
NAXOS
LISZT
Études d'exécution transcendante
La leggierezza
Rigoletto Paraphrase
Boris Giltburg, Piano

Franz
LISZT
(1811–1886)

1	**Paraphrase de concert sur Rigoletto (Verdi), S434/R267** (1859)	**7:50**
	12 Études d'exécution transcendante, S139/R2b (1852)	**66:02**
2	No. 1 in C major, 'Preludio': Presto	0:59
3	No. 2 in A minor: Molto vivace	2:48
4	No. 3 in F major, 'Paysage': Poco adagio	4:17
5	No. 4 in D minor, 'Mazeppa': Allegro	7:36
6	No. 5 in B flat major, 'Feux follets': Allegretto	4:27
7	No. 6 in G minor, 'Vision': Lento	5:37
8	No. 7 in E flat major, 'Eroica': Allegro	4:30
9	No. 8 in C minor, 'Wilde Jagd': Presto furioso	5:35
10	No. 9 in A flat major, 'Ricordanza': Andantino	10:23
11	No. 10 in F minor: Allegro agitato molto	4:41
12	No. 11 in D flat major, 'Harmonies du soir': Andantino	9:33
13	No. 12 in B flat minor, 'Chasse-neige': Andante con moto	5:08
	3 Études de concert, S144/R5	
14	No. 2. La leggierezza (1848)	**5:28**

Franz Liszt (1811–1886)

12 Études d'exécution transcendante · La leggierezza · Paraphrase de concert sur Rigoletto

Franz Liszt was one of the very first musical superstars, standing out from the ranks of 19th-century piano virtuosos. He is also the only one of them whose compositions continue to be widely performed to this day. Liszt's ambitions were most likely triggered in 1832, when after hearing Niccolò Paganini at a concert, the 21-year-old determined to become as great a virtuoso on the piano as Paganini was on the violin. In this he succeeded brilliantly: his career as a touring pianist lasted only eight years (1839–47), but during that time his tours blazed all over Europe, leaving in their wake admiring, unbelieving audiences, swooning ladies, and broken pianos and hearts.

Stunning technique, a charismatic stage presence, and the solo piano concert format which he invented and whose name he coined himself – the recital – all contributed to the frenzied reaction of his audiences, an effect which Heinrich Heine described as 'Lisztomania'. His musicality and unique sound production were mentioned too, but the repertoire usually relied heavily on breath-taking bravura and pianistic fireworks. The most popular works were his *Grand galop chromatique* and several of his fiendishly difficult opera arrangements.

Virtuosos are defined by their technique, and here, too, Liszt differed from his colleagues and rivals. At that time many a virtuoso's claims to fame were based on a single technical device, such as Sigismond Thalberg's 'three-hands effect' (in which a melody is played by alternating thumbs in the middle of the keyboard, surrounded by arpeggios above and below). Today this may seem like nothing special, but in the 1830s Thalberg's effect was new and caused a sensation; audience members would stand up from their seats to see how it was done.

Liszt, on the other hand, employed an all-encompassing technique, in which an invention such as Thalberg's would be just one tool among numerous others (he indeed uses it in *Vision* 7 to great effect). This encyclopedic approach is seen throughout his compositions, and perhaps nowhere as clearly or in as concentrated a form as in the cycle of *12 Études d'exécution transcendante*.

As an aside, *études* ('studies') seem to lead a dual life. On the one hand, they can be systematic, thorough exercises by composers such as Cramer and Czerny, which many of us learning the piano encountered during our early years. Those studies could be of great help in developing one's technique, but – with rare exceptions – are not very musically exciting. On the other hand, *études* can be rich, alluring worlds locked behind walls of foreboding technique, such as in the cycles of Chopin, Liszt, Scriabin, Debussy, Rachmaninov and Ligeti, to name just a few.

Piano technique is what unites the two worlds, and the continuous composition of *études* by composers of this calibre for over two centuries suggests an enduring fascination with the technical, physical side of piano-playing, as well as a desire to push beyond the boundaries reached by previous generations of composers. Virtuosity can sometimes appear empty, yet at the same time we seem to be drawn to it: there is something mesmerising and exhilarating in watching a master of any craft in their element, accomplishing feats which appear beyond what is commonly possible.

Liszt's fascination with the genre goes back to his youth. The version of the *Études* recorded here was referred to by Liszt as the 'only authentic' one, when he completed it in 1852. It was, however, the second major revision of a cycle he first wrote at the age of 15. That early cycle of twelve pieces is significantly simpler in its technical demands, but it is unexpectedly touching to find that nearly all of the melodic ideas of the final version of the *Études* were already present in some form in the 15-year-old's imagination, including the highly poetic theme of what was to become *Harmonies du soir* ('Evening Harmonies') 12 (the *études* in the first and second versions lack titles).

The early version also allows us to see the huge leap in Liszt's development eleven years later. The first revision, completed in 1837, is light-years ahead, both in its technical challenges, and more importantly in the complexity of its structures and sonorities, and the

richness of its imagination. The composer who wrote the 1837 version was a complete master of the keyboard, and saw his instrument's possibilities as essentially boundless. If there is anything to reproach, it is that sometimes the technical demands were too high, the structures overly elaborate, and some of the *études* over-long. Schumann praised the set highly in his review in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1839, but doubted he would find more than two handfuls of pianists who could play it.

The final revision, written a few years after Liszt concluded his career as a touring virtuoso, further refined the sonorities and removed those difficulties that were there for their own sake. Liszt concentrated on the atmospheric and evocative elements in the *études*, and simplified the structures, making extensive cuts (though in one instance, *Ricordanza* 10, he added a beautiful lyrical introduction). Liszt did not set out to make this revision as wide-ranging as the first one, but he ended up polishing and re-writing to such an extent that the final version stands as a completely independent work, one which in my opinion balances the musical and technical elements to perfection.

The integration of these two elements forms the fabric of the *Études*. The technique has become an inseparable part of the whole, rather than an obstacle to be overcome in order to gain access to the music; the passage-work is the music itself, the building material from which the image behind the notes is created.

This is most easily heard in the physicality of many of the *Études*. Liszt knew how to lean fully into the keyboard, using the sheer bulk of the notes to create a sense of immediate, visceral presence: the chromatic scales that are the howling winds in *Chasse-neige* ('Snow Storm') 13, the vicious arpeggio whiplashes at the beginning of *Mazeppa* 5, the crashing stampede of alternating octaves in *Wilde Jagd* ('Wild Hunt') 9. Similarly, articulation is often used to create or heighten a mood, as in, for example, the detaché and staccato of the shimmering *Feux follets* ('Will-o'-the-wisps') 6 or the deep, finger-bound *legato* in *Paysage* ('Landscape') 4 creating a sense of tranquil, slow movement.

Devices which in other circumstances could be purely technical, are here used for storytelling and to paint images; *Chasse-neige* could be a 'study of tremolos', but the tremolos *are* the eponymous snow-storm. Soft in the beginning, just enough to envelop the melody as if obscuring it behind gently falling snow, they then grow to an almost terrifying avalanche in the reprise. The sequences of ascending thirds in the middle voices of *Mazeppa* are perhaps the most difficult challenge in the entire cycle, but they are there for a reason, depicting the galloping and cantering of a wild horse (see below for the *étude*'s backstory).

Colour and sound production play as important a role. Liszt imagined an orchestral richness of sonorities: fanfares blazing in *Eroica* 8 and *Vision*, hunters' horns calling in the middle section of *Wilde Jagd*, and a whole carillon of bells in the climaxes of *Harmonies du soir*. But it is not always about the decibels: Liszt also uses extremes of register masterfully in order to create illusions of distance, like the gentle fading away of the right-hand octaves at the end of *Paysage*, as if the landscape receded gradually from our view, or the layering of quiet bells near and far in the opening of *Harmonies du soir*.

Perhaps we should see Liszt's cycle as bridging the two different approaches to the composition of *études* – musical inspiration and methodical instruction. The title he eventually chose, *Études d'exécution transcendante*, is usually translated as 'Transcendental Studies', but is probably closer to 'Studies for Superlative Execution'. This could imply that not only superlative technique was needed to do the *Études* justice, but also (or maybe even rather) that by studying and mastering the cycle one could attain such a technique.

The huge scope and variety of challenges in the cycle could also mean that, in Liszt's view, superlative execution encompassed much more than a mastery of technical difficulties ticked off a checklist (octaves, sixths, thirds, trills, tremolos, etc.; though these are all thoroughly covered by the *Études*). It had also to include a mastery of touch, articulation, pedalling, with an ability to use all of these elements to conjure up a powerful image. The *Études* may thus have a third function: as a compendium of Liszt's knowledge of piano technique at that time, and a brilliant demonstration of what could be accomplished at the keyboard.

I have talked at length about technique, but in the end the cycle's popularity would not endure for 170 years if it were not for its exciting musical content. The *Études* perfectly express the spirit of High Romanticism: wild and unbounded, favouring extremes of both emotion and sound, pushing against the physical limits of the keyboard: Liszt included several *ossia* ('alternative') passages that were to be played if the pianist possessed a keyboard with what would then be considered an extended range, similar to that of modern-day pianos. The fantastical, colourful and gripping images created by many of the *Études* show a real boldness of vision, using the piano as a means to explore hitherto unknown territories – the very definition of transcendent.

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Briefly, regarding a few of the *Études*' titles:

Mazeppa refers to Ivan Mazeppa, a Ukranian noble who according to legend was caught in flagrante with a Polish noblewoman and punished by her husband, who tied Mazeppa naked to a wild horse and set it loose. He survived three gruelling days tied to the horse's back, reached a Cossack encampment and succeeded in becoming their leader. This legend was made into a narrative poem by Lord Byron, inspiring numerous paintings, plays, stories and other poems, including one by Victor Hugo. It was the latter which served as inspiration for Liszt. He quotes Hugo in the end: '*Il tombe enfin!… et se relève Roi!*' – 'he falls at last!… and arises as King!'

Feux follets ('Will-o'-the-wisps') are shimmering lights seen at dusk and at night over swamps or marshes. The name may also refer to the Walpurgis Night scene from Goethe's *Faust*, in which the Will-o'-the-wisps appear as minor characters.

Wilde Jagd refers to an old Germanic legend of a horde of ghostly or supernatural hunters passing in wild pursuit, often depicted as flying through the air.

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Closing the album, *La leggierezza* ('Lightness') is the middle piece of *Trois Études de concert*. It was written in 1848 and published a year later, soon after Liszt stopped his touring career and settled down in Weimar, and before he undertook the last revision of his main *Études* cycle. It is in my opinion one of the best *études* Liszt has composed: a perfectly shaped structural arch with a heartfelt, naturally flowing melody, which evolves into a filigree virtuosic mesh of rare beauty and elegance.

Die Wilde Jagd (1856/57) by Johann Wilhelm Cordes (1824–1869)

The opening piece of the album is not an *étude*, but belongs to another of Liszt's favourite genres – the opera paraphrase. These were tremendously popular with audiences, and Liszt wrote around 70 in total, first for himself to perform on tour and later for other piano virtuosos. The *Paraphrase de concert sur Rigoletto* ('Concert paraphrase on Verdi's Rigoletto') belongs in the second group: Liszt wrote it in 1859 for Hans von Bülow, his son-in-law and former student.

Rather than presenting a potpourri of various numbers from the opera, as was common, here Liszt arranges just a single episode: the famous quartet from Act III, in which Gilda, with her father Rigoletto by her side, witnesses the unfaithfulness of the Duke as he courts Maddalena. Liszt faithfully preserves Verdi's dramatic structure and tonal sequence, simply adding an introduction, repeating one section in the middle, and writing a purely pianistic coda full of bravura (it was to be a stand-alone concert piece after all!). He employs his complete mastery of colour and piano technique to effortlessly combine four voices and their accompaniment, while vividly filling the nocturnal scene with atmosphere. It is, I believe, a wonderful introduction to Liszt's approach to the piano – a seamless, ingenious integration of musicality and technique.

Boris Giltburg

Boris Giltburg

Photo: Oliver Binns

The young Moscow-born Israeli pianist Boris Giltburg is lauded across the globe as a deeply sensitive, insightful and compelling musician. Born in 1984 in Moscow, he moved to Tel Aviv at an early age, studying with his mother and then with Arie Vardi. He went on to win numerous awards, most recently the Second (and audience) Prize at the Rubinstein Competition in 2011, and in 2013 he won First Prize at the Queen Elisabeth Competition, catapulting his career to a new level. In 2015 he began a long-term recording plan with Naxos. At home with repertoire ranging from Beethoven to Shostakovich, in recent years he has been increasingly recognised as a leading interpreter of Rachmaninov. Giltburg has appeared with many leading orchestras such as the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic, the NHK Symphony, the Deutsche Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Oslo Philharmonic, the St Petersburg Philharmonic and the Baltimore Symphony. He made his BBC Proms debut in 2010, his Australian debut in 2017 (with the Adelaide and Tasmanian Symphony Orchestras), and has frequently toured South America and China, as well as Germany with the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse. He has played recitals in leading venues such as the Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Carnegie Hall, the Southbank Centre in London, the Louvre, and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. In 2018 he won Best Soloist Recording (20th/21st century) at the inaugural Opus Klassik Awards for his Naxos recording of Rachmaninov's *Second Piano Concerto* with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Carlos Miguel Prieto, coupled with the *Études-tableaux* (8.573629). In 2018 Naxos released his recording of the *Third Piano Concerto* and *Corelli Variations* with the same forces (8.573630), which has already garnered spectacular reviews. He won a Diapason d'Or for his first concerto recording – the Shostakovich concerti with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and Vasily Petrenko, coupled with his own arrangement of Shostakovich's *Eighth String Quartet* (8.573666) – and his solo recordings of Schumann (8.573399) and Beethoven (8.573400) have been similarly well received. Boris is an avid amateur photographer and blogger, writing about classical music for a non-specialist audience.

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Liszt's *Études d'exécution transcendante* enshrine the spirit of High Romanticism, embodying extremes of expressive drama and technical virtuosity. His encyclopedic approach to technique is shown at its most dazzling in this cycle, heard here in the 1852 revision which Liszt himself declared 'the only authentic one'. Integration of musical and technical elements is absolute, and the music's narratives are supported by dramatic physicality, an orchestral richness of sonority, and an exceptional colouristic quality.

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2–13 **12 Études d'exécution transcendante, S139/R2b** (1852) — **66:02**

14 **3 Études de concert, S144/R5 – No. 2. La leggierezza** (1848) — **5:28**

Boris Giltburg, Piano

A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

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