

## Liszt's Liebestraum No. 3: History Surrounding His Famed Work

Grace Stevens

Music 242: Music Theory V

March 23, 2026

### *Abstract*

This paper covers an analytical approach to Franz Liszt's work *Liebestraum* No. 3, written in 1850. This song is known for expressing intense, raw emotion. There were many historical factors that influenced the composing of this piece, for example, the death of Liszt's close friend Frédéric Chopin, and Liszt's recent move to Weimar, Germany to court a princess. It was written in memory of Chopin, and imitated many of Chopin's notable techniques in the field of nocturnes. It was composed as a set of three pieces dealing with different aspects of love, with each being called a "dream of love". One of the most distinctive parts of Liszt's third *Liebestraum*, are the grand cadenzas between sections, which represent transitions between waking life and sleep. The piece provides quite a challenge for any performer, with flurried arpeggiated chords, and held notes that demand strength. Overall, *Liebestraum* No. 3 is distinctive in its genre for its unusual chord makeup, and constant key changes, and well deserves its place of renown today.

*Keywords:* Liszt, Chopin, nocturne, love, cadenza, arpeggiated

A celebrated piece to come out of the Romantic Era is Franz Liszt's *Liebesträume* No. 3. It was written as a German *lieder* and set to a love-focused poem penned by Ferdinand Freiligrath. It demonstrates developmental techniques of the era, while also breaking parts of the mold at the time. It is harmonically complex, and is a stand-out piece for the era it was written in. The love-based lyrics give the piece an extra layer of depth and meaning. It was written as a product of various factors within the composer's personal life, including the death of a close friend and a new romance in a new place.

The Hungarian composer Franz Liszt lived and wrote during the Romantic era of music, and is recognized by many to be one of the most influential composers for piano during his lifespan. Frédéric Chopin and Robert Schumann were both significant influences in his composing style. *Liebesträume* No. 3 is part of a trio of piano pieces each relating to a different form of love. All three are adapted from art songs that Liszt had previously written. The later composed *Liebesträume*s have far surpassed the original works in popularity. There are three poems written by Ferdinand Freiligrath and Ludwig Uhland. The date of composition for the third *Liebesträume* is placed sometime in 1850, following the death of Liszt's close friend Chopin in 1849. At this time Liszt had settled in Weimar, Germany, and was courting the princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein. She was the person who had persuaded Liszt to give up his career as a piano virtuoso and focus on being a composer. As a tribute to Chopin, Liszt slightly deviated from his usual compositional style and wrote more pieces in Chopin's typical genres, like *Nocturnes*, *Ballades*, and *Etudes*. Some of Chopin's most famous examples of these are his *Nocturne in E-flat Major*, his *Ballade No.1 in G minor*, and his *Etude Op. 10 No. 3 (Tristesse)*. A well-known Liszt piece that is thought to be patterned after Chopin's *Nocturne Op. 27, No. 2*, is Liszt's *Consolation no. 3 in D-flat Major*. Previous to when Chopin was writing *Nocturnes*, it

was first made common by John Field, an Irish composer in the early 1800s. One of Field's more well-known works, that Liszt even called a "genuine masterpiece" (Lai and Lai 2025), is his Nocturne No. 18 in E Major, also known as "Le Midi". Field's Nocturnes usually consisted of a singable melody in the right hand over arpeggiated chords. Chopin developed the Nocturne by using more adventurous chords, like chromatic mediants, and various augmented sixth chords. He also introduces more counterpoint in the left hand, and variance in textures throughout the song. Chopin typically used a simple ternary structure in his Nocturnes. His pieces in this style also deviate from Field's compositions in that they are intended to be played with liberal rubato. Liszt's *Liebestraum* No. 3 reflects the thicker textures and more complex counterpoint that Chopin was using in his Nocturnes. Liszt also employs less conservative chords, like a German augmented sixths and even uses chords built upon a raised tonic.

*Liebestraum* No. 3 was written as part of a set of three. Each of the three pieces were called 'dreams of love' with each exploring different parts of love. The first of the trio is about exalted love and carries religious themes concerning surrendering worldly cares for heaven. It is set with a poem called "Hohe Liebe" by Ludwig Uhland. The second song is about erotic love and is also set to a poem by Uhland, "Seliger Tod". *Liebestraum* No. 3 was set with a poem by Freiligrath, and it is about unconditional love. The English translation of the poem, according to Scott Horton is as follows:

"O love, as long as love you can,  
 O love, as long as love you may,  
 The time will come, the time will come  
 When you will stand at the grave and mourn!  
 Be sure that your heart burns,  
 And holds and keeps love  
 As long as another heart beats warmly  
 With its love for you  
 And if someone bears his soul to you  
 Love him back as best you can

Give his every hour joy,  
 Let him pass none in sorrow!  
 And guard your words with care,  
 Lest harm flow from your lips!  
 Dear God, I meant no harm,  
 But the loved one recoils and mourns.”

When accompanying a vocalist, Liebestraum No. 3 has some alterations to make it highlight the singer more clearly. Many of the arpeggiated chords in the left hand are removed, and there's only an octave on the downbeat in the bass. The version of Liebestraum No. 3 with lyrics is a bit more difficult to procure, since it is filed under S. 298 with the title “O Liebestraum so Lang du Lieben Kannst”, instead of S.541 like Liebestraum No. 3. The overall texture is much lighter, and it has an additional piano intro. In the middle of the “dream” narrative, the singer has a few more solo moments, apart from the piano to let vocal skill shine. The piano accompaniment at that time also takes on a more march-like beat, with clear short chords.

It is written in a rounded ternary form. The “A” section of this Nocturne is written in Ab major, with brief tonicizations sprinkled throughout. For most of the initial A section, there is only one note in the bass, aside from the occasional melodic note. Nearing the first cadenza, there are usually two notes in the bass, but they are far apart, the smallest interval being an octave, and the largest being a tenth. Liszt tonicizes the key of Bb minor, F minor, and, most surprisingly, A minor. When compared to Liebestraum No. 2, it is a dramatic shift in tone. This second Liebestraum is written in E major, and features descending cascading motives throughout. Considering that erotic love was seen as confined to marriage, and that the German opinions on it were very structured at the time, Liebestraum No. 2 reflects that well, being much less free-flowing than the two pieces that surround it. Since the third Liebestraum is focused on a theme of unconditional love, it strives throughout to create a large sound. Unconditional love is

associated with the joy and freedom that comes with being loved with no limits. The third Liebestraum pushes the limits of what is possible on the piano, with flurrying cadenzas, and arpeggiated chords under held notes, all while challenging the performer to constantly express the emotion through dynamics. The first piece has some arpeggiated chords that are very similar to what we hear in the beginning of Liebestraum No. 3. The third Liebestraum begins in the same key that Liebestraum No.1 is written in, and serves as a link to that. At measure twenty-four there is a cadenza that signals the entrance to the “B” section of the piece, often thought of by analysts as representing entering a dream. The cadenza builds quickly upwards through trilling chords. At the end of the B section, there is another cadenza that leads to the original key by way of fast descending motion. In comparison to the first cadenza it is a lighter texture and a bit more discordant, possibly signalling the harsh transition to real life in the waking process. Towards the end of the cadenza, it spirals upward just briefly by motion of minor seconds and even a tritone. During the B section, Liszt plays around in several different keys, including B Major, C major, and E Major. He never stays long in any, but he brings back a motive again and again, each time striving to make it more powerful. The B section just grows and grows, until the melody is painfully clear in comparison to the relative subtlety at the beginning of the piece.

In closing, Liebestraum No. 3 has a deep history surrounding it. Liszt’s personal life had a deep influence on his compositional decisions throughout the piece. It has rich arpeggiated textures, and an intended liberal use of rubato to express grand dreams of love. Through the flowing chords, the idea of a free love seems almost natural to the listener. All the thoughts that Liszt poured into this work are a testament to his skill as a composer.

## Bibliography

“About Franz Liszt.” n.d. Liszt Ferenc Memorial Museum and Research Centre.

<https://lisztmuseum.hu/research/about-franz-liszt-119943>.

Allysia, and Allysia. 2018. “Liebestraume by Liszt: A Musical Journey.” PianoTV.Net. April 2, 2018. <https://www.pianotv.net/2016/08/liszt-liebestraume-musical-journey/>.

Cook, Nicholas. “Liszt’s Second Thoughts: ‘Liebestraum’ No. 2 and Its Relatives.” *19th-Century Music* 12, no. 2 (1988): 163–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/746739>.

Duane. 2020. “The Story of Liebestraum.” PlayPiano. November 25, 2020.

<https://playpiano.com/classical-piano-for-beginners/the-story-of-liebestraum>.

Lai, Hermione, and Hermione Lai. 2025. “John Field 10 Most Beautiful Nocturnes.” Interlude HK Limited. January 27, 2025. <https://interlude.hk/john-field-10-most-beautiful-nocturnes/>.

Nairne, Julian. 2025. “Deep Dive Into Chopin’s Nocturnes: Romantic Masterpieces.” *Serenade Magazine*. July 12, 2025.

<https://serenademagazine.com/deep-dive-into-chopins-nocturnes-romantic-piano-masterpieces/>.

Team, View All Posts by Revue Des Romantiques. 2025. “Liszt’s Third Liebestraume: Background and Structure – Revue Des Romantiques.” November 8, 2025.

<https://revuedesromantiques.com/liszts-third-liebestraume-background-and-structure/>.

Walker, Alan, Maria Eckhardt, and Rena Charnin Mueller. 2001. *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Edited by Stanley Sadie. 2nd ed. Vol. 14. Oxford University Press.