eye strain were bouts of a severe, stabbing pain in the right temple that began in Russia before the first world war and increased every year in frequency and severity until in 1921 he spent time in hospital undergoing treatment, but without success. In Russia he had always attributed these pains to eye strain and continual bending over the manuscript while composing. After leaving Russia for the last time in December 1917 he was forced by this trouble to give up composition for three years, and he found relief from it only in his recital work. Both these problems, I suggest, were due to difficulties of accommodation and convergence resulting from myopia. Lastly, it would appear from photographs that Rachmaninov did not use reading glasses in his 50s and early 60s.

Rachmaninov seems to have been free of the cardiovascular features of Marfan's syndrome. In fact, some 40% of those affected by the syndrome have normal cardiovascular findings on auscultation,³ although in almost all cases echocardiography will show abnormalities.

In diagnosing Marfan's syndrome more reliance is placed on the presence of hard manifestations (for example, subluxated lenses and aortic dilatation) than on the soft features (myopia, tall stature, lax joints, and arachnodactyly) on which my conjecture relies. This is not, however, to deny the possible presence of the hard manifestations in Rachmaninov, as in a substantial proportion of cases they can be established only with the aid of the laboratory tests of slit lamp examination and echocardiography.³

Large hands and artistic genius

Does entertaining this conjecture help at all in understanding the life of Rachmaninov? His life was plagued by minor illness, which

had important consequences for his musical career both as a composer and as a performer. Thus, at intervals from his mid-30s, in addition to the eye strain and headaches, he suffered disabling back pain, stiffness of the hands, arthritis, and, for a while, a strange bruising of the finger tips while performing at the piano (a microvascular fragility, perhaps the result of connective tissue disorganisation arising from the syndrome), all of which seriously interfered with his work. The stoical manner in which he faced his final illness makes it unlikely that these were trivial complaints magnified by hypochondria; but when seen in terms of Marfan's syndrome they allow us to have a better appreciation of his difficulties.

In conclusion, I should add that Rachmaninov's eminence as a pianist was founded as much on his interpretation of the music of others, especially Chopin, as on the extraordinary virtuosity he displayed in performing some of his own compositions. Undoubtedly, his hands contributed to his virtuosity; but for his interpretation of others' work it was artistic genius, not large hands, that made his performance so memorable.

References

- 1 Smith C. *Duet for three hands*. London: Angus and Robertson, 1958:79, 82.
- 2 Walker BA, Murdoch JL. The wrist sign: a useful physical finding in the Marfan syndrome. *Arch Intern Med* 1970;126:276-7.
- 3 Pyeritz RE. Marfan syndrome. In: Emery AEH, Rimoin DL, eds. *Principles and practice of medical genetics*. Vol 2. London: Churchill Livingstone, 1983:820-35.
- 4 Bertensson S, Leyda J. *Sergei Rachmaninoff—a lifetime in music*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1965.
- 5 Norris G. *Rachmaninov*. London: J M Dent and Sons Ltd, 1976.
- 6 Piggott P. *Rachmaninov*. London: Faber and Faber, 1978.
- 7 Gordon AM. Abraham Lincoln—a medical appraisal. *J Ky Med Assoc* 1962;60:249-53.
- 8 Schwartz H. Abraham Lincoln and the Marfan syndrome. *JAMA* 1964;187:473.

Enthusiasms: a tropical wreath for Liszt

V BASNAYAKE

Franz Liszt, born on 22 October 1811, died on 31 July 1886. Too poor to visit his grave in Bayreuth but enriched beyond words by his music, let me commemorate the centenary of his death by winding a wreath of tropical flowers as a thank offering before the muse.

The inmost array of the wreath shall be of jasmines, bestrewn with a dozen of another fragrant flower, the purple brunfelsia, to mark my gratitude for the 12 études, written by Liszt at the age of 15. These piano studies are excellent fare for amateur performers who lack the time or the talent to play concert études such as those of Chopin or the later Liszt. For me the 12 studies have been daily company for years, though numbers 5 and 10 remain difficult. In 1820, at the age of 9, Liszt gave his first public concert in his native land, Hungary. From then on he received international recognition as a prodigy. The Paris press called the 12 year old boy the eighth wonder of the world. Gall, the phrenologist, wished to make a plaster cast of the Wunderkind's head.

The second whorl of my wreath shall be bright with the flower of the flamboyante to denote the young adult phase of Liszt, when he was virtuoso supremo in pianoforte performance, exerting a magical

Franz Liszt. (By permission of the Royal College of Music.)

effect on his audiences. To this day Liszt is synonymous with the ultimate in piano virtuosity. His *Transcendental Studies*, which are a transmogrification of the aforementioned 12 studies, the *Paganini Studies*, and the *Operatic Transcriptions* of this period are unapproachable except to virtuosos. But difficult pieces are often

interspersed with simpler ones that come within the scope of the amateur. The zealous collector of piano scores will come across many marvellous items that he might easily miss if he depended on the vagaries of concert artists and recording companies for his knowledge of the master's repertoire. To mention only a few such items: *Apparitions*, *Ballade No 1*, and the *Bells of Geneva*.

Liszt's hands were narrow with long, slender fingers that were so supple and flexible that an American piano student of his, Amy Fay, wrote, "He seems to have twice as many joints as other people. . . . It makes me nervous to look at them."

The third whorl of flowers in my wreath shall be the magenta Indian queen of flowers, for the period of Liszt's life when, abandoning in his 37th year the glitter of the virtuoso, he settled down to compose, to conduct, and to champion the cause of innovative fellow composers, especially Wagner. Liszt's compositions during this period include the *Symphonic Poems* (a term he invented), the *Faust* and *Dante* symphonies, and the *Sonata*.

A fourth circle of flowers shall be from the temple tree. In his 54th year Liszt took minor orders in the Roman Catholic priesthood, becoming the Abbé Liszt; he dressed in a black soutane ever afterwards. In his later 50s he periodically entered into states of mystical non-attachment, which he called *santa indifferenza*. I have an unpublished handwritten note from Aldous Huxley, dated 26 October 1961, which reads:

The *santa indifferenza* of Liszt is certainly the "holy indifference" advocated by St Francois de Sales and other spiritual writers in the Catholic mystical tradition. And this in turn is obviously identical with the non-attachment advocated in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Being ignorant of Sanskrit and Pali, I don't know the original phrase—but would guess that it might easily be translated as "holy indifference." Needless to say, "holy indifference" is not at all the same thing as plain, unholy indifference, and is fully compatible with an intense concern for goodness, beauty and truth.

The final circle of flowers is for Liszt's old age. He still retained his charisma at the piano, although he wished to avoid playing in public. Weingartner, who in his youth had heard the old master play, wrote: "His touch was a thing of glory to dream about. If he played a melody it was as if flowers sprang into being under his fingers—in spite of the fact that he kept his arms and his body so still

that one formed the impression that he was not playing at all, but bringing forth sounds from the piano by magnetism." But what a strange old man Liszt became in regard to the music he wrote. He abandoned the hummable tune, the luscious harmony, the coruscant brilliance. He wrote curious gloomy music. The Liszt Society, through its publications, has now made these forgotten and unknown works available to the public. The titles of many of these late works read like a thesaurus of the sombre: *Bagatelle sans tonality*, *From cradle to grave*, *Csárdás macabre*, *Dry bones*, *Elegy*, *Evil star*, *Farewell*, *Forgotten romance*, *Forgotten waltzes*, *Funeral gondola*, *Funeral march*, *Funeral prelude*, *At the graveside*, *Mephisto polka*, *Mephisto waltz Nos 2, 3, and 4*, *Sleepless*, *Question and answer*, *Storm clouds*, *There are tears for things*, *Threnody*, *Way of the cross*.

I now need a strange flower for my wreath. Perhaps the white queen of the night that fills the nocturnal air with a strong perfume of its own? Or the flowers of grasses, which have shed their power to attract the birds and bees and have courted the wind that blows where it lists?

Tolstoy's prescription for the craft of writing was "clearness, beauty, simplicity, and compression." Liszt's last gerontic works are lucid, simple, and compressed but hardly euphonious to the unaccustomed ear. Liszt was an experimentalist who was ever revising his work, a fastidious craftsman who held back publication, often for years, and one of the greatest musical innovators who ever lived. In his time his works drew extremely adverse criticism, which he bore with quiet dignity. He declared: "I hurl a lance as far as possible into the boundless realms of the future. We can afford to wait!"

Let Franz Liszt have the last word.

I wish, and urgently entreat and command, that my burial may take place without show, and be as simple and economical as possible. Let there be no pomp, no music, no procession in my honour, no superfluous illuminations, or any kind of oration. Let my body be buried, not in a church, but in some cemetery, and let it not be removed from that grave to any other. I will not have any other place for my body than the cemetery in use in the place where I die, nor any other religious ceremony than a quiet mass in the parish church (not any kind of requiem to be sung). The inscription on my tomb might be "Et habitabunt recti cum vultu suo."

The City Lunatic Asylum, near Dartford (Wellcome Institute Library).