Franz Liszt: Sardanapalo - Mazeppa

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I have read widely on the life and music of Liszt, and for anyone interested in a thoroughly readable, gripping biography, it is difficult to do better than Alan Walker's three volume set, published in 1983,1989 and 1996. In it we learn of Liszt the composer, pianist, music teacher, music arranger, organist, philanthropist, author and traveller as well as of his relations with his children, contemporaries (musical and otherwise) and his lovers.

However, in it you will not find any discussion of Liszt's incomplete opera Sardanapolo. This is unsurprising, since Liszt left over one hundred and fifty works and/or components of works unfinished. His finished total amounts to over seven hundred, and very many of these are multi-part works. Pieces by him are still being discovered to this day, as anyone who followed Hyperion's Complete Piano Music series would know, as supplementary 'New Discoveries' discs were added quite soon after the official termination.

Now we have an opera, or to be accurate, part of one, and original opera is a genre with which Liszt is not usually associated. In fact, his catalogue of completed works contains only one operatic entry, Don Sanche from 1824-5 when Liszt was 13. Of course, he composed a multitude of operatic paraphrases for piano, and during his Weimar years he wrote a series of tracts on Opera and Stage Works. As far as I can tell only some of these are in print, but in edited, collected form, Vol.1 has 314 pages, Vol.3 part 1 has 314 pages and Vol.3 part 2 has 342 pages. From this information alone, it can be seen that opera formed a fundamental part of Liszt's artistic interests, which were of an astonishing range and depth.

Sardanapolo dates from about 1846 until 1852. Its progress, or otherwise is a complex matter, and it seems that Liszt finally gave up in frustration over complications with the libretto. The booklet notes that accompany this fine CD are by Dr. David Trippett, who is responsible for Sardanapolo's unearthing, the editing and the completion of the first act. They are similar to the content of an interesting interview with him for Presto Classical by Katherine Cooper, which can be read here.

The plot is derived from Byron's five-act tragedy Sardanapalus (1821). The plot of the first act begins with a slave girl, Mirra, being comforted by a chorus of the King Sardanapalus' concubines. She is pining for her lost home, as the chorus assures that she is the de facto Queen, having been chosen by the King from thousands of others. She is struggling with guilt for having fallen for the King who conquered her homeland, and also for having adopted his faith. Then the King enters and asks her why she is distressed and he seeks to reassure her, speaking of their love in a grand lyric duet. Despite this, she still feels unhappy at her circumstances. Beloso, a Chaldean Soothsayer enters and warns of war, urging the indolent and pleasure-loving king to take up arms against the insurgents. Sardanapalus hesitates, being fearful of the carnage that would ensue, but Mirra pleads with him to take action. The act concludes with a grand trio espousing the war, and a closing orchestral march.

And the operatic style? In five words – largely Italian, sung in Italian. I must admit that this surprised me. Liszt conducted the first performance of Lohengrin at Weimar in 1850, and it might be supposed that he would have been greatly influenced by it. Instead, to my ears, at least, we have bel canto and a hint of Verdi, but I have to admit that the booklet informs us that there are proto-Wagnerian harmonies and massed sonorities after the style of Berlioz. It seems that Liszt believed that the genre of Italian opera could be modernised, even monumentalised, as drama. In common with other orchestral works of the period, Liszt had intended the work to be orchestrated by Joseph Joachim Raff, who was acting as his assistant at Weimar in the 1850's, and from whom he was learning the techniques of orchestration. In fact, Raff orchestrated some of the early Symphonic Poems, although once he felt himself to be fully competent in handling the orchestra, Liszt re-orchestrated them himself. The opening section of the opera has the woodwind chirping in a manner that reminds me of some of Raff's rustically inspired works.

The vocal writing is taxing, and the excellent soprano, Joyce El Khoury is occasionally pushed to her limits. She has a lovely voice though, and such moments are rare There is a lovely passage where she persuades the king to go to war, her voice chiming beautifully with the harp. The tenor, Airam Hernández is splendid, his voice youthful and ardent in his passion for Mirra, and the bass-baritone, Oleksandr Pushniak is suitably impressive in his warnings of war. The female chorus is lovely and Kirill Karabits obtains accurate and committed playing from the heirs to Liszt's own orchestra at Weimar.

The CD is completed with a performance of the roughly contemporaneous Mazeppa. This is really just a nicely performed makeweight. However, Audite might have done better to include one of Liszt's rarer orchestral works instead.

The recording itself is suitably natural, with an excellent balance between the vocal and instrumental forces, and a fine bloom on the sound. The booklet is in German and English, and is suitably comprehensive, but unfortunately no text is given, just a synopsis. However, the complete libretto, in Italian, German and English, is available through the Audite website.

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Franz LISZT (1811-1886)
Sardanapalo, Reconstruction of the first act of an unfinished opera [51:26]
Mazeppa, Symphonic Poem No.6 [15:32]
Joyce El-Khoury (soprano)
Airam Hernández (tenor)
Oleksandr Pushniak (bass-baritone)
Opera Chorus Nationaltheater Weimar
Staatskapelle Weimar / Kirill Karabits
rec. 2018, Congress Centrum Neue Weimarhalle
AUDITE 97.764 [67:01]

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