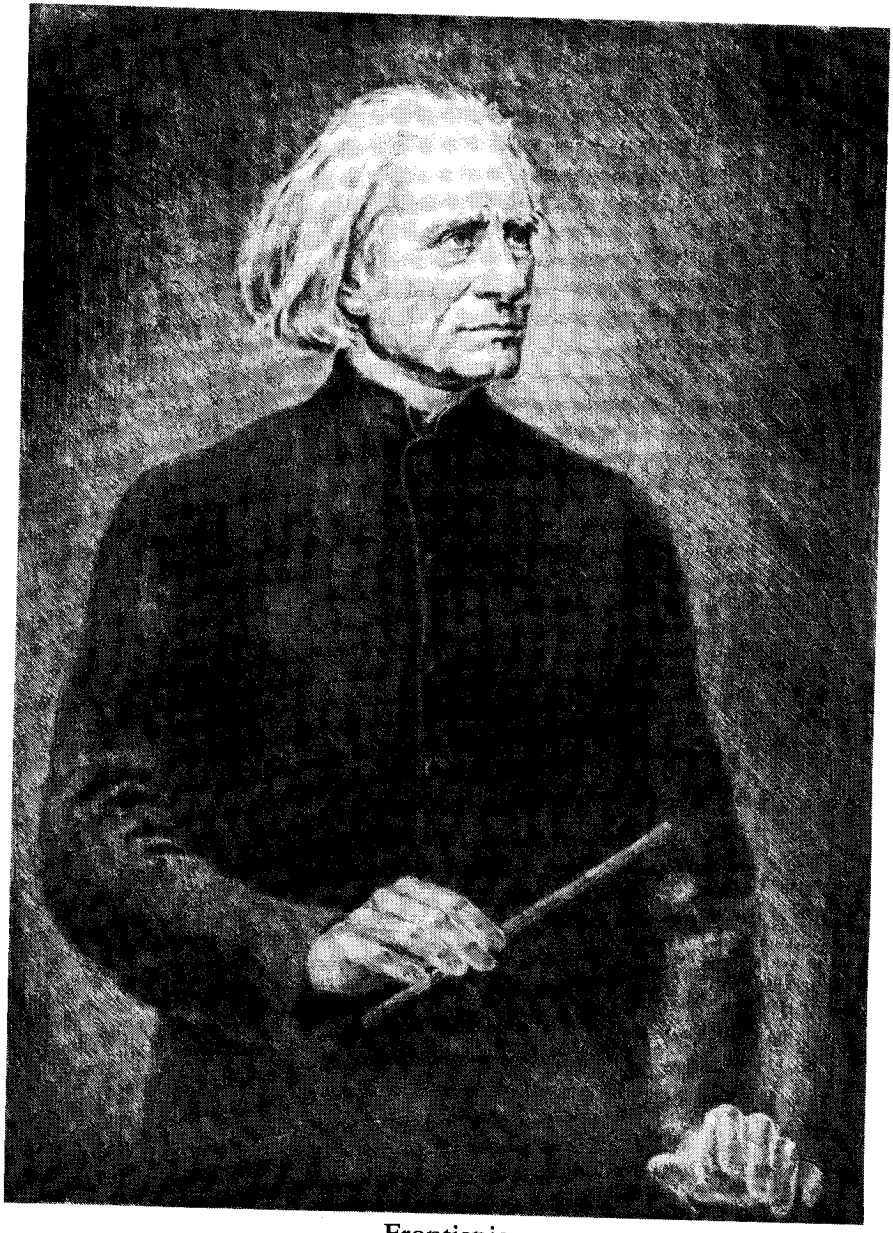
Liszt: A Chorus of Voices

Essays, Interviews, and Reminiscences

Edited by MICHAEL SAFFLE
with JOHN C. TIBBETTS and CLAIRE McKINNEY

FRANZ LISZT STUDIES SERIES No. 13
General Editor: Michael Saffle

PENDRAGON PRESS
HILLSDALE, NY



Frontispiece:
A Liszt portrait by Pál Paulovits (1963).
Used as the logo of the Los Angeles International Liszt Competition.
Reproduced with permission from the Los Angeles International Liszt Competition.

PAUL MERRICK

Liszt in Hungary

A Personal View through English Eyes

When I was at school I saw a film at the cinema entitled *Song without End* starring Dirk Bogarde. The film was about the life of Liszt, and the pianist who played the music on the sound track was Jorge Bolet. At the time I was learning the piano as a late starter, but I made very rapid progress, and after three or four years I was tackling the "Hungarian Rhapsodies," playing No. 11 in A minor at a school concert. I also composed immense amounts of music, sending a parcel to Oxford University when I applied to enter as an undergraduate. I was interviewed by Professor Sir Jack Westrup, and played him No. 11. The result was that I was awarded a Major Scholarship in Music at Wadham College, where I spent the happiest three years of my life. One of the works we had to analyse was the *Faust* symphony, and I bought the recording by Sir Thomas Beecham. The fill-up was *Psalm XIII* by Liszt—sung in English. I was completely astonished by it, having until then no idea that Liszt wrote church music. My astonishment grew when I found a German recording of the "Hungarian Coronation Mass" and became something like incredulity when, in Blackwell's music shop in Oxford, I found a Hungarian recording of the "Gran Mass," conducted by János Ferencsik.

Apart from the fact that Hungary was a Communist country, and I could not imagine what they were doing recording church music, it was obvious to me that something had gone very wrong in the musical world regarding this music. Liszt was usually portrayed as a virtuoso pianist and womanizer, a man with no real moral integrity, a composer who was at best

an inspired improviser with no solid technique, an experimenter who hit on some interesting harmonies that influenced later and greater composers like Debussy and perhaps Schoenberg. Yet here was a masterpiece, a towering monument in the history of the Mass as a musical genre, an inspiring and proficient piece of deeply felt intelligent composition, wonderfully orchestrated, vividly imagined, superbly executed. And unknown. I set out to collect everything I could that Liszt wrote for the Church, and it turned out that only the Hungarians dealt with this music. They recorded all the masses, the psalms, very many of the shorter choral works, the organ works, and the really rare pieces like the *Cantico del Sol* and *Die Glocken des Strassburger Münsters.* At the beginning of the 1970s the oratorio *Die Legende der heiligen Elisabeth* appeared on LPs, and then, finally, *Christus.* This last work changed my life: I was English, the nation whose choral tradition is the envy of the world, and nobody knew Liszt's *Christus.* How could this be? What had gone wrong? Why was the picture of Liszt given in the books so false, so obviously not the man in his music?

I am now much older, but I still cannot answer this question easily. Following the road it led me down, I have encountered the terrible mess that constitutes the history of Europe, in particular Hungary, and I can only say how grateful I am to those Hungarian musicians who stuck their heads above the parapet to champion these works of Liszt at a time when the political climate did not favour them. Miklós Forrai had to struggle with the Communist authorities to be allowed to record *Christus,* which was eventually permitted at midnight in the Coronation Church in Buda. Forrai told me he heard Weingartner conduct the work in the 1930s, and Weingartner had heard Liszt himself as a conductor.

The manuscript of the score of *Christus* is in the British Library—I do not know how it got there—and when I was writing my book *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt* I of course went to have a look at it. But before then I visited Hungary in 1978. My ostensible purpose was to 'do research,' for which I was awarded a British Council Exchange Scholarship for two months. But my real purpose was to find Liszt in the Hungary that produced the recordings of his choral works.

I did find the Catholic Liszt in Hungary—he was alive and well, and still is. He always has been, ever since he conducted his "Gran Mass" in Esztergom in 1856 and Palestrina's *Panis angelicus* in Pest in 1872. For a hundred and fifty years the Liszt who wrote music for the Church has been loved and preserved by church musicians in Hungary. His betrayal, sad to say, is to be laid at the door of the Hungarian musical establishment. Although I fell in love with Hungary, even under Communism, I have not fallen in love

with the official musical world here. Only slowly have I begun to understand the strange situation Liszt is in by living in Hungary for a quarter of a century.

The darling of official music in Hungary—the foundation of their musicology and the myth-making that surrounds their musical identity—is Béla Bartók, who is universally acknowledged as a great genius. Certainly Bartók was always my favourite twentieth-century composer, the last example of what might be called the 'classical' tradition. But he invented a musical identity for Hungary which he put into his music, the one we all know that is rooted in Hungarian folk song. There is nothing wrong with this; it has been justified by the supreme compositional genius of Bartók himself. The false element is its ideology—false, that is, in terms of the history of music. Bartók and Zoltán Kodály argued that as Hungary has no musical history, it had to be found in folk music, which represents the instinctive musical creative genius of the people. A folk song, in its own way, is an artistic product of as much value as a Bach cantata. Hungary did not have a Bach, but it does have singing peasants who, furthermore, are really Hungarian and not a foreign import—as, for example, is Italian opera.

The reasoning cannot be faulted if the first premise is true: that Hungary has no musical history. But it is not true. There were many composers working in Hungary in the eighteenth century. Their music was unknown to Bartók and Kodály; nobody researched it at the time. The preoccupation of Hungarian musicians was to be *Hungarian.* Obviously, no eighteenth-century composer would fit the bill, not even Benedek Istvánffy (1733-1788), who wrote good church music and was born and bred in Hungary, never leaving the country. (Istvánffy's music began to be researched in the 1980s, and much of it has since been recorded by Hungaroton.) Another assumption, never explicitly stated, was that church music had had its day, and the day it had was in any case 'foreign' in terms of its composers and their musical style. In the period of Hapsburg rul3—beginning in 1438 with the coronation of Albert of Hapsburg and lasting, with interludes, until the departure of Charles IV in 1919—the territory of Hungary was so extensive (three times as large as it is today) that composers from parts of today's Austria, Slovakia, the Czech republic and Romania could all live and work in Budapest (until 1873 separate cities called Pest and Buda) or other main ecclesiastical towns like Veszprém, Kalocsa, Eger, Pécs, Szeged or, indeed, the seat of the Catholic Church in Hungary, Esztergom. It was, literally, 'international' (the peoples living in the territory of historical Hungary were called *Natio Hungarica* irrespective of their ethnic background).

Liszt's church music was seen as a continuation of this world—it was discounted by modern composers and musicologists as a contribution to the

question of what is musically 'Hungarian,' and in historical terms was seen as an irrelevant contribution from the nineteenth century to a field of musical composition now largely defunct, buried beneath the symphonies and operas of Beethoven and Wagner. The future was the orchestra and the piano—in Kodály's case linked to a praiseworthy desire to use singing for educational purposes, the music he wrote and used being rooted also in folksong. We all know the results this produced: famous choirs that won competitions the world over, and a system of musical education that could be exported to countries like Japan and Finland. Kodály's philosophy of music had its heyday and did good things. But it is over. Today the future of choral singing in Hungary as elsewhere is to sing Bach and Palestrina correctly.

Throughout all this, including the long decades from the 1950s through the 1980s, musicians were singing Liszt's "Hungarian Coronation Mass" in the Coronation Church in Buda. Meanwhile, in the Institute for Musicology, five minutes' walk away from the church, scholars behaved as though this music did not exist. They still do—there is no book in Hungarian about the church music of Liszt.

Liszt in the Music Academy that bears his name still tends to be thought of primarily as a pianist. One composer—a very good one and still young—replied, when I asked him what he thought of Liszt, "I don't know, I'm not a pianist." One of the professors who was Dean of the Music Academy as well as an established figure as a composer, said in my hearing: "I don't know why Liszt thought he could be a composer." These are the sort of opinions Liszt's English piano pupil Walter Bache had to fight against in nineteenth-century London. I soon learned that the so-called 'Liszt Academy' was simply making use of his name. The Liszt I was looking for was not inside it, but outside it. This might be forgiven in a state-run institution in a Communist country, where oratorios were not performed in the Great Concert Hall (in 1978 one had been, and letters appeared in the newspapers asking how this could be permitted in a 'socialist' country), but since 1989 the real change has yet to come—and this, even though works like Haydn's *Creation* and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* are now programmed. The Department of Church Music that was founded in 1927 and disbanded by the Communists in 1950 was re-started at the political change, but it concentrates on liturgical music and its history and, astonishingly, omits the nineteenth century. Once again ideology rules—the Department's head is a neo-Cecilianist, which translates into: medieval, renaissance, and modern. Many really great works—for example, the masses of Haydn—fall outside this categorization.

It should be said that the controversies surrounding Catholic church music since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council have by no means

spelled the death of the great classical settings of the mass in Hungarian churches. It is true that Latin Gregorian chant has all but disappeared—as it has nearly everywhere, being now the preserve of academic historical research—but the whole repertory of sacred polyphony from the Renaissance to Kodály's *Missa Brevis* can be heard in the Coronation Church on Sundays at 10 o'clock. This church boasts an excellent choir and orchestra conducted by László Tardy, whose life story includes the fact that, as a student of conducting in the 1960s, he was not allowed to conduct church music in the Music Academy, and that, when Tardy left the Academy and joined the Coronation Church as its cantor, he was virtually excommunicated from his former institution. The musical life of other churches in the city is equally rich. But this old split between the Church and the Music Academy has never really been faced up to and healed.

A similar situation exists in musicology. The Institute for Musicology, housed in a splendid building—a baroque palace—is founded on the work of Bartók as a collector of folk songs and houses the huge collection of wax cylinders on which he recorded thousands of them, all preserved in an air-conditioned museum. Naturally, the building is the home of the whole of Hungarian Bartók research. To this can be added the documentation of Hungarian musical history, the specialist study of Gregorian chant in Hungary, and today the rehabilitation of Dohnányi as a composer and the establishment of a Dohnányi archive. But no Liszt. The rooms used for lectures and concerts are labelled "Bartók terem" (*terem* = room), "Kodály terem," and "Haydn terem." Liszt has his own Liszt Museum and Research Centre across the river in Pest in the Old Music Academy (the building where he actually lived and taught from 1879 until 1886).

Furthermore, musicological prejudice against the Church was reflected in the volumes published by the Institute in the series *Musicalia Danubiana.* It took years before any settings of the mass were published in that series, whereas nearly all the composers represented in it—many from eighteenth-century Hungary—worked for the Church. A young musicologist studying this repertory, including some works not heard since their own day, recently told me that the music archive in the attic of the Pest City Church contains the manuscripts of around 500 works by some sixty composers, all waiting to be sorted and catalogued. Not all of these composers are

Hungarian, of course—they represent the music used by that particular church. But even so, when Pope John Paul II visited Hungary in 1991, I searched the Hungarian musical dictionary looking for Hungarian composers of the mass, and found well over fifty between 1700 and 1900. In the history of music, the genre to which Hungary's composers contributed the most

music is the mass. Hundreds of them still lie silent in churches throughout the country.

Of the thirty years I have lived in Hungary, seven were spent under Communism (1982-1989). The positive side of Socialist Hungary was its triumph of intelligence over adversity; for me it was the nearest thing I have seen to a society not ruled by money. If Socialist Hungary had been reformed instead of demolished, it might have become a model for other societies. Instead, the triumph of capitalism in 1989 has blown away many Hungarian dreams of happiness and prosperity. Debate in the country at present centres on the dwindling population and fears of economic meltdown. If we add to this the 'culture of death' spoken of by Pope John Paul II and the reality of global warming, then perhaps Hungarians may be excused for sometimes sounding gloomy. They are famously pessimistic—and famously hospitable. They are ultimately realists. But not in music, where ideology still rules the day, politics having wormed its way into the centre of their musical identity.

Being 'European' and not English, the split between Left and Right in Hungary today broadly parallels the Secular (including atheist) versus the Church, and this is mirrored in how Hungarians argue about themselves and music. The Hungarian fault in my opinion is not to begin with their music simply as art, and tp forget the politics. Liszt, Bartók and Kodály should be simply performed in their entirety as the art of the country—to which can be added Dohnányi, Hubay, Mihalovich, Mosonyi, Erkel, the recently researched eighteenth-century composers,

Gregorian chant, the music yet to be unearthed, and the host of twentieth century composers and those writing today. Music lovers want *all* of it—particularly the foreign visitors who think of Hungary as a musical nation. The politics, in so far as it is relevant to an understanding of the music and its composer, should be relegated to the concert programme-notes.

Not for nothing did I call my book *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt,* since part of the puzzle Liszt seems to present us with is a musical journey from the French revolution to the Hungarian king—a musical path from the "Transcendental Studies" to the "Hungarian Coronation Mass." Where is the logic in that path? Was Liszt consistent, or was he a turncoat?

What I have learned here is that in Hungary revolution is not French. The Hungarians have never deposed a king; even in 1848 their aim was to secure independence from Austrian rule. The fact that for a hundred years the King of Hungary had been also the Emperor of Austria has tended to obfuscate the issue. When Liszt wrote his *Magyar Király-dal* (or "Hungarian Royal Song") for the opening of the Budapest Opera House in 1884, and

its performance was banned by the Hungarians because it made use of a melody associated with the eighteenth-century Rákóczy uprising, the reasons for the ban were local sensitivity toward the question of Hungarian national identity within the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy[1] as well as a desire not to offend the ruling Franz Joseph. There was no implied threat to monarchy as such. A Hungarian can identify with revolt and at the same time be loyal to the Crown of St. Stephen.

Looked at from this perspective, Liszt's amalgamation of musical reform with Hungarian identity fits well into the national psyche. What is not Lisztian is to espouse atheism. This was done in Hungarian politics twice: in 1919, and from 1947-1989. Speaking as an Englishman, I have to say these espousals were mistakes. In England today debates about religion take place mostly between groups of intellectuals, often in academic settings like Oxford University. We could say that religious debate is a hobbyhorse, even a hobby, within intellectual circles. But such debate does not reflect majority opinion. England has a monarch, and so long as that is the case, it will have a Church. There is no such thing as an atheist kingdom. This is what I believe the young Liszt realized when he left the revolutionary ferment of Paris in the 1830s and experienced the warm welcome he received in Hungary in January 1840. In Paris his republicanism had been Catholic, influenced by Lamennais, and I think what Hungary gave him was a model for what a *country* is. In Hungary he discovered (re-discovered) the Christian kingdom founded a thousand years earlier by Saint Stephen, the first King of that nation. At the same time the nation was in ferment about its emerging modern national identity. To this nation Liszt—by that time after his Parisian years musically re-incarnated in terms of revolutionary Romanticism—felt he could take his music without it being *socially* subversive. In Hungary all layers of society were to an extent 'subversive,' desiring political independence. There 'modern' music could itself embody a *patria*. This became clear in 1856 when he was commissioned to compose a mass to represent the nation at the consecration of the arch-basilica at Esztergom (in German, "Gran"), the seat of the Primate of Hungary. Here was the authentically *avant-garde* Liszt: a modern Catholic musician representing a particular country within the universal Church.

Liszt's most modern composition stylistically is a late piece of church music: *Via crucis*, written to accompany a service commemorating the fourteen Stations of the Cross. Composed in 1878-1879, it was left unpublished and unperformed at his death. The manuscript was in Budapest—where he

[1]The Dual Monarchy was established in 1867. The Hungarian revolution of 1848 was called *szabadságharc* by the Hungarians themselves; the term means "struggle for liberation"—in this case, liberation from Vienna.

composed part of it, the rest having been composed at the Villa d'Este. *Via crucis* was performed for the first time on Good Friday 1929 by the choir of the Pest City Church conducted by the composer Artúr Harmat (1885-1962), who was the cantor and organist of the church. This was an historic occasion. Who attended that performance? Certainly not Bartók, who took no interest in the church music of Liszt, or in that of anyone else.

This was Bartók's great mistake, and it has become inbuilt into the Hungarian musical psyche. Bartók's error was to exclude the Church, whereas the Church is the cradle of all music—of *art* music. The Hungarian Liszt is the ecclesiastical Liszt—because Liszt wrote many of his religious works (including three of his four massses, and the oratorio *Saint Elizabeth*) for Hungary, and only in Hungary are they sung on a regular basis. This was true when Bartók was alive, and it remained true under Communism, when to go to church could affect your prospects for promotion at work, and the few church choirs that functioned were not permitted to include children. Now all has changed, and religious life has returned to normality, with the natural consequence that music in churches is flourishing. Hungary is full of churches, and Budapest seems to have one on every other street corner. Each church has an organ, each organ has an organist, and every Sunday a choir sings in most of them. All Hungarian organists play Liszt, all Hungarian church choirs sing something by Liszt, if only the *Ave maris stella* or an *Ave Maria*. I have heard all the Liszt masses, including his *Requiem*, sung on numerous occasions in Hungarian churches, while *Via Crucis* is frequently performed in Budapest on one or another of the Fridays in Lent. I was right to look for the Catholic Liszt in Hungary—the church music he composed is in my opinion the real native artistic treasure of the musical life of this country, a corner of musical history that is living, relatively unknown, and still musicologically unresolved. Its importance in my opinion exceeds that of Bartók studies and questions to do with folk song. Until Hungary faces this square on, it cannot claim to have recognized its actual contribution to musical history—namely Liszt, and what he tells us about music.

* * *

How to end this essay? As I write, in April 2011, the bicentenary of Liszt's birth, it is a joy to know that the oratorio *Christus* is at last taking centre stage throughout the world; it will be performed in many countries this year on October 22, Liszt's birthday. Readers of this article may wonder what I have to complain about 33 years after my first visit to Hungary.

The Hungarian government has decided this year to change the name of Hungary's international airport, situated outside Budapest at a place called Ferihegy. At present it is called "Budapest Ferihegy Airport." Its new name

will be "Ferenc Liszt Ferihegy Airport Budapest." All lovers of Liszt will cheer, of course—and this includes myself. But the posters in the Budapest metro say "Liszt Ferenc—magyar világsiker" which translates as "Franz Liszt—a Hungarian world success story." This is true. But it is not the whole truth. If Hungary wants to make use of Liszt's immense fame to promote its cultural standing, it is now the turn of Hungarian musicians to point out where the real Hungarian Liszt in music is to be found. As I have been saying for years—decades—the Liszt you find only in Hungary and nowhere else is the Catholic Liszt. What foreign visitors can hear in Budapest that they cannot hear in London, Paris, or New York is the sound of a choir singing *Gloria in excelsis Deo* to music by Liszt. Until the Hungarian musical establishment acknowledges this, Hungary cannot be said to have embraced what it really has to offer those who visit the country looking for Liszt.[2]

email: paulmerrick@ymail.com

April 2011

Liszt Publications by Paul Merrick

"The Choral Works of Liszt." *Liszt Society Journal* 3 (1978): 35–36.

"Liszt's Transfer from Weimar to Rome: A Thwarted Marriage." *Studia Musicologica* 21, nos. 2-4 (1979): 219-38.

"Responses and Antiphons: Liszt in 1860." *Studia Musicologica* 28 (1986): 187-94.

Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, re-issued 2008.

"Original or Doubtful? Liszt's Use of Key in *Don Sanche*." *Studia Musicologica* 34, nos. 3-4 (1992): 427-34.

"The Role of Tonality in the Swiss book of *Années de pelèrinage*." *Studia Musicologica* 39, nos. 2-4 (1998): 367-83.

"A tonalitás szerepe az *Années de Pelerinage* svajci kötetében." *Magyar zene* 37, no. 2 (March 1999): 127-42.

[2][After Merrick's essay had been written, the following article appeared about his theories concerning key, key signatures, and Liszt's compositions: Michael Saffle, "L'analyse musicale de la musique de Liszt en termes de tonalité et d'armure: une critique des travaux de Merrick," *Analyse musicale* no. 65 (September 2011): 36-46. – Ed.]

"G flat or F sharp? The Cycle of Keys in Liszt's Music." In: *Liszt 2000. Selected Lectures given at the International Liszt Conference in Budapest, May 18-20, 1999*, ed. Klára Hamburger (Budapest: Magyar Liszt Társaság, 2000), 188-200.

"'nach Ges dur': Liszt's Inscription in the Score of Handel's Opera *Almira*." *Studia Musicologica* 42, nos. 3-4 (2001): 349-72.

"*Le chasseur maudit*. Key and Content in Liszt's Music in C minor." *Studia Musicologica* 44, nos. 3-4 (2003): 321-36.

"Liszt's *sans ton* Key Signature." *Studia Musicologica* 45, nos. 3-4 (2004): 281-302. Also in Hungarian as "'...sans ton ni mesure.' Egy halálszimbólum Liszt zenéjében?" *Magyar Zene* 41, no. 2 (May 2003): 219-36.

"Two Keys for Six Pieces: Tonality and Liszt's *Consolations*." *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 54-56 (2003-2005): 125-33.

"Liszt's Music in C Major." *The Musical Times* 149, no. 1903 (Summer 2008): 70-80.

"'Teufelsonate': Mephistopheles in Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor." *The Musical Times* 152, no. 1914 (Spring 2011): 7-19. Also in Hungarian as "Liszt 'kereszt'-motivuma és a h-moll szonáta." *Magyar Zene* 49, no. 1 (February 2011): 7-19.