

# Liszt's *sans ton* Key Signature

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**Abstract:** The early piano piece *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses* (S154) begins without a key signature. But, as we learn from a study of the sources by Adrienne Kaczmarczyk, the draft contains a key signature of 2 flats signifying g minor, which Liszt removed before publication in 1835. Earlier, in 1833, he had referred to the music as being “sans ton ni mesure”. Twenty years later Liszt gave the same music, still without a signature, the title *Pensée des morts*. An examination of over 300 works reveals that only in 84 instances wrote Liszt either a passage or a whole piece without key signature. Most of these examples have a content associated with death. The article explores the probability that in Liszt’s notation the removal of the key signature constitutes a programmatic symbol.

**Keywords:** Franz Liszt, tonality – no tonality, programme music

Catalogues of Liszt’s works do not make mention of their key. Of course, there are some exceptions, like the two piano concertos, or the *Piano Sonata*, but generally the reader can form no concept of what relationship, if any, may exist between key and content. This omission doubtless reflects an assumption on the part of the catalogue makers (the chief of whom are Raabe, Searle, and most recently in the *New Grove Dictionary* Mueller and Eckhardt) that key is not relevant. There seems to be no agreement among catalogue makers on this question – when to give the key and when not – for example for songs or lieder, which is surely a genre where there might be a relationship between key and content. Students of this question will find the key given in the catalogues of Haydn, Mozart and Schubert, but not Schumann, Mendelssohn and Liszt. Anyone who wishes to study key and content in Liszt – no small matter in a composer who said that ‘programme music is a legitimate genre of the art’<sup>1</sup> – must examine each work for himself. Only in this way can he form a

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of Franz Liszt*, translated by Constance Bache (London 1894) Vol. II, p. 329. To Walter Bache, March 19th 1878, Budapest [the original is in French, but Liszt writes in English the words *legitimate genre of the art*].

picture of what, if anything, links different music say in D minor or F# major, two keys used by Liszt in very specific programmatic contexts.

During the course of my work on this question,<sup>2</sup> I was forced to invent a sign for a 'blank' key signature which was not C major or A minor, but which figures not infrequently in Liszt's music. The first example I noticed was the Inferno movement of the *Dante Symphony*, which, although it is in D minor, has no key signature (*Example 1*). Other examples began to present themselves, with the result that I invented a category of music by Liszt which had no key signature, and began to ponder what its significance might be. That it had a significance I was certain, because by then I had collected ample evidence to show that choice of key was directly related to programmatic content

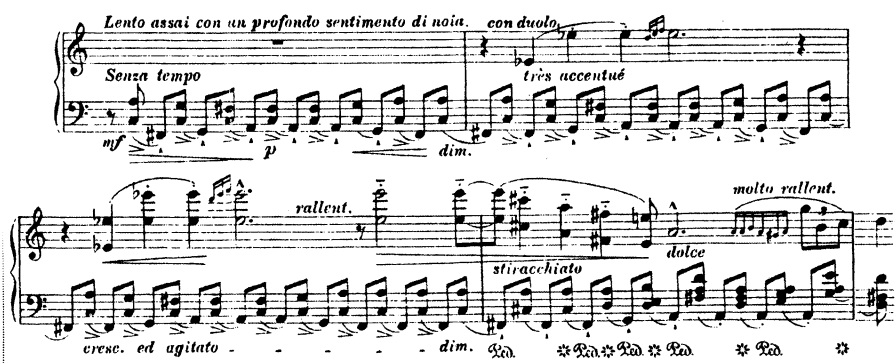
*Example 1: Dante Symphony, Inferno, closing bars (637–646)*

<sup>2</sup> My articles on the question of Liszt's use of tonality and programme are: "Doubtful or authentic? Liszt's use of key in Don Sanche". *Studia Musicologica* 34, 1992, pp. 427–434. "The role of tonality in the Swiss book of *Années de pèlerinage*". *Studia Musicologica* 39, 1998, pp. 367–383; "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*, pp. 188–200, Budapest: Magyar Liszt Társaság, 2000; "'nach Ges dur': Liszt's inscription in the score of Handel's opera *Almira*". *Studia Musicologica* 42, 2001, pp. 349–372; "*Le chasseur maudit*. Key and Content in Liszt's Music in C Minor". *Studia Musicologica* 44, 2003, pp. 321–336.

in Liszt, in which case the absence of a key signature must have been deliberate, and must have had meaning. The clue to what this meaning might be I found in an article by Adrienne Kaczmarczyk on the genesis of the early piano piece *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (S154) – which Liszt based on poems by Lamartine with this title. The author makes the observation that in the manuscript draft of the piece, there is a key signature of 2 flats signifying G minor, but Liszt crossed it out before publishing the work in 1835:

The G minor background of the music is dominated by a diminished 7th chord on F#, whose resolution to G minor does not take place. Liszt further weakened the feeling of tonality “visually”, when before publication he crossed out the key signature of 2b which is in the draft.<sup>3</sup>

This piece of information has to be taken in conjunction with a letter Liszt wrote to Madame d'Agoult in October 1833, when he had just written the piece, but left the manuscript behind at her house: “S’il vous est possible de me renvoyer par occasion...ma petite harmonie lamartinienne sans ton ni mesure, je vous en serai fort reconnaissant. Je tiens beaucoup a ce peu de pages.” [If some time you could send me...my little Lamartine harmony without key or time, I would very much appreciate it. Those few pages mean a lot to me.]<sup>4</sup> The importance of this letter is that it tells us that Liszt intended the music to be ‘sans ton’, or ‘without key’. The ‘sans mesure’, or ‘without time’ is reflected in the absence of a time signature and regular barring (*Example 2*). However, when he wrote the letter, the score still contained a key signature. This means



*Example 2: The beginning of Harmonies poétiques et religieuses, S154*

<sup>3</sup> In Hungarian: Adrienne Kaczmarczyk: “Az *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*-től (1835) a *Pensée des morts*-ig (Liszt Ferenc zeneszerzői indulása)” [From *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* (1835) to *Pensée des morts* (Liszt’s commencement as a composer)]. *Magyar Zene* 1995, XXXVI, no. 2, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> *Correspondance de Liszt et de Madame d'Agoult* (Paris, 1933–4) vol. I, 47. 30 octobre 1833.

that only later, after telling us that the music is meant to be ‘sans ton’, did he remove the key signature.

This act of erasure is clearly related to the idea of the music being ‘without key’ – which in actuality it is not, the whole piece being a tonal journey from G minor to G major, the last section of the piece having the signature of one sharp (*Example 3*). However, Liszt’s letter tells us that his idea had been to compose at the beginning music ‘sans ton’, and this idea was clearly what he tried to express in the act of erasure. In Liszt’s mind, if there is no key signature, then logically there is no key. To be exact, Liszt probably wished to express the concept of ‘no key’ by removing the sign that we call the key signature which stands at the beginning of every piece of music.

It is my opinion that Liszt introduced two innovations in musical history when he erased the G minor signature in the draft of this piece. Firstly, he began a practice, as far as I know not previously known, of deliberately omitting the key signature at certain points when he notated his music; secondly, he invented a new sign. The first innovation, interestingly, seems to have gone unnoticed in well-known instances where it might have been expected to

*Example 3: The last section of Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*

arouse comment. An example is the first movement of the *Faust Symphony*, a work in C minor, but whose introduction of 70 bars before the beginning of the allegro proper has no signature (the 3 flats only appear at the first subject of the sonata form). It cannot be said that earlier composers omitted the key signature when they wrote introductions to their symphonies, however free-ranging these may be tonally. Even Haydn's 'Chaos' that opens *The Creation* has a signature of 3 flats. In Liszt's symphony, the empty key signature seems to be a reference to 'sans ton'.

More important, however, is the exact nature of the sign that Liszt created in 1835. His erasure was more than simply a decision not to have a reference to G minor. What Liszt wanted was a sign that conveyed visually the concept of their being no key. Logically, such a sign cannot be a 'key signature'. It can only be a 'no key' signature. What Liszt draws attention to here is that the normal practice of musical notation is to assume that there is always key – even when the signature is 'blank'. To that extent musicians are accustomed to interpreting the empty space not as 'nothing', but as 'something', understanding it in conjunction with what follows in the music. Thus for example a musician of Liszt's time, if he saw a signature without flats or sharps, would expect to find music in C major or A minor. Another possibility, as for example in recitative, would be that the tonality is free, or unspecified. What he did not think of was that there would be *no* tonality. But in my opinion this is exactly what Liszt wanted to signify in 1835 when he erased the signature – it was the signature *per se* that he erased, by this means expressing literally 'sans ton'. In other words, he left an empty space. In this way he created an extra meaning for the blank signature. Whereas a signature normally has two meanings – say, one sharp signifying either G major or E minor – so the blank signature in Liszt came to have three meanings. The first is the one preceding, for example, *Les Préludes*, which signifies C major; the second is the one preceding *Psalm 13* or *Prometheus*, which signifies A minor; the third is the one at the beginning of the *Faust Symphony*, where the music is not in either C major or A minor, and as such bears no relationship to the traditional meaning of the signature. This third meaning is different from the recitative tradition, as the example mentioned above from the *Dante Symphony* shows. The principle of unrelatedness found here in Liszt applies regardless of whether the tonality of the succeeding music is clearly defined or not. Liszt is saying there *is* no signature, because he wants to indicate his idea of 'sans ton'.

The question arises why Liszt invented this sign – a question related to the fact that its function is to express 'sans ton'. What did Liszt's 'sans ton' itself express? In other words, what made Liszt think of trying to write music 'with-

out key' in the first place? Here we must beware of associating 'sans ton' directly with atonality, even though Liszt himself composed in his late years a piece entitled *Bagatelle sans tonalité*. It is common in the Liszt literature to read that the composer was a kind of musical prophet in whose works we find many compositional devices characteristic of modern composers. This is especially true of his original harmony, which is often, especially in the late works, given the adjective 'experimental'. As we have seen, the 'sans ton' idea appears first in the early Liszt, not the late Liszt. Why did Liszt want to write 'sans ton' music in 1833, when at that time atonality did not yet exist? Liszt's 'experiment', though it may seem to us prophetic of later musical developments, was born in the 19th century, and as such was a child of its time.

Liszt's idea, as far as he was concerned, was an impossible idea – namely to produce actual music without tonality. In other words, Liszt's 'sans ton' is an imagined concept – even if he can try and suggest it by avoiding harmony which is key orientated (such as whole-tone chords, diminished sevenths, enharmonic ambiguity etc.). Thus the new signature Liszt created expresses by 'visible invisibility' a vision of something he could not compose. In the 1830s all music had tonality, and nobody had seriously suggested that it was possible for it not to have. The reason Liszt thought of not having it may be connected to the title and content of *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, which was prefaced with a long quotation from Lamartine. To quote once again from Kaczmarczyk:

The piano work that Liszt hoped would mark a turning point in his reputation as a composer was first published in 1835 in the *Gazette musicale de Paris* as a supplement to the June 7th issue, exactly one week before Joseph d'Ortigue's biographical study of the composer appeared in the columns of the same paper. Without doubt *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* would have aroused interest without d'Ortigue's article devoted to Liszt, since in the eyes of his contemporaries, who judged composers primarily on the basis of original works, the piece constituted Liszt's debut. ...we know from his letters that Liszt himself regarded the piece as a milestone in his development, probably as the beginning of his "ligne intérieure"... The special importance he attached to the work shows in the preface, unusually long for a single short composition, consisting of two extracts from the *Avertissement* by Lamartine, as well as in his dedication to the poet himself, who at that time enjoyed great respect and popularity. To ensure its wide distribution he sold it simultaneously to publishers in three different European cities.<sup>5</sup>

This all points to the seriousness with which Liszt approached the composition. It is clear that it played an important role in his career as a composer – he considered it to be the real beginning. In that sense the work is a kind of mani-

<sup>5</sup> Adrienne Kaczmarczyk, op. cit.

festo. As such, his quotation from Lamartine was more than just a programme for a particular piano piece. It had relevance to his philosophy of composition – of music as a language. There is a sense in which ‘sans ton’ is the ultimate beginning – the stage before a key is depressed on the piano, before a note is written on paper.

The opening words of Liszt's Lamartine quotation are:

Ces vers ne s'adressent qu'à un petit nombre.

Il y a des âmes méditatives

que la solitude et la contemplation élèvent

invinciblement vers les idées infinies,

c'est-à-dire vers la religion.

[These verses are meant for a small number of people only. There are meditative minds, whom solitude and contemplation insensibly raise towards infinite ideas, that is to say – Religion.]

This text represents in effect Liszt's first choice of programme. It contains nothing more concrete than that religion and religious men exist. That the topic of Liszt's music may simply be religion itself is surely intrinsic to his choice of literary programme – even, we might say, its very title. The coincidence of Lamartine's use of the word ‘*Harmonies*’ and Liszt's preoccupation with harmony at the beginning of his music must surely be taken into consideration. Indeed, translated into English as ‘Poetic and Religious Harmonies’, we may say that the religious harmonies are simply religious music, and that the poetic is the narrative, or programmatic content. In other words, the literary inspiration was to consider the relationship between religion and music. That this is the music's thought content seems to be confirmed by the second half of the piece in G major, marked *Andante religioso* (Example 3), and its musical relation to the first half. The inscription in French at the beginning of the first half is “Extrêmement lent avec un profond sentiment d'ennui” (Example 2). The French “ennui” is today translated into English as worry, boredom; but its deeper meaning is weariness of life. Putting Liszt's 19th century inscription into today's psychological language, we could say he was referring to depression. Certainly we can say ‘ennui’ is used here by the composer as a religious reference – we might say a psychological reference. Musically the two sections of the work are in fact thematically related, being based on a single theme, namely the G major ‘*religioso*’ melody itself. The first section consists of a series of stormy “premonitions”, or variations, of the first phrase of this melody, Liszt evidently having composed the piece ‘backwards’. In this way from the work's inception onwards the listener, or performer, can, as it were, ‘look forward’ to the ‘*religioso*’ theme as a kind of salvation. This would

explain how Liszt came to be so preoccupied with the beginning of the piece – he would have to consider from what the g minor music at the beginning is ‘saved’ by the G major music at the end.

Why this question should have made Liszt think of writing music ‘sans ton’ and removing the key signature is perhaps brought closer to us by the title he chose for the same music, still without key signature, twenty years later, when it was included as the fourth item in the set of ten pieces entitled *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* [S173]. Here it is called *Pensée des morts* [Thinking about the Dead]. This title brings the blank key signature idea into line with its use in the *Dante Symphony*, where Dante’s words inscribed over the gates of Hell are inscribed into the brass section of the score: “Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrate” [Abandon all hope ye who enter here] (Example 1). In both cases we know that Liszt is thinking of death, and therefore inevitably of the connection between music itself and death. Logically death is where there is ‘no music’. At the same time for Liszt there is music – his programme music about the question. Therefore the subject of death in these works involves music ‘talking about itself as not existing’. This would explain the origin of the ‘sans ton’ idea. Music without key is music ‘without itself’ – literally ‘nothing’. In other words, ‘sans ton’ for Liszt can express the idea of death as nothing, thereby bringing his musical composition into the realm of the philosophical and theological questions the concept of nothing arouses. In music, as a composer knows, there is never ‘nothing’, not even silence – although silence can perhaps symbolize ‘nothing’ (as it seems to in the Storm in Liszt’s *Christus*). But *nihilum*, or ‘nothing’ would be a logical thought for a religious man like Liszt faced with the task of thinking about death as the subject of music of a programmatic character. [This was the period – 1834 – when the 23 year-old Liszt visited the Abbé Lamennais at La Chênaie as his house guest, and composed for him a piano concerto (left unfinished by the composer) based on the *De Profundis* melody, a work described by Liszt as a ‘Psaume instrumental’.] In Christianity, death is not extinction, and to have this *nihilum* as the subject of sounding music – of a Christian composer’s musical meditation on the thoughts of a Christian poet – requires somehow its expression in relation to the language of music, or at least to its notation. Liszt’s inspiration was to say that ‘music as nothing’ is ‘music without key’ – since he conceived of tonality or key as the very substance of music – and then to create the symbol of this nothing visually by erasing the key signature. In this way his ‘sans ton’ became a symbol of death.

This symbol – ‘sans ton’ music as death – can be seen in a religious context in the orchestral storm from the oratorio *Christus* (Example 4). Here Liszt uses





Example 4: The orchestral storm (*Christus*, no. 9 “Das Wunder”)

the solo voice of Christ (*Example 5*) after a long silence, seemingly to reflect the death symbol of the preceding music. The occasion is where the disciples, during a storm on Lake Galilee, cry out “Domine salva nos, perimus”. [Lord, save us, we perish.] The music of the storm, which brings the fear of death to the disciples, is an orchestral piece 175 bars long in no clear tonality, and with no key signature. After the disciples’ cry for help, the orchestra falls silent and there is a long pause, into which the unaccompanied voice of Christ sings “Quid timidi estis modicae fidei?” [Why are you fearful, O ye of little faith?] The orchestra then restarts, groping its way towards tonality and a key, whose signature seems to ‘be born’ before our eyes, the storm having subsided. Surely here Liszt is using the voice of Christ to bridge the gap between the ‘sans ton’ music (death) – and tonality (life). If Liszt’s thinking at these points is, as it seems to be, theological, then it gives the whole question of tonality in his work a religious foundation.

The question arises whether Liszt’s ‘sans ton’ – together with its blank signature – can actually be identified as a symbol of death in his music. The only way to ascertain this is to list the music that uses the blank signature, and see whether or not its programmatic or verbal content is about death. This is because it is the presence of death in the musical narrative which makes the symbol exist, not the signature that makes death exist in the music. If the ‘sans ton’ signature is a special signature for the reasons I have given, it is because Liszt was thinking about music and death, and not for any other reason.

The image shows a musical score for a voice and piano piece. The first system, starting at measure 173, is for the 'Christus Dr. solo' section. It features a vocal line with lyrics 'Quid ti - mi - di - e - stis mo - di - cue fi - de - i?' and a piano accompaniment. The second system, starting at measure 176, is marked 'Andante' and 'p sostenuto'. The third system, starting at measure 183, shows a piano solo with a 'pp' dynamic marking. The fourth system, starting at measure 191, continues the piano solo with a key signature change to two sharps (F# and C#).

Example 5: Voice of Christ and re-entry of orchestra (*Christus*, no. 9 “Das Wunder”)

The list I have prepared does not pretend to be complete, and contains the results of examining about 400 significant works by the composer written at various points in his life, for various instrumental and vocal combinations. Among these I have found 84 instances where the key signature is removed at some stage of the music. The order in which the works are listed depends upon the importance given to words, as a sung text, a programme, or a title. Thus the first group is songs, the second choral (taken from the sacred works), the third orchestral and the last for piano or organ.

The use of a blank signature ( $\emptyset$ ) is divided into four categories:

1. where  $\emptyset$  is the main signature, i.e. it begins and ends the work
2. where  $\emptyset$  is the opening signature, leading to another
3. where  $\emptyset$  occurs during the course of a piece
4. where  $\emptyset$  occurs at the end

## Works by Liszt which contain a blank key signature (Ø)

[The letters (tonalities) are the key signatures used by Liszt in a given piece.]

### 1. ØØ (Ø as main key signature)

#### choral

- 001 *Via Crucis (14 Stations of the Cross)* S53  
 Station I. Jesus is condemned to death  
 ØØ  
 Station II. Jesus is made to bear his cross  
 ØØ  
 Station IV. Jesus meets his afflicted mother  
 ØØ  
 Station VIII. Jesus speaks to the daughters of Jerusalem  
 ØØ  
 Station XI. Jesus is nailed to the cross  
 ØØ

#### orchestra

- 002 *Christus* S3  
 9. Das Wunder (Storm)  
 ØØ  
 003 *Dante Symphony* S109  
 I. Inferno  
 Øf# F#Ø

#### piano

- 004 *Sospiri* S192.5  
 Ø Ab Ø  
 005 *La lugubre gondole* (II) S200.2  
 Ø f e DØ  
 006 *R. W. Venezia* S201  
 Ø Bb Ø  
 007 *Trauervorspiel* S206.1  
 ØØ  
 008 *Bagatelle sans tonalité* S216.a  
 ØØ

title(s) in autograph: *Vierter Mephisto-Walzer* – / (ohne Tonart),  
 and: *Bagatelle* / ohne Tonart; *Bagatelle*, / sans tonalité

[there is also another work by Liszt, unfinished, called “4th Mephisto waltz”]  
 – the unison theme at the beginning of this bagatelle contains the tritone  
*(diabolus in musica)*

– strong flavour of B minor/F# minor tonality [the ‘sans tonalité’ is trick notation, i.e. “Augenmusik”, where for example E# is written as F, producing visually ungrammatical harmony – an attempt to disguise (deny) the presence of tonality, so that in the score Mephisto’s *sans ton* presence can perhaps be more ‘seen’ than heard]

## 2. Ø + (Ø as opening key signature)

**songs**

- 009 *Blume und duft* S324  
Ø Ab
- 010 *Petrarch 104* S270.2  
Ø E
- 011 *Wartburglieder* S345  
II. Heinrich von Ofterdingen  
Ø Ab

**recitations**

- 012 *Der traurige Mönch* S348  
Ø e Ø D Db
- 013 *Der blinde Sänger* S350  
Ø E

**choral**

- 014 *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth* S2  
Zweiter Theil No 5 Elisabeth  
Ø F# A F# Bb Ø F# g E Ø G (death of Elisabeth)  
[in the oratorio the scene containing the death of the saint is followed by the final scene, her canonisation]
- 015 *Christus* S3  
III. Passion und Auferstehung  
Resurrexit  
Ø E
- 016 *Missa solennis (Esztergomi Mise)* S9  
Agnus Dei  
Ø D
- 017 *Ungarische Krönungsmesse (Magyar Koronázási Mise)* S11  
Agnus Dei  
Ø E Eb
- 018 *Psalms 129 De Profundis* S16.1.  
Ø E  
[associated with the funeral mass]  
there are 3 “De Profundis” pieces:  
1. 1834 the (unfinished) “*De Profundis*” piano concerto – which contains much Ø, and was composed immediately after *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*  
2. 066 *Les morts* (1st funeral ode, contains De profundis as sung text with Ø signature)  
3. [this psalm]
- 019 *Via Crucis* S53  
Station III. Jesus falls the first time  
Ø A  
Station V. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the Cross  
Ø Ab

Station VII. Jesus falls the second time

Ø Bb

Station XII. Jesus dies on the Cross

Ø A g

020 *Ossa arida* S55

Ø A

[based on the picture of death in Ezekiel 37.4, see 37.9: "breathe on these dead, so they may come to life!"]

021 *Rosario* S56

II. dolorosa

Ø G

### orchestral

022 *Faust Symphony* S108

I. Faust

Ø c A Eb Ø E Ø c# Ø (development section) E c A E C c

III. Mephistopheles

Ø f# Ø c A Ø c Ø e E Ø Db E c A C Ø (collapse) C (chorus)

N. B. [here the musical drama of Faust's soul is surely death and Mephistopheles the defeat of Mephistopheles is a "sans ton" passage at letter Ww which is followed by a return to tonality at the Chorus Mysticus]

023 *2nd Mephisto Waltz* S111

Ø E Eb Ø Eb Ø E Ø B Ø Eb Ø Eb

[begins and ends on tritone BF = *diabolus in musica*]

### piano

024 *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* S154

Ø G

025 *Années de Pèlerinage II. Italy* S161

4. Petrarch Sonnet 47

Ø Db

5. Petrarch Sonnet 104

Ø E

026

*Ballade No 1* S170 (chant du croisé)

Ø Db

027 *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* S173

4. Pensée des morts

Ø G

028 *Mosonyi's funeral music* S194

Ø D

029 *Elegie I (Schlummerlied im Grabe)* S196

Ø Ab

030 *Elegie II* S197

Ø Ab

- 031 *Am Grabe Richard Wagners* S202  
Ø A
- 032 *Trauermarsch* S206.2  
Ø g
- 033 *Unstern* S208  
Ø B  
[– a death star? N.B. extreme violence of the music]
- 034 *Valse Oubliée* No. 1 S215  
Ø F#
- 035 *Csárdás macabre* S224  
Ø D  
[does “macabre” = Ø?]

### 3. + Ø + (Ø in the middle)

#### songs

- 036 *O lieb, so lang (Liebesträume 3)* S298  
Ab B Ø Ab
- 037 *Ich möchte hingehen* S296  
A F Ab E Ø a
- 038 *Jeanne d’Arc au bûcher* S293  
E Ø (mourant) E  
[the text at Ø is: Allez me chercher ma bannière, sur ce symbole d’espérance mon  
oeil mourant veut s’attacher]
- 039 *Die stille Wasserrose* S321  
E Ø E
- 040 *Die Fischerstochter* S325  
Ab Ø a
- 041 *Die Perle* S326  
A Ø A
- 042 *Petrarch Sonnet 123* S270  
F Ø A F
- 043 *Ungarns Gott* S339  
a Ø A

#### choral

- 044 *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth* S2  
Part One  
No. 2 Ludwig  
F Ø Db D E  
No. 3 Die Kreuzritter  
Bb Ø D Eb Bb  
Part Two  
No. 4 Landgräfin Sophie  
e f Ø (als einen Todten ihn beklagt) E g Ab e

- 045 *Christus* S3  
 III Passion and Resurrection  
 11. Tristis est anima mea  
 Ø c# ('usque ad mortem') Ø (58 bars for orchestra) c# Db  
 ['Tristis est anima mea' is the struggle with death in the garden of Gethsemane, in pictorial art usually called 'The Agony in the Garden']  
 12. Stabat Mater  
 f Ø (vidit Jesum in tormentis) E Bb C G Db D F
- 046 *Cantico del Sol* S4  
 F Ø (suor luna) A Db Ab E F
- 047 *Sainte Cécile* S5  
 (2 flats but c) A Db E Ø (on mit dans sa tombe) C
- 048 *Die Glocken des Strassburger Münsters* S6  
 II Die Glocken  
 c Ø E Ø F f Ø D C  
 [the text, a poem by Longfellow, is about Lucifer and his angels who attempt to destroy the cathedral at Strasbourg]
- 049 *Missa solennis (Gran Mass)* S9  
 Gloria  
 B Eb Ø D g B D Ø B (fugue: cum sancto spiritu)  
 Credo  
 C B Ø F# D F# C F# Ø (et homo factus) E Ø (judicare) C D C
- 050 *Missa choralis* S10  
 Credo  
 D Ø (judicare vivos et mortuos) D
- 051 *Requiem* S12  
 Dies Irae  
 c e E Eb B G Eb B G Eb A c Ø (Oro supplex, Lacrymosa) c C
- 052 *Psalm 13* S13  
 a Ab B (dass ich nicht im Tod entschlafe) Ø (dass nicht mein Feind rühme, er sei meiner mächtig geworden) c# Ø A C A F A C A
- 053 *Psalm 137* S17  
 c D Ø (Wie sollten wir im fremden Lande das Lied des Herrn singen!) C
- 054 *Septem Sacramenta* S52  
 II. Confirmatio  
 F E Ø C F  
 IV. Poenitentia  
 d Ø d  
 VI. Ordo  
 C Ab Ø C

**orchestral**

- 055 *Ce qu'on entend* S95  
 Eb D F# Eb g e B G Ø Eb G (religioso) d E Eb Ø Eb D Eb

- 056 *Tasso* S96  
c E Ø F# Bb b C  
based on gondolier melody sung to Tasso's *Jerusalemme liberata*
- 057 *Les Préludes* S97  
C E Ø (storm) A C  
[cf. 'sans ton' storm in *Christus oratorio*]  
"...interrompues par quelque orage... dont la foudre fatale consume son autel..."  
(from Liszt's programme)
- 058 *Orpheus* S98  
C E Ø C  
"Orphée pleure Eurydice, cet emblème de l'Idéal englouti par le mal et la douleur, qu'il lui est permis d'arracher aux monstres de l'Érèbe, de faire sortir du fond des ténèbres cimmériennes..." (from Liszt's programme)
- 059 *Prometheus* S99  
a Db fugue (Db) A Ø A  
"foi tacite en un libérateur qui fera monter le captif longtemps torturé aux régions transmondaines..." (from Liszt's programme)  
[Liszt says Prometheus represents 'Audace, Souffrance, Endurance, et Salvation'. Ø occurs at the end of the development section in the sonata form, i.e. just before the recapitulation, which is the 'Salvation'. This moment is the most intense in the life and death struggle of Prometheus, and Ø occurs in other works at a similar position, e. g. in *Faust*, *Hungaria*, and the *Sonata in B minor*]
- 060 *Mazeppa* S100  
d f# Bb b E Ø d D Allegro marziale  
"Enfin le terme arrive...il court, il vole, il tombe, Et se relève roi!" (from V. Hugo's poem used by Liszt as the programme)
- 061 *Festklänge* S101  
C Bb G A Ø D (apotheosis) C A C
- 062 *Hungaria* S103  
d Eb B Ab B C (folk dance tune) f# A Ø Agitato molto (battle scene)  
Eb B (folk dance tune) d b (g) Marcia funebre D Allegro trionfante  
[the battle scene in the central section is usually taken to represent the 1848 revolution against Austrian rule. Ø occurs at the end of the battle, before the return of the Hungarian folk dance. The 'death' idea here is part of Liszt's portrait of Hungary as the Patria, and the dangerous situation it was in.]
- 063 *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe* S107  
I Die Wiege  
C  
II Der Kampf um's Dasein  
Ø Db Ø Eb Ø E  
III Zum Grabe: Die Wiege des zukünftigen Lebens  
Ø a C C#  
[the prominence of Ø in section II is explained by its title (The Struggle for Existence)]



- 064 *Faust symphony* S108  
 II. Gretchen  
 Ab E Ab c (Faust) Ø B Ab F# c Ab E Ab  
 [Ø appears when Faust enters – because he represents the same danger to Gretchen that Mephistopheles does to Faust]
- 065 *2 Episodes from Lenaus Faust* S110  
 1. Der nächtliche Zug  
c# (“Tiefnacht”) Bb Ø c# f A Eb F# religioso (Pange lingua) A C D c#  
 [The programme in the score of the 1st episode says it is a dark night, and Faust is in despair. The presence of Ø refers to the 2nd episode, the Mephisto waltz, which results from the dark despair (Liszt said these two pieces should always be played together – which they almost never are).]
- 066 *Trois Odes Funèbres* S112  
 1. Les morts  
 e Ab e Eb Ø (De Profundis) E (Te Deum)

**piano and orchestra**

- 067 *Malédiction* S121  
 e Ø (80 bars) E  
 [Bar 36 of the 80 bars of Ø is a whole page of cadenza without barlines, i.e. “sans ton ni mesure”. The performance markings are: Patetico. Senza tempo. disperato. Andante Lacrimoso.]
- 068 *Piano Concerto No2 in A major* S125  
 A d bb c# E Db Ø (stormy, 118 bars) A Marziale  
 [As in other works, the Ø music is stormy. Even though Liszt gave no programme, it is possible he had one in his mind.]

**piano**

- 069 *Waldesrauchen* S145  
 Db E F A Ø Db
- 070 *Apparitions* S155  
 1. F# Ø F#  
 3. Eb E Ø F# Eb
- 071 *Années de pèlérinage I. Switzerland* S160  
 5. Orage  
 c Ø F# c
- 072 *Années de pèlérinage II. Italy* S161  
 7. Après une lecture de Dante  
 d f# F# Ø F# Ø (101 bars) D
- 073 *Années de pèlérinage III* S163  
 2. Aux cyprès de la Villa d’Este, thrénodie [I]  
 g Ø f# G  
 3. Aux cyprès de la Villa d’Este, thrénodie [II]  
 e Ø Bb F# f# Ø Bb E

4. Jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este  
F# E D F# A Ø F# Ø F#
5. Sunt lacrimae rerum, en mode hongrois  
a Ab Ø A
6. Marche funèbre  
f a A Ø F#
- 074 *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* S173  
1. Invocation  
E Ø E
9. Andante lagrimoso  
g# Ø Ab g#
- 075 *Deux Légendes* S175  
2. St François de Paule marchant sur les flots  
E Ø E
- [According to the legend, the saint walked over stormy water. As in the *Christus* oratorio, the stormy music is a religious image of death, hence Liszt uses the Ø signature.]
- 076 *Sonata in B minor* S178  
bEbDc#fe F#AF#geF# bbØ bB  
(exposition) (development + fugue) (recapitulation)
- [The Ø occurs at the same place as it does in *Prometheus* and the *Faust Symphony*, namely at the end of a developmental fugue before the recapitulation. Although the *Sonata* has no published programme, I would point out that in other instrumental works by Liszt, where there is a fugue there is a programme.]
- 077 *Valses oubliées* [4] S215  
2. Ab E Ø Ab  
3. Db D E A Ø Db
- 078 *Dritter Mephisto-Walzer* S216  
F# Ø F# Ø F# Ø F# D E Ab F#
- 079 *Rhapsodies Hongroises* S244  
1. E Db Ø E
- 080 *Rhapsodie Espagnole* S254  
c# F Ab E Eb Ø Bb D
- organ**
- 081 *Fantasie und Fuge über den Choral "Ad nos, ad salutarem undam"* S259  
c Ø E F# Bb f# b B C
- 082 *Missa pro organo* S264  
Credo  
Bb Gb Ø Bb

#### 4. + Ø (Ø at the end)

#### song

- 083 *Gebet* S331  
d Ø

**piano**084 *La lugubre gondola I* [Dritter elegie] S200.1

f Ø

[Liszt's programmatic image is probably a funeral gondola going to San Michele, the cemetery island of Venice. In which case we can say that the *sans ton* key signature written at the end of the score parallels the black gondola floating on the water – a visual image of death.]

The above list shows clearly that in a high percentage of cases the use of a blank signature and the subject of death go together. The proportion is too high to be just coincidence. This would tend to confirm the theory that Liszt's omission of the signature in the draft of the 1835 *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* formed part of his musical thinking in connection with the subject of death.

The omission of the key signature, as an act of erasure, expressed the idea in Liszt's mind that tonality itself can be viewed as a constituent of the language of music, and as such omitted. But he also thought that if we really did omit tonality, literally, then the music would cease to be – in this sense the idea represents music's own death. Insofar as this idea is conveyed via notation, it may be objected that it is visual: can we hear the blank key signature, or 'sans ton' tonality? One reply might be that Liszt, if unconsciously, was making a point about the connection between our concept of tonality, and notation. He would ask how else can our knowledge of tonality – of its existence as a system – be conveyed, except visually? As regards whether or not we can hear Liszt's *sans ton* idea, one answer would be that because Liszt seems to have associated the idea of no tonality with death, then he tried to compose this idea into the music that he wrote about death. That is to say, Liszt's death music tries to avoid tonality, or an established key. To that extent we can 'hear' the absence of tonality in that this music sometimes seems 'strange' – particularly the late works. [Cosima Wagner in her diary entry for November 29th 1882 says of Wagner: 'Today he begins to talk about my father again, very blunt in his truthfulness; he describes his new works as "budding insanity" and finds it impossible to develop a taste for their dissonances ... He keeps talking about it to me, while I remain silent, sorry that there is nothing I can say in reply!']<sup>6</sup> Being chromatic and 'experimental', this music is often said to be 'modern'. This may be so, in terms of its 'linguistic' relationship to modern music – its harmonic language and so forth. But it is not at all modern in its associations – to associate 'no tonality' with death is Liszt's nineteenth century programme. It

<sup>6</sup> *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, translated by Geoffrey Skelton (London, 1980) volume II, p. 963, November 29th 1882.

was the subject of death that led him to the idea of music ‘sans ton’, and to the act of erasure in his score. We may ask ourselves, more pertinently, whether there is anything modern in Liszt’s meditations on death, which began in his youth. Are they what English people would call ‘Victorian’ – part of the acknowledged preoccupation with death that characterized the period?

In purely musical terms, I think Liszt reveals himself as a thinker quite out of the ordinary in his musical dealings with this topic. It seems to me that, just as a child at the piano begins with C major, and adds ‘the black notes’, so Liszt in his notation, confronted with the empty paper, thought in a similar way of C major as the beginning, as the ‘white’ tonality. The question Liszt asked himself, surely, was ‘if C major is the beginning, then what precedes this beginning?’ The answer is, of course, ‘nothing’. But this nothing is real, for example if I close the piano lid and walk away. Similarly, before I write on the paper, there is no music. Liszt’s erasure allowed the composer to move back to the step *before* C major, even though the appearance in the score at the point of the ‘signature’ is the same. For the rest of his life Liszt knew he had once erased the signature, and we know from his letter at the time that the music in question was in his mind ‘sans ton’. But our knowledge of the connection between the two – the letter and the erasure – is recent. Taken together, the two factors help us to probe Liszt’s thinking. If the ‘nothing before C’ is real – Liszt seems to be saying – then its presence in notation is real, because notation can refer to itself. If 2 flats has a meaning – for example G minor – then if we want to indicate G minor we cannot write 3 flats. At the same time the presence of G minor is the presence of all tonality. Inevitably, the writing of the key signature signifies this presence. If the convention of writing a key signature serves to signify the presence of all tonality, then the same convention can serve to signify the absence of all tonality – this is Liszt’s logic. He simply deleted it. His deletion in the score forms a statement – it is not a revision or correction, as deletions customarily are. Its meaning is erasure – ‘sans ton’ is *erasure of key* in the music. In which case what we see is ‘nothing’ – but in the usual place for a signature. Therefore what is in that place, as an inevitable part of the sign language of musical notation, is *zero*. And insofar as the absence of tonality in Liszt’s mind was the musical equivalent of nothing, and the sign of this nothing is present when the music is associated with death, then the zero signature functions in the score as a symbol of this programmatic content – a ‘death signature’.

The presence of a blank signature in works with no programme – for example the *Piano Concerto in A major* – involves consideration of whether in these cases too we should not interpret it as Liszt’s zero signature, together

with the symbolism that accompanies it. It is after all possible that these works are also in principle programme music, even if we do not know what Liszt's programme was. It was natural for Liszt to think programmatically, especially when conceiving works on a large scale. If a symphony can have a programme, then so can a concerto. [During his concert tours Liszt frequently played the *Konzertstück* by Weber, which is of course a piano concerto with a programme.] Because the zero signature is associated with death, it is quite possible for it to appear in large works whose programme has been undeclared by the composer. In conjunction with his 'sans ton' concept, Liszt doubtless regarded the signature as an inherent ingredient in the language of music, or at least in his vocabulary of musical notation. Liszt would not in this case have separated what we see as his 'programme', or subjective view of music, from his thoughts about music *per se*. If Liszt had a reason for inventing a new sign, it was because it said something about all music, not just his own. What today we call 'narrative' was for Liszt simply the natural progression of any musical work – a progression which for Liszt always had a meaning. Music without meaning was probably something he could not conceive of – meaninglessness being 'not music', and thus as such enshrined in his symbolic use of a zero key signature. To make use of this symbol in the notation of his serious works becomes almost a simple matter of logic, once we accept that 'programme music', so-called, in Liszt is music talking about the nature of itself – a tale to be told.

The sense of music's tale being told is especially strong in Liszt's *Piano Sonata* – and is surely what animates the work. It is widely held that this work is 'absolute' music, yet this begs the question of whether Liszt ever thought there was such a thing. The work's main material, or sonata form first subject, is a dual theme where two musical characters, in the two hands, are locked in combat – from this the whole work is generated. The appearance of the blank key signature in the work – namely at the end of the fugue before the recapitulation – is paralleled by the place where the zero signature appears in the *Faust Symphony* and *Prometheus*, namely after a fugal passage leading to the recapitulation, or final section of the work. In other words, the signature's appearance precedes a victory, for example in the *Faust Symphony* it is present at the collapse of Mephistopheles (who symbolizes death to the soul) before the final triumphant Chorus Mysticus. In *Prometheus* death also threatens the hero, until at the last minute he is rescued (according to Liszt's programme that prefaces the score Prometheus represents an example of endurance and perseverance). Why should the *Sonata* be an exception in this trio of works? If it is not, and the blank signature is the zero signature-symbol, then what is the

identity of the two characters locked in combat in the first subject material? For we can be sure that if Liszt has made death and its programmatic presence visible in the notation, as he does in numerous other scores, both those where a programme is given and perhaps some where one is not, then every musical theme in the *Sonata*, as in those other works, has a clearly defined task, or character, in Liszt's mind. Here the zero key signature can perhaps help us in the task of uncovering the identity of these characters. After all, the main ingredient of what is generally considered to be Liszt's masterpiece is its perfectly articulated convincing dramaturgy – could Liszt have produced it unless he was illustrating an idea?