Les Préludes (Symphonic Poem No. 3) (1854)
Franz Liszt (1811 – 1886)

Liszt’s shortcomings as a person and as an artist had much in common. His personal life is a study in extreme contrasts. For example, he immersed himself at various times in politics, literature, and especially religion, yet during his life he allegedly had 25 lovers. His music, frequently lacking an overall integral plan, rushes recklessly from moments of real eloquence to passages of sheer bombast, and from original and powerful creativity to triviality, banality, and diffuseness. History perceives him as not a great composer, but an important one. He created the “tone poem” or “symphonic poem” and established the form of the “rhapsody.” He contributed to the development of program music, integrated the “recurrent theme” technique into orchestral writing, gave musical form new horizons of freedom, and introduced many innovations in harmonic writing and instrumentation.

The final form of Les Préludes was first performed in 1854, but its themes date from 1848 when they were used in the introduction to the choral work “The Four Elements.” In the early 1850s the themes were revised and the new work was subtitled d’après Lamartine (according to Lamartine). The program is taken from Lamartine’s Méditations poétiques, which, in free translation says: “What is our life but a series of preludes to that unknown song whose first solemn note is sounded by death? Love is the enchanted dawn of every heart whose soul, when wounded, dreams away its recollections in the solitude of country life. However, at the sound of the trumpet man hurries to join his comrades and in the tumult of battle regains confidence in himself.”

A broad, solemn theme in the double basses is the key to the whole work. After enlargement it reappears, changed and exultant, in the brasses and basses. Later the cellos present it more introspectively. After some development, a new theme representing “happiness in love” is heard first in the horns, strings, and harp, and then in the woodwinds.

After a climax a new variation of the main theme summons “storm” music, filled with lashing chromatism and turbulent, diminished sevenths. As the storm subsides, an extension of the main theme in the oboe introduces a pastoral scene, horns hint at a country dance, and the “love” melody is recalled. The music becomes more agitated and march-like; the mood becomes increasingly turbulent until a dramatic apotheosis is reached in the coda. A majestic recall of the main theme brings the work to a moving conclusion.

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