

Totentanz

Mort omnibus unum.

Liszt's mid-century inspiration, *Totentanz* (*Paraphrase on "Dies Irae" for pianoforte and orchestra*), would prove to be one of the most enduring, inspiring, and disturbing works of the 19th century. It was inspired partly by Traini's fresco, "Triumph of Death," but also from the entire medieval tradition of Death depicted as a wild sort of Peter Pan, leading the folk to their demise in dances of ecstatic frenzy. It has often been noted how these medieval depictions were psychological aids to those surrounded by inexplicable deaths (that we now know were from plague and pestilence), but they also probably served as strict warnings against excess.

A notable achievement in this genre is Hans Holbein's series of wood-cuttings also entitled *Totentanz*, depicting everyone from the Pope to a peddler being approached by Death, who carries an expired hourglass and tugs them away by their garments. One particularly gruesome cutting envisions Death liberally imbibing drunkards with ale, inducing what is surely the most graphic vomiting ever depicted in 16th century art.*

Liszt was perfectly suited to take up this old tradition and make it his own: he had his own macabre obsessions that led him to visit, observe and play for patients in asylums, hospitals, prisons and hospices throughout Europe. He has a whole genre of macabre themed works, including four Mephisto Waltzes, the b-minor sonata, and the Dante sonata. He also had the perfect musical starting point, the ancient requiem sequence *Dies irae*, which he had heard to great effect in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*:



(traditionally symbolic of Hades) - a powerful image is suggested: the chasm of Hell relentlessly cracking open in a mighty earthquake. The instrumentation, perhaps ugly by conservative standards, even seems to give off an offensive stench of sulfur. It is surely one of Liszt's most demonic strokes, and will continue to intrigue composers almost a hundred years later. The piano follows with three wild cadenzas traversing the keyboard all the way to the top, then all the way to the bottom: a terrifying image of the minions of Satan bursting forth from the opened chasm and gaining ground on Earth.

Following that, there comes a tableau of variations based on the theme proper. A contemporary biographer of Liszt's, Richard Pohl, astutely commented: "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." Indeed, the Holbein series of wood-cuttings depicts all these characters and more visited by Death.

A second tableau of variations gives a nobler, less devilish version of the theme, harmonized with a modal flair. In these variations, the texture becomes noticeably lighter and more brilliant, giving an effective contrast to the dark and foreboding music of the previous variations. The main theme does return, however, and in a devilish turn of events the piece closes with a chromatic scale cascading downwards, signaling the return of Satan and his minions to Gehenna, mortal souls in tow.

Throughout the whole piece, Liszt creates a practical catalog of *haute-virtuose*: rapidly alternating chords, tempestuous octaves, Liszt-octaves (fast octaves alternated between hands), brilliant and ornamented runs, *glissandi*, lightning-fast repeated notes and chords, treacherous leaps, contrapuntal playing, polyrhythmic passages, and massive scales. One of his ultimate trademarks, lyrical *bel canto* passages, are conspicuously missing, and that proved to be the biggest boon for composers of the future. In this unique, radically austere approach to piano technique, Liszt was the first to understand the inherently percussive nature of the piano. Everyone strove to make it sing like an opera star, or articulate like winds, or make *legato* like strings - including Liszt - but he was the first to take it a step further. Composers that were drawn to this piece included Busoni, Bartók, Prokofiev, and Rachmaninoff, innovators in the realm of piano, who definitely exploited the percussive nature of the piano as handed down by Liszt.

While certainly not a neglected work, *Totentanz* is not as familiar as the other Liszt concerti. Its aesthetic is perhaps slightly more foreign to us today, as threats of eternal damnation tend to hold little water with the regular concert-going public. Still, the sheer innovatory quality sustained through the whole concerto is enough to give us a thrill, even if unaccompanied by visions of wailing and gnashing of teeth.

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