

RECEPTION OF THE *DANTE SYMPHONY* IN 19th CENTURY BUDAPEST *

(Adrienne Kaczmarczyk)

On the 700th anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the question inevitably arises whether his oeuvre can still inspire the other Muses; whether any musical work composed nowadays can match the Liszt symphony inspired by the *Divine Comedy* and first performed in Budapest in 1865, on the 600th anniversary of the poet's birth. The following article examines the relationship between the symphony and the contemporary Budapest audience, embedded in the topics of Dante- and Liszt-reception in 19th century Hungary.

The idea of the *Dante Symphony* first arose in Liszt in early 1839, but he did not begin composing it until 1855, after he had settled in Weimar and having written the *Faust Symphony*. After the unsuccessful world première in Dresden on November 7th 1857, the Hungarian première came only after another eight years, which is not that long, however, if we consider that the *Faust Symphony*, with a world première in Weimar in 1857, was not performed in Budapest until after Liszt's death, on March 7th 1888.¹ The première of the *Dante Symphony* was followed by six more performances during Liszt's lifetime, and then three more performances up to the centenary year of 1911 (see Table).² The total of ten performances in four and a half decades is not a small number compared with the total of nine performances over the following six and a half decades (1912-1978).³ It is true, however, that before 1911 it was performed in its entirety only twice, and six times only the first movement was played (moreover, we have data for the period 1912-78 only about Budapest). The first ten performances of the symphony, by the way, are linked not only to the capital city, but also to the same ensemble, namely the Philharmonic Society. The orchestra was formed in 1853 from the musicians of the National Theatre and was conducted by Ferenc Erkel until 1871, and then by his son Sándor between 1875 and 1900. Sándor Erkel, Liszt's godson, is remembered as having conducted regularly by heart, as he did with the *Dante Symphony*, among other works, which shows his devotion to the composition. Thus, as with Liszt's other orchestral and oratorio works, the two Erkels played a decisive role in the reception of the symphony in Hungary. The close collegial and personal relationship between them and Liszt is also reflected in the fact that five of the six performances before 1886 were given during Liszt's sojourns in Budapest.



* This study has been supported by a research grant from the Musical Section of the Hungarian Academy of Arts for the period 2019-21.

The performances of the *Dante Symphony* were covered in several daily and weekly newspapers, drawing their readers' attention to the planned concerts and then publishing long or short reports about how the performances went on. Most of the reports are short news articles whose authors remain anonymous. The longer ones, such as Richard Pohl's analysis, based in all likelihood on information directly provided by Liszt,⁴ seek to guide their readers by recalling the Dante quotations in the orchestral score and describing the emotions associated with them. From the style of the articles, it is clear that their authors could rightly count on their readers to have some knowledge of Dante's major work. The *Divine Comedy*, after the admiration it had received in the 1300's, became popular again around 1800 among Romantics across Europe disillusioned with the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Although the first complete Hungarian translation, an ambitious work by Károly Szász, was not completed until the end of the century (1885-1899), readers interested in Dante, given that educated people of the era were indeed literate in several languages, had easy access to the poem in German or other translations in addition to the original Italian. In any case, the reception of Dante in Hungarian literature was under development exactly in the second half of the century, at the time of the composition and first performances of Liszt's symphony.⁵ Ágost Pulszky's essay on the Italian poet and his oeuvre, which gives a detailed account of the *Comedy*, was published in four parts in 1865 in the periodical *Koszorú*.⁶ János Arany, the most popular Hungarian contemporary poet, was so much taken by the *Comedy* that he translated its opening lines and expressed his reading experience in a poem with the title *Dante*. In 1865, on the 600th anniversary of Dante Alighieri's birth, Hungary sent this poem in an ornamental binding to the Dante Festival in Florence, the poet's hometown.

The première of the *Dante Symphony* was fortunately timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the National Conservatory of Music (Nemzeti Zenede), as Liszt had also been involved in the institution's founding: he gave a charity concert in the National Theatre on January 11th 1840.⁷ The première of the *Dante Symphony* on August 17th 1865 was featured by the orchestra of the Philharmonic Society, which had been formed in 1853 from the National Theatre's musicians, but the ensemble was enlarged for the occasion with further musicians. The choir was a mixture of professional and amateur singers. After Liszt had only one day to rehearse, and after discovering that the ensemble did not know the symphony with sufficient certainty, and also learning from the failure of the Dresden première, he cancelled the "Purgatorio" and the choral "Magnificat". Focusing on the "Inferno", the orchestra and the conductor triumphed successfully: the audience demanded a repeat of the movement. We know from Hans von Bülow's review in *Pesti Napló* that Liszt had the movement played for the second time from the Paolo and Francesca scene onwards.⁸



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres: Paolo and Francesca



Gustave Doré: Dante and Vergil

The success of the “Inferno” was so unexpected that Bülow felt he had to dispel suspicions that the applause was for Liszt’s person rather than for his composition. In doing so, however, he drew attention exactly to a cornerstone of Liszt’s reception in Hungary: in knowledge of the reviews of later performances of the *Dante Symphony*, it is certain that Liszt’s expected presence at a certain concert increased the size of the audience considerably. Even the Philharmonic Society’s memorial concert on the occasion of Liszt’s death did not attract as large an audience as the earlier ones, where the composer had been present in person. Similar reactions would also happen in other countries, however, especially in case of Liszt’s piano recitals in the 1830’s and 1840’s, and at his visits in his old age at performances of some of his major symphonic or oratorio works. The persons of composers first attracted eminent attention from the public around 1800. The elderly Haydn experienced this in London and Vienna, and then Beethoven, whose veneration became a cult during the 19th century. This gave rise to a general apprehension, fully in contrast to the approach of previous centuries, that truly profound music is a puzzle that requires the audience to mature to understand. This was also Bülow’s idea, who praised the Hungarian audience in his review for celebrating the *Dante Symphony* and condemned the audience at the 1857 world première in Dresden. While Liszt explained the Dresden fiasco in practical terms, blaming the orchestra’s lack of preparation, Bülow attributed it to the exceptional quality of the composition, in the spirit of the aesthetics that became dominant around 1850. Convinced that the work of a genius was impossible for the ordinary person to understand, he put forth as a proof of his thesis that the symphony’s failure in Dresden was on a scale comparable only to the failure of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* in Paris (1861), another composer whom he also deeply respected. Liszt himself must have felt the celebration of his compatriots as satisfaction, because he congratulated the audience, evidently for their openness and musicality: “*You, Gentlemen, are all greater artists than I am.*”⁹ Music reviewers also found the music worthy of Dante, and considered Liszt’s spirit to be similar to that of Dante.¹⁰

Such parallels based on character, which today seem far-fetched, appealed to Liszt’s contemporaries. Liszt himself is known to have drawn parallels between Dante, Michelangelo and Beethoven in a literary letter to Berlioz in 1839.¹¹ For us, Bülow’s explanation, who saw in both Dante’s and Liszt’s *Inferno* a representation of the ‘august’ (in today’s parlance: the sublime), seems more professional. Between the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime, or between the classicist and the romantic stylistic ideas, as discussed by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Bülow advocated the latter. He argues that Liszt’s “*Inferno*” proves how music can “*give expression to pain up to its highest level, to despair, hopelessness and self-condemnation.*” But “*quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi*”, he adds, as “*only the genius can be allowed to frighten, excite and soothe the pain with his music.*” When he rejects the claim often laid to music, i.e. that it should soothe, Bülow is not confronting compositions of that character, but those who lay such a claim to music – because music, he argues, is an autonomous art and its freedom must be respected. In other words, Bülow took a stand against the “aesthetics of feelings” that was popular in the 19th century, just as Eduard Hanslick did in 1854 in his famous (and infamous) work on aesthetics, “*On the Musically Beautiful*”. And in this respect, Liszt agreed with both of them.

The positive reception of the “*Inferno*” was probably due to several musical and non-musical factors. Among them was the Hungarian audience, with an a priori positive attitude towards Liszt, grateful for his charity concerts and proud of his exceptional professional achievements – in contrast to the Dresden audience that favoured the Schumann-Brahms circle. The venue of the old Redoute – which had been demolished in 1849, and afterwards the new Vigadó had been built in its place from 1859 to plans by Frigyes Feszl and was opened in early 1865 – had been the witness of important political and cultural events. As Katalin Szerző has suggested, Liszt’s “*Inferno*” may have reminded the audience of a notable event that had taken place on the same site a decade and a half earlier.¹² On July 11th 1849, Lajos Kossuth gave a famous speech in the Redoute, in which he asked the Parliament to pledge 200,000 new recruits and issue 42 million forints in paper money to support the Hungarian war of independence. It was then, in the wake of the affirmative reply, that Kossuth uttered the words, which inadvertently placed Dante’s and Liszt’s *Inferno* in a political context in 1865:

“I was going to ask you that, but you have stood up; and I prostrate myself before the greatness of this nation, and I only say: May we have as much energy in the execution as much patriotism I have experienced in your pledge, and Hungary shall not be overthrown even by the gates of hell!”¹³

The quote, which quickly became a common saying, paraphrased the words of Jesus: “*You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.*” (Matthew 16:18). In the spring of 1849, it was probably in the knowledge of Kossuth’s statement that the Austrian general Heinrich Hentzi had the Redoute building demolished, along with the palaces on the bank of the Danube in Pest. Did the audience – we ask the question together with Katalin Szerző – indeed recalled Kossuth’s words when they set off for a journey in hell with Dante and Liszt in Feszl’s beautiful new Vigadó building? If they did, they must have felt a sense of satisfaction. It is possible that the clamorous success of the “*Inferno*” was partly due to the storm of memories the venue had evoked. In any case, music critics, both then and afterwards, kept away from direct political allusions.

Audiences in Pest expressed their approval of Liszt's "Inferno" not only on August 17th 1865, but also thereafter. On October 29th, at the first full performance of the symphony in Hungary – in Liszt's absence – the audience also demanded a repeat after the "Inferno". However, the conductor, Ferenc Erkel, did not accede to their request; he obviously didn't want to sacrifice the integrity of the composition by interrupting the musical-dramaturgical process. Erkel, with fidelity to the work ("Werktreue") in mind, represented the modern aesthetic views of the time. The second movement of the symphony, the "Purgatorio" with the "Magnificat" (the latter with the female choir singing from the gallery) could not approach the success of the "Inferno", either then or later. Music critics excused Liszt by saying that it was impossible to compose anything after a movement as dramatic and energetic as the "Inferno".¹⁴



Ceiling decoration design by Peter Cornelius
with scenes from Dante's *Divine Comedy* from Liszt's estate

Wagner, as Cosima's diary testifies, thought otherwise. Cosima wrote on August 27th 1878:¹⁵

In the evening we take out my father's Dante-symphony, or rather he plays it for us, and after he has retired, R[ichard] talks us about the high-end poetic conception of the work, how beautiful it is that he refrains from any musical colouring, which Berlioz would surely have fallen into; how beautiful and atmospheric Purgatory is, and how it is impossible to know whether it is despair or hope that sounds in it, and why he does not dare to raise his eyes; how beautiful the fugato is. But it has no audience; it needs erudition, Dante-experience, an understanding of Catholicism.

Therefore, according to Wagner, the success of the “Inferno” is not a proof of musical sensitivity, but rather of the lack of sensitivity. The drastic sounds and the dynamism are easier to follow, he argues, than the meditative poetry. Hungarian audiences, unlike the one in Dresden, were presumably less confused about the definition of the genre. It was felt and also noted by the critics that in the *Dante Symphony* Liszt moved very far away from the model of the classical symphony, but presumably they did not expect a classical work from him either. It seems that Kornél Ábrányi’s “programme booklet” in *Zenészet* *Lapok*, translated from Richard Pohl’s introduction to the concert, may have prepared the audience for something more oratorical, and the symphony lived up to that expectation.

A further *Leitmotiv* of the Hungarian reception of the *Dante Symphony* and Liszt’s large-scale symphonic and oratorio works in general is the question of the national affiliation of the composer and the work. One extreme position is phrased by Viktor Langer, who argues that Liszt’s Hungarian nationality determines that the style of his symphonies is also Hungarian, which, he believes, would explain why his works are less understood elsewhere.¹⁶ At the other extreme, István Bartalus, who was outraged by Liszt’s *Gypsy Book*, mocked what he saw as the German tendency represented by Liszt, Wagner and their followers, in a humorous essay (“*The 1002nd Night*”) he read out at a meeting of the Kisfaludy Society. Liszt did not bother himself too much about that, but he was deeply offended by the words of an anonymous letter-writer who lamented over a performance of the *Legend of St. Elisabeth* that had resulted in a financial loss.¹⁷ In a letter addressed to the new director of the National Conservatory of Music (Nemzeti Zenede), Ede Bartay, the author who introduced himself as “the ghost of Gábor Mátray”, the late director of the institution who had died in 1875, complained about the financial loss of 750 Forints suffered by the institution. He asked Bartay to beware of such “big shots” like Liszt and to compensate the Zenede. The editorial staff of *Fővárosi Lapok*, reminding the readers of the charity concerts given by Liszt, rejected the ingratitude and arrogance of the anonymous letter-writer. The paper took a stand against all those who profited from Liszt’s charity piano recitals, but stayed at home when a major work of the composer was performed. It was most probably Adolf Ágai, the editor of *Magyarország és a Nagyvilág*, and his circle behind the attack against Liszt, claiming that Liszt’s original compositions, including the *Legend of St. Elisabeth* and the *Esztergom [Gran] Mass*, were unlikely to outlive him, and that he would only be remembered for his “gypsy music transcriptions” at the best. In response, Liszt banned the performance of his major works in Hungary, including the *Dante Symphony*, which the Philharmonic Society had announced for March 27th 1878.¹⁸ The symphony was nevertheless performed by Sándor Erkel and his ensemble on the scheduled date, but Liszt, although staying in Budapest, did not attend the event. Although his Hungarian friends later managed to appease him, he was never able to hear his symphony in Budapest again.

NOTES:

1. About the première see the review in the March 8th issue of *Fővárosi Lapok*.
2. For information about the performances in Liszt’s lifetime, I studied contemporary reviews and periodicals. About the performances in the Vigadó, I found the book “*Ferenc Liszt a Vigadó színpadán*” (“Ferenc Liszt on the stage of Vigadó”) by Ágnes Waczatka particularly useful (published in Budapest in 2014 by the Hungarian Academy of Arts).
3. See the data of the premières between 1900–1978 in the Concert Database of the ELKH BTK Institute of Musicology Art: http://db.zti.hu/koncert/koncert_Kereses.asp
4. Kornél Ábrányi: “*Bevezető magyarázat Liszt Ferenc »Dante symphoniájához« Pohl Richard után*” (“Introductory explanation to Ferenc Liszt’s »Dante symphony« after Richard Pohl”), in *Zenészet* *Lapok* 5/46 (Aug 17th 1865), 363–367.
5. József Szauder: “*Dante a XIX. század magyar irodalmában*” (Dante in the Hungarian Literature of the 19th Century), in Kardos Tibor (edit): *Dante a középkor és a renaissance között* (“Dante between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance”), Budapest: Akadémiai kiadó, 1966, 499–574. For the detailed treatment of the reception in literature see József Kaposi: *Dante Magyarországon* (Dante in Hungary), Budapest: Révai és Salamon, 1911).
6. Ágost Pulszky: “Dante”, in *Koszorú* 3/20–23 (May 14th– June 4th 1865), 457–461, 485–488, 505–508, 529–533.
7. Alan Walker: *Franz Liszt I: The Virtuoso Years (1811–1847)*. (New York: Knopf, 1983), 332.
8. Hans von Bülow wrote an appreciation of the three festive concerts for the 25th anniversary of the Zenede in the August 24th, 27th and 28th issues of *Pesti Napló*.
9. Liszt’s words are known from Bülow’s review: “Vous êtes tous de plus grands artistes que moi, Messieurs.”
10. *Fővárosi Lapok* (December 10th 1870), 1248; (April 18th 1886), 783.
11. Liszt: *Lettres d’un bachelier ès musique*, edited by Rémy Stricker (Mayenne: Le Castor Astral, 1991), 160.
12. Katalin Szerző Szőnyiné: “*Jeles napok a pesti Vigadó zenei múltjából*” (“Famous Days from the Musical Past of the Vigadó in Pest”) in: *Parlando* 59/1 (2017) <http://www.parlando.hu/NEWPROBE/PARLANDO.html>, last visited in September 2021.
13. György Szabad (edit): *Kossuth Lajos üzenetei* (“Messages of Lajos Kossuth”) Budapest: Neumann Kht., 2004), <http://mek.niif.hu/04800/04882/html/szabadku0083.html>, last visited in September 2021.
14. See *Hazánk s a Külföld*, April 29th 1869.
15. Cosima Wagner: *Diary (1869–1883)*.
16. *MTA Szépirodalmi Közlöny*, August 11th 1870, 320–321.
17. The review *Fővárosi Lapok* published the story, backing Liszt in the debate: March 16th 1877, 301.
18. Liszt’s letter of March 8th 1878 to Katalin Marsch, who had sung the title role of the *Legend of St. Elisabeth* at the performance on March 5th 1877. Published by Margit Prahács in: *Franz Liszt, Briefe aus ungarischen Sammlungen (1835–1886)* (Budapest: Akadémiai kiadó, 1966), no. 364, 195 and 383.

PERFORMANCES OF THE DANTE-SYMPHONY IN BUDAPEST BETWEEN 1865–1911

Date	Venue	Performers	Movement	Press sources	Note
17/08/1865	Vigadó	Orchestra and choir of the National Theatre, Enlarged Ensemble of the Philharmonic Society, conducted by Ferenc Liszt	I. première	Pesti Hirnök, 18/08 Fővárosi Lapok, 19/08: V.K. [Károly Vadnai] Pesti Napló, 19/08 Sürgöny, 19/08 Vasárnapi Ujság, 20/08 Nefelejts, 20/08 Hazánk s a Külföld, 27/08: Károly Vadnai Pesti Napló, 27/08: Hans von Bülow Képes Ujság, 01/09 Zenészeti Lapok, 07/09: Kornél Ábrányi	On the 25 th jubilee of Nemzeti Zenede (National Music School) (15/08, 17/08, 20/08)
29/10/1865	Vigadó	Philharmonic Society, conducted by Ferenc Erkel	I-II. complete première	Sürgöny, 31/10 Hazánk s a Külföld, 05/11: Károly Vadnai Magyarország és a Nagyvilág, 05/11: Imre Áldor	Liszt was not present
17/12/1865	Vigadó	Philharmonic Society, conducted by Ferenc Erkel	I.	Fővárosi Lapok 19/12 Pesti Napló, 19/12 Magyarország és a Nagyvilág, 24/12	Concert for the benefit of the authors' aid association; Liszt was not present
26/04/1869	Vigadó	Orchestras of the National Theatre and the Philharmonic Society, Society of Music Lovers, conducted by Ferenc Erkel	I-II.	Pesti Napló, 27/04 Hazánk s a Külföld, 29/04 Nefelejts, 02/05 Zenészeti Lapok, 02/05 Hazánk s a Külföld, 06/05: V.K. [Károly Vadnai]	Liszt was present
22/08/1870	Vigadó	conducted by Ferenc Erkel	I.	A Hon, 23/08 Fővárosi Lapok, 23/08 Vasárnapi Ujság, 28/08 Hazánk s a Külföld, 01/09	Liszt was present
27/03/1878	Vigadó	Philharmonic Society, conducted by Sándor Erkel	I.	Fővárosi Lapok, 27/03: József Harrach Magyarország és a Nagyvilág, 31/03	Liszt was not present, although he was staying in Budapest
25/10/1886	Opera House	Philharmonic Society, conducted by Sándor Erkel	I.	Budapesti Hírlap, 26/10 Fővárosi Lapok, 26/10 Nemzet, 26/10 Pesti Hírlap, 26/10 Pesti Napló, 26/10 Ország-Világ, 30/10 Zenelap, 01/11	Memorial concert on the occasion of Liszt's death
26/01/1898	Vigadó	Philharmonic Society, conducted by Sándor Erkel	I.	Alkotmány, 27/01 Budapesti Hírlap, 27/01 Budapesti Napló, 27/01 Pesti Hírlap, 27/01 Magyar Ujság, 28/01 Magyarország, 28/01	
01/06/1911	Music Academy	Orchestra of the Music Academy Students, conducted by Jenő Hubay	I-II.	Az Ujság, 02/06 Budapesti Hírlap, 02/06 Világ, 02/06 Magyarország, 03/06 Zenelap, 20/06	Festive concert on the occasion of Liszt's 100 th birthday
08/11/1911	Vigadó	Philharmonic Society, Choir Association of Hungarian Women led by Emil Lichtenberg, conducted by István Kerner	I-II.	Az Ujság, 09/11 Budapesti Hírlap, 09/11 Népszava, 09/11 Pesti Hírlap, 09/11 Pesti Napló, 09/11 Világ, 09/11 Zenelap, 09/20	Festive concert on the occasion of Liszt's 100 th birthday