

University of Pécs Doctoral School of Arts

FERENC LISZT:
VON DER WIEGE BIS ZUM GRABE –
FROM THE CRADLE TO THE GRAVE
THE EVIDENCE INTO THE NOTES

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THESIS

„There are contemplative souls who are irresistibly drawn by solitude and contemplation to eternal ideals, that is, to religion; their every thought becomes a devotion and a prayer, their whole being a silent hymn to the Deity and to hope. They seek in themselves and in the creation around them the steps by which they may ascend to God, they seek expressions and images by which he may reveal himself to them and by which they may reveal themselves to him... I wish I could lend them some!”

(Lamartine: *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*)

Franz Liszt's art had a significant influence on the intellectual and spiritual layout of the 19th century. With the diversity of his creative career and his religiously inspired works, he left an everlasting mark on the history of classical music over the centuries. His artistic creed placed the composer-genius in a special role: he served as a mediator between earthly and divine ideals, helping us to feel and experience more deeply one of the fundamental essences of music, the sacred dimension behind the sounds.

The subject of the research is Franz Liszt's last symphonic poem, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, which can be considered as the composer's personal testament. A declaration of belief in musical notes, proclaiming the fragility of mortality on earth and the hope of eternity. The work focuses on the most important stages of the human journey, using music to portray the mystery of birth, the struggles of life, and the question of death and final departure. It uniquely combines the narrative structure of programme music with spiritual contemplation, while at the same time combining the pure harmonic style of Liszt's late and a musical thinking sensitive to progressive elements.

The aim of the research is to provide a comprehensive study of Liszt's last symphonic poem, including an analysis of the manuscript material, an insight into the composer's compositional technique and the development of the final version of the work. A detailed analysis of the work deals with the structural characteristics of the piece, its motivic, rhythmic and harmonic solutions, the unusual changes in tonality, the development of the musical elements and their interrelationships.

The aim is also to explore how music and transcendence are expressed, how their coherent unity is realized in the symphonic poem, and what are the characteristics that reveal the deep spiritual message of this rarely performed – but highly significant – work.

Liszt, through his musical heritage, his artistic quest and his innovative solutions, is an inspiring figure of modern musical thinking. This is demonstrated by his work *From the Cradle to the Grave*, which, with its unique handling of harmony and tonality, its use of chromaticism,

modal and whole-tone sets, model scales, and its clear and meditative style, foreshadows certain trends in 20th century music.

Interpreting Franz Liszt's piano works requires a high level of technical skills and spiritual maturity. Performing them with authenticity is often a challenge for performers, especially in late works, where a strong technical basis is needed and philosophical sensitivity is essential.

On the occasion of the 2011 Liszt jubilee year, his four-hand piano transcription *From the Cradle to the Grave* became a defining work for me, and practising and performing it gave me a deeper insight into Liszt's unique musical world. It became clear to me that the clear language, philosophical depth and unique harmonic world of his works are a priceless collection of musical and spiritual revelations, and a timeless musical heritage of the universal musical history. Franz Liszt's artistic vision of the world is closely linked to the various artistic disciplines, and his compositional technique and musical concept reveal strong visual influences. In his last symphonic poem, the thirteenth, he was also greatly influenced by Mihály Zichy's pen-drawing *Du berceau jusqu' au cercueil* (From the Cradle to the Coffin), which depicts the beginning and end of the human life journey through the symbols of the cradle and the grave.

And what lies between the two? The struggles of our existence, with the hardships and joys of our daily lives. In Mihály Zichy's gift of pen drawing, one of the favourite forms of expression in Romantic art, the composer found drama and philosophical depth. While the picture emphasises the transcendent role of art as a means of visuality, in parallel and in full harmony with it, the expression of a symphonic poem in sound has an equally symbolic content.

The dialogue between music and visual art reflects one of Liszt's most thoughtful artistic concept: the visual representation of the human life becomes a musical narrative. The interaction between the arts is a natural progression, and so the late 19th-century mindset can be seen in both Zichy's pen-drawing and Liszt's works. They were pioneers in establishing the unique spirit of the age, which is reflected in later artistic expressions. This foreshadows the vision of a synthesis of the arts in the ages to come: the relationship between the arts, music and the inspiring interplay between music and the literary, visual and theatrical works that played a decisive role in the relationship between the arts and music influenced the conditions under which the compositions were created and the characteristics of their creative phases.

During the compositional process, Liszt first created a piano version for solo and four hands, and soon afterwards orchestrated the work. Thus the orchestral version was born, which presents the dramatic and philosophical content with an even richer palette of timbres and musical toolkit. The composition breaks with the single-movement tradition of the symphonic poems, and its three-movement structure closely follows the three main motifs of Zichy's drawing.

The last years of Franz Liszt's life were marked by incessant travel between Budapest, Rome and Weimar, which was physically demanding and stressful, but also had a strong influence on his way of thinking and artistic expression. The worsening of his health and his physical pains stimulated in him even more the intellectual summing up and the focus on the essence of human life. His later works were characterised by a clear, unadorned musical language, and his work *From the Cradle to the Grave* displays this maturity, puritanism and concentration. From a psychological point of view the composition is a spiritual projection of the composer's personal development, a summation of life, a musical portrayal of thoughts and feelings about transience and the hope of eternity.

In the analysis of *From the Cradle to the Grave*, the surviving manuscript collection of Ferenc Liszt is a valuable source and support material, which serves as a relevant document not only from the point of view of musicology, but also from the point of view of personality psychology and aesthetics, to reveal an authentic portrait of Liszt. The analysis of the manuscripts reveals a spiritual man full of inner struggles, striving for artistic perfection, whose desire to experience divine intimacy in the twilight of his life was decisive.

The biography and personality of Franz Liszt have been studied in many disciplines. In the field of psychology, Dr. András Szilágyi, a medical psychologist, examined the composer's emotional world and personality development. In his opinion the composer's outlook on life and his way of thinking did not lose any of its passion and dynamism as he approached the end of his life, which was sometimes characterised by a calm and meditative contemplation as a counterpoint. From a graphological point of view, Gabriella Urbán, a writing expert, has analysed the composer's music manuscripts and letters, revealing the composer's mental state and emotional world. She was convinced that Liszt did not lose his composing vitality in his old age and worked with untiring creative passion to perfect his works. These studies of the manuscripts also attest to the fact that Liszt's central personality traits remained unchanged until the end of his life, and that his spirituality was based on emotional calm, philosophical reflection and creative vigour. His handwriting was dynamic, reflecting his unbroken creative spirit.

The demand for perfection, the constant building on each other of self-reflections, the intention of continuous improvement are behind the crossings out and corrections and notes in the manuscripts. The rethinking and refinement not only brought changes to the music in a technical sense, but also showed differences with the first version in a spiritual sense, which clearly shows that Liszt was not satisfied with himself in the process of composition.

The manuscript analysis focuses on the analysis of the musical solutions that can be read from the score of the solo and four-hand versions, which draws attention to the differences within each version and the differences in the development of the musical material. The analysis reveals that most of the versions have two major formal unit junctures, an intermediate section forming a transition, and the ending or beginning of the movement. The most characteristic differences are the length of the analogue sections, the tendency to increase in time, the harmonic turns, the modulation and the different use of rhythmic values. In most of them there is a coherent relationship, the functional relationships are strengthened by common tones. For Liszt, the organic construction, development and continuation of the musical process is particularly important, even at the boundary points of the movements, including those where the different, often contrasting, parts alternate. Often thematic connections also tie the composition's themes and melodic turns closely together, indicating the homogeneity of the work's character and tonal structure, thus supporting the linear development of the musical process.

The manuscript (written by the copyist) of the solo version of the first movement, *Die Wiege*, is almost free of corrections and is quite readable. The voices, articulations, musical instructions and individual entries can be considered accurate, so the reconstruction of the final version is limited to minor corrections.

In the second movement there are several corrections, crossings out and gluings. The transitional sections become longer, Liszt often attributes a significant role to the time factor among the quality solutions of the 'musical bridge' between two sections. Despite the fact that the tonal differences between the various variants are obvious, and the internal harmonic and tonal proportions are different, the building concept is still evident in all of them.

Thus, in almost all the versions, as a result of the unity and organic development of the musical material, these solutions could even be alternatives to the final version in terms of their musical value.

Although there are different solutions for the closure at the end of movement II, most versions have in common the dramatic tonal set „A–B–C sharp–D sharp–F”, which forms through the model 1:5, the augmented triad, the augmented six-five and augmented four-three

chords, into an almost complete whole-tone scale, with which the composer aims to achieve one goal: to direct the music to total tonal uncertainty. The shorter and longer alternative versions of the ending of the second movement and the beginning of the third movement show that Liszt repeatedly rethought the formal connection between the two sections at the boundary of the two movements.

From a composer's point of view, it is not easy to think about how to end the struggle of life at the ecstatic culmination of the musical process, where the music has already completely escalated, or how to connect it to the point where the struggle spills over into another world of enormous contrast. A medium in which the grave marks the end of man's earthly existence and the beginning of the afterlife, and where the music, leaving the world of the initial painful sighs, becomes translucent and bends into a transcendent sphere.

Liszt – even if only for a short time – completely moves away from the traditional tonal structure, from the traditional tonal treatment, and the sound becomes completely "groundless", floating. The attempt to 'distort' Romantic tonality in this way is one of Liszt's progressive compositional ideas, and the innovative and convincing force of the sound of this movement is due to its unique character.

Various versions of the conclusion of the third movement and of the immediately preceding movements have survived, from which one can strongly infer that Liszt was also intensely preoccupied with the final musical moments as the work neared its end.

When comparing the early, intermediate and final versions of the solo and four-hand versions, the differences are the number of melody notes, the length of the introductory parts, the diatonic and chromatic melody, the rhythm and its augmented version, the length of the pauses, the repetition, the sequencing, shorter and longer transitions, accompanied and unaccompanied measures, sustained, static or rhythmic harmonies and harmonic resolutions, which, as alternatives that overlap and replace each other, are undoubtedly clearly visible stages in the development of musical thinking.

While manuscript analysis maps the different versions, the stages of the development and maturation of the music in relation to the various early, intermediate and final versions, the analysis of the work focuses on the compositional structure of the final (solo) version and on the characteristics of its various elements. Of course, in terms of music theory and the relationship between music and its transcendent content, manuscript analysis and analysis are closely related.

Aspects of the analysis of the work include notation, tonality, modulation, harmonies, spacing, melody, rhythm, analogies and monophony, which are similar to the issues that arise in manuscript analysis when comparing different versions. *From the Cradle to the Grave*, the lyrical and dramatic representation of the musical process, the development of musical progressions, the role of the musical keys (C major, C sharp major, A major, A flat major, E flat major, E flat major, B major), the role of chromaticism in shaping mood, melody and harmony, sequences as extensive pillars of the formal components within the great whole, the monophonic melody – reminiscent of Gregorian chant – as a carrier of philosophical content, the cross motif hidden behind the notes – which also belong to Liszt's typically recognizable "musical stamps" – as well as the mirrored representation of the four-voice B–A–C–H motive is an extremely concise formulation of Liszt's artistic ars poetica of his age, and at the same time a testimony to his creed in musical notes. The musical minimalism, simplified harmonic structure and clean form of the work thus clearly reflect the state of mind of Liszt in his last years: an acceptance of the transience of earthly life and a profound turning towards the transcendent dimension.

Characteristics of the three movements (in summary):

- Movement I (*Die Wiege – The Cradle*): meditative, lyrical music evoking the innocence and purity of birth. The accompaniment, which imitates the rocking motion of the cradle, the simple, clear melody and the light harmonies combine to create a serene yet mysterious atmosphere.
- Movement II (*Der Kampf – The Struggle*): a dynamic and dramatic musical passage symbolising the struggles of life. The ostinato rhythms, the 'distortion' of the sound, the appearance of a whole-tone tone set and the contrasting structure are used to musically represent the struggles and uncertainties of human existence.
- Movement III (*Das Grab – The Tomb*): The themes of transcendence and eternal life. The music gradually becomes floating and abstract, the dissolution of harmonies creating a sense of calm. The final sound symbolizes the passage into eternal life, the "final" arrival.

Franz Liszt's religiosity played a decisive role in his life, and was in harmony with his artistic and creative approach. The practice of his faith was more intrapersonal and philosophical than dogmatic. His meditative and liturgical compositions of his later years were the most pronounced in his immersion in the spiritual and spiritual depths of religion.

Liszt's aim was to reform church music, and he saw his work as a missionary service, in which the complete symbiosis of art and faith was the highest moral and artistic ideal.

Franz Liszt's art and his personal creed were closely intertwined with Franciscan ideals, in particular the idea of simplicity, humility and the search for transcendence. His attachment not only shaped the moral and philosophical orientation of his life, but also profoundly influenced his musical thinking. His commitment is demonstrated by the fact that he joined the Franciscan Order of the Third Order in 1857 and wore the cassock regularly at the end of his life. In the case of *From the Cradle to the Grave*, the Franciscan spirituality is not expressed as a direct religious programme, but rather on an aesthetic and philosophical level. The puritanism of the composition's structure, the natural transitions between the sections, and the clear, elevated atmosphere of the final section all indicate that Liszt understood the art not as a revelation in itself, but as a tool for spiritual contemplation.

An analysis of the different versions of the piece – two-handed, four-handed and orchestral – also shows that Liszt paid particular attention to the possibilities of interpretation. In many ways, the adaptation of the work demonstrates that his creative concept is not based on a single tonal ideal, but that he wants to allow the music to be both intimate and monumental in all three versions.

Forty-five books and twenty-six studies and articles have been used as literary sources for a comprehensive research of the symphonic poem. The solo piano edition of the *New Liszt Edition* formed the basis for the analysis of the work, while the manuscript analysis was based on sources provided by Maria Eckhardt and the online database of the Washington Library of Congress. For the manuscript analysis and the comparison of the three versions, the four-hand version published by Bote & Bock in Berlin and the orchestral score were helpful. The scores and examples of manuscript material selected for illustrative purposes are presented in the picture list at the end of this dissertation.

Some of the main sources of literature were Alan Walker's three-volume biography of *Franz Liszt*, the book on *Liszt's last days* (based on the unpublished diary of Lina Schmalhausen), Mária Eckhardt's „*Liszt and the Franciscans*”, and »*From the Cradle to the Grave*«: *a retrospective view of an artist's life. The Memory of Dezső Legány*”, and La Mara's collection of Liszt's correspondence, *Franz Liszt's Briefe*.

The results of the research show that the symphonic poem *From the Cradle to the Grave* is one of the most outstanding works of the late Romantic period, a true masterpiece. With its ground-breaking innovations, musical expression and timeless spiritual messages, it is not only the end of Liszt's oeuvre, but also the imprint of the spiritual legacy of an era. The progressive elements and innovative formal solutions used in its sound bridged the gap between Romanticism and Impressionism, just as they were an inspiration to 20th century composers as a forerunner of modern music.

The main objective of this dissertation is to provide a gap-filling analysis of the work, applying new analytical perspectives to provide a more complex picture for a fuller understanding of the musical and spiritual messages of Liszt's last symphonic poem. By emphasising the aesthetic and philosophical importance of the work, the research contributes to a more accurate understanding of Liszt's legacy and proves beyond doubt that Franz Liszt's symphonic poem *From the Cradle to the Grave* has a worthy place among the outstanding masterpieces of music history, whose profound spiritual guidance has not lost its relevance for today's people.

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