

Unicorn

# Thomas McIntosh plays Liszt

TRANSCENDENTAL ETUDES Nos. 1-9 Volume One



PATRIMONIO UC

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THOMAS McINTOSH, American pianist now living in London, has played in more than 25 countries of Europe, the United States, and Latin America. His extensive repertoire ranges from Mozart and Beethoven to Schönberg and Boulez. During the Beethoven bi-centenary year he was heard in the cycle of five Beethoven piano concerti, praised as a 'tour de force by an excellent pianist and, above all, a magnificent musician.'

Any consideration of 19th-century music must take into account the piano as one of the principal means of musical expression. As a primitive instrument at the time of Bach, and still related to the harpsichord during most of Mozart's lifetime, the development of the piano coincided with the beginning of the 19th-century and was made possible primarily through the efforts of John Broadwood. His technical innovations provided greater sonority and more precise differentiation of pianistic touch and gave impetus to composers to explore this new aural world. Certainly Liszt was enormously concerned with the piano and its potentialities; the *Twelve Transcendental Etudes* and *Six Etudes after Paganini* stand as evidence of his achievements both as virtuoso performer and as composer. In these compositions one finds not only an almost superhuman challenge to make the hands stretch to their utmost physical limits but also an intense amassing of sonorities and fascination for sound.

Indeed it can be said that the 'big sound' was equally as important to the audiences of Liszt's time as it is to those attending the highly amplified rock concerts of today. The spectacle of the artist striving for more and more sound, the piano almost visibly vibrating, the atmosphere of a dense and expectant audience — these stimulations of the senses induced people to flock to the box-office as a headline pop group attracts its followers today.

A perusal of 19th-century

programmes, in contrast to today's serious music and yet strangely paralleling the pop field, amply demonstrates the differences in standard and taste by audiences little more than 125 years apart. Man cast as 'hero' and 'something for everyone' seem to have been the two premises upon which concert promoters operated. Orchestral selections, solo performances by instrumentalists as well as singers, improvisations on themes from the audience, perhaps a chamber work — are we describing an evening in Liszt's time or the Isle of Wight denizens 'doing their thing'?

Musical indigestion? Perhaps; but this was the Romantic Era, a time for flirtation with the exotic, the display of emotion, a glorification of the individual, the conquering hero. And Liszt stood poised to lead the field, not only superbly gifted in his own right but arriving at a time when the artistic world was looking for such a leader.

The genesis of the *Douze Etudes d'Exécution transcendante* is to be found in a set of 12 studies, Opus 1, written by the 15-year-old student in Paris, dedicated to Mlle Lydie Garella (the two later sets of études bear an inscription to Carl Czerny) and published by Bisselot in Marseilles, 1827. They contain exercises for finger independence, speed, and pianistic problems such as rapid octaves, leaps, and repeated notes, and, beginning with C major and its relative minor, progress harmonically through the first five 'flat' tonalities of the circle of fifths.

This harmonic order is retained in the two later versions of the studies, but the seventh étude of the 1827 set is lowered from E-flat major to D-flat major in the later sets (ultimately to be known as *Harmonies du soir*), the charming eleventh study of 1827 is deleted from the other editions, and the *Eroica* is inserted in both the editions of 1839 and 1852.

In this early set of the études one finds not only technical problems isolated and expanded for study, but musical ideas and themes, often crudely handled, which form the basis from which the two later editions derive.

More than a decade separates this first effort from the edition of 1839, years spent by Liszt as a touring virtuoso and aspiring composer, a time of personal re-evaluation and artistic growth — in short the awkward years between precocious adolescence and maturity.

Among the artistic figures who influenced him was Paganini, who inspired Liszt to attempt on the piano what Paganini had achieved with the violin. His influence also led Liszt to cultivate the image and aura of the supreme showman, invincible in his abilities and, who knows, perhaps in league with the devil . . . . .

From friendship and association with Chopin, Liszt grasped that mood, emotion, and idea could suggest new musical forms. And thus the metamorphosis of the Opus 1 studies into the powerful compositions of 1839 is virtually complete.

The last edition of 1852 consists mainly in editing, smoothing out some of the more fiendish pianistic difficulties, and adding titles to all but two of the études.

In 1816 Louis Spohr wrote in his diary of a private meeting with Paganini and of his request that Paganini play some of his works. Paganini refused on the grounds that his music was conceived for and necessitated a large audience. And so it is with the *Twelve Transcendental Etudes*. Not the drawing room but the concert hall is the arena for which these works were conceived; here the grand gesture, the larger-than-life scale, the obvious drama and emotion are entirely appropriate. Imagine a packed theatre, the magic moment as the lights dim and the artist

enters, the hush before he begins. And then . . . . .

1. *Preludio (presto)* — an introductory work, scarcely more than arpeggios, sequential patterns, and several chords; over before it really begins. Of practical value in offering the pianist a chance to warm his hands and hear how the piano sounds in the hall.

2. *Etude in A minor (molto vivace)* — based on a short rhythmic pattern, this study displays some of the new arabesque figurations taken from violin playing and ending forcefully, almost overflowing into . . . . .

3. *Paysage (poco adagio)* — a tone picture, perhaps of Elysian Fields, reposeful and calm.

4. *Mazeppa (allegro)* — here a headlong plunge into a musical saga, treated in literature by Byron and Victor Hugo, of the Polish hero Ivan Mazeppa.

5. *Feux follets (allegretto)* — as relief from the powerful sonorities of the foregoing study, 'Will-o'-the-Wisps' exemplifies filigree gradations of sound and finger control.

6. *Vision (lento)* — a sombre, brooding work, perhaps akin to spirits behind closed doors, spectral apparitions, and nightmares.

7. *Eroica (allegro)* — the hero triumphant; trumpet calls and majestic musical flourishes.

8. *Wilde Jagd (presto furioso)* — a dramatic tone picture of the hunt; fast, furious, and an exaltation of 'action'.

9. *Ricordanza (andantino, improvisato)* — a nostalgic yearning for things of the past and gone forever; sad but not embittered.

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