

Ferenc Liszt and the Coronation Mass

In Hungary, Franz Liszt was considered a spiritual leader of his people. He was a revolutionary and the founder of modern church and piano music. His genius led him to the greatest concert halls of the world and his imaginative treatment of form opened up new vistas for every succeeding composer. Not so many people know of him by his Hungarian name of Ferenc Liszt. In Hungary this is how he is known and this reflects the pride they take in him as a Hungarian musician and composer. In this exploration, I would like to talk about his coronation mass, its connection with his life as a Hungarian, the musical material used and what relation this bears to his music and life. While not as famous as Liszt's other works, the coronation mass demonstrates some of the common musical materials used by composers in the 19th century and the techniques with which they used them. In this examination we will see how Liszt himself worked with his piece and finally, I hope to demonstrate the importance of this piece for his country and himself.

1. The meaning of the coronation mass for Hungarians

A brief review of Hungary's history will help to place the composition of this mass in context. Throughout history, Hungary suffered a lot from invasion by outsiders. Hungary was established as a country in the late 9th century, undergoing huge development of its culture and territory in the 14th century in particular. However, from the 16th century Hungary was invaded and conquered by the Turks for the following 150 years. The Hungarians eventually expelled the Turks in the 17th century but it took a power from abroad to rule them. The Hapsburg family provided this.

Between 1701 and 1711 however, an anti-Hapsburg civil war followed, led by Francis II Rákóczi. Rákóczi was Prince of Transylvania, and a hugely celebrated figure in the history of Hungary. The civil war lasted from 1703 to 1711 but the struggle continued until 1867, despite another battle in 1848-49. With the Compromise agreement in 1867, the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy began. Within this agreement, the two countries were considered equal and Hungary gained a king. Liszt composed the coronation mass in 1867 for the coronation of Franz Josef in Budapest. This coronation was a highly ceremonial occasion at which Franz Josef, the Austrian Emperor, was to be crowned King of Hungary. This was a vastly important event for the Hungarian people and for this reason Liszt was surely the most suitable person to participate in and celebrate this coronation. He was Hungarian, famous and most of all he was the hero of the Hungarian people.

2. Ferenc Liszt the musician



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Liszt is known as one of the leading composers in the 19th century romantic tradition. He was a child prodigy and became perhaps the most famous virtuoso piano performer ever known. In contrast with the tradition of classical sonata form and the symphony as perfected by Beethoven, Liszt took a less strict, less formal approach. His pieces include for instance the fantasia, rhapsody, etude and prelude and music characterized by an improvisatory style. This unique style founded virtually every non-classical genre in the 19th century. Liszt was the most pioneering composer in this period. Most of his music is in this programmatic category and Liszt is also credited with creating the symphonic poem. These are a musical equivalent of pictures in a painter's sketchbook. This novel style adopted by Liszt is a natural result of his steeping in the literature and philosophy of the time, and his interest in formal innovation through program music.

A few years prior to the July revolution of 1830, Liszt was a struggling composer in Paris,

but nevertheless content in his situation. However, at this time he lost his father who had always helped and encouraged him. This loss, followed by the revolution, gave him much thought on the bitterness of life. However, he saw how people achieved their freedom and independent life style from their various restrictions. From the formality and insincere courtesy of contemporary society, freedom was necessary, not only for individual life, but also for each nation. The July revolution must also have made him think about his own country under Hapsburg rule, and the desire of his people to be independent. Although he was far from his country so often and he could not speak Hungarian, Liszt took great pride in himself as a Hungarian. Liszt was known in Hungary from abroad and had achieved a remarkable reputation in his native home. It is little wonder that we can trace in his music a great many Hungarian elements. Around this time he met many composers, including Chopin, Berlioz and Paganini. He also encountered Hugo, Lamartine and many other writers. Liszt immersed himself in literature and philosophical writings and discussions. This had a profound influence on his music and life.



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3. Liszt's thoughts on the coronation mass

The coronation mass is not as well known as Liszt's other choral works. Liszt had to compose this in a very short time. At first, the Austrian court was going to provide the music. However, in Hungary, many people felt that a Hungarian composer should do this. Efforts by the Hungarians eventually made this possible and Liszt was asked to compose the coronation music in March 1867. As already discussed, the installation of a king was an occasion of special significance to the Hungarian people. Liszt was very aware of this and so made wide use of Hungarian musical material. The piece is filled with a strong national color in the themes and rhythms that derive from Hungarian folk melody. The mass had to be short since the entire ceremony was to take only six

hours. Liszt therefore had to consider the timing of the music very carefully. He described this problem to his friend and fellow composer Mihály Mosonyi¹:

“First of all I must apologize from a musical point of view for the unusual simplicity of the mass; it was impossible for me to evade my prior instructions to keep it as short as possible and so abandoned a larger scale work. Despite that, I hope the work’s two main characteristics – its ecclesiastical and its Hungarian national aspects – can plainly be seen. You will, by the way, see how careful I have been to make sure that the performance should under all circumstances be exceptionally light and smooth. The vocal parts are kept within their most comfortable registers and the instruments accompanying them also play in their most comfortable positions. I have renounced enharmonics so as to prevent all dissonance, I have restricted myself to the customary devices and forsworn all offensive instruments, various percussion effects, bass clarinets or other innovations; I was not able even to include a single harp. In short, the mass is built up in such a way that it can be well sung and performed at sight...”²

Although Liszt mainly describes the limitations of the piece, it is highly effective as a ceremonial piece. It is also a deeply dramatic piece and has some sublimely beautiful sections.

4. Characteristics of the coronation mass

The mass is in eight sections but was first performed in a six-section form on June 8, 1867 for the coronation ceremony in the Matthias Church near Buda Castle. After the first performance,

the Offertory was added and two years later the Gradual. As Liszt recounts, its vocal resources are simple: mixed voices and four soloists. Neither is the instrumentation complex: double woodwind, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, organ and strings.

The Kyrie begins in E flat major and is in ternary form. The first and third sections are like the pillars of this movement. With the device of the soloist in the middle *Christe eleison*, the entire movement takes on arch structure. If we look at the *Christe eleison* section, the melody has a definite reference to Hungarian-associated "verbunkos" song. Although the origin of this style is not well known, some things can be said about it. It appeared around 1760, spreading in the towns first, through Gypsy bands and Western musicians. In Hungary it developed a complete set of highly recognizable characteristic elements, including turns of melody that were particular to that country. They include the cadential "bokázó" (literally "clicking of heels") and the "gypsy scale" or "Hungarian scale". The Verbunkos is also characterized by an instrumental flexibility, a Western treatment of form, sharply divided but widely arched melodic pattern and a unique set of rhythms peculiar to Hungary at the time³. Some of these elements are clearly audible in the *Christe Eleison* of Liszt's coronation mass. Verbunkos takes on greater significance because of the fact that everything known abroad since 1780 by the name "Hungarian music" consisted entirely of the verbunkos. Verbunkos stood as a symbol for the hugely popular music style that was a combination of Hungarian popular music, Levantine, Balkan, Slav and Viennese-Italian music⁴. Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, this music gained much more widespread acceptance. Verbunkos music enriched the resources available to composers and consequently western technical expertise and culture served and helped develop Hungarian music. Several composers incorporated this style into their large-scale compositions. These include Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Weber, Schubert, Berlioz and Brahms. Some examples of the works in which the Verbunkos appears

include Mozart's *Violin Concerto in A Major*, Beethoven's *König Stephan* and some sections from the Third and Seventh Symphonies, Schubert's *Divertissement*, Haydn's and Weber's Hungarian rondos and Brahms' Hungarian dance series. It can therefore be assumed that the use of the Verbunkos had a powerful effect in the evocation of Hungary and its people.

Ex1. "Verbunkos" song ("Magyar") from István Gáti's manual of piano teaching (1802)⁴



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The Gloria begins in C Major. The entry to this movement is broad and forceful. We see the use of the Hungarian scale at *Qui tollis*. Notably however, there is a quotation from the Rákóczi Song, the patriotic valse associated with the aforementioned Ferenc Rákóczi. Rákóczi, prince of Transylvania, led the War of Independence from 1703 through 1711 against the Hapsburgs. The

melodies of the Rákóczi period were principally, and have remained, heroic dance music. This quotation occurs at *magnum gloriam tuam* and *Qui sedes*. The use of the Hungarian scale is instantly recognizable by the interval of an augmented second. Along with this, we find the use of strings of triplets and alternating “lassu” (slow) and “friss” (fresh) tempi. Melodies are widely arched and there are several free melodies without words, known as “halgató”. These are all strongly characteristic of the verbunkos style, and so of Hungary. This, along with rhythmic effects such the sharp “cifra” shows the signs of an early-matured style.⁵

Example 2. Hungarian scale



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Example 3. Gloria from Coronation mass, bars 136-142

The Graduale is a setting of Psalm 116, added in 1869. As the setting of a Psalm, it certainly has the atmosphere of an old hymn. It is homophonic in texture and has great brilliance and color. At the beginning of the orchestral section, the triplets conceal the cross motif. It is independent of the choral part. It demonstrates very well Liszt's use of the orchestra and the influence of plainsong on his writing style. When the chorus sing *Laudate laudate* in a full C major harmony, the orchestra plays the opening theme. The overall effect is highly energetic and vibrant.

For the Credo, Liszt took the melody from *Messe royle* by Henri Dumont, the seventeenth century French composer, and set it in the style of a Gregorian chant. The choir sings in unison mostly and occasionally with some harmony for the more important text. Liszt desired simplicity above all, and in using Gregorian melody wished to encourage a hear-felt reverence on the part of the listener. In the nineteenth century, Catholic church music was undergoing a reform, moving away from the common non-standard practices of the time. Liszt showed his respect for this reform, and from the 1860s on effected changes in line with this. The range of styles evident in Liszt's sacred music is overwhelming, yet he preserves a wonderful simplicity in several ways, notably in the purity of Gregorian chant. He used passages in the vocal style of Palestrina, once again anticipating future reforms (the Cecilian movement of 1868). Simultaneously, Liszt preserved a sense of drama in his sacred works. The Lutheran chorale features also and notably, striking Hungarian elements. Techniques of symphonic development are in evidence and typical of his later experimental period, his melodic and harmonic resources extend beyond contemporary practice.⁶

A Cantabile melody, the Offertorium is set for solo violin and orchestra only. It has both a spiritual and Hungarian Verbunkos style. Liszt himself wrote to Baron Augusz of this section:

"I have just written an instrumental Offertorium for our Mass, which can be performed or

not, ad libitum. It is a sort of *Magyar hymn* whose simple character will not displease you, I think....perhaps later some Hungarian words might be added to it.”⁷

The dotted rhythm in the violin solo again shows the Verbunkos style and the melody is in the style of a nineteenth century popular Hungarian song.

The Sanctus begins majestically with a dotted rhythmic passage in the orchestral part. Thus, a Hungarian atmosphere is immediately evoked. The music glitters in celebratory excitement, bringing us to the Hosanna. At this point, the harmonies express a heavenly state, while still gentle and intimate. The Benedictus opens on a bright and high register in the romantic Hungarian style of violin solo. There is clear influence from Wagner’s *Lohengrin*. Liszt’s words are particularly appropriate at this point:

“The core of the composition resides in the feeling and shall produce its effect through the latter”⁸

The Agnus Dei brings a moment of particular importance when we hear the return of Hungarian scale from the *Qui tollis* passage of the Gloria. Again we hear musical phrases from the Rákóczi song and a very definite Hungarian mood about the music. The entire movement is very much in Verbunkos style. As such, it surely reflects Liszt’s genuine love for his native Hungary.

5. Conclusion: The meaning of coronation mass for Liszt.

As we can see from the above study the prevalence of Hungarian material and influences in

the Coronation Mass is striking. On a general level, this seems to occur particularly in his choral music. There is not much need for a detailed explanation for this; it is clear how deeply Liszt felt for his people and country. Through studying his music, I have realized how important and significant one life can be to a nation. One life can have a far-reaching effect on a whole nation and this both brings pride and presents a challenge to that nation. In general circles, the music of Liszt's coronation mass may be dismissed too quickly. When one understands the background to it and its balance of diverse musical styles within an overall atmosphere of simplicity, one can begin to appreciate its strength and power. For the Hungarians and Liszt, this music is of crucial importance. So strongly did Liszt associate himself with Hungarian culture, both in private and public, that he claimed to belong with every fiber to his native country. This can be felt through his music, and in particular through the coronation mass.



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NOTES

¹ Mihály Mosonyi (born 1815, Boldogasszonyfalva, died 1870, Pest) composer of music in a highly Romantic style.

² "Liszt Ferenc: Missa coronationalis." Liner notes for Audio Recording. Hungaroton Classic Ltd. 1994.

³ Bence Szabocsi, *A Concise History of Hungarian Music* (Hungarian Edition, 1955). Translated by Florence Knepler, 54

⁴ Ibid., 160

⁵ Ibid., 56

⁶ Derek Watson, *Liszt* (Schirmer Books New York, 1989), 292

⁷ Paul Merrick, *Revolution And Religion in The Music of Liszt* (Cambridge University Press 1987) 134

⁸ Ibid., 136

MUSICAL SOURCES

Bence Szabocsi, *A Concise History of Hungarian Music* (Hungarian Edition, 1955). Translated by Florence Knepler