Franz Liszt: Künstlerfestzug - Tasso - Dante Symphony

aud 97.760

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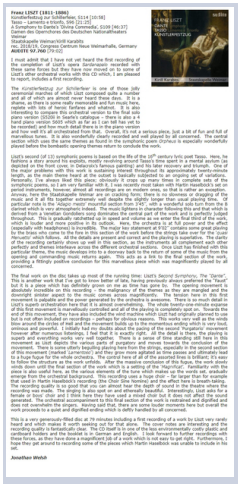

The Künstlerfestzug zur Schillerfeier is one of those jolly ceremonial marches of which Liszt composed quite a number and all of which are almost never heard these days. It is a shame, as there is some really memorable and fun music here, replete with lots of heroic fanfares and whatnot. It is also interesting to compare this orchestral version to the final solo piano version (S520ii in Searle's catalogue – there is also a 4 hand piano version S605 which as far as I can tell has yet to be recorded) and how much detail there is in the piano version and how well it's all orchestrated from that. Overall, it's not a serious piece, just a bit of fun and full of marvellous tunes. It is also wonderfully clearly recorded and well played by all concerned. The central section which uses the same themes as found in the symphonic poem Orpheus is especially wonderfully played before the bombastic opening themes return to conclude the work.

Liszt's second (of 13) symphonic poems is based on the life of the 16th century lyric poet Tasso. Here, he fashions a story around his exploits, mostly revolving around Tasso's time spent in a mental asylum (as depicted on the front cover, in Delacroix's famous painting) and his later recovery and triumph. One of the major problems with this work is sustaining interest throughout its approximately twenty-minute length, as the main theme heard at the outset is basically subjected to an ongoing set of variations. Personally, I've always liked this piece; obviously it crops up many times in complete sets of the symphonic poems, so I am very familiar with it. I was recently most taken with Martin Haselböck's set on period instruments, however, almost all recordings are on modern ones, so that is rather an exception. Anyway, here the Staatskapelle Weimar are on cracking form; there is no slowness or dragging of the music and it all fits together extremely well despite the slightly longer than usual playing time. Of particular note is the 'Adagio mesto' mournful section from 3'45'', with a wonderful solo turn from the B clarinet which is very atmospheric indeed. The music lightens in character following this and that which is derived from a Venetian Gondoliers song dominates the central part of the work and is perfectly judged throughout. This is gradually ratchetted up in speed and volume as we enter the final third of the work, which is louder and more positive in its outlook. Here, the orchestra is at full power and the effect (especially with headphones) is incredible. The major key statement at 9'02'' contains some great playing by the brass who come to the

fore in this section of the work before the strings take over for the ‘quasi Menuetto’ which follows. All the details are present and correct and the playing is superlative. The clarity of the recording certainly shows up well in this section, as the instruments all complement each other perfectly and themes interleave across the different orchestral sections. Once Liszt has finished with this particular theme, the music develops into to a doorway back to the return of some of the music from the opening and commanding music returns again. This acts as a link to the final section of the work, providing a fittingly positive conclusion for this marvellous piece which was magnificently played by all concerned.

The final work on the disc takes up most of the running time: Liszt’s Second Symphony, The “Dante”. This is another work that I’ve got to know better of late, having previously always preferred the “Faust” but it is a piece which has definitely grown on me as time has gone by. The opening movement is absolutely incredible on this recording – the malignancy of the themes as they are mangled and the downright sinister aspect to the music comes across magnificently. The tension here in this first movement is palpable and the power generated by the orchestra is awesome. There is so much detail in Liszt’s superb orchestration here that it is almost overwhelming. The whole twenty-one-minute expanse of this first movement is marvellously controlled and all of the playing is completely spot on. Towards the end of this movement, they have also included the wind machine which Liszt had originally planned to use but is not often included on recordings – perhaps for obvious reasons. This works very well as the winds blow around the circles of Hell and the movement builds up to the momentous ending which is very loud, ominous and powerful. I initially had my doubts about the pacing of the second ‘Purgatorio’ movement however after numerous listenings, I feel that it is exactly right. All the detail is there, the playing is superb and everything works very well together. There is a sense of time standing still here in this movement as Liszt depicts the various parts of purgatory and moves towards the conclusion of the movement. There is some utterly beguiling playing here from the strings, especially in the second section of this movement (marked ‘Lamentoso’) and they grow more agitated as time passes and ultimately lead to a huge fugue for the whole orchestra. The control here of all of the assorted lines is brilliant; it’s easy to follow the structure as the work unfolds. After the massive conclusion of this fugue, the work slowly winds down until the final section of the work which is a setting of the ‘Magnificat’. Familiarity with the piece is also useful here, as the various elements of the tune which makes up the words set, gradually emerge from the orchestral background. This recording uses a huge choir – far larger than for example that used in Martin Haselböck’s recording (the Choir Sine Nomine) and the effect here is breath-taking. The recording quality is so good that you can almost hear the depth of sound in the theatre where the recording was made. The singing is also spot on and ethereally beautiful. Interestingly, Liszt asks for a female or boys’ choir and I think here they have used a mixed choir but it does not affect the sound generated. The orchestral accompaniment to this final section of the work is restrained and dignified and does not overwhelm the singers. Having said that, there are some louder moments here but overall the work proceeds to a quiet and dignified ending which is deftly handled by all concerned.

This is a very generously-filled disc at 79 minutes including a first recording of a work by Liszt very rarely heard and which makes it worth seeking out for that alone. The cover notes are interesting and the recording quality is fantastically clear. The CD itself is in one of the less environmentally costly plastic and cardboard holders and the booklet is in German and English. I look forward to further recordings with these forces, as they have done a magnificent job of a work which is not easy to get right. Furthermore, I hope they get around to recording some of the pieces which Martin Haselböck was unable to include in his set.

Franz LISZT (1811-1886)
Künstlerfestzug zur Schillerfeier, S114 [10:58]
Tasso – Lamento e trionfo, S96 [21:25]
A Symphony to Dante's 'Divina Commedia', S109 [46:37]
Damen des Opernchores des Deutschen Nationaltheaters Weimar
Staatskapelle Weimar/Kirill Karabits
rec. 2018/19, Congress Centrum Neue Weimarhalle, Germany
AUDITE 97.760 [79:02]

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Jonathan Welsh