

Franz Liszt was the most popular pianist of his day. He had everything in his favour – good looks, magnetism, power, a masterly technique, and an unprecedented rich sound. Born on 22 October, 1811, in Raiding, Hungary, he was an accomplished pianist at the age of seven, composing at eight, making concert appearances at nine and studying in Vienna at ten. In 1827, at the age of 16, after the death of his father, he made Paris his headquarters.

It was as a pianist that Liszt made his initial impact on Europe. Although he did not break with tradition completely, he created much that was new. Before Liszt, pianists kept their hands close to the keyboard, playing from wrist and finger rather than arm or shoulder. But not after Liszt. He established the genre of the bravura pianist who would haughtily come out, lift hands high, and assault the instrument. Even “pure” musicians who hated everything he represented could not but be impressed. Mendelssohn had to admit that he was unparalleled, that he could play with “a degree of virtuosity and complete finger independence”. Contemporary pianists, such as Charles Halle, heard him and were in despair. They could not possibly begin to compete with that combination of brilliance and sheer aura.

Franz Liszt was a great and a complicated man. He had a fine musical mind – one of the strongest in history – yet, in his recitals he could not keep from tampering with other men’s music, cheapening even Beethoven with added effects. He was vain and needed constant adulation, yet he could be genuinely humble in the presence of a genius such as Wagner.

His recitals were a series of triumphs, and women were especially attracted to his concerts. There were scenes of frenzy in which impressionable ladies fainted or would fight over the gloves he negligently tossed on the stage. He knew well the impression he was making and everything was calculated and that included his programmes, which seldom had much “meat” on them. He probably had the entire literature, as it was then known, committed to memory. At his large public concerts he would play impressive, attention-seeking music and generally it was his own. His music held a genuine fascination, but one of the difficulties in understanding it was that it is so heavily dependent on performance. He would enter on stage, clanking with decorations suspended on chains. Hair hanging down to his shoulders, he would survey the audience and slowly remove his gloves, tossing them to the floor.

Until 1839, he followed the established format for concerts, which meant that he shared the time with other artists or an orchestra, and he would be heard only for part of the programme. However, that same year he invented the

LISZT IN LIMERICK

BY RICHARD AHERN



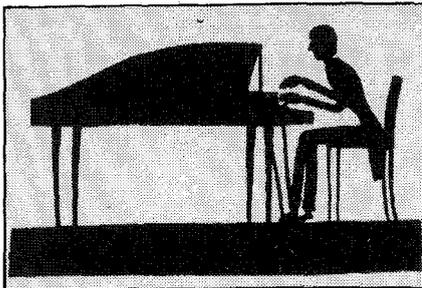
Liszt, in 1847.

solo recital, as it is known today.

Liszt’s life was a hectic musical and full of emotional outburst. It included a love affair that had Europe wagging its head in disapproval. He met the Countess d’Agoult in 1834, and the following year she left her husband and went off with Liszt to Switzerland. They settled in Geneva, where he taught, and it was the

headquarters from which he was to set out on tour after tour.

This, then, was the colourful, famous, impulsive, whimsical character who in August, 1840, decided to undertake a Grand Tour of England, Ireland and Scotland. Travelling in a horsedrawn coach (at an average speed of 9 m.p.h), Liszt and his troupe were to wend their



way through 65 towns and cities and cover 3,389 miles. One of his aims was to demonstrate the wonderful music his European colleagues were composing, and to give audiences a unique opportunity to hear, often for the first time, the music of Chopin, Beethoven and Schubert.

He had varying opinions of his five travelling companions. He described Frank Mori, the duettist, as "a nasty little dog", the singer Mlle de Varny as "absolutely detestable" and Louisa Bassano, another singer, as "a nice unpretentious girl". Together this incongruous band wove their way through the British Isles, combatting the most adverse weather conditions and illnesses.

Their expedition commenced in Chichester on 17 August, 1841, and in the following weeks journeyed through countless towns and villages. In Southampton he "electrified and delighted with a skill that seems superhuman. At one moment the most delicate and silvery tones sweep over the senses, and at another, a torrent of magnificent sound which has never been heard from the instrument before". In Sidmouth they arrived late to "fireworks and lemonade!", and in Taunton "His fingers wandered wildly over the notes, and seemingly without plan, and a stream of music burst upon the ear ...".

Some few days later, in Stamford, they encountered "No encores. Pigs squeaking during the singing. Bad dinner". This was not the end of their misfortune, as in other venues they were "diddled out of 12 shillings"; there was a report of bloody noses on the way from Bury, and "No encores - no laughter - no nuffin!" at another location.

By November, they had reached Wolverhampton and were "one and all perfectly miserable". Accounts of his performances in England ranged from the vibrant - "... his fingers we have likened to talons on account of their thinness and length, pouncing upon the keys of the pianoforte with the eagerness and velocity of an eagle"; to the disconcerting - "a musical performance which gave so little satisfaction ... We think he has been greatly over-rated".

On stage Liszt sometimes wore his great Hungarian coat which was "composed of skins and ornamented with different coloured leathers - it is a most enormous concern and weighs at least as heavy as three greatcoats". This combined "... with fevered gestures and hair flying in all directions" was certainly a sight to while away the desolate winter

nights. It was also six shillings well spent.

Leaving Liverpool, they crossed a wind-swept Irish Sea. Their next stop, 24 hours later, was Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) Harbour, Dublin. In the Rotunda Grand Room, Sackville Street, they played to a hall of 1,200 people. The master played as one who possessed "40-handed power" while Mr. Parry's singing passed "from grave to gay, from lively to severe", and Misses Bassano and Steele were "the fair sirens of the night".

The exuberant ensemble boarded



Portrait of Liszt, aged twenty-eight, by Jean Ingres.

their horse-drawn carriage, and, took their leave of the capital city at 11 a.m. on Friday, 8 January. At 4 p.m., they stopped briefly at Fleming's Hotel in Monaster-evin, and as they traversed the Midlands, the moon pierced through a heavy snow. Reaching Roserea, they "Stopped and had some tea and capital toasted cheese and pickles". Continuing through the turnpikes and into the early hours of Saturday morning they steered a steady course for Limerick. At 6 a.m., they were disturbed by a dreadful commotion - they had run over a pig being brought to market. Over an hour later, after a journey of 20 hours, they stopped at the Royal Mail Hotel Cruise's.

Monsieur Liszt went directly to Major Vokes' residence in fashionable Pery Square, while his associates went straight to bed in the hotel.

Advertisements for their "Two Grand Concerts" appeared in the local papers. These were to take place at 1 p.m. that day (Saturday the 9th) and at 8 p.m. on

Monday, 11 January, in Anthony Swinburn's Rooms in Brunswick (Sarsfield) Street. Tickets for the occasions were 5 shillings (25p) each and could be obtained from Corbett and Sons' Music Warehouse in Patrick Street.

Having had no more than 4 hours sleep, they were up at mid-day and on their way to Swinburn's. They arrived fifteen minutes late, and sweeping past the proprietor, made their way into "... a poor dirty place ... where there were about 100 people present. They were uncommonly lively for a Morning Concert and gave everything applause. Unfortunately, Joey Richardson was not well - out in the cold all night. He played very queer and threw his flute down and nearly broke it after missing a passage in 'Rousseau's Dream' ... Liszt was encored once".

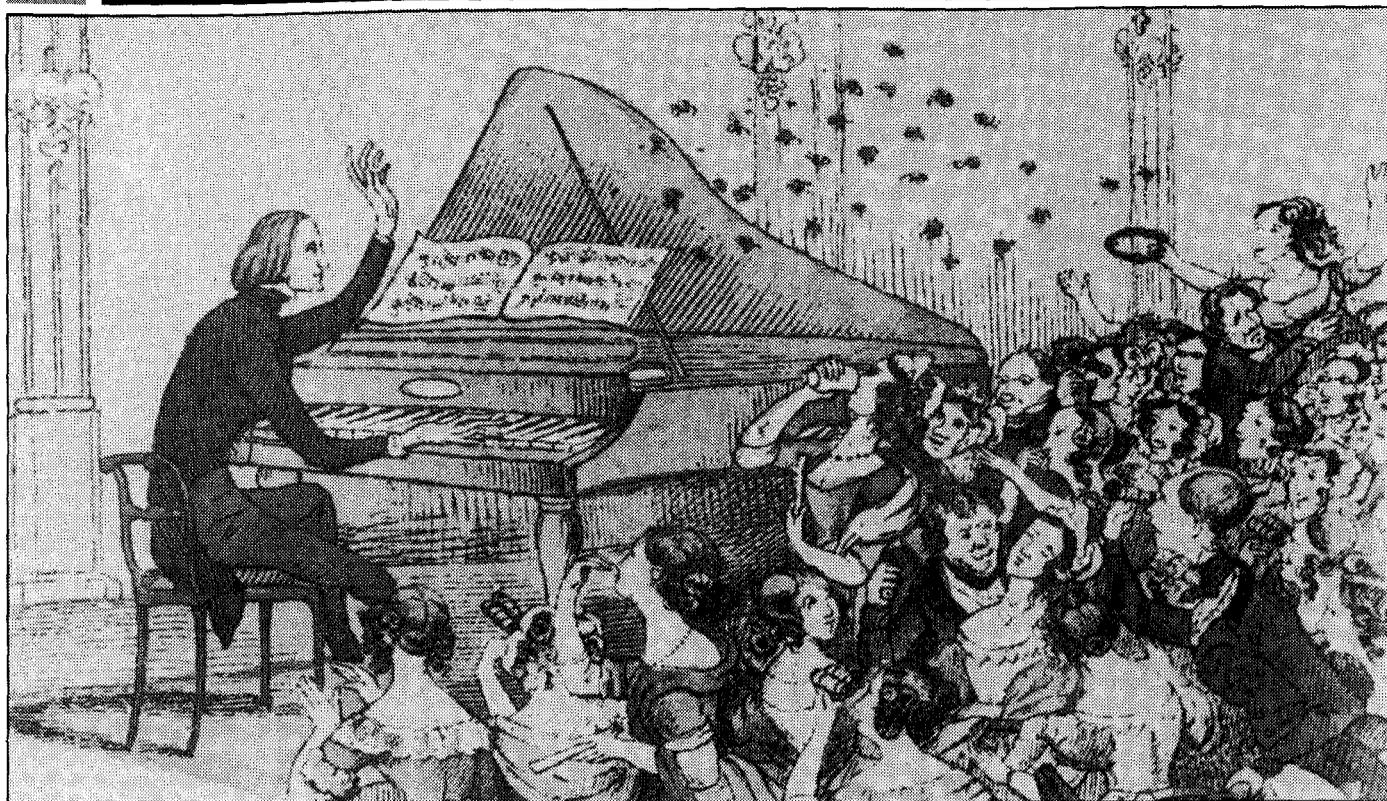
That afternoon they took a walk along George (O'Connell) Street and decided it was "... a nice street, like the back-bone of a fish, one long street". They returned to their hotel to eat and Liszt went back to Major Vokes - "a grand man" - to play "whist and games etc."

It was their intention to attend to their religious duties the next morning but they were late in rising. Two local men, Messrs. Corbett and Rodgers, visited Liszt and spent most of the day with him "smoking and dining". At the invitation of Bishop Knox, he gave a recital in the drawing-room of the then Bishop's Palace (now the head-office of Bord na gCon) at 104 Henry Street.

Their big concert was scheduled for the next evening, Monday the 11th. A few hours prior to it, Parry and Miss Bassano went shopping and he bought "a pair of Limerick Gloves, which are so small they go into a nutshell". Mr. Rodgers brought them to see the Grand (Pery) Square then being laid out.

At 8 p.m., Swinburn's Rooms were "... visited by 200 of the elite of Limerick and Clare ... a full and fashionable audience. Liszt's first piece, the 'Hexameron', was most exquisite and masterly". The





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audience was "At one moment astonished by the rapid brilliancy of his passages, and at another were spell-bound by the sweet and delicate softness of his touch. He also performed his celebrated "Galop Chromatique". Such was "the impress of his execution", combined, no doubt, with "fevered gestures and hair flying in all directions" that "some thought the instrument would fall to pieces in his hands - it was a marvellous piano to stand up to it".

And if that was not enough, "The audience was kept in roars of laughter by John Parry's inimitable amusing compositions ... During the interval they were much pleased with Joe Richardson's beautiful variations on the flute, and Miss Bassano and Miss Steele sang several well-known duets".

Their performance finished at 11 p.m., and returning to their respective abodes, they packed their belongings and "had a capital supper". In the very early hours of Tuesday morning, with their adrenalin still flowing, they set out from a foggy Limerick to return the 94 Irish miles to Dublin.

Some years later, in February, 1852, Miss Bassano again appeared in Limerick in the Theatre Royal and her visit, eleven years earlier, was alluded to as follows: "Miss Bassano is not unknown to Limerick audiences for she appeared here some years ago when Liszt was astonishing the public with his extraordinary pianoforte playing".

Back in the Rotunda in Dublin, they prepared for yet another concert. On this occasion, the remarkable Catherine Hayes (referred to later as the Pearl of La Scala and the Irish Nightingale) performed. She was then only 15 years of age

and was introduced to Liszt at this time.

A number of misconceptions, surrounding Liszt's stay here, have crept into reminiscences of the event. It was erroneously reported that he gave his performances in the Theatre Royal, Henry Street, but he, in fact, did so in Swinburn's Hotel. Tradition has it that he performed his Hungarian Rhapsody Number 2, for the first time in public, in Limerick. This is highly unlikely, as there is no evidence anywhere to offer support, and Parry's Diaries, so detailed in all aspects, would surely have recorded this. It was also thought that Catherine Hayes sang at one of his concerts in Limerick but this is inaccurate as it was in Dublin that she performed, a few days later. She did perform in Limerick some weeks later, on 5 and 6 February.

By then, Liszt was already back in England and was on his way to Halifax where they proceeded "to the Odd-fellows Hall ... the last concert on this awfully long tour". Awfully long it may have been but the accounts of their episodes are rich and picturesque. Through their concerts, they experienced the various characteristics of the Irish, English and Scottish gatherings.

Many of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies came following his tour. He continued to captivate and his life was constantly being discussed. More scandal followed when his pupil, the rich Olga Janina ("the Cossack Countess"), tried to shoot him and then herself. Everything about him was of interest to a gossip-hungry world. Even his hands received special attention - plaster casts were made of them and his pupils wrote prose-poems about them.

Throughout his life, he was always

talking about joining the church; that was part of his romantic posture and it was mostly talk. Even when he did join, late in life, he had the best of both worlds, and probably never took his religion very seriously, but only made a great show of doing so. He took four minor church orders in 1865, wore a cassock, and was addressed as the Abbé Liszt.

In the course of his career, he insulted nobles and even kings, when their manners were rude while he was playing. He was Liszt, the only one of his kind, and royalty had to bow to his will. He continued to compose steadily and taught up to the last year of his life. The old Liszt idly sketched music that hinted at a world still unknown. He did this merely to amuse himself, not caring if it was ever played.

And so, the man who had made his own rules, the exceptional figure who had his cake and ate it too, the Grand Old Man of Music, Franz Liszt, died on 31 July, 1886.

SOURCES

1. *The Lives of the Great Composers* by Harold C. Schonberg.
2. *The Master Musicians* by Walter Beckett and Sir Jack Westrup.
3. Robin Colvill, St. Albans, Herts.
4. John Hargaden, Arts Adviser, University of Limerick.
5. *The Dublin Evening Mail*, Wednesday, 23 December, 1840.
6. *The Limerick Chronicle*, 6, 13 and 27 January, 1841.
7. *The Limerick Reporter* of 12 and 22 January, 1941.
8. "Liszt's British Tours of 1840 and 1841", from the *Diaries of John Orlando Parry*.