

**Risto-Matti Marin, piano**

*FIRST RECORDINGS TT 71:51

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