



Liszt Consolations
Saskia Giorgini



CONSOLATIONS

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

6 Consolations, S.172

1	No. 1, Andante con moto	1. 31
2	No. 2, Un poco più mosso	3. 12
3	No. 3, Lento placido	4. 31
4	No. 4, Quasi Adagio, cantabile con devozione	3. 03
5	No. 5, Andantino	2. 30
6	No. 6, Allegretto sempre cantabile	3. 09

3 Caprices-Valses, S.214

7	No. 1 in B-flat Major "Valse de bravoure"	8. 26
8	No. 2 in E Major "Valse mélancolique"	6. 11
9	No. 3 in A Major "Valse de concert sur deux motifs de Lucia et Parisina de Donizetti"	9. 27

10	Valse Impromptu S.213	6. 21
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Liebesträume, S.541

11	No. 1 in A-flat Major "Hohe Liebe"	6. 48
12	No. 2 in E-flat Major "Seliger Tod"	4. 31
13	No. 3 in A-flat Major "Oh Lieb, so lang du lieben kannst"	4. 51

2 Légendes, S.175

14	No. 1, St François d'Assise: la prédication aux oiseaux	9. 44
15	No. 2, St François de Paule: marchant sur les flots	8. 45

Total playing time: 82. 59

Saskia Giorgini, piano

This album represents another step in my personal journey through the fascinating layers of Liszt's creative personality. It is such a joy to spend time with these amazing compositions. Some of them belong to the most beloved and celebrated repertoire by Liszt. Dealing with well-known repertoire, finding one's way through it, looking for its essence, is a very special pleasure.

Having heard a piece many times, performed by illustrious and great artists, finding a personal voice is not always easy. It is a job that requires particular attention and an introspective search that often happens far from the piano itself. A never-ending process of (self)discovery. Any beauty revealed, or any doubt (these are equally important and powerful companions in a musician's life) will appear in the music we play and make it somehow closer to the Truth. The goal is to turn the instrument, the piano, into something else, to turn the sound into dreams, into hopes, into nostalgic memories, into pure excitement.

Liszt showed us human nature in all its different aspects. This album is about universal experiences: heartache, hope, happiness, and exaltation. Some of the most beautiful pieces of the repertoire, they show us a way of dealing with the trials and doubts of life.

Saskia Giorgini



New forms of love

Images of Liszt — sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical — tend to fall into two categories. The first clusters around the youthful virtuoso sweeping piano and women alike before him. The second portrays the Abbé Liszt as elderly sage and seer, discouraging pupils from performing his music lest it damage their careers, whilst seeking as composer to ‘hurl my lance into the boundless realms of the future’. Transcendental pianism, broadly speaking, cedes to whispers, elegies, even atonality. That is a caricature. Yet perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves not only that Liszt was always an *avant-gardist*; not only that his late music could still storm the technical heights of youth; but that there was no straight line to his career; and, moreover, that many of Liszt’s greatest and most celebrated works come from what we might call a ‘middle’ or ‘mixed’ period that followed withdrawal from the

exhausting circus of itinerant performance, prior to his final, inward turn.

For one renowned as *the* towering virtuoso of his instrument, Liszt’s touring career proved surprisingly brief, ending at the age of 36 in February 1847 with concerts in Odessa and Elizabethgrad. Accepting in 1848 an invitation from Weimar, from Grand Duke Charles Frederick of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (and his wife Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna) to be *Kapellmeister* afforded Liszt new stability with time to compose and an orchestra on which to experiment. Liszt did not cease to play in public but those Ukrainian concerts were the last for which he received payment. Performing activities shifted towards conducting and gave way to composition: piano, orchestral, and choral.

Dating, even categorising, Liszt’s works is in many cases a fool’s errand, both because there is much we do not know and because many long, sometimes always, remained

works-in-progress. The supremely ‘finished’ quality of, say, the B Minor Sonata is relatively unusual. Liszt was not a reviser in the sense the perfectionist Brahms would be, chiselling away to attempt Michelangesque perfection, destroying countless works because they did not, for him, quite match up. Liszt was inclined to offer different versions of the same work in different circumstances, the first superior in one way, the second in another, many just different. It is for us to decide: fascinating rather than frustrating, though not on occasion without elements of the latter. But why categorise? This is high Romantic art, not philately. ‘New wine demands new bottles,’ as Liszt declared.

Liszt’s six *Consolations* were written in Weimar in 1849 and 1850, the second version of a set written between 1844 and 1849, its fifth originally a sole ‘Madrigal’ with the intriguing motto ‘nessun maggior’ from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Four, that fifth included, are in bright, warm, yet tender E

Major (felt even with equal temperament). They surround a third in flattened D-flat and a fourth, on a song theme by Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna, which leads us again to A-flat Major, poised between hymnody and the sepulchre. A white star above the theme refers to Weimar’s Order of the White Falcon. The D-flat piece, ‘Lento placido’ yet ardent in its *cantabile*, is a post-Chopin nocturne replete with mini-cadenza, dying to almost-nothingness before the final descent. When, in 1883, Liszt received from Steinway a piano with *sostenuto* pedal, he immediately recommended use here, notating the opening bars accordingly.

If the first piece is an opening album leaf, the second a more extended, equally vernal successor, the sixth unfolds in grander, more rhetorical style that clearly completes the whole. In 1882, Liszt’s pupil Carl Lachmund noted in his diary: ‘He played each note of the melody as if it were a significant poetic word, which effect was heightened in that he used the thumb for each one of these

notes, and dropping his hand in a languid manner as he did this. He would dwell slightly here or there on a note as if entranced and then resume the motion without leaving a feeling that the time had been disturbed. ... I felt that he might do it in a different place each time he played the piece.' Whether the name comes from Charles Sainte-Beuve's 1830 verse collection, *Les Consolations*, or Lamartine's poem *Une larme, ou Consolation* — perhaps both — this visionary climax and postlude are fully in keeping with such inspiration.

The *Valses-caprices* are differently big-hearted: very much works from, if not entirely of, the virtuoso years, similarly undergoing revision for eventual publication in 1852. They feature charming reminiscences of the opera house and development — or at least expansion — of material learned there, but of Donizetti, not Wagner. The third, 'Valse de concert', embroiders a waltz from *Lucia di Lammermoor* so much, yet so lightly, that it is no transcription but a

new piece, that waltz eventually combining in invertible counterpoint another waltz, from the same composer's *Parisina*. Byron, the latter's original poet, is not far from our thoughts, nor is the devilish virtuosity of Paganini. These are after all flights of 'caprice'. Although it would be foolish to push the 'Valse mélancolique' into Liszt's old age, one could be forgiven for wondering from its repeated opening dissonances, B-sharp against a tonic E as yet barely revealed as such, quite where it will head. That it reaches an almost self-consciously charming waltz, 'dolce con sentimento', only adds to surprise and delight. Not least of Liszt's qualities here, amongst a 'bravoure' far from limited to the first waltz bearing that name, is a humour less readily divined in fruits of later, headier, more Germanic Romanticism (and modernism).

The A-flat Major *Valse-Impromptu* (a favourite key for Liszt, as heard in the first and third *Liebesträume*), probably composed between 1850 and 1852 publication, was the

third incarnation of material first heard in an 1842 *Petite valse favorite* (*Souvenir de St Petersburg*, S.212), extended the following year and dedicated to the pianist Maria Kalergis. (Liszt would furnish a further, longer version, S.213a, in about 1880.) What we hear here stands close to the spirit of the *Valses-caprices*, improvisatory, 'preluding' introduction transporting us to a waltz of considerable charm, even coquetry, 'sempre scherzando', that knows its Chopin yet is not bound by him.

Three *Liebesträume* date from Liszt's virtuoso days, probably as early as 1843, reaching 'finished', published form — though arguably always with some licence in performance — in 1850. This is Liszt the inveterate transcriber, albeit of his own music: three settings, published simultaneously, of poems by Ludwig Uhland ('Hohe Liebe', 'Seliger Tod') and Ferdinand Freiligrath ('O lieb, so lang du lieben kannst'). Long melodic lines sing as they can only on the piano. A voice can sustain, swell,

subside, many things the piano cannot; it cannot readily imitate itself.

'Il canto accentato assai,' Liszt writes above opening melodies to the first two: accent considerably, yet no more than enough. Melodies variously characterised ('quasi recitativo' (1), 'con passione' (2)) have arpeggios spun round them like gossamer or more colourful, even primal, flights of fancy, erupting in cadenzas that bring us down from heaven to love's delights on earth. Those arpeggios may look straightforward in concept, but that does not necessarily translate into simplicity of harmony, extramusical reference (no.2's blessed death, evoking *avant la lettre* Wagner's *Tristan*), or indeed of technique. Here are grand passion *and* breathtaking intimacy. 'Love's dreams' are generous, enrapturing, even all-encompassing, as Liszt moves from saintly love to the frankly erotic, to the reconciling wish of maturity to perpetuate those dreams and their realisation, like music itself, as far into the future as one

can, equally drawing on memories of the past that have made the present what it is. A good (and/or bad) Catholic, Liszt would never truly distinguish between or categorise the three; he was no Tannhäuser, split between Venusberg and Wartburg. Above all, one must believe; what is life without?

Deux Légendes are later, though not 'late', pieces, from Liszt's 1863 sojourn at Rome's Madonna del Rosario. He wrote piano and orchestral versions, but the piano originals have remained better known. The first, dedicated to Liszt's daughter Cosima, was inspired by recently published *Petites fleurs de Saint François d'Assise* and, it is said, more immediately by Roman sparrows. Liszt evokes rather than transcribes birdsong. St Francis preaches in piano recitative. The two are magically combined, religious mystery before our ears. In the barnstorming second, another St Francis, of Paola, walks on water after a painting by Eduard von Steinle, which hung in (Franciscus) Liszt's Weimar

study. Waters rise; the saint rises above them. Liszt's description to Wagner (of the painting) comes to pass: 'he strides firmly, steadfastly, over the tumultuous waves,' in the saint's left hand 'burning coals', his right giving 'the sign of blessing'. Upward he gazes, his way lit by the word 'Caritas' (that is, love). In the first, Liszt quotes his *Cantico del sol di San Francesco d'Assisi*, S.4. In the coda to the second, Liszt quotes from *An den heiligen Franziskus von Paula*, S.28, also from 1862. Style, key (E Major) and sentiment recall *Consolations*, the words in question once more the *Liebesträume*: 'O let us preserve love whole.'

Hearing Liszt play this 'legend' at Princess Pauline von Metternich's Paris salon, Saint-Saëns concluded: 'Never again shall we see or hear anything to compare with it.' For, if comparisons are odious, chez Liszt they are futile, every performance bringing new form, new love, and a new form of love.

Mark Berry

Acknowledgements

PRODUCTION TEAM

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Saskia Giorgini plays a Bösendorfer 280VC.

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