LISZT, HUNGARY, AND THE KEY OF F SHARP MAJOR

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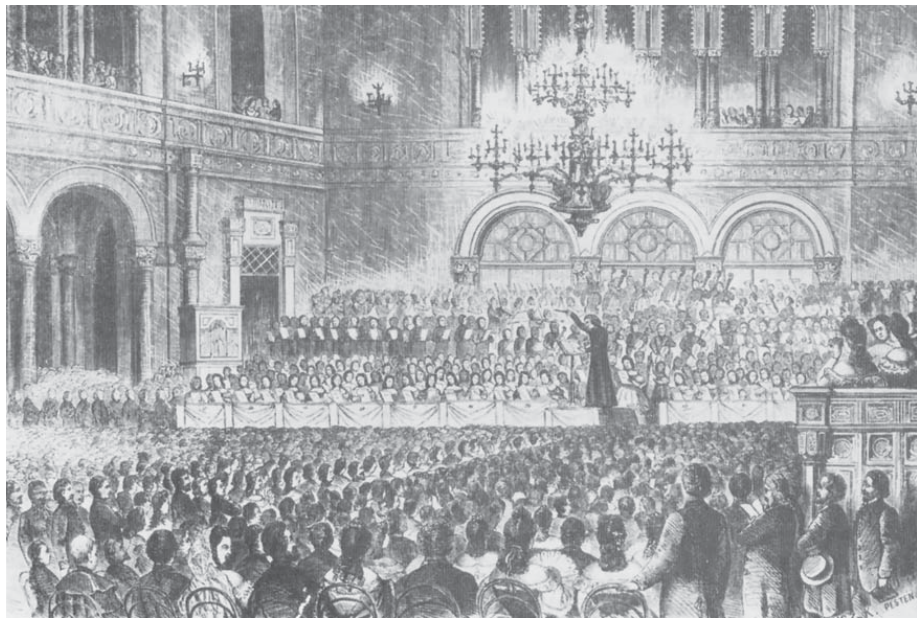
Everyone knows Franz Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, especially No. 2, which figures in the famous 'Tom and Jerry' cartoon. The Chinese pianist Lang Lang has said that it was watching the 'The Cat Concerto' as a child that made him want to learn the piano. To hear the result decades later, search for Proms 08—Lang Lang: Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*—on YouTube.

Lang Lang was inspired by Liszt, who was himself inspired to compose the rhapsodies after hearing Hungarian melodies during his travels in Hungary in the 1840s. As a child, he heard the gypsies playing music in the village where he grew up (since the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, Hungary's borders have changed, and today his birthplace is in Austria). At the age of twelve, his father took him to study piano in Vienna with Carl Czerny, and when he was fourteen they went to Paris, hoping the young prodigy could study at the Conservatoire, but he was rejected because he was a foreigner. They lived in Paris until his father died in 1827, when Liszt was sixteen. His mother came from the village to look after him, and the boy gave piano lessons to support them both. In memory of his father, he composed a set of three piano pieces entitled *Zum Andenken*, based on Hungarian dances he knew from his childhood. These dances were composed in the so-called *verbunkos* style, by musicians who themselves were often not musically literate, then the music was notated on paper by someone with classical training. The performers were usually gypsy bands—Liszt heard these Hungarian musicians outside Hungary in the capitals of Europe, including Vienna, Paris, and London. *Zum Andenken* linked his childhood with his father in Hungary to his adolescence in Paris. But the style of the gypsy bands remained with him all his life—posthumously influencing the whole of Europe via the *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, and in 1984 even reaching Communist China.

Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* is in the key of C sharp minor. Or at least, so the books say—but actually only the slow introduction is in that key. The rest of it—the famous popular *friska* or allegro—is in the key of F sharp major, a very rare key in Liszt's music. The piece is also unusual in that the sources of the melodies have not been identified by musicologists. The set of fifteen rhapsodies are really arrangements of known melodies, usually popular songs and dances,



Franz Liszt's fundraising concert for the flood victims of Pest in 1839, Redoute (later Vigadó) Concert Hall, Budapest. Illustration by Robert Hersch

some of them printed, which were part of the urban cafe life of nineteenth-century Hungary, and in particular of Budapest, where, as today, the music was often played by gypsy bands. They are *not* folksongs (defined as rural peasant music). However, the music of *Rhapsody No. 2* seems to be by Liszt himself, as such constituting a personal contribution to what he intended to be a musical 'national epic'. Interestingly, the choice of key turns out to be the most personal ingredient.

The question of why a composer chooses one key rather than another is generally thought to be scientifically unanswerable. But certain works—for example Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—are inseparable from their key—in that case C minor. The work is called the 'Fate Symphony' (Beethoven said the opening theme is 'Fate knocking on the door') and this association influenced many other composers after him. It took Brahms twenty years to write his Symphony No. 1 in C minor, so afraid was he of comparison with Beethoven. Beethoven's Sixth Symphony is in F major, and the work's nickname is 'The Pastoral Symphony'. The composer said it was about his feelings towards nature, and it is considered programme music. In this case, the composer used an ancient association of the key of F major with the pastoral. This topic—the connection of a piece of music's key or tonality with the content of the music written in it—is called key character or key characteristics. Indeed, for centuries—basically the three hundred years from 1600 to 1900—music was written in identifiable keys, and theorists have pondered and written about key character. Rita Steblin has compiled a collection of their writings in a book entitled

A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries. In it, she quotes Czerny, talking about the key of F sharp major:

> [O]n the piano, a composer of fantasy and finer feelings can make the peculiar observation that, for example, in composing an Adagio in … G♭ major, completely different ideas occur to him, and the piece takes on a totally different character (a different colour), than if he writes it in … F♯ major.[1]

Czerny—who taught the twelve-year-old Liszt—added this as a footnote to his German translation of Reicha's French *Traité de mélodie*, in which the author says:

> The keys of F♯ and G♭, which are seldom used and which are one and the same key on the piano, are consequently very different in their nature; the former is very brilliant or piercing, while the latter is very sombre … This observation is important in the case of enharmonic transitions, because, when the key of F♯ is suddenly changed into … G♭ we fall … into a very sombre key … On the piano, this difference is little felt; but in the orchestra it can produce bad effects, completely contrary to the intention of the composer.[2]

All this is evidence that the question of key character formed part of the young Liszt's musical education. Relevant specifically to these texts is the fact that Liszt did not write a work in G flat major—an assertion I make based on an examination of 392 works by the composer, sorted by key. The results of this I have published in a book entitled *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key*.[3] The section on F sharp major contains 11 works by the composer:

1834	F♯	*Senza lentezza* (*Apparition No.1*) [piano] S155.1
1845	*F♯*	*Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude* [piano] S173.3
1862	*F♯*	*Elizabeth's Prayer* (from *St Elizabeth*) [choral] [S2.5/a]
1872	*F♯*	*Impromptu* (*'Nocturne'*) [piano] S191
1873	*F♯*	*Piano piece* (no title) (*Five little piano pieces*) S192.3
1876	*F♯*	*Piano piece* (no title) (*Five little piano pieces*) S192.4
1876	*F♯*	*Schlummerlied* (*Weihnachtsbaum*) [piano] S186.7
1877	*F♯*	*Les jeux d'eau à la villa d'Este* [piano] S163.4
1878	*F♯*	*Matrimonium* (from *Septem Sacramenta*) [choral] S52.7
1880	*F♯*	*Klavierstück* [piano] S193
1883	*F♯*	*Mephisto Waltz III* [piano] S216

To these we can add here the *Second Hungarian Rhapsody*—which otherwise figures among the works in C sharp minor. What we might hope to gain from studying these

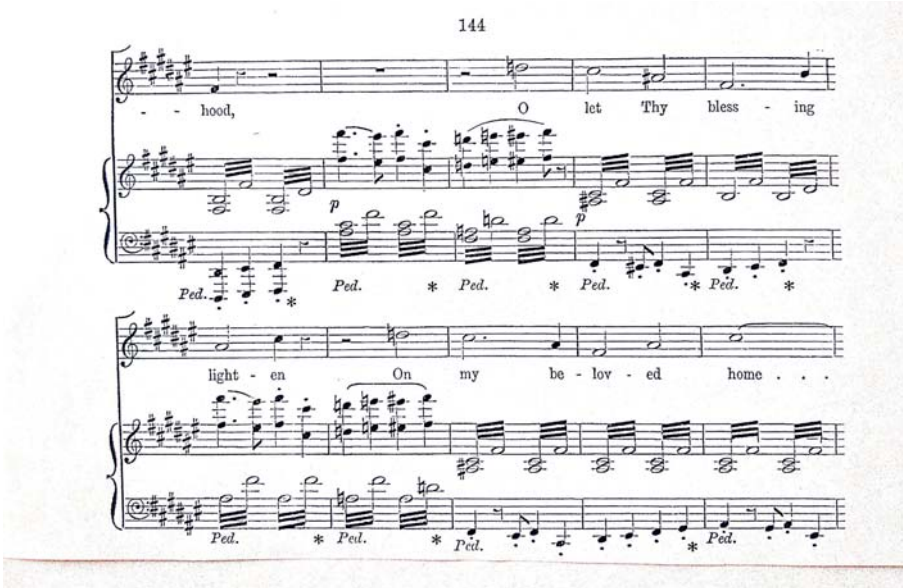
compositions in F sharp major is an outline of what Liszt had in mind as the character of the key. The basis for drawing such a conclusion is Liszt's own declaration—in a letter written from Budapest in 1878 to his English pupil Walter Bache—that 'programme music is a legitimate genre of the art'. Much of the controversy that still surrounds Liszt is concerned with what he intended by 'programme music', and how seriously we are meant to take it. In my book, I try to extract the character Liszt had in mind for a particular key, and then give it a name. I chose Latin names because all the keys Liszt uses in his music occur together only in one work—the Latin oratorio *Christus*. Thus, for example, Liszt's F major is *natura*.

Not all the F sharp major pieces listed are for the piano, but the two exceptions are religious choral works. This religious ingredient is also strongly present in the piano music. The astoundingly beautiful *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude* is based on a poem of this title by Lamartine, and forms part of a collection of piano pieces entitled *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. The piece describing the fountains at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli contains a quotation from John's gospel written into the score: 'But the water that I will give him, shall become in him a fountain of water, springing up into life everlasting' (Jn 4,14). Another religious piano piece, not listed here, begins in C major and ends in F sharp major, a most unusual tonal journey. The reason for it is the programme indicated by the title of the piece, *In festo transfigurationis*. The story of the transfiguration is given in the New Testament:

> Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain. There his appearance was changed before their eyes. A cloud formed, covering them in a shadow, and from this cloud came this word, 'This is my Son. The Beloved; listen to him.' (Mk 9:2,7)

In theological teaching, Christ has two natures: the human and the divine. At the Transfiguration, the disciples were shown both, the divine nature here accompanied by the voice of God. Hence the change at the end of the piece to the key of F sharp major. These examples alone are sufficient evidence to justify calling Liszt's F sharp major *divinitas*.

This key character is brought into alignment with Hungary in *Elizabeth's Prayer.* The oratorio *The Legend of St Elizabeth* is a major choral work of Liszt, much performed during his lifetime. In 1886, it was performed in English in London, in the presence of the composer, for which occasion the vocal score was published by Novello.[4] In the Catholic liturgical calendar, the feast of St Elizabeth of Hungary falls on 17 November (in Hungary on 19 November). Elizabeth was the daughter of the Hungarian King Andrew II (who ruled from 1205 to 1235), and after marrying the Landgrave of Thuringia, she went to live in the castle of Wartburg near Weimar. She thus formed a link between Liszt's childhood in Hungary and his adult life in



Example 1. End of Dream of Home {Elizabeth's Prayer} from the English vocal score of The Legend of St Elizabeth (London: Novello, 1886, page 144)

Germany. The 'legend' of the title refers to a medieval tradition according to which a miracle took place when her husband expressed displeasure at one day finding her alone outside the castle carrying a basket. When he angrily demanded to know its contents—in reality bread for the poor—she fearfully claimed she had roses. Upon uncovering the basket, its contents were indeed roses. The rose miracle is the germ of the whole work: it inspires the Landgrave to leave for Palestine on a Crusade, and during his absence, the mother-in-law ejects Elizabeth from the castle and seizes power. After wandering with her children and ministering to the poor, she dies, and her soul goes to heaven. The work ends with her canonization, sung in Latin. Elizabeth's Prayer is sung at the moment of her death, and contains an episode entitled 'Dream of Her Childhood's Home'. The text is:

> O childhood's dream! Remembrance brings before me times long since forgotten.
> Through golden twilight I behold my fatherland with fragrant meadows.
> O Hungary, my fatherland! Light clouds transport me
> Like silver swans, upon the breeze of spring,
> And show to me my parents weeping, weeping o'er their distant child.
> O Father, let Thy blessing lighten on my beloved home of childhood!

The music of this section begins in the key of B flat major. The key of F sharp major returns for the last line 'O Father', etc. This is an expansive, full-throated passage, during which the phrase 'my beloved home of childhood' is sung four

times, with the so-called 'Hungarian' theme played in the orchestra, first in the treble, then in the bass (see Example 1 on the previous page). This theme is used for its national character, and was given to Liszt by the Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi, who took part in the 1848 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence (see Example 2 on the next page). Afterwards he was forced to emigrate, and for a time played in Liszt's orchestra at Weimar. He was also a friend of Brahms, to whom he gave a number of Hungarian melodies, including some that ended up in the composer's *Hungarian Dances*.

Liszt was invited by Baron Prónay to give the first performance of the oratorio in Hungary, and in his letter of acceptance the composer thanked him, saying the work was part of his artistic tribute to his homeland. He conducted *The Legend of St Elizabeth* on 15 August 1865 in the Vigadó (earlier known as Redoute) in Budapest. Seven years earlier, in 1858, he had been made a *confrater* of the Franciscan order in Pest, an aspect of his musical identity which echoed his closeness to St Elizabeth, who ended her life as a Third Order Franciscan. Contemporary illustrations of Liszt conducting the premiere of the oratorio show him wearing the Franciscan habit. We thus have here a mixture of ingredients which bring us close to Liszt's identity as a Hungarian musical patriot.

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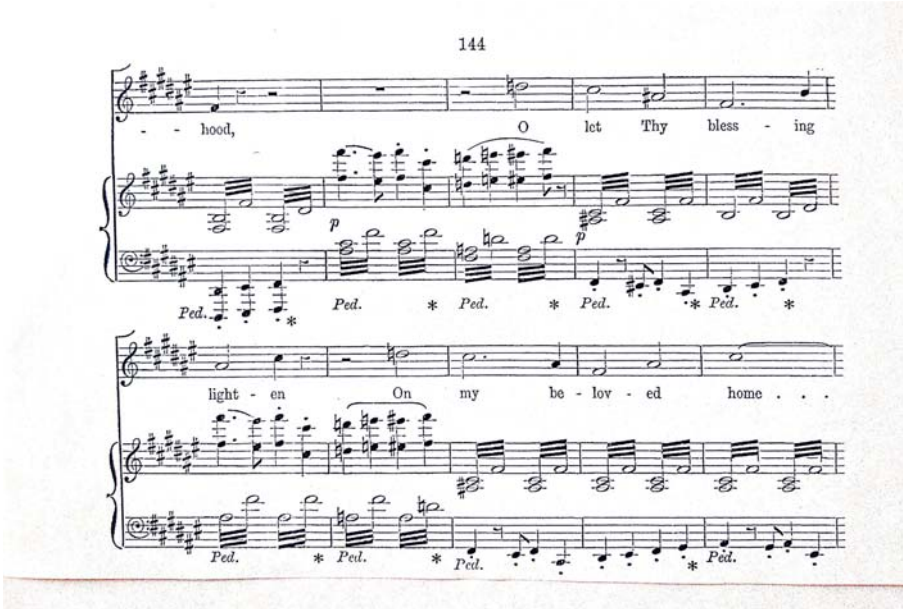
At this point, we may feel we have strayed a long way from Lang Lang and the 'Tom and Jerry' cartoon. However, in terms of the nineteenth century and its music, Liszt thinking about Hungary and St Elizabeth thinking about Hungary reflect the same theme. The 'Hungarian' melody in the oratorio has the same character as the rhapsody—the *verbunkos* style and its association with dance music played by gypsy bands. Its contextual significance, however, is the key Liszt chose. That is what brings it into the sphere of art music, in the cultural and intellectual context of its time. The key tells us something that Liszt is saying in the *writing* of his music. It can only be conveyed permanently via musical notation. We do not hear F sharp major—we see it.

This may contradict the claims of those who say they hear with absolute pitch. It is common to meet musicians who dislike recordings because sometimes the pitch is inaccurate—a work in D major may be sharp, sounding in E flat, or the reverse. Without deriding these scruples, it has to be pointed out that Beethoven's F major was not the same as Handel's, which in turn was not the same as Liszt's. Pitch has varied over time and in different places. But F major as a notated key was the same in 1750 as in 1950, and had the same character. It is a notational convention, and certainly so once equal temperament became widely accepted in the eighteenth century. F sharp major is not at all popular with musicians, and arrangers of the



Example 2. Reményi's 'Hungarian theme' listed among extraneous material used by Liszt in the oratorio (Novello vocal score, Preface, page vii)

famous *Second Rhapsody* often transpose it down to F major without anyone noticing the difference. Liszt's own orchestral version is transposed up to the easier key of G major. This simply reinforces his extraordinary choice of key for the piano version.

Clearly, we have to begin by taking seriously Liszt's artistic intention regarding the rhapsodies—namely that he was thinking of creating a musical 'national epic'. Today the topic is usually restricted to the question of style—in particular the cosmopolitan nature of Liszt's 'Hungarianness' and his use of the *verbunkos* style versus the 'purity' of the Bartók–Kodály use of peasant folk music. Their often-reiterated phrase *csak tiszta forrásból* (only from a pure source) has entered the consciousness of musicologists like a *mantra* with magical powers. But even if the idea of a pure source were true—with or without the magic—it cannot obviate the need for a personal commitment from the user. It cannot function *in lieu* of a conscious artistic identity.

Artistically speaking, the *Rhapsodies* are simply a portrait of Hungary as *music*—not a picture of the map. It has no borders. It has no politics. Its messengers (for the child Liszt) were the gypsy bands. The 'epic' the fifteen works attempt to convey is the saga of the Hungarian soul, not its various bodies. Liszt's musical idea of a nation is the one conveyed by the Latin name of the country—*Hungaria*. In conformity with its medieval origins, it is a kingdom—but all kingdoms in medieval Europe originate from Christ. It is their basic cultural idea, and Liszt carried this in himself.

The Britannica Dictionary defines patriotism as 'love that people feel for their country'.[5] Obviously, this applies to all Hungary's composers. But in Liszt's case, the topic of love plays a special role in his music generally. The motto of his Latin oratorio *Christus* is a quotation from St Paul: '*Veritatem facientes autem in caritate*' (we will speak the truth in love, Ephesians 4:15). Liszt did not separate human love from divine love—the one entails the other. In the oratorio, F sharp major occurs only once, at the Nativity, when the Three Kings arrive at Bethlehem and see the place '*ubi erat puer*' (where the child was, Matthew 2:9). The key of love for Christ when his prayer is said (the choir sings the *Pater noster*) is A flat major—the key of all three of Liszt's first love songs (the *Petrarch Sonnets*) and two of the famous *Liebestraum* piano pieces (also originally love songs). The only orchestral piece Liszt wrote in A flat is the Gretchen movement of the *Faust Symphony*. And when Faust meets Gretchen, his own key (C minor) changes to F sharp—because it is the love he finds that redeems him (i.e. rescues him from the deadly grip of Mephistopheles). This is where the human and the divine meet as *amor* and *divinitas*.

We are left therefore with the question of the significance of the key of F sharp major in the Hungarian music of Liszt. Choosing the key of a composition is not done by accident—in Liszt's case, as we have seen, it can be an independent ingredient of the 'programme'. Taken in its widest sense, the programme can be any text associated with the composition—its title, the words if it is sung, the known intentions of the composer (usually given in a preface that precedes the score, sometimes detectable in other writings that mention plans for the work, such as letters or polemic articles, etc.)—and can serve as a guide to the music's content, to what it is 'about'. The starting point must be the character of the key as conceived by the composer—and its role in making him use it. In Liszt's case, we should exclude the possibility that it is simply a milestone on the tonal highway travelled by the work in question. Liszt's handling of tonality is not always 'logical' in terms of traditional structural procedures. He is famous for being unpredictable—he changes key (and key signature) at will (itself a stylistic characteristic that propelled him towards modernism).

F sharp major occurs in four different genres of Liszt's Hungarian music: a mass, an oratorio, a suite of character portraits for piano, and the Hungarian rhapsodies.

• The mass is the one he composed for the consecration of the basilica at Esztergom in 1856. The key appears in the Credo:

Missa Solennis (Gran mass) 1855 S9
Credo. The keys are: C F B F# D F# C F# B E♭ E C D C B C

F sharp appears at the words '*qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem /et incarnatus est / ex Maria virgine*' (who for us men and for our salvation / was incarnate / of the Virgin Mary).

• The oratorio was begun at Weimar, completed in Rome, and premiered in Budapest:

The Legend of St Elizabeth of Hungary 1862 S2
Elizabeth's Prayer [S2.5/a]. The keys are: F# A F#

Elizabeth's prayer is sung when the storm that breaks out when she is expelled from the castle has subsided. She begins: '*Beruhigt ist das Toben auf wildem Schmerzensmeer, und friede bringend droben zieht der Gestirne Heer.*' (Now peace to earth is given, The storm of grief is o'er, And bringing hope from Heaven, Shine forth the stars once more.)

The return of the key of F sharp occurs when Elizabeth invokes God's blessing on Hungary:
Dream of Home [S2.5/b]. The keys are: B♭ C F#

• The set of Hungarian portraits for piano includes the minister for religion and education:

Hungarian Historical Portraits 1885 S205
Eötvös [S205.2]. The keys are: B A G A[F#]

Liszt's use of F sharp major here is most revealing. The last key signature is A major, but the piece ends on the chord of F sharp, which may be the composer referring to the divine source of knowledge (as celestial light, or illumination).

These examples have titles or texts as verbal identities by means of which we can try to deduce the composer's thinking. Clearly, the appearances of the key of F sharp are for a reason, and it is usually the same reason.

• In the rhapsodies we see F sharp major in six of them, but here we have no verbal identities to guide us:

Hungarian Rhapsodies [Nos. 1–15], 1853, S244.1–15
No. 2 c# f# F#
No. 8 f# B♭ F#
No. 9 E♭ A♭ E F# E♭
No. 11 a f# F#

Hungarian Rhapsodies [Late, Nos. 16–19], 1882–1885, S244.16–19
No. 16 a b♭ F# A
No. 18 f# F#

So why does *divinitas* appear in the rhapsodies? The answer, by analogy with the above 'programmatic' examples, must be that the use of the key of F sharp major indicates an overall religious approach to the question of patriotism. It forms part of Liszt's Catholicism, according to which every man has a home, a country, a nationality—but which is only a preliminary to the inheritance that awaits us. The true 'home' of every individual soul is the afterlife, the *return*. In this sense, the earthly *patria* is a God-given shadow of the true one. To some modern observers it may seem that this interpretation leads Liszt into an incongruous mixture of *verbunkos* and *divinitas.* But all Liszt's music is histrionic—in one of his letters to the Princess Wittgenstein, he refers to himself as '*un pauvre histrion*'—and is all genuinely like himself. Why dissemble?

Liszt's use of F sharp major in the *Rhapsodies* is not to sanctify the *style* of the music, but the *act* of playing it. In his day, the *abbé* Liszt was mocked as being 'half Franciscan, half gypsy', his detractors seeking by this to belittle his intelligence and cast doubt on his sincerity. But the actor in Liszt never gave a bad performance, all was clearly thought out beforehand. To go on stage and imitate the gypsy musicians with musical material he had himself composed in their style was his way of transferring his patriotism to the piano. Just as wearing the Franciscan habit and conducting a choir and orchestra singing Gregorian chant pretending to be St Elizabeth was his way of transferring his patriotism to the Church. In both, he used the *verbunkos* style to represent Hungary, and in both, he made room for the voice of God. This was natural for a composer like Liszt, who was an executant by nature, and whose contact with his audiences was unrivalled in history.

He lived at the end of nearly a thousand years of European notated music. In nature, music is transient; its sounds fall silent and die. But the written nature of the printed score removes the death from the silence. Liszt knew that after his own death the *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* would always resurrect tomorrow.

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[1] Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, 1983), 131.
[2] Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, 131.
[3] Paul Merrick, *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key* (Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 2022), www.argumentum.net/musicology.
[4] It can be downloaded at free-scores.com.
[5] *The Britannica Dictionary*, 'patriotism', www.britannica.com/dictionary/patriotism.