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COMPLETE
PIANO MUSIC



VOLUME 70

FRANZ LISZT

Marches

Christopher Williams, Piano



Franz Liszt (1811–1886)

Marches

To speak of Franz Liszt is to enter a world in which categories collapse. Virtuoso, visionary, reformer, celebrity, mystic – none of these labels is sufficient, and yet each illuminates a facet of a musician whose creative presence reshaped 19th-century musical life. He inhabited his age with a rare duality: outwardly the most electrifying pianist Europe had ever known, inwardly a thinker preoccupied with the ethical, spiritual and imaginative potential of art. That tension – between public spectacle and private enquiry – lies at the heart of an *œuvre* whose range and unpredictability remain without parallel.

Liszt's early fame rested on a pianistic style that expanded the technical and expressive boundaries of the instrument. His performances were not merely demonstrations of dexterity but events that altered the nature of concert listening itself, whether in orchestral appearances or in the solo recital format he effectively established. However, virtuosity was never an end in itself. From the 1830s onward, Liszt's compositions increasingly acknowledged poetic, literary and philosophical impulses, often signalled through titles, epigraphs or extra-musical associations. This stimulus would later crystallise in his codification of the symphonic poem, but it was equally present in his keyboard music, where narrative, argument and symbolism frequently replace abstract formal logic.

A central expression of this aesthetic is Liszt's lifelong engagement with the march – a genre that might seem, on the surface, to withstand the kind of reflective complexity he prized. The march offered something irresistible: a form already laden with public meaning, ripe for reinterpretation. In his hands, its regulated tread becomes a medium for ambiguity, its grand gestures inflected with harmonic adventurousness, its civic pronouncements quietly complicated by covert sensibility. The same impulse that drove him to revisit and rework earlier compositions in the light of new understanding shaped his relationship to the genre as a whole: returning to it across decades, he treated it not as a fixed form but as an evolving channel for dramatic, national and personal expression.

Goethe-Festmarsch, S521 (second version) is a substantial commemorative work in which Liszt's homage to the presiding genius of Weimar's intellectual life finds its most expansive expression. The broad declamatory writing projects dignity rather than militarism, and Liszt's chromatic discourse lends the piece a symphonic depth that raises it well above the level of occasional music.

Marche funèbre, S226a (1827), composed at Boulogne in August 1827, two days after the death of his father Adam (Liszt was 15 years old), inhabits a tradition shaped by Beethoven and intensified by Chopin, yet its character is distinctly Liszt's own. Rather than sustaining the rigid processional weight of its antecedents, the music allows shadowed textures and moments of harmonic unease to interrupt the tread, as though grief itself keeps breaking through the ceremonial frame. For a teenager, the result is a remarkably inward piece, rendered with an expressive restraint that anticipates the more deliberate austerity of Liszt's later style.

The rousing *Ungarischer Sturmmarsch*, S524 (1876) follows – a new piano version derived from Liszt's orchestral reworking (S119) of 1875. Though its origins lie in the earlier *Seconde marche hongroise*, S232 of 1844, the two are not simply early and late versions of the same piece but represent fundamentally different engagements with the same Hungarian storm. The 1876 reworking brings a more cohesive musical language and the weight of Liszt's mature idiom to material that had first taken shape over three decades earlier. Syncopated rhythms, sharp accents and rhapsodic contrasts surge forward with restless energy.

Marche hongroise, S233b (1844) is a brief but pointed fragment, its intense energy and bold sonorous profile suggesting, in compressed form, what the larger Hungarian marches pursue at greater length. The *verbunkos* syntax (the Hungarian recruiting dance with its characteristic dotted rhythms and fierce accents) is present throughout, and the piece functions as a kind of distilled essence of Liszt's Hungarian march writing. *Ungarischer Geschwindmarsch*, S233 (1870–71) follows in the same vein, exemplifying the laconic directness of Liszt's final approach: concise, rhythmically driven and tonally heroic, its propulsion suggesting dance as much as procession, gesture and effect pared to essentials.

Dedicated to King Consort Ferdinand II of Portugal, the *Heroischer Marsch im ungarischen Styl*, S231 (1840) occupies a more significant position in Liszt's output than its origins might suggest. Broad thematic material and emphatic rhythms evoke the spirit of daring. Underlying progressions introduce ambiguities that refuse any reading of the work as simple triumphalism. That its thematic substance later provided the foundation for the symphonic poem *Hungaria* (1854) is itself revealing. What began as a dedicatory gesture evolved into an instrument of national mythology. When Liszt conducted *Hungaria* in Budapest in 1856, he wrote afterwards that the audience's response had moved him profoundly – a measure of how deeply this material had come to carry the weight of a collective identity.

Vom Fels zum Meer, S229 (1853–56) – subtitled *Deutscher Siegesmarsch* (‘German Victory March’) – presents something of an interpretative puzzle. Unlike most of Liszt’s marches it appears to commemorate no specific historical happening, and the question of its original medium is still unresolved. What is clear is the music’s jubilant directness, a frank confidence that sets it apart from the more tentative formality of its neighbours on this album. The title’s geographical sweep (‘From the Rock to the Sea’) adds a narrative suggestion of journey and expansiveness, but the music ultimately defies over-determined reading, enduring as one of Liszt’s more enigmatically cheerful public statements.

The *Bülow-Marsch*, S230 (1883), written in tribute to Hans von Bülow’s celebrated work with the Meiningen orchestra, was notably declined by its dedicatee and has never secured a firm place in the repertoire – a fate that lends it a peculiar fascination as a document of one of the most complicated relationships in Liszt’s later life. The writing has moments of genuine warmth, amid a certain dryness about the thematic invention that perhaps explains Bülow’s reluctance, making it an illuminating if uneven tribute.

Among the earliest of Liszt’s Hungarian concert marches, the *Ungarischer Marsch*, S229a (1859) integrates stylised folk elements within a bold architectural design, reflecting his desire to elevate national idiom to the international stage. The *Siegesmarsch*, S233a (c. 1870), by contrast, embodies triumphant oratory through brass-like sonorities and resolute cadences enriched by a harmonic confidence that prevents the traditional from becoming predictable. Its origins remain obscure and Liszt may not have intended it for publication, lending it the quality of a clandestine utterance in a communal mode.

Liszt’s *Seconde marche hongroise (Ungarischer Sturmmarsch)*, S232 (1844), conceived as a companion to the *Heroischer Marsch*, S231, and dedicated to Count László Teleki, is the earliest in the genealogy of works on this programme bearing the ‘Sturmmarsch’ title, directing the fiery energy of *verbunkos* tradition into virtuosic brilliance. Rapid figurations, abrupt dynamic contrasts and sharply accented rhythms create a theatrical intensity that transforms folk-inspired material into Romantic spectacle. Heard after the late S524 reworking earlier in the programme, this original piano version reveals its rawness and immediacy all the more vividly – the source from which Liszt’s later, searching engagement with the material ultimately grew.

Composed at speed over two days in July 1853 for the inauguration of Grand Duke Carl Alexander of Saxe-Weimar, the *Huldigungsmarsch*, S228 (second version) demonstrates Liszt’s ability to weave pageantry, the personal and the civic into a single unifying musical expression. Its trio section contains material he later rescued for his *Weimars Volkslied*, a melody he cherished as a potential anthem for the Grand Duchy.

Written for the coronation of Franz Joseph I as King of Hungary on 8 June 1867 – the ceremony that sealed the Austro-Hungarian Compromise – the *Ungarischer Marsch zur Krönungsfeier in Ofen-Pest*, S523 was not completed until around 1870, and carries the ambivalence of a composer who understood the distance between ritualistic optimism and political reality. Liszt’s symbolic alignment with the occasion reflects his complex identification with Hungarian nationhood, an identity negotiated across a lifetime spent largely outside the country.

The album closes with the *Festmarsch zur Säkularfeier von Goethes Geburtstag*, S227, written for the centenary of Goethe’s birth and first performed in Weimar on 28 August 1849. More compact than *Goethe-Festmarsch*, it refines the same cultural homage into a tighter, more subdued countenance – the festivity drawn back towards private contemplation. Together the two Goethe marches frame the album as a whole, confirming how deeply and repeatedly Liszt returned to this particular allegiance, and how differently the same devotion could sound across time.

Dr Emer Nestor

Christopher Williams

Photo: Matthew Thistlewood



Born in Wales, Christopher Williams leads a busy and varied professional life as a pianist, composer, conductor, teacher and arranger. He is currently a staff pianist at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, piano tutor at Cardiff University, and pianist for both the BBC National Chorus of Wales and BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Influenced by his teacher and mentor Walter Ryan, Williams developed a keen interest in the performance and recording of works by undeservedly neglected composers, culminating in the release of three albums of world premiere recordings by the composer Semyon Barmotin. In addition to his work as a soloist, Williams is in great demand as an accompanist and chamber musician, and has partnered many of the prominent instrumentalists of his generation including Philippe Scharz, Tim Thorpe, David Childs, David Pyatt, Tine Thing Helseth and Anneke Scott. Williams' longest musical partnership is with his wife, oboist Catherine Tanner-Williams, and has resulted in world premiere performances and recordings. His recording of Brahms transcriptions for Grand Piano (GP749) was featured as album of the week on *NDR Kultur*.

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**Franz
LISZT**
(1811–1886)

Complete Piano Music • 70

Marches

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|-----------|--|-------------|
| 1 | Goethe-Festmarsch, S521/R48b (1849, rev. 1857/c. 1872) (second version) | 9:47 |
| 2 | Marche funèbre, S226a (1827) | 2:06 |
| 3 | Seconde marche hongroise (Ungarischer Sturmmarsch), S524/R54b (c. 1842, rev. 1876) (second version) | 5:29 |
| 4 | Marche hongroise, S233b (1844) | 0:56 |
| 5 | Ungarischer Geschwindmarsch (Magyar Gyors induló), S233/R56 (1870–71) | 3:10 |
| 6 | Heroischer Marsch im ungarischen Styl, S231/R53 (1840) | 6:24 |
| 7 | Vom Fels zum Meer (Deutscher Siegesmarsch), S229/R50 (1853–56) | 6:38 |
| 8 | Bülów-Marsch, S230/R52 (1883) | 5:35 |
| 9 | Ungarischer Marsch, S229a (1859) | 3:08 |
| 10 | Siegesmarsch-Marche triomphale, S233a/R56a (c. 1870) | 5:03 |
| 11 | Seconde marche hongroise (Ungarischer Sturmmarsch), S232/R54a (1844) (first version) | 5:50 |
| 12 | Huldigungsmarsch, S228/R49 (1853, rev. 1858) (second version) | 6:10 |
| 13 | Ungarischer Marsch zur Krönungsfeier in Ofen-Pest am 8ten Juni 1867, S523/R55 (1870) | 4:58 |
| 14 | Festmarsch zur Säkularfeier von Goethes Geburtstag, S227/R48a (1849) (first version) | 7:27 |

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