The Critical Reception of Liszt's Symphonic and Choral Works in the United States, 1857-1890.

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THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF
LISZT'S SYMPHONIC AND CHORAL WORKS
IN THE UNITED STATES, 1857-1890

By

Jorge Luis Modolell

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THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF
LISZT’S SYMPHONIC AND CHORAL WORKS
IN THE UNITED STATES, 1857-1890

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During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the United States emerged as an epicenter for the performance of Liszt's music. In fact, thanks to the efforts of pioneering conductors, two of Liszt's symphonic works received their world premieres in New York. As was the case in Europe, however, Liszt's music generated great controversy and became the subject of a vast amount of critical literature that filled the pages of music journals and newspapers. The present study is the first comprehensive effort to examine and evaluate this material and present an in-depth account of the critical reception of Liszt's symphonic and choral works in the United States.

The supremacy of absolute music over programmatic music became a heated topic of contention in Europe during the 1850s. The bitter debate generated an aesthetic schism, which historians later termed “The War of the Romantics.” The works of Liszt in particular, as prototypes of program music, became the main target of brutal criticism by the more conservative side. Although the conflict originated and unfolded in Europe, the American musical reviews of this period reveal that hostility towards Liszt's music also reached the United States. In fact, American critics were often more adamant about their
views and ideals than their European counterparts. This study highlights this important issue and evaluates nineteenth-century American musical tastes by analyzing the opinions of critics who wrote reviews of Liszt’s music. Additionally, the paper proposes reasons why the early US reception of these works might have accounted for their subsequent neglect and eventual disappearance from the repertoire.
To my Mother
Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1

Introduction

State of Scholarship

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the United States emerged as an epicenter for the performance of Liszt’s music. In fact, thanks to the efforts of pioneering conductors, two of Liszt’s symphonic works received their world premieres in New York. As was the case in Europe, however, Liszt’s music generated great controversy and became the subject of a vast amount of critical literature that filled the pages of music journals and newspapers. This fascinating material has hitherto not received proper evaluation. The majority of scholarship has focused instead on the response to the composer’s music in Europe. According to the latest edition of the *Liszt Research and Information Guide* by Michael Saffle,¹ only four significant studies have tackled the subject of Liszt reception in The United States. The first of these efforts is an article by Irving Lowens published in 1978 in the *Journal for the American Liszt Society* titled “Liszt and America.”² This brief study does not provide an account of the reception of the composer’s music, but should be praised as the earliest attempt to tackle the subject of Liszt’s music in the United States and for providing a partial, yet accurate chronology of Liszt US premieres.


Additionally, the article includes valuable information about early champions of Liszt's music in America—such as pianists William Mason and Sebastian Bach Mills, and conductors Carl Bergmann and Theodore Thomas—as well as a table of Liszt pupils who pursued careers in the United States. Aside from these undoubtedly important contributions, however, the article contains significant factual errors, which inevitably undermine its academic validity. Lowens makes the claim, for instance, that the first pianist ever to perform Liszt in America was William Mason in 1854. More recent research, however, has revealed that at least a dozen other pianists had been performing works by Liszt on the American stage for over a decade before Mason.³

The most extensive effort listed in the guide is a dissertation written in 2006 at the University of Iowa by Leslie Jane Finer titled, “The Dissemination and Reception of Liszt’s Piano Music in New York, 1835-1875.”⁴ This work is an important contribution to Liszt scholarship for it lays the groundwork for further study of this topic by extending the scope to include subsequent decades. In her paper, Finer argues that Liszt’s piano music resonated with 19th-century American audiences, and satisfied a growing fascination with virtuosity, celebrities, and all things European. Among the study’s salient achievements is a complete list of US performances of Liszt’s piano works from 1839 through 1875.

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³ See Appendix D of Leslie Jane Finer, “The Dissemination and Reception of Liszt’s Piano Music in New York, 1835 – 1875” for a complete chronology of performances of Liszt’s piano works in New York from 1839 through 1875.

arranged by performer and venue. One additional appendix includes every Liszt work published in the United States during those years.

A third source is a chapter by Rena Charnin Mueller from the book *European Music and Musicians in New York City, 1840-1900* published in 2006. This survey, titled "Liszt (and Wagner) in New York, 1840-1890," traces the history of Liszt’s music in New York from the first documented performance in 1839 through the 1880s, a decade during which Mueller argues the frequency of performances of Liszt’s music steadily declined as Wagner’s popularity significantly increased. The article deals with the topic of reception to the extent that is possible within the confines of a single book chapter. Perhaps one its most important contributions is a partial, though provocative, list of performances of Liszt’s music in New York from 1840 through 1890. It surpasses the similar table in Finer’s dissertation by including more than just piano works and reproducing an additional fifteen-year’s worth of performances. Although this study is, indeed, a successful and well-documented overview of this subject, my own research has led me to identify a number of minor errors in it. In the Appendix, for instance, the article designates 1891 as the year of the American premiere of *Prometheus*. However, two other creditable sources, as well as a number of newspaper reviews later quoted in the present study, indicate that the premiere actually took place in 1869, and that the work received at least two other performances before

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1891. Also, the article wrongly identifies the dates of the US premieres of the symphonic poems, *Hunnenschlacht* and *Die Idelale*, and of the E flat Concerto.

The last and perhaps most significant source is an article by James Deaville titled, “Liszt's Symphonic Poems in the New World,” which was published in a 2008 German book titled *Liszt und Europa*. This work is of particular interest because it carefully explains the historical context of the period in America when the symphonic poems received their first performances. It also provides relevant information about Theodore Thomas and Carl Bergmann, the two most ardent Liszt promoters of this era, and the individuals responsible for all but two of the premieres of Liszt's orchestral works in the United States. Perhaps most interesting about the study is the point Deaville raises that the reception of “modern music”—or specifically Liszt's symphonic poems—in America at this time, varied throughout different areas of the country. In other words, because of the significant German influence in the Northeast part of the country, audiences there tended to have an unfavorable response to Liszt's music, which mirrored the sentiments of critics in Germany. Audiences with unbiased ears in the western cities, on the other hand, provided contrasting opinions and a largely more positive response to the “Music of the Future.”

All of these sources contribute an important new dimension to contemporary Liszt research. However, none of them is exhaustive or definitive. Lowen’s article is fairly brief and contains some errors, while the writings of Mueller and Deaville provide only an overview of the very broad subject of Liszt's

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7 At the Cincinnati May Festival in 1875, and in Boston (Music Hall) in 1876.

8 James Deaville, “Liszt's Symphonic Poems in the New World,” 365-381.
music in America. Finer’s dissertation, on the other hand, though considerably more thorough, has a limited scope and deals only with the piano works and their reception in New York. The present effort constitutes a more comprehensive study: one that analyzes in depth the varying opinions of US critics regarding Liszt’s music and seeks to expand on Finer’s dissertation by focusing on the reception of larger-scale works: namely, the symphonic poems, symphonies, and oratorios. Additionally, the paper considers the Liszt reception in other musically developed cities during this period outside of New York, such as Boston, Chicago, and Cincinnati. Finally, the study analyzes changes in musical taste over time and denotes trends across different cities, and newspapers.

James Deaville’s article “Liszt and the German-Language Press” presents a useful survey, which outlines the relationship between Liszt and the German press during the principal three stages of his career. Also, it presents an accurate illustration, in broad terms, of the general reception of Liszt and his music in Europe. We might summarize the essence of Deaville’s argument as follows: at the height of Liszt’s career as a piano virtuoso, newspapers painted a largely positive image of the composer and hailed him as a performer of the highest caliber—which contributed to the magnificent reputation as a pianist which he preserved for the rest of his life. The next phase of his career, which—after retiring from the concert stage—Liszt devoted mainly to conducting and composing orchestral works, is characterized by a general resistance from critics to accept him as a serious composer, violent opposition to his artistic vision, and

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attempts to negate his creative merit and abilities. Finally, during his old age, newspapers devoted increasingly fewer lines to Liszt and the focus shifted to Wagner. This change, Deaville argues, occurred as a result of Liszt turning his attention to religious choral works and music that was less accessible to the public. I suggest that throughout the different stages of his career the relationship between Liszt and the American press presents a very similar version of this model. From Finer's dissertation, we discover that American audiences were fascinated with the element of spectacle in Liszt's virtuosic piano works, and virtually nothing more. Consequently, pieces such as the Opera Paraphrases from Liszt's early career were quite popular in the country and their reception was largely positive. Similarly, in the aforementioned article by Rena Charnin Mueller, she argues that during the latter stage of Liszt's life, the composer's popularity in the United States waned as Wagner's increased—much in the same way that Deaville suggests it happened in Europe. The present study is devoted to the analysis of reviews of Liszt's works written primarily during the middle period of his career, and seeks to evaluate the impact these assessments had on the composer’s popularity in the United States and whether they contributed to, or caused the disappearance of his symphonic and choral works from the repertoire.

Scope & Methods

The paper examines the three decades during which the premieres of every major symphonic and choral work took place, starting with 1857—the year
of the first performance—through 1890, four years after Liszt’s death. All the specific dates of American premieres of Liszt works come primarily from the book *First Performances in America to 1900*. Additionally, I have confirmed these dates by consulting the tables listed in the articles by Deaville and Mueller, and used newspaper reviews to further corroborate. In some instances, this process led me to discover discrepancies and obvious errors in some of the sources. Whenever possible, I used newspaper reviews of the performances as definitive proof of the date of a particular premiere. In cases of discrepancy of dates between sources, I give explanations for any assertions regarding the exactness of dates.

To provide a thorough and complete overview of the critical reception of Liszt’s symphonic and choral works in the United States, the paper quotes extensively from pertinent newspaper reviews. I obtained the great majority of these reviews from the online databases *Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers, 1690-1922*, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* and *Retrospective Index to Music Periodicals* (RIPM). If ever an article or review was not available in full-text through one of these archives, the University of Miami’s Interlibrary-Loan System diligently sought and acquired these sources for me. In the case of *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, all issues of the publication were available online through various websites.

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Historical Overview

The world of musical critics holds to but one enthusiastic opinion regarding Franz Liszt’s greatness as a virtuoso. He is the greatest performer of this century, perhaps the greatest that ever lived. Opinions differ, however, as to his rank as a composer for his instrument, some critics, the fiercest opponents of the Wagnerian school, considering him, in view of his great number of transcriptions, paraphrases, etc., as a mere translator, not a creator. But his orchestral compositions, the fourteen so-called Symphonic Poems, are as great a bone of contention among the futurist and non-futurists as the “chromatically inclined” works of the head of the new school. By some they are buried in extravagant praise, while others characterize them as bordering on that point where music ceases to be an art; as soulless music, a negation of itself, which produces upon its hearers a painful, unsatisfactory impression. But the defenders of Berlioz and Wagner are Liszt’s defenders, and while the battle rages in Europe, and the critics and musicians pelt each other with their musical lore, sacred traditions on one side, and fanciful fights regarding the possibilities of music on the other, we listen to the strains stripped of encumbering principles, give free flight to our imagination, comprehend what we can, admire the beauties which we discover, and forget the strains in which we found neither beauty nor meaning.\textsuperscript{11}

The commentary on Liszt’s symphonic poems quoted above appeared in 1874 in the \textit{Cincinnati Daily Gazette} and presented an accurate idea of what US critics of the time thought of the composer. Indeed, by the year the article appeared, American critics and audiences had had sufficient exposure to Liszt’s music to form strong opinions about it. His piano works—especially the opera paraphrases—had been popular since the 1840s, and virtually all of his tone poems and symphonies had, by that point, received performances in the nation’s major cities. During this period, thanks to conductors such as Carl Bergmann and Theodore Thomas, US audiences witnessed frequent performances of Liszt’s music and that of other exponents of the New German School. Indeed, Theodore Thomas alone performed more orchestral works by Liszt in America than Hans

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Cincinnati Daily Gazette}, December 12, 1874.
von Bülow, Eduard Lassen, Hans Bronsart and even Liszt himself did in Europe. This striking fact justifies the need for further study of Liszt’s music in America. Yet, despite the tireless efforts of pioneering conductors to educate audiences and promote the so-called Music of the Future, the works of Liszt received little approval from critics, whose antagonistic views mirrored those of European musical conservatives. Indeed, as the article above references, the response of a majority of American critics to Liszt’s symphonic works reveals the overwhelming resistance to modern music commonly expressed by leading newspapers and musical journals during the time. Awareness of this prevailing attitude towards new compositions will aid in understanding Liszt’s American reception.

The idea that Liszt enjoyed tremendous success all his life is only partially true. As a pianist, he had one of the most celebrated careers of the century; however, as a composer of large-scale orchestral and choral works, he endured many failures and struggled to gain recognition as a creative artist. This lack of success resulted from several factors. One important issue was the lack of understanding on the part of conservative critics who fervidly held on to older traditions. Another consideration was the general reluctance to accept Liszt as a creator, rather than a mere interpreter. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, was the influence of the so-called War of the Romantics. This ardent battle that conservatives waged against programmatic music and essentially all that was new took a severe toll on Liszt’s career and reputation as a composer. Although

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19th-century scholars primarily associate this conflict with Europe, the musical reviews from this period reveal not only that hostility towards new music had reached the United States, but also that American critics could be even more dogmatic and opinionated about the subject than their European counterparts. The present study highlights this important issue and evaluates nineteenth-century American musical tastes by assessing and analyzing the opinions of critics who wrote reviews of Liszt's symphonies, tone poems and oratorios. Additionally, it proposes reasons why the early US reception of these works might account for their subsequent neglect and eventual disappearance from the repertoire.
Chapter 2

Early Symphonic Poems – *Les Preludes, Tasso, Festklänge, Orpheus & Mazeppa*

In 1847, after the longest of his world tours, Franz Liszt decided to retire from the concert platform. Thus came to an end one of the most celebrated performing careers of the century. Although it is common to think of Liszt as having spent his entire life concertizing around the world, he only did so for roughly eight years. Still, the success of his recitals helped establish his everlasting reputation as the world’s greatest pianist. After making the decision to cease performing professionally, Liszt moved to Weimar, where he accepted a position as Kapellmeister at the Grand Ducal Court of Carl Alexander II. Liszt’s so-called Weimar Years represent a high point in his career. It is during this period that he became a conductor, instituted his famous masterclasses, completed the B-minor sonata and two piano concerti, and began writing for the orchestra. Liszt’s experimentation with orchestral idioms resulted in his two symphonies and in the invention of the symphonic poem—of which he produced twelve examples from 1848 through 1857. Most performances of these works in Europe took place under Liszt’s direction, partly because he feared they might not receive appropriate interpretations at the hands of more careless conductors. In some instances, Liszt himself discouraged performances by friends and pupils in an effort to protect them from the scathing criticism the works usually received. Indeed, Liszt’s symphonic music met with great resistance from the start. By
1854, Liszt acknowledged in a letter that that “to approve of his works, or even hear them without condemning them in advance, seems to be a crime.” As we shall discover, the symphonic poems endured a similar fate in the New World.

The first symphonic poem by Liszt performed in the United States was Les Preludes—which has inarguably remained the most popular work in the genre to this day. The performance considered the “American premiere” took place in 1858; however, the two-piano arrangement of the work received a performance the year before that. The book, *First Performances in America till 1900*, indicates that this concert took place on March 27, 1857 at Dadworth’s Hall with William Mason and Candido Berti as the soloists. A review of the event printed in the *New York Musical World* confirms all this information except for the month, which was, in fact, February and not March. Further research, however, has led me to discover that this was not the first American performance of Les Preludes, but that the work had been programmed as early as one month prior, according to a review printed in *Dwight’s Journal of Music*. For this occasion, the soloists were William Mason, once again, and Gustav Satter. Although it did not feature the piece in its original orchestral version, this performance deserves consideration as the first time an American audience heard one of Liszt’s symphonic poems.

The only review I could trace of this concert comes from the nation’s first major music periodical, *Dwight’s Journal of Music*. This important publication, established in 1852, chronicled the country’s musical activities for nearly three decades and set the standard for the critical evaluation of art music. The journal’s

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founder and editor—John Sullivan Dwight—became hugely influential as the first major American music critic, despite possessing no real musical background. Not to undermine the journal’s influence, it must be noted that Dwight had a decided predilection for absolute music, especially that of the German symphonists, which hindered his fair appraisal of newer programmatic music. In Dwight’s opinion, the truest music did not need literary or pictorial associations to render it comprehensible. Accordingly, we shall see that his remarks about Liszt’s orchestral works were usually unfavorable. Because the journal employed many critics and correspondents from different regions of the country, and published all reviews anonymously, we cannot assert that Dwight himself wrote the first of review of *Les Preludes*. However, it is evident that a majority of the journal’s critics were like-minded and had similar reservations about program music. This review presents an excellent example of what soon became the journal’s firm stance on works by composer of the New German School:

What shall we say of *The Preludes*, a Poesie Symphonique by Liszt, for two pianos, performed by Messrs. William Mason and Satter? This also purports to have been reared on a poetic basis, to-wit, Lamartine’s *Mediations Poetiques*. The poetry we listened for in vain. It was lost as it were in the smoke and stunning tumult of a battlefield. There were here and there brief, fleeting fragments of something delicate and sweet to ear and mind, but these were quickly swallowed up in one long, monotonous, fatiguing melée of convulsive, crashing, startling masses of tone, flung back and forth as if in rivalry from instrument to instrument. We must have been very stupid listeners; but we felt after it as if we had been stoned, and beaten, and trampled under foot, and in all ways evilly entreated.

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What did Liszt mean by such a work? We fear that we shall have to join the London *Athenaeum, Musical World, &c.*, in their crusade against the “Music of the Future,” if we have no other specimens. ... We find we speak the general impression, or we might hesitate about confessing all of our experience in the matter of this famous work by Liszt.\(^\text{17}\)

Perhaps most striking about this review is the prophetic sentence found towards the end. Quite bluntly, the critic makes it clear that, based on his impression of *Les Preludes*, *Dwight’s Journal of Music* shall embark on a crusade against the “Music of the Future” from that point on. Indeed, as we continue exploring American reviews of Liszt’s music, we find that is precisely what the publication did. This is particularly telling as it reveals a preconceived intention to reject all music from the New German School. In other words, Dwight and his staff never gave Liszt’s music a chance, but instead committed, from the beginning, to dismiss it categorically in every instance.

With regard to the music’s aesthetic value, the critic’s main argument is that he could not find any trace of the poetry that supposedly inspired the work. Instead, all he heard were rare and sporadic moments of delicate music, amidst clashes of repetitious and convulsive masses of sound. Finally, he unashamedly claims not to have understood the piece.\(^\text{18}\) To think that *Les Preludes*—possibly the most accessible and certainly most successful of Liszt’s orchestral works, even at that time—generated this kind of a reaction is somewhat puzzling. Like the modern music of almost every era, Liszt’s symphonic poems were works that a majority of people seemed not to understand.

\(^{17}\) *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, January 31, 1857.

\(^{18}\) Because musical criticism was a male-dominated profession in the 19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century, I have used the masculine pronoun throughout the paper when referring to reviewers.
Before examining the reception of *Les Preludes* in its orchestral version, it is interesting to consult a review by a different publication of the other performance of the two-piano arrangement mentioned above. Here, the unsigned critic of the *New York Musical World* presents a considerably more positive opinion, but asserts the work did not have a positive effect on the audience:

*Les Preludes*—Poesie Symphonique for two Pianos by F. Liszt [*sic*]—played by Messrs. Mason and Berti.—A piece of great breadth of harmony and execution, interlarded with bits of strange melody, and excellently played, but entirely lost upon a majority of the audience—a piece which Mr. Liszt and his pupil, Mr. Mason, would, doubtless, be pleased to play to a company of piano students, but processing little to please any other class of people. But why apologize for Francis Liszt? More than thirty years of remarkable success ought to have placed him in a condition above apologies or explanations.\(^{19}\)

In the reviewer’s words, despite *Les Preludes* being “a piece of great breadth of harmony and execution,” the work can only please piano students, and not the average concertgoer. This argument, that Liszt’s music is only suitable for musicians, is one we encounter rather often in subsequent reviews of this and other works. The critic’s last comment—perhaps tinged with a bit of envy—is somewhat amusing and exemplifies the then-common idea that Liszt—having already had so much success—can endure a failure. Ironically, this would be the first of many failures for Liszt.

On May 5, 1858 at Irving Hall in New York, the Philharmonic Society gave the American premiere of *Les Preludes* in its original orchestral version. The conductor was Carl Bergmann—the man who soon became the country’s most ardent promoter of the Liszt cause. A German émigré, Bergmann joined the

\(^{19}\) *New York Musical World*, March 7, 1857.
Philharmonic Society of New York in 1855 as a cellist and quickly rose to the position of Principal Conductor.\(^{20}\) At the height of his career, he was considered “the most respected and admired musical leader in the country.”\(^{21}\) In fact, despite his unpopular stance as a champion of modern music, the conservative press almost never targeted Bergmann personally. Instead, reviewers reserved their criticism for the music he conducted.

After that first performance of *Les Preludes*, the unsigned critic from the *New York Musical World* wrote:

The *Poème Symphonique*, by Liszt, is, to our way of thinking, more intellectually significant than musically beautiful. It is a kind of prose done into music. Here is the text on which it rests, as furnished by the programme for the evening … [Lamartine poem quoted].

The materials to work upon here are certainly not bad. We have first the passion of love to deal with; second, calamity of some kind; third, the consolation to the soul of rural life; fourth, the outburst into worldly strife again. Now, however thoughtful we may be in music, we must never cease to be musical. The ear, after all, is the great judge of the Court of Appeals in music. However much the intellect may be gratified in a composition, if the pleasures of the ear be not catered to, we might call what we hear by any other name than music. For our own part, we do not particularly affect anything of a kind that sets us too much a-thinking. We want to feel in music—not think. The legitimate enjoyment of the tuneful art is of a sensuous nature. Emotion, not intellection, is the sphere of music. The intellect comes only into play as it is wrought upon by, and through the emotions. Making music declaim, instead of sing, is to our apprehension not orthodox. For this reason we cannot so much admire *Les Preludes* as many do.\(^{22}\)

Probably in reference to the work’s European reception, the reviewer acknowledges that apparently many “admire” *Les Preludes*. However, according

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\(^{22}\) *New York Musical World*, May 7, 1858.
to his argument, the piece is purely intellectual—much in the same way listeners today continue to consider the work of Arnold Schoenberg to be intellectual rather than expressive. For this reason, the critic says, the Liszt symphonic poem is not effective—because it caters only to the intellect and not the ear. In the critic's own words, when it comes to music “we want to feel—not think.” This argument is interesting, if not bizarre. For this critic, it would seem as though the idea of translating a piece of poetry into music is too abstract a concept, and somehow results in a composition devoid of emotion. It must be noted, however, that Liszt's symphonic poems are not musical translations of their programs. The prefaces printed with the score merely provide the composer's inspiration and, in many cases, Liszt wrote and appended them after the completion of the piece of music with which they are associated.  

Additionally, recent scholarship has revealed that the Lamartine poem did not serve as the original inspiration for Les Preludes.  

The next concert to feature Les Preludes, which took place in Brooklyn on April 16 of the following year, received attention from various publications. In fact, Irving Lowens and Rena C. Mueller mistakenly denote this performance as the American premiere of the work. Because of the significantly greater number of reviews, and wider range of opinions it generated, this performance presents a more interesting case. The newspaper Review and Gazette declared Les


Preludes “a very pleasing, highly interesting, and effective composition.”

*Dwight's Journal of Music*, on the other hand, remained true to its promise and produced a rather unfavorable commentary. The tone of the article inevitably reminds us of the review printed two years earlier of the two-piano arrangement of the same work. More than likely, the author of both reviews is one in the same. His argument remains that the symphonic poem contains some fragments of beautiful music, but that overall the work is incomprehensible. As in the earlier review, the critic makes reference to the public's response and hints at the fact that his opinion mirrors—or perhaps *should* mirror—that of the audience. Employing a kind of poetic language, the reviewer compares the experience of listening to Liszt's music to various hypothetical scenarios. This peculiar style, evident from glancing at the earlier review and the one reproduced below, may serve to identify this particular critic in future reviews from *Dwight's Journal* or possibly other publications.

The *Poème Symphonique* is more eccentric than beautiful; full of grotesque and even outlandish ideas. Occasionally you hear a delicious bit of melody accompanied by exquisite harmony; the next instant you look up in astonishment to see if the orchestra are not at loggerheads. Imagine yourself riding through a most beautiful park, with everything that art and nature can do combined to please the eye. Suppose this beautiful prospect be interrupted by some untoward event, and you find yourself all at once floundering in a goose pasture, which *happens* to be handy, just for the occasion. If the first impressions of most who hear the *Poème Symphonique* for the first time, are not something like the above, they must be among those who are lucky in deciphering musical hieroglyphics.

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25 *Review and Gazette*, April 19, 1859.

The Albion, the first New York daily newspaper to publish musical reviews, described Les Preludes as “a bewildering and clashy jumble or fragmentary ideas… too pretentious to please the ear and too empty to satisfy the mind.” The critic went on:

Liszt, in all he does, is essentially vulgar; his piano compositions are remarkable for pretending to be what they are not—orchestra pieces.

In this review we find perhaps the earliest examples of some attacks against Liszt that quickly became quite common. Among these is the claim that his music is fragmentary and therefore lacks unity. Interestingly, whereas the critic from The Musical World one year earlier considered the work too intellectual to satisfy the ear, the author of this review finds Les Preludes “too empty to satisfy the mind.” Additionally, the Albion reviewer accuses Liszt’s music of being pretentious and vulgar. Not surprisingly, Liszt’s reputation as a virtuoso, in fact, hurt his career as a composer of symphonic music. It became common at the time, both in Europe and the US, to label Liszt as a mere keyboard technician capable only of producing showy, superficial music to please the masses. For this reason, many critics dismissed him. Regrettably, it is not uncommon to hear this argument even today.

The New York Musical World had the most diplomatic opinion of the two-piano arrangement of Les Preludes, although it was not necessarily favorable. With regard to the orchestral version, however, the journal produced possibly one

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28 Albion, May 7, 1859.
of the most positive reviews of the symphonic poem ever. For its rarity, I quote the review in full:

This *Poème Symphonique*, as it is called, belongs to the new German school of music. We believe it to be illustrative of a poem by Lamartine. It is very wild, but very beautiful. The passage for violins, representing the approach and actual outbreak of a furious storm, is remarkable as a specimen of vigorous musical description. The lull that follows brings to our mind the opening of the last movement in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony—but only for an instant, as the andante, with which this overture commences, is speedily resumed, clothed in different “tone colors,” but even more beautiful than before.29

What immediately strikes us the most is the comparison to Beethoven. One cannot help but wonder what J. S. Dwight might have made of this remark, since he held Beethoven in such high esteem and thought so poorly of Liszt. Also significant is the comment about the effectiveness of the programmatic elements of the work. In short, the review shows a refreshing open-mindedness to the concept of program music and an essential understanding of its purpose and merit. Evidently, the initial American response to Liszt's symphonic music was mixed and showed a tendency towards resistance. Still, despite the largely negative reception of *Les Preludes*, Carl Bergmann—as well as other conductors—continued frequently to program the piece and other works by Liszt for the next several years. By 1873, all of Liszt's symphonic poems had received performances in major cities of the United States.

The next significant performance of *Les Preludes* took place in Boston on March 22, 1862, with conductor Carl Zerrahn leading the city's Philharmonic Orchestra. Particularly interesting is the review of the performance printed in *Dwight's Journal of Music*, which displays a remarkable change of tone:

[The themes in Lamartine’s poem] came up one by one in a moving panorama, as it were, of tone–pictures, painted on a great breadth of orchestral canvass, with a richer scale than usual of colors. ... The pastoral music of “rural life,” in cheerful six-eight measure, drew its tones happily and skillfully from the warmest instruments, and horns and clarinets, and was indeed quite charming. ... The real merit of the work appeared to us to lie in the remarkable talent shown for instrumentation. It is full of striking, original, sometimes exquisite effects: there were chord-phrases and blendings of instruments in it, which almost opened a new sense. ... It has a certain outward and well-managed unity, we own, but not that sort of unity, which great works of Art have, where the whole is implied and felt in each successive part, or rather each unfolding phrase. A more instructive contrast between these two modes of production could not well be offered, than we had that night in Liszt’s symphonic poem, and Beethoven’s less pretending, but most imaginative and genial Eighth Symphony. The latter music haunts you, mingles with your life, your love, forever after you have heard it—will the former?

The Preludes were quite well rendered this time, and generally well enjoyed; although the work would seem to have more interest to the musician for its curious and often happy effects in instrumentation, than to the common listener who seeks edification in the poetry and genius of the thing. It hardly makes good the place of a Symphony by a great master.  

Evidently, the Boston critic—possibly Dwight himself—presents a considerably more balanced and diplomatic position than the New York correspondent of that same journal. Not only does this critic acknowledge a positive audience response, but also praises the work’s instrumentation, orchestral effects, and even its structural unity. Yet, he resorts to comparing the symphonic poem to Beethoven and concludes that Liszt’s piece is not on par with great works of art. Like earlier reviews examined above, the critic also claims that the composition appeals more to the musician—for its instrumental innovations—than the average listener. A very similar review, most likely by the same critic, appeared a year later about another performance of Les Preludes. In this review, he admits that while the ingenious instrumental effects may be pleasing and entertaining,

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30 Dwight’s Journal of Music, April 5, 1862.
the work is “certainly not at all a thing to fill the vacuum where one craves a Symphony.”

*Les Preludes* continued to receive performances throughout the United States and eventually became the most popular of Liszt’s symphonic poems. St. Louis (1869), Cincinnatti (1869), Indianapolis (1870), Pittsburgh (1870), Philadelphia (1871), Baltimore (1873), Cleveland (1873), Milwaukee (1874) and Knoxville (1883) are among the cities where orchestras performed the piece.

As we examine the reviews of these performances through the years, we find that the reception of the work becomes increasingly more positive. In 1870, for instance, one critic stated that *Les Preludes* “contains not only fine effects of instrumentation, but some truly beautiful themes and passages.” By 1873 even a fierce opponent of Liszt’s music referred to the work as the composer’s only great composition:

> Had Liszt contented himself with the standard rules of art, which are scarcely transgressed in *Les Preludes*, he would not cut such a ridiculous figure as at present in the world. In this work he is truly great. It is the only thing he can point back to with pride. Probably, in his present crazy mood he regrets ever having written it.

It would be accurate to say that *Les Preludes* was Liszt’s most successful symphonic poem in the United States and the one work in the genre that critics praised most enthusiastically. Reviewing an 1877 performance, the *New York Herald*...
Herald described the piece as a masterwork of such striking “poetical grandeur” that “the audience could not but break out in a storm of applaudissements.”

This commentary is significant as it presents a rare account of the audience’s response to the music. The following 1883 review perhaps best illustrates the dramatic change of attitude regarding Les Preludes that occurred since its premiere in 1858:

Liszt’s charming symphonic poem, Les Preludes, was indeed, the poetry of music, and its notes swept every chord of the heart. This piece seemed not only to set the imagination free but to wonderfully strengthen its wings and to aid it to make flights in the highest realms of delight. We doubt whether a piece more acceptable was played last night.

The year 1860 saw the American premieres of two other symphonic poems—Festklänge and Tasso. The first work, originally composed as wedding music for the composer’s eventually thwarted marriage, received its first performance in Boston under the direction of Carl Zerrahn. As was the case with Les Preludes, the initial response to Festklänge was mixed, if not largely negative. The review by the Boston Musical Times employed the same kind of rhetoric we have seen in Dwight’s Journal of Music:

Liszt’s Fest Klaenge is the most incomprehensible, crazy assemblage of efforts we ever listened to. One pursues a musical idea through its mazes as he would hang an ignis fatuus through the darkness of night. It seemed to be the maximum of that unconnectedness which marks his musical creations. It would require considerable acquaintance with these Klaenge to create a fondness therefore.

35 New York Herald, October 28, 1877.
36 Knoxville Daily Chronicle, November 30, 1883.
37 Reeves Shulstad, “Liszt’s Symphonic Poems and Symphonies,” 214.
38 Boston Musical Times, March 10, 1860.
By using phrases such as “that unconnectedness which marks [Liszt’s] musical creations,” the critic makes a generalization about the composer’s entire body of work, despite having only heard two of Liszt’s symphonic poems by this point. It then becomes obvious that the reviewer’s intention is to defame Liszt and convince the reader that all of his works are inadequate or deficient. We might say that this critic joined J. S. Dwight in his “crusade against the Music of the Future.” As Paul Bekker rightly points out, it seems “much criticism of Liszt resulted from malevolence, spitefulness or ignorance.”\(^{39}\) The critic for the *Boston Post* expressed similarly negative opinions and also attacked the New German School in general:

Liszt’s *Fest-Klaenge* is one of the oddest, strangest pieces of music we ever listened to. It seems as though the parts were, by mistake, chosen from half a dozen different compositions and the musicians were vainly endeavoring to make them harmonize. This must certainly be the “Music of the Future”; and so far as we are concerned we trust that the future will never become present time while we look to orchestral music for amusement and delight.\(^{40}\)

By contrast, a correspondent for the *New York Times* wrote that *Festklänge* is “a work which proves M. Liszt is as familiar with the gamut of a grand orchestra as he is with the keyboard of a piano,” and that there was “great merit in this production.”\(^{41}\) One year later, the New York premiere of *Festklänge* by Carl Bergmann and the Philharmonic Society generated a more balanced response from the critic of the *New York Musical Review & Musical World*, who stated that:


\(^{40}\) *Boston Post*, March 5, 1860.

\(^{41}\) *New York Times*, December 25, 1860.
It is a pity that the program was omitted on this occasion as it would have tended to a kinder opinion of the work among that class of musicians who condemn everything that they cannot understand entirely, forgetting that only the so-called inspired mediocrity is interesting at first hearing by everybody. Some of the modulations he uses may probably have filled the so-called connoisseurs (alas! we have a good many of them in our concert rooms) with horror; we should not wonder if these connoisseurs have detected some awful discords entirely against the rules of somebody, or rather nobody.  

In the first sentence the critic seems to refer to unfavorable reviews by other newspapers or perhaps to the reaction of some musicians present at the concert. It is certainly unexpected to see a reviewer’s genuine regret over the negative reception of a work on account of lack of understanding. Unknown to the critic, evidently, was the fact that *Festklänge* is one of three symphonic poems that do not have a preface or “program.” Regardless, the critic’s diplomatic stance stands out as rare and refreshing. A remarkably positive review of *Festklänge* appeared in the same publication several years later. In addition to demonstrating a change of tone with regards to Liszt’s symphonic music over time, this article sets *The New York Musical Review* apart as a progressive journal with generally favorable views of modern music, and specially the music of the New German School. The particular performance took place in New York’s Steinway Hall under the direction of Leopold Damrosch, who according to the following review, conducted the performance to great acclaim:

Dr. Damrosch is a suitable conductor … for such a brilliant, delightful composition as the *Festklänge* of Liszt, which, while less grand than some of the other symphonic poems of the Hungarian master, is an ornament to a good program. Its varying shades of feeling were admirably

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43 Reeves Shulstad, “Liszt’s Symphonic Poems and Symphonies,” 214.
presented by the orchestra; and the final climax was so nearly analogous to that of Les Preludes as to make it intensely interesting.\textsuperscript{44}

A German émigré like Carl Bergmann, Damrosch was one of the city’s most respected conductors. He had been a close friend of Liszt’s while he lived in Weimar and later championed his music as conductor of the Breslau Philharmonic Society.\textsuperscript{45} Yet, except for a few performances like this one and the world premiere of Le Triomphe funèbre du Tasse, Damrosch’s role in promoting Liszt’s symphonic music in the United States was surprisingly minor.\textsuperscript{46}

There is no need to clarify that the reviewer of the 1879 Festklänge performance was a Liszt supporter. Not only does he refer to the composer as “the Hungarian Master,” but also seizes the opportunity to praise all his other symphonic poems, as well as Les Preludes specifically. Festklänge, however, did not receive nearly as many performances as Tasso—the other Liszt symphonic poem premiered in America in 1860. The latter work quickly gained almost as much popularity as Les Preludes and received performances in New York, Chicago, Boston, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Cincinnati and Baltimore.\textsuperscript{47}

On March 24, 1860, Carl Bergmann and the Philharmonic Society gave the American premiere of Tasso at the Academy of Music in New York. Like the 1859 performance of Les Preludes, the event attracted attention from various sources and received mixed reviews. The critic from the New York Musical

\textsuperscript{44} New York Musical Review, November 13, 1879.

\textsuperscript{45} Saloman, Listening Well, 206.

\textsuperscript{46} James Deaville, “Liszt’s Symphonic Poems,” 371.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 377.
*Review & Gazette* presented a seemingly unbiased point of view in his commentary:

As to the usual reproach of being incomprehensible music, we do not understand how any musician of modern education can utter it. There is nothing incomprehensible in this music; on the contrary, some parts are rather too clear. No doubt the middle part of this piece is well defined and beautifully rendered. The finale appeared too brassy and empty.\(^{48}\)

It is almost difficult to decipher whether the review is positive or negative. It seems that the critic is merely presenting a balanced perspective. He claims *Tasso* is so clear in its conception that no educated musician could claim not to understand the work. Yet, he uses this very attribute as an attack against the piece—as if claiming that the references are too obvious and the work lacks subtlety. He then acknowledges the mastery of the middle section but criticizes the end of the piece. We encounter no difficulties, however, deciphering the intent of the review by the *New York Times*. Indeed, the critic was anything but subtle in expressing his discontent:

Although like everything Liszt composed it abounded in startling effects expertly wrought, such a composition might just as well have been improvised by a well-informed orchestra for the musical quality it possessed.\(^{49}\)

Most commonly, newspaper reviews from this period appeared anonymously. For this reason, it is sometimes challenging to decipher the identities of those who wrote them. However, we can safely attribute this particular review to

\(^{48}\) *New York Musical Review & Gazette*, March 31, 1860.

\(^{49}\) *New York Times*, March 26, 1860.
Charles Bailey Seymour, who served as music critic for The Times from 1849 – 1869.\(^{50}\)

On the other hand, the critic from the New York Herald—an influential newspaper at the time—disliked the piece overall but recognized at least some virtues in it:

> The Liszt music was after the manner of some of the incomprehensible literature of the day, perplexing and unsatisfactory as a whole, although distinguished by descriptive passages of singular force, originality, and beauty.\(^{51}\)

The following review from the Musical World also presents a curious case:

> To say that Liszt succeed in making his Poème Symphonique a spiritual representation of the mighty poet [Tasso], to our mind would be an acknowledgement that he can do impossibilities. The last thing one thinks of in listening to such wild music is Tasso. As a work, it is immensely difficult, owing to the whimsical ideas the composer holds with regard to the resources of the various instruments, taxing each to the outmost, as if the parts were written for soloists rather than for a grand ensemble.\(^{52}\)

Here the critic is clearly bewildered at the difficulty of the individual instrumental parts and even spends part of the column [not quoted] suggesting how the orchestra should have gone about rehearsing the difficult passagework. The critic’s most thought-provoking statement, however, is that it is impossible to represent a character or person via musical means. Naturally, this claim invalidates the very concept of program music and negates its purpose. Not surprisingly, the critic from Dwight’s Journal presented a similar stance, although

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\(^{51}\) New York Herald, March 26, 1860.

\(^{52}\) Musical World, March 31, 1860.
he stated it much more emphatically. His rather lengthy review of *Tasso* is almost a manifesto against program music. He begins by explaining the fundamental difference between Liszt and the “classical masters.” The critic argues that while great composers are “content” to give us symphonies “that appeal to us spiritually” and do not need the aid of extra-musical references, Liszt believes that:

> Tone by itself is capable of conveying ideas, as ideas, and not as sentiments—that musical phrases may appeal to our *intelligence*, and that they are all-sufficient in themselves to convey their absolute meaning with very little or no aid from words.\(^{53}\)

The reviewer goes on to argue that to express ideas through music is as impossible as “translating the scent of a flower into words.”\(^{54}\) Furthermore, as one listens to *Tasso*, he explains that:

> The ear is assailed from every quarter by the most uncouth tones; abrupt sequences of harmony startle and confound us; dissonances of the most complex character vex the ear; discords are hung suspended never to be resolved; the orchestra is a great sea of turbulence and unrest.\(^{55}\)

The critic’s comments are perhaps the most scathing we have encountered thus far. However, this kind of rhetoric soon becomes the norm for anti-Liszt critics—in fact, it only gets worse. During the 1870s, as we shall see, negative reviews of Liszt’s music become so slanderous as to appear almost comical. A good example is the following—rather lengthy—review of an 1872 performance of

\(^{53}\) *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, April 7, 1860.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
Tasso that appeared in the *Daily Advisor* and was reprinted in *Dwight’s Journal of Music*. I reproduce below only the most striking passages:

Liszt, like a third-rate actor, struts and snorts and grows red in the face; like a fourth-rate painter he throws potfuls of dabs on the unfortunate canvass. With exceeding strength he wields ponderous engines to lift up—a feather. He exaggerates; he vainly seeks for the strongest expression; he is overpowering, but tedious, ... the whole work lacks that quality which only genius can give to any work of art. ... It sparkles, it glitters, it shines like an overdressed belle, gorgeously got up and overloaded with finery.\(^{56}\)

The unforgiving review goes on in the same manner for practically two full columns. So outrageous it must have seemed to some readers that it caused one individual to send an angry response to the editors of the newspaper. Surprisingly, *Dwight’s Journal* published the anonymous response. This is the only instance of such a reaction I was able to find during my research.\(^{57}\) I believe it is necessary to reproduce it in full for its rarity, and also because it suggests that the negative comments expressed by a majority of leading newspapers and journals might not necessarily reflect the opinion of audiences.

A pre-requisite for discriminating musical criticism is that the critic shall understand the music he is criticizing, which, unfortunately for art, does not appear to be the case with the Advisor’s musical critic in his review of Liszt’s *Tasso* in the Symphony concert of yesterday. Musical criticism is something more than a mere expression of likes and dislikes; it is, or should be, a careful discrimination of the merits and demerits of the work; and to say that Liszt “struts and snorts and grows red in the face like a third-rate actor,” or that he “throws potfuls of dabs like a fourth-rate painter,” is to exhibit lack of taste equaled only by ignorance of the true character of the music he undertakes to criticize. If the critic does not see the beauty or grandeur of such music it is not the fault of the composer, and the critic’s vague talk about “lack of creative genius” and failure to embody an idea will not convince the many, who at that concert


\(^{57}\) It is, of course, impossible to know how many other dissenting opinions might have been suppressed by editors.
thoroughly enjoyed the Tasso “poem,” of their lack of taste in liking what he is pleased to call “harmonic contortions.” As a music lover I would heartily thank the Harvard Symphony Association for the enjoyment they gave some of us yesterday, in their presentation of Liszt’s Symphonic Poem, and at the same time protest against the indiscriminate censure indulged by the critic above mentioned, as lowering the standard of musical criticism.56

This remarkable response not only raises valid points, but also shows that such scathing reviews did not necessarily convince concertgoers who, in fact, enjoyed Liszt’s music. Immediately following the response, under a heading that read “Thoroughly out of Humor,” Dwight printed another even more scorching review of Tasso—as if mocking the attack on the critic. It would appear that the whole situation entertained him.

On May 9, 1873, having already received performances in New York, Chicago, Boston, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia, Tasso was performed at Cincinnati’s famous “May Festival.” The conductor was Theodore Thomas, one of the nation’s most respected musicians who—like Bergmann—was also a champion of Liszt’s music. As the leader of the renowned orchestra that bore his name, Thomas conducted more Liszt in America that Hans von Bülow, Eduard Lassen, Hans Bronsart, or even Liszt himself did in Europe.59 Additionally, he was responsible for the American premieres of Prometheus (1869), Heroïde Funèbre (1872), Hunnenschlacht (1872), and Hamlet (1873).

In his article about Liszt’s symphonic poems in the United States, James Deaville argues that the reception of these works varied across different regions


of the country. More specifically, he poses that the largely negative response to Liszt’s works in the northeastern part of the country was due to: 1) the generally conservative taste of the German émigrés who populated the area and 2) the cultivation of an “elite—highbrow—culture” in that region of the country.\footnote{Ibid, 367.}

Audiences with unbiased ears in the midwestern part of the country, on the other hand, presented a much more favorable response to Liszt’s program music. The claim is certainly provocative and Deaville defends it well in his paper. However, a number of reviews by midwestern newspapers such as the {\it Cincinnati Daily Gazette} would seem to reflect otherwise. The following review of the 1873 performance of {\it Tasso}, for instance, inevitably reminds us of something we might see in {\it Dwight’s Journal of Music}:

> This symphony of Liszt is an ingeniously rich piece of instrumentation, and as such, interesting as a study to musicians. It seems, however, merely a well-constructed piece of mechanism, and not an emanation from a great soul, which elevates those who are brought into contact with it, and in this consists the difference between truly classical music and that which is merely curious or difficult. Liszt’s musical perceptions are deep and comprehensive, but his own ideas, which are, after all, the chief point, are lacking in power and originality. There is in his compositions much sensational excitement, but very little nourishment, reminding one of Falstaff’s diet, which consisted of “an unconscionable amount of sack to such a small quantity of bread.”\footnote{{\it Cincinnati Daily Gazette}, May 10, 1873.}

The arguments against Liszt are the same as those often used by Boston and New York critics:

1) Liszt’s music only appeals to musicians for its novel instrumentation
2) The music is clearly not the work of a genius (it does not “elevate the soul”), although well constructed and executed
3) The musical ideas lack originality and depth
4) The music, overall, is “empty”

To say that Tasso received only negative reviews, however, would be inaccurate. Furthermore, based on the vast number of performances that the work received during the three decades that followed its premiere, it might be safe to assume that it elicited a positive reaction from audiences. In 1875, in anticipation of a New York Philharmonic performance, the Evening Post devoted a lengthy column exclusively to an analysis of Tasso and an explanation of its program. In the article, the critic describes the piece as “a noble work” and “worthy tribute of the tone-poet to the word-poet.” Finally, he added that the composition is “uniformly elevated in conception and refined and artistic in realization.” By 1877, another critic declared that he “can only speak with unqualified admiration” of Tasso.

The next Liszt symphonic poem to receive its American premiere was Orpheus—once again at the hands of the pioneering Carl Bergmann. The performance took place on March 20, 1862, at Irving Hall in New York. Unfortunately, the event was not well documented, and despite a diligent search I could only find one brief review from the Evening Post. The critic’s positive tone is consistent with the 1875 review of Tasso from the same publication. He

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62 *Evening Post*, February 17, 1875.

63 *New York Tribune*, November 5, 1877.
described the work as “a delicious pastoral, replete with dreamy passages for the woodwinds.”

Theodore Thomas conducted every subsequent major performance of *Orpheus*, including the Boston premiere—after which the critic from the *Boston Daily Advisor* wrote:

> The idea of the work was given at length on the programme, in the language of the author himself, in two of whose sentences it might be easily summed up, “the mission of art is to soften and ennoble the instincts of humanity—to rescue the ideal from the ocean of evil and of pain.” This thought would seem to be sufficiently definite, and at the same time sufficiently mystical at once to inspire the peculiar genius of Liszt, and to guide it into shape and consistency of expression. The composition was received with unmistakable delight by the audience. There was the inevitable tendency toward a bewildering multiplication of forms, but in a much less degree than usual, and the whole work was marked by pure poetic grace and sensibility, the melodies being of special beauty and suggestiveness.

From this remarkably positive review, we learn that the program for the symphonic poem, as written by Liszt in German, was printed and given to the audience members at the concert to enhance their listening experience. Although an English translation might better have served the purpose, the idea was essentially a good one. From a number of other reviews, we gather that this practice was common at performances of Liszt’s symphonic poems in the US and might, indeed, have aided in the understanding and enjoyment of these works by the audience. This review also reveals that there was an enthusiastic response from the public and acknowledges a less “bewildering” treatment of musical forms than in, presumably, *Les Preludes*, *Tasso* and *Festklänge*.

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64 *Evening Post*, March 28, 1862.

65 *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 16, 1874.
Additionally, by quoting from Liszt’s own words, the critic displays a willingness to understand the work from the composer’s point of view and a desire to impart this knowledge to the reader.

A correspondent for the *Massachusetts Spy* had a legitimate opinion of *Orpheus* and produced the following generous and diplomatic review of the work:

There is hardly a passage that one can recall after listening to it, only little fragments of melody which are here and there interspersed come to haunt us. Its wild, strange harmonics constantly assume new forms, like summer clouds, then suddenly vanish, leaving no trace of them behind. … Liszt has developed the great wealth of his livid imagination in this poem, and one desires to hear it many times to appreciate its beauty. Undoubtedly it will be many years before his orchestral works will be understood. There is too much of prejudice against them at the present time, and by many they are declared to be “monstrosities” utterly chaotic in their formation and development, productions “without form and void.” But we must remember that Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was once declared to be the work of a mad man; but now it is regarded as one of the most sublime works ever written, becoming more loved and revered the more it is known and understood.⁶⁶

It seems that the critic generally liked the work but wished to hear it more times to acquire a better understanding and appreciation of it. On the other hand, he believed that, despite the overwhelming prejudice against Liszt’s music, the symphonic poems—like Beethoven’s Ninth—might gain recognition in time. Unfortunately, as the resistance to the music of the New German School subsided, Liszt’s symphonic poems also disappeared from the repertoire.

The next notable performance of *Orpheus* was the Brooklyn premiere, which took place on February 13, 1875 at the Academy of Music in that city. The review of the work by the *Evening Post* was, once again, remarkably positive:

⁶⁶ *Massachusetts Spy*, December 25, 1874.
The second part of the concert began with Liszt’s celebrated symphonic poem *Orpheus*, which was then heard for the first time at the society’s concerts. It had not been played at all the rehearsals and therefore was probably new to many, who would have been more gratified if some indications of the composers intention had been given in the programme, although the performance was characterized by the highest finish in point of details, and a sympathetic interpretation of the poetical, underlying basis of the work.67

The critic then goes on to quote a passage from Liszt’s own prose about his inspiration. Like the earlier *Orpheus* review by the *Boston Dailey Advisor*, this critique reveals a desire to gain greater understanding of the work and instruct readers about the composer’s intention. Based on the number positive reviews by the *Evening Post* we have encountered thus far, it seems valid to label this publication as progressive and pro-Liszt—much like we would denote *Dwight’s Journal* as conservative and anti-program music. Subsequent reviews of *Orpheus* continue to be positive and we might say that the work was one of Liszt’s most successful symphonic poems in the US. By 1886, the *New York Times* described it as “one of the lightest and most graceful of this class of the virtuoso’s compositions.”68

The next symphonic poem performed in the United States was *Mazeppa* in 1865.69 Like the premiere of *Orpheus*, the first performance was poorly documented and finding a review of the event has proven impossible. The earliest known assessment of the work comes from an 1866 article in the journal the *Album*, where the critic describes *Mazeppa* as “the uttermost trash ever given

67 *Evening Post*, February 15, 1875.
69 The *Faust Symphony* received its premiere before *Mazeppa* in 1863. The reception of this work is examined in a later chapter.
to a New York public."\textsuperscript{70} A review of another performance one year later was no more favorable:

Seldom has an orchestra ventured on anything as wild as this emanation from Franz Liszt. \ldots{} His works are generally a series of marches strung together by discordant eccentric passages, which are perfectly unintelligible to the listener. The modes of treatment may be very profound and sublime, but we may suspect that this shows a lack of purpose and inability to develop a subject. \ldots{} We can readily console ourselves for the absence of Liszt, or any of his insane imitators, from any programme.\textsuperscript{71}

Clearly a Liszt opponent, the *Herald* critic generalizes Liszt’s works as constructed in a similarly erratic fashion. We are reminded of the 1860 review by the *Boston Musical Times*, which claimed that all of Liszt’s works are marked by “unconnectedness.”\textsuperscript{72} This reviewer of *Mazeppa* also accuses Liszt of masking his inability to develop subjects behind “profound and sublime modes of treatment.” Additionally, the critic speaks of Liszt’s “insane imitators”—an insulting name for the composer’s disciples and other members of the New German School—and wishes that their music never be featured in any future programs.

*The Evening Post*, reviewing an 1876 performance of *Mazeppa* by Theodore Thomas, presented its usual laudatory, pro-Liszt stance:

Few orchestras are competent to undertake this highly original, complex and difficult work, yet when one is found fully able to present it free from technical blemishes and with the requisite speed, \&c., it always repays for the efforts required for its production, and stimulates one’s imagination to conceive new possibilities for instrumental music. It is scarcely necessary


\textsuperscript{71} *New York Herald*, October 13, 1867.

\textsuperscript{72} See page 13.
to say that under the direction of Mr. Theodore Thomas, this remarkable art work was delivered with the spontaneity and ease noticeable in their production of most simple pieces.73

A transformative development regarding the New York Herald seems to have occurred from the 1860s to the 1870s. In 1877, the once notoriously anti-Liszt publication referred to Mazeppa as “one of the most beautiful things ever played by an orchestra,”74 and spoke also of its “warm reception.”75 Evidently, the newspaper replaced its antagonistic and conservative music critic with an ardent supporter of modern music.

The reception of the symphonic poems addressed in this chapter sheds light on the radical views of 19th-century American music critics. In general, these opinions represented a harsh opposition to program music and a tendency to dismiss Liszt as an orchestral composer. Although the response to Liszt's works was not always unfavorable, a majority of critics complained about fragmentary phrases, painful dissonances, unorthodox modulations and a lack of melody. Yet, because opinions of specific pieces sometimes varied, making further generalizations poses challenges. The following chapters will examine additional reviews of other works to provide a comprehensive assessment of Liszt reception in the United States.

73 Evening Post, February 14, 1876.
74 New York Herald, November 24, 1877.
75 New York Herald, November 25, 1877.
Chapter 3

Late Symphonic Poems – *Die Ideale*, *Prometheus*, *Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne*, *Hunnenschlacht*, and *Hamlet*

By 1865, thanks to the efforts of conductors like Carl Bergmann and Theodore Thomas, US audiences had witnessed performances of *Les Preludes*, *Festklänge*, *Tasso*, *Orpheus*, *Mazeppa*, and the *Faust Symphony*. The country was quickly emerging as an epicenter for the performance of Liszt’s music. It is an interesting question, then, whether Liszt himself was aware of this situation and what he thought about it. Let us recall that the composer often discouraged performances of his symphonic works for fear that they might not receive correct interpretations. Surprisingly, we discover that Liszt was more than pleased to learn about the frequent performances of his works in the United States. Proof of this comes from a letter the composer sent Theodore Thomas in 1871, which read:

Honored Herr Director:

I have often heard of the famous performances of the orchestra under your direction, and our mutual friend, Julius Schuberth, delighted me especially by telling me of the unusual care you have given to the performance of my works. They need—even more than other, better-known compositions—the sympathetic and intelligent care of the conductor, on account of the many changes of tempo and tone color. The unfortunately too frequent reading-at-sight performances are not sufficient for them. … Accept, honored sir, my earnest thanks for your goodness, and be so kind as to give my friendly greeting to the members of your orchestra.

With the highest respect,

F. Liszt.76

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Liszt and Theodore Thomas even met at the composer’s home in Weimar in 1880—a memorable occasion that Thomas recorded in his diary:

Liszt received me in his private rooms, and alone... his geniality was beyond all expression, and this meeting with him was, in itself, worth the journey from New York. ... Now I am very glad to have seen the giant, for the world looks so much the smaller to me.77

Liszt might also have been well aware of the reception of his music in the New World. We know, for instance, that he read reviews of his works from US publications. In an 1854 letter to his American pupil William Mason, Liszt thanks his student for the newspapers and journals he has sent him:

The Musical Gazette of New York has in particular given me a genuine satisfaction, not alone on account of the agreeable and flattering things concerning me personally which it contains, but furthermore because this journal seems to me to inculcate an excellent and superior direction of opinion in your country. As you know, my dear Mason, I have no other self-interest than to serve the good cause of art so far as is possible, and whenever I find men who are making conscientious efforts in the same direction, I rejoice and am strengthened by the good example they give me. ...

Your very friendly affectionate, F. Liszt.78

Although Liszt did not speak English, we can assume that any one of his American pupils—of which he had many—translated the articles for him. We might also surmise that Mason sent him only issues that contained positive reviews of his works.

77 Reproduced in Rose Fay Thomas, Memoirs of Theodore Thomas, 184.

On September 1876, the *New York Tribune* dispatched its music critic John R. G. Hassard to cover the first Bayreuth festival.\textsuperscript{79} While in the German city, Hassard managed to obtain a rare interview with Liszt, which the newspaper published under the title “A Visit to Liszt.” The journalist’s description of Liszt is consistent with the many accounts of the composer’s genial disposition:

Liszt received us with great cordiality ... When he came forward, in his plain suit of black, with frock coat of slightly clerical cut, and grasped the hands of his visitors, he might have been taken for a gentle old priest receiving his parishioners. He has a simple and hearty manner which puts the stranger immediately at ease. It is the politeness of a thorough man of the world softened by the sincerity of a singularly affectionate and generous disposition.\textsuperscript{80}

Naturally, the conversation soon turned to Liszt’s music in America:

We spoke of his symphonic poems, and he seemed deeply gratified to learn that the whole set had been performed in New York. ... Naturally then we referred to the great work which Theodore Thomas has done in the United States, and I found that Liszt (as indeed I had expected) was familiar with it. ... Afterward we took our leave, the maestro parting from us at the door with kind and gracious words and expressions of high interest in our country.\textsuperscript{81}

In addition to expressing his interest in America’s musical activities, Liszt admits that the country is ahead of many others in championing modern music: “We are not so far advanced yet in Germany. You do more than we dare attempt.”\textsuperscript{82} To my knowledge—as I have been unable to find any references to this interview in additional sources—no other scholars have hitherto taken notice of this valuable


\textsuperscript{80} John Rose Green Hassard, “A Visit to Liszt,” *New York Tribune*, September 26, 1876.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
and immensely interesting document. It is the only known Liszt interview by an American newspaper.

After the premiere of *Mazeppa* in 1866, the next notable event involving Liszt’s music in the United States was a concert of the New York Philharmonic Society, which took place on April 10, 1869. For this event, the bold Carl Bergmann dared to perform Wagner and Liszt on the same program! The reaction that ensued was nothing short of sheer outrage. The two works were Wagner’s *Faust Overture* and Liszt’s symphonic poem *Die Ideale*. The critic from the *Herald* expressed his indignation in the distinctive, almost comical tone that had become common by that point:

> Liszt and Wagner on a programme at the same time are too much for even the most hardened disciple of the music of the future. Both of them are, we suppose, necessary evils, which we must endure at times in order to be the better able to appreciate good music; but please, Mr. Bergmann, don’t let them form a partnership to torment suffering ears!\(^{83}\)

Surprisingly, even the progressive *Evening Post* had a less than favorable opinion of the program. In his review, the music critic of that newspaper reported a negative response from the audience with regard to both pieces:

> Liszt’s long symphonic poem *Ideale* was enjoyed by but few and understood by fewer. To most of the auditors it was sound and fury signifying nothing. To a lesser degree the same remark applies to Wagner’s *Faust Overture*. This class of music, however, the Society is not to be blamed for programming. It is attracting much attention in Europe, and it is but fair that the music lovers of the New World should share the infliction in common with their fellow-sufferers of the Old. Possibly in fifty years from now Liszt and Wagner will be appreciated and Beethoven and Mendelssohn seem as antiquated as Glück and Paesiello do now.\(^{84}\)

\(^{83}\) *New York Herald*, April 11, 1869.

\(^{84}\) *Evening Post*, April 12 1869.
The reception of *Die Ideale* after its premiere the previous year had not been any more positive. However, when the Theodore Thomas Orchestra performed the work at Steinway Hall in 1874, it attracted much more attention and produced a wider range of opinions. The critic of *The Tribune*—by this point one of the most prestigious newspapers in circulation—presented a particularly interesting point of view and discussed the importance of understanding, or simply knowing, the source of inspiration for the work: in this case, a poem by Friedrich Schiller:

Liszt’s *Die Ideale*, which the disciples of the new school rate as one of the best of the Symphonic Poems, has not been played here very often in late years. … More than many others of the series it needs the help of the programme, and as Schiller’s poem is probably not as well known as it ought to be by the average American audience, it seems a pity that an explanatory text was not printed on the bills. As “absolute music” it is inevitably a puzzle and a disappointment; but bear in mind what it is meant to be, an illustration of the poet’s “elegy on departed youth,” filled with sad memories of defeated aspirations, lost joys, and vanished phantasies [sic], but closing with the comforting reflection that, “although the ideal images of youth forsake us, the Ideal itself still remains to the poet—his task and his companion”—bear this in mind, and its purpose becomes clear, its sentiment is quickly felt, and a hundred beauties otherwise indistinguishable start from the score.⁸⁵

The critic appears to know the Schiller poem intimately and understand its role in the conception of the entire work. His view, however, that the symphonic poem is “a puzzle and a disappointment” when separated from this literary element is extreme. Alan Walker, for instance, argues that posterity has “overestimated the importance of extra-musical thought in Liszt’s symphonic poems,”⁸⁶ and this review might be an excellent example of this misconception. The prefaces or “programmes” that accompany these works are merely explanations of the

⁸⁵ *New York Tribune*, November 30, 1874.

composer’s inspiration there to provide context. This is not to say that they are unimportant; however, the critic of the review in question has clearly given the piece’s program a role greater than Liszt intended.

In reference to the same performance, the Evening Post reinstated its pro-Liszt stance by declaring Die Ideale a “great work.” Additionally, the critic devoted the first portion of the review to defending Liszt’s use of form:

Following the example set by Beethoven, the composer Liszt, in common with others of the same school, has not scrupled to modify and vary the classic forms whenever too strict an adherence to them would hamper and restrain him in the expression of new ideas. Yet his respect for these fixed moulds is everywhere apparent, for they are always employed unaltered, so far as they are found suitable to the satisfactory expression of the spiritual contents.\(^{87}\)

It seems this reviewer had a deeper understanding of Liszt’s compositional process than most critics of the period. Indeed, of the five Liszt symphonic poems originally conceived as overtures, all but Hamlet display sonata organization.\(^{88}\) It appears unfounded, then, that so many critics accused Liszt of writing formless compositions. Clearly, these kinds of attacks were often rooted in ignorance and lack of understanding. Finally, by declaring that Liszt followed Beethoven’s example or compositional model, the critic managed to elevate Liszt’s stature. The review then presented a detailed analysis of the composition and an explanation of its programmatic elements. Though certainly not the only lengthy commentary of this kind printed during the period, this review of Die Ideale stands out for its depth and remarkable insight. Perhaps most surprising

\(^{87}\) *Evening Post*, November 30, 1874.

about this performance was the response by the critic of *Dwight’s Journal*, who thought the symphonic poem was “remarkable as a display of virtuosity on the part of the orchestra.” Though not necessarily an explicit comment about the music’s quality, an acknowledgement from *Dwight’s* of any positive attribute of a Liszt work is entirely rare.

Also in the year 1869, *Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne* and *Prometheus* received their American premieres in New York. Carl Bergmann and Theodore Thomas respectively conducted these performances. *Prometheus* does not seem to have made the best impression as evidenced by the review published in the *Musical Times*:

That Liszt is aiming to express something in his symphonic poem, and that according to his own opinion he does so intelligibly, there is no doubt; but such a “hide and seek” meaning, forever eluding our pursuit among a multitude of notes, becomes a tiresome thing, and with a long breath we give up the chase.  

The review resembles perhaps too closely an account of the same work by no other than Eduard Hanslick, the most notorious anti-Liszt critic in Europe. In his 1860 review of *Prometheus*, the German critic speaks of a “constant searching and not finding,” which is essentially the same idea as the “hide and seek” in the *Musical Times*. We might be tempted to think the US reviewer reused Hanslick’s words. Such a scenario would not be entirely inconceivable as

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89 *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, December 26, 1874.

90 *Musical Times*, May 1869.

91 Eduard Hanslick, *Die Presse*, March 1, 1860.
Dwight’s Journal commonly translated and reprinted reviews from the German press by writers such as Hanslick, Hiller, and Bischoff.92

Two correspondents for Dwight’s Journal wrote reviews of the premiere of Prometheus. In the first example, the critic praised some aspects of the work but quickly condemned it:

Prometheus really has something like coherence and persistency of design, and the instrumentation is of course good. Liszt’s weak point is always the uncouth harmonic transitions, which disfigure nearly all his symphonic works.93

In the second critique, on the other hand, the critic denounced the lack of melody in the work and resorted to generalizing about all of Liszt’s symphonic poems:

Liszt is never himself except when he gets all the instruments of the orchestra at loggerheads. There is method in his madness, to be sure, but that method entirely ignores such a thing as melody. The poem wound up with the inevitable march that closes all his works.94

Prometheus is the product of several revisions of an overture to Liszt’s choral setting of Herder’s Der entfesselte Prometheus (1802), which was first performed in August 1850.95 Liszt later turned the overture into a symphonic poem and the choruses into a concert stage work. In 1875, conductor Otto Singer programmed both of these works for the famous Cincinnati May Festival. Singer, a personal friend of Liszt’s, knew the composer well enough to invite him to attend the concert. After an exchange of letters, however, Liszt politely declined the

93 Dwight’s Journal of Music, April 24, 1869.
94 Ibid.
95 Reeves Schulstad, “Liszt’s Symphonic Poems and Symphonies,” 209.
invitation saying that he was much too old to undergo the lengthy trip. Had Liszt attended the event, one cannot help but wonder how his presence might have influenced both critic and audience. It is no exaggeration that Liszt’s charisma and even his mere physical presence had the power to change people’s views of his music. Even the antagonistic Hanslick, one of Liszt’s fiercest enemies, recognized this. In 1880, after a performance of an all-Liszt program in Vienna, the German critic wrote:

We are not in a position to decide whether the Mass and the following tone poems of Liszt delighted or only satisfied, or even somewhat bored, the auditorium. One can never say, when Liszt’s compositions are given with the protective magic of his personal presence. The fascinating power of this man is no fable—indeed, many members of the public listen without interest or satisfaction, but their gaze is fixed on Liszt’s appearance and—they applaud.

As it turned out, the performance of Prometheus and the accompanying choral works did not need the aid of Liszt’s presence to generate a positive response. A Chicago newspaper called the Daily Inter Ocean dispatched its critic to review the various performances at the festival. Among the other main works performed were Mendelssohn’s Elijah and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. After the first public rehearsal, the critic of that newspaper wrote an unprecedented report of the Prometheus music so favorable as to deserve special mention:

The great work on Friday night, and the one which closes the festival, will be Liszt’s Prometheus. I heard it for the first time Saturday night at the mass rehearsal, and predict that it will, on its presentation, excite more enthusiasm than even the Ninth Symphony. The orchestral accompaniment is one of the most indescribably glorious pieces of instrumentation that has been written in connection with vocal music. The

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97 Eduard Hanlick, Die Neue Presse, March 27, 1880.
opening overture is full of the most startling and dazzling effects, which, 
like all the new school music, exhausts all the resources of the orchestra. 
It never could have been written in Beethoven’s time, because it demands 
all the modern inventions in the way of musical instruments and 
instrumentation. … The only comparable vocal composition which I now 
recall is the despairing chorus to Baal, in Elijah, but Liszt has succeeded 
better than Mendelssohn in interpreting the sentiment of utter despair. … 
Prometheus will, I think, be the musical sensation of the festival, because 
it will be such a startling surprise to those who come prepared only to 
enjoy the noble grandeur of Elijah and the Ninth Symphony.⁹⁸

The highly enthusiastic tone—not matched by even the most generous reviews in 
the Evening Post—is certainly rare for a review of Liszt’s music during this 
period. The article supports James Deaville’s idea that midwesterners were more 
receptive to the music of the New German School. Additionally, a number of 
accounts by other newspapers prove that the performance was wonderfully 
successful. The Cincinnati Daily Inquirer, for instance, describes the terrific 
audience reaction:

We are delighted to re hear in Liszt’s setting the old tale of the demigod. 
Mr. Otto Singer led, and when the last bars were passing away the whole 
audience rose to their feet. From every side, with unanimous acclaim, 
rose shouts for Singer. … It was a brilliant ovation.⁹⁹

A correspondent for the New York Tribune also produced a rather favorable 
account, which seemed to prove the prophecy in the Daily Inter Ocean:

Liszt’s symphonic poem of Prometheus is known by our audience, but the 
vocal music which he wrote for Herder’s poem on the same subject is as 
yet a sealed book to us in its complete form. … To those who know Liszt 
only by his instrumental works, the sweetness of this melodious, vocal 
composition will be a great surprise. The most delicate vein of poetry runs 
all through it, imparting to the whole an appearance of grace and 
refinement quite as remarkable as its strong dramatic character. The 
poetic basis is always conspicuous in Liszt’s songs and choruses; but 
here the union between the melody and the poem seem to be particularly

⁹⁸ Daily Inter Ocean, May 11, 1875.

⁹⁹ Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, May 15, 1875.
close. One beautiful conception follows another with the most rapid step, but each is perfect and distinct. ... The orchestra not only embroiders the vocal parts with a rich and delicate ornament, but combines with them to form a compact and carefully planned texture, and carries on so beautifully the spirit that, if not for the musical motives of the symphonic poem which has been adopted as the introduction, we can hardly realize that we listen to two independent compositions. ... The tone was magnificent; the ever-changing nuances, from which Liszt's music derives so much of its effect, were observed with perfection; the singing was equally admirable for technical precision and for fine intelligence.  

The initial reception of the symphonic poem alone was largely negative. However, when the piece was paired with the choral music to Herder's poem, the reception by both audience and critic changed dramatically. Even Dwight's Journal, in a review of these same works the following year, seems to change its tone regarding the vocal numbers:

The symphonic poem, or overture, was about the most thankless music we have listened to for many years. As for beauty, we could find none of it, nor any meaning. The only thing it seemed to suggest, in connection with its title, was the gnawing vulture and the groaning victim, and this seemed helpless, hopeless, endless. The vocal portion contained more variety, some tantalizing signs of promise here and there, and even beautiful effects, many of which were very curious and striking.  

The notion that we could attribute this change of opinion to an American predilection for vocal music—or perhaps even for Liszt's vocal writing—will present an interesting case as we examine the reception of Liszt's oratorios in a later chapter.

As time elapsed, the reception of Liszt's music gradually became more positive. By the late 1860s, the formerly anti-Liszt New York Herald had drastically changed its stance on the Music of the Future. That newspaper's

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100 New York Tribune, May 15, 1875.
101 Dwight's Journal of Music, April 1, 1876.
review of the premiere of *Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne* illustrates this shift most evidently:

A poetic symphony by Liszt, from Victor Hugo’s poem *Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne*, was then given for the first time in this country. The subject was magnificently treated and created a most favorable impression. Though the first time of its performance in America, it is sincerely to be hoped that the superb composition will be often repeated. The concert last evening, under the direction of Mr. Carl Bergmann, may be faithfully chronicled as one of the most successful in every respect that the society has given for a long period.\(^{102}\)

In addition to acknowledging a positive response from the audience, the critic generously describes the performance as one of the most successful ever given by the Philharmonic. However, as views of Liszt's music became increasingly more progressive and accepting, *Dwight’s Journal* remained firm on its hostile stance. Accordingly, the *Journal*’s review of the premiere of *Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne* emphatically contradicted that of the *Herald*:

> The Liszt nondescript was humanely placed at the end of the programme, and was of course heard by comparatively few people. The “poem” possesses all of Liszt’s defects, and none, or nearly none, of his few excellencies; it is the very essence of turgidity, and is thoroughly chaotic in form, or in the lack of any form.\(^{103}\)

This review is particularly vague and dismissive. The only explicit negative traits that the critic cites to justify his poor opinion of the work are its “turgidity,” or pompousness, and its lack of form. Whatever other weakness the piece might have displayed the reviewer simply categorized as Liszt’s common “defects”—with which the reader is expected to be familiar. On the other hand, the symphonic poem also failed to impress the critic for the *New York Times*, who

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\(^{102}\) *New York Herald*, January 10, 1869.

\(^{103}\) *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, January 16, 1869.
thought the "grand religious theme in the last movement redeems the work from mediocrity; otherwise it is tedious and mechanical."³⁰⁴

Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne did not receive any performances outside New York; however, an 1876 performance by Carl Bergmann and the Philharmonic Society deserves mention. The New York Tribune, a seemingly unbiased newspaper, reviewed the performance and provided an honest and insightful account of it. The critic hailed the work as a “remarkable symphonic poem” and continued:

Under Mr. Bergmann’s intelligent direction the score was played through with fidelity and refinement. The various solo passages were distinctly accented, and some of the most important of them were beautifully expressive. There was force and majesty also in the ensembles, and in the Andante religioso the fine tone and smoothness of the brasses deserved all praise. If nevertheless there was an indescribable lack of vitality in the interpretation, that fact only illustrates what we have often said before, that Liszt’s symphonic poems require, more than any other compositions, something besides intelligence and good taste in the conductor and technical proficiency in the band. Vivid coloring, strong effects of contrast, incessant variations of rhythm, and a delicate management of nuance and shading are essential even to an approximately faithful rendering of the composer’s meaning; and these the Philharmonic Society did not always give. A painter would have complained that the tone of the picture was too low. It is possible, however, that some of the heaviness of the performance is properly chargeable to the foul and heated atmosphere, which, not having been renewed since the operatic representation in the afternoon, weighed upon the assembly with a drowsy and depressing effect.³⁰⁵

It is safe to attribute this review to John R. G. Hassard, the Tribune’s music critic at the time, and the journalist who interviewed Liszt that same year.³⁰⁶ Here Hassard does not comment on the music itself, but instead, criticizes the

³⁰⁵ New York Tribune, February 21, 1876.
³⁰⁶ See page 41.
performance and interpretation. This is the first example we encounter of an explicitly negative review of the Philharmonic Society as an orchestra. Previous accounts thus far have consisted only of praises for the prestigious group and its illustrious conductor. This performance, however, must have been especially unsatisfying. Indeed, even Dwight’s Journal, while also stating its negative opinion of the music, spoke of an uninspired performance:

The orchestral music of Liszt, with the best interpretation, is sufficiently obscure to satisfy most people, but when performed by the Philharmonic Orchestra it is hopelessly mixed, and we can only suspect what is made clear to us by the performance of a band of such consummate skill as the Thomas Orchestra, namely, that this gorgeous web of involved harmony and wealth of instrumentation serve only to cover a lack of melodic invention.  

Although not as scathing as examples we have previously encountered, the review accuses Liszt of not being a prolific melodist and masking this flaw behind dense harmonic textures and an elaborate orchestration—an all-too common attack by this point.

In 1868, a restaurant and open-air beer garden with a small informal auditorium opened at the heart of New York City. Central Park Garden, as it was called, quickly became one of the most fashionable and popular attractions for the members of the high society. For eight consecutive seasons, each four months long, Theodore Thomas and his orchestra performed daily at Central Park Garden. These concerts became a landmark in the musical life of the

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107 Dwight’s Journal of Music, March 4, 1876.

108 Ezra Schabas, Theodore Thomas, 37.
city.\textsuperscript{109} Initially intended to feature light music, the Central Park Garden Concerts soon became an avenue for Thomas to introduce the New York public to the works of modern composers. The 1872 series alone featured no fewer than six symphonic poems by Liszt.\textsuperscript{110} By the end of his eight-year tenure at the Garden, Thomas had performed a total of 1127 concerts—an extraordinary figure by any standard. It is at the Central Park Garden Concerts that Liszt’s *Heroïde funèbre* and *Hunnenschlacht* received their American premieres under Thomas’s baton. Regrettably, because of the fairly informal nature of these daily concerts, newspapers did not cover them in any substantial way or provide reviews of the works performed. For this reason, there exist no accounts of the premieres of *Heroïde funèbre* or *Hunnenschlacht*. The latter of these two symphonic poems, however, received a number of other performances at different venues in subsequent years. This is not the case for *Heroïde funèbre*.\textsuperscript{111}

*Hunnenschlacht*—the last of Liszt’s symphonic poems from the Weimar period—is perhaps one of the most explicit of these compositions. The work’s inspiration is a painting by Wilhelm von Kaulbach of the same name (*The Battle of the Huns*), which illustrates a battle between the pagan hordes of Attila the Hun and the armies of Christian Emperor Theodoric.\textsuperscript{112} The programmatic

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} *Orpheus* (June 20); *Festklänge* (August 1); *Heroïde funèbre* (August 8); *Hunnenschlacht* (September 12); *Les Preludes* (September 22); *Tasso* (November 22).

\textsuperscript{111} I was not able to trace any other performances of *Heroïde funèbre* until August 8, 1886—when Thomas performed it as part of a “Liszt Memorial Concert” commemorating the composer’s death days earlier.

\textsuperscript{112} Alan Walker, *The Weimar Years*, 311-312.
elements are very clear to the listener with an informal acquaintance of the piece’s program. A hymn, *Crux fidelis*, which Liszt believed to be a Gregorian chant, serves to depict the forces of Christianity, while a so-called “Battle-cry motive” represents the barbaric camp. The introduction of an organ in the instrumentation further emphasizes the religious connotations. After premiering *Hunnenschlacht* at the Central Park Garden Concerts on September 12, 1872, Theodore Thomas performed the work again three months later at Steinway Hall. The initial reception of this symphonic poem was generally favorable as best evidenced by the *New York Tribune* review:

The second part of the concert opened with one of Liszt’s latest symphonic poems, *Die Hunnenschlacht* (*The Battle of the Huns*), founded upon and suggested by one of six fresco paintings in the Imperial Museum at Berlin by Kaulbach. Mr. Thomas played it once before in this city at the Central Park Garden Concerts last summer. It needs not be said that the performance of such a work, heard in a good concert hall, produces upon the mind a far different impression. The Hunnenschlacht improves vastly by repeated hearings and may be classed as perhaps one of the most easily understood of Liszt’s poems. The picture and poem represent the wars of the barbarians against the early Christians, the struggle of Christianity against Idolatry and the final triumph of Christianity. Liszt through the phases of his latter life is enabled to do justice to such a sublime subject. The Christian chorale (Gregorian tone) in this symphony is gloriously worked, and the very appropriate introduction by Liszt of the organ as an orchestral instrument negates Berlioz’s theory, or what should be called, perhaps, his prejudice, that an organ is an instrument not to be introduced in orchestral writing. The chorale is first given out boldly by the brass—trumpets, horns, etc. When finally Christianity is the victor, the organ takes up the chant, beautifully harmonized, the orchestra repeating the antiphonal, as between choir and the great congregation. The listener is not prepared for the wonderful effects.

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113 For the premiere of *Hunnenschlacht* in Central Park Garden—an open-air setting—Thomas must have performed the work in its alternative orchestration, which Liszt created to accommodate performances in venues without an organ.

The reviewer acknowledges the inherent clarity of this work and succeeds in providing a very accurate account of its program and the musical devices used to represent it. We might assume that an explanatory note, or perhaps Liszt’s own preface, was included with the program booklet for this performance. It is not hard to imagine how *Hunnenschlacht*, with its startling orchestral effects and exciting musical depictions of battle, generated a positive reaction from both critic and audience. Interestingly, while this critic thought that *Hunnenschlacht* “improves vastly by repeated hearings,” the critic of the *New York Herald*, six years later, thought exactly the opposite:

> The Liszt number, *The Battle of the Huns*, does not grow in favor upon further hearing. It proves to be too complex, too fanciful, and the almost continuous introduction of the cymbals palls upon the ear. The scoring is the work of a master, but it lacks the inspiring touch of genius, and the work, as a whole, is not be compared to the composer’s *Les Preludes* or his *Lamento e Trionfo [Tasso]*.\footnote{115 *New York Herald*, November 24, 1878.}

This negative review, while not particularly brutal, is out of character for the *New York Herald* at this point in time. The critic’s attacks are the same we have heard over and over: masterful instrumentation but not the work of a genius. Additionally, this critic believes the work to be too complex—admittedly, a claim we have encountered less often. We might conclude that either the *Herald* employed two music critics at this time with drastically different views on modern music, or that the seemingly progressive critic we know from previous reviews genuinely did not like *Hunnenschlacht*. Both present plausible scenarios, yet the former seems more likely. A third possibility is that an entirely new critic now worked for the newspaper.
The *New York Tribune* also printed an article about that very same performance. More an account of the piece than a discussion of its musical quality, the review presented a largely positive report:

Liszt’s symphonic poem, *The Battle of the Huns*, has not been performed in New York for six years, and we do not know if it has ever been played more than twice, both times under the direction of Theodore Thomas. It was inspired by a cartoon of Kaulbach’s, which depicts the triumph of Christianity over the barbarian hordes; the “battle” to which it refers is therefore the struggle of paganism against the gospel. The voice of the conflict is interrupted from time to time in the course of the stirring composition by the pealing organ which intones a Gregorian chant, and it is with solemn organ harmonies that the poem closes. … The performance of the band in this piece … was earnest and in general very creditable.\(^{116}\)

Through later years, the work continued to be, for the most part, successful. After an 1882 concert, one critic raved that “the symphonic poem made a thrilling close”\(^{117}\) to the program. Finally, by 1885, the critic for the *New York Times* acknowledged the effectiveness of the piece and attributed this to the work’s “intelligibility of purpose and distinctness of outline,” stating:

The rehearsal was brought to a close with *Die Hunnenschlacht*, an exemplar of “programme music” intended to illustrate, like Kaulbach’s fresco painting in Berlin, the struggle of barbarism against Christianity, and the final triumph of the latter. This composition, which has often been given in New York, possesses over many works of a similar character the advantages of intelligibility of purpose and distinctness of outline. The instrumentation—often suggestive of portions of the *Ritt der Walküren*—is of the familiar richness and vividness, and although the broad stream of the last chorale comes as a happy relief from the gloom and clangor of the passages illustrative of the barbarian hordes, the most *tourmenté* music preceding it is not too confusing or deafening. *Die Hunnenschlacht* was very effectively interpreted by the orchestra.\(^{118}\)

\(^{116}\) *New York Tribune*, November 23, 1878.

\(^{117}\) *New York Tribune*, January 8, 1882.

\(^{118}\) *New York Times*, March 28, 1885.
In 1873, by performing *Hamlet*, Theodore Thomas accomplished the feat of presenting all of Liszt’s symphonic poems and programmatic symphonies to US audiences.\(^{119}\) It is worth noting that Liszt himself never managed to do this in Europe. Even more significant is the fact that *Hamlet* received its world premiere in the United States. All modern scholarly sources have hitherto indicated that the first performance of *Hamlet* took place in Sonderhausen, Germany, on July 2, 1876, under the direction of Max Erdmannsdörfer.\(^{120}\) However, conclusive proof presented here for the first time reveals that Theodore Thomas performed the symphonic poem three years earlier at Steinway Hall on March 29, 1873.\(^{121}\)

Although the event received minimal coverage in the press, the sole surviving review from the *New York Tribune* provides an extensive and detailed report. In addition to *Hamlet*, the program included Beethoven’s *Triple Concerto*, Schumann’s *Genoveva Overture*, part of Berlioz’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and a symphony by Raff. The review, characterized by a rather malicious wit, is particularly scathing:

What shall we say of Liszt’s *Hamlet*? Mr. Thomas may have had either of two purposes in presenting it. It was the only important orchestral work of Liszt’s which had never been heard in New York (indeed we believe it had never been played anywhere), and there was a sort of satisfaction in rounding off our experience of the most eccentric of composers. Or Mr. Thomas may have produced it as a great practical joke—and we are rather inclined to suspect that such was his intention. Nothing that we have had before approaches it in melancholy extravagance. In the wildest of Liszt’s music we can generally trace a vein of poetry, but we can trace

\(^{119}\) Thomas performed *Hungaria* on January 11, 1873, but no meaningful review of the performance exists.

\(^{120}\) This is the information given in *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Alan Walker’s Liszt biography, and every other scholarly source that deals with the piece.

\(^{121}\) Facsimiles of an advertisement and a review of this performance are reproduced in Appendix B, figures 1 and 2.
nothing of the sort here. It is a series of perplexed and hesitating modulations, wandering through the mazes of doubt and inquiry and never coming to a solution—a succession of inchoate phrases perpetually stopping to ask themselves the question, to be or not to be, and never getting an answer. A faint attempt at applause at the end of the piece was instantly suppressed by a counter demonstration, and Mr. Thomas acknowledged both with a most quizzical countenance.122

The reviewer acknowledges, albeit hesitantly, that the performance is a world premiere. His criticism of the work, however, is similar to Hanslick’s remarks about *Prometheus*: “a constant searching and not finding.”123 Perhaps most telling about this review is the report of the audience reaction. If we are to believe this critic, the piece was thoroughly unsuccessful. However, in the history of Liszt reception, it is not unusual for two critics reviewing the same concert to provide sharply contradicting accounts. Such was the case with an 1858 Liszt concert in Berlin. While some newspapers reported thunderous applause, one critic still preferred to write of “a very energetic opposition.”124 Unfortunately—at least in the numerous digitized archives I have searched—there exist no other reviews of this *Hamlet* performance for comparison.

The modern Liszt scholar might also be surprised to learn that *Hamlet* was not the only Liszt orchestral work to receive its world premiere in the United States. In 1876, following the death of Carl Bergmann, the New York Philharmonic Society appointed Leopold Damrosch as its conductor for the 1876-

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122 *New York Tribune*, March 31, 1873.

123 See page 45.

The year afterward, Damrosch received from Liszt the manuscript of his unpublished symphonic poem, *Le triomphe funèbre du Tasse*. With a superb orchestra under his command, Damrosch set out to give the world premiere of this unperformed symphonic poem, which Liszt had dedicated to him. He programmed the work to follow *Tasso*, as the epilogue it was intended to be.

The performance received reasonable coverage in the press and a generally warm reception. John R. G. Hassard of the *New York Tribune*, by now a staunch Liszt supporter, called the symphonic poem "one of the remarkable works of the day." His lengthy review of the performance is exceptional for its high praise of the composer:

> The feature of the concert was the new symphonic poem by Liszt. Any fresh orchestral work by this great master deserves the most careful consideration, and the *Funeral Triumph of Tasso* has a special interest for us because the composer sends it in manuscript to the conductor of our Philharmonic Society before it has been heard anywhere in Europe. ... The manner in which he uses a short and simple phrase to depict all the varied emotions and incidents of this story, melancholy longings, love, madness, and finally a transfiguration of triumph, can hardly be praised too highly. It is the work of a master of the orchestra and of a true poet. ... In unity of sentiment, poetic feeling, and ingenuity and novelty of modulation, it is certainly one of the remarkable works of the day, and it is also one of the very best illustrations of that peculiar method of developing and elaborating a musical idea which Liszt originated in his symphonic poems. The triumph which we are invited to witness in this composition is what its name imports, a triumph deeply tinged with sorrow, and nothing could be finer than the delicacy with which even the strongest lights of the picture are suffused with somber tints.\(^{126}\)

After this premiere, Liszt's symphonic poems received increasingly fewer performances. In the 1879-1880, 1883-1884, and 1890-1891 seasons of the New


\(^{126}\) *New York Tribune*, March 26, 1877.
York Philharmonic Society the orchestra programmed no works by the composer.¹²⁷ According to Mueller, American audiences—which had a greater predilection for opera than for instrumental music—inevitably grew bored with the repeated performances of Liszt's orchestral works.¹²⁸ The death in 1876 of Carl Bergmann—one of the most prominent Liszt champions—did not help the situation. Also during this period, Liszt himself turned his attention to sacred music and produced pieces that were less accessible to the public. These works also reached the New World, however, and their American reception presents a fascinating case in the next chapter of this study.


¹²⁸ Ibid, 59.
Chapter 4

Symphonies and Oratorios – Faust Symphony, Dante Symphony, The Legend of Saint Elisabeth and Christus

In the 1850s, during a time when Liszt was composing his symphonic poems and experimenting with orchestral idioms, he wrote two multi-movement programmatic symphonies: one based on the legend of Faust, and the other based on Dante’s La Divina Commedia. By common consent, the Faust Symphony is Liszt’s towering achievement from the Weimar period, comparable only to the B-Minor Sonata. A radical and innovative work, the symphony begins hauntingly with a descending motive built out of arpeggiated augmented chords, which uses all the notes of the chromatic scale. Some scholars have interpreted this gesture as perhaps the first twelve-tone row in music history. It is not difficult to imagine how this motive, completely devoid of a tonal center, might have shocked 19th-century audiences. Indeed, the symphony received both harsh criticism and high praise from Liszt’s contemporaries in Europe. In the United States the critic’s response was notoriously negative. In fact, finding positive reviews has proven nearly impossible. Regardless, the thorough examination of these critiques presented here for the first time reveals much about Liszt’s reputation in the United States, the nation’s musical tastes, and the state of 19th-century American musical criticism.

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Not surprisingly, Carl Bergmann introduced both of Liszt’s symphonies to American audiences. The premiere of the *Faust Symphony* took place on May 23, 1863 at Irving Hall in New York. This performance received considerable attention particularly from *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, which published two reviews by different correspondents. As expected, the critiques were primarily unfavorable, but both merit close examination. The first presented a fascinating case:

On Saturday evening last Carl Bergmann gave a concert and introduced Liszt's *Faust Symphony*. This was the first performance of this composition in America, and, judging from the universal on-dit, its repetition will not be solicited save from mere curiosity. ... Even a Mendelssohn enthusiast of the German School pronounced it wild, disjointed, and unsatisfactory. A succession of angular sounds; a sort of chaotic mass, no melody distinguishable; a labored seeking but never finding—in fact bewildering and beyond description. How much sweeter and how charming was the Schumann Concerto in A minor, and Wagner’s *Lohengrin* with Berlioz’s *Carnaval Romain* as a finale!\(^{131}\)

Once again an American critic reused Hanslick’s remarks about *Prometheus*: “a labored seeking but never finding.”\(^{132}\) The resemblance between the two reviews, however, goes further and borders on plagiarism. At the 1860 performance of *Prometheus*, which Hanslick reviewed, a Mozart symphony followed the Liszt composition in the program. Commenting on the effect of the Liszt-Mozart juxtaposition, Hanslick exclaimed that, after *Prometheus*, listening to Mozart was “as if a window were suddenly swung open and fragrant spring air rushed into the stifling, oppressive hall.”\(^{133}\) The critic for *Dwight’s Journal* used essentially the

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\(^{131}\) *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, May 30, 1863.

\(^{132}\) Eduard Hanslick, *Die Presse*, March 1, 1860.

\(^{133}\) Ibid.
same analogy. There is, however, one striking difference between the rhetoric of both writers. Whereas Hanslick used a Classical master to contrast against Liszt, the American critic used two other members of the New German School. Although other reviews have pointed to a resistance to the “Music of the Future” in general, the attack here was aimed at Liszt alone. However, when we discover that the critic was practically quoting Hanslick, the review inevitably loses authority.

The other anonymous critic, we might assume, was more honest in his assessment. He devotes the first part of the review to an amusing explanation of what modern music is:

The most interesting concert of the past two weeks was that given by Mr. Carl Bergmann on Saturday evening last, at Irving Hall. The programme consisted almost exclusively of what old people call “future music”—that is, music by composers yet living, or not yet cold enough in their graves to have become “classic.”

Liszt’s “Faust” Symphony was the feature, performed here for the first time. The whole work is too “long drawn out”, not always in “linked sweetness”; it consists of three movements … In programme music, one naturally expects to hear the poetic subject very clearly presented; but although Liszt has successfully embodied Mephisto in the closing movement, which is malicious, witty, diabolic with a will,—the musical Faust is uncharacterized—and as to Gretchen! Liszt brings before us from the cradle to the grave, apparently, yet his Gretchen is but an insipid servant maid.134

What is most unusual about this particular review is that the critic seems to have no problem with program music at all. He takes issue instead with the symphony itself and its inadequate representations of the characters in the Faust legend. He considers successful only the last movement—Liszt’s musical depiction of

Mephistopheles. As Michael Saffle has asserted, Liszt was often at his best when it came to diabolical music,\textsuperscript{135} and, remarkably, the critic recognizes this.

In the early 1860s, before John R. G Hassard assumed his position as chief music critic of the \textit{New York Tribune}, the newspaper had strong anti-Liszt sentiments. Accordingly, the premiere of the \textit{Faust Symphony} did not receive a favorable review:

> The special novelty of the evening was Liszt's symphony \textit{Faust}. The original printer-devil has been variously blackened in musical notation ... But we think if \textit{Faust} is to be represented by the anti-melodic school, Liszt has succeeded; for anything more ghastly and uninteresting it is not possible to conceive. Liszt is magnificent as a pianist,—as a transcriber of opera-pieces for the piano—but as a melodist he is worse than bad. \textit{Poeta nascitur non fit}. The ambitious character of the music does not save it from being disjointed, and empty. Melody is the soul of music: the orchestra is but a large voice—for all instrumental music derives its charm from its likeness to the human voice, and not to the grunt of a pig or the chirrup of a bird: and when this philosophy of music is overlooked, we have the new “broken-crockery” school as it is aptly termed.\textsuperscript{136}

Here the critic emphasizes the common idea that Liszt is only great as an interpreter and transcriber of works by other composers but possesses no creative genius of his own. “A poet is born, not made” is the meaning of the Latin phrase the reviewer quotes. Besides this claim, however, the only concrete flaw in the piece that the critic is able to cite is that it lacks melody. Surely, to nineteenth-century ears the near-atonal theme of the first movement must have been bewildering. However, to accuse the work of being “uninteresting” hardly seems possible to justify. I have not yet encountered the phrase “new broken

\textsuperscript{135} Michael Saffle, “Orchestral Works,” 263.

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{New York Tribune}, May 25, 1863.
crockery school” anywhere else. Whether this had indeed become a common defamatory name for the New German School I cannot assert.

The Faust Symphony received another performance the following year. Surprisingly, this time, Dwight’s Journal produced a much more balanced assessment. We also learn from this report the opinion expressed by the Musical Review. It is curious that the critic appears unaware that the work had received its premiere the previous year:

The third Philharmonic Concert wore a very “future” or “new school” complexion. Liszt’s Faust Symphony occupied the first part, being given here for the first time. … The work had the advantage of Carl Bergmann’s able direction, as did the rest of the concert, and seems to have pleased many; the Musical Review is even enthusiastic about it and thinks the motivo that portrays Gretchen as beautiful as any of the melodies in Beethoven’s Adagios!

This assessment might be the first and only favorable review of a Liszt work printed in Dwight’s Journal. In addition to reporting a warm response from the audience, the critic goes as far as to quote a positive opinion of the work by another publication. There is hardly a need to mention that the comparison to Beethoven by the Musical Review is as high a compliment as Liszt could have received.

On March 23, 1874, two days after a performance of the Faust Symphony by the Theodore Thomas Orchestra, the New York Herald devoted an entire column to a review of the work. The extensive report, reproduced below, is worthy of consideration:

In the production of a work like the Faust Symphony of Liszt Mr. Thomas does a good service to the music. He strips off the disguises which the disciples of the “music of the future” throw around it by learned

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137 Dwight’s Journal of Music, February 20, 1864.
disquisitions and elaborate theories, and exposes it in all its grotesqueness and deformities. ... A wilder, more incoherent and more thoroughly audacious composition has never been submitted to any audience. It seems more like the phantasmagoria of a disordered mind than anything else. Yet there are some interesting features in it, the principal one being the wonderful instrumental effects to be found in every number. There is one little theme particularly that runs through the work and is presented at the most unexpected places, always in a different form. But the general tenor of the music is unhealthy. Strange effects, fragmentary phrases and chaotic thoughts do not constitute music. The performance was absolutely perfect, and, considering the enormous technical difficulties of the composition, no higher compliment could be paid to his orchestra. Still it seemed akin to desecration of the talents of the noble band to give them a work which is fitter for Charenton than Steinway Hall. The glorious Fifth Symphony in C minor of Beethoven was like “the balm of Gilead” after Liszt.\footnote{\textit{New York Herald}, March 23 1874.}

Here the critic acknowledges the use of a technique akin to \textit{leitmotif}, as well as the masterful orchestration, which no reports ever fail to recognize.\footnote{Authorities on the subject have also recognized Liszt’s orchestral mastery—most notably R. Strauss, who added examples from \textit{Mazappa} and the \textit{Dante Symphony} in his edition of Berlioz’s \textit{Treatise on Instrumentation} (Ex. 6, 53 & 104).} However, in addition to the usual negative remarks about the music, this reviewer introduces for the first time personal attacks against Liszt himself. For instance, when the critic mentions that the work is “like the phantasmagoria of a disordered mind” and that it is more fit for a lunatic asylum\footnote{Charenton—the place that the critic mentions—was a noted mental asylum founded in France in 1645.} than the concert hall, he unashamedly implies that the composer is mentally unstable. Resorting to a version of the Hanslick analogy, the reviewer also expresses that—after Liszt—the Beethoven symphony acted like a healing ointment on a wound. Interestingly enough, at the end of the review he reports an enthusiastic response from the audience—thus implying that the work was in fact successful: “Mr. Thomas was
called out repeatedly by the unanimous voice of the audience, and bowed his acknowledgements amid the wildest enthusiasm."

On April 7, 1877 Theodore Thomas and his orchestra performed the *Faust Symphony* at Steinway Hall once again. The reviews of this concert by the *New York Herald* and the *New York Tribune* are fascinating examples, the first of which reads:

The first "picture" (that of Faust) is very much the least interesting of the three [movements]; in fact, the only distinct impression left on one's mind at its conclusion is that made by a prominent trombone motion, occurring near the close of the movement, and largely used in the two succeeding. The second "picture" (Gretchen) contains many passages of great beauty and originality, but the finest and most thoroughly descriptive of all is the last (Mephistopheles). Here is a field in which Liszt is perfectly at home. The wild, the bizarre, the demonic flow easily from his pen; here he can revel in those fantastic changes, those strange modulations, those broken snatches of melody—ever commenced and never finished—in which he so delights. … This symphony was finely—indeed, considering the immense difficulties in the score, one might say wonderfully—played.¹⁴¹

This review by the *New York Herald* bears some resemblance to one printed in *Dwight's Journal* after the work’s premiere.¹⁴² Like in the earlier assessment, the critic here recognizes the effectiveness of the last movement and Liszt’s ability to depict diabolical subjects in music. Interestingly, those elements that critics have tended to find objectionable—strange modulations and fragmentary melodies—are apparently perfectly appropriate if used to represent a demonic figure. Neither reviewer considered the *Faust* movement particularly remarkable.

The report by the *Tribune* is considerably more favorable. John R. G. Hassard, the review’s likely author, had by this point established his position as

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¹⁴¹ *New York Herald*, April 8, 1877.

¹⁴² See page 63.
an avid Liszt supporter. The style and tone of his account are consistent with previous reviews by the newspaper and the cordial interview with the composer discussed earlier in this study. Hassard proclaims that the *Faust Symphony* is “the grandest in design of all of Liszt’s orchestral works”¹⁴³ and, although it has generated great controversy, he proposes:

No candid judge will deny that in profound feeling, intellectual force, and vast musical scholarship, it has hardly few parallels in the productions of this generation … vague aspiration and bitter disappointment cry out from the broken melody, but through the whole, like the better tendency which is to save Faust after all, runs a clear sentiment of beauty, as if the discords and disjointed fragments were gradually shaping themselves into harmonious forms. … “Gretchen” offers an astonishing contrast to the impressive movement that precedes it. Here a variety of solo instruments are treated, singly or together, in the most exquisite manner, and two tender melodies in particular, breathing gentle melancholy and simple love, are heard in the most beautiful combinations and most fascinating forms. The last movement, “Mephistopheles,” is a diabolical scherzo, which … mixes up a nightmare of mocking reminiscences, and is finally overcome by the triumph of the good principle¹⁴⁴

One element on which the critics from the *Herald* and the *Tribune* agree is that the work is of unprecedented difficulty. We might assume, based on these remarks, that the reviewers attended the performance with score in hand. More than any of the symphonic poems, the complexities in the symphony evidently took both writers aback. The *Herald* critic focused on the challenges faced by the conductor:

No one can have any conception of the magnitude of the task a conductor undertakes when he attacks this work unless one has seen the *partitur*. Even the merely mechanical duty of beating the time is made as difficult as possible by continual changes; now three in a measure, now two, now

¹⁴³ *New York Tribune*, April 9, 1877.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid.
five, now four; and these changes occur not at intervals of ten or twenty
pages of the orchestral score, but every few measures! 145

The Tribune went farther:

The difficulties of the work are enormous. Perhaps there is no
composition in existence which exacts so much of the conductor and
keeps the orchestra upon such a long and severe strain. Every instrument
in the band is taxed to the utmost. The rhythm is constantly changing in
the most eccentric manner at the most unexpected times. 146

After this concert, the Faust Symphony continued to receive performances during
the 1880s, yet opinions of the work did not change too drastically. Dwight’s
Journal remained firmly antagonistic until its very last year of publication. The
journal’s final review of the symphony declared the work “bewildering,” and
“positively ugly.” Additionally, according to the critic, the experience of listening to
it was “depressing, wearisome and most unedifying.” 147

In 1880, Henry Edward Krehbiel assumed the position of music critic for
the New York Tribune. By the end of his 43-year tenure, he had established a
reputation as the country’s most prominent music critic. His colleague Richard
Aldrich of the New York Times explained Krehbiel’s influence most eloquently in
an article published after Krehbiel’s death:

He was the leading musical critic of America; and, indeed, it is not too
much to say that he had set musical criticism in the United States on a
plane that it had never occupied before, in respect of technical
knowledge, breadth and penetration of view, critical faculty and power of
expression. 148

145 New York Herald, April 8, 1877.
146 New York Tribune, April 9, 1877.
147 Dwight’s Journal of Music, January 1, 1881.
When Wagner’s operas received their first performances at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1880s, Krehbiel’s reviews were highly influential and did much to win the New York public to an appreciation and love of Wagner.\(^{149}\) However, unlike Hassard—his predecessor—Krehbiel had reservations about Liszt’s music. His review of an 1884 performance of the *Faust Symphony* presents a carefully calculated and balanced assessment of the work, characteristic of the critic’s style. Interestingly, like the author of an 1858 review of *Les Preludes* from the *New York Musical World*,\(^{150}\) Krehbiel finds the *Faust Symphony* more intellectual than expressive:

> The symphony received an admirable reading. Whatever of eloquence in its passages was published to the listeners in a manner the brilliancy and vigor of which were not seriously impaired by a few technical mishaps. The purposes of the composer at least were clearly and entirely set forth. That the reception given the music was not enthusiastic is to be laid at the door of the composition. It is unquestionably the extremest product of Liszt’s poetic system, and no one fully acquainted with the aims of the composer and imbued with those philosophical principles which the thinking world agrees in finding personified in the three chief characters of Goethe’s tragedy can listen to it unmoved. But there is no denying that except in the second movement, the appeal which the symphony makes is much more to the intellectual faculty than to the emotions.\(^{151}\)

The *Dante Symphony* received its American premiere under Carl Bergmann on April 2, 1870. The work endured great resistance and received some of the harshest criticism of any Liszt composition performed in the United States. It is not hard to imagine, however, how Liszt’s vivid depiction of Hell and Purgatory might have shocked and even offended 19\(^{th}\)-century critics. Indeed, the work

\(^{149}\) Ibid.

\(^{150}\) See page 16.

proved too crude and literal for reviewers who expected sublime representations of even the darkest subjects. While program music proponents might have argued that Liszt succeeded in depicting the horrors inherent in his subject, a majority of American critics considered the *Dante Symphony* a work that overstepped the boundaries of art. The reviews of the premiere set the tone for virtually all subsequent critiques of the work. The article printed in *Dwight’s Journal* seemed to reach a new level in scathing comments and defamation:

> The music of Liszt to Dante’s “Hell” and “Purgatory” is to our thinking the worst that the composers of this school can do. We are thankful to believe that in this symphony they have run their course to its very end and exhausted their powers of perversion. Having lived through the hour of agony during which this Symphony lasted, and escaped with reason not overturned, we can safely bid defiance to Liszt, Wagner, and their fellow madmen of the school of the future. The principle on which this musical monstrosity was constructed was evidently to find out precisely what effects the best composers had made use of to produce lovely and satisfying results, and to reverse them. It was like playing one of Beethoven’s symphonies backward. … We know of nothing better calculated to call the obdurate to repentance than this work of Liszt’s, for if any person could fully be brought to realize that his punishment hereafter would consist in being compelled forever to listen to the symphony that we heard for an hour on Saturday night, there is, we venture to say, no man living bold enough to contemplate unmoved such a doom, or who would not at once take measure to be rescued from so terrible a fate.  

The review is merely an example of words masterfully manipulated to express a very extreme stance—and as such, it is certainly effective. Yet, beyond the slanderous prose, the review makes no concrete references to the music, or engages in any meaningful discussion of aesthetic issues—in short, it carries no content at all. Although deciphering the identity of its author poses challenges, William Foster Apthorp emerges as a very likely possibility. Apthorp, who worked

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152 *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, April 23, 1870.
for Dwight’s Journal and other notable Boston papers in the 1870s, was known for his conservative views on music and very sharp tongue. So extreme was his attitude that he once referred to Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony as “obscene.” The tone and style of Apthorp’s writings are consistent with the review of the Dante Symphony quoted and make a compelling case for the attribution of authorship.

In much the same vein, the critic for the Herald expressed great disdain for the piece:

Liszt's Dante Symphony is the craziest thing in music that ever emanated from a human brain. It may last for some time before the public as a curiosity, as a melancholy example of a great intellect at sea without compass or rudder, but all true musicians will repudiate such machine music at once. Pray, Mr. Bergmann, let us have no more of it. Hell is bad enough, but nothing can be more excruciating to the ear of a musician than this frenzied attempt of Liszt to portray its horrors in music.

Even John R. G. Hassard of the Tribune, clearly torn, was unable to praise the symphony with his usual enthusiasm:

The Liszt Symphony had been awaited with greatest interest by critics and connoisseurs for it is acknowledged to be one of the master’s grandest and most highly finished productions, remarkable not so much for bold effect and broad treatment of unusual combinations, as for severe scientific study and the solution of gravest difficulties of counterpoint. To the select few who can delight in the unraveling of musical tangles and appreciate a composer’s triumph over obstacles of his own creating, this symphony is an engrossing subject of contemplation—nay, it is an impressive and in some places an inspiring poem. To the less highly educated lover of music it is, however, comparatively unattractive, and, of all Liszt's orchestral works we have heard, it is the least likely to please a miscellaneous audience. … We do not believe that Dante’s immortal verses will ever be wedded to more beautifully descriptive music. … Listening to the performance on Saturday

153 Mark N. Grant, Maestros of the Pen, 71.

154 For examples of Apthorp’s writings see Mark N. Grant, Maestros of the Pen, 69-72.

155 New York Herald, April 3, 1870.
night, the plaintive phrases seemed too vague, and the iterations, however interesting as a study of counterpoint, became monotonous. Remembered afterwards, the impression becomes awful.\(^{156}\)

After a performance of the *Dante Symphony* in 1873, the critic for the *New York Herald* prefaced his review by declaring that “the popular verdict, as well as that of every reasoning musician, is that [Liszt's orchestral] music has decidedly an unhealthy tendency.”\(^{157}\) With regard to the *Dante Symphony* specifically, the reviewer wrote:

> [In the Dante Symphony] of course, one must expect, quoting from the words of the programme, “everlasting curses” … but let the subject be what it may, its illustration in music should be at least conformable with the very fundamental principles of the divine art. But Liszt reduces the orchestra to chaos and makes it very unpleasant.\(^{158}\)

The critic believed the symphony’s choral finale to be the only interesting part of the work, yet asserted that Liszt had “stolen” the idea from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. In a notoriously dismissive review, the writer for the *Evening Post*—a once decidedly pro-Liszt newspaper—reduced the work to mere technical terms:

> No one can gather the slightest gleam of intelligence from such a mass of incongruous harmony. The whole is one eternal round of play with sounds, based upon a resolution of the chord of the seventh of the second species in its third inversion, with major fourth, augmented third, superfluous fifth, minor seventh, resolving on a chord of the eleventh, and such like progressions.\(^{159}\)

On November 13, 1875, Theodore Thomas programmed the *Dante Symphony* for the first concert of his orchestra’s ninth season. By this point, opinions of the


\(^{157}\) *New York Herald*, March 17, 1873.

\(^{158}\) Ibid.

\(^{159}\) *Evening Post*, March 17, 1873.
work had slightly improved. The eloquent review by John R. G. Hassard declared the work “one of the most splendid monuments of the modern romantic school.” In an effort to present a balanced assessment, Hassard discussed the common criticisms of the piece:

The most obvious objection to the symphony is that it deals with two subjects hardly susceptible to musical treatment. … A second objection is one which applies to all or nearly all Liszt's greater orchestral works. Namely, that he does not reach an expression of his ideal without a somewhat painful and constantly conspicuous art. His poetic perception is extraordinary, but he does not convey the poem at once to our emotional faculties, as Wagner does: he taxes our intellect and keeps our attention overstrained.

Perhaps most interesting about the review is Hassard’s observation that the reception of the symphony has changed over time:

We can remember that when it was first produced by the Philharmonic Society, between six and seven years ago, it was barely tolerated. Three years and a half ago it was played again and met with a little more favor. Thomas gave it on Saturday night with a beauty of expression and magnificence of effect which the Philharmonic Society was very far indeed from attaining, and his audience listened with a profound stillness more eloquent than any applause.

Most surprisingly, Dwight’s Journal avoided lengthy commentary about aesthetic issues and instead devoted its column to a rather technical description of the work. In place of the usual ruthless attacks, the critic simply stated that the symphony is “the work of a man whose talent is great beyond comparison, but in whom that indescribable something called genius is lacking.” The critic of the New York Herald, on the other had, recognized “flashes of genius” in the first

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160 New York Tribune, November 15, 1875.
161 Ibid.
162 Dwight’s Journal of Music, December 11, 1875.
movement but considered the subject matter of the piece and its musical treatment unworthy of admiration:

Dante’s *Inferno* is so filled with horrible imaginings that there is little to admire in bringing into tangible shape, either through the medium of music or speaking canvas. ... [The Symphony] is wild, frenetic and, to some extent, chaotic. The instrumentation contradicts all received notions of art, and its violent contrasts of color, fragmentary phrases ... and constant succession of dissonances are sufficient to shock the nerves of the least sensitive musician. ... The tortures of the damned form an unpleasant subject for a musical composer, but there is no reason why they should be intensified in the orchestra.  

As the majority of reviews have shown, American critics had a fundamental problem with the subject of the *Dante Symphony*. Indeed, for those who were already uneasy about the concept of program music an explicit musical depiction of the horrors of Hell proved practically intolerable. Even Liszt supporters such as John R. G. Hassard refrained from enthusiastic praise and found it challenging to acknowledge the work’s merit. While a number of critics indicated that the subject was simply not suitable for musical representation, William F. Apthorp—in a later assessment of the symphony—suggested that Liszt chose to depict the wrong element of Dante’s masterpiece. Additionally, he explained the inherent impossibility of creating beautiful music using Hell as inspiration, and emphasized the idea that music should idealize:

> What utter crudity of poetic feeling does it not seem to show in the composer, that he should have attempted to take the Dante’s poem almost wholly by the pictorial side? This is just the side of Dante’s *Inferno* which is the most grotesque. ... Poetry is the only art which can fairly deal with such a subject in detail, without being untrue to its own artistic purpose. Horrible things may be even minutely described in very beautiful language, but you can not paint a beautiful picture of them. ... In like manner, you can not represent hideous sounds in beautiful music. Had Liszt been content to overlook physical details and to give us the musical

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163 *New York Herald*, November 12, 1875.
expression of the merely tragic and emotional side of the poem, he would not so have overstepped the boundaries of art. But he has not expressed in music the suffering, the hopelessness, the mental anguish of the damned; he has simply given us a musical picture of the shrieks and groans ... Instead of idealizing Dante’s picture—and music should always idealize—he has done just the opposite, and so realized it (in both senses) that it is simply horrible and offensive.\textsuperscript{164}

Despite his negative opinion of the work, Apthorp acknowledged, albeit disapprovingly, that the audience “applauded like mad.”

Between 1857 and 1858, while still serving as Kapellmeister at the Grand Ducal Court in Weimar, Liszt began composing his oratorio on the legend of Saint Elisabeth. By the time he finished the work in 1862, he had resigned from his post and moved into apartments at the Oratory of the Madonna del Rosario in Rome where, for five years, he lived in near-monastic seclusion.\textsuperscript{165} The oratorio, based on the life of Saint Elisabeth of Hungary, was inspired by a series of frescoes by Moritz von Schwind, created as part of the restoration of the historic Wartburg castle in Eisenach, where Saint Elisabeth had spent part of her life.\textsuperscript{166} Displaying a remarkable command of operatic idioms, orchestration and dramatic timing, the oratorio contains some of Liszt’s very best music and was the most frequently performed of the composer’s works during his lifetime.\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Saint Elisabeth} premiered in August 1865 in Pest at a celebration of the 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the founding of the city’s conservatory. The work was so well


\textsuperscript{165} Howard E. Smither, \textit{A History of the Oratorio, vol. 4: The Oratorio in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 205.

\textsuperscript{166} Smither, 204.

received that another performance had to be arranged one week later.\textsuperscript{168} By the
time the oratorio was brought to the United States five years afterward, multiple
orchestras had performed it to great acclaim in at least six different cities across
Europe.\textsuperscript{169}

The first American performance of a piece from \textit{Saint Elisabeth} took place
on May 7, 1870 at the last concert of the 28\textsuperscript{th} season of the New York
Philharmonic Society. In charge of the concert was Carl Bergmann, who, by that
point, had already conducted the American premieres of the \textit{Faust} and \textit{Dante}
Symphonies and eight of Liszt’s symphonic poems.

After that first performance of the “Chorus of Crusaders” the unsigned
critic from the \textit{New York Herald} wrote:

And then that terrible pest of all musicians, Liszt, came in with a chorus
from his oratorio, \textit{Die Heilige Elisabeth}. … If anything could surpass in
pure musical insanity the Dante symphony of Liszt it would be the
selection from his oratorio played and sung last night. It is the veriest
nonsense that ever entered the human mind on the score of music.
Commencing with a sort of introductory breakdown for the trombones, it
wonders, bellows, strides and indulges in the most extraordinary pranks.
St. Elizabeth of Hungary must have been a martyr, if she suffered one-
half of what the auditors of her musical biography endure whenever they
are compelled to listen to it.\textsuperscript{170}

After commenting on all other pieces in the program, which included Wagner’s
“Meistersinger Chorus,” and Schumann’s Second Symphony, the critic had
words of advice for the Philharmonic Society. For their next season, he urged the
group’s members to “pay more attention to their programmes and have nothing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{169} Budapest (1865); Munich (1866); Prague (1866); Eisenach (1867); Saint Petersburg
(1869); Vienna (1869).
\item \textsuperscript{170} \textit{New York Herald}, May 8, 1870.
\end{itemize}
but first-class music on them.” Liszt, he asserted, should be “entirely thrown overboard, with the exception of his Preludes.”

Although it is hard to imagine a harsher review, The New York Tribune had an even more unfavorable opinion. Rather than evaluating the work on its merits or referring to its aesthetic value, the critic simply dismissed the piece altogether, stating:

But if the Meistersinger chorus was unpleasant, the chorus of crusaders from Liszt’s oratorio of St. Elizabeth was little else than repulsive. Only the most fanatical devotee of the new school could bear it. For our part, we are not willing to call this music.\textsuperscript{171}

Although Hassard had already begun working for the Tribune by this point, it is obvious that he was not the author of this negligent review. This leads us to conclude that the newspaper employed both progressive and conservative music critics at the same, at least during this specific period.

The sensationalist review of the “Chorus of Crusaders” printed in Dwight’s Journal is anything but surprising:

As if to offset the raving of Wagner, Liszt, in his coldest and most uncompromising mood of musical asceticism and melodic barrenness, is introduced on the same programme! We shivered to the bone when we heard those blatant ravings with which the selection from his oratorio of Elizabeth commenced, and listened in a state of blank despair, as the horrors of mechanical, soulless, devil-inspired musical discord multiplied. We looked around and found the same hopelessness, combined with a solid expression of resignation upon every face.\textsuperscript{172}

Much like other critiques already discussed, this review lacks content and it is obvious that its author only sought to scandalize. Yet, despite the overwhelmingly

\textsuperscript{171} New York Tribune, May 8, 1870.

\textsuperscript{172} Dwight’s Journal of Music, May 21, 1870.
negative response to the *Saint Elisabeth* chorus, the Deutsche Liederkranz Society—then considered one of New York’s most important musical organizations—performed the entire oratorio six months later. This first complete performance took place on November 13, 1870 at Liederkranz Hall, under the direction of Agriol Paur. The date of this premiere had hitherto gone undocumented and is acknowledged here for the first time.\(^{173}\) Although some scholars have made mention of the earlier performance of the “Chorus of Crusaders,” all major sources fail indicate the correct date of the American premiere of the complete *Saint Elisabeth* oratorio.

The work in its entirety also did not elicit a positive response from the city’s critics. The *New York Herald* produced a near-slanderous, romanticized review that could hardly be matched:

(\(\text{The Liederkranz Society) attempted last night at their hall, the Herculean task of performing the latest and craziest emanation of the prince of musical lunatics, Franz Liszt. This was his “oratorio” on the legend of St. Elizabeth of Hungary. We know not whether this lady has been canonized a martyr; but if ever she endured half what Liszt has put in her mouth in his oratorio she certainly deserves the title. With the exception of an occasional scrap of melody here and there, which appears like an oasis in a dessert of barren nonsense, the oratorio is the climax of absurdity. It would be needless for us to undertake the onerous task of analyzing such chaos; but we trust that we have heard it for the first and last time. Everything that could be done to make it a success... was done... but there are some things which are impossible, and one of these is to make sense out of the ravings of the demented Abbé. We suppose that as a mosquito is created for some good end so Liszt came into the world and wrote, as a punishment for our manifold sins, or perhaps, to make us appreciate good music the more when we hear it.}\(^{174}\)

\(^{173}\) *First Performances in America till 1900* wrongly denotes 1885 as the year of the American premiere of *Saint Elisabeth* (page 219).

\(^{174}\) *New York Herald*, November 14, 1870.
Implying that Liszt was mentally unstable by referring to him as “the demented Abbé” or “the prince of musical lunatics,” became a favorite defamatory tactic of this particular critic. We recall that four years later he described the *Faust Symphony* as a work more fit for the lunatic asylum than the concert hall.\textsuperscript{175}

The negative backlash against *Saint Elisabeth* had a lasting effect and no other American orchestra performed the work for the next fifteen years. Subsequent performances took place only on commemorative occasions: once in 1886—the year of Liszt's death, and later in 1911—the composer's centennial. By this point, critics had adopted a more conciliatory tone and began to recognize some of the work's virtues. After the 1886 performance by Theodore Thomas and the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the critic from the *Herald* wrote a remarkably insightful review, devoid of the common sensationalism. Noting the remarkable use of operatic idioms and the undeniable influence of Wagner, the reviewer concluded that *Saint Elisabeth* is not an oratorio, but rather, a “music drama in concert form.” His argument is compelling:

Though dealing with a subject that is more or less sacred, *The Legend of Saint Elizabeth* cannot, in the strict sense of the term, be called an oratorio. Nor would a subject so dramatic and so full of human emotions have lent itself to that tedious and rather antiquated form of musical expression. With the insight of a great artist, and one, moreover, who has the courage of his opinions, Liszt felt this. And whatever the world might think or the conservatives in music might write, he broke with old forms, adhering to traditions only when it served his purpose.

While *The Legend of St. Elizabeth* differs in character from most other oratorios, it cannot at the same time be claimed that Liszt created in this instance a new art form, as he did in his symphonic poems. The influence of Wagner is so strong and so apparent that one might call it a music drama in concert form. Take, for instance, the scene in which Elizabeth takes leave of her husband. The manner in which their words of love and

\textsuperscript{175} See page 66.
forebodings are broken in upon by the chorus of crusaders assembled in the courtyard of a castle is plainly the outcome of the finale of the first act of *Tristan and Isolde*. This influence at times takes the form of imitation ... Nevertheless, the score is replete with beautiful passages that are thoroughly Liszt's own. Never for instance, has outraged dignity been so beautifully and at the same time so powerfully expressed in tones as in Elizabeth's music beginning "From Hungary's race imperial."  

Henry E. Krehbiel of the *Tribune* also recognized a certain ambiguity of genre but considered this a flaw:

> Taken as a whole we cannot say that the work impresses us as a deeply inspired composition. It is fragmentary and disconnected as to its book, and its music too, hesitates between the boundaries of opera and oratorio in such a degree that one is at a loss for a satisfactory point of view. When it approaches the operatic side it grows more and more unsatisfactory, and too often when it nears the epical or lyrical, it becomes excessively sentimental.  

Krehbiel's overall opinion of *Saint Elisabeth* was unfavorable and he admitted that while listening to the oratorio “one is tempted to set it down as a sort of musical 'crazy quilt' in which the patches that are worked over and over again with a thousand and one variations are scarcely beautiful enough to have justified their selection in the first instance.” Yet, his assessment was balanced and also acknowledged positives attributes in the work:

> A great deal of ingenuity has been expended in giving color and character to the various personages who take part in the legend, and in every instance with success. ... The inspiring beauty of the first two scenes ... introduce the work most favorably, and there is nothing seriously disappointing until after the "Miracle of the Roses," which marks the musical climax of the score. ... In the pompous celebration of Elizabeth's burial and canonization, Liszt's advocates will recognize beside other admirable qualities a deep spirituality, which must receive prominent consideration wherever an attempt is made to pronounce Liszt as an ecclesiastical composer.

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176 New York Herald, December 18, 1886.

Soon after completing *Saint Elisabeth*, Liszt began work on a four-year-long project, which resulted in the magnum opus of his religious output—the vast oratorio, *Christus*. The monumental work, completed in 1866, is an elaborate depiction of the life of Christ, which lasts about three hours and requires an unusually large orchestra and chorus plus six soloists. According to Paul Merrick, the oratorio is “the greatest musical composition of its time based on the life of Christ.”

In January of 1873—the same year of the world premiere in Weimar—the New York Philharmonic Society performed “The March of the Three Kings” from *Christus* for the first time in the country. The concert took place at the city’s Academy of Music with the orchestra’s long-time music director, Carl Bergmann, on the podium. The critics, who must have still recalled the *Saint Elisabeth* fiasco, were quick to dismiss this piece from Liszt’s newest sacred work. One reviewer in particular admitted “there are pretty effects here and there scattered through the work, but they are apparently purposeless.”

Three years later, on February 28, 1876, the so-called *Christmas Oratorio*—which constitutes the first part of *Christus*—was performed at Steinway Hall in New York. Leopold Damrosch led the combined forces of the Oratorio Society and the Theodore Thomas Orchestra in this important performance. After

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180 *New York Herald*, January 19, 1873.
hearing the first part of *Christus*, the reviewer from *The New York Sun* accused Liszt of charlatanry and insincerity of purpose—a claim critics often made against him but one that was hardly justified in this instance:

Here certainly was an opportunity for some devotional writing if any devotion Liszt had in him that he was capable of expressing through the medium of music. Apparently he had none, for certainly he expressed none. In fact he masquerades with religion as with other things. It is mere matter of costuming as much as his Abbe's dress is. ... [The work] was long and tedious, unrelieved by any indication of genius or by any phrase of genuine and original melody. ... Everything is patchwork—a confused medley of tones and phrases, without symmetry, relation, logical development or sequence. ... If heaven to all his talents had been pleased to add a spark of true genius and a little nobility and sincerity of life and purpose, we might have had a great composer in Liszt. As it is, we have only this strange compound of talent and charlatanry, who, when he tires of the good things of this world and the adulation with which he is surfeited, turns his mind to dressing up some of his fancies in an ecclesiastical garb, and is pleased to believe that in his *Christus* he is giving to the world a devotional work.¹⁸¹

Clearly, the review is rife with envy and resentment. Liszt's own words seem appropriate: “Either the critic is unintelligent, insolent, absurd ... or he is biased, filled with rancor and envy.”¹⁸² Certainly one claim that no one could make against Liszt is that his religious devotion was not sincere. Liszt had been deeply devout all his life, and, in his youth, had even manifested a serious interest in the priesthood.¹⁸³ After finishing *Christus*—by which point he had taken the lower orders of the Catholic Church—Liszt confessed that the oratorio had been “an

¹⁸¹ *New York Sun*, February 28, 1876.
artistic necessity” for him. Nevertheless, at the height of the war against modern music, Liszt could do no right in the eyes of New York critics.

The reviewer from *The Times* attempted to begin his critique diplomatically by admitting that it is “manifestly unjust” to form an opinion about a work like *Christus* after a single hearing. However, he claimed it was impossible to resist the impression of this particular performance—which caused him to conclude that:

Nothing drearier, more meaningless, or more pretentious was ever perpetrated by a man of genius straying after false gods. Neither the Introduction, nor the orchestral Pastorale, nor the monotonous chorus (“Stabat mater speciosa”) nor the wild "Song of the Shepherds at the Cradle" nor the "March of the Kings of the East" revealed an idea or a phrase worth repetition; it is meager praise for such a writer as Liszt to say that the scoring, vocal and instrumental, is admirable, and yet we could discern no other merit in *Christus.*

One last reviewer described the work as an insipid imitation of Handel and Mendelssohn and declared it the most purposeless and pedantic attempt at oratorio ever heard in the city. Finally, the critic concluded “American audiences will never take kindly to such music,” and advised Liszt to “stick to his *Hungarian Rhapsodies.*” Interestingly, some critics came to prefer Liszt’s “shallow” compositions of his early career to his more mature larger-scale works.

The oratorio’s negative reception did not dissuade Damrosch and the Oratorio Society from programming other numbers from *Christus* the following year, and later in 1881. But it was the conductor’s son, Walter Damrosch, who, in

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184 Walker, *The Final Years,* 265.

185 *New York Times,* February 29, 1876.

186 *New York Herald,* February 29, 1876.
1887, conducted the first US performance of the complete *Christus Oratorio* at the Metropolitan Opera House. By this point, one year after Liszt’s death, we witness a noticeable change in the critic’s tone with regards to Liszt’s music. No longer are the reviews bitter and slanderous as they had been in the 1870s. Instead, we find them more insightful and balanced, devoid of romanticized insults and personal attacks—a true testament to the development of musical criticism in the country. But even the most distinguished and respected American music journalists seemed unable to recognize the full merit of a work that scholars today commonly rank among the most important oratorios of the nineteenth century.\(^{187}\) Henry E. Krehbiel, for instance, in a lengthy article about the oratorio, declared that “despite a great deal of beautiful music, *Christus* is a monotonous work” and “inappropriate on the concert stage.”\(^{188}\) William James Henderson of the *New York Times*, on the other hand, described *Christus* rather eloquently as “a very novel and original work … profoundly reverent in thought, curiously imbued with a mystical medieval feeling, and shaped into a perfect organic whole.”\(^{189}\) Beyond this, Henderson refrained from discussing aesthetic issues in greater detail. In his view, the complete appreciation of a religious work of this magnitude is largely a question of sentiment. However, he still acknowledged that:

*Christus* is most impressive through the simple melodiousness and the harmonic richness of parts of the composer’s score. Of the far-fetched and violent music of which so much is found in Liszt’s symphonic poems, there is no trace in this; few numbers are distinguished by what would be


termed a wealth of melody in the sense of the word as used in connection with Handel, Haydn, or Mendelssohn, but a stream of graceful themes, exquisitely harmonized, and now and then so treated as to attain a fine climactic effect, flows on almost continuously.

Walter Damrosch performed *Christus* once again in 1889, but the critics’ opinions remained unchanged. After this performance, *Christus* disappeared from the repertoire, much like *Saint Elisabeth*—which received only sporadic performances after its premiere. It is difficult to assert whether the critics’ overwhelming resistance to Liszt’s oratorios might have accounted for their subsequent neglect. The inherent difficulty of producing works of such magnitude, as well as other factors, might have also played a role. However, the fate of musical compositions, to some extent, depends on the evaluations and opinions of critics. Thus, it is conceivable that the critical reception of Liszt’s oratorios deterred further performances of these works—or at the very least, undermined the basis for their appreciation.
Chapter 5
Conclusions

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the United States emerged as an epicenter for the performance of Liszt’s music. In fact, thanks to the efforts of pioneering conductors, two of Liszt’s symphonic poems received their world premieres in New York.\footnote{\textit{Hamlet} in 1873 (Thomas) and \textit{Le triomphe funèbre du Tasse} in 1877 (Damrosch).} As was the case in Europe, however, Liszt’s music generated great controversy and became the subject of a vast amount of critical literature that filled the pages of music journals and newspapers. The present study is the first comprehensive effort to examine and evaluate this material and present an in-depth account of the critical reception of Liszt’s symphonic and choral works in the United States.

The supremacy of absolute music over programmatic music became a heated topic of contention in Europe during the 1850s. The bitter debate generated an aesthetic schism, which historians later termed “The War of the Romantics.” The works of Liszt in particular, as prototypes of program music, became the main target of brutal criticism by the more conservative side. Although the conflict originated and unfolded in Europe, the American musical reviews of this period reveal that hostility towards Liszt’s music also reached the United States. In fact, American critics were often more adamant about their views and ideals than their European counterparts. John Sullivan Dwight, the founder and editor of the nation’s first major music periodical, emerged as one of Liszt’s most notorious detractors. During its near thirty years of circulation,
Dwight’s *Journal of Music* railed against Liszt more vigorously than any other publication and printed endless reviews that sought to defame the composer and condemn his works. Dwight established the position of his journal early on, and, in his first review of a Liszt work, declared that he would embark on a “crusade” against the so-called Music of the Future.\(^{191}\) In the context of the times, however, Dwight’s seemingly extreme declaration was probably appropriate. In an 1858 review of a Liszt work, for instance, the critic for the German journal *Signale für die musikalische Welt* made a similar statement and explained his reason for doing it:

> In a case like the present, it is infinitely difficult for a reviewer, who should be factionless, to preserve necessary objectivity and impartiality. Indeed, seen in a clear light, it is quite important to declare oneself as determinedly for or against the “Music of the Future” because, on the occasion of things that stand in absolute opposition to all previous opinions about art and are presented as a messianical proclamation of a new era in art, any temporizing, tacking and so forth is inadmissible. In such a case factionlessness would be a weakness and unpardonable tepidity.\(^{192}\)

Publications like the *Boston Post* and *Boston Musical Times*, as well as some notable New York papers joined Dwight in his mission to warn audiences against the “horrors” of Liszt’s music. These antagonistic critics complained, among other things, about painful dissonances, unorthodox modulations and a lack of melody. To a lesser extent, some writers accused Liszt of writing music that was more intellectual than expressive. A majority of reviews also discussed the weaknesses of program music. However, Liszt’s works also found strong

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\(^{191}\) See page 14.

supporters in the press—most notably, the *New York Musical World* and the *Evening Post*.

With the exception of *Dwight’s Journal*, whose stance on Liszt remained unchanged throughout the years, labeling any one publication as pro or anti Liszt poses problems. Indeed, some newspapers changed their views on the composer’s music on more than one occasion. The *New York Herald*, for instance, emerged as decidedly pro-Liszt during a period, only to go back to printing scathing reviews shortly afterwards. The same applies to the *Evening Post*. Evidently, a newspaper’s stance on Liszt depended on the music critic writing for that publication at the time.

All but one of Liszt’s symphonic poems were introduced to American audiences by two German-born conductors who made it their mission to promote the music of modern composers in the United States.¹⁹³ In the championing of Liszt’s orchestral music, the efforts of Carl Bergmann and Theodore Thomas had no parallels. Indeed, Theodore Thomas alone performed more orchestral music by Liszt in America than the composer himself or any of his disciples did in Europe. Liszt became aware of Thomas’ efforts in the 1870s and sent the conductor a letter to thank him for his unwavering support.¹⁹⁴

The American reception of each of Liszt’s symphonic poems varied a great deal. *Les Preludes*, for instance, enjoyed the greatest popularity with the public and received the most performances. *Orpheus* and one specific performance of *Prometheus* were remarkably successful as well. All other

¹⁹³ Carl Zerrahn gave the American premiere of *Festklänge* in 1860.

¹⁹⁴ See page 39.
symphonic poems, however, produced such a wide range of opinions throughout the years that it is impossible to make generalizations. To the critic who understood the extra-musical references and accepted the concept of program music, the symphonic poems usually made favorable impressions. If, on the other hand, the critic had preconceived reservations about Liszt or the music of the New German School, the assessments were decidedly biased. In many instances, critics resorted to quoting the words of Eduard Hanslick, the most notorious anti-Liszt critic in Europe. A favorite attack coined by Hanslick and which American critics reused constantly was that the music embodied a feeling of “constant searching and not finding.” Virtually all reviewers of the period acknowledged that Liszt was a truly great orchestrator. However, they insisted that he lacked creative genius, that his compositions were “empty,” and that they failed to elevate the soul like the works of Classical masters.

Interestingly, Liszt's larger-scale works, and those usually recognized as his greatest achievements, elicited the least favorable response from critics. The *Dante Symphony*, specifically, was the target of some of the harshest criticism of any Liszt work performed in the United States. The symphony’s subject—Dante’s depiction of Hell and Purgatory—was especially problematic for reviewers. Indeed, even critics who had established themselves as Liszt champions struggled to recognize the merits of this composition. The most conservative writers found it inherently impossible to produce a musical depiction of Hell that was not aesthetically unpleasant. Moreover, the premiere of the *Dante Symphony* coincided with a period during which reviews of Liszt's music had
became particularly scathing. Indeed, during the 1870s critics resorted more than ever to sensationalism and began using personal attacks on Liszt in an effort to defame him. One particular critic took to referring to the composer as “the demented Abbé” and the “the prince of musical lunatics.”

During the 1870s, as attacks against Liszt grew more virulent, John R. G. Hassard—the new music critic for the New York Tribune—emerged as one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the composer’s music. Although the majority of 19th-century musical reviews appeared anonymously, a number of factors point to Hassard as the author of the remarkably positive accounts printed in that newspaper. The most compelling proof is a rare interview with Liszt, which appeared in the Tribune in 1876, signed “J. R. G. H.” The writing style and laudatory tone accord with various critiques of Liszt’s works in that newspaper during this period. Additionally, Mark N. Grant confirms that Hassard worked for the Tribune from 1866 –1884.

Whereas Hassard acted as an advocate for Liszt’s music, the English-born critic William Foster Apthorp openly professed his fierce opposition. As a writer for Dwight’s Journal and other Boston-based publications, Apthorp became notorious for his radical stance on programmatic music. Though it is nearly impossible to attribute specific reviews to him, his known writings bear great resemblance to some of the anonymous reviews in Dwight’s Journal. Prominent critics of the late 1880s such as Henry E. Krehbiel of the Tribune and William J.

195 See page 79.

196 Mark N. Grant, Maestros of the Pen, 65-66.
Henderson of the *Times* had reservations about Liszt as well, but were considerably more balanced in their reviews of his works.

Liszt's oratorios, also among his towering achievements, received poor reviews in the United States. During the 1870s—the decade during which they received their premieres—critics expressed overwhelming resistance to these works and wrote only scathing reviews in reference to their aesthetic value and artistic merits. Although Liszt's choral setting of Herder's *Prometheus* elicited an enthusiastic response at the Cincinnati May Festival in 1875, *Saint Elisabeth* and *Christus* failed to create a favorable impression. The sensationalist reviews from this period, however, lack content and do not provide insightful assessments or meaningful discussions of aesthetic issues. In the 1880s, however, the tone changes considerably. Krehbiel, for instance, criticizes the ambiguity of genre in *Saint Elisabeth* and claims that the work "hesitates between the boundaries of opera and oratorio in such a degree that one is at a loss for a satisfactory point of view." Although generally more diplomatic, Henderson also points out this peculiarity. With regards to *Christus*, on the other hand, both critics recognize some undeniable virtues in the colossal work. Henderson, however, refrains from explicit judgment, while Krehbiel concludes that the oratorio is monotonous.

The 1880s witnessed a decline in the frequency of Liszt performances. The Philharmonic Society of New York—a group noted for its advocacy of Liszt's music—ceased programming works by the composer with the same insistence it had done so during the 1860s and 1870s. Mueller attributes this shift to American audiences' preference for opera and their growing indifference to
repeated performances of Liszt's works. The deaths of Carl Bergmann (1876) and Theodore Thomas (1905) must also have had a profound impact. Eventually, finding no champions of equal determination in later years, Liszt's orchestral and choral works gradually disappeared from the repertoire. Whether the critical reception of these compositions also played a role in their neglect I cannot assert with any certainty. Nonetheless, the consideration and study of the critical literature presented here for the first time enriches our understanding of the composer's reputation in the United States. Additionally, it reveals a great deal about critical aesthetic debates of this period and sheds light on the development of American musical criticism.
### APPENDIX A

Premieres and Notable Performances of Liszt's Works in the United States

#### Les Preludes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Conductor</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 5, 1858</td>
<td>New York, Irving Hall</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 16, 1859</td>
<td>Brooklyn, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 22, 1862</td>
<td>Boston, Music Hall</td>
<td>Carl Zerrahn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 5, 1869</td>
<td>St. Louis, DeBar's Opera House</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 12, 1869</td>
<td>Cincinnati, Mozart Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 7, 1870</td>
<td>Chicago, Farewell Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 25, 1870</td>
<td>Indianapolis, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 7, 1870</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, Mercantile Library Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 3, 1871</td>
<td>Philadelphia, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 16, 1873</td>
<td>Baltimore, Music Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>April 20, 1873</td>
<td>Cleveland, Case Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Milwaukee, Academy of Music</td>
<td>William Mickler</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 29, 1883</td>
<td>Knoxville, Staub's Opera House</td>
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#### Tasso

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 24, 1860</td>
<td>New York, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 22, 1868</td>
<td>Chicago, Library Hall</td>
<td>Hans Balatka</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 5, 1870</td>
<td>Boston, Music Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 22, 1872</td>
<td>Milwaukee, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Hans Balatka</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 22, 1872</td>
<td>Philadelphia, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 9, 1873</td>
<td>Cincinatti, Music Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 22, 1884</td>
<td>Baltimore, Conservatory</td>
<td>Asger Hamerik</td>
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#### Festklänge

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<tr>
<td>March 3, 1860</td>
<td>Boston, Music Hall</td>
<td>Carl Zerrahn</td>
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<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
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<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
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#### Orpheus

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<td>March 20, 1862</td>
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<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Boston, Music Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>December 12, 1874</td>
<td>Philadelphia, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 13, 1875</td>
<td>Brooklyn, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 12, 1886</td>
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<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mazeppa</strong></td>
<td><strong>Die Ideale</strong></td>
<td><strong>Prometheus</strong></td>
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<td>November 4, 1865</td>
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<td>October 11, 1867</td>
<td>New York, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 9, 1871</td>
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<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 24, 1874</td>
<td>Cleveland, Sängерfest Halle</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 12, 1876</td>
<td>Brooklyn, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>New York, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
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<td>November 1, 1868</td>
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<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>April 10, 1869</td>
<td>New York, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 6, 1870</td>
<td>Boston, Music Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>November 28, 1874</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
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<td>Baltimore, Conservatory</td>
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<td>April 3, 1869</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 14, 1875</td>
<td>Cincinnati, Music Hall</td>
<td>Otto Singer</td>
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<td>Boston, Music Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
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<td>February 19, 1876</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 5, 1872</td>
<td>New York, Central Park Garden</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>August 8, 1886</td>
<td>New York, Central Park Garden</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>September 12, 1872</td>
<td>New York, Central Park Garden</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>December 28, 1872</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 23, 1878</td>
<td>New York, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Adolf Neuendorff</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 7, 1882</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
<td>Leopold Damrosch</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 27, 1885</td>
<td>New York, Metropolitan Opera</td>
<td>Walter Damrosch</td>
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**Hungaria**

January 11, 1873  New York, Steinway Hall  Theodore Thomas

**Hamlet**

March 29, 1873  New York, Steinway Hall  Theodore Thomas

**Faust Symphony**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>May 23, 1863</td>
<td>New York, Irving Hall</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
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<td>March 21, 1874</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 27, 1874</td>
<td>Philadelphia, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 7, 1877</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 17, 1880</td>
<td>Boston, Music Hall</td>
<td>Bernhard Listemann</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 8, 1884</td>
<td>New York, Academy of Music</td>
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**Dante Symphony**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 2, 1870</td>
<td>New York, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 15, 1873</td>
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<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 14, 1875</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 19, 1880</td>
<td>Boston, Music Hall</td>
<td>Bernhard Listemann</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 19, 1882</td>
<td>Cincinnati, Music Hall</td>
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**Saint Elisabeth Oratorio**

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td>November 13, 1870</td>
<td>New York, Liederkranz Hall</td>
<td>Agriol Paur</td>
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<td>February 28, 1885</td>
<td>New York, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 17, 1886</td>
<td>Brooklyn, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Theodore Thomas</td>
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<td>December 11, 1911</td>
<td>New York, Carnegie Hall</td>
<td>Kurt Schindler</td>
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**Christus Oratorio**

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 13, 1873</td>
<td>New York, Academy of Music</td>
<td>Carl Bergmann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 28, 1876</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
<td>Leopold Damrosch</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 22, 1877</td>
<td>New York, Steinway Hall</td>
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<td>March 2, 1887</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 9, 1889</td>
<td>New York, Metropolitan Opera</td>
<td>Walter Damrosch</td>
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APPENDIX B

Works Cited

BOOKS & ARTICLES


Kaplan, Richard. “Sonata Form in the Orchestral Works of Liszt: The Revolutionary Reconsidered.” *Nineteenth Century Music* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 142-152.


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