

## THE SEMANTICS OF FRANZ LISZT'S PIANO *THRENODIES* WITHIN THE CONCEPT OF PASSION

ALONA BORSHULIAK<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY.** The interpretation of a musical work in modern performance arises as an acute problem that causes discussion. Thanks to the theory of analysis, it is possible to obtain a variety of analytical interpretations of a musical text. Semantic analysis appears as one of the main and most promising methods of decoding the semantic structures of the works of later Franz Liszt's period. The composer creates a new genre – a mournful piece or a threnody, through which he was able to express painful feelings about tragic events. Liszt most actively uses the symbols of passion in the late period of creative life. Passion is interpreted as a phenomenon that takes over the properties of the genre of passions and transforms them into the principle of thinking, reasoning and dramatic art. In piano threnodies, musical-rhetorical pieces of passion express something secret, sacred, and sometimes tragic, and the symbols of the passion nature of the threnodies reflect Liszt's tragic outlook in his late years. Consequently, immersion in the semantic depth of the threnodies in the context of the concept of passion allows both instrumentalist performers and teachers to reveal the multidimensionality of the complex of eternal problems in a new way that contribute to the birth of a new meaning.

**Keywords:** threnody, phenomenon of passion, musical symbols, principle of thinking, semantic perspective.

The current stage in the development of musical art makes it imperative to seek innovative methods of interpreting the musical text. Thanks to the functional method based on semantic analysis one can solve a number of problems related to semantic structures and content. Introducing

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<sup>1</sup> *PhD in History of Art, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Musical Art, Kamianets-Podilskyi Ivan Ogiienko National University, Kamianets-Podilskyi, Ukraine. E-mail: alyona\_bor@ukr.net.*

this innovative approach to Franz Liszt's piano pieces, in particular, to threnody pieces, the performer will be able to feel the semantic perspective of his work in a new way. The later period of Franz Liszt's work is characterized by innovative search in the composer's style, bold experimentation, and active use of symbolic-rhetorical means. At this time, Franz Liszt is actively turning to the genre of a mournful piece-lament – threnody, through which he expresses mournful feelings that overwhelm him. In a piano miniature of the last period, the composer expresses a wide range of emotions and feelings of passion, which has become a function of the principle of symbolic thinking. The urgency of the topic is due to the practical need to search the semantic depth of Liszt's piano mourning pieces, which have been actively used in the performing practice of contemporary musicians.

There is a large number of research works and studies of the romanticism era in contemporary art, in particular those dealing with the creative personality of Franz Liszt and his musical heritage. Yakov Milstein's fundamental work<sup>2</sup> in two volumes is still important; it is the result of more than thirty-five years of research on the life and creative work of Franz Liszt in a wide range of problems including philosophic and aesthetic views of the composer in connection with modernity and social conditions. Bence Szabolcsi's book is an important contribution to the issue,<sup>3</sup> the author tries to reveal the reasons that led to the composer's disappointment in life and changed his style of writing in final years. Considerable scientific value is represented by fundamental works of Alan Walker, including "Franz Liszt: "Franz Liszt: The final years, 1861-1886".<sup>4</sup> Researcher Konstantin Zenkin<sup>5</sup> in his dissertation explores ways of developing musical romanticism in the mirror of a piano miniature.

Michael Saffle (professor of Music and Humanities at Virginia Tech) makes an important contribution to the modern understanding of Liszt style. He represents Liszt's work "not only as a master of Romanticism and an early Impressionist, but as a precursor of Postmodern "pop".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Yakov Milshtein, *Franz Liszt*, Muzyka, Moscow, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Bence Szabolcsi, *The last years of Franz Liszt*, AN Vengrii, Budapest 1959.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The final years, 1861-1886*, Cornell University Press, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Konstantin Zenkin, "Piano Miniature and Ways of Musical Romanticism", Thesis of Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Arts, Moscow, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Saffle, *The Music of Franz Liszt: Stylistic Development and Cultural Synthesis*, Routledge, London and New York, 2018.

Considerable attention is paid to various aspects of creativity by contemporary Ukrainian musicologists. Professor Olena Roschenko<sup>7</sup> is actively investigating Liszt's relation to the mythology and mythologization of various plots, in particular, Dante and Danteism, and approaches the interpretation of these images in a rather unorthodox way. Ganna Koval<sup>8</sup> also devotes her dissertation to the theme of Dante in the work of Liszt and the problem of synthesis of arts. Musicologists Luba Kyyanovska,<sup>9</sup> Natalia Kashkadamova<sup>10</sup> and others explore the issue of Liszt and Ukraine. However, the consideration of Liszt's piano works from the point of view of semiotics has not yet found a thorough reflection in scientific literature, and still remains an inexhaustible sphere of symbolic-rhetorical means used by the composer in piano threnodies. The purpose of the study is to analyze Franz Liszt's piano threnodies, discover and reveal their semantic depth in line with the concept of passion.

The symbolism of Liszt's passion is especially prominent in his late creative period, which can be characterized as a combination of certainty and doubt, hope and hopelessness. This is a difficult time in Franz Liszt's life – death of his beloved daughter Blandina, son Daniel, loss of hope to marry Carolyne Wittgenstein. Sad thoughts are increasing and haunting the composer. This is what Liszt writes in a letter to Lina Ramann: "Ever since I was young, I have been thinking that to die is simpler than to live."<sup>11</sup> Liszt is disappointed in life, in people and he is smitten with worries. Let's mention the piano pieces: "Unstern", "Gray Clouds", "Funeral Prelude", "The Mourning Gondola", "Laszlo Teleki" from the cycle "Hungarian Historical Portraits" and others. All of them relate to the genre of a mournful piece created by Liszt, which the composer often called elegy or "funeral chant", i.e. threnodies. Szabolcsi defines this genre as a lamentation piece, and writes that "the forms of "tombeau", "epitaph", or "lament" have found deeply dramatic sounds to pour out grief over the death of famous people or great tragic events."<sup>12</sup> Liszt seems to be "speaking" in a strange language not understood by his contemporaries. According to the just remark made by Thomas Hoi-Ning Lee:

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<sup>7</sup> Olena Roschenko, *Number and name in the new mythology of musical romanticism (numerological and onomatological methods of music analysis)*, KhNURE, Kharkiv, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Ganna Koval, "Liszt and Dante: the regarding the issue of synthesis of arts", Thesis of Dissertation for the Degree of Candidate of Arts, Kyiv, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Luba Kyyanovska, *Perception of Franz Liszt's Works of in Lviv*, in: Journal of Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine, vol. 4, 2011 (p. 3–9).

<sup>10</sup> Natalia Kashkadamova, *Piano art in Lviv. Articles. Reviews. Materials*, SMT "Aston", Ternopil, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Bence Szabolcsi, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>12</sup> Bence Szabolcsi, op. cit., p. 45.

“His unparalleled pianistic acumen, coupled with his belief in the symphonic resources of instrument, led him to invent new ways to effect pictorial description through the instrument and to discover a new evocative language that the Impressionists would draw on many decades later.”<sup>13</sup>

The composer’s quest for “music of the future”, which for a long time remained outside the discourse of both performers and art critics, was vividly embodied in the late opuses. With the help of the symbols of passion, Liszt sends a mournful, disconsolate image of lament.

Michael Saffle gives seven arguments about Liszt’s music and in the later he says, that “much of Liszt’s tone-poetry expresses or suggests an archetypal spiritual experience: that of sin or suffering followed or alleviated by redemption or triumph. Seventh and last, I argue that Liszt can finally be understood as a fantasist, re-composer, collaborator, and tone poet only if we acknowledge his Catholic faith.”<sup>14</sup>

It should be mentioned that passion images occupy a significant place in the history of art, ranging from the genre of passion and to our time. Two polar sides – joy and sorrow are the artistic expression of the sound-intonation image of the world, which Alexander Sokol defines as a semantic field (lecton), “the set of meanings, representations, characteristics that we impart to one or another sound-intonation manifestations of things and phenomena of the world, including (inner sobbing, laughter...)”<sup>15</sup> These opposing images permeate the creative path of many composers and, for some, become the major essentials of philosophical views.

Passion comes from the genre of passion (from Latin *passio* – “passion”). But the concept of *passio* and passion are not identical in content, because all the properties of the original pre-concept are passed on to the next derivative. The traditions of the Passion genre are rooted in ancient times, they became part of Catholic church use in the fourth century and were dedicated to the pre-Easter, so-called, passionate week. These were musical works on the Gospel text about the betrayal of Judas, the captivity and crucifixion of Jesus.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Hoi-Ning Lee, “Evocations of Nature in the Piano Music of Franz Liszt and the Seeds of Impressionism”, Thesis of Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts, *Washington*, 2016, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Saffle, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Sokol, *Performing remarks, image of the world and musical style*, Odessa, 2007. p. 27.

Passion is interpreted in accordance with the definition of Vladimir Dahl, namely: suffering, anguish, torment, bodily pain, mental sorrow, anxiety, conscious acceptance of burden and martyrdom.<sup>16</sup>

Having delved into a large number of interpreters and encyclopedias, not only secular but also spiritual, we can see their common position on the interpretation of *passio* as passion and suffering. The etymology of the word *passion* is associated with suffering, grief and sadness. Theological vocabularies and encyclopedias, both Orthodox and Catholic, also interpret passions as suffering.

But taking over the properties of the genre of passions and constructive features, passion is transformed from the genre into the principle of thinking, reasoning, shaping and dramaturgy. Applying the Christian meaningful ideology of understanding passions, Liszt builds the drama of many of his works by passing from “darkness to light”.

The symbolic phenomenon of passion is a unique complex of symbols embedded in a single system and is the vehicle of artistic and symbolic imagery. Extending the essence and content of this phenomenon, we proceed from the fact that it is a complex of symbols that express different emotional shades of one of the possible (polar) sides of the sound intonational image of the world – sorrow.

The image is represented quite broadly as a semantic field: from lamentation sighs, anguish and high tragedy to redemption and state of grace. Due to this phenomenon, the works possess significant representativeness and symbolic.

The functioning of the symbolism of passion can be represented as a progressive meaningful series of feelings of this image: sighing – sadness – anguish – sorrow – grief – mourning – lamentation – torments – suffering – pain – redemption – grace, expressed by certain musical symbols and rhetorical figures: *lamento* – *suspiratio* – *catabasis* – *pathopoiia* – *passus duriusculus* – theme of the cross – the theme of the cross in reverse – *figura corta*.

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<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Dahl, *Large illustrated dictionary of the Russian language: modern spelling*, Astrel, AST, Khranitel, Moscow, 2007, p. 219.

**Table 1**

symbolism of passion				
musical symbols				
sadness	suffering	passions	redemption	resurgence
lamento		themes		the motive of the resurrection
musical rhetorical figures		theme of the cross	the theme of the cross in reverse	musical rhetorical figures
suspiratio	catabasis; passus duriusculus, saltus duriusculus; pathopoiia;			figura corta

The symbolism of passion dates back to ancient times and goes a long way in history, spreading over many centuries in the work of different composers, different genres, not only spiritual but also secular, and manifested through specific musical motives, rhetorical and ostinato figures, through their development and repeated conduct. Symbolism is understood by us as a collection of characters.

In more detail, the complex of passion symbols is considered in Alona Borshuliak's monograph.<sup>17</sup>

Liszt uses the principle of "character of motives" (Milstein's definition) in his work; almost every motive can be traced to the composer's specific symbolic meaning, expressing certain poetic ideas and feelings. It is "melody-characteristic" (Liszt's term) that acts not only a kind of symbol of the main idea underlying a work or protagonist, but also expresses his complex feelings and movements of the soul. Thus, a poetic-figurative meaning is fixed on specific motives. As we see, these motives as understood by Liszt are similar to the meaning of musical and rhetorical figures; peculiar motives with specific semantic meanings. It is common knowledge that Liszt was interested in the laws of musical rhetoric and held oratory in high esteem.

<sup>17</sup> Alona Borshuliak, *The phenomenon of symbolism of passion of the baroque and romanticism*, KPNU, Kamianets-Podilskyi, 2012.

Consequently, the circle of Liszt's passion images is revealed with the help of specific "melody-characteristic" (musical and rhetorical figures) characterized by the absence of large interval leaps, descending semitone moves, more often chromatic, and slow tempo.

The works of the later period are noted for the simplicity of the texture, but in this way the semantic role of almost every note grows acquiring a symbolic meaning. Liszt with his ingenious discoveries laid the foundation for the next centuries. It is at this time that a certain phenomenon appeared in his work that allowed him "to throw a spear farther into the future than Wagner could."<sup>18</sup> One can hardly agree with Yakov Milstein's thought, who suggests that:

"His aging experiments are not always full-fledged artistic works. Rather, these experiments remind us of the fragments, more or less successful, one of the grandiose melancholy confessions of a musician who is struggling with new ways in art and trying to open these paths to others."<sup>19</sup>

Liszt's confession is deeply philosophical. Mei Li notes, that "in his old age, the inspirations were from his innermost being: inspirations reflecting the essence of life and the meaning of death."<sup>20</sup> The composer himself wrote in his letters to Lina Ramann that his heart was full of deep sorrow, which from time to time had to manifest itself in music. This tension broke out in new forms and genres. In the genre of piano miniatures, the bitter feelings of the composer are symbolically expressed in a concentrated form in threnodies. After all, the miniature of the era of romanticism is based on emotion and is aimed at the crystallization of one particular state of the soul. Thanks to the powerful momentum of romanticism, the piano miniature reached its heyday at that time and was charged with life force for many years. According to Konstantin Zenkin's poetic expression, the miniature is a "mirror", which reflected the most essential features of the romantic world-view, its concentration, and "artistic formula". Indeed, the miniature of the era of romanticism accumulated not only the peculiarities of the style of

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<sup>18</sup> Yakov Milshtein, *Revision and comments to 3 vol. of Franz Liszt's works for piano*, Muzyka, Moscow, 1966, p. 195.

<sup>19</sup> Yakov Milshtein, op. cit., p. 195.

<sup>20</sup> Mei Li, *The Key Characteristics of Franz Liszt's Late Piano Works*.

[https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/27109/LI\\_ku\\_0099D\\_15942\\_DATA\\_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/27109/LI_ku_0099D_15942_DATA_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

the individual composer, but also the whole era. Its uniqueness consisted in the fact that the feeling of staying at the moment of the present time is maximally sharpened in it:

“in a miniature there is a time of lyrical experience that psychologically continues into the present ... The organization of the musical time of miniatures is determined by the specificity of the themes, the development of the texture, syntax, composition, etc.”<sup>21</sup>

Many tendencies of romanticism reached completion in the late period of Liszt's work. The composer abandons the concert, virtuoso style, thus creating a transparent texture, in which he lays down only the basic, typifying the expressive and semantic elements of romantic music and often uses symbols. A characteristic phenomenon is the universality of the figurative world of miniatures, which manifested itself in a concise constructive basis of the piece. It led to a modification of the discovery of poemness – which Zenkin draws attention to:

“The procedural nature of the form has turned into its openness; mono motive began to act as a self-dependent factor (hidden primarily in monothematism), which led to motive ostinato. The theme acquires the features of a “procession”, and the motive acquires the function of the modal center.”<sup>22</sup>

Note that in the writings of the late period, Liszt is no longer so actively using epigraphs and literary prefaces, because he selects and captures only the main and essential indications, considering them sufficient for those who can penetrate the poetic meaning of the created pieces.

The circle of passion images originated in the earlier period of the composer's work, even in the “Funeral”, “Heroes Cry”, which can be seen as the immediate precursors of the late “laments” and threnodies. Note that already in the introduction (Introduzione) to the “Funeral”, Liszt uses *lamento*, *passus duriusculus*, *suspiratio* to create an image of the mourning procession.

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<sup>21</sup> Konstantin Zenkin, op. cit., pp. 8, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Konstantin Zenkin, op. cit., pp. 26, 27.



E.g. 1

Adagio  $\text{♩} = 80$

Franz Liszt, “Funeral”, m. 1-3.

“Hungarian Historical Portraits” is an interesting cycle by which Liszt built a monument to his contemporaries. These pieces-laments reveal the tragic part of Hungarian history. At the basis of piece number four, the portrait of Laszlo Teleki, there are four sounds of the theme, ostinato from the famous work of Mihaly Mosonyi “Funeral Sounds”, but offered in a different combination – order.

E.g. 2

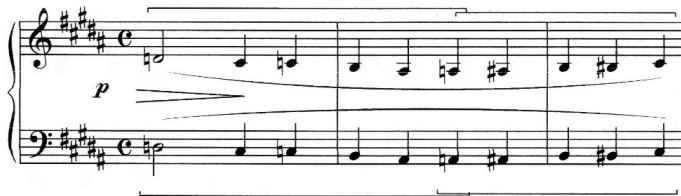
Franz Liszt, “László Teleki”, m. 1-12.

As a counterpoint, the composer uses *passus duriusculus* and creates a burgeoning funeral music. The third counterpoint line is a transformed intonation of sighs – *suspiratio*: formed by semitones, turned into ostinato, which slowly creeps up. Gradually, this intonation turns into an ascending movement of the rhetorical figure of the *passus duriusculus*. The work is finished with the ascending movement of ostinato, which seems to be hanging in the air against the background of tremolo. The initial version of the piece was a funeral march dedicated to Gellerich, published by the later shortly after Liszt's death.

The piano piece “Unstern” is a vivid example of the innovative search of the later period of Liszt's creativity. This work, written in 1885, is a harbinger of the symbolic aspirations of the next century. “Unstern” consists of four parts. Augmented triads resembling entire series, penetrate all of the piece. And only the first and last note of “E” can be considered a unifying element of two distant tonalities.

In the piano piece “Unstern” Liszt uses the symbol – the rhetorical figure of the *passus duriusculus* in two versions: ascending and descending. In the first case, thanks to augmented triads, *passus duriusculus* acquires an ominous character, and in the second – inevitability.

### E.g. 3



Franz Liszt, “Unstern”, m. 105-107.

Peter Raabe compares dissonances with a prisoner's fist knocking the wall of his prison; he is perfectly aware that nobody will hear him. The striking effect creates a tremolo of sustained bass for thirteen measures, which leads to the main culmination of the work and a break with the rhetorical figure of the *aposiopesis*, after which you can perceive the sound of a chorus (quasi *Organo* – Liszt's designation) interrupted by *passus duriusculus* and *lamento*. At the end of the piece “Unstern”, the descending movement of the *passus duriusculus* expresses hopelessness. Such an interpretation of this image reveals the idea of tragedy as a world-view (according to Aleksej Losev<sup>23</sup>). It is “the world's abyss or fatality”, breaking through the “chaotic space” that

<sup>23</sup> Aleksej Losev, *Form – Style – Expression*, Mysl, Moscow, 1995.

defines the fate of a tragic individual. Thus, the symbols of passion in this work evolve into a symbolic embodiment of the tragic world-view of composer Liszt in the last years of his life.

An interesting analogy is the programmability of “Unstern” with “an evocation of the end of the world” and “moving from darkness into the light of the church”, conducted by Mei Li:

“the first part could be heard as a musical rendering of the apocalypse, trumpets and all; the second part represents the prayers of a terrified humanity. However, given the quasi-transcendent character of the final section, it seems that all is not lost, even if all is not entirely resolved. The simple hymn-like character of the conclusion gives us the feeling that Liszt has found a resolution for his anxiety.”<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the work embodies the passion principle of thinking Liszt and shows the movement of dramaturgy from darkness into the light.

In “Gray Clouds”, Liszt also uses a set of passion symbols – the lamento intonation and the rhetorical figure of the *passus duriusculus* in the ascending and descending movement. Against the background of *tremolando*, the bass of the *passus duriusculus* in the chord statement slowly descends downward, thereby creating an awe-inspiring impression of the approaching storm clouds.

E.g. 4

The musical score for Franz Liszt's "Gray Clouds" (measures 9-20) is presented in three systems. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked "Andante" with a metronome marking of quarter note = 80. The score is written for piano, with a treble clef on the right hand and a bass clef on the left hand. The right hand features a descending bass line in the *passus duriusculus* figure, while the left hand provides a tremolando accompaniment. The first system shows measures 9-12, the second system shows measures 13-16, and the third system shows measures 17-20. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp* and *ppp*, and articulation like slurs and accents.

Franz Liszt, “Gray Clouds”, m. 9-20.

<sup>24</sup> Mei Li, op. cit., p. 25.

Enlightenment comes in the final section of the miniature the *passus duriusculus* octaves ascend, the sound becomes fragile, as if hanging in the air; the clouds disperse. The lamento intonation is stored in the bass. Thus, the “darkness to light” drama is highlighted in the work, which emphasizes the phenomenon of passion.

Raabe writes about the two Liszt’s late piano pieces – “Gray Clouds” and “Unstern” that they, on the one hand, “are very poor in melodic image”, but on the other hand, “they should be attributed to his most touching works”. They say that “it is hopelessness, and the person who lost hope no longer creates works in exquisite ways. He does not confide it anyone, only himself.”<sup>25</sup> It is unlikely that this statement should be accepted, as Liszt’s music was addressed to the future generations, although, of course, hopelessness, loss of faith in the future, as temporary feelings, are found in those writings. After all, Liszt had the gift of prediction and presentiment. He is more courageous than any contemporary composer in outlining the contours of music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Several works of the Liszt’s final years have become a sort of laboratory of expressive means of the next century. The rationally constructive approach to building a musical form, the graphic nature of the writing with the principle of “linearism”, the emphasized scant texture, the general stiffness of the sound structure, which is achieved partly due to the “beat” interpretation of the instrument is inherent in many of his late threnodies.

Liszt gives great value to the brightly sounding atmosphere of music. Emphasizing the four stages in the evolution of Liszt’s methods of using the piano, Milstein defines the fourth as a period of impressionistic pianism, characterized by the division of monumental sound constructions, the predominance of subtle coloristic effects.<sup>26</sup>

In the final years of Liszt’s creative life, at first glance, the concept of form is given preference, as Szabolcsi puts it “dramatic cycles of paintings”. Liszt’s goal was to construct a cyclic form around one main theme, like “garlands of variations” (that is, to reduce, concentrate). Of course, the form can no longer remain in the old framework, it is influenced by “something of the new, totally different ideas: it leads to a series of paintings that make it possible to express a single basic mood among visions, portraits, landscapes, fate, and feelings.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bence Szabolcsi, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> Yakov Milshtein, *Franz Liszt*, Muzyka, Moscow, vol. II, 1971, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> Bence Szabolcsi, op. cit., p. 39.

On the basis of the semantic analysis of Liszt's threnodies one can conclude that due to strained living conditions and changes in the philosophical and religious views of the composer, there is revision of musical-rhetorical figures of passion character in his works. They do not so much fascinate and convince, but express something secret, sacred, and sometimes tragic due to being transformed into musical symbols. And although the tragic world-view influenced by the era of romanticism with its pessimistic tones manifested in the late period of the composer's work more clearly, Liszt's main theme of the work still is the idea of humanism (the victory of good over evil), moving from "darkness to light", which clearly demonstrates the phenomenon of passion. As a "passionary", Liszt consistently sought means of solving political, social, and religious problems, trying to penetrate by his work into the very essence of artistic phenomena of the Romantic era and after becoming a Catholic abbot, the composer tried to "reconcile reality with heaven". Thus, Franz Liszt's threnodies reveal the idea of tragedy as a world-view of only one component of character. And the symbolism of passion grows into a symbolic embodiment of the tragic world of Liszt's later years.

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