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JORGE BOLET

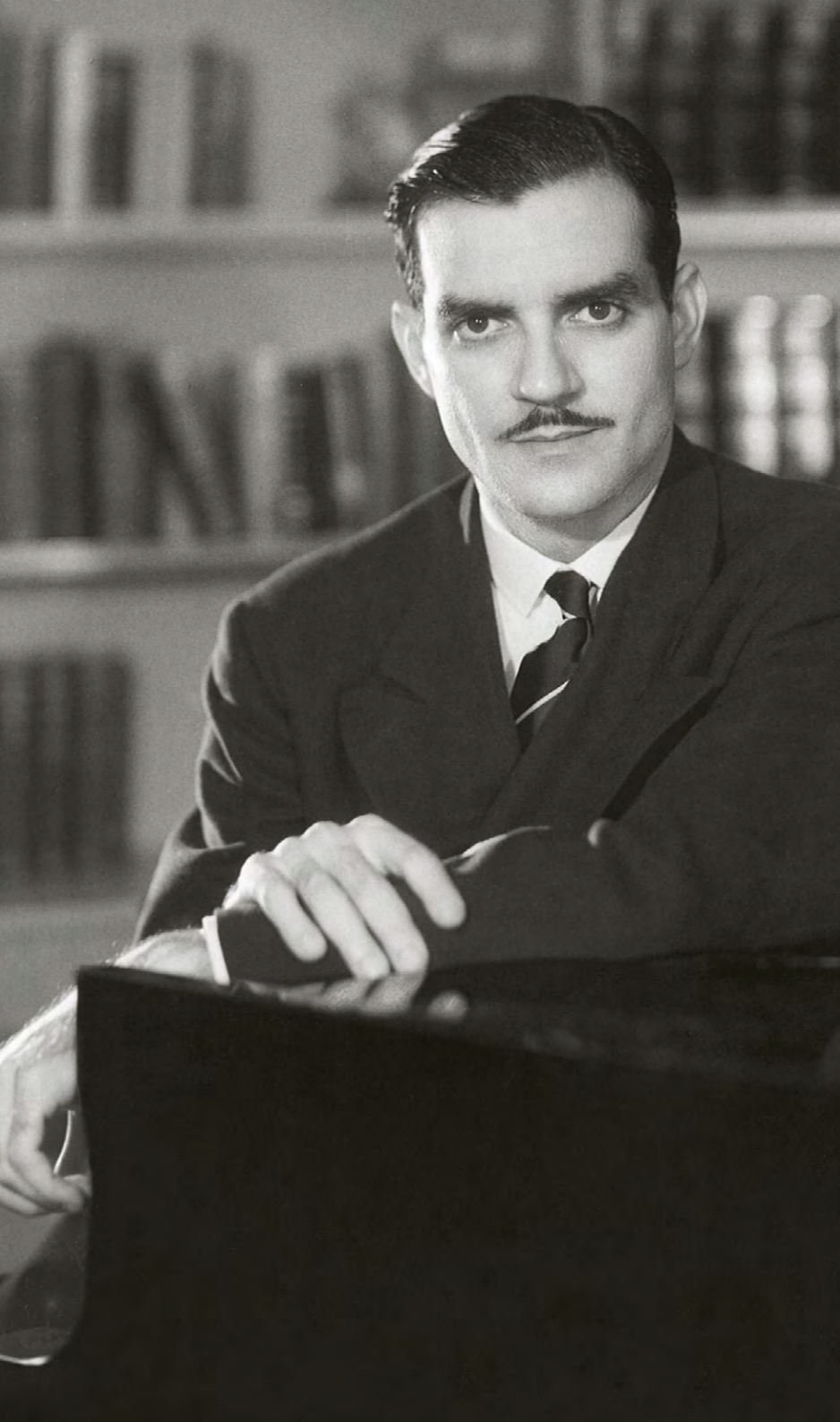
Liszt: Piano Concertos | Années de Pèlerinage
'Tannhäuser' Overture

Radio-Symphonie-Orchester Berlin
Lawrence Foster | Edo de Waart

RIAS

Vol. II

Berlin, 1971-1982

**FRANZ LISZT****Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major, S. 124***

- I. Allegro maestoso – Tempo giusto 5:49
- II. Quasi Adagio 4:59
- III. Allegretto vivace – Allegro animato 4:07
- IV. Allegro marziale animato – Presto 4:50

Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major, S. 125**

- I. Adagio sostenuto assai 5:10
- II. Allegro agitato assai 1:59
- III. Allegro moderato 5:12
- IV. Allegro deciso 3:20
- V. Marziale, un poco meno Allegro 4:06
- VI. Allegro animatio – Stretto 2:27

Années de Pèlerinage. Deuxième Année: Italie

- IV. Sonetto 47 del Petrarca Des-Dur 6:23
- V. Sonetto 104 del Petrarca E-Dur 6:51
- VI. Sonetto 123 del Petrarca in As-Dur 7:02

Overture to 'Tannhäuser', S. 442 16:53**JORGE BOLET** piano**Radio-Symphonie-Orchester Berlin**

today: Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin

Lawrence Foster* conductor**Edo de Waart**** conductor

Jorge Bolet plays Liszt

Jorge Bolet's relationship with Liszt was a special one. Not only did Liszt's music pose a new challenge each time Bolet turned towards it, but it also inspired the breakthrough in Bolet's career as a pianist which progressed in a peculiar manner – albeit one that is perfectly typical of American music life. The pianist Abram Chasins played a decisive role in this, for he supported Bolet in his somewhat frustrating attempts to establish himself as a concert pianist during the 1950s. They had met when Bolet trained at the prestigious Curtis Institute for Music where Chasins was a lecturer. Strictly speaking, Bolet (born in Cuba in 1914) was already too old for an audience who, after the Second World War, were at the feet of a generation of “Outstanding Young American Pianists” (OYAP) including John Browning, Leon Fleisher, William Kapell, Julius Katchen (see audite 21.419) and Van Cliburn, who were all born in the 1920s and 30s. When Chasins was engaged as musical consultant for George Cukor's 1960 Hollywood adaptation of the Liszt biography *Song Without End* (starring Dirk Bogarde in the title role), Bolet's hour also finally arrived. In a 1980 interview with the music journalist Elyse Mach, he recalled: “Naturally, for an undertaking such as that the big question is, »Who is going to do the piano playing?« Van Cliburn had won the Tchaikovsky Competition shortly before then, and the powers at Columbia thought, naturally, of him, since in their opinion he would give prestige to the film. When Abram Chasins heard this, his response was, »Well, I think he might be a good choice if you're prepared to wait three years until he learns the repertoire.« And that put the kibosh on the Van Cliburn choice. Morris Stoloff, who was the music director of Columbia Pictures, then asked for a recommendation from Chasins. »There's one man I'd recommend,« replied Abram, »and that's Jorge Bolet. He has the repertoire, he has the style, he has everything that you're looking for.« Of course, they had never heard of Jorge Bolet, but they would because this time luck was on my side. Just shortly after the Chasins-Stoloff conversation, I was playing Liszt's E-flat Concerto in Carnegie Hall with the National Symphony of Washington, and Morris Stoloff came to New York to hear that performance. Needless to say, after hearing it, he agreed with Chasins. And yet, that, too, was a mixed blessing. While the chance to play the soundtrack would bring my name before the public and bring a certain amount of notoriety, it would also antagonize further those with a very closed mind who do not think that one can go to Hollywood and still be a serious musician. I know; I've heard the remarks and read the print. However, it did bring more bookings. As I said, the name was now recognizable because I had gotten, as you know from seeing the film, star billing; my name on the whole screen, alone: piano soloist, Jorge Bolet.”

An artist of Bolet's standing was not mentally dependent on the media fame which he had come unexpectedly to enjoy, but he gained from it financially. That is why, with the benefit of hindsight, one is grateful to those in charge at Columbia for engaging Bolet, for the film's success enabled him, slowly but surely, from the 1960s to realise and expand his interpretational and pianistic objectives. Within Bolet's vast repertoire, Liszt's music took pride of place; it is documented in his monumental recorded legacy of major works, including several for piano and orchestra, made for DECCA in the 1980s. However, even before the success of *Song Without End*, in 1958, Bolet had recorded the *Études d'exécution transcendante* for RCA (unfortunately in mono, meaning that this album, released during the advent of the stereo age, went unheeded). This, alongside a Liszt recording for the Everest label (featuring the B minor Piano Sonata, *Funérailles* as well as the First *Mephisto* Waltz), proved him to be a true, and rare, authority on Liszt. This applied not only to his ever-impressive manual mastery of the instrument, but even more so to his musical intelligence, taste, differentiation of sound and – the greatest virtue of a Liszt interpreter – his sense of drama and suspense. These RIAS recordings, made between 1971 and 1982, released here for the first time, prove this once more. The notorious concert paraphrase on Wagner's *Tannhäuser* overture is rarely heard in such a superb rendition as that which Bolet recorded in RIAS studio no 10. Bolet's mastery of what at times seem the monstrous challenges of the score (even if these remain genuinely pianistic at every moment), his painstaking attention to detail whilst never losing sight of the bigger picture, and his ingenious structuring of the enormous build-ups representing, to a certain extent, a double portrait of Liszt and Wagner, are hugely impressive. Bolet's interpreta-

tion stands equal to the legendary recordings of Ignaz Friedman and Benno Moiseiwitsch, whose pianistic tour de force of this piece survives as film documentation made by the BBC in 1954. Not long before his death and already ravaged by illness, Bolet once more played one of his “war horses”, the *Tannhäuser Paraphrase*, at one of his final concerts in April 1989 in New York (documented on the CD box set Marston 56003-2, released in 2014 to mark the centenary of Bolet’s birth).

Bolet’s recordings of the three Petrarca sonnets from the second volume of Liszt’s *Années de Pèlerinage*, published in 1855, are also immaculate and exquisitely beautiful. The fact that Liszt had originally set these sonnets as songs becomes clear in Bolet’s wonderfully phrased performance: he plays each melodic line in perfect legato without overstating, by way of sentimental agogics, the autobiographic and programmatic background of the poems (all sonnets are addressed to the persona’s idealised lover Laura and revolve around her elusiveness). These “Songs without words” are significant examples of Liszt’s ability to create ambiguous moods oscillating between melancholy and euphoria, whilst at the same time designing an absolute, autonomous musical plot. This poses a great interpretational challenge as the player, on the one hand, has to uncover this ambivalence, and on the other hand must not compromise the flow of the music. Without actually creating polyphony, Liszt develops a fascinating multidimensional soundscape that already anticipates Debussy and Ravel. Bolet’s interpretation, once again, is characterised by limpid playing and artistic mastery, making each sonnet appear as an act in an imaginary drama.

It is a cast of fortune that the Berlin microphones and tapes documented Bolet’s concert performances of the two Liszt piano concertos, thus adding to his commercial discography which features studio recordings of these works. Alongside sensitive partners on the conductor’s podium, Lawrence Foster and Edo de Waart, Bolet used the interpretational challenges of these concertos as an opportunity to make a case for their musical substance (which had consistently been contested). In the history of the classical-romantic piano concerto, these two works represent a realisation of a symphonic concerto genre on which Liszt had been working since the 1830s, reinventing the relationship between soloist and orchestra. The A major concerto, which Liszt did not present to the public until 1857 in Weimar, was explicitly named “concert symphonique”, referring to the concertos of Henry Litolff. The determining factor is the multi-part, yet single-movement, format: each section serves a dual function, on the one hand representing part of the sonata form (exposition, development, recapitulation, coda), on the other hand representing part of a multi-part form (opening movement, slow movement, scherzo, finale). The responsibilities and tasks between soloist and orchestra are allocated in a differentiated manner and flourish through switching roles: Liszt’s innovative method of constantly transforming his thematic “cells”. (In the first concerto this is the characteristic rhythm of the main theme to which Hans von Bülow had added the words “Das versteht Ihr alle nicht” [This you will not understand]; and in the second concerto it is a harmonic progression whose attraction lies in the use of the submediant key of F major within the home key of A major.) It is therefore a gross misunderstanding to consider the piano part to be no more than a virtuoso’s self-portrayal against the foil of a few impulses provided by the orchestra. What does become apparent is Bolet’s orchestral playing, producing sonorities reminiscent of Brahms or Rachmaninov, as well as his careful phrasing to highlight the inner relationships between the different parts, and how he deliberately resists the temptation of unleashing the tempo. (The fact that he could easily accomplish this becomes apparent in the cadenzas, whose latitude he uses to elevate the dramatic element.) One could criticise such moderation, for it eclipses the scherzo character or the “diabolical” aspect of Liszt’s musical language, especially in Bolet’s reading of the A major concerto. However, does Bolet’s expert and well-considered approach not forge a new path, free of clichés, towards a composer whose most ambitious artistic aspiration consisted of raising music to the same level as literature and art? That is possibly the greatest compliment which can be paid to a Liszt interpreter.

Wolfgang Rathert

Translation: Viola Scheffel

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We gratefully acknowledge the generous support by Dr. Donald Manildi (International Piano Archives, University of Maryland - IPAM), who kindly gave the permission for the release of these recordings and the use of photo material from the estate of Jorge Bolet kept at IPAM.

recording date / location:

Piano Concerto No. 1: November 30, 1971 (live / stereo)

Piano Concerto No. 2: December 19, 1982 (live / stereo)

Berlin, Haus des Rundfunks, Großer Sendesaal

Années de Pèlerinage / ‚Tannhäuser‘: October 8, 1973 (stereo)

RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 10

recording producer:

Wolfgang Gottschalk (1971) • Walter Schales (1982) • Müller (1973)

recording engineer:

Geert Puhlmann (1971 + 1982) • Eng. Steinke (1973)

 Deutschlandfunk Kultur

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photos: PAM / p. 7: Jorge Bolet

further reading:

Elyse Mach: Great Contemporary Pianists Speak for Themselves. New York: Dover 1991, S. 21-41.

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