

The Key Characteristics of Franz Liszt's Late Piano Works

By
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Abstract

Many of Franz Liszt's piano works have been analyzed and discussed in depth and in different ways, yet the piano music of his final period awaits exploration and initiation into the standard repertory. In this document, I discuss two main categories into which Liszt's late works often fall: death and despair. I introduce biographical evidence from Liszt's last years (1860–1886), which might explain why these two categories had such a strong hold over his mental and musical world. I also focus on the key characteristics of Liszt's late works: that is, why certain keys, as opposed to others, were chosen to express particular moods. Through the analysis of four pieces: *Nuages gris* (1881), *La lugubre gondolas II and I* (1883), and *Unstern!* (1881), I discuss pertinent musical ideas and characteristics to demonstrate Liszt's manifestation of death and despair in his compositions.

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The Key Characteristics of Franz Liszt's Late Piano Works

Introduction

Born in Raiding, Hungary in 1811, Franz Liszt is considered by many to be the greatest composer and pianist of his time. As a performer, he practically invented the solo recital as we know it today, and was a “superstar” who thrilled audiences with his dramatic technique. Liszt was also a remarkable composer who influenced other Romantic composers such as Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss.

The majority of Liszt's piano compositions reflect his advanced virtuosity. In his early works, he was the archetypal Romantic composer. As a pianist, I personally think that Liszt's late piano works are much simpler in technique, texture, and form than his earlier works. They are challenging to interpret correctly because his late works leave a large opening for imagination on behalf of the audience. These works require a performer to understand the spiritual and musical world of Liszt's final years. In this thesis, I discuss how to correctly interpret Liszt's late piano works and I will shed light on the spiritual and musical world of Liszt's final years.

As Franz Liszt approached old age, his music, once so full of verve and emotional flamboyancy like his playing, grew full of depression and darkness. While one can only speculate on matters of the heart, perhaps the reason for such a dramatic change was his personal difficulties, beginning with his declining health. In July 1881, Liszt fell down the stairs at the Hofgärtnerei, his home in Weimar, and was confined to his bed for several weeks under the care

of local physician Dr. Richard von Volkmann. Liszt had remained in good health up until this point, but after the accident, he began experiencing other health problems “including dropsy, asthma, insomnia, a cataract in his left eye and chronic heart disease,” all of which would eventually lead to his death five years later.¹ His failing eyesight was particularly frustrating since it not only affected his reading and writing, but it also limited his composing and performing. Desolation and despair preoccupied his thoughts and he told his biographer, the German musicologist and author Lina Ramann, that he was carrying the deepest sadness in his heart. These emotions are not difficult to hear in the music written during that period, and many scholars contend that the accident marked the beginning of Liszt’s final period and his traumatic introduction into old age.²

Beyond his health problems, other things contributed to Liszt’s melancholy mood. Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, his long-time companion, revised Liszt’s 1859 book *Des Bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie*. The origin and purpose of this work is worth noting here. Liszt originally sought to introduce his fifteen Hungarian Rhapsodies by way of a preface. However, the document eventually reached book-length and he published it independently in 1859. In the revised edition supervised by Princess Carolyne, she expressed some anti-Semitic views that were mistakenly attributed to Liszt. Unfortunately, he did not see her editorial changes before publication, and it created serious problems for him, resulting in widely-distributed criticism in the Jewish-controlled press.³

¹ Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Final Years 1861–1886* (NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 403–404.

² Walker, *Franz Liszt*, 403–404.

³ Walker, *Franz Liszt*, 405–410.

Another problem with the book was the mistaken idea that the old Magyar folksongs were originally Gypsy melodies, stolen by the Hungarians who added their own traditional texts to make them sound like Hungarian folk songs. This inaccuracy created problems for Liszt among Hungarian musicologists and created more controversy in the newspapers. Liszt was even threatened with physical assault if he visited the city of Budapest again. All these troubles threw him into despair. He felt rejected not only by his mother country, but also by all of Europe with its various religious, political, and cultural groups. As he wrote in a letter to the Hungarian composer Ödön Mihalovich:

Everyone is against me. Catholics because they find my church music profane, Protestants because to them my music is Catholic, Freemasons because they think my music is too clerical; to conservatives I am a revolutionary, to the “futurists” an old Jacobin. As for the Italians, in spite of Sgambati, if they support Garibaldi they detest me as a hypocrite, if they are on the side of the Vatican, I am accused of bringing the Venusberg into the Church. To Bayreuth I am not a composer but a publicity agent. The Germans reject my music as French, the French as German; to Austrians I write Gypsy music, to the Hungarians foreign music. And the Jews loathe me, my music and myself, for no reason at all.⁴

Although these debacles were compounded by the death of friends and family, his misfortunes did not prevent Liszt from composing. However, they appear to have had a profound impact on his stylistic development.

In the last six years of his life, Liszt wrote fifteen solo piano works that make up a small but impressive collection. Out of his later piano works, *Nuages gris*, *La lugubre gondola I and II*, and *Urstern!* really highlight Liszt’s three main preoccupations during this final period: death, despair, and recollections of times past. The musical style was drastically different from his early

⁴ Walker, *Franz Liszt*, 411.

virtuosic period, especially with regard to texture (much more sparse) and overall emotional content (rather gloomy and austere). His melodies were constrained, dissonance prevails, and tonality is ambiguous at best. The pieces were generally much shorter than earlier works, with a comparatively simple approach to form. Many of these works have open or tonally incomplete endings. We will now consider some of these compositional and stylistic changes in detail, beginning with *Nuages gris*.

Nuages gris

Completed on 24 August 1881 in Weimar, shortly after his accident at the Hofgärtnerei, *Nuages gris* has two elements typical of Liszt's late style: brevity of expression and simplicity in texture. Although the piece is technically simple regarding harmony—so different from earlier works—it has a dark, almost morbid feel.

Analysis

In terms of structure, *Nuages gris* is organized in two parts connected by a bridge: Part I (mm. 1–20), bridge (mm. 21–24), and Part II (mm. 25–48). The piece begins with a two-measure ostinato in the right hand, starting on the fifth degree of G minor, the tonic key. The C-sharp in the ostinato indicates the use of the so-called “Hungarian Gypsy Scale” shown in Figure 1. The structure of the scale is whole step, half step, augmented second, half step, half step, augmented second, half step.



Figure 1. Hungarian Gypsy Scale Beginning on C

Liszt used this scale in many of his compositions, especially in the Hungarian Rhapsodies, and it produces an exuberant sound in places. While the aspects of nationalism closely associated with Liszt are present here, the emotional affect is quite different from his earlier works.

The left hand joins the right with the tremolo at measure 5, creating a dark and heavy atmosphere. Five augmented triads follow the right hand starting at measure 11: F#-F-E-E \flat -D (Example 1), and they are accompanied with the alternating B-flat and A tremolo in the bass. The bridge (mm. 21–24) recalls the opening ostinato, but also serves as the preparation for the second part of the piece (Example 2).

Example 1 *Nuages gris*, mm. 11–22



Example 2 *Nuages gris*, mm. 21–24



The critical moment occurs in measure 25 (Example 3). The left hand employs the opening material as the accompaniment, while the right hand articulates the first clear melody in the piece. This lyrical line serves as the protagonist here, giving voice to the already fearful and depressed mood of the piece. It is as if a lone singer against the background of a dark and dreary scene comes on stage briefly to mourn his loss, then quickly exits.

Example 3 *Nuages gris*, mm. 25–32



The second part (shown in Example 4) seems to dispel the dread. Beginning in measure

33, there is an ingenious reworking of the material from the first section played by both hands from measure 9 to 20 (Example 5). This forms an accompaniment for the chromatic-scale melody in the right hand, beginning on F-sharp and spanning a minor ninth to the concluding G. Although it arrives at the first scale degree of the tonic key G minor, the harmony in the left hand undercuts any sense of finality. To me, this parallels the composer's personal and religious struggles at the time: he desires to see God and heaven, but he is uncertain and troubled at the same time.

Example 4 *Nuages gris*, mm. 33–48

The image displays a musical score for Example 4, consisting of three systems of piano music. The first system covers measures 33 to 37, the second system covers measures 38 to 42, and the third system covers measures 43 to 48. The music is written for piano in G minor (one flat) and 3/4 time. The right hand features a chromatic scale melody starting on F-sharp and ending on G, while the left hand provides a complex accompaniment with chords and moving lines. Performance markings include 'sempre legato' in the first system, 'rall.' in the third system, and a dynamic marking of 'p' (piano) in the third system.

To put a little finer point on it, the final chord, spanning both hands, suggests the whole-tone scale. As noted above, the melody ends on the first scale degree of G minor, but the harmony in the left hand does not confirm this. Instead Liszt supports the melody with a virtually unanalyzable chord consisting of an E-flat augmented triad over a pedal A. It is hard to imagine a more ambiguous ending for a piece ostensibly in G minor. Liszt seems to be asking a question to which there is no reply, leaving an evocative imaginary space for the audience.

Example 5 *Nuages gris*, mm. 9–21

The musical score for Example 5, *Nuages gris*, mm. 9–21, is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 9–10) features a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a tremolando accompaniment. The second system (measures 11–16) continues the melodic and accompanimental patterns. The third system (measures 17–21) concludes the piece with a final chord in both hands, consisting of an E-flat augmented triad over a pedal A.

Nuages gris is a miniature masterpiece among Liszt's late works. The composer cleverly uses augmented triads to create a pervasive bleakness of mood. Although very simple in technique and form, it shows a great depth of spirit and emotion. The work seems to reflect the situation Liszt was facing at that time—the suffering from dropsy, failing eyesight, and depression. It also exposes the dark side of Liszt's personality. As he himself said, "Ever since the days of my youth I have considered dying much simpler than living."⁵ This sense of lingering despair is expressed well in the grey clouds of this small but brilliant piece.

La lugubre gondola I and II

La lugubre gondola consists of two pieces and cannot be fully understood without reference to Liszt's relationship with Wagner—both musically and personally—and particularly with regard to Wagner's death. In 1882, Liszt's daughter Cosima and his son-in-law Richard Wagner invited him to visit them in Venice. Wagner was very ill during that visit, and it was clear that his days were numbered. The Venetian funeral procession of the gondolas fascinated Liszt. He had a premonition that Wagner would die in Venice and a funeral gondola would carry his body through the canals. As Liszt mentioned in his letter to Ferdinand Taborszky on 8 June 1885, "The title is 'The gloomy gondola.' I wrote this elegy in Venice, as a premonition, six weeks before Wagner's death."⁶ "The oars of a gondola lugubre beat on [his] brain."⁷ Liszt's

⁵ Liszt to Lina Ramann, Budapest, February 22, 1883, in *Franz Liszt Briefe: Gesammelt und Herausgegeben*, ed. La Mara, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1893), 438.

⁶ Rossana Dalmonte, "Liszt and the Death of Old Europe: Reflections on 'La lugubre gondola,'" in *Liszt and the Birth of Modern Europe: Music as a Mirror of Religious Political, Cultural, and Aesthetic Transformations*, ed. Michael Saffle and Rossana Dalmonte (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2003), 303.

⁷ Liszt to Olga von Meyendorff, Vince, January 7, 1883, in *The Letters of Franz Liszt to Olga von Meyendorff*.

premonition is reflected in two extraordinary funeral elegies, which he called *La lugubre gondola I and II*. They were composed in Venice in December 1882, with a possible revision of the second in 1883, after Wagner's death.⁸

Liszt wrote the first version of *La lugubre gondola* for piano, later revised and extended the work, and arranged a version for violin, cello and piano in 1883. The piano version was published in 1885 and is usually called *La lugubre gondola II* today. This was the only version of the piece published during Liszt's lifetime. There is also an undated manuscript—clearly from the end of Liszt's life—of a starker version of the piece in 6/8 for piano solo. It is virtually a new composition. The undated manuscript remained unpublished until 1927 when it appeared alongside the first version of the piece, with the same title. Since then, the 4/4 version has been known as *La lugubre gondola II*, while the 6/8 piece is usually called *La lugubre gondola I*.

***La lugubre gondola I* Analysis**

The music of *La lugubre gondola I* is based on the barcarolle—freely transformed—with exceptionally desolate harmonies creating a sense of tragedy. As it did in *Nuages gris*, the augmented triad plays a very important role. Although written with the key signature of F minor, the consistent presence of an E-natural in the bass obscures a sense of traditional tonality, especially while keeping F minor in view as an implied reference point. Zdenek Skoumal noted,

1871–1886 in the Mildred Bliss Collection at Dumbarton Oaks, ed. William R. Tyler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 441.

⁸ Alan Walker, "The Music of Catastrophe: Liszt's 'Wagner Elegies,'" *Piano and Keyboard* 142 (May/June 1993), 20.

“F minor appears to be Liszt’s funeral key, acting as tonic key in other funeral works.”⁹

According to Alan Walker in his article “The Music of Catastrophe: Liszt’s ‘Wagner Elegies,’” “the choice of F minor of these “Funeral gondolas” is no accident. This is Liszt’s ‘key of mourning.’”¹⁰ The key of F minor appears in many other compositions to express the emotional, misery, and depression. Beethoven composed his *Appassionata Sonata* in F minor, and Chopin wrote an *F minor Ballade*, both of which are known for their mournful character. In Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart’s book *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst*, F minor is the key of deep depression, extreme lamenting, funereal lament, misery, and the grave.¹¹ The key of F minor to signify mourning is well established in Liszt’s works. He wrote other pieces in F minor that are programmatically linked to death, loss, and mourning including *Funérailles*; *Héroïde funèbre* (a Symphonic Poem); *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen: Variationen über das Motiv von Bach*; and “Stabat mater dolorosa” (from the Oratorio *Christus*).

La lugubre gondola I has three sections: section A (mm. 1–38), section A’ (mm. 39–76), and section B (mm. 77–120). The first two sections are based upon the undulating barcarolle accompaniment that evokes the Venetian canals. The poignant melody and simultaneous cross relations occurring in measures 6, 13, and 17, establish a sense of bitterness underlying much of the piece. The first two sections close with a descending, unaccompanied melody. The third section is based on the first two, but with some notable differences.

⁹ Zdenek Skoumal, “Liszt’s Androgynous Harmony,” *Music Analysis* 13, no. 1 (1994): 65, <https://doi-org.www2.lib.ku.edu/10.2307/854280>.

¹⁰ Walker, “The Music of Catastrophe,” 20.

¹¹ Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 116.

Section A is itself divided into three subsections, the first from measure 1 to 18. The left hand plays an E-augmented arpeggio in barcarolle style, setting the mood for the entire piece. The melody beginning at measure 3, arising out of the E-augmented accompaniment but quickly moves beyond it (Example 6). The second subsection (measure 19 to the downbeat of measure 27, shown in Example 7) introduces a new melodic idea based on descending and ascending semitones. This melody is accompanied by, and helps to create, a series of common-tone triads and seventh chords, all hovering around F minor. This music appears twice, first from measure 19, beat 2 to measure 22, and again from measure 23, beat 2 to measure 27 (Example 8). The third subsection (measure 27, beat 2 to measure 38, shown in Example 9), in a recitative style, serves as a chromatic transition to the B section. The key of this first large section is difficult to discern, and the ambiguity seems quite deliberate on Liszt's part. As noted previously, although written using a key signature of F minor, the appearance of E in the bass contravenes a clear sense of tonality.

Example 6 *La lugubre gondola I*, mm. 1–5

The musical score for Example 6 consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The time signature is 8/8. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The tempo is marked 'Andante'. The dynamics are 'mf' (measures 1-2) and 'sempre legato' (measures 3-5). The right hand has rests in measures 1-2 and then plays a melodic line in measures 3-5. The left hand plays a continuous arpeggiated accompaniment throughout. Performance instructions include 'una corda' at the beginning and 'marcato' above the right hand in measure 3.

The second section begins in measure 39 and the opening 39 measures are repeated almost verbatim, but transposed down a whole step to the “key” of D major (see Example 9). Interestingly, if he had been true in his key signatures to the real transposition level of a whole step (between the two sections) then the second section should be in E-flat minor (with 6 flats). One can only speculate why he chose the key signature with two sharps. Such a choice reinterprets the function of the note D to that of a tonic in D major, whereas the E-natural in the first section is immediately seen (although not necessarily heard) as a leading tone.

As noted above, the third section (mm. 77–120) is based on the first two, and while it shares many musical elements with them—especially in the right hand—the constant low-register tremolo in the left hand destroys the lilting rhythmic ostinato presented previously (Example 10).

Example 10 *La lugubre gondola I*, mm. 77–84

Although *La lugubre gondola I* was composed separately from *La lugubre gondola II*, the pieces share many musical ideas and formal structures. They are, in a sense, like two chapters of a single story, and it makes musical sense to play them in succession in the order of their

composition (II, then I), as opposed to the order of their publication (I, then II).¹²

***La lugubre gondola II* Analysis**

The first piece composed in this funeral set, *La lugubre gondola II* is darker in color and more desolate in expression. The music reveals a sense of longing, presumably for the deceased loved one, and a sense of helplessness and despair in the face of impending death. Compared to *La lugubre gondola I*, *La lugubre gondola II* is longer and more complex in structure.

The form is *ABA'* with an introduction and coda. The introduction is from measure 1 to 34 and it consists of two musical ideas, each appearing three times. The first idea, shown in Example 11, is transposed down a semitone each time, beginning on F-sharp, F-natural, and E-natural (in mm. 1–4, mm. 10–13, and mm. 19–22 respectively). In contrast, the second idea (Example 12) is transposed up a whole step up each time, beginning on A, B, and D-flat (in mm. 5–9, mm. 14–18, mm. 23–34 respectively). The tonality of this first large section is implied and shifting at best, only settling into a very ambiguous version of F minor at measure 35, remarkably like the opening of *La lugubre gondola I*.

Example 11 *La lugubre gondola II*, mm. 1–4



¹² Walker, "The Music of Catastrophe," 20.

Example 12 *La lugubre gondola II*, mm. 5–10

The image displays a musical score for Example 12 from *La lugubre gondola II*, measures 5–10. The score is presented in two systems. The upper system features a vocal line on a single staff with a treble clef, marked "recitando" and "mf". The lower system shows a piano accompaniment with two staves, a bass clef, and a dynamic marking of "mp". The piano part consists of a series of chords in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is indicated as "recitando".

The A section (mm. 35–68) consists of two new musical ideas: the first from measure 35 to 42 (**Error! Reference source not found.**), and the second from measure 43 to 51 (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The first idea seems to play a more primary role. After the second section, an exact transposition of measures 35 through 51 appears in measures 52 to 68. The interval of the transposition is one half step down, as reflected in the new key signature of one sharp, which could refer to E minor.

Example 13 *La lugubre gondola II*, mm. 35–42

Example 13 shows two systems of musical notation for measures 35–42. The first system (measures 35–38) is marked "accentuato il canto" and "sempre legato". The second system (measures 39–42) continues the piece. The music is in F minor, 4/4 time, and features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

Example 14 *La lugubre gondola II*, mm. 43–51

Example 14 shows two systems of musical notation for measures 43–51. The first system (measures 43–46) is marked "piangendo". The second system (measures 47–51) is marked "sf" and "p sempre legato". The music is in F minor, 4/4 time, and features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

The B section (mm. 69–108) begins with a key signature with two sharps (see Example 15). The rolled chords in the right hand oscillate between F-sharp major and F-sharp minor, then between B major and B minor until the melody comes in at measure 85, clearly in B major (see Example 16). The music from measures 69 through 88 is transposed down a whole step and repeated exactly from measure 89 to 108. The A' section returns in F minor beginning in

measure 109 and is a variation of section A (mm. 35–68) with a thicker texture and much greater dynamic level. The Coda begins in measure 125. From measures 132 to 139, there is another transition and the musical ideas from the introduction return in the Coda.

Example 15 *La lugubre gondola II*, mm. 69–72

69 Un poco meno lento ♩ = 104
 dolce, dolente

Example 16 *La lugubre gondola II*, mm. 85–88

85 espressivo

The coda consists of three parts: measure 125 to 139, measure 140 to 151, and measure 152 to 169. The first part uses the musical idea from the opening material of the introduction. The second part has no tonal center with both hands playing chromatic minor chords, creating a sense of foreboding. In the third part, the Liszt seems to dwell on the pitch G₃, and the piece ends on that note. In fact, one could make the argument that the last seventeen bars of the piece are in a highly chromaticized version of G-sharp minor. This would be clearer if the G-naturals were spelled as F-double-sharps. This same note (i.e. G-sharp) appears—spelled now as an A-flat—as the third of the E augmented chord outlined by the left hand in the beginning of *La lugubre*

gondola I, thus providing a link between the two movements when played in the order of composition.

It is also worth discussing Liszt's use of fragmentation in *La lugubre gondola II*. He uses a formal technique called the Introduction-Coda frame, whereby the material from the introduction returns as all or part of the coda. William Caplan mentioned this technique in his 1998 book *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven*, where he explores "Recollection of main-theme ideas."¹³ He said, "The musical material at the beginning of a movement should return toward its end."¹⁴ Such framing functions were becoming more common in the later decades of the nineteenth century when this piece was written. As discussed earlier, there are two musical ideas in the introduction (mm.1–34) and each appears three times. These same two ideas return in the beginning of the coda (mm. 125–139) with slight changes and only one presentation each. Moreover, the first idea from the introduction is fragmented even further from measure 152 to 155.

Inter-Relationship between *La lugubre gondola I* and *La lugubre gondola II*

In a sense, these two movements are like two chapters of a single story. Although distinct, they are related in that they deal with the same themes and use "the same rocking movement meant to depict a swaying gondola, providing the irregular accompaniment over which the right

¹³ William Caplan, *Classical Form: A Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1998), 186.

¹⁴ Caplan, *Classical Form*, 186.

hand floats its threnodies” [i.e. the Barcarolle].¹⁵ One of most notable similarities is the thematic material present in the opening section of *La lugubre gondola I* (Example 17) and at measure 35 of *La lugubre gondola II* (Example 18). Overall, *La lugubre gondola II* seems more hopeful than *La lugubre gondola I*, especially in the middle section (mm. 69-108). *La lugubre gondola I*, in contrast, seems more desolate throughout.

Example 17 *La lugubre gondola I*, mm. 1–11

The musical score for Example 17 shows the first eleven measures of *La lugubre gondola I*. The right hand begins with a whole rest, while the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The melody enters in the second measure with a half note, followed by quarter notes. Performance markings include *mf*, *una corda*, *marcato*, and *sempre legato*.

Example 18 *La lugubre gondola II*, mm. 35–38

The musical score for Example 18 shows measures 35-38 of *La lugubre gondola II*. The right hand features a melody with accents, marked *accentuato il canto*. The left hand continues with a steady eighth-note accompaniment, marked *sempre legato*.

Unlike *La lugubre gondola I*, *La lugubre gondola II* outlines many fully-diminished seventh chords rather than the prevalent augmented triads of *La lugubre gondola I*.¹⁶ *La*

¹⁵ Walker, “The Music of Catastrophe,” 20.

¹⁶ It is important to note that both augmented and diminished chords are unstable by nature, which plays into the tonally ambiguous character of both pieces.

lugubre gondola II also has a coda. The most striking difference between these two pieces is that Liszt includes a contrasting middle section in *La lugubre gondola II* (mm. 69–108). This section creates a transcendent, heavenly feeling that is completely absent from *La lugubre gondola I*.

The augmented triad plays a major role in *La lugubre gondola I*, while the fully-diminished seventh chord is featured heavily in *La lugubre gondola II*. These sonorities create a dark, sometimes even morose character in the music. These two pieces likely flow out of Liszt's personal preoccupation with death in general, especially the contemporaneous death of his respected friend, son-in-law, and fellow composer Richard Wagner. Together with *Richard Wagner-Venezia*, and *Am Grabe Richard Wagner*, these pieces are known as Liszt's Wagner Elegies. All four compositions dwell on death and, to a lesser extent, the afterlife (e.g. mm. 69–108 of *La lugubre gondola II*). Liszt begins with his premonition of Wagner's death in *La lugubre gondola II*, and concludes, perhaps, with his acceptance of Wagner's death in *Am Grabe Richard Wagner*.

Unstern!

Liszt's late piano works are mostly short and serious in tone, with long passages of unison melodic material and a notable increase in the use of augmented and diminished sonorities. Indeed, Liszt began to deliberately avoid tonal cadences and traditional tonality in general. Such innovations are found in the piano works from 1879 to 1886 and his last symphonic poem *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe* (1881–1882), which together formed the principal musical output of his final years. Within these works, Liszt brought the use of

dissonance to a new level, arguably making him a forerunner of some twentieth-century atonal music. The dissonances in Liszt's late piano music are largely unresolved: the tension is continuous, often never achieving a true tonic resolution throughout an entire work.

Analysis

Unstern! consists of four parts: Part A (mm. 1–20), Part B (mm. 21–57), Part C (mm. 58–83), and the conclusion (Part D, mm. 84–146). Part A is comprised of four symmetrical phrases. The melodic and harmonic elements of each are identical, the last two phrases being a transposed version (by a perfect fourth) of the first two. Part B can be divided into four subsections as well, but with new thematic material presented in from measure 21 to 28. The second subsection (mm. 29–35) is the exact repetition of the first but transposed up a minor second. Likewise, the third subsection begins with an upward semitone transposition of the previous material. Together with the fourth subsection beginning in measure 41, it functions as a developmental passage followed by a transition to a new section beginning in measure 52.

Part C emerges naturally from this transition—based on a fragment of the Whole-tone Scale II (F–G–A–B–C#)—arriving on the augmented triad F–A–C#. Rhythmically, the passage continues using the dotted-note figure from Part B (see Example 19). In terms of the larger formal outline, Parts A, B, and C are best grouped together as a single section, with Part D alone comprising Section 2. Sections 1 and 2 might hypothetically be divided into two programmatic

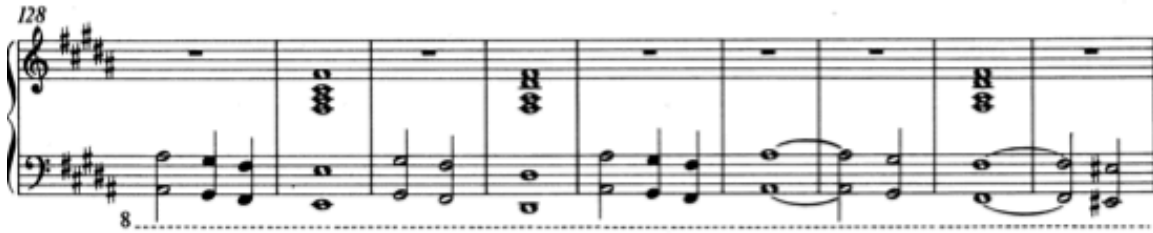
settings related to the title of the piece. The first section perhaps associated with a fear of death and hell, with the second revealing an acceptance of mortality and hope for salvation.

Example 19 *Unstern!*, mm. 55–66

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the piece 'Unstern!'. The first system, starting at measure 55, features a treble clef with a whole rest and a dynamic marking of 'dim.'. The bass clef contains a series of chords, with a 'p' (piano) marking appearing in measure 56. The second system, starting at measure 61, shows a treble clef with a key signature change to B major (two sharps) and a dynamic marking of 'poco a poco cresc.'. The bass clef continues with chords and includes a 'più cresc.' marking. The system concludes with the instruction 'un poco accelerando'.

Part D begins with a new key signature of B major in measure 84 and consists of three large musical quasi-periods. The first and second are comprised of two eight-measure phrases. The third and largest one begins in measure 110 and is comprised of smaller, four-measure phrase units. It is here that Liszt starts to emphasize the note E in the bass, which is also the final note of the piece (see Example 20).

Example 20 *Unstern!*, mm. 118–146



Instead of functioning as the tonic, the E is the unresolved fourth scale degree of B major. Liszt marked these measures *quasi organo*, like an organ, bringing to mind the more transcendent music of the church. Indeed, the absence of the tritone, the more conventional harmony, and the trailing away of the piece into silence, suggest that the unlucky star referenced in the title has been dispelled. It is possible to see this piece as moving from darkness into the light of the church.

Unstern! seems darkly programmatic, almost an evocation of the end of the world. The first part could be heard as a musical rendering of the apocalypse, trumpets and all; the second

part represents the prayers of a terrified humanity. However, given the quasi-transcendent character of the final section, it seems that all is not lost, even if all is not entirely resolved. The simple hymn-like character of the conclusion gives us the feeling that Liszt has found a resolution for his anxiety.

The frequent presence of the tritone, augmented triads, and the lack of traditional cadences suggest a dark and unresolved path we might associate with an unlucky star. Composers working between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries studiously avoided the tritone as an isolated interval (i.e. outside of its role in dominant to tonic resolutions) because it disturbed traditional tonality. The first theorists even called it *diabolus in musica*, the devil in music but Liszt was not one of these composers. The tritone has a special place in his late works. Even though Liszt did not avoid the interval, the phrase *diabolus in musica* might be worth bearing in mind when considering the fact that Liszt named the piece *Unstern!* or “Unlucky Star.” Perhaps he is giving us a glimpse into his personal experience with the devil behind his dark and brooding thoughts.

There is a marked similarity between this piece and others of Liszt’s final period, including *Nuages gris* and *La lugubre gondola I and II*. One can see them as smaller parts of a greater whole—dealing with the theme of death and despair—and employing similar compositional techniques such as the non-traditional use of augmented and diminished triads, deliberate tonal ambiguities, very simple forms and stark musical textures. Indeed, most of Liszt’s late works are uncomfortable for everyone: the listener, the interpreter and perhaps even Liszt himself.

Conclusion

In his early years, Franz Liszt's compositions reflected his performance career as a virtuoso and his interest in romanticism. His works were charismatic and filled with energy as well as an unconstrained and highly expressive style. However, as his life progressed, it is not unlikely that his religious beliefs, philosophy, tragic death of his son and daughter in the 1860s, and the loneliness and illness during his final years began to turn his music in a different direction. Whatever the cause, it is undeniable that Liszt gradually let go of his more flamboyant style and began to create unadorned and succinct piano works. These works, including *Nuages gris*, *La lugubre gondola I and II*, and *Unstern!*, reflect the tragedy of his late life and the sadness of his heart: unadorned and profound without relying on complicated techniques and stunning piano skills. Rather, in his old age, the inspirations were from his innermost being: inspirations reflecting the essence of life and the meaning of death.

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