This is the bicentenary of Franz Liszt's birth, and perhaps time for British audiences to reassess this great musical genius, who not only was a dazzling virtuoso on the piano, but a great composer and conductor as well. Tall and slim, with fair shoulder-length hair and sparkling green eyes, he "tore up the audience emotionally with his passionate approach to his piano playing", says North London author and playwright John Spurling, who has recently written a novel about Liszt's life: A Book of Liszts.

A man who came from nowhere, Liszt ended up mixing with aristocracy, knowing all the crowned heads of Europe and with a public that adored him. Considered the greatest pianist of his day, for years he had a touring schedule that pianists today would find punishing, until at the age of 36 he stopped abruptly and didn't play again except for charity events. He wanted to be able to concentrate on composing, and although he ended his life in relative poverty, he always had an entourage of aspiring young pianists around himself.

Liszt is at times dismissed as "superficial", says Spurling, yet he was the 'real father of modern music' as Bartok called him. "Some of his late pieces are atonal, and very difficult to appreciate, but the harmonic invention of the core pieces was very important, innovative music." Although Liszt wrote many short popular pieces, the body of his entire oeuvre is enormous, some 1400 separate piano pieces. He was constantly rewriting his work, polishing older pieces all the time. "His genius was expressed in his music and his life," says Spurling. "I want others to realise what an extraordinary composer he was." He dreams of creating "Lisztomania" again in this bicentenary year.

Liszt was a heart-breaker, and had a string of women to whom he was linked, most notably a young Countess and a Ukrainian princess, to say nothing of the others who fancied themselves as his muse. He became Richard Wagner's father-in-law, which broke an old musical friendship, and in later life took the lower orders of priesthood. His financial hardship was partly due to the fact that he never took money for the nearly 400 students he taught. It was the same generosity of spirit that made him rush to Vienna to play a concert for the victims of the flooded Danube in Pest which then catapulted him into stardom. Though his pleasure in the adulation of his youth had dimmed, he never lost his devout Catholic faith, despite the fact that the two loves of his life were married women.
Although Alan Walker has written the definitive English biography, Spurling felt the need to "express his feelings about Liszt" and he does so in a manner which is both playful and inventive, but does not tamper with the biographical facts. For example he creates a short play about the conversation the two musical giants may have had when Liszt told his old friend Wagner to leave his youngest daughter Cosmina alone. As an aside, Spurling adds that Cosmina took up the reins of Bayreuth after Wagner’s death, "so that it belongs as much to the children of Liszt as of Wagner."

Liszt toured Europe extensively and did numerous tours of Britain. On one early tour, the impresario didn’t recoup his money and although his fee was an enormous £2000, Liszt refused it. "Genie oblige", he would say. He was such a rare phenomenon because he genuinely cared for and tried to promote the music of other composers such as Wagner, Schumann and Berlioz and he took as his mission to help other musical talent in any way he could.

Spurling and pianist Grace Francis present a reading and performance of Liszt at King’s Place on 9 October, and at the Red Hedeghog later that month. There will be a few concerts at the South Bank Centre in November and December with Pierre-Laurent Aimard. Lang Lang includes Liszt on his programme at the Roundhouse iTunes Festival on 25 July. The BBC Proms features 11 Liszt concerts, including Lang Lang on the Last Night of the Proms. See also the Liszt Society for other concerts.