

THE NATURE OF GENIUS: FRANZ LISZT

Produced by
University of California Television (www.uctv.tv)
Professor Cecil Lytle, Project Director and Narrator

Narrative Summary

3 programs

57 minutes each

Program Content

This series will focus on the long and prolific life and music of the world's first international musician, Hungarian composer, Franz Liszt (1811-1886), whose bicentenary will be celebrated in 2011. As with the Beethoven bicentenary in 1970, Mozart's Semiquincentennial in 2006, and the tercentennial of Johann Sebastian Bach in 1985, leading international orchestras, soloists, and scholars are expected to commemorate the occasion.

The three-part series will be shot on location in Harlem (New York), Vienna, Weimar (Germany), Raiding (Austria), Budapest (Hungary), and on the campus of the University of California San Diego in La Jolla. Previous discussions in Budapest have confirmed collaboration with Mr. Leel-Össy Lóránt and the Hungarian Film Commission in coordinating plans for local filming in Budapest, Vienna, and Raiding. UCTV will handle local arrangements on the La Jolla campus.

This series is designed to be an accessible public documentary presentation on the significance of the greatest musical prodigy and "phenom" since Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Franz Liszt was a creature of his age and temperament; he was the archetypical Byronic hero and an anthropomorphic actor in the romantic gothic image. Known as the greatest living pianist of his time throughout all of Europe and Asia Minor, he was idolized, but flawed; highly gifted and intelligent, but nomadic; cunning and adept, but self-critical to extreme; charismatic and sexually attractive, but religious and pious. The aggregate collection of over 10,000 of his letters to more than 1,000 correspondents reveals that Franz Liszt personally knew every major artist and political figure of his age. Liszt was responsible for drawing public and critical attention to the late piano sonatas, string quartets, and symphonies of Beethoven, and establishing the first state museum to Beethoven. He personally supported the publication and performances of the works of Frédéric Chopin, Hector Berlioz, Richard Wagner, Camille Saint-Saëns, and others.

Despite these accomplishments (or, perhaps because of them), his life was also filled with tragedy and incongruities. Segments of this series will touch on the distant and aloof relationship Franz Liszt maintained with the three children born out of wedlock with Countess Marie d'Agoult: Blandine (1835-62), Daniel (1839-59), and Cosima (1837-1930). The long and often-fraught relationship with Cosima and Richard Wagner (with whom she bore three children out of wedlock) will be examined. Another source of torment for Franz Liszt was the long and bitter feud between him and Johannes Brahms and his allies over "the future of music" and Liszt's association with Wagner and his anti-Semitic views.

Part One:

The series opens with Professor Cecil Lytle seated in the small two bedroom apartment in Harlem where he and his ten siblings were raised. The script has him describe how the music of Franz Liszt first entered his life by way of old 78s his father found in a trash bin behind the neighborhood library:

It was growing up in a Harlem apartment (like this) that I first heard the piano music of Franz Liszt on old 78s that my father collected from a trash bin behind a neighborhood library. Worn out and scratchy, the music lifted from old vinyl captured my imagination. It was bold, verbose, flashy, and came wrapped in titles like Mephisto, Ave Maria, Rhapsody, Transcendental...

Why did this music drive me to the piano before I could walk to school? Knowing as little about music theory as planetary physics, it was clear to me, even then, that this was a music that spoke across centuries and cultures in bold terms, pushed boundaries, inspired and endured. This music boasted and brayed without apology.

In a performance/narrative format, Professor Lytle will focus on the early life and training of Franz Liszt. This discussion takes place on location in the birth place cottage in the village of Raiding. He was raised in a German-speaking, devoutly Catholic family that early on encouraged him to consider life as a priest. As a result of this early religious exposure, many of Liszt's compositions focus on issues of social liberation as well as aspects of the Old and New Testaments. On location in Budapest, Professor Lytle discusses and demonstrates at the piano how young Liszt, enters the national music scene as "the other" from Hungary and boldly begins to incorporate what he believes to be indigenous ethnic music of the Roma (Gypsies) into his early piano compositions.

Recognizing the extraordinary gifts of his preadolescent son, Adam Liszt compares his circumstance to that of Leopold Mozart a generation earlier. He makes a desperate leap for posterity and profit by resigning his post as chief sheep herder and accountant for the Esterházy in Raiding to take his son to Vienna to study with well-connected celebrity teachers. On location in Vienna in the home of Carl Czerny, Professor Lytle's script specifically comments:

At the beginning of the 19th century, Vienna was the easternmost frontier of European culture and power. Having swept the monarchy from the thrones of power, it was here that Napoleon met the Muslim world.

As Venice was the maritime halfway point between Europe and Asia, Vienna was its inland equivalent for the import and export of culture and goods between the west and the east. More importantly for Adam Liszt, it was the home of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Like Leopold Mozart a generation earlier, Adam shared a father's neurotic obsession about his son's career. He knew that Franz could not develop his prodigious talent in the backwaters of Hungary. Unlike London and Paris on the western outer edge of European cultural hegemony, Vienna was German-speaking and easily accessible to them. So it was here that he brought Franz to study. It was here that he staked his family's meager resources in a bid for both posterity and prosperity.

In 1821, as Napoleon met his end on a desolate wind-swept island in the south Atlantic, Adam and Anna Liszt moved to the Austrian capital with their gifted son. Vienna was full of infant prodigies in the tow of obsessive "stage parents"-- all making their desperate leap for fame and fortune. Despite their

humble origins (or, perhaps because of it), the Liszt family wanted to be near and to acquire the levers of aristocratic power. They arrived destitute, but resolved...

Adam wasted little time in presenting “Franzi” to the most famous teachers in town.

The script relates how, under the tutelage of Viennese piano pedagogue Carl Czerny (Beethoven’s prized student and secretary) and Antonio Salieri (Mozart’s celebrated competitor and Kapellmeister to the Royal Court of Vienna), young Liszt develops into the world’s greatest pianist and goes on to almost singlehandedly create the “public audience” after the fall of the aristocratic arts patronage system.

Although little is known of Salieri’s influence on Liszt, the narration comments on the strict pedagogic training the prodigy received from Carl Czerny; especially, the benefits the youngster derived from months of scales and velocity piano exercises that Czerny imposed on the gifted nine year old. Professor Lytle builds the script around letters to, from, or about Czerny that tell of the deep affection Franz Liszt held for his early piano teacher. Those studies helped him form his mature concept of “transcendental” piano technique that serves as the basis of his dozen Transcendental Etudes first published in 1837, then revised into the set that comes to us from 1852. Using transcendental Etudes #4 (Mazeppa), Professor Lytle will perform and demonstrate the evolving differences between the 1837 and 1852 versions of Mazeppa.

After 18 months in Vienna, Adam Liszt is disillusioned with the slow methodical progress of the boy’s studies and seeks to profit by presenting the prodigy in concert as soon as possible. Adam comes to the opinion that Vienna was home of the celebrated “past” in music—its leaders were either dead (Haydn & Mozart), losing their hearing (Beethoven), or yet to be recognized (Schubert). During the middle portion of Part One, Professor Lytle uses paintings by French painter, Eugène Delacroix (1797-1863), letters between Liszt, George Sands, and Marie d’Agoult, Victor Hugo, and Prince Metternich to relate the story of the Liszt family’s arrival in Paris in 1822 during the aftermath of the French Revolution, denial of his admission to attend the Paris Conservatory, and his liaison and with Countess Marie d’Agoult as relayed musically in his mammoth three-set composition, *Années de Pèlerinage* (“Years of Pilgrimage,” 1855-83). The script opens this section:

The emancipating glitz and turmoil of Paris beckoned. It was the home of revolutions in literature, dress, painting, and politics. Parisiennes had scrawled their signature on the principalities of Europe and now looked to also make a lasting imprint on the New World and the new century.

This time, Adam knew that the leap would be much further in distance, language, and custom—it would be a “do or die” one-way trip. He wagered that Franz would continue his training amid the liberating aether of a city that was quite literally on fire!

In the final section of Part One, Professor Lytle reflects on young Liszt’s encounter with the eccentric Italian violin virtuoso, Nicolo Paganini (1782-1840).

WORKS PERFORMED IN PART ONE

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">» <i>Au lac de Wallenstadt</i> from <i>Années de Pèlerinage</i>» <i>Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude</i> from Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses (portions in concert at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest);» <i>Hungarian Rhapsodies #2</i> (portions in concert at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest)» <i>Transcendental Etude #4, Mazeppa</i> (portions...) |
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Part Two:

Continuing in the narrative/performance format, the second segment concentrates on three factors that will drive Liszt's music composition in the middle portion of his long life: first, his long liaisons with Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittenstein; second, his career as a conductor, composer, and champion of "Music of the Future" in Weimar; and third, his difficult relationship with Richard Wagner.

Liszt puts on hold a vibrant and profitable international concert career to develop a concept and symphonic repertoire he called, *Music of the Future*. Opposition to this movement brings him into direct and bitter public dispute with Johannes Brahms and Robert Schumann who believed that they were the true legatees of the Austro-German symphonic tradition that reached its apogee with Ludwig van Beethoven. Through letters, paintings, and critiques, Professor Lytle will lead the viewer into an understanding of the dozen years Liszt spent as *Kapellmeister Extraordinaire* in Weimar (Germany) from 1842 to 1861. On location at Altenburg, the home of Carolyne and Liszt in Weimar, Professor Lytle discusses Liszt's many "firsts" such as Liszt coining the event and term "recital," his establishment of the tradition of piano soloists performing from memory and in profile on stage, conducting an orchestra as would a soloist with great expression and varied tempi, and using his position to commission and premiere the works of unknown living composers--now famously known--such as Robert Schumann, Hector Berlioz, Camille Saint-Saëns, and Richard Wagner.

The final third of Part Two ends with Professor Lytle discussing Liszt's tortured 40-year relationship with Richard Wagner. Liszt personally supported Wagner throughout his life and commissioned four of his operas which were premiered at the Royal Court in Weimar. Lytle discusses several of Richard Wagner's anti-Semitic writings and letters that, by their musical association, falsely portray Franz Liszt as similarly intolerant. Lytle makes the case that Liszt had the ability to intellectually separate Richard Wagner the man from his music. Pianist/conductor Daniel Barenboim will be interviewed to explain the contradictions within Wagner and his music. Maestro Barenboim will be asked to reprise a statement he made to Edward Said in conversation:

"First of all, there is Wagner the composer. Then there's Wagner the writer of his own librettos—in other words, everything that is tied to the music. Then there is Wagner the writer on artistic matters. And then there is Wagner the political writer—in this case, primarily the anti-Semitic political writer. These are four different aspects to his work... I think it's obvious that Wagner's anti-Semitic views and writings are monstrous. And I must say that if I, in a naively sentimental way, try to think which of the great composers of the past I would love to spend twenty-four hours with, if I could, Wagner doesn't come to mind. I'd love to follow Mozart around for twenty-four hours; I'm sure it would be very entertaining, amusing edifying, but Wagner ... I might invite him to dinner for

study purposes by not for enjoyment. Wagner, the person, is absolutely appalling, despicable, and, in a way, very difficult to put together with the music he wrote, which so often has exactly the opposite kind of feelings ... noble, generous.”

WORKS PERFORMED IN PART TWO

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| » Piano Sonata in B Minor (portions in concert at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest)
» Piano Transcription of Tristan und Isolde (portions...) |
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Part Three:

The last of the three one-hour programs concentrates on the challenges Liszt faced during the final years of his life. During the final years, Franz Liszt lived life as he always lived it, as a pilgrim. He essentially resides in three cities during the year: in Rome as an ordained Abbé; Weimar where he composed and continued his writings about the future of music and held Master Classes for selected students at no charge; and, in Budapest where he was installed by the Hungarian government as Director of the Franz Liszt Academy of Music.

Regarded by his peers as the most influential and important musician of the 19th century, his last years are superbly documented by the many letters, portraits, lithographs, caricatures and other representations. This chapter focuses on three topics and events in particular: 1) Liszt's ordination as Abbé in Rome; 2) his difficult relationship with his only surviving offspring, Cosima van Bülow and her adulterous relationship with Wagner; and, 3) the compositions of Liszt's late period (1872-86) which demonstrate his interest in atonal music.

Service to the Catholic Church had been a recurring ambition for both Franz Liszt and his father, Adam. The script describes their interest in serving the Catholic Church:

Adam and Anna Liszt cradled their sickly child the day after he was born, here, in the village church of the neighboring town, Unterfrauenhaid. He was baptized “Franciscus” in honor of the Franciscans: an order that dismissed Adam 14 years earlier for, “...his inconstant and changeable nature.”

In 1865, Liszt took minor Holy Orders and was ordained as an Abbé, a semi-Lay position with some, but not all, of the responsibilities and obligations of a priest. He could not, for instance, celebrate and conduct a Mass or hear confession, and curiously enough, he took no vows of chastity. One biographer is quoted in the script as saying: “He now wears the Abbé's cassock and looks well and contented. This is the end of the gifted virtuoso, a truly sovereign personality...” Professor Lytle, narrating on location in the tiny cell Liszt occupied in Rome, describes the peace Liszt found after receiving the tonsure in St Peter's Basilica.

It is through the controversy over Wagner and Cosima, however, that Liszt's life philosophy comes into full view. The script directs Professor Lytle in quotations from letters between Liszt and Cosima upbraiding her for making a cuckold of her husband, Hans van Bülow Liszt's friend and favored student. Cosima's very public adulterous relationship with Richard Wagner leads to a *Ménage à trois* that was aided and abetted by Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria (who is reported to have enjoyed sexual favors from Wagner as well.)

Finally, the third segment of the series closes with Professor Lytle at the piano before a Master Class of 160 students in the new Conrad Prebys Music Center on the University of California San Diego campus. He will discuss and perform two enigmatic late piano pieces by Franz Liszt during this 9-minute segment. Lytle employs graphic animation to analyze two of the late works: 1) *Nuage Gris* (Grey Clouds) composed in 1881 and used in the sound track of Stanley Kubrick's 1999 film, *Eyes Wide Shut*; and, *Bagatelle sans tonalité* (Bagatelle without tonality) composed in 1885, the year before Liszt died.

WORKS PERFORMED IN PART THREE

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Scherzo & March (entirety in class at UC San Diego)» Nuages Gris (in its entirety in class at UC San Diego)» Bagatelle sans tonalité (in its entirety in class at UC San Diego) |
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Project Timeline:

May 2010: The Nature of Genius: Franz Liszt (NOG) production begins, including videotaping concerts and sites in Europe central to Liszt's personal/musical history. Taping local concerts, narrative segments, segments will follow.

September 2010: Post- production begins, including addition of graphics/animations and editing of series.

December 2010: Publicity for the upcoming series will be begin dissemination through targeted emails to UCTV Music Subscribers, high school teachers, Music Departments of post secondary institutions and others. Special publicity for teachers will include instructions on accessing using the Teacher's Guide to the series.

January 2011: Broadcast/webcast debut of the Part One of the NOG: Franz Liszt Series.

March 2011: Broadcast/webcast debut of Part Two of the NOG

June 2011: Broadcast/webcast debut of Part Three of the NOG

June 2011: Offer the Nature of Genius Series to PBS Stations across the US for broadcast only. Drive all web viewers to UCTV for data collection purposes.

July 2011: Web data evaluation will begin, with requisite adjustments made to publicity/outreach program.

January 2012: Begin Evaluation of the Teacher's Guide with questionnaires to secondary teachers. Revise Teacher's Guide as warranted from teacher feedback.

February 2013: Begin final web data analysis and teacher feedback for final report

April 2013: Complete Final Report.