

## *Totentanz*

Franz Liszt

transcribed by MGySgt Donald Patterson\*

Franz Liszt's reputation as an innovative composer and a virtuoso pianist is secure in music history. The fervor surrounding Liszt's performances rivaled that of rock or pop concerts today, with fans swarming the pianist and fighting over their hero's personal items such as gloves, broken piano strings, locks of hair, and even cigar stubs. Given the intensity of this social popularity, it is somewhat surprising to learn of Liszt's steadfast interest in inner questions of morality and religious life, leading him to describe music's role as simultaneously "dramatic and holy, splendid and simple, solemn and serious, fiery, stormy, and calm."

The virtuoso piano work *Totentanz*, then, must be viewed as more than just an impressively difficult showpiece for the pianist. The composer chose the "Dies Irae" chant from the Catholic Mass of the Dead as the theme for a set of six variations. The title *Totentanz*, or *Dance of the Dead*, refers to a popular tradition in medieval Europe of visually portraying Death visiting people of all ages and stations of life. Thus, each of Liszt's variations can be interpreted as examining the mortality of a new character, from youthful to frail and doubting to faithful, all within an exciting display of pianistic pyrotechnics.