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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Liszt, Franz

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Title: Liszt, Franz

Franz Liszt, virtuoso pianist and internationally renowned composer, revolutionized 19th-century concert practice and the music trade with his Bohemian attitude towards art and politics. He achieved fame as one of the first musical celebrities of his time, and later came to be seen as a quintessential figure of European Romantic Nationalism.

Born to a German (Suabian) family in 1811 in Doborján (present-day Raiding, Austria, then in the county of Sopron, Western Hungary), Liszt began his musical education with his father, who, like Ferenc [Erkel's](#) father, was both a musician and an estate administrator. At the age of eight, Liszt performed a piano recital for his father's employer, Count Esterházy. A second performance, years later, at Esterházy's other palace in Bratislava (Pozsony/Pressburg), impressed the wealthy aristocrat enough to earn him a sponsorship enabling his studies with prominent musicians in Vienna: [Beethoven's](#) disciple Carl [Czerny](#) and [Mozart's](#) contemporary and rival Antonio [Salieri](#).

At his coming-out concert in Pest in 1823, he performed the Rakóczi March and other [verbunkos](#) transcriptions in a gesture to the rising national awareness of the Hungarian public, whose attendance had been canvassed with the advertisement "Esteemed Public! I am Hungarian and I can think of no greater happiness than to offer the first fruits of my education and erudition to the public of my homeland before embarking on a tour of France and England".

On this European tour, Liszt, as a child prodigy, mainly performed his own piano transcriptions from famous operas and dazzled the audience with his piano technique and virtuosity. Denied enrollment in the Paris Conservatoire in 1823, he continued his Vienna training and concert tours. Life as a child prodigy wearied him; he found solace in religion and seriously considered becoming a Catholic priest, until his father's death left him, at age seventeen, to provide for his widowed mother, with whom he moved to Paris. Here Liszt became the darling of the [salons](#), and befriended luminaries such as like George [Sand](#) (1804–1876), Frédéric [Chopin](#) (1810–1849), and Hector [Berlioz](#) (1803–1869). When he was not teaching, composing, or giving concerts, he spent his time reading philosophy and literature and writing essays about music and aesthetics. Periods of retreat and reflection alternated with months of intensive musical tours and social life (including numerous eyebrow-raising love affairs). In 1835 he began a long-term turbulent relationship with Countess Marie [d'Agoult](#), with whom he had three children. Their daughter Cosima would later abandon her husband Hans von [Bülow](#) for Richard [Wagner](#) (1813–1883).

Liszt revolutionized concert life with his transcriptions and free fantasies or paraphrases. He based these on the works of the most famous opera composers of his time, and his piano arrangements helped disseminate and popularize the symphonic work of [Schubert](#), [Berlioz](#), and [Wagner](#). Liszt began transcribing Beethoven's symphonies in the 1830s and finished them in 1860s. He took the European concert halls by storm; his recitals were so popular that Heinrich Heine coined the term *Lisztomania* to describe the rapture evoked by Liszt's presence in the concert halls. Virtuosity and programme music were the typical aspects of Liszt's trade. Liszt often dared to improvise freely when he played standard repertoire pieces. At a time when musical scores were seen as canonized sacred texts, such improvisation and spontaneity was a daring but essential feature of Liszt's recitals, which were, nonetheless, carefully staged pieces of showmanship. He toured Europe tirelessly from London to St Petersburg and from Copenhagen to Trieste; he was the first virtuoso musician to have a personal agent who managed his concerts, kept up with his personal and professional correspondence, and negotiated his fees.

When the Danube flooded Pest in 1838, Liszt gave a series of benefit concerts for the reconstruction of the city,

and rediscovered his attachment to his native country. Though he had never learned Hungarian, he was interested in Hungarian culture and supported the national cause on every platform. The *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, the *Hungarian Fantasy*, the *Rákóczy March*, and many *verbunkos*-themed pieces expressed his Hungarian self-identification musically. His symphonic poem *Hungaria* was a musical reply to an ode dedicated to him by the poet Mihály [Vörösmarty](#) (1800–1855). After a concert in 1840 he received a sword from the public, and he responded to the festive gesture by promising to champion the national cause with his music just as Hungarians in previous centuries had vindicated it with their swords.

After the revolution of 1848 and the crushed War of Independence in 1849, Liszt composed his *Funérailles*, the funeral marches whose tone and style marks a new phase in Liszt's compositional treatment of the national element. In his earlier works Liszt had used variations on *verbunkos* as dazzling ornamentation, but in the later works, after the 1850s, the Hungarian elements gradually came to occupy a central position in the harmonization and structure of his pieces, which became more reserved, complex, and meditative. From the 1850s his ties with Hungary intensified and he became more actively involved in the institutionalization of Hungarian music. In 1856 he was asked to compose a mass for the consecration of the basilica in Esztergom, the *Missa Solemnis*. He also wrote a series of compositions called "Hungarian Historical Portraits" (*Magyar történelmi arcképek*), musical tributes to luminaries such as Count István [Széchenyi](#), the writers/statesmen Ferenc [Deák](#) and József [Eötvös](#), the poets Vörösmarty and Sándor [Petőfi](#), and the composer Mihály [Mosonyi](#). Beyond the programme and the title, these pieces represent a new kind of national music: they are more thoughtfully innovative in their incorporation of Hungarian elements than the earlier rhapsodies.

In 1858 Liszt came into contact with the Hungarian choral societies and became an ardent advocate of the choral movement. Many choral societies elected Liszt as their honorary president, and he thanked them for their enthusiasm by writing choral compositions for them.

In 1859 Liszt published his famous essay on "Gypsy" music, *Des bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie*, which provoked controversy in the Hungarian press. Many Hungarian intellectuals took umbrage at Liszt's celebration of Romani musicians as the true practitioners of authentically Hungarian music, and for equating "Gypsy" music with the Hungarian national style. This public criticism brought him closer to some of his musical friends, like Mosonyi and Kornél [Ábrányi](#).

In 1865, Liszt renewed his earlier religious calling, took the tonsure and minor orders of priesthood and lived in the Vatican and later in Rome. He motivated his decision with his strong attraction to Catholicism since childhood. Later that year his oratorio, "The Legend of St Elisabeth of Hungary" (which had been partly inspired by his viewing of Moritz von [Schwind](#)'s frescos in the restored Wartburg Castle), premiered with resounding success in the Vigadó concert hall in Pest. A year later, in 1866, he was commissioned to write a mass for the coronation of the Austrian Emperor and Hungarian King Franz Joseph, an event that marked the dawn of the Austro-Hungarian *Ausgleich*.

In the 1870s Liszt spent more time in Hungary, dividing his time between Rome, Weimar, and Pest. In 1873 in the Vigadó he conducted with great success two new pieces: *Szózat* and *Hungarian Himnusz Fantasy*, inspired by poems written by the prominent Romantic poets Vörösmarty and Ferenc [Kölcsey](#). In Pest Liszt was involved in setting up the Hungarian Music Academy, serving as the head of the piano section and as its president between 1873 and 1879. In order to raise money for the Academy Liszt gave countless benefit concerts. During this period, he took Hungarian lessons and made an effort to learn the language, without ever becoming fluent in it.

In the late 1870s he visited his daughter Cosima and her husband, Richard Wagner and their relations improved after the temporary estrangement when Liszt learned of their relationship. In 1876 he was present at the opening of Wagner's *Bayreuth Festspielhaus*. In the same year he finished his symphonic poem *Hunnenschlacht* ("The Battle of the Huns"), which was inspired by an eponymous painting by Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805–1874). Liszt was not a great art connoisseur and had little affinity with the modern French painters of his time, but the deeply religious and Romantic Liszt was attracted to the spectacular representation of the struggle between Christianity and Paganism in Kaulbach's painting. He liked this painting so much that he wanted to set all of Kaulbach's historical paintings to music under the title *The Drama of World History*. He abandoned his plan and completed only the musical tableau of Kaulbach's *Battle of the Huns*. Almost twenty years earlier Liszt had received a reproduction of the painting from the Podolian Countess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein. She was Liszt's companion for several years and he would have married her had the Pope not revoked his initial permission to allow the divorced countess to marry. Shortly afterwards Liszt decided to join the Catholic Church, but he kept up

his friendship with the Countess Carolyne until the end of his life. In 1881 she republished Liszt's essays about "Gypsy" music with the addition of heavily anti-Semitic sections of her own, and without ever showing the text to Liszt or informing him of her alterations. When the book was published, Liszt was accused of anti-Semitism, and he was often obliged to defend himself against these accusations.

In the final years of his life Liszt attended many concerts and operas and was constantly travelling between Italy, Germany, and Hungary. In July 1886 he arrived in Bayreuth with a high fever and pneumonia. Although his daughter Cosima was concerned about his health, he remained very active and received many visitors.

Nonetheless, Liszt succumbed to the illness and died on 31 July in his hotel room at the age of 74. He is buried in Bayreuth next to Richard Wagner.



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