



## HUMANITIES

## Longing for Liszt

Pianist and composer Franz Liszt brought star power to 19th-century music.

By Kathleen McGarvey

More than a hundred years before Beatlemania, audiences went wild for pianist and composer Franz Liszt, in thrall to his charisma and dramatic musicianship. Women vied to garner scraps of his hair or clothes or broken piano strings. German poet Heinrich Heine, his contemporary, invented a term for the sensation he created: “Lisztomania.”

“It was a very similar phenomenon” to the Beatles craze, says Robert Doran, an associate professor of French and comparative literature. “His sex appeal, his looks, his magnetism—all those things became important, as they’d never been important for a musician before.”

But by no means was Liszt all flash and flamboyance. “Some commentators consider him to be the greatest musician of the 19th century—greater even than Beethoven in terms of all-around musicianship, and in terms of his impact on performance,” Doran says.

When he died in 1886, at age 74, Liszt left behind some 1,400 works. He created the symphonic poem and wrote instrumental music, piano works, and sacred choral music. He produced new sounds and effects that relied on extreme technical prowess at the keyboard. He was an unrivaled musical transcriber who, by arranging others’ symphonic works for the piano, made music more accessible to a general public. And his influence reverberates in the works of composers such as Bartok, Grieg, Saint-Saens, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninoff.

In collaboration with Eastman School of Music faculty Jonathan Dunsby, a professor of music theory, and Ralph Locke, a professor emeritus of musicology, Doran was the principal organizer of a three-day international symposium on Liszt and virtuosity that was held at the University in

**CAPTIVATING:** Franz Liszt (left, in a portrait by Henri Charles Lehmann) played in ways intended to excite audiences—and succeeded, as shown (top right) in a caricature by Theodor Hosema of an 1842 concert in Berlin.



## TRENDSETTER

## Liszt List

Franz Liszt—who once famously declared “*Le concert, c’est moi*”—changed classical music in a dizzying number of ways:

**First “star”** of the musical world

**Inventor** of the public concert tour

**Coiner** of the term “solo recital”

**Inventor** of the master class

**Creator** of many of the conventions of modern piano performance, including the pianist entering from the wings, playing in profile to the audience, and performing from memory

**Performer and composer** who pushed the boundaries of piano technique to their limits

Most important **musical transcriber**, who made music newly accessible to the public

**Champion** of the musical avant garde of his day

—Kathleen McGarvey



**MAESTRO:** Liszt’s innovations are taken for granted today.



early March. It brought together some of the world’s leading Liszt scholars and scholar-performers—including Alan Walker, author of a monumental three-volume biography—to consider the ways in which Liszt transformed virtuosity. The conference was among this year’s Humanities Projects, a program that champions work by Rochester faculty in all humanistic fields.

A child prodigy who studied piano with Beethoven’s former student Carl Czerny and with composer Antonio Salieri—best known to modern audiences as the protagonist of *Amadeus*—Liszt took over the financial support of his family at age 15, after the death of his father. But grief drove him from the stage, and he considered a clerical life. Among the influences that called him back was hearing violinist Niccolò Paganini perform. The young man determined to achieve the same level of virtuosity on the piano that Paganini had on the violin.

He set forth on his career at a time when music was taking on a much more expansive social role. Formal musical performances had been the territory of the aristocracy; in the 19th century, with the rise of bourgeois culture, a concert-going public emerged. “People were learning, appreciating, and enjoying music—and supporting it monetarily, so that you could start to make a lot of money from it,” says Doran. Liszt launched one of the first concert tours, the forerunner of today’s “worldwide tours.” Because the apparatus of touring didn’t yet exist, Liszt did everything, from booking the venue to advertising the concert, before he took the stage.

His deft management of the business side of performing didn’t detract from popular adulation of his artistry. “He basically incarnated what we now call the modern virtuoso,” Doran says. And audiences claimed


for music a newly lofty status. “It was the exaltation of genius, musical genius, that gave the musician a new social status,” he says.

Appealing to the public meant that virtuosity and public spectacle took on new significance, too. Liszt created the conventions of the modern classical music performance, repositioning the piano in profile to the audience, so that his playing could be better seen—before Liszt, pianists performed with their backs to the audience. It was said that to really hear Liszt, you had to see him. “His performances were also a visual experience,” Doran says.

Liszt invented the practice of performing from memory. Playing without sheet music had been considered less than serious, because it looked like improvisation.

And Liszt excelled at improvisation, too. Concerts—which, before he remade them, were more like variety shows—involved a musician playing others’ works, original works, and improvisations. “Often the audience would provide a theme, and then the virtuoso would be called upon to play on it, to make sure that you hadn’t written on it before. It was very important to show that you were able to improvise in the moment,” Doran says.

But in Liszt’s day, virtuosity was in tension with so-called “serious music,” he adds. Liszt was criticized for being too much of a showman, and using virtuosity to bring music down to public tastes. It “often unjustly marred his reputation as a composer,” Doran says. But ultimately, Liszt redefined virtuosity as something artistically potent and not mere showmanship.

“It’s difficult to understand his innovations because we take them all for granted now,” says Doran. 

*With reporting by Helene Snihur.*