



Franz LISZT

Totentanz (Dance of the Dead), S. 126

Franz Liszt (born Franz Joseph Liszt) (22 October 1811 – 31 July 1886) was a prolific 19th-century Hungarian composer, virtuoso pianist, conductor, music teacher, arranger, organist, philanthropist, author, nationalist and a Franciscan tertiary. Liszt gained renown in Europe during the early nineteenth century for his prodigious virtuosic skill as a pianist. He was a friend, musical promoter and benefactor to many composers of his time, including Frédéric Chopin, Richard Wagner, Hector Berlioz, Robert Schumann, Camille Saint-Saëns, Edvard Grieg, Ole Bull, Joachim Raff, Mikhail Glinka, and Alexander Borodin. As a composer, Liszt was one of the most prominent representatives of the New German School (*Neudeutsche Schule*). He left behind an extensive and diverse body of work in which he influenced his forward-looking contemporaries and anticipated many 20th-century ideas and trends. Some of his most notable musical contributions were the invention of the symphonic poem, developing the concept of thematic transformation as part of his experiments in musical form, and making radical departures in harmony.

Totentanz (English: Dance of the Dead): **Paraphrase on *Dies irae***, S.126, is the name of a symphonic piece for solo piano and orchestra. It is notable for being based on the Gregorian plainchant melody *Dies Irae* as well as for daring stylistic innovations. The piece was originally planned in 1838 and completed in 1849; it was then revised twice, however, in 1853 and 1859. Some of the titles of Liszt's pieces, such as *Totentanz*, *Funérailles*, *La lugubre gondola* and *Pensée des morts*, show the composer's fascination with death. In the young Liszt we can already observe manifestations of his obsession with death, with religion, and with heaven and hell. According to Alan Walker, Liszt frequented Parisian "hospitals, gambling casinos and asylums" in the early 1830s, and he even went down into prison dungeons in order to see those condemned to die. Since it is based on Gregorian material, Liszt's *Totentanz* contains medieval sounding passages with canonic counterpoint, but by far the most innovative aspect of the scoring is the shockingly modernistic, even percussive, nature of the piano part. The opening comes surprisingly close to the introduction in Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, a work composed almost a hundred years later. This may be no coincidence since Bartók frequently performed Liszt's *Totentanz*. Other modernistic features are the toccata like sections where the pianist's repeated notes beat with diabolic intensity and special sound effects in the orchestra. For example, the *col legno* in the strings sound like shuddering or clanking bones. Richard Pohl (an early biographer) notes. Every variation discloses some new character—the earnest man, the flighty youth, the scornful doubter, the prayerful monk, the daring soldier, the tender maiden, the playful child.