



Franz Liszt: Künstlerfestzug - Tasso - Dante Symphony

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In 1847 while touring as a pianist in Kiev, Liszt met Polish Princess Carolyne of Sayn-Wittgenstein, who became his companion for the rest of his life. In 1848 he accepted a conducting job in Weimar, where he and the Princess lived until 1861. Carolyne persuaded him to trade performing for composing, and those years, among his most prolific, produced the three works on this program.

As a young man, Liszt was already an admirer of Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy. In the 1840s he considered writing a chorus and orchestra work drawn from it, accompanied by a slideshow of scenes from the poem by German artist Bonaventura Genelli, but nothing came of it. In 1849, he composed *Après une Lecture du Dante: Fantasia quasi Sonata* (the Dante Sonata) for piano. In 1855 he began the Dante Symphony based on the 'Inferno' and 'Purgatorio' sections of Dante's poem. He completed it in 1857.

The work begins with Virgil and Dante descending into the Inferno. Liszt supplied no text save for the Magnificat, but he included a few lines from the poem under score staves to guide the conductor's interpretation, most notably the opening brass motifs to the rhythms of the text over the Gates of Hell. Raging downward figures in the low brass follow and then a quiet section where Virgil and Dante meet adulterous lovers Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta. (Francesca was married to Paolo's brother, Giovanni. Their affair lasted ten years until Giovanni caught and killed them.) In sublime woodwind passages through a rapturous passage for strings, Francesca tells Dante their story, and he faints in despair. After a funereal chant in the muted horns, the descent into Hell resumes in the brass, followed by a soft menacing march and a thunderous conclusion. Many of those themes reappear in 'Purgatorio', which opens with a mysterious nocturnal pastorella with reflective woodwinds, a chantlike beautiful chorale, and urgent strings. A slow fugue (with touches of Berlioz) depicts Dante's journey up the Mountain of Purification. Liszt intended to describe Dante's arrival in 'Paradiso', but after son-in-law Richard Wagner convinced him that no composer can create an image of Heaven, he seamlessly turned the chorale into a Magnificat that Dante observes from the mountain. Carolyne urged Liszt to compose a loud, triumphant ending, which he did; but when Wagner objected, Liszt turned the new ending into a coda that can be tagged onto the original ending. Few conductors, Karabits included, use it.

For more on this fascinating work, consult Steve Haller's reviews (J/A 2011, J/A 2005, S/O 2009, M/J/2013) and Don O'Connor's perceptive introduction to the Liszt Overview.

This performance is sleek. The slightly blended texture of the opening to 'Inferno' maintains the weight of the low brass but mitigates its bite. In some performances

those downward passages cut through so powerfully that one can imagine two giant hands pounding on Liszt's piano, but here they are more blended. The quiet midsection, beautifully played by winds (especially) and strings, could be more expressive and dig in more, but Karabits's reflective and narrative approach in an air of suspension works. The ending is similar to the opening. 'Purgatorio' maintains the suspended quality beautifully, but some performances are more expressive and urgent here. The fugue is refined and clearly drawn, though the violins are sometimes too bright. Busier scoring creates the impression of speeding up, but Karabits holds to his tempo. Liszt called for a female or boys chorus for the Magnificat. Karabits uses both, with the solo sung by boys. The composer also wanted the chorus out of sight. I doubt that is the case here, but the effect is Heavenly enough, and the work evaporates quietly away.

Karabits's sleek and polished Dante Symphony did not appeal to me at first, but it has grown on me a great deal, and it presents an interesting contrast with the heavier, more dramatic Sinopoli, Barenboim (N/D 1994 & 2011), Lopez-Cobos (J/A 2001), and Roth (M/J 2013), the ones favored by most ARG critics. (The Roth is with the period Les Siecles group that I have been critical of, but they are quite good here.) I have not heard the favorably reviewed Ahronovitch (J/A 2011), Haenchen (J/A 2005), and Noseda (S/O 2009). Not reviewed is the heavyweight Masur, which is exciting and gripping, if sometimes hurried in the slower places.

Liszt wrote *Kunstlerfestzug zur Schillerfeier* (Artist Pageant for a Schiller Celebration) for the 1857 unveiling of Ernst Rietschel's statue of Goethe and Schiller in front of the Weimar National Theater, but the work was not actually played until an 1859 celebration of Schiller's birth. Its controlled festive nature is structured in fast-slow-fast sections. It is based on themes from another Liszt Schiller piece, *Die Ideale*, and it sounds like a condensation of that. This is its only recording.

Lord Byron's *Lament of Tasso* (1856) fired Liszt's interest in the Italian poet, Torquato Tasso and led to this symphonic chronicle. The work is based on an Italian gondolier's song Liszt used in 'Chant du Gondolier' from *Venezia e Napoli*. The opening depicts Tasso's sufferings in an insane asylum where he was committed after behavioral problems as court poet of the House of Este in Ferrara, Italy. His life with the Estes is depicted in a lovely minuet that makes up the midsection. The third part describes his triumphal visit to Rome just before he died. Karabits achieves the right celebratory feeling in the Rome music, but the opening could use a greater touch of madness, and the minuet is dull. Alternatives include Silvestri (J/A 1999), Ferencsik (J/A 2005), Noseda (J/F 2006), Botstein (with a poor Dante M/A 2004), Fruhbeck de Burgos (in the Overview but not recommended by Haller—S/O 2001), Masur, and Ivan Fischer.

The engineers handle the churchlike acoustic of the Congress Centrum Neue Weimarahalle by exchanging some detail for ambiance in a way that suits the performances well. Just make sure the volume is high enough. Nicolas Dufetel's good notes would be improved by more on Dante.

This is the second Franz Liszt recording from Karabits and the sleek sounding orchestra with touches of Czech string sound.