

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator

Les Préludes, Symphonic Poem No. 3, after Lamartine

Franz Liszt

The genealogy of *Les Préludes*, the third of Franz Liszt's 13 symphonic poems, reaches back to a piece titled *Les Quatre Éléments: La Terre, Les Aquilons, Les Flots, Les Astres* (*The Four Elements: Earth, Wind, Waves, Stars*), a work for men's chorus and piano that he had written between 1844 and 1848. The four poems Liszt set in that work were written by another mid-19th-century figure, Joseph Auran, who served as the City Librarian of Marseilles. Liszt's large-scale work was performed only twice when it was new, both times in Marseilles. He never published it, and it has since descended into almost total obscurity, mentioned only in connection with the famous symphonic poem to which it gave rise.

Four years after *Les Quatre Éléments* was performed, Liszt refashioned the piano introduction and several later themes from the work and expanded them into the piece we know as *Les Préludes*. Liszt introduced the term "symphonic poem" in about 1853, just as he was embarking on his earliest works in the then-novel genre. He was the first major composer to truly champion such works, large-scale but single-

movement orchestral pieces structured to convey a literary program. In this case, the composer faced the challenge of retrofitting existing musical material to some sort of plot. He found a solution in the 15th item from *Nouvelles méditations poétiques* by Alphonse de Lamartine — a poem called "Les Préludes." The connection between Lamartine's verse and Liszt's music is vague, apart from the fact that both juxtapose pastoral and bellicose elements; the Liszt biographer (and composer) Humphrey Searle was quite right in objecting that the piece "is wrongly described [by Liszt] as 'd'après Lamartine,' [since] in fact the sequence of moods is Liszt's own." That sequence divides into four parts, which focus on love, war, the natural beauty of the countryside, and destiny (at least in Liszt's ordering, which is different from Lamartine's).

By their very nature, Liszt's symphonic poems invite the listener's imagination to range to extramusical references or, in this case, even to musical references. The essential musical

In Short

Born: October 22, 1811, in Raiding, Hungary

Died: July 31, 1886, in Bayreuth, Germany

Work composed: 1853–54, mostly while in France and Spain, drawing on some material written in the 1840s; dedicated to Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein

World premiere: February 23, 1854, in Weimar, Germany, the composer conducting the Weimar Court Orchestra

New York Philharmonic premiere: April 30, 1859, Carl Bergmann, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 24, 2009, Riccardo Muti, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 16 minutes

theme that generates this piece is a three-note motif in the opening bars, which music lovers are likely to recognize as something very close to the “Muss es sein?” (“Must it be?”) phrase that announces the finale of Beethoven’s ultimate string quartet (in F major, Op. 135). It is true that, at least on the surface, Beethoven penned those words above the theme as a sort of joke to his publisher, but ensuing generations invested profound meaning into the inscription, reading it as a defiant objection to mortality itself. Liszt, arch-Romantic that he was, would have been the last person to diminish the potential significance of such a motto. From these three notes he builds a spiraling phrase that swells up through the entire orchestra, from the low strings to the high woodwinds.

After a grand, C-major response — obviously on the side of immortality — Liszt sweeps the listener into a section of spacious music in three-quarter time. The three-note motif is to be found here, too, opening the gentle melody assigned to the second violins and violas. This is an example of the “thematic transformation” for which Liszt is famous, a technique he

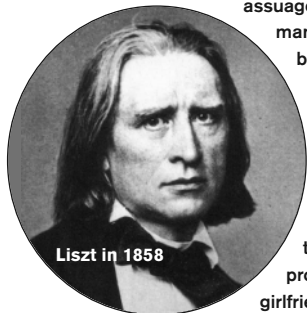
learned by studying Schubert. Through this process, basic motivic material is constantly molded into substantially new themes, with one seeming to develop into the next. So it is that the same three notes are embedded in the cello’s theme that launches “Wind,” the second section of *Les Préludes*. While each of the piece’s four sections flows from what preceded it without a pause, there is no mistaking that a stormy character inhabits these several minutes, or that the ensuing section, with its solo wind writing, is intended to depict the same bucolic landscape that Beethoven had extolled in his *Pastoral Symphony*. This leads us to the final concern of *Les Préludes*, a depiction of heroic “Destiny,” introduced by trumpets playing a fanfare-like transformation of the “Muss es sein?” motif and ending in a spirit of exalted affirmation.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, harp, and strings.

Sources and Inspirations

When preparing *Les Préludes* for publication, in 1859, Liszt placed this written program at the head of the score:

What is life but a series of preludes to that unknown song whose first solemn note is sounded by Death? Love is the enchanted dawn of every life, but what person is there whose first delights of happiness are not dissipated by some storm, a storm whose fatal blast dispels his youthful illusions, destroying his altar as though by a stroke of lightning? And what wounded soul, after the cruel storm, does not attempt to assuage its memories in the pleasant solitude of rural life? Nevertheless, man does not long allow himself the sweet quiet offered in Nature’s bosom. When the trumpet sounds the alarm, he hurries to take up his post, no matter what struggle summons him, in order that in battle he may regain full confidence in himself and his powers.



Liszt in 1858

This rather depressing scenario, such as it is, has little in common with Lamartine’s poem “*Les Préludes*,” though it has much in common with the trajectory of Liszt’s symphonic poem. Nonetheless, it appears that Liszt did not write this scenario himself. The words were apparently provided by the Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, his longtime girlfriend and the dedicatee of this work.