

Paul Merrick

Liszt in Esztergom. A Festival in his Memory

“It is a quarter to 3. The last Amen of the Mass has just been pronounced... and I am coming to kiss your hands... while telling you that everything went according to your wishes, and that God blessed me. My Mass began at 1.30. As I had estimated, the whole work lasts only 45 to 50 minutes at most, watch in hand. The performance was perfect, even admirable in several places – without the least little hitch... In all, we were more than 130 singers and players. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the general impression produced by the work is beyond what I could have flattered myself I would obtain... For the moment, I want only to thank and bless you for having inspired me with good thoughts and helped me to work for God!”

So wrote Liszt from Esztergom on 31 August 1856 in a letter to Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein in Weimar. He was describing the performance of his Gran Mass during the ceremony of the consecration of the Cathedral – the occasion for which the work had been commissioned by the Primate of Hungary, archbishop János Scitovsky. Gran is the German name for Esztergom, and in Hungary the work is referred to by its Hungarian name: Esztergomi Mise.

I first heard Liszt’s Esztergom Mass when I was a student at Oxford in the 1960s. I found a Hungarian recording of it in Blackwell’s Music Shop. I can still recall my astonishment at hearing this wonderful work for the first time, hardly able to believe that Liszt could have written it – and puzzled as to why it was never sung in England, a country famous for its choral tradition and where everything from Machaut to Maxwell Davies was sung all the time. But not Liszt. His four masses, two oratorios, a requiem, the Stations of the Cross (Via Crucis), the Seven Sacraments (Septem Sacramenta), the half dozen or so psalms, and thirty or forty smaller choral works, mostly Latin motets of varied character for mixed choir with organ, were never heard. At least not then. Today there are good English recordings of the Missa Choralis and Via Crucis, but not of the oratorios or the orchestral masses. In 1958 Sir Thomas Beecham recorded

Psalm 13 – a half hour work for tenor solo, choir and orchestra – which was the fill-up for his pioneer recording of the Faust Symphony. Both recordings are still the best I have heard of these two works – even though the psalm was sung in English. Beecham absolutely understood the Lisztian mix of the devout and the theatrical. Otherwise I had then – as now – to collect Hungarian recordings if I wanted to become familiar with this repertoire.

Esztergom is Hungary's oldest town, the birthplace of Saint Stephen who as the first Christian King of Hungary founded the state in around the year 1000. Hungarians still refer to it as the királyi város – the royal city. It was the capital until King Béla IV moved the royal court to Buda in the 13th century.

A previous King Béla – the third – built a new royal castle at Esztergom in the 12th century. King Béla III's tomb is in the Church of Our Lady in Buda, also known as the Coronation Church, or the Matthias Church after the renaissance King Matthias who was married there in the 15th century. Next to King Béla is his wife Agnes of Antioch. But the king had two wives, the second being Margaret of France of the House of Capet. Margaret had been Queen of England, married to Henry the Young King, son of Henry II, and was living in England when Thomas Becket was murdered in Canterbury cathedral in 1170. After the death of her husband (a crowned king of England who never ruled, his father outliving him) she became Queen of Hungary and lived in Esztergom. The ruins of King Béla's royal castle are now the foundations of the castle museum, and they contain one medieval room traditionally called the room of Saint Stephen, but actually dating from the time of Béla III. You can sit in the window and see the Danube – I like to imagine Queen Margaret seeing the same view. On one of the hills near the town there is a little chapel dedicated to Saint Thomas Becket – its white walls are visible from miles around. On 29 December, his feast day, it has always been customary for a representative from the British Embassy to attend a church service in Esztergom, which is twinned with the city of Canterbury in England.

Liszt visited Esztergom not just in 1856, but also in 1884 and 1885, both times as the guest of Cardinal Simor. In 1884 he wrote to the Grand Duke Carl Alexander in Weimar:

“When you come to Hungary, do not fail to visit Esztergom. Here you will find architecture worthy of renown: the propylaea of the Basilica – 8 very lofty,

imposing, and massive columns. Right beside the Basilica stands the ancient chapel of the King of Hungary, Saint Stephen. Cardinal Prince-Primate Simor's architect, named Lippert, has restored it in wholly worthy manner. Lippert has also built the Cardinal Prince-Primate's new palace, admirably situated on the right bank of the Danube, here very imposing. The palace is excellently planned, and has a library of more than 30,000 volumes plus a gallery containing several hundred paintings, engravings, and drawings..."

The art collection of Cardinal Simor now forms the basis of the contents of the Christian Museum in Esztergom. The Archbishop's Palace still stands – it is where on 26th December 1948 Cardinal Mindszenty was arrested by the communists and accused of treason and conspiracy. Today there is a Mindszenty museum in Esztergom, and the Cardinal himself is entombed in the crypt of the cathedral, his remains being brought back to Hungary from Austria in 1991, where later that year they were visited by Pope John Paul II, who celebrated Mass in the open air on the steps of the Basilica, near the columns described by Liszt. The whole event was televised, and as the pope travelled through the crowded streets of Esztergom, loudspeakers on lampposts broadcast the sound of a choir singing Liszt's "Tu es Petrus" from his oratorio Christus.

Liszt's recommendation, "when you come to Hungary, do not fail to visit Esztergom", is something I would echo still today, even though the town was marginalized for forty years by the Communist Hungarian state because of its ecclesiastical associations, as a result of which it has sunk into a dilapidated condition. But it has the ingredients to make it easily Hungary's most attractive town. Next to the Basilica is a grand building called the Saint Adalbert Centre. For forty years it served as a barracks for Russian soldiers, but after the end of communism in 1989 the property was returned to the Church, which has splendidly renovated it. When it was first opened in 1865 as the city's Seminary housing 100 priests, it was Hungary's largest public building. Today it is a conference and retreat centre, still run by the Church, but with a hotel attached, and many functions open to the public. One of the events it hosts is the Esztergom Liszt Week, which began in 2008, and this year, 2011 the Liszt year, has just celebrated its fourth year of existence.

The origin of the festival is connected indirectly to the celebration in 2006 of the 150th anniversary of the consecration of the Basilica. Among the various

events was of course a performance of Liszt's mass in August conducted by the organist and choirmaster at the Basilica, István Baróti, which I attended. At Christmas the same year I was invited by Father László Lukács, the editor of the catholic journal *Vigilia*, to contribute to a symposium of writings by Hungarian musicians on what music meant to them (2006 was the 250th anniversary of the birth of Mozart). He knew my story – how I had come to research the church music of Liszt years before and stayed – and told me to write about it. So I related my discovery of the Esztergom Mass in England and how it led me to Hungary. This was read by several people, one of whom had the idea of making Esztergom a place where Liszt's rarer religious works would be performed annually, centred round the anniversary of the consecration, namely the last week in August. A committee was formed of seven people including myself, Zsuzsa Esztó, a pianist and specialist in the piano technique of Liszt, László Tardy, the conductor of the choir at the Coronation Church in Buda, Károly Reményi, the founder of the Esztergom Music School and conductor of the Esztergom Symphony Orchestra, Mária Eckhardt, Hungary's leading Liszt expert and the founder of the Liszt Museum and Research Centre in Budapest, Dr Zsuzsanna Domokos, a Liszt scholar and the curator of the Liszt Museum, and Judit Rozsnyay, the General Secretary and Treasurer of the Hungarian Liszt Society. The Esztergom Town Council promised financial support, as did others, and on Sunday 24th August 2008 the first Esztergom Liszt Week was inaugurated. Amazingly it coincided with a major musical event exactly connected to the history of Liszt's mass for the Basilica. In 1859, three years after the work's première at the consecration, the score was published, and Liszt straightaway sent a copy of it to Pope Pius IX, whose response was conveyed to Liszt via a letter from Prince Gustav Hohenlohe, the Papal Chamberlain, saying that the mass would be performed in Saint Peter's Basilica in November. However, it was not, since an orchestra was not permitted to play in Saint Peter's. An arrangement of the Gran Mass was therefore made by the director of the Cappella Giulia, Salvatore Meluzzi, for organ and choir, with support from a cello and a doublebass. This arrangement remained in autograph, unperformed, until its whereabouts were researched in the Vatican Archives by a Hungarian musician living in Germany, József Ács, the founder of the Eschweiler Liszt Society, and who published the score in 2007. This, the so-called "Vatican version", was first performed the same year

in the church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Eszweiler on 26th October. Its first performance in the Basilica at Esztergom, given by the combined choirs of the Eszweiler Liszt Society, the Budapest Inner City Church, the town of Esztergom and the Coronation Church in Buda, was the opening event of the first Esztergom Liszt Week. The same week closed with again the Gran Mass in the Basilica, this time Liszt's original orchestral version.

During the week were of course other concerts, a song recital, a lecture on Liszt, a symphony concert, an organ recital, and a piano recital. In all of these the emphasis was on Liszt, and in particular his works with a religious character. This basic format – the opening and closing concerts on a Sunday in the Basilica along with other concerts in different venues in the town during the week, including a song recital, organ recital, piano recital, lectures and a symphony concert – was preserved in 2009, 2010 and 2011. In 2009 as an experiment the opening concert was a piano recital given in the Basilica by Gergely Bogányi. The acoustics of the Basilica have a long reverberation, and require clever manipulation by musicians who perform there. Bogányi was so successful at handling this problem, that all present agreed the idea should be repeated in the Liszt bicentenary year 2011 – which it was. On both occasions he played pieces from the set entitled *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, including *Funérailles* and *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude*, adding in 2011 two beautiful transcriptions by Liszt of songs by Schubert, as well as Liszt's *Il Sospiro*, *Ave Maria* and *La Leggerezza*. Other works heard during the first three festivals included the symphonic poem *Tasso*, the song versions of the Liszt Petrarch Sonnets, parts of the oratorios *Saint Elizabeth* and *Christus*, Liszt's own orchestration of his *Legend of Saint Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds*, performed in the Franciscan church in Esztergom, the Mass for Male Voice Choir (the "Szekszárd Mass"), the organ version of the Introduction, Fugue and Magnificat from the *Dante Symphony*, the Requiem for Organ, Liszt's Hungarian Coronation Mass and *Cantantibus organis* (antifona per la festa di Santa Cecilia).

Each year has had a song recital, the guiding light of which has been the English countertenor Nicholas Clapton, who is a regular guest professor at the Budapest Liszt Academy. In 2010 he initiated a week's summer course for singers at the Esztergom Music School, at the end of which the participants featured in a gala concert that formed part of the Liszt Week. This proved so

successful that it was repeated in 2011. Participants bring songs of their own choice, one of which must be by Liszt. This year we heard singers from the USA, England and Hungary, singing Liszt's *Freudvoll und Leidvoll*, *Du bist wie eine Blume*, *Der du von dem Himmel bist* and *Ihr Glocken von Marling*, as well as music by Purcell, Fauré, Britten, and Donizetti. The superb pianist accompanying and working with the singers throughout the course and in the concerts every year has been Gabriella Gyökér.

Another summer course began in 2009 for choirs from neighbouring countries to take part in learning the mass to be performed at the end of the Liszt Week. This year singers from Hungary, Slovakia and Poland arrived on the Friday, rehearsing in the Esztergom Music School ("Zsolt Nándor Zeneiskola") with László Tardy, and attending the concerts on Friday and Saturday in the Saint Adalbert Centre.

The final concert of the 2011 Liszt Week was a performance of the Gran Mass in the Basilica by the combined choirs of the Buda Coronation Church and the Summer School, with the orchestra of the Coronation Church conducted by László Tardy. It was preceded by a performance of Liszt's *Les Morts* by István Baróti in the composer's own arrangement for organ.

During the week there were other concerts with piano, apart from Bogányi's in the Basilica. There were two in the Saint Adalbert Centre, one given by Nicholas Namoradze, the other by the husband and wife duo Edit Klukon and Dezső Ránki. At nineteen Nicholas Namoradze is the most talented young pianist studying at the Budapest Liszt Academy, and he played his solo programme for the International Liszt Piano Competition to be held the following month, which consisted of the Transcendental studies in C major (Preludio), F major (Paysage), F minor (No.10) and D♭ major (Harmonies du soir) followed by the *Weinen, Klagen* Variations and the *Scherzo and March*. After the interval he played the B minor Sonata. The programme of Klukon and Ránki consisted entirely of late works by Liszt, mostly short and of a religious character. In the first half Edit Klukon played solo various pieces, including *Pater Noster* and *Ave Aria*, *In festo transfigurationis Domini*, *Am Grabe* Richard Wagners and various Chorales. In the second half the two together played Liszt's piano duet version of *Via Crucis*. Both concerts were played to a packed and enthusiastic audience. These artists all gave their services without a fee,

since for the first time the Esztergom Liszt Week ran into financial difficulties as the town council was unable to support us with any funding due to a serious financial crisis. Funding from other sources was not enough to cover the whole week, and the festival was rescued in the Liszt Year by the generosity of these musicians, who in doing what they did expressed their support for the endeavour, together with a love and admiration of Liszt.

Another pianist who played, this time with orchestra, was the talented young Renáta Konyicska, who lives in Esztergom and studies at the Budapest Music Academy. She has played in all the Esztergom Liszt weeks, beginning in 2008 with Liszt's Hungarian Fantasia. This year she played the Piano Concerto No.1 in Eb Major with the Esztergom Symphony Orchestra conducted by Károly Reményi.

Also during the week we heard Liszt's Requiem performed by the excellent Saint Ephraim Male Voice Choir conducted by their founder Tamás Bubnó, and a programme of Liszt motets sung by the National Széchényi Library Choir conducted by Mária Eckhardt, with organ solos by the talented young organist László Fassang. Both concerts were in the church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, and the artists also generously performed without a fee.

And so to the future. In the twentieth century the Liszt years were 1911, 1936, 1961 and 1986, marking the 100th, 125th and 150th anniversary of the composer's birth, and the centenary of his death. Presumably the next Liszt year therefore will be 2036, which obviously the present members of the committee will not live to see. Although in 2008 the plan for the festival was to survive until 2011, that was not the basic motivation for starting the Liszt Week. Because of the town's direct association with Liszt and one of his most important works – a work important surely in the history of music in Hungary, not to say in the whole of the European 19th century – the founders envisaged trying to establish a permanent festival in Liszt's memory. It has become clear that there is no shortage of musicians and audiences to support this endeavour. At the present time, the shortage lies in finding the necessary funding. Hopefully this can be found, and what has become Hungary's largest Liszt festival will be able to continue.