OCR AoS5 and Pre-U topic B1: Liszt's *Prometheus* and Dvořák's *The Noon Witch*

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Introduction

Cambridge International's Pre-U syllabus specifies 'a tone poem by Liszt', while the OCR A level Area of Study 5 covers programme music from 1820 to 1910.
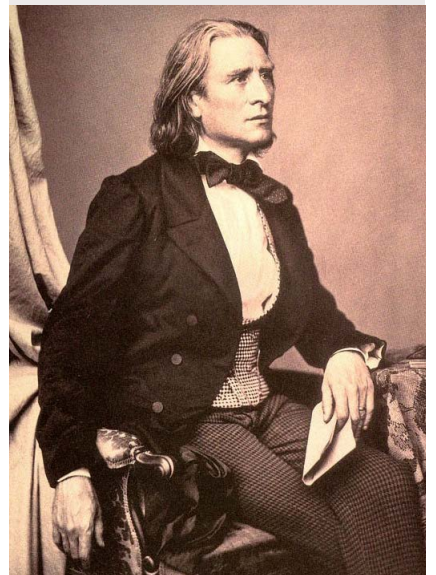
This resource will consider two works:
► Liszt's *Prometheus*, written in 1850, the fifth of his 13 symphonic poems.
► Dvořák's *The Noon Witch*, written in 1896, the second of his later set of five symphonic poems.

Liszt originated the idea of the tone poem, building on earlier programmatic concert overtures, and intending to capture the inventiveness of a whole symphony into one movement. He explored cyclical form and thematic transformation in order to achieve this, and later composers, mainly from central Europe and Russia, used similar ideas.

Prometheus, like many tone poems, does not follow the storyline of its programme slavishly, but rather takes a 'broad brush' approach to the themes it contains. *The Noon Witch*, by contrast, takes a very direct narrative approach, and makes a good comparison.

In this resource, each work will be considered under broad headings of elements, as this is how exam questions tend to be worded.

Franz Liszt in 1858

Liszt's *Prometheus*

Prometheus is the Greek god of fire. He stole fire from the gods and passed it on to humanity in order to advance civilisation. As punishment, Zeus had him chained to a rock with eagles eating his liver, which grew back and was eaten again every day. Eventually, Prometheus was freed from his imprisonment by the hero Heracles.

Liszt's tone poem is a distillation of his cantata *Prometheus Unbound* for choir and orchestra, where all the main thematic material appears. The tone poem does not tell Prometheus's story in any tightly linear narrative sense: do not go looking for musical representations of eagles pecking at his liver. Instead, Liszt takes the themes of the story – Prometheus's boldness, his suffering, and eventual redemption – and gives these a broader programmatic treatment.

The score for *Prometheus* is freely available from imslp.org. All the page numbers in this resource refer to this score. Liszt himself transcribed *Prometheus* for piano four hands and for two pianos. An organ solo transcription was made in 2008 by Jean Guillou.

Instrumentation and orchestration
Prometheus is scored for the following orchestra:
▶ Piccolo
▶ Two flutes
▶ Two oboes
▶ Cor anglais
▶ Two clarinets in C
▶ Two bassoons
▶ Four horns in E and F (these would have been natural horns, so players would have swapped crooks as necessary to cover the notes used in different chords/keys)
▶ Two trumpets in C
▶ Two tenor trombones
▶ Bass trombone
▶ Tuba
▶ Three timpani, played with hard and soft mallets
▶ Strings

This orchestra is used creatively for dramatic effect, showing Liszt's understanding of the functionality of the instruments used, and the precise sonorities he wanted to create. Explore these by asking your students to find the following (these are in order of appearance, but you could mix them up to increase challenge):

▶ Octave tripling
▶ Cellos playing a less complex version of the melody played by upper strings
▶ Double basses joining in with an idea to reinforce a crescendo
▶ A melody played in unison by cor anglais, bassoon and violas
▶ Muted strings (con sordino)
▶ Muted horns
▶ A melody played in octaves by trumpets and trombones
▶ Bassoons doubling strings
▶ An oboe solo
▶ A very independent viola part
▶ Double basses playing pizzicato when all other strings are playing arco
▶ A pedal note played by horns, timpani and double basses
▶ Quadruple stopping

Structure, melody and tonality

Prometheus is based on five themes:

1 Boldness (bar 1, page 3)

2 Lament (bar 28, page 6)

Notice the tritone here, in the first upward leap. This unstable interval is usually resolved upwards (think of *The Simpsons* theme, and 'Maria' from *West Side Story*), but here it is treated differently. This is very typical of Liszt's defiance of norms concerning resolution: you will find many of these throughout the piece.

3 Suffering (bar 48, page 8)

4 Hope of redemption (bar 129, page 22)

5 Perseverance (bar 161, page 26)

An overview of the structure of the piece, and the tonalities used, might look like this:

Section	Bars (beginning at)	Keys	Themes
Introduction	1	Unstable	Boldness
	13		Suffering
	27	Based on A dim 7th	Lament
Exposition: First theme	48	A minor	Suffering
Transition	78	Moves through C major, E minor, C sharp minor, F major	
Second theme	129	D flat major	Hope for redemption
Development	161	D flat major, A major, A minor	Perseverance
Introduction (fragments)	237	Unstable	Boldness
	245		Suffering
	250		Lament
Recapitulation: First theme	269	A minor	Suffering
Second theme	304	A major	Hope for redemption
Transition	322	A major	Perseverance
Second theme	364	A major	Final redemption
Coda	385	C major to A major	

The structure is a loose variant on sonata form, given that it has an exposition with two main themes, a development, and a recapitulation where we hear the two main themes with the same tonic. However, there are some things that are quite different from the 'standard' sonata form you might expect to see in (for example) a Mozart symphony:

▶ The introduction has its own themes, as well as a foreshadowing of the first main theme.
▶ Rather than moving to a closely related key for the second theme, Liszt chooses the remote key of D flat major.
▶ The development section introduces a new theme, rather than working with previous material.
▶ Development of the motifs happens in all sections, often straight away, and using melodic sequence.

This type of interpretation of sonata principles is typical of Liszt's tone poems. There is still a sense of tonal journey that results in a sense of returning 'home'. Liszt weaves in the idea of thematic transformation, which is one of his often-used techniques, and of course suits any programmatic idea that involves a narrative. Here, in the recapitulation, when Prometheus is finally redeemed, we hear the 'hope of redemption' theme in a new, triumphant version which is a stark contrast to its first statement at bar 129:

Another point to make regarding Liszt's approach to tonality is to do with his key relationships. Rather than focusing on a tonic/dominant axis, Liszt's modulations often move to a key a 3rd away, for example the move from F major to D flat major at the start of the second main theme, and the move away from A major to C major at the start of the coda, in order then to return to the tonic of A major at the very end. This kind of bold modulation is a mark of Liszt's enthusiasm for embracing the Romantic ideal of abandoning convention if the effect on the music was the desired emotional impact.

Many contemporary listeners found the tonal ambiguity of the introduction difficult to listen to. This was before the watershed moment of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* in 1858, and would have sounded extremely unfamiliar to audiences of the time.

Harmony

If tonic-dominant relationships are the foundation of functional harmony, Liszt is very choosy in *Prometheus* as to when he makes use of them, and when he actively avoids them. The opening passage, for example, demonstrates chromatic harmony that actively avoids establishing a key. The change in pedal note from F to F sharp ramps up the tension but there's no sense of dissonances resolving. From bars 13 to 26, the harmony moves through chords of C minor, A flat minor, A flat major and C sharp minor before settling on an A diminished 7th chord, which persists through the next section from bar 27 to bar 47. Diminished 7th chords are the most commonly used chromatic chords throughout the piece, and often have no sense of resolving in a conventional way, with both tritones resolving inwards:

Another example of the way that Liszt avoids conventional tonic-dominant polarity is in bars 78-83, where alternating chords a tritone apart (D and G sharp) appear. Tritones, historically known as 'diabolus in musica' owing to their destabilising qualities, are about as far as it is possible to get harmonically from functional harmony while still in a triadic system.

The section from bar 129 is much more harmonically stable, establishing the key of D flat major using primary triads, although the chord of E major is used to give a chromatic inflexion. The section ends with a long Ab7 chord acting as dominant preparation for the beginning of the fugue subject at bar 160. The fugue does indeed start off with conventional tonic-dominant relationships between the subject and answer, but from bar 206 the harmony becomes more unstable until diminished 7th chords again begin to proliferate.

Another interesting example of harmonic relationships comes in the final passage of *Prometheus*. Although the key of A major feels firmly established, and the final nine bars are based solely on the tonic chord, Liszt precedes this not with dominant preparation on an E or E7 chord, but with juxtaposition of A major with F minor. This is another example of Liszt using tertiary relationships (a 3rd apart).

Texture

There are many moments in *Prometheus* with effective and easily spotted examples of antiphony. Finding these, and looking at how Liszt groups the instruments in his antiphonal exchanges, can be a very helpful activity to gain understanding of the composer's approach to orchestration.

Perhaps the most interesting textural feature of *Prometheus*, though, is the fugal passage from bar 161. This starts with a very conventional fugal exposition, with the following entries:

1 Subject in the tonic key, played by cellos and violas (bars 161-164)
2 Answer in the dominant key, played by the violas and second violins (bars 164-168)
3 Subject in the tonic key, played by the first violins (bars 168-172)
4 Answer in the dominant key, played by the cellos (bars 171-175)

There is then an episode from bar 175 to bar 197 featuring development of material from the subject and countersubject, often sequential. There follows a second exposition from bar 198 onwards, with a long sequence and a new countersubject in the woodwind. Look out for the subject appearing in rhythmic augmentation. From bar 214 there is a second episode with more freely contrapuntal writing and more melodic sequences. Spot part of the subject in diminution at bar 214 and in inversion at bar 225.

Dvořák's *The Noon Witch* (*Polednice*)

This is a good piece to contrast with *Prometheus*, as the music follows the story much more closely. Like many Slavic folk tales, the story of the Noon Witch is rather grisly. A child and his mother are together at home while she is cooking lunch. The child is playing with a toy cockerel that makes a rather irritating noise, and he is warned by his mother that continued bad behaviour will result in the Noon Witch arriving to take him away. He pays no attention, and continues to play with his cockerel. At midday, the terrifying witch appears and demands the child. There is a chase, with the mother trying to protect her child, which ends with her fainting with the child in her arms. Later on, the father arrives home and revives his wife, only to find that their son is dead, smothered beneath her when she fainted.

All references to bar and page numbers are from this score on imslp.org.

Instrumentation and orchestration

Dvořák's orchestra for *The Noon Witch* is similar to that of *Prometheus*, although without the cor anglais and with the addition of bass clarinet, cymbals, bass drum, triangle and a tubular bell. The oboe represents the child's toy cockerel, and the bass clarinet represents the witch herself. The tubular bell appears only once, chiming 12 times as the clock strikes noon, reminding us of *Danse macabre*, Saint-Saëns's tone poem of 1874 – although in that work, the clock strikes midnight and signals the start, rather than the end, of the otherworldly goings-on.

As before, orchestration is employed skilfully to link with the programme. Again, a 'treasure hunt' of features can get students engaged with the score. Ask them to locate the following features (given here in order of appearance):

► A folk-like drone in open 5ths played by bassoons
► A longish stretch where the strings do not play, and the musical action is carried mostly by woodwind
► Oboe imitiating cockerel
► Full string section playing in octaves
► A 'pesante' marking
► A triangle roll
► Horns I and II in dialogue with horns III and IV
► A 'sempre marcatissimo' marking
► Clarinets doubled by bassoon
► String tremolo
► A pedal note played by the bass clarinet
► Muted strings
► Bass clarinet doubled by bassoon
► Pizzicato string chords
► The one and only appearance of the tubular bell (labelled 'campana' on the score) – how many notes does it play?
► An oboe solo
► Muted horns
► Divisi violas
► Triple stopping

Structure and tonality

The Noon Witch is based on the following main themes:

1 The 'home' theme, representing domesticity and contentment (bar 5):

2 The child with his toy (bar 22):

3 The mother (bar 61)

4 The Noon Witch herself (bar 265)

The work as a whole falls into four sections. With the second being slow, and the third having the feeling of a scherzo, it makes the tone poem feel rather like a condensed symphony:

Section	Bar number (from)	Plot	Key	Musical details
1: The home	1	A picture of domesticity: the son plays while the mother cooks	C major	Woodwind-dominated, and with a drone in open 5ths; has a folk-like, pastoral mood
	22	The sound of the boy's cockerel toy starts to become irritating	Leans to F major, but is pulled back to C	The solo oboe plays the boy's theme, with its repeated B flats disrupting the tonality of the home key. A perfect cadence takes us back to C.
	35	Peace is briefly restored	C major	A repeat of the 'home' theme
	45	The boy's toy irritates yet again		This time the boy's theme interrupts with an unexpected A flat.
	52			The boy's theme is developed in the strings, in octaves
	61	The mother admonishes her son	E flat to C	We hear the mother's theme, which returns to C major via an interrupted cadence
	72	The boy continues to misbehave		Further development of the boy's theme.
	86	The mother admonishes him again	A minor	A new version of the mother's theme
	102	The mother threatens the child that the witch will come for him		At bar 110 we hear a foreshadowing of the accompaniment to the witch's theme
	122	A return to the opening: the whole scene is played out again	C major	'Home' theme
	140		Hint at F	Boy's theme
	152		C major	'Home' theme
	162			Boy's theme with A flat as before
	178		E flat to C	Mother's theme
	203		A minor	Development of the mother's theme – now more fully orchestrated, and with interjection of the boy's theme
	250	The witch appears		Unexpected A flat offbeat octaves in bass trombone, tuba, cellos, and basses
2: The witch	252	The witch takes shape	Unclear: based on diminished 7ths	Alternating chords on muted strings set up a spooky mood. The string writing feels like a precursor to Bernard Herrmann's film scores
	265	The witch demands the child	E flat minor tonal centre, but unstable	We hear the witch's theme played by bass clarinet and bassoon
	274		Moving to C sharp minor	Immediate development of the witch's theme
	282			The witch's accompaniment returns
	295		F sharp minor moving to G minor	A further statement of the witch's theme
	303			Development of the witch's theme, similar to bar 274
3: The chase	312	The witch chases the mother and child	E minor to C minor and A minor	Development of the witch's theme including bold statements of the theme in brass, and a fragment of the theme turned into a countermelody. Alternating time signatures give the chase a dance-like quality.
	400	The mother screams and collapses	Unstable	The woodwind and horns play the mother's scream. The music subsides as she collapses.
	434	The clock strikes 12 and the witch disappears	Unstable; feels like dominant preparation	The only appearance of the bell, with an A7/G chord

	457	The father returns home	D major	A new idea with contrary motion scales
4. Father's return and conclusion	465	The father finds his wife unconscious		An oboe solo plays a version of the mother's theme
	477			The witch's accompaniment figure is developed, as the consequences of her visit become evident
	481	The mother regains consciousness	A major	
	487		A minor	Dramatic change to minor key and maestoso
	491	They realise that the boy is dead		Final dramatic statement of witch's theme in trumpets and horns. Use of the flat supertonic give a Phrygian twist to the final cadence

Harmony

In the broadest sense, Dvořák's approach to harmony in *The Noon Witch* is much more tonal than Liszt's in *Prometheus*, and there is much less of a sense of absence of resolution. We hear more use of dominant-tonic relationships to establish or change keys, provide expectation-confounding twists, and examples of dominant preparation, for example:

► When we first hear the boy's theme, the oboe's B flat disrupts the C major tonality, and hints at F major. However, C major re-establishes itself via a perfect cadence.
► As we approach bar 72 we're expecting a perfect cadence in C major. However, it turns out to be an interrupted cadence, heralding a return of the boy's theme, this time with a fuller orchestration.
► At bar 84 the octave Es provide dominant preparation for a passage in A minor, with a dominant pedal.
► At bar 434 the clock chimes over an A7 chord in third inversion, providing dominant preparation for a passage in D major.

However, there are also some similarities with Liszt's approach in the more ambiguous moments, particularly in the second section. Like Liszt, Dvořák frequently uses diminished 7th chords, for example in the witch's accompaniment figure, and later at bar 465 when the father finds the mother unconscious. Also in a similar fashion to Liszt, harmonic instability is often accomplished through use of sequences, heard frequently in the witch's section where the sequences feel like shifting sand, hinting at E flat minor, then B minor and by way of a sequence to E minor.