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AN AUDIBLE TESTAMENT TO PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAGEDY

Abstract

The framework of this research is a fissure in time—June 2025—where wounds open in the air itself, and statistics cease to be numbers, becoming instead the fever charts of the collective soul. Within this ailing landscape, the analysis of Franz Liszt's *Funérailles* becomes a kind of surgical intervention. The objective, therefore, is to open the black body of the piano, to exhume the ontological testament concealed within it, for the hypothesis is a whisper from the deep: music is an unregulated space, a sanctuary from the laws of oblivion, where Chopin's final cough and the blood of the Arad martyrs circulate in a single shared bloodstream.

For this autopsy, instruments are indispensable. The scalpel is musical hermeneutics, by which the sonic body is dissected into its constituent layers. The spirits invoked—Hegel, Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger—haunt the interstices between the notes and offer their testimonies. The magnifying glass is historical context, which renders visible the erased traces of blood from 1849 on the manuscript paper. And what these instruments uncover is nothing less than a judgment. The result is this: *Funérailles* is not music but ritual—a performative retrial of History. Its triumphant central section is a radiant deception, hope a mayfly simulacrum annulled by the eternal law of mourning.

The work's hermeneutic indeterminacy thus becomes not its weakness, but its weapon—for through this it transforms into a universal tribunal. And herein lies the value of the research. Theoretically, it offers a new map for the anatomy of grief; practically, it reveals art as a counteragent—as an acoustic vaccine against collective amnesia, as proof that sonic beauty can grant jurisdiction even to that pain which the world would rather suppress.

Keywords: *mourning; piano; philosophy*

Introduction

On the horizon of June 2025, as the complex challenges of the present era unveil ever-newer dimensions of the vulnerability of human existence, a philosophical examination of Franz Liszt's elegiac piano composition, *Funérailles*, becomes indispensable. Within a national and European sphere where crisis phenomena profoundly affecting the deepest layers of the human psyche – including Hungary's lamentably prominent position in suicide statistics within the European Union (Rihmer & Gonda, 2013). These data poignantly attest to the burden of unprocessed individual and collective traumas, a pervasive sense of despondency, and communal experiences of loss. In this context, the artistic and philosophical contemplation of grief, tragedy, heroism, and temporality emerges as an urgent imperative for societal self-awareness, the critical re-evaluation of cultural memory, and the quest for solace. This context compels the interrogation of how

a work of art might address the most poignant wounds of our time and what pathways it might offer towards understanding in an epoch grappling with the experiences of meaninglessness and alienation. It is in light of these pressing questions that penetrating the deeper layers of Liszt's oeuvre becomes acutely relevant, where the dramas of personal and national destiny confront us with philosophical dilemmas of universal importance.

The present investigation therefore attempts to uncover, within the layers of this dense, enigmatic composition by Franz Liszt, those philosophical and musico-aesthetic mechanisms that elevate *Funérailles* beyond the category of mere funeral music, transforming it into an existential-ontological pronouncement. Beyond the documentary significance of the work's genesis – the Hungarian tragedy of 1848-49 and the death of Chopin – the central focus is the process whereby the composer, in the wake of these events, poses questions of universal validity concerning loss, the ethics of remembrance, the tragic nature of heroism, and the burden of existence in time. The analysis is structured around the premise that the musical language of *Funérailles* itself becomes a philosophical gesture: an unregulated space wherein ineffable sorrow, the suppressed narratives of history, and the uncodified rituals of mourning are given voice, thereby bypassing the potential constraints of official discourses and the cultural regulators of forgetting. To this end, the investigation concentrates on those pivotal concepts that delineate the interpretative framework of the work, and along which Liszt's musical testament initiates a dialogue with humanity that remains profoundly resonant to this day.

More about the audible testament

The conceptual quartet of grief, tragedy, heroism, and time encapsulates fundamental experiences of human existence, interweaving intellectual trajectories from Hegelian philosophy of history, through Kierkegaard's existential dilemmas, to Ricœur's theory of narrative identity (Ricœur, 1985). These concepts constitute points of condensation within the human condition, where the imperative to process loss, the drama of fate, the pathos of value-based conviction, and the consciousness of irreversible transiency coalesce into a single, complex phenomenological field. The triad of funeral, farewell, and rite, inherent in the title *Funérailles*, inherently opens an interpretative space that invites an acoustic exploration of these philosophical dimensions.

Here, grief cannot be reduced to a mere psychological reaction; its philosophical horizon can also be understood as a negative ontology, wherein the absence of the departed Other possesses constitutive force, reconfiguring the relational system of the world and the self (Derrida, 2003). Tragedy, transcending the commonplace narrative of suffering, enables the representation of irreconcilable value conflicts, the Hegelian struggle of 'world spirits' (Hegel, 1988), or indeed, the Camusian absurd within the musical sphere. Heroism, in this context, signifies defiant confrontation with tragic destiny, a moral fortitude upheld despite loss, the gesture of Kierkegaard's 'knight of faith' manifesting on the stage of history (Samson, 1992). The all-pervading dimension of time, in the case of *Funérailles*, is ritual time, the time of remembrance, which interrupts the

linearity of profane time and performatively inserts the past into the present, thereby creating the possibility for processing and transcendence.

The work was composed in October 1849, amidst the atmosphere of mourning and retribution following the collapse of the Hungarian War of Independence. In this historical vacuum, where open political expression was impossible and national mourning confined to private or artistic forms, *Funérailles* became one of the most harrowing documents of musical memory politics. Its implicit program, though not articulated by Liszt, is closely linked to the execution of Prime Minister Count Lajos Batthyány and the tragedy of the thirteen Martyrs of Arad (Hamburger, 2010). Alongside these events, the death of Frédéric Chopin in the same month wove a personal layer of grief into the collective trauma.

The musical language functions as an uncodified ritual of mourning, where the piano's monumental sonic capabilities evoke the profound depth of national cataclysm and the pathos of heroic struggle. Its dark, ominous tonality, dotted rhythms reminiscent of funeral marches, the weighty chords in the profound registers of the left hand, and the heroic-elegiac, march-like theme of the middle section collectively forge a musical narrative that embodies the duality of despondency and defiant remembrance. Its structure—an introductory funeral march, a middle section akin to a heroic apotheosis, followed by the return of an overwhelming grief—symbolically traces the arc of revolutionary hopes and their tragic denouement.

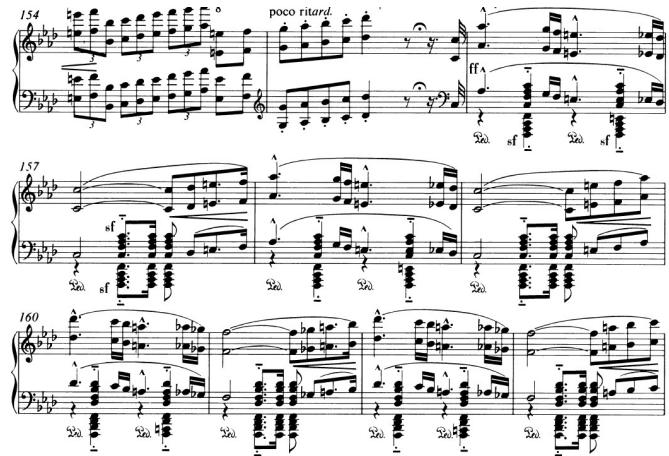
This musical process also engenders interpretive legal uncertainty. Despite the absence of explicit references, the historical allusions were likely palpable to contemporary audiences. For later generations, however, the work may acquire a more universal significance, interpretable as a broader symbol of the struggle against oppression and of generalized mourning, a notion supported by the contexts of its performance, which frequently occur in connection with memorial events.

The piece's central section, conceived as a heroic march reverberating in octaves, holds particular significance. It stands as a musical monument to fallen heroes, providing moral vindication within the realm of sound where political reality denied it. Alan Walker, too, posits that in these segments of the work, Liszt's musical rhetoric ascends to its zenith, expanding the piano almost into a symphonic apparatus (Walker, 1989). The music here operates as an unregulated historical testimony, offering an alternative form of remembrance that counters narratives silenced or distorted by official historiography and censorship.

Its formal structure and musical rhetoric, in my view, delineate a narrative arc that guides the listener from mourning through heroic struggle to a tragic conclusion. The opening, a solemn and dignified funeral march (Introduzione: Adagio), immediately establishes the atmosphere of a memorial service through its dotted rhythms and somber harmonic language. Subsequently, the octaves resounding in the left hand's deep registers, imitating the tolling of bells (alluding to *Lacrymosa* or the bell motif), further intensify the grim sense of grief, serving as an acoustic memento. These elements articulate the ritualistic act of loss and remembrance, transforming the musical material into a performative act of mourning.

The central section of the work, marked *Lagrimoso*, gradually shifts into a more passionate, struggle-laden character. Militant, march-like motifs and fanfares reminiscent of trumpet calls, coupled with escalating dynamics, prepare for the emotional climax. This culminates in a heroic outburst: a triumphant theme rich in octaves and chords in A-flat major or C major, demanding extraordinary technical and expressive power (Hamilton, 1996). These keys can be read as musical metaphors for hope, resistance, and the evocation of a glorious past.

Figure 1: *Quelle: Franz Liszt: Funérailles*



Source: *Neue Liszt-Ausgabe, Serie I, Band 9. Mező, I. & Sulyok, I. (Eds). (1981). Editio Musica.*

In light of Susanne Langer's aesthetics, the music here realizes a metaphorical reenactment of the dynamic forms of conceptual structures, such as struggle or heroism. The music does not directly depict these concepts but rather articulates their internal logic and emotional arc (Langer, 1996).

Following the heroic climax, the musical material gradually reverts to its initial mournful character, with the triumphant theme fragmentarily and brokenly recalled, signaling the tragic outcome of the struggle. The conclusion features the deep, resonant tolling of bells and a dark-toned recapitulation of the funeral march's material, providing a cathartic, albeit bleak, resolution.

The opening measures, in my view, embody universal musical codes of collective mourning, rooted in Western tradition and in more archaic layers of the human psyche. The dark-toned chords that begin the piece, moving in deep registers and reminiscent of bell tolls, combined with the *Adagio* tempo indication, collectively create a sonic space that almost immediately evokes associations with grief, solemnity, and final farewell. These musical gestures—the slow, heavy steps; the descending melodic lines; the preference for minor keys; the pain-expressing use of dissonances—appear as intercultural musical archetypes, capturing universal aspects of the experience of mourning. Leonard B. Meyer's argumentation also suggests that certain musical structures can elicit emotional responses by embodying patterns rooted in human experience e.g., the dynamics of tension and release (Meyer, 1961).

The introductory bell-like effects are particularly potent symbols. The sound of bells, in numerous cultures, signifies death, transience, remembrance, and the transition into a

sacred space. The profound depth of these associations raises the relevance of Carl Gustav Jung's theories on the collective unconscious and archetypes in understanding musical experience. According to Jung, archetypes are inherited, universal patterns and images residing in the collective unconscious, finding expression in myths, dreams, and artistic creations (Jung, 2024). Within this interpretive framework, the musical elements at the beginning of *Funérailles*, such as the somber tolling bells or the weighty rhythm of the funeral march, can activate ancient, collective experiences related to loss and death in the listener, functioning as acoustic archetypes.

These musical codes constitute an unregulated, consensually established semiotic system for the expression of mourning its temporal (Loya, 2011). There are no explicit laws or codified regulations dictating the musical means by which grief should be portrayed; yet, the use of these elements elicits an almost instinctive recognition and emotional resonance from a culturally conditioned listener. In the case of *Funérailles*, Liszt embeds these universally understandable codes within a specific historical context—the suppression of the 1848-49 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence—thereby creating a unique expression of collective mourning pertaining to a national tragedy.

The jurisprudential uncertainty of the musical symbols—that is, to precisely which event or person they refer—paradoxically enhances the work's universality, enabling listeners to project their own experiences of loss onto the piece. Thus, the music exercises transcendent jurisdiction over emotions, addressing deeper and more archaic layers than verbal discourse or formal regulatory systems could achieve. Raymond Monelle, in his work on musical topoi such as the *passus duriusculus* or the funeral march, similarly illuminates the role of these conventional, yet powerfully meaningful musical formulas in musical communication (Monelle, 2006). Liszt employs and transforms these topoi in *Funérailles*, crafting a poignant musical tableau of collective grief.

The work stands as a poignant example of the musical synthesis of individual sorrow and collective historical tragedy, where personal destiny and national cataclysm are inextricably intertwined. The piano, Liszt's most personal instrument, speaks with a pianist's voice, revealing the intimate spaces of individual grief and internal struggle. Its more lyrical, sorrowful episodes, the tear-filled sections marked *Lagrimoso*, and the softer, more fragmented gestures create the impression of a personal lament, in which the composer's subjective emotions find their sonic expression. In my view, the coincidence of Frédéric Chopin's death with the work's period of creation further strengthens this layer of personal mourning, where the pain over the loss of a friend resonates with the larger, national tragedy (Walker, 1989).

Parallel to and permeating this personal anguish, the musical codes of historical tragedy emerge. The militant, march-like motifs, fanfare-like signals, and the heroic outburst in the central section unequivocally depict the revolutionary thematic elements of the Hungarian War of Independence: the struggle, the hope, and subsequently, the defeat. These elements represent the collective experience and the nation's turning point, serving as a musical monument to communal mourning and the bitterness over a lost cause. This layer of the piece articulates the public, historical dimension, supporting the

thesis that the impact of historical events is deeply ingrained in individual destiny, inseparable from it. Charles Rosen also points out that Romantic music often sought to connect personal emotions with grand-scale, even historical, narratives, and Liszt was one of its preeminent masters (Rosen, 1998). In the musical fabric of the work, the boundaries between individual and collective tragedy blur, forming a jurisdictional overlap where personal and historical destinies interpret and reinforce each other. The pianist's lament gains deeper meaning within the context of the nation's mourning, while the historical tragedy becomes tangible and emotionally graspable through the prism of personal experience. The work's structural organization also reflects this interplay, with intimate, introspective moments alternating with monumental sections radiating communal pathos.

Consequently, the composition navigates an unregulated musical space where emotions and historical reflections can freely flow into one another, avoiding rigid formal or narrative codification. *Funérailles* thus immortalizes the experience that major historical upheavals inevitably shape individual destinies, and individual suffering becomes part of the collective trauma, its unique manifestation. In such works, the compositional subject effectively forms a litigious community with national destiny, where the individual voice becomes the bearer of the legal continuity of collective memory.

The central section of the piece can be described as a dramatic representation of heroic resistance and burgeoning hope, yet within the overall tragic context of the composition, it is unmasked as an illusory intermezzo, a simulacrum of hope. The sudden emergence of this section's powerful character—with the thundering octaves in the left hand, the expansive, fanfare-like melodies unfolding with broad gestures, and the monumental torrents of sound (in A-flat major or C major, featuring heroic, trumpet-like motifs)—evokes the final, desperate gesture of suppressed forces, a musical manifestation of defiance.

Here, the musical material seems to portray the glory of the past or a momentary triumph of the struggle, attempting a musical coup d'état against the prevailing atmosphere of mourning.

The musical narrative of *Funérailles*, however, does not elevate this heroic episode to the level of ultimate redemption or triumph; rather, hope here assumes a tragic character. Following the elemental outburst of the middle section, the music gradually recedes into the somber world of the opening funeral march. The heroic theme fragments, loses its power, and the dark harmonies of the funeral procession, along with the relentless tolling of bells, reaffirm the dominance of tragedy and transience. This structural organization—the dramatic arc of mourning → heroic episode → returning mourning—supports the interpretation that heroism, within the work's universe, is not a redemptive event, but merely a transient, albeit uplifting, moment overshadowed by ultimate demise.

Hope here emerges as a simulacrum: it evokes the possibility of victory yet remains ephemeral. Within the overarching legal order of the work, it cannot achieve lasting validity. Heroism is commemorated as a moral gesture, but its inadequacy in reversing historical calamity is painfully exposed. Jim Samson's analyses also address the

expressive and structural complexity underlying romantic virtuosity and heroic gestures in Liszt's works, which here manifests in the portrayal of hope's illusory nature (Samson, 2007). The hope-simulacrum of *Funérailles*'s middle section thus constitutes a peculiar musical imprint of 19th-century historical pessimism and Romantic irony, where the value of the heroic act stands on its own, independent of its ultimate, tragic outcome. The music here offers a retrial against the fact of historical defeat; however, the acquittal is withheld, and the jurisdiction of grief proves unshakable.

Its temporal unfolding creates a deeply structured narrative time, whose phases—the somber beginning, the heroic outburst, the painful retreat, and the final silencing—resonate with philosophical concepts of existential time experience heremenet (Kramer, 2003). This musical process transcends mere chronological succession; it forms a meaningful 'temporal fabric' that, in light of Martin Heidegger's or Paul Ricœur's understanding of time, can be interpreted as an ontological experience. While the work depicts events in time, time itself becomes the carrier and shaper of meaning within it. The musical 'temporal fabric' of *Funérailles* becomes an ontological experience by articulating fundamental temporal dimensions of human existence: remembrance, anticipation, presentness, and confrontation with loss.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) as the fundamental characteristic of human *Dasein*, not as objective, clock-measured time, but rather as the unified, ecstatic structure of being: the unity of orientation towards the future, thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) into the past, and active manifestation in the present (Heidegger, 2006).

The musical treatment of time in *Funérailles* evokes this Heideggerian concept by continuously presenting the weight of past tragedy (the suppression of the revolution, the death of heroes) within the musical now. This presence shapes the piece's progression and the course of processing grief. The heroic central section, a recollection of past glory and resistance, is embedded in the present pain, projecting the musical process towards future silencing and a tragic conclusion. The music here synthesizes the complex temporal experience of remembrance, present-day experience, and future fulfillment (or its absence).

Paul Ricœur, in his work *Temps et Récit*, emphasizes the role of narrative in structuring human temporal experience. He argues that through narrative, a mere chronological succession of events (episodic time) is configured into a meaningful story (narrative time) with a beginning, middle, and end (Ricœur, 1985).

In this sense, *Funérailles* functions as an instrumental narrative that organizes the chaotic experience of collective and individual trauma into a musically formed, emotionally and symbolically coherent temporal structure. The piece's plot—the introduction of mourning, the flash of heroic resistance, the fading of hope, and the ultimate resignation—constitutes an internal, lived time for the listener, where the relationships between musical events create meaning. Lawrence Kramer's writings similarly analyze how music can convey complex cultural and psychological meanings through narrative structures, treating temporality as a key element in this meaning-making process (Kramer, 1993).

The mere sound ascends to a philosophical manifesto; the radical treatment of the musical material engages in dialogue with fundamental questions of human destiny. The sharp, finely honed dissonances interwoven throughout the work transcend the mere mechanism of tension creation, instead proclaiming the inherent disharmony of existence, the acoustic embodiment of Sartrean existential anguish (Sartre, 1990). The incisive character of the sonorities and the consistent eschew of consonances map an acoustic landscape of a bleak worldview, promising resolution only sparingly, if at all. The frequent fragmentation of the harmonic fabric, the erosion or ambivalence of traditional progressions, foreshadows a state of being devoid of a transcendent organizing principle, where the illusion of resolution crumbles into dust.

The persistent deferral of cadences and the unwavering turning away from the repose of tonic centers during the formal development become a musical emblem of the Camusian absurd (Camus, 1973). This musical narrative approach, which rejects definitive conclusions, closely aligns with the existentialist realization that the human life path is not a solvable endeavor, but rather a ceaseless experience interwoven with pain and struggle. This realization unfolds in the score of *Funérailles*, echoing its genesis in Liszt's response of mourning to the suppression of the 1848-49 Hungarian War of Independence and its martyrs (Walker, 1989). The ominous, bell-tolling bass lines and the dramatic alternations between heroic struggle and subsequent numb despair are the acoustic stigmata of this compulsion to process; from the deepest layers of sound emanates the drama of a bleak confrontation with finite and often tragic humanity. In this manner, the musical gestures transmute into a veritable ontological creed, in which the notes carry the leaden weight of existence and the resigned knowledge of the unattainability of resolution.

The category of mourning in this work extends far beyond the mere concept of an emotional response to loss; it transforms into a performative act, a deliberate resistance against the imperative of oblivion. The work of remembrance encoded within the musical fabric (Assmann, 2013) constitutes a heroic gesture, created in defiance of the obfuscation of historical trauma—the downfall of the 1848-49 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence. The monumental scale of the composition and the weighty, somber pathos of its funeral march elements inherently elevate the piece into an acoustic monument, articulating the processing of collective trauma and a tribute to the victims (Walker, 1989). Within this interpretive framework, the militant, march-like central section of *Funérailles*, featuring the renowned octave passages, functions not only as a recollection of past struggle but also as a perpetuation of suppressed ideals and the spirit of resistance. At this juncture, the musical narrative portrays mourning as active defiance: the fact of loss does not act as a debilitating force but rather becomes a source of moral integrity and the obligation to remember.

The work can thus also be read as a hidden political statement, where musical forms and dramatic climaxes are metaphorical expressions of an oppressed nation's tragedy and its unextinguished will to live. The sonic violence, dissonances, and unexpected modulations reflect an internal struggle that, instead of passively accepting grief, opts for its active experience, using memory as a weapon. The composition, through the aesthetics

of mourning, thereby formulates an ethical imperative: resistance to the allure of forgetting and the preservation of lessons embedded in historical allegories (Connerton, 1989).

The musical idiom of *Funérailles* supports the thesis that within historical consciousness, the threads of individual grief and collective tragedy are inextricably interwoven. Liszt's treatment of the piano capitalizes on the instrument's inherent duality: the piano is simultaneously the mediator of the most intimate personal anguish—the subjective confession of a pianist's voice—and an acoustic entity capable of evoking an almost orchestral apparatus to render the overwhelming drama of national cataclysm. In the sighs of the *Lagrimoso* and the more transparent textures reflecting personal sorrow over Chopin's loss, the lyrical manifestations of individual grief emerge. Concurrently, and permeating this, the somber procession of the funeral march, the ominous tolling of bells, and the march-like, fanfare gestures of heroic struggle elevate the work into the sphere of collective memory, where the tragedy of the 1848-49 events resonates.

The musical structure's continuous oscillation between these two registers—the private and the public—the interplay of personal lament and historical tableau, and the musical unmasking of the heroic outburst's illusory nature (as the triumphant fanfares brokenly recede into the dark tones of mourning) all reinforce that individual destiny inevitably shares in the community's fate during historical storms.

Thus, *Funérailles* transforms into an acoustic monument of historical memory, where the individual tear and the tide of collective tragedy appear as a single, stirring musical process, indelibly imprinting this indivisible duality of human existence into the consciousness of posterity.

The foregoing analysis illuminates how Liszt's *Funérailles* transcends into a universally resonant meditation on the tragedy of human existence, the arduous process of confronting loss, the fallibility of heroism, and the creative yet burdensome power of memory. A meticulous examination of its musical toolkit has revealed how the language of sound can articulate philosophical depths and existential experiences.

Summation

The work thus embodies art's transcendent capacity to provide a dignified, profound space for confronting the most painful truths, for voicing the unspeakable, and for engaging in an essential, if not always redemptive, dialogue with historical wounds. Consequently, the piece is not a monument gazing into the past, but rather an everlasting musical testament addressing the present, probing the depths of the soul. Within the uncodified domain of grief and before the tribunal of history, it asserts the unassailable right to remembrance and dignity, demonstrating that art can give voice and jurisdiction even to pains and truths that history seeks to suppress.

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