



Franz Liszt: Künstlerfestzug - Tasso - Dante Symphony

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Franz Liszt's purely symphonic works, viewed in hindsight, have been more historically instructive than popular with the public. Only A Faust Symphony and Les préludes ever entered the general repertoire, and the latter is currently on life support, though, in fairness, this is probably due to over-familiarity from film, television, and Muzak at the supermarket. Although Liszt sowed the seeds of modern development in concert music, from tone poems to tone rows, his orchestral pieces sound melodramatically pianistic to most ears, constantly declaiming in octaves to stir up excitement and—kiss of death—rarely featuring inspired melodies. An exception is the “Gretchen” movement from his Faust Symphony, which Liszt realized was destined for popularity and published separately in various permutations. Liszt also had trouble with orchestration. Indeed, much of what we encounter was actually scored by Joachim Raff, though musicologists today easily demonstrate that Raff took too much credit as a collaborator, when in fact he simply orchestrated Liszt's direct intentions.

Scholars of the day twisted themselves into pretzels worrying whether Liszt's 1857 Dante Symphony, omitting “Paradiso,” correctly represented Dante Alighieri's 14th-century epic poem, “Divine Comedy.” Wagner, horrified at Liszt's original decision to conclude the piece with a depiction—presumably loud and bombastic—of paradise, urged him to keep the music ethereal. Liszt took Wagner's critique to heart, and the symphony finishes with a women's chorus singing Mary's hymn of praise from the Gospel according to St. Luke: Magnificat anima mea Dominum, “My soul doth magnify the Lord.” More important for modern listeners, though, has been how well or badly the symphony works as music. Just in case the piece would be accused of lamely petering out, Liszt supplied a loud alternative ending, not played here, nor in Daniel Barenboim's benchmark version with the Berlin Philharmonic. It may not make much difference to today's ears.

The Dante Symphony is ultimately boxed-in by the necessary progression from hell to heaven implicit in Dante's poem. Liszt, to be frank, is much better at the “hell” part. His slow movement, “Purgatorio,” does feature a haunting horn refrain, but it isn't otherwise that memorable, and listeners tend to experience the symphony, ending quietly and fading away, as a gradual letdown.

It's fully appropriate that this release should come to us from Weimar, Goethe's and Schiller's home and Liszt's home base in later life. The Weimar Court Orchestra was a major ensemble in its day, and its successor plays well here, recorded in flawless sound. Kirill Karabits is a high-energy sort of conductor, and the devilish slashing and dashing he achieves is certainly exciting. But it lacks the rich dreamlike mystery Barenboim elicits from the Berlin Philharmonic. Liszt never achieved, or perhaps even sought, the “seamless melody” of Wagnerian ideal, but Barenboim seems to

find it in the music anyway, and in his hands it glows, intrigues, and frightens us with metaphysical things which go bump in the night. This is no criticism of Karabits's effort. It's satisfying in its way, but Barenboim surpasses the music itself and makes it better than it is.

The two other works on this release represent Liszt at roughly the same time in history. The *Künstlerfestzug* listed first translates as "Artists Pageant," and was composed to introduce a Schiller festival in Weimar. It's an 11-minute overture/tone poem and like so many of the era, it seeks to capture one's attention with a variant of Beethoven's whiplash opening to the *Coriolan Overture*, followed by a fair share of march-like academic pomp, a pretty horn tune, and a good bit of melodic sweep. Its diffuse manner and low brass and percussion proclamations seem to foreshadow Edward Elgar's early efforts. It manages to include a minuet and actually works rather well.

Tasso, which follows, is Liszt's second tone poem. Its second version is performed here, orchestrated by Joachim Raff. The full title is *Tasso, Lament and Triumph* and it traces the descent into madness and eventual success of Torquato Tasso, 16th-century Venetian poet. A shorter version of Liszt's music was originally used to introduce Goethe's play of that name and was later expanded to the 1854 version we encounter here. As one can well imagine, Liszt does very well by the madness part! The romance and triumphal rehabilitation portions of the music are enjoyable and well performed without being quite memorable for today's ears. But that's a judgment call one leaves to the listener. I doubt one would hear it better performed than by Karabits and the Weimar Staatskapelle. Chorus and orchestra are perfectly balanced and above reproach. If you enjoy the vivid tortures of hell, this may be the set of performances for you. If you aspire ascending to a more atmospheric heavenly perch, perhaps Barenboim's performance of the symphony would be the better ladder.