



Liszt - The Organ Composer

aud 97.793

EAN: 4022143977939



Gramophone (2023.01.10)

source: <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/features/ar...>

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Liszt's Totentanz: a guide to the best recordings

Franz Liszt's scintillating journey to the Underworld challenges pianists and thrills audiences. Jeremy Nicholas compares a selection of recordings of this diabolic masterpiece and selects his favourite

Pisa's Piazza dei Miracoli, also known as the Piazza del Duomo, contains the Cathedral, the Baptistry, the Campanile (aka the Leaning Tower) – and the Camposanto Monumentale. Among its murals is an impressive fresco entitled Il trionfo della Morte: 'The Triumph of Death'. Once attributed to Orcagna, nowadays to Buonamico Buffalmacco or, by some scholars, to Francesco Traini, it was created in 1338-39. Five hundred years later, one of those who came to the Camposanto to admire the work was Franz Liszt in the company of his mistress the Countess Marie d'Agoult. It was the sight of this, it is said, that first inspired the composition of his Totentanz – Danse macabre, though it would not appear in its final form for nearly three decades.

The couple had eloped in 1835, leaving Paris for Geneva and thence, for the next few years, travelling through Switzerland and Italy absorbing scenery, places, literature and painting, while producing three illegitimate children. The first of these was their daughter Cosima, later to become the wife of Hans von Bülow and latterly of Richard Wagner. From this period of Liszt's prolific output came early versions of the 12 Transcendental Études, the Six Études de Paganini and the first two volumes of *Années de pèlerinage*, and much else besides. Totentanz, a series of variations on the Latin plainsong chant of the 'Dies irae', can be considered 'the spiritual sister' of these 'Years of Travel' (indeed, Variation 5 puts one in mind of the central section of the Dante Sonata).

The gestation of Totentanz was protracted and complex. Without going into great detail, basically there exist two versions: the first, dated October 21, 1849, with the title *Fantasie für Pianoforte und Orchester* was not published until 1919 (in an edition by Busoni); it is generally known as the 'De profundis' version because it incorporates the plainsong setting of Psalm 130 ('Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord').

Liszt continued tinkering with the score between 1853 and 1859, when a second



version appeared. This dispenses with all of the 'De profundis' material and other sections never sanctioned for publication by the composer. It was issued with the title *Todtentanz* [sic] (*Danse macabre*) – *Paraphrase über 'Dies irae'*, and published in 1865, the same year in which Liszt's versions for solo piano and two pianos were published. It was dedicated to his son-in-law Hans von Bülow and it was he who gave the first performance of this version on April 15, 1865, in The Hague with an orchestra conducted by the Dutch composer Johannes Verhulst. Though there are several other editions, notably by Liszt pupils Alexander Siloti, Bernhard Stavenhagen and Eugen d'Albert, it is Liszt's second version that is most frequently heard today,

Liszt was not the first – and by no means the last – to use the 'Dies irae' ('Day of Wrath', used for centuries in the Roman Catholic rite of the Mass for the Dead). Berlioz quotes it in his *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), the premiere of which was attended by Liszt. The music is a sequence of variations on the theme, interspersed with three cadenzas, a development section and a coda. Only the first five variations are so numbered in the score but it is possible to identify over 30 different treatments of the theme (or part of the theme) by the piano or other instruments in the course of the work, often variants within the variations.

This survey is concerned principally with the second version. Why? Despite the two versions having many sections in common, they are two distinct and different works. Version 2 represents Liszt's final, definitive thoughts (ie he decided his intentions were better realised by cutting the 'De profundis' material) to form, in this writer's opinion, a tone poem that expresses itself more powerfully with greater economical means.

[...]

The version for solo piano is also the basis for its adaptation as a work for organ, an instrument to which *Totentanz* is particularly well suited. There's a new recording of it, this one based on the two-piano arrangement, made and played by Anna-Victoria Baltrusch (reviewed on page 71). It's impressive enough but not the equal of the quite stunning performance by Thomas Mellan on the organ of the First United Methodist Church, San Diego (available to view on YouTube), one of several filmed accounts on the organ. This one, while properly thrilling, highlights the 'Dies irae' quotations more clearly than many accounts of the second piano-and-orchestra version, recordings to which it is now high time we turn.

