EMINENT SCHOLAR
SERIES PRESENTS
JAMES TOCCO, piano
FRANZ LISZT
HARMONIES POÉTIQUES ET RELIGIEUSES (complete)

PROGRAM NOTES, cont.

cataclysmic proportions (also utilizing unusual meters of 7/8 and 7/4), which leads to an incantation – fortissimo and in the lowest register of the instrument – of the Latin hymn “De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine” (From the depths I cried out to you, O Lord). The manner in which this is developed and subsequently resolved is nothing short of miraculous. The piece ends with a simple, repeated utterance, on a unison G, of the rhythm corresponding to the word “Domine”. In Funérailles (Funeral Rites), Liszt paints a profoundly moving portrait of the death of three Hungarian patriots, all friends of his, who were executed following the Hungarian uprising of October 1849. It is a powerful threnody worthy to stand in the tradition of funeral music set by Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin.

I doubt that Liszt ever thought Harmonies would be performed as a single work. Rather, I believe he intended the individual pieces, including the more liturgical ones, as grist for meditation and devotional study. Nevertheless, similar collections - one calls to mind Bach’s Goldberg Variations, Chopin’s 24 Preludes or Messiaen’s Vingt regards sur L’Enfant Jésus - are now successfully realized as unbroken cycles. I have long felt a compelling need to bring Harmonies to life in this manner, and this evening’s performance is the realization of that dream.

-James Tocco

CCM has become an All-Steinway School through the kindness of its donors. A generous gift by Patricia A. Corbett in her estate plan has played a key role in making this a reality.

Tuesday, November 19, 2013
Robert J. Werner Recital Hall
8:00 p.m.
The spirit of renunciation that pervades much of Franz Liszt’s extraordinary compendium of pieces entitled Harmonies poétiques et religieuses is probably best explained by the fact that in 1849 he had decided to abandon the life of a touring virtuoso and accept an invitation by Grand-Duke Carl Alexander of Sachsen-Weimar to be “Kapellmeister Extraordinary” at his ducal palace, Weimar, the city of Goethe and Schiller, provided Liszt a suitable retreat where he could finally concentrate on serious composition as well as the advancement, through his conducting of orchestral concerts and opera, of a number of younger composers who represented the music of the future. Chief among these of course was Richard Wagner, who was ultimately to become Liszt’s son-in-law. There is a strong case to be made that Liszt, especially in his unconventional and boldly innovative use of harmony and freedom of form, exerted just as much influence on Wagner as Wagner did on Liszt. Evidence for this can be found in much of Harmonies poétiques et religieuses. Equally significant is the degree to which Russian and French composers of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries were indebted to Liszt’s use of pentatonic and whole-tone scales, close tritonal key relationships, harmonic resolutions significantly delayed or even absent, as well as an entire panoply of strikingly original pianistic devices and textures.

The direct inspiration for this set is a collection of poems with the same title by the French writer Alphonse de Lamartine, who was considered by his compatriots to be the first of the great romantic poets. Many of the original pieces in Liszt’s collection are prefaced by excerpts from the Lamartine poetry. Others are of a more purely religious nature, and these are often transcriptions or reworkings of sacred choral works by Liszt. Of particular note are the three magnificent centerpieces of the collection, pillars that soar to majestic heights. Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude (God’s Blessing in Solitude) is arguably one of the most beautiful works ever written for the instrument, and was a favorite of Liszt in his late years. The exquisitely diaphanous accompaniments wrought to embellish the aching, arching melody launched the entire French impressionistic style. Pensée des morts (Thoughts of the Dead) is a shattering depiction of souls awaiting deliverance from purgatory. One hears at the beginning a recitative, a lamentation with no clear harmonic resolution and in an inherently unstable meter (5/4), followed by an upheaval of...