

***Franz Liszt: The cultural ambassador of the 19th century.***

Kevin Burns for [www.hungarianpresence.ca](http://www.hungarianpresence.ca)

It's hard to imagine anyone alive who knows more about Franz Liszt than McMaster University's Alan Walker. On May 28, as part of the Hungarian Studies Association of Canada's participation in the 2011 Congress of the Humanities, Walker will present a lecture: "Franz Liszt: The cultural ambassador of the 19th century." This will be followed by a recital of selections from Liszt's music performed by the renowned Canadian pianist and Juno Award winner, Valerie Tryon.

Walker has spent a lifetime studying and writing about the life and music of Franz Liszt. His monumental trilogy: *Liszt: The virtuoso years, 1811-1847*; *Liszt: The Weimar years, 1848-1861*; and *Liszt: The final years, 1861-1886* is regarded as definitive, one of the most influential studies of its kind. Walker's creative and scholarly insights have helped shape the contemporary understanding and appreciation of this highly complex and frequently conflicted artist whose music will be heard often in 2011. This year events have been scheduled around the world, and especially Hungary, to celebrate the bicentenary of Liszt's birth in Raiding (then known as Doborján) on October 22, 1811.

As a pianist Liszt became an international phenomenon, his concerts sold-out, hysterical fans fainted, and all manner of speculation swirled around him concerning his marital status. Wherever Liszt travelled his every gesture and change of clothing was subjected to the scrutiny of the paparazzi of the day.

But that wasn't what attracted Alan Walker to Liszt. "I can speak only for myself. From my earliest youth I was attracted to the music. Only later did I find out more about the man," explains Walker. "After all, the chief reason we like to read about exceptional human beings is because we are already attracted to them through what they have done. Others may feel differently. But I believe I speak for most musicians when I say that interest in the music came first."

However, musical tastes come and go and Walker concedes that today, Liszt's reputation as a composer is still in the process of being re-evaluated. "But his star is rising rapidly," he asserts. "When I was young, he was regarded as a marginal figure in the Romantic movement. All that changed after World War II, and for many of us he has entered the Pantheon."

And what of Liszt's likely reputation in the future? "Just what Liszt's final position in music history will be with the public at large, it is not yet possible to say. But it will be considerable," says Walker confidently. He bases this on a number of Liszt's key accomplishments during his lifetime. It was Liszt who "created the model for today's solo recital," Walker explains. "He was a composer

who introduced new forms into music, including the symphonic poem and the single-movement, ‘cyclical’ sonata. He was an orchestral conductor who developed a new repertory of body-signals at the podium, which still leave a visible mark on conductors today.” And Walker says that it was Liszt who first came up with the notion of a master class for musicians in training.

Walker and Tryon limit their focus for this combined lecture and recital on Liszt as a cultural ambassador. “It was therefore necessary to choose works for Valerie Tryon’s recital that reflected Liszt’s ceaseless travels through Europe, with music that showed Liszt as a kind of Hungarian ambassador-at-large, dealing with all the problems that ambassadors usually face (in Liszt’s case mostly musical ones) as he made his way through France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Poland, Russia – and ending with his connections to the Vatican,” says Walker.

An internationally acclaimed pianist and recording artist celebrated for her life-long commitment to the music of Liszt, Valerie Tryon was awarded the *Ferenc Liszt Medal* in 1994 by Hungary’s Ministry of Culture. She is also the recipient of the award established by the composer Arnold Bax in honour of another pioneering pianist, Harriet Cohen. In addition to her concert career, Tryon has also served as Artist in Residence at McMaster University. She and Walker have confirmed some of the pieces she will play to illustrate Liszt’s “ambassadorial” links. These include *Venezia e Napoli* (Italy), *Au bord d'une source* (Switzerland), *Rakoczi March - Hungarian Rhapsody no. 15* (Hungary), and *Legend: St Francis of Paola Walking on the Waters* (the Vatican).

When asked to suggest a good place to start listening for people who may not be at all familiar with the music of Liszt, Walker opts for a piece not programmed in the concert: *Liebestraum Number 3*. “It is memorable, melodious, and easy to find. Another piece would be the equally popular *Hungarian Rhapsody Number 2*, which is full of nationalistic fervour and musical excitement.” After a short pause, he continues, “You might then receive a big surprise. You might discover that you have known these pieces for most of your life without ever suspecting that they were composed by Franz Liszt.”

The Canada Hungary Educational Foundation is pleased to co-sponsor this Fredericton event with the Hungarian Studies Association of Canada. The support of the host universities of Congress and of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and the Social Sciences is also much appreciated.

For the time and location of the combined Alan Walker and Valerie Tryon event at the 2011 Congress of the Humanities click [HERE \(http://congress2011.ca/program/\)](http://congress2011.ca/program/)