

Rediscovering Liszt

Connor Fogel - piano



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1. Ouverture de l'opéra Guillaume Tell de Rossini, S552	[12:05]
2. Réminiscences de Lucia di Lammermoor de Donizetti, S397	[05:48]
3. Réminiscences de "Don Juan" de Mozart – Grande fantaisie, S418	[16:45]
4. Ave Maria (Ellens dritter Gesang) Mélodie de Schubert, S557d	[07:20]
5. La sérénade (Ständchen, Leise flehen) Mélodie de Schubert, S559a	[06:00]
6. Le roi des aulnes (Erkönig) Mélodie de Schubert, S557a	[04:35]
7. La serenata e l'orgia – Grande fantaisie sur des motifs des Soirées musicales de Rossini, S422i	[11:47]
8. Grand galop chromatique, S219	[04:12]
Total Time	[68:37]

Liszt's Performance Style

Franz Liszt occupies a singular place in the history of piano playing. His virtuosity earned him a level of fame during and after his lifetime that few others have achieved, and even in old age his presence exerted an almost irresistible force. Audience accounts describe performances charged with emotional electricity: listeners wept, trembled, or sat in stunned silence. Those who heard him – from the electrifying concerts of the 1840s to the reflective masterclasses of Weimar and Rome – describe a manner of playing that seemed to transcend the mechanism of the pianos of his era. His sound, it was said, possessed an almost vocal immediacy: warm, penetrating, and capable of astonishing variety.

Liszt consistently spoke about piano playing in vocal metaphors. He insisted that the instrument should sing – that it should imitate vocal declamation, shaping phrases in breath-units, connecting tones smoothly within the syllabic contours of imagined words rather than pursuing continuous mechanical legato for its own sake. Central to this conception was contrast: the play of brightness and darkness of tone (*chiaroscuro*), used to articulate character and affect. These qualities, rooted in the Italian *bel canto* tradition, entered Liszt's expressive vocabulary through his deep admiration for the operas of Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini, his intimate contact with leading singers such as Giuditta Pasta, and his frequent immersion in Italian opera in Paris, Milan, and later Rome. They also align closely with advice found in contemporary vocal treatises, including those of Mancini (1774), García (1847/48), and Domenico Corri (1783/84; 1810).

Liszt possessed an interpretative capacity that consistently blurred the line between composition and performance. Whether performing his own music or that of others, he could conjure emotional states ranging from the spiritual to the violently demonic. His playing told stories in sound through a rhetorical delivery shaped by improvisational freedom, colouristic imagination, and textural variety — qualities that mesmerised listeners. One of Liszt's most eloquent witnesses, his student Moriz Rosenthal, marvelled at the sheer plasticity of his playing, recalling a tone of “marvellous warmth and variety” unmatched by any other pianist. Rosenthal also spoke of Liszt's sovereign mastery of *rubato*, a temporal flexibility that arose not from self-indulgence but from the expressive meaning of the phrase itself. Of Liszt's touch, he noted that even a single chord could be made to “speak.” Varying degrees of asynchrony between the hands and the expressive spreading of chords were used not as mannerisms, but as means of suggesting vocal portamento, emphatic consonants, and subtle inflection.

Other pupils confirm this impression. Arthur Friedheim wrote that Liszt “played as though the piano were speaking,” shaping phrases through breath and rhetorical nuance. August Göllerich's masterclass notes reveal a teacher who demanded character above correctness, urging his students to “play the meaning.” Carl Lachmund remembered that Liszt touched the piano “as though it were a living being,” while Lina Ramann described a sound “glowing with inner warmth,” capable of holding an audience in a in a kind of spell.

Liszt's improvisational genius left an equally profound mark. Rosenthal declared him without equal, recalling that no two performances were ever the same. To witness Liszt at the piano, even in his later years, was to experience interpretation as a form of spontaneous re-creation: each phrase freshly imagined, each silence charged with significance. These testimonies reveal Liszt not merely as a visionary virtuoso, but as the embodiment of an expressive tradition – a continuum of practice (Peres Da Costa, 2025) – with roots far older than the nineteenth century; one in which the notated score functioned as a point of departure rather than a set of constraints.

Liszt himself articulated the philosophical basis of this tradition with striking clarity in 1859:

“The virtuoso is not a mason who, with the chisel in his hand, faithfully and conscientiously cuts his stone after the design of the architect. He is not a passive tool that reproduces feeling and thought without adding himself. He is not the more or less experienced reader of works that have no margin for his notes and which make no paragraph necessary between the lines. These spiritedly written musical works are in reality for the virtuoso only the tragic and touching, putting-in-scene of feelings; he is called upon to let these speak, weep, sing and sigh – to render these to his own consciousness. He creates in this way like the composer himself, for he must embrace in himself those passions which he, in their complete brilliancy, has to bring to light” (Huneker, 1911, p. 393)

It is a great loss that Liszt did not live into the age of sound recording. What we would give to hear even a short fragment of his playing. What did his piano playing sound like? How did he move beyond the notation to project meaning? While such questions cannot be answered with absolute certainty, valuable insights emerge from the acoustic, electrical, and reproducing piano-roll recordings of his pedagogical descendants — including Rosenthal, Emil von Sauer, Arthur Friedheim, and Friedrich Lamond — which provide compelling sonic corroboration. These recordings reveal a musical language far more flexible than modern conventions typically permit: tempos that breathe and expand; melodies shaped with a singer's sensitivity to word painting; textural variety achieved through arpeggiation of differing speeds; and expressive asynchrony between melody and accompaniment, creating agogic emphasis through subtle temporal displacement. Such practices align closely with the written testimony of Liszt's pupils and with broader nineteenth-century performance traditions documented in piano treatises and preserved on early recordings by pianists such as Carl Reinecke, Theodor Leschetizky, and Camille Saint-Saëns (see Peres Da Costa, 2012).

Liszt's musical world was one in which performance was not the literal execution of a score, but an act of poetic re-creation — alive to nuance, character, and the expressive breath of time. Connor Fogel stands within this lineage as a committed advocate for the expressive practices that Liszt and his pupils relied upon to make the piano sing. By courageously embedding these principles in his own playing – through a process of adoption, adaptation, and embodiment – he cultivates a heightened sense of spontaneity, imagination, and artistic sovereignty that Liszt himself would surely have recognised and admired.

Neal Peres Da Costa FAHA (Author of *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing*)

Rediscovering Liszt

From his early public appearances during the mid 1830s, to a performance in June 1840 that Liszt would title “Recitals at the Pianoforte” (the first use of the term; recital), to his final appearance as a touring virtuoso in October 1847 (retiring from the platform at just 35), Liszt performed well over 1000 concerts throughout most of Europe, bringing hysteria, frenzy and elation to audiences wherever he went. The international pandemic of “Lisztomania” swept across the world, seeing audiences screaming, ladies fainting, and Liszt’s gloves, cigar butts and even coffee dregs being pocketed for personal collections. Modern documentation and cataloguing of these concerts is surprisingly sparse, and it is my hope that this recording will shed more light on what exactly made Liszt’s recitals so impactful, giving an informed and authentic impression of how Liszt may have played, with both musical style and programmes reconstructed. Wherever possible the first version of each piece is performed, most of which are seldom heard today and some of which have never been recorded. Also included are as many authentic variants and alternative cadenzas as possible – during Liszt’s time such moments were often spontaneously improvised by the performer – these seldom heard variations are included here to create the feel of improvisation. Along with the historical practices of unnotated arpeggiation, asynchrony of melody and accompaniment, and modification of rhythm and tempo, I believe this recording reignites the sound of an all but extinct style of pianism.

The pieces presented here were all absolute staples of Liszt’s performing repertoire. For example, one typical recital consisted of *William Tell*, *Lucia*, *Don Juan*, *Standchen*, *Erlkönig* and the *Grand Galop* (Liszt performed this recital at least 5 times in 1843), another consisted of *William Tell*, *Lucia*, *Don Juan*, *Seranata e L’orgia* and the *Grand Galop* (also from 1843). The pieces were also performed in combination with other works from this time; Liszt seldom performed the same exact programme more than twice. For this recording I was delighted to use a wonderful 1922 Bösendorfer grand piano, a brand which would become Liszt’s favourite.

Ouverture de l’opéra Guillaume Tell de Rossini, S552 1838
(at least 103 performances by Liszt)

Liszt opened the majority of his recitals throughout his virtuoso career with the now famous William Tell Overture, dazzling audiences from the get-go with his ability to conjure up the entire orchestra with only 10 fingers. Throughout the piece Liszt offers alternatives to various passages, which are almost always more virtuosic. Which alternatives he played we can never know, so this recording uses the more virtuosic text, and in repeated passages uses both options. Liszt’s blisteringly fast metronome marks – identical to Rossini’s – are observed. A remarkable piano roll of this piece by Wassily Sapellnikoff from 1910 was referenced for this recording, and is filled with unnotated arpeggiations, rhythmic modifications and melodic asynchrony.

Réminiscences de Lucia di Lammermoor de Donizetti, S397 1835
(at least 109 performances by Liszt)

Liszt's transcription of this famous operatic Sextet was written as part of a much larger fantasia; the accompanying March and Cavatine are excluded here as they were performed far less frequently by Liszt than the initial Sextet. During an 1886 masterclass, Liszt recommended pianists learn an edition by his student Adolf Von Henselt; "I have always played these pieces completely free and not as printed. Henselt heard me play it once and included much of what he learned in his edition". This recording takes Liszt's words and Henselt's edition with a grain of salt, mixing Liszt's edition with several of Henselt's variants. Hopefully I've created a performance which sounds "free and not as printed". Exactly what Liszt played has been lost to time, but I feel Henselt's edition is a substantial step closer to knowing. A wonderful 1923 piano roll of the work by Emil Paur contains many arpeggiations and asynchronies, and even some of Henselt's variants.

Réminiscences de "Don Juan" de Mozart – Grande fantaisie, S418 1841
(at least 92 performances by Liszt)

Perhaps one of the most thrilling, dramatic, and famously difficult pieces of music Liszt ever wrote. Based on music from Mozart's opera Don Giovanni – the Commendatore scene, a theme and variations on the love duet La Ci Darem La Mano, and the drinking aria Fin Ch'han dal Vino – Liszt distills the themes and through-line of the opera into one concise 17 minute work. Many small variants are offered in this recording – the short cadenza like transition into the love duet is as found in both Liszt's 1877 two piano version and the great pianist Ferruccio Busoni's 1918 edition of the piece, along with the two cadenzas during the love duet, and a cadenza during the first variation. Liszt offers two versions of the transition into the drinking aria – one short, and a longer more difficult alternative which contains rapid tenths and thematic combination. While apparently Liszt preferred the longer transition, he frequently performed the shorter (which he felt was better received by audiences), therefore the latter is played here. Two staggering piano rolls exist of this piece; a 1911 roll by Liszt's student Emil Von Sauer, and a 1907 roll by Busoni. Both contain a huge amount of asynchrony, arpeggiation, rhythmic modification and near inhumanly fast tempi.

Ave Maria [Ellens dritter Gesang] – Mélodie de François Schubert, S557d 1837
(at least 69 performances by Liszt)

Liszt clearly had a great affinity for the songs of Franz Schubert, many of which he transcribed for solo piano, and a handful almost always finding their way into Liszt's recital programmes. This first version of Ave Maria features a remarkable long meditative coda, showcasing some incredibly futuristic harmony which looks ahead to Liszt's late compositional period. Here we can hear the early building blocks of Liszt's genius and originality as a composer in his own right. A 1905 piano roll of the work by Liszt's student Richard Burneister –while not Liszt's transcription – features some lovely arpeggiation, wide rubato and rhythmic flexibility.

La sérénade [Ständchen, Leise flehen] – Mélodie de François Schubert, S559a 1837
(at least 70 performances by Liszt)

This first version contains some very subtle differences in voicing and structure when compared to the popular later versions. Also featured is a short cadenza towards the end of the piece reportedly played by Liszt and notated by his student Lina Ramann. An excellent 1942 recording by pianist and composer Sergei Rachmaninoff of this work features a great deal of melodic asynchrony, strong cantabile projection of the vocal line, wild rubato and heavy arpeggiation of the accompaniment.

Le roi des aulnes [Erlkönig] – Mélodie de François Schubert, 557a 1837
(at least 106 performances by Liszt)

Erlkönig was one of Liszt's recital tour de forces, astonishing the audience with his ability to play both complex accompaniment and vocal lines simultaneously. This first version features subtle textural differences in comparison to later versions, and is almost never performed nowadays. The metronome mark observed here is Schubert's own. A concise 1919 recording of the piece by Liszt's student Frederic Lamond rolls along at a remarkable speed, and an astonishing 1923 piano roll by Ignace Jan Paderewski features strong asynchrony, unequal note lengths, and fluid rubato.

La serenata e l'orgia – Grande fantasia sur des motifs des Soirées musicales de Rossini 'Première grande fantasia', S422i 1836
(at least 24 performances by Liszt)

A staple of the first half of Liszt's virtuoso career, this wonderful early fantasia is based on two songs from Rossini's Soirées Musicales. The metronome marks used are as found in Rossini's score, and this first version of the work features a more concise coda and some less elaborate transitions in comparison to the second version. A particularly enlightening 1901 piano roll of the first half of the fantasia by Busoni features a great deal of asynchrony, arpeggiation and rhythmic modification.

Grand Gallop Chromatique, S219 1838
(least 144 performances by Liszt)

Possibly the work given the most performances by Liszt, he often used this as an encore, considering the piece to be a "rouser" — appearing here in its almost never heard first version. This recording also features a short cadenza near the end found in two sources: a tornado of blind octaves (Liszt's own invention) flying up and down the keyboard chromatically. While not notated in his editions of the score, Liszt may have improvised these fireworks live, so it's included here to give an idea of how this may have sounded.

Connor Fogel

Connor Fogel studied piano at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and gained a Master's degree in Musical Direction from Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts. He currently enjoys a varied career as a concert pianist, musicologist, and musical director for theatre. Connor has been the recipient of several prizes and awards including 2nd prize in the 2019 International Liszt Society Piano Competition and the 2016 Musical Director Award from The Worshipful Company of Musicians, of which Connor was made a Freeman in 2022. In 2026 Connor was granted Freedom of the City of London. He has written numerous articles on historically informed performance for The Liszt Society and has spoken at several music conferences internationally, as well as performing regularly in recitals, concerts, theatrical shows and cabarets throughout the UK and internationally.

Connor is an Honorary Associate of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and was previously the Andrew Lloyd Webber Associate Musical Director of The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. As well as Royal Welsh, Mountview and Central, he also teaches at The Royal Academy of Music, ArtsEd and Italia Conti.

As a musical director, his theatrical credits include The Phantom of The Opera (West End & World Tour), The BFG (Royal Shakespeare Company, Chichester, Singapore) Scissorhandz (Southwark Playhouse), Chicago (International Tour), Hello Dolly! (London Palladium), Ben & Imo (Royal Shakespeare Company, Orange Tree London), The King and I (UK Tour), Flowers for Mrs. Harris (Riverside Studios), Polly & Esther (Edinburgh Fringe, Adelaide Fringe, Sherman Theatre), Julius Caesar (Royal Shakespeare Company UK Tour), Les Misérables (UK & Ireland Tour), Queerway (Wales Millennium Centre and UK Tour), Cinderella (Queen's Theatre Barnstaple, Gatehouse Stafford), Topsy's Crystal Balls (UK Tour), The Soprano Behind the Screen (UK Tour), As You Like It, Taming of the Shrew, Measure for Measure (Royal Shakespeare Company, Barbican, UK, US and Asian Tour), Queen of the Mist (Charing Cross Theatre, Jack Studio Theatre), Sweet Charity (Nottingham Playhouse) Connor's film and television credits include the Harry Enfield film The Contract and BAFTA award winning ITV1 drama The Lost Honour Of Christopher Jeffries.

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And of course to Franz Liszt, who has continued to shape, surprise and guide for the last 214 years.

In loving memory of Jonathan Powell.