

## Hunting for Liszt Treasure

BY RICHARD AND JOHN CONTIGUGLIA

The pursuit of buried treasure must seem as far removed from the life of a musician as the practice of scales is from that of an adventurer. Yet, the past six years have involved us in nothing less than such a treasure hunt, as we searched for and discovered in museums, libraries, and second-hand music stores throughout Europe and America compositions of Franz Liszt for two pianos and for piano, four-hands virtually unknown to concertgoers and most professional musicians. Grove's Dictionary and Humphrey Searle's book, *The Music of Liszt*, gave us an awesome compilation of this repertoire, well over 100 compositions. Fortunately, Liszt was such a popular composer during his lifetime that most of his music was published; unfortunately, it has long been out-of-print. Our task was to locate the first editions, photocopy them and prepare the music for public performance.

Our first "find," in London's British Museum, was the *Don Juan Fantasy*. What thrilled us immediately was the discovery that this music was no merely routine disposition for two pianos of the solo Fantasy which preceded it chronologically and upon which it was undoubtedly based. More concisely organized than the solo, the two-piano Fantasy realizes the idiomatic, antiphonal potential of two instruments, particularly in the central section devoted to Zerlina's and Don Giovanni's duet, *La ci darem la mano*, in a manner reminiscent of the greatest two-piano writing of Bach and Mozart. The following year 1970, we performed the *Don Juan Fantasy* on a recital in Amsterdam and as an encore following a commemorative Bartok concert in London's Queen Elizabeth Hall. It seemed fitting to follow an eve-



ning of Bartok's complete works for two pianos, in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of his death, with the London premiere of a work by a fellow Hungarian, whose *oeuvre* Bartok described as being "of far greater importance for the future development of music than that of Strauss or even Wagner." The public's reactions were overwhelming; they had seldom, if ever, heard such brilliant, two-pie music.

From that moment on our course was set. We collected Symphonic Poems from the British Museum and the New York Public Library, *Weihnachtsbaum* from the Library of

Congress, the *Festival Cantata* and numerous other four-hand works, such as the *Hungarian Storm March*, the *Grande Valse di Bravura*, the *2nd Mephisto Waltz* and the transcriptions of the *Field Nocturnes*, from the British Museum and the Boston Public Library. A particularly rich discovery was a recently published Russian edition of Liszt's piano music, which included one volume each of two-piano and piano, four-hand compositions. These significantly expanded our repertoire with the *Norma Fantasy*, the *Sonnambula Fantasy* and the *Tscherkesenmarsch* from *Ruslan und Ludmila*, among other works. The four-hand version of the *Grand Galop Chromatique* turned up in a second-hand music store in Amsterdam.

With so much Liszt at our fingertips it was only natural for us to follow our Bartok program of 1970, in London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, with one devoted entirely to Liszt the following year. At this time we were also involved in recording some of our repertoire for Connoisseur Society. The idea of a two-piano, piano, four-hand recording devoted to Liszt's Operatic Transcriptions seemed not only commercially exciting, but a novelty to boot. No other duo had ever recorded this repertoire. The record's success directly brought about our learning, performing and recording perhaps the most remarkable of all Liszt's transcriptions for two pianos, Beethoven's *9th Symphony*. When our recording company expressed an interest in the work, we set out to locate it, somewhat apprehensively, to be sure, but by now prepared for the unexpected. When 200 pages of xeroxed music finally arrived from the Library of Congress, we were speechless. Here was no routine piano adaptation of the Beethoven score, but a highly original, 'virtuoso, idiomatic work for two pianos. At first, the formidable difficulties seemed almost insurmountable. After a year's preparation, we steeled ourselves to give the modern-day premiere of this work, and perhaps the first public performance ever, in London's Queen Elizabeth Hall on April 13, 1972. The audience rose to its feet midst a crescendo of cheers

that were directed as much toward Liszt as they were toward us. Our subsequent recording of the Symphony made the best-seller charts in America, caused a *succès fou* in Japan and found itself in demand throughout much of Europe. Clearly Clara Schumann's enthusiasm for the work which Joachim brought to the Schumann household in Düsseldorf on Brahms' 22nd birthday and which she and Brahms performed was echoed by contemporary listeners.

Perhaps the most gratifying and exciting response to any of our public performances of Liszt's duos occurred in New York's Carnegie Hall last Oct. 30th, when we gave the New York premieres of two Symphonic Poems, *Orpheus* and *Mazeppa*, selections from *Weihnachtsbaum* the Beethoven *9th Symphony*, two Operatic Fantasies on *Don Giovanni* and *Norma* and the modern-day premiere of a work which came to us, via Malcolm Frager, from a second-hand music store in Budapest, *Gaudeamus Igitur*. The 3-hour marathon concert drew a huge audience, whose overwhelming reaction to the music — two standing ovations, one after the Beethoven Symphony and another at the end of the concert — made it clear that Liszt's two-piano and piano, four-hand music was long overdue in our concert halls.

Although our repertoire comprises a great deal more than the music of Liszt, it is seldom that we give a recital without performing at least one of his duets. It is difficult to understand why one of the handful of truly great mid-19th century, Romantic composers has been so ignored by duo pianists over the years. Admittedly, Liszt was very badly served by music publishers after his death. It is impossible to purchase through a music store more than a small percentage of his enormous output; although there are projects afoot, mostly through East European publishers, eventually to publish his complete works. The only two-piano work that has been readily available in this country is the *Concerto Pathétique*, and that only in an edition altered by von Bülow.

Perhaps what misleads most musicians in their assessment of Liszt's compositions is the word *transcription*. Liszt was an inveterate reworker, of his own and of other people's music.

Fully half of the compositions contained in his Catalogue of Works comes under the heading *Arrangements, Transcriptions, Fantasies, etc.*, and these designations do not even include the many extant versions of so-called Original Works. There are at least 8 published versions of *Mazeppa*, 4 for piano solo, 2 for full orchestra, and 1 each for two pianos and for piano, four-hands. The familiar *Liebesträume* are both songs and piano solos, as are the *Tre Sonetti di Petrarca*. The *Hungarian Rhapsodies* are both orchestral and pianistic showpieces. Liszt had such a fertile imagination that the act of rewriting or of transcribing his own or other people's music for piano was *every bit as creative* as the genesis of the original inspiration itself.

Liszt is not the only great transcriber in the history of music. Almost all of Bach's keyboard Concerti are reworkings of earlier material, his own and Vivaldi's. Brahms' *Variations on a Theme of Haydn* for orchestra is a transcription of the two-piano original. Ravel's orchestration of Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exposition* is a popular example of the transcriber's art. For some inexplicable reason many musicians who accept the validity of these transcriptions are unwilling to grant Liszt's even the possibility of a hearing. Liszt played such transcriptions as the Beethoven Symphonies, the Schubert Songs and the Operatic Fantasies in public. Why shouldn't musicians of today do as much? Clearly, no valid assessment of Liszt, the composer, can be made without reference to this large, fascinating body of music.

We lovers of the art of duo-pianism have seldom had such a treasure of important music set before us. We, personally, have no doubt that history will come to view Liszt as the greatest composer of music for two pianists since Schubert. In the meantime we shall return to the industry of our treasure hunt, where so many beautiful jewels still lie buried. □

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