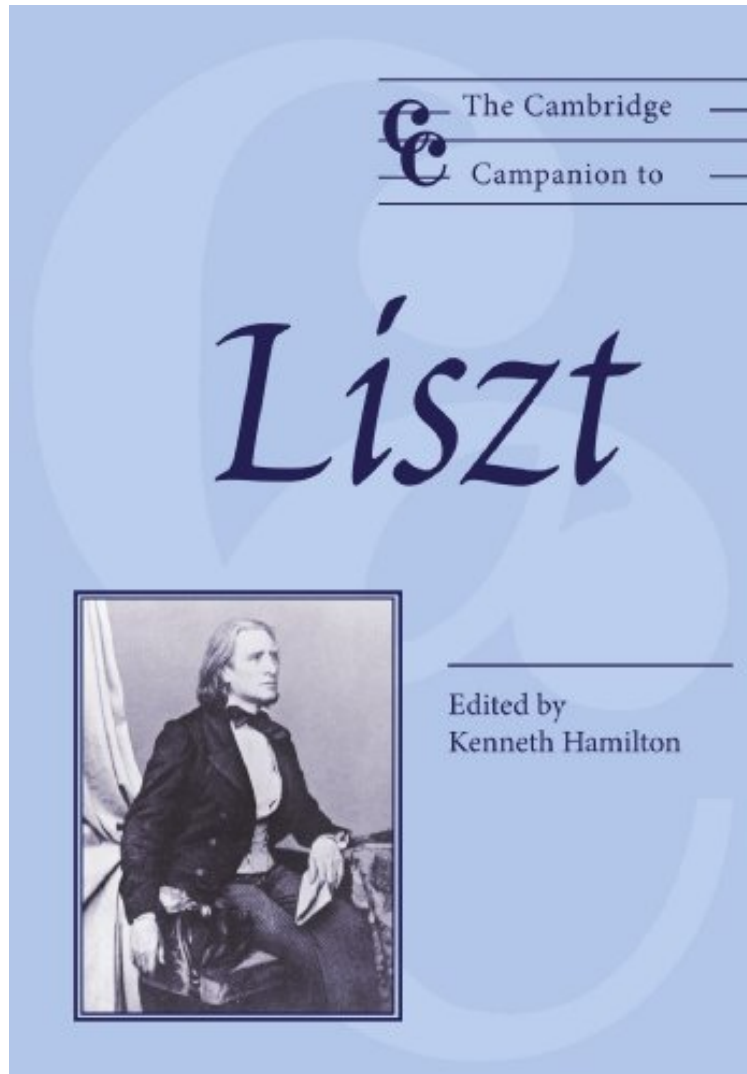


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The Cambridge Companion to Liszt (Cambridge Companions to Music)

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From Brand: Cambridge University Press : The Cambridge Companion to Liszt (Cambridge Companions to Music) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Cambridge Companion to Liszt (Cambridge Companions to Music):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I beg to differ By Carl Czerny I don't have time or energy or quite honestly the intellectual firepower to debate the previous review point by point But I will say this: I picked up many useful insights from this book. Sure it's a mixed bag, that's to be expected with these companions. But it was well worth the purchase price and certainly deserves more than two stars in my opinion. 10 of 10 people found the following

review helpful. Severely technical and painfully pedestrian
By Alexander Arsov
The Cambridge Companion to Liszt
Edited by Kenneth Hamilton
Cambridge University Press, Paperback, 2005. 8vo. 300 pp.
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index=====This is what happens when one reads something about Franz Liszt but not written by Alan Walker - a disappointment. Not a major one, perhaps, but a disappointment nonetheless. Maybe I misunderstand the conception of this type of book - companion, that is - but it seems to me that such a work should not only be scholarly excellent, which the present Cambridge companion apparently is, but also as comprehensive as possible summing up the matter in an insightful and perceptive way as well as fully readable for the general public - and that the companion that is being reviewed here certainly is not. It does contain many points of interest, some of them can even be called perceptive ones, but they are scattered among a great deal of indifferent writing which not so seldom degenerates into either incomprehensibly technical language or far-fetched conjectures which dangerously border on nonsense. Most often the authors do no more than pointing where a more detailed account about this or that aspect of Liszt's life or music can be found, and fairly often this happens to be another of their own books which smacks of appallingly self-serving attitude - but is apparently considered as a firm proof of authors' capacity as Liszt scholars. It is doubtless true that Franz Liszt has benefited a great deal from the so called Romantic revival in the last few decades, most notably through Alan Walker's phenomenal three volume biography and Leslie Howard's astounding achievement of recording the complete piano music of the great Hungarian composer who preferred to speak French and spent most of his life in Germany and Italy; not to mention of course the numerous scholarly volumes and articles exploring the life and music of Liszt that have appeared. Unfortunately 'The Cambridge Companion to Liszt', as a putative link between the strict objectivity of the professional scholarship and the balanced partiality which is so compelling for the general reader, can hardly justify its existence. The first three chapters, which try to put Liszt in the context of his times and, perhaps, to touch on his personality, are just a little above disgrace. It really beggars belief how such junk could ever have been published. Katharine Ellis starts well enough: with a nice description of the Paris salon culture during the 1830s and Liszt's complete identification with the Romantic artist at the time. Rather unfortunately though, Katharine then continues through one digression after another, mixing literary creations like Hoffman's Kreisler or de Ferriere's Brand-Sachs (the latter is supposed to have been based on Liszt himself), and ending up as a perfect bore. It must be admitted that she doesn't entirely lack shrewd points about Liszt's early Romantic inspirations, but they are much too diluted with tenuous, to say the least, links between Liszt and his putative literary recreations. Katharine Ellis' style may well be described with Eva Hanska's unjustly famous description of Liszt, first published in 1843 and quoted in this chapter as well: "There are sublime things in him, but also deplorable ones; he is the human reflection of what is grandiose in nature - but also, alas, of what is abhorrent. There are sublime heights, the mountains with dazzling peaks, but also bottomless gulfs and abysses." Purple prose par excellence: ridiculously florid, bursting with affectation and so, so nonsensical. Big words, small substance - if any. Katharine Ellis' writing reaches its own nonsensical peak in her "interpretation" of the famous painting "Liszt am Flgel" by Josef Danhauser. Painted in 1840, and served as a cover of numerous discs with Liszt's music, this celebrated canvas shows the rapt Liszt on the piano and in the company of Marie d'Agoult, George Sand, Alexandre Dumas Pere, Berlioz, Paganini and Rossini as well as a portrait of Byron and a bust of Beethoven. It captures to perfection the bohemian atmosphere from the Paris salons at the time. But I have never been able to bother myself with things like the piano being half inside the room and half outside "collapsing the distance between here-and-now and infinity", or the Beethoven bust inhabiting "an ambiguous space above it - a floating vision for the viewer", and least of all to read the picture as a "close cousin" to narrative descriptions of Beethoven's Fifth symphony as "a progression from symbolic darkness to light". When we come down to brass tacks, the most useful part of Katharine Ellis' chapter are her quotes from Liszt's early literary writings which - no matter whether written by himself or by Marie d'Agoult, for they surely reflected Liszt's outlook - tell us much more about the composer as a Romantic artist in his tempestuous youth than this particular contributor to this companion is able to. I was looking very much forward to Alexander Rehding's chapter "Inventing Liszt's life: early biography and autobiography", expecting an excellent overview of the many attempts for writing a biography of Liszt, their shortcomings and positive sides, their significance if any for the Liszt scholarship today. How wrong I was! Indeed, I should have read the title of the chapter more carefully, its second part especially. For Mr Rehding is concerned entirely with early biographies and, most of all, with the supremely irrelevant question why Liszt never wrote an autobiography, or why he never wanted to, to be more exact. What seems to be Mr Rehding's main point is the ludicrous Victorian statement that writing a biography is one of the duties of a genius. That's a farrago of nonsense, at best. Such may be the duty of a genius if we are talking of a

statesman, for example, if there ever was a genius among that race, but this is certainly not the case when we are talking about a creative artist. It is not that the biography will be grossly inaccurate in terms of facts - of course it will be in the hands of a creative artist: otherwise he wouldn't be one; Liszt probably meant exactly that with his seemingly bizarre statement that his biography is more to be invented rather than written after the facts; Wagner's "Mein Leben", for instance, might often replace fact with fancy but it does tell us a great deal about Wagner's personality, if not necessarily all facts of his life as objectively as the scholars want them. To Mr Rehding's credit, he touches, not unsympathetically, upon the fanciful nature of the Romantic biography and even on the very sensible notion that, as far as artists are concerned, their works are the best possible biography there is; sadly, he either didn't want to or he simply lacked the capacity to elaborate on the latter. Instead, the author confronts Liszt's famous, paraphrased motto "Gnie Oblige!" and accuses him of shying away "from his obligations of genius". It is perfectly beyond me how such rubbish could be published at all! Incidentally Liszt, with his daunting number and diversity of compositions spread over some 65 years, is the ideal candidate for such musical biography. All one needs to do is to follow closely his extraordinary development as a composer, for that's the perfect key to his character and personality. This has been done many times, few of them with distinction. Mr Rehding chooses a different approach: he presents few autobiographical moments and then tries to convince us that Liszt used these, rather deceptively, to make the public believe what he wanted them to believe. But perhaps I am unfair to Mr Rehding and his confused, convoluted style tells many more, and profound, things. I am not aware of them though. James Deaville's essay is by far the best among the three introductory ones. Considering the limited space on his disposal, Mr Deaville has written a fairly comprehensive survey of Liszt's reception and influence during the XX century. He has a number of fascinating things to say about Liszt's influence over great many composers, or about the Liszt scholarship and its development from total neglect to one of the hottest areas in musicological research. For once, the writing is lucid and engaging, a far cry from the drab, tedious stuff in the first two essays. Whatever the merits or the drawbacks of the three general essays, the chapters about Liszt's music - most of the book, that is - are certainly the more important part. But they don't fare particularly well in comparison with their counterparts in the earlier Liszt companion edited by Ben Arnold. Indeed, one wonders why two Liszt companions should have been published in just three years, between 2002 and 2005, but that happens to be a fact. Wouldn't one combined effort of all of these brilliant scholars have been better? In almost all cases, the chapters about the music in the Cambridge companion are much shorter, less detailed, more bogged down into technical analyses and sometimes downright flippant. There are few exceptions, most notably correction of some amateurish blunders in the scholarship, and for them the book is worth having - at least in the cheap paperback edition. On the whole, however, there is only one chapter here that has no analog in Ben Arnold's companion and therefore makes a fairly fascinating read; all others have little if anything to offer to anybody who has already perused the Liszt companion edited by Ben Arnold. The editor Kenneth Hamilton has of course taken the most awesome responsibility of all contributors: Liszt's piano music. It is hard to imagine what he wanted to do with compressing all early and Weimar works for solo piano in just one chapter. So he did the only possible thing: he wrote a perfunctory and indifferent essay, if it may be called by that name, omitting many details from the compositional history and thus obscuring the most essential thing about Liszt as a composer - his unbelievable development. To take but one striking example, Mr Hamilton is obliged to deal with such crucial original works like "Deux pisodes d'apres le Faust de Lenau" and the "Two legendes" in just one short paragraph. This is simply not serious, to say the least. (The legendes, incidentally, are supposed to be late works and one is left hoping that they will receive their proper treatment in the next chapter - in vain.) Mr Hamilton's scholarship at least seems to be on a sufficiently high level. He mentions Leslie Howard's completion of the almost totally neglected today full version of what is popularly known "Figaro fantasy", and what actually is a severely mutilated edition of Busoni; to Mr Hamilton's credit, he makes no bones about Busoni's highly questionable decision to cut almost one third of the piece. (Charles Suttoni should read that - he might learn something.) On the other hand, the discussion of Liszt's opera paraphrases as a whole is perfectly mediocre. When I come to Mr Hamilton's judgments, however, I am in for a disappointment - again. He is quite scornful towards most of Liszt's juvenile compositions, perhaps understandably so but perhaps a little excessively as well. His most controversial, not to say ridiculous, assessment is that the First ballade, another almost forgotten work, is "fatally compromised by a sentimental and repetitive principal theme" (cf with Ben Arnold's "outstanding, tightly organised work"). For my part, I think of this ballade's principal theme as lyrical and unusually beautiful melody; I certainly don't mind hearing it several times, all the more so since it is never exactly the same. Strangely, Mr Hamilton doesn't think it worth his time to mention the second theme of this piece: a somewhat trivial march, admittedly, but developed in a most Lisztian and magnificent manner. Performing Liszt's piano music, the other chapter of the book contributed by Mr Hamilton, makes much more interesting, even absorbing, read. In the end, however, I am left a little confused by the author's final opinion: so should one stick as closely to the note as possible when performing Liszt's piano music, or should one give oneself a certain leeway resting assured that the Master would have approved of that? Notwithstanding that little uncertainty, the chapter contains a lot of compelling details about Liszt's performance practice and his attitude to interpretation of his own and other composers' music. As a special bonus, a survey of the pianos Liszt played through his life is provided too. This is the chapter mentioned above that has no analog in Ben

Arnold's companion; though it is not the only reason to have this Cambridge companion in addition to the other one, it is certainly the main one. The other chapters are all mixed bags, with the exception of Liszt's symphonic poems and symphonies by Reeves Shulstad which cannot be described even as average. Mr Shulstad rushes through the symphonic poems as if he is chasing a plane, giving nothing that is not generally known by every Lisztian but omitting a good deal of important historical details; skipping the incomprehensible analyses, there is very little of interest here. Anna Celenza's chapter on the piano concerti is more or less interesting but it is compromised by excessive and rather minor details. She is obviously at her element about Liszt's Totentanz, investigating both, quite different, versions of the work; there is even a reproduction of the title page of the earlier version which is given as a part of one "Lehman collection" (I wonder if Lehman is the private owner of the manuscript mentioned in Leslie Howard's liner notes who refused to grant him access). Also commendable is Celenza's idea to reproduce, though the quality is somewhat inferior, the two works of art that are supposed to have inspired Liszt to compose one of his greatest masterpieces for piano and orchestra: Hans Holbein's Totentanz and the famous frescoes in Campo Santo, Piza, popularly known as The Triumph of Death. But then the authoress goes into intolerable detail describing the work variation by variation and how each corresponds to certain part of Holbein's work, but another one seems contradictory to that work, and so on and so forth. I cannot for the life of me believe that Franz Liszt ever composed anything so obsessed with representing so minute, perfectly insignificant details, with his music. Moreover, such anatomizing of the music is very easy to be overdone; once one believes in oneself's infallibility and one gets totally carried away with wilder and crazier visions about "interpretation" of the composer's ideas - and so Anna Celenza does. Interestingly, the late piano works are covered a great deal more extensively than the early and the Weimar ones, and therefore this is the only part of the Cambridge companion that may hold a candle to his earlier colleague edited by Ben Arnold. Even though James M. Baker may sometimes rush through pieces with nothing more than purely technical stuff, most of the time he is wonderfully detailed about the last, and in a way most extraordinary, period of Liszt's life as a composer and as a man. The subject of program music is of course extremely complex, multi-faceted and controversial. And Liszt didn't make it easier for his scholars, to be sure. On the whole, as far as I am concerned, knowing the history of composition, the number and nature of revisions, the composer's opinion of his works or any program he thought it appropriate to leave us, even some speculations of contemporary colleagues or modern scholars, all that information does enhance my appreciation of a work. But there is a limit to that. When I am confronted with bar by bar analyses and their putative programmatic details, I am left more confused than enlightened, unable to believe that any composer - Liszt least of all! - could have concerned himself with such trifles while composing so great a music; it is quite possible of course, but highly unlikely in my opinion. Here lies the chief weakness of the Cambridge companion to Liszt. Not only does it not cover extensively all fields of Liszt's activity as a composer - his organ works and orchestral transcriptions are mentioned in passing; his secular choral works are totally neglected; almost all other areas of his output are treated in a rather too perfunctory a fashion - but worst of all, the contributors seem often to get lost into insignificant details, technical or not, fanciful or not, but of minor importance all the same. As a consequence, Liszt emerges more like a pathetic seeker of cheap effects than like a major composer with firm handle of his craft and solid philosophical and intellectual background, not to mention one whose music reflected almost whole century, from Beethoven to Debussy. It is singular how often the writers remark on the notorious contradictions of Liszt's personality - Mephistopheles and abbe, the spirit and the flesh, the virtuoso and the serious musician, and all that kind of stuff - but never is any attempt made to explain even one of this contradictions, much less to put it into the context of Liszt's music and especially of his development as a composer. There lies the key to Liszt's heart and soul. Unfortunately, the Cambridge companion is very wide of the mark and can be regarded, at best, as a little appendix to the companion edited by Ben Arnold. At any rate, Franz Liszt deserves much more than both taken together. The ultimate book about his music probably remains to be written. The bottom line, however, is that even the superior companion hardly deserves the monstrous price it is sold for. As far as Liszt's life is concerned, Alan Walker remains - and most probably will remain for quite some time - by far the finest source, combining scholarship, partiality and readability in a most compelling manner. Everybody seriously interested in Liszt as a man and composer should start with this three volumes: Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847, Vol. 1 (Franz Liszt) Franz Liszt, Vol. 2: The Weimar Years, 1848-1861 Franz Liszt, Vol. 3: The Final Years, 1861-1886. Though spread on three hefty volumes, this is one work and should ideally be read or consulted complete. As far as Liszt's music is concerned, the classic book of Humphrey Searle (The Music of Liszt (Second Revised Edition)) and the volume edited by Alan Walker himself long before he started writing his biography (Franz Liszt (Man His Music)), badly dated biographically as both of them are, contain tons of perceptive observations more than the both Liszt companions taken together.

Although the music of Franz Liszt is becoming ever more popular in the concert-hall and the subject of much recent research, there are few books available for a general reader that present up-to-date scholarship on the composer. Written by leading specialists in the field, this Companion provides an authoritative overview of Liszt's music, its context and performance practice.

This collection comprises three essays on Liszt's career and artistic legacy and eight on his compositions and their performance. The scholarship is up-to-date, and the writing is engaging throughout. ChoiceAbout the AuthorKenneth Hamilton is pianist-in-residence and senior lecturer in music at the University of Birmingham, UK. A virtuoso pianist with an international reputation, he is also an authority on Liszt and has a special interest in nineteenth-century performing techniques. He is the author of the Cambridge Music handbook Liszt: Sonata in B Minor.