

The first superstar

Long before there was Britney, Elvis or Charlie Chaplin, there was Franz Liszt (pronounced "List"). He and his sometimes-friend and contemporary Nikolo Paganini were the first true international superstars of the entertainment industry. Before Liszt and Paganini, you had to be a King George or an Alexander the Great to capture the attention of the world stage. To be sure, great musicians like Bach, Beethoven and Mozart had come before Liszt, but, great as they seem to us, the aristocracy of the time saw them as mere hired hands or even servants. Liszt changed all that.

Liszt had everything in his favor: To start with, from the age of 8 it was clear that he had a natural talent for playing the piano and that he would quickly become a virtuoso of the highest level. Over time, he would combine this explosive talent at the keyboard with striking good looks and a magnetic personality to become a performer unlike any the world had ever seen.

There is barely a city or town in all of Europe which Liszt did not visit as a performer in the 20 years between 1827 and 1847. Honors were showered on him wherever he went. Kings and queens were forced to pay homage. By 1842 "Lisztomania" was sweeping across Europe. 125 years before Elvis and the Beatles, women swooned in his presence and actually fought over his silk handkerchiefs and



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velvet gloves, which he would calculatingly drop onto the stage during performances. In the last eight years of his concert tours Liszt gave over a thousand concerts.

And then it all stopped: Liszt ceased to perform publicly. Unlike Elvis or Britney, he did not self-destruct. He simply chose to put an end to the concert tours. Some said it was that he had simply tired of the bad hotel rooms, one night stands, and agonizing cross-country trips by horse-drawn coach on bad roads. Others said it was because he had begun to look over his shoulder at how he would be viewed by posterity, and that he wanted to leave a musical legacy of more lasting worth. Both views are probably correct. Liszt started to compose.

After 25 years of gallivanting and womanizing through Europe, Liszt married, settled down, had children and spent the next 13 years reinventing himself. And he reinvented music in the process. The same explosive personality who had musically conquered all of Europe was now intently focused upon creating music that was

new and revolutionary. Liszt openly declared war on the musical establishment and set for himself the task of creating the "Music of the Future." Whether or not he actually succeeded is up for debate, but this much can be said: His musical experimentation led to some of the most bold and exciting developments the musical world would see for the next 50 years. His music also had a lasting impact on the next generation of composers, and in particular the music of Richard Wagner.

The most famous piece Franz Liszt wrote is called "Les Preludes," and it will be part of the Lima Symphony Orchestra's program Saturday evening. It is Liszt at his best: soaring romantic melodies, powerful statements by brass and drums, daring harmonies, and all of it at the service of a single dramatic idea.

As an explanation of the piece's title, Liszt stated in a preface: "What else is our life but a series of preludes to that unknown Hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death?"

In "Les Preludes," he challenges himself to the grandest of designs: to express in a mere 15 minutes the content of a human lifetime — the love, the tragedy, the pain, the joys and the triumphs. Few would have the audacity or the courage to set upon such a task, but "big" and "grand" is what Liszt had always understood the best. He was a superstar after all.