



Portrait of Franz Liszt by Henri Lehmann (1839)

MUSIC OF FRANZ LISZT  
ALEX MCDONALD  
PIANO



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SUNDAY, APRIL 12, 2026 3:00 PM  
GREAT HALL  
ST. MATTHEW'S CATHEDRAL  
DALLAS, TEXAS



# PROGRAM

## Prologue

Impromptu in A-flat Major, D. 899 (Op. 90) No. 4

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

## Works on a Theme of Water Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

*Auf dem wasser zu singen* (To be sung on the water) (1837-38, rev. 1876)

12 Lieder von Franz Schubert, S.558/2

*Der Müller und der Bach* (The miller and the brook) (1846)

Müllerlieder von Franz Schubert, S.565/2

*Am Rhein, im schönen Strome* (On the Rhine, in lovely currents) (1843)

Buch der Lieder für Piano allein - 6 Poésies - I, S.531/2

Ballade No. 2 in B minor, S.171 (1853)

## INTERMISSION

*Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage)

*Première Année - Suisse* (First Year: Switzerland) (1855)

*Au lac de Wallenstadt* (At Lake Wallenstadt), S.160/2

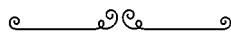
*Au bord d'une source* (By a spring), S.160/4

*Deuxième Année - Italie: Venezia e Napoli* (Second Year - Italy: Venice and Naples) (1858)

*Gondoliera* (Gondolier), S.162/1

*Troisième Année - Italie* (Third Year - Italy) (1883)

*Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este* (The fountains of the Villa d'Este), S.163/4



*La lugubre gondola* (The gloomy gondola), S.200/2 (1885)

*St. François de Paule marchant sur les flots* (St. Francis of Paola walking on the waves)

Deux légendes (Two Legends), S.175/2 (1863)

# ALEX MCDONALD

Alex McDonald has been described as “an archetypal American pianist: great technique, spacious sound...” (Fort Worth Weekly), containing the “full gamut of technique and musicianship... consistent in quality and virtuosity” (Salt Lake Tribune). The Miami Herald praised his “tender poetry” in addition to his “blazing firepower.” New York Concert Review, Inc. lauded how he “seemed to wash the blood, sweat, and tears from the stage.” Praised for his “rich, singing line... Complex rhythms” and “gorgeous sounds” as well as how he “showed how silences and sprays of notes could be equally propulsive” by nola.com, TheaterJones.com has likewise praised a recent performance as “deeper than lush and more timeless than merely moving.” McDonald has performed as soloist with orchestras since his debut at age 11, including the Orquesta Sinfónica del Estado de Mexico, the Yucatán Symphony Orchestra, the Louisiana Philharmonic, and the Fort Worth and Utah Symphony Orchestras. He has performed across the United States, Israel, Mexico, Canada, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, and has been featured on PBS, WRR, NPR, and WQXR. Awards and fellowships include second prize at the 2007 New Orleans International Competition, and second prize at the 2001 Gina Bachauer International Young Artist Competition. He was a competitor in the 2013 Van Cliburn Competition. An active chamber musician, McDonald directed and performed in “Music for Animals,” hailed by TheaterJones.com as one of its Concerts of the Year for 2016. His students have been admitted to Juilliard, Colburn, Eastman, Yale, Harvard, Stanford, and MIT, have won top prizes at national and international competitions, have soloed with the Dallas and Fort Worth Symphonies, have performed at Carnegie’s Weill Hall, and have appeared on the *From the Top* radio program. McDonald is artistic director of the Mozart Academy of North Texas Chamber Orchestra. He received his pre-college training under Lois Nielson, his bachelor’s degree from the New England Conservatory with Academic Honors and Distinction in Performance under Russell Sherman, and his master’s and doctoral degrees from Juilliard under Yoheved Kaplinsky and Julian Martin. His doctoral document, a source study on manuscripts and editions for Liszt’s Sonata in B Minor, has been cited in the a recent edition of the sonata by Alfred Publishers, edited by Nancy Bricard. The Texas Music Teacher’s Association awarded him its 2017 Outstanding Achievement Award, and he was inducted into Steinway’s Teacher Hall of Fame in New York City in 2023. Visit [mcdonaldmusicstudios.com](http://mcdonaldmusicstudios.com).

## NOTES

*As the manifold forms of art are but different incantations, charged with electricity from the soul of the artist, and destined to evoke the latent emotions and passions in order to render them sensible, intelligible, and, in some degree, tangible; so genius may be manifested in the invention of new forms, adapted, it may be, to the expression of feelings which have not yet surged within the limits of common experience, and are indeed first evoked within the magic circle by the creative power of artistic intuition. — Franz Liszt, *The Life of Chopin* (1852)*

The prolific composer, teacher, and formidable pianist Franz Liszt (1811-1886) viewed rigidity as a shackle to divinely inspired genius. His output reveals him to be the first unapologetic champion of program music on the piano, meant to design a preconceived narrative, or evoke a specific idea and atmosphere. Liszt’s unparalleled understanding of the piano’s means of expression, coupled with his belief in the symphonic resources of the instrument, led him to invent new ways to effect pictorial description through the piano and to discover a new evocative language.

A few words about the instrument itself: By the end of Beethoven’s life in 1827, the emerging Industrial Revolution had a profound effect on the production of pianos. Innovations included the double-escapement action, allowing for quick key repetitions; cast-iron frames, leading to higher string tensions and paving the way for the powerful sound of the modern grand piano; and Steinway’s patented use of cross-stringing, allowing for increased resonance and a blended, homogenized sound throughout the instrument. The Parisian manufacturers Pleyel and Érard exploited a light action and delicate tone suitable for Chopin (Pleyel), and a powerful seven-octave range and robust sonority suitable for the concert stage (Érard).

In 1837, at the age of 26, when he had become one of music’s first “superstar” performers, surrounded by swooning admirers, Liszt chose an Érard piano to perform a concert in the great La Scala opera house in Milan, before a sold-out audience. He then wrote to Sebastian Érard: “Let them not tell me any more that the piano is not a suitable instrument for a big hall, that the sounds are lost in it, that the nuances disappear, etc. I bring as witnesses the three thousand people who filled the immense Scala theatre yesterday evening from the pit to the gods on the seventh balcony (for there are seven tiers of boxes here), all of whom heard and admired down to the smallest details, your instrument. Never before has a piano created such an effect.”

Liszt leveraged advancements in piano technology with an innovative approach to music, transforming the piano from a private, domestic instrument into a powerful symphonic tool suitable for concert halls, capable of achieving his broad artistic and expressive goals. A lesser pianist could not have imagined writing the sounds and textures he did, because they could not fathom their technical execution. Liszt not only revolutionized piano technique itself, but in doing so he widened the palette of sonic and expressive possibilities of the instrument.

Today’s program begins with a meaningful prologue. Liszt met Franz Schubert (and Beethoven) in Vienna around 1822, when Liszt was a child prodigy of eleven. Schubert died nine years later at age 31. Liszt became a massive admirer of Schubert, deeply impressed by Schubert’s evident concept of a preconceived narrative in music. Schubert composed two sets of Impromptus in 1827, towards the end of his life. The term “impromptu” suggests an improvisational character, yet the Impromptus are character pieces. As a composer who wrote over 600 *Lieder*, Schubert demonstrates his mastery of melodic contour and poetic lyricism throughout the Impromptus. When considered together, the four Impromptus of Op. 90 present a kind of journey, both musical and metaphorical, with an eventual completion in the *Impromptu in A-flat, No. 4*. The protagonist, a meandering stranger, must find a home. Though written in A-flat major, the piece opens in A-flat minor, and the harmonic ambiguity lingers until the cascading figure is at last heard in A-flat major, beneath which the left hand has a fragile, cello-like melody. At the center of the piece is a lyrical trio, after which the sense of alienation and tension is swept aside by a gradual acceleration of all the elements. The home key, A-flat, becomes fully dominant, while a life-affirming dance-like figure takes over in the bass. The final cadence is an emphatic A-flat major descent, with two forceful closing chords. Home at last. This is a poetic, timeless, and very personal work, displaying a gravity and intensity far beyond the typical nineteenth-century drawing room.

Yet Schubert’s reputation did not extend far beyond his native Vienna, and he was virtually unknown in several key European cities. Liszt attempted to correct the situation by transcribing fifty-six songs of Schubert for piano solo. Liszt preserves the

essence of Schubert's melodies and lyrical qualities, while adding his signature textures and dramatic flourishes. The transcriptions were begun in 1833, five years after the death of Schubert, and the last one was completed in 1846. Liszt's transcriptions of *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* (later revised in 1876), and *Der Müller und der Bach* (1846) transform the originals into virtuosic piano pieces, showcasing his skill in re-imagining vocal music for the instrument. In *Auf dem Wasser zu singen*, Liszt stays close to Schubert's original song, depicting the soul's journey as a floating boat. The flowing melody and gentle accompaniment are preserved almost exactly. Even without words, the calm and lyrical beauty comes through clearly. Yet Liszt can't resist adding a little extra magic. He sprinkles in soft arpeggios, delicate flourishes, and shimmering textures that give the piece a more sparkling sound. These enhancements don't change the character of the song, but bring out the color that a solo piano can provide. The result is a transcription that feels entirely faithful and lyrical. Liszt's admiration of Schubert is particularly evident in *Der Müller und der Bach*, taken from Schubert's 1823 song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* (The Miller's Beautiful Daughter). The lovely melody is sung twice in the original song; here Liszt allows us to hear it three times. The second verse has some of his most exquisite piano writing, the bell-like melody singing elegantly above pedaled *staccatos* and *arpeggios*.

*Am Rhein, im schönen strome* (1843) was originally a setting for voice and piano of one of Heinrich Heine's early poems about unrequited love and isolation, reflecting on the beauty of the Rhine river, mentioning Liszt's beloved Cologne cathedral, and comparing the image of the Madonna in the cathedral to the poet's beloved. Liszt's piano setting captures the imagery of the poem, with rippling piano figurations evoking the river, and a fluttering of angel's wings.

Certain Liszt scholars and performers have maintained that his programmatic *Ballade No. 2* (1853) is based on one of a number of myths and tales concerning Love both won and lost (as in *Orpheus and Eurydice*), including wild emotions, ghastly scenes, and supernatural struggles with God and Fate, all ending in tragedy. The renowned pianist Claudio Arrau maintained that the *Ballade* was based on a Byzantine myth, *Hero and Leander*, relating the story of Hero, a priestess of Aphrodite who dwelt in a tower in Sestos on the European side of the Dardanelles strait, and Leander, a young man from Abydos on the opposite side of the strait, who repeatedly swims the dangerous waters to visit his lover, until he ultimately drowns during a winter storm. Hero throws herself from the tower to join Leander in death. *Ballade No. 2* contains the essence of Liszt's creativity: a skillful manipulation of thematic ideas, a fusion of drama and lyricism, an innovative approach to instrumental texture and formal architecture, and the central element of pianistic virtuosity in his music's expressive vocabulary.

The first volume of Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage) span twenty years before their eventual publication in 1855. The collection originates from the time Liszt lived in Switzerland during 1835-36, where he began to sketch lively musical impressions of various landscapes he encountered. It's important to realize that Liszt was not simply a tourist; note his eventual use of the term *Pilgrimage*. The significance of works in the *Années* lie not only in their descriptive pictorial language, but also in their poetic content and spiritual impact. While experiencing the illustrative quality of Liszt's musical paintings of nature on the surface, understand that the composer is also concerned with their resonance in human nature.

...Thy contrasted lake with the wild world I dwelt in, is a thing which warns me, with its stillness,  
to forsake Earth's troubled waters for a purer spring. -- Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812)

Characteristic of the Romantic ideal of nature as a deeply personal and spiritual experience, Liszt added Lord Byron's verse to *Au lac de Wallenstadt* (1855), signaling his desire to be in communion with nature, and to return to the simple, pure, and untainted pastoral landscapes that provide a refuge from the troubled waters of the rapidly industrializing world.

In its sparkling, effervescent quality, *Au bord d'une source* (1855) is unprecedented in piano literature. It's the first to depict the movement of water not as a passive phenomenon, but as an active, multi-faceted element imbued with life. It's also the first to extensively explore the crystalline sonorities of the piano's upper register in both hands, to conjure new sensations in aural and visual color.

In March of 1838, Liszt visited Venice for the first time and was clearly captivated. Water was everywhere. His descriptions of gondolas and their talented oarsmen are revealing: "... a boat is passing beneath my windows just now. It carries musicians; and a man's beautiful voice, accompanied by a chorus, is singing *La notte è bella*. ... They are going to the Lido; I shout that we must follow them; we leap into my gondola..." The song mentioned is by Giovanni Perucchini, who wrote popular Venetian songs. Perucchini's setting of *La Biondina in Gondoletta* (The Blonde in the Gondola) is used by Liszt as the basis of his *Gondoliera* (1855).

The fountains which inspired *Les Jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este* (1883) were located in the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, near Rome. The Villa d'Este became a physical and spiritual sanctuary to which Liszt would retreat every spring and summer between 1867 and his death. *Les Jeux* is a pinnacle of achievement in Liszt's evocative writing, and the most often cited example of so-called "pre-Impressionistic" music. It's also a culmination of many prior experiments that laid the groundwork, such as mercurial water figuration (such as using the horizontal keyboard to express the vertical nature of fountains), a free treatment of dissonances, and a nonfunctional use of harmonies.

Liszt's two versions of *La lugubre gondola* (1882 and 1885) are considered the result of a premonition that Liszt may have had of Richard Wagner's death, when he visited the composer in Venice just before Wagner's death in February of 1883. Liszt's daughter, Cosima, had become Wagner's wife in 1870 (a convoluted tale, rivaling pulp fiction). Beyond this personal connection, Liszt's composition contains much of the boundary-pushing harmonic adventures we hear in Wagner's music.

In conclusion, the *Deux légendes* (1863) provide a perfect summary of the complex intersection between art, nature, and faith in Liszt's life and works. These depictions of miraculous acts, by St. Francis of Assisi preaching to attentive birds, and St. Francis of Paola walking on water to silence non-believers, come close to being actual program music—a genre that had been largely reserved for the powers of an orchestra. Liszt owned a painting of St. Francis of Paola walking on the waves, which he described in a letter to Wagner: "...on his outspread cloak he strides firmly, steadfastly over the tumultuous waves—his left hand calmly holding burning coals, his right hand giving the sign of blessing."

Note: The majority of this text has been excerpted and gently adapted from *Evocations of Nature in the Piano Music of Franz Liszt and the Seeds of Impressionism*, written by Thomas Hoi-Ning Lee for his 2016 Doctor of Musical Arts Dissertation at the University of Washington, used with the author's very kind permission. - JW

Program design and notes by Jon White