

## ABOUT THE PIECE

# *Les préludes*

Franz Liszt

Liszt himself declared, after becoming an abbé in the Catholic Church, "The best of me is in my religious music." However, the composer's judgment has not coincided with posterity's, which has set the seal of approval on Liszt's piano concertos and many of his solo piano pieces, and on a select few of his orchestral works. *Les préludes* is one of these, being the most famous of his 12 symphonic poems. Liszt had a very strong conviction on the subject of program music, namely, that a given story is a symbol of an idea, and that the expounding of the inherent philosophical and humanistic elements of the idea in pure lyricism should be the goal.

In theory, and most often in practice, Liszt, of all the 19th-century composers of program music, was closer to realizing the sense of Beethoven's preface to his "Pastoral" Symphony: "More the expression of sentiment than painting." Of course, Liszt, like Beethoven, with his drenchingly graphic rain and thunderstorm, acceded to certain specific picturesque temptations. But essentially the Lisztian imagery is poetically suggestive rather than concretely descriptive, and it was arrived at in original musical ways that worked a profound influence on all those, including Wagner, prepared to accept a new order. Liszt's structural means for attaining his goal was the devising of a free form in which a few basic themes undergo continuous transformations of melody, rhythm, harmony, timbre, dynamics, or tempo (any one, or several, or all of these simultaneously). Thus, for example, a Lisztian love theme can emerge as a blazing march, or vice-versa. The first-mentioned is precisely what happens in *Les préludes*. In the climactic section, the pair of lyric themes labeled by Liszt "the enchanted dawn of every life" and containing the work's pervading three-note motif, are transformed into surging battle calls.

*Les préludes* was composed in 1854 and to it was appended a program note written by Liszt, indicating that the piece is to be considered a musical depiction of a poem by Alphonse de Lamartine.

"What is our life but a series of preludes to that unknown song whose first solemn note is tolled by death? The enchanted dawn of every life is love. But where is the destiny on whose first delicious joys some storm does not break?... And what soul thus cruelly bruised, when the tempest rolls away, seeks not to rest its memories in the pleasant calm of pastoral life? Yet man does not long permit himself to taste the kindly quiet that first attracted him to nature's lap. For when the trumpet sounds he hastens to danger's post, that in the struggle he may once more regain full knowledge of himself and his strength."

— Orrin Howard

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