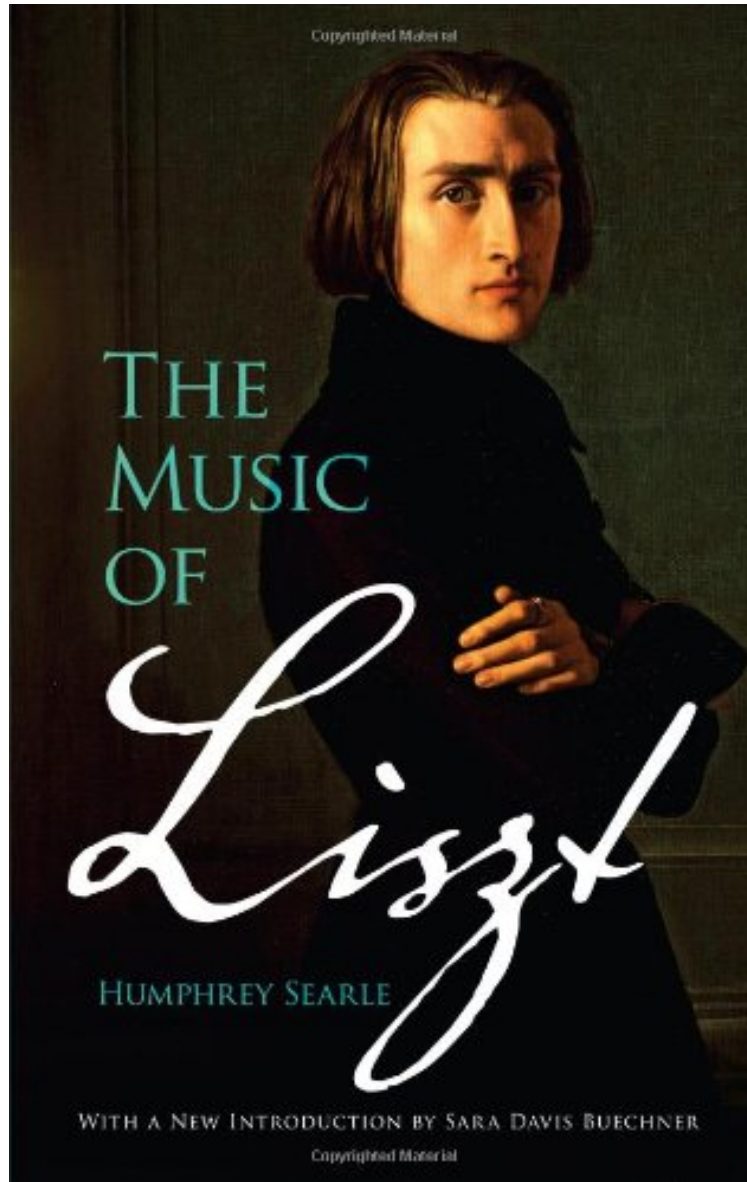


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The Music of Liszt (Dover Books on Music)

Humphrey Searle

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Humphrey Searle : The Music of Liszt (Dover Books on Music) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Music of Liszt (Dover Books on Music):

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Excellent introduction to Liszt's music By Alexander Arsov
Humphrey Searle The Music of Liszt Dover, Paperback, 1966. 8vo. xiv, 207 pp. Second Revised Edition. First published, 1954. Second Revised Edition, 1966. Contents I. The Early Works (1822-39) II. The Virtuoso Period (1839-

47)III. The Weimar Years (1848-61)IV. The Final YearsPart I. Rome (1861-9)Part II. Rome, Weimar, Budapest (1869-1886)Biographical SurveyCatalogue of WorksBibliographyIndex of Works MentionedIndex of

Names=====Perhaps the attitude to no other great composer has changed more in the last half a century than it has to Franz Liszt. This utterly fascinating man, who lived one of the most spectacular lives and created one of the most dauntingly huge outputs ever, has come all the way from meretricious poser and composer of virtuoso but shallow piano music to a revolutionary and prophetic figure who changed not only the history of piano playing and composition but the writing for orchestra as well, not to mention his almost as novel for their time choral works or his daring in terms of thematic transformation and harmonic language. The last few decades have seen an enormous amount of Liszt scholarship; the two by far most important events of this 'Liszt renaissance' have been Alan Walker's impressive, scholarly but so wonderfully readable three volume biography, which took him quarter of a century and about 1600 pages to write, and Leslie Howard's simply unbelievable committing to disc the complete piano works of Liszt: a project which took him 15 years and almost 100 CDs - not to mention that Leslie was also the author of all liner notes and painstaking musicological research. Nowadays we know so much more about Liszt's life, personality and music that it is inconceivable for a book about him written almost half a century ago to have any real value. Yet, Humphrey Searle's *The Music of Liszt* does. For it really is a classic and an absolutely required reading for every true Lisztian - as well as for any newcomer in the field, for that matter. How could that be? Considering that even fifty years ago, with many a work yet to be discovered, Liszt's oeuvre was still outstandingly large and that, discarding indexes and such like in the end of the book, *The Music of Liszt* is a little more than 100 pages long, Humphrey Searle has done a truly fantastic job summarising Liszt's almost unbelievable development as a composer: from the juvenile and quite unremarkable attempts, through his fabulously productive Weimar years in the middle of his life, until the late piano works which looked far into the twentieth century. During his long life, which often reads more like a novel, Liszt composed in at least five different directions, namely for piano, orchestra and organ as well as a large number of choral works and songs; most of these areas are highly heterogeneous: the piano works, to take just one telling example, can easily be divided to original works, straightforward transcriptions of music by others and free compositions only based on certain themes by other composers, not to mention that a good many works lie somewhere in the middle and cannot really be classified. It seems just short of impossible that Mr Searle should have succeeded to cover so wide a range of works. Of course he was compelled to omit many, for which he asks for his readers' indulgence, but quite enough is present to allow us a captivating glance into Liszt's inner world. Mr Searle's writing style is nothing short of excellent: very well structured, clear, concise and lucid. He has something interesting, and often perceptive, to say about almost every work he mentions; he never forgets to put Liszt's compositions in the proper biographical context, nor does he allow himself any digressions; every part of the book is finely organised and Mr Searle always takes the trouble to end his chapters with a wonderful conclusion which more often than not is revelatory about Liszt's development as a composer. As the title of the book implies, the stress is firmly on the music; biographical content is scanty and provided only when it is really necessary. So certain basic knowledge about Liszt's life is a prerequisite to reading the book, though I imagine one might also do without it. What detracts from the great value of Mr Searle's book is not the fact that it is dated - though considerably less so than one might expect - but that the author is highly opinionated. Rarely if ever is he totally negative about certain work, but quite often he is positively ambivalent, to say the least. Many of my favourite pieces - the Ballades, Polonaises and Hungarian Rhapsodies, to name but a few - are dismissed as containing some fine moments here and there but overall quite unsatisfactory affairs; concerning the Rhapsodies Mr Searle even goes on to quote Bartok's appallingly snobbish, not to say ludicrous, opinion that these are 'his least successful works (perhaps that is why they are so generally known and admired).' I cannot for the life of me agree with either of these eminent gentlemen; for my part Liszt's Ballades and Polonaises (both of them in both cases!) are masterpieces on par with Chopin's works of the same genre, though very different of course; as for the Rhapsodies, they may well not be among Liszt's greatest masterpieces, but their melodic fecundity and the composer's endless inventiveness are enough to make them worthy of their popularity. (The famous notion that everything popular should be valueless is well known nonsense that extends pretty much to all arts and has a great deal to do with the equally idiotic statement that everything popular is certainly worthy; the human race is neither so smart nor so dumb after all; as usual, the truth is somewhere in the middle. Not to mention that of the 19 Hungarian rhapsodies, only a handful are more or less generally known, but that's quite another story.) When he comes to the symphonic poems, however, Mr Searle is at his most scathing: the music of Tasso is 'extremely uneven' and the final section shows 'Liszt at his most bombastic'; not to mention Mazeppa which has a concluding march with 'distinctly vulgar flavour': according to Mr Searle, Sacheverell Sitwell rightly described this music as 'flat and shallow'. Such statements really baffle the mind, or at least they certainly baffle mine. Admittedly, it is true that both symphonic poems in question have often been victims of abominable performances which may well sound 'bombastic', 'shallow' and 'vulgar'. But it is equally true that sometimes they have also been performed with the right combination of abandon and restraint leading to results that, granted certain Romantic rhetoric and Lisztian flamboyance, are far removed from anything bombastic and vulgar. And if that was what Mr Searle and Mr Sitwell had heard in their heads while perusing the scores, it may perhaps

show that their minds are not altogether devoid of vulgar and bombastic elements. Nothing to worry about of course: it is quite human. Be that as it may, it must be stressed firmly that Mr Searle's insight into Liszt's oeuvre and his remarkable ability to place every work in the right historical context more than compensate for all harsh things he might have to say about this or that favourite work of mine. Indeed, overall Mr Searle has a distinctly positive attitude toward Liszt and his music. Even about the symphonic poems he has some nice things to say about *Festklänge* or *Hungaria* (though both are somewhat overwritten and overlong of course) or about *Les Preludes* which is described as 'eminently successful' (though it is by no means one Liszt's best works of course); nor is Mr Searle ashamed to confess his admiration for *Prometheus* and *Orpheus*, or even to openly describe *Hamlet* as 'masterpiece'. It is worth noting also that the author defends Liszt's concept of program music and argues that the great composer never was interested in pictorial effects or minute details, going even further to state that these elements are precisely what the genre of symphonic poem later 'degenerated' into. This is a bold, audacious statement, that fans of Dvorak, Smetana, Sibelius or Richard Strauss may not find easy to swallow - but the point about Liszt's attitude to his program compositions remains. Mr Searle concludes the section about the symphonic poems with a very sound and thought-provoking argument, namely that they were 'landmark in musical history', and since Liszt largely created and certainly developed the genre more than anybody else of his contemporaries, it was only too natural that in so revolutionary a field he should not be entirely successful and should score as many failures as successes. But here is the bottom line, which Mr Searle somewhat misses from time to time as far as I am concerned: Liszt was so compelling and unique a personality that even his failures are of more than passing interest. Another legendary bone of contention for which Humphrey Searle has a surprisingly positive attitude to - especially for 1966! - are Liszt's famous opera paraphrases. The genre itself has been much derided for most of the twentieth century, numerous times has Liszt himself been charged with sacrilegious treatment of operatic material. Nowadays this is nothing more than a charming bit of history, but in 1966 it must have wanted a great deal of courage and it is very much to Mr Searle's credit that he had the audacity to write the following lines: '...whatever one may think about the operatic fantasy as musical form, there is no doubt that in many of these works Liszt completely transcended his original material and produced a kind of re-creation of the thoughts of the composers which raises them to a far higher musical level. [...] ...before dismissing these works as mere salon fireworks one should note the extraordinary breadth and power which Liszt was able to impart to material which in itself was often somewhat undistinguished.' The ardent admirers of Meyerbeer, Donizetti or Bellini might sneer at such statement, but Lisztians all over the world could hardly agree more. It may be noted in passing that, considering his very limited space, Mr Searle dedicates commendable amount of time discussing Liszt's songs. Yet another bold move for the mid-1960s. It might well be that, of all his works, Liszt's lieder have been most severely neglected. Mr Searle's opinion that Liszt was a very much underrated song writer has later been shared by Alan Walker and Harold Schonberg. But almost half a century had to pass for the first complete edition of Liszt's lieder even to commence its existence: the first two volumes have been released just last year. They fully corroborated the statement that Liszt's genius should be reckoned on that level as well. Perhaps the most striking and unexpected example of Mr Searle's sympathetic treatment is the notorious 'Grand Galop Chromatique': a fascinating piece of musical fun with which Liszt himself used to finish many a concert during his legendary career as virtuoso. No other piece of Liszt has ever served more frequently and more conveniently for maligning the composer. Empty virtuoso, meretricious poser, vulgar, commonplace and trivial composer, if there ever was one; much poison of that sort has been spilled on Liszt and among the chief examples 'Grand Galop Chromatique' invariably stands out. Not so Humphrey though. He is perfectly charming on the subject as well as capable of remarkable flight of imagination: 'This work is the essence of all concert platform fireworks; it is the grand finale par excellence, and we can well imagine Liszt ending his concerts with it, with fevered gestures and hair flying in all directions. Nevertheless it is by no means negligible as a piece of light music, which is all that is intended to be; it is short, well shaped, entertaining and has good tunes, and there is no reason why a serious composer should not unbend at times if he does it as well as this.' Sensibly, perceptively and exquisitely written. It really is refreshing to read something like that about this particular piece which has suffered so much in the hands and mouths of conceited and condescending fellows. Speaking of Mr Searle's style, it cannot be repeated too often that it is as eminently readable as it is possible for such matter. Despite having no fewer than 73 musical examples, Mr Searle very seldom discusses technical details in the text, he virtually never becomes unreadable because of that - not many writers on Liszt can this be said of, alas. Also, Humphrey has a remarkable capacity for striking parallel or profound observation. Maybe the most astonishing example about that is his discussion of the so called 'Maldiction concerto'. An early piece for piano and strings without title but which bears the name of the opening theme as marked in the score, composed about 1833 but not published until decades after Liszt's death, 'Maldiction' explores in the beginning a stunning effect which, Mr Searle tells us, is not paralleled until Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* - almost 80 years later! Liszt's seminal place in developing the harmonic language of the future has long since been recognised, but to my knowledge never has it been linked with so early a work. But Mr Searle saves the most fascinating part of the story for a casual footnote in which he remarks on the 'curious coincidence' that the passage from the Stravinsky's ballet in question is marked 'Maledictions de *Petrouchka*'. Curious indeed! For Stravinsky composed his work in 1911, but Liszt's concerto was first published in 1914. Last but

not least, a few words about the so called 'Catalogue of Works' must be said - for this is no other but the famous 'Searle catalogue' which is still pretty much in use; those who wonder what is the meaning of these numbers with preceding "S" that often appear after Liszt's works may now rest. Even though Searle's catalogue - first published in 1954, I think - is not the first attempt for serious listing of Liszt's oeuvre (Peter Raabe, or simply R., was the pioneer some twenty years later), it is still the most widely used. The 1966 version here is of course obsolete today, lacking numerous revised versions of well known works as well as a number of original works which were totally unknown at the time. But the most updated version of the Searle catalogue, which in condensed form may be found even on Wikipedia, preserves the original and very convenient layout which collects at one place all different versions of certain work; for the countless additions and corrections we should be thankful to Sharon Winklhofer and Leslie Howard. (Speaking of Leslie, his impressive, to put it mildly, series of Liszt's complete piano music make a perfect companion to Mr Searle's book.) As for the catalogue in the end of *The Music of Liszt*, though it certainly is a great deal dated, it is by no means useless. As a matter of fact, pretty much all Liszt's works you're likely to encounter on CD today (except in Leslie's aforementioned series of course) can be found in this 1966 version. What is more, all of Liszt's famous piano cycles - the Transcendental and Paganini etudes, the three books of *Années de pèlerinage* and *Album d'un voyageur*, the second version of *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, the Hungarian rhapsodies and their unjustly neglected precursors *Magyar Dalok: Magyar Rapszodik* - are given here with all pieces listed, which is tremendously helpful for finding easy and quickly what on earth was the fifth piece from the First book of the *Années*, for example; not to mention that the text of Humphrey Searle will probably give you an invaluable additional information about the composition of the piece, Liszt's inspiration about it and, most importantly, its place among those God knows how many pieces Liszt composed during his extraordinary life. *The Music of Liszt* by Humphrey Searle is one of those books that gives lots of valuable information and food for thought, in remarkably limited space and very fine style. It also is one of those books that, though they may well become dated, never really grow old. In short, it is a classic. Quite an achievement for a nonfiction writing in a highly changeable area of musical scholarship.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. *Liszt - An analysis of his music* By Dr. H. A. Jones This book gives a description and analysis of the music of Franz Liszt, with such biographical information as there is interwoven into the description where appropriate. As a result, there are a number of musical examples throughout the text which will be intelligible only to those who can read music. The author was himself a composer and probably the foremost British exponent of serial music, who died in 1982. The analyses are penetrating, as would be expected from another composer, and for the general reader there are some useful Appendixes. We have a thirty-page biographical survey of Liszt's life, given in more detail than that found in the text by Walter Beckett published in Dent's *Master musicians Series*. The book reproduces the list from the *Grove Dictionary of Music* of Liszt's 768 works, grouped according to genre; and Indexes of works and names from the text. This is a good introduction to Liszt's music for fellow musicians.

Virtuoso pianist Franz Liszt was a key figure in the evolution of modern music. Most of his 700 compositions, which range from romantic impressionism to daring experimental pieces, were written for the piano. This survey by a well-known British composer and musicologist constitutes the most authoritative English-language study of Liszt's works. "Mr. Searle is himself a composer of progressive outlook and he thus speaks with authority. His book was needed and he has made it a good one," observed the *Times (London) Literary Supplement*. This classic study surveys the compositions in chronological order and the medium for which they were written. The author examines in detail the most important pieces and fully reviews Liszt's place in history. Subjects include romantic pieces, symphonic poems, songs, symphonies, and other works. A biographical summary illustrates the relationship between significant works and events in the composer's life. Acclaimed by *Library Journal* as "a balanced, long-overdue treatment," this study is essential for every true Lisztian student.