



Franz Liszt: A Faust Symphony, S. 108 – Mephisto Waltz No. 3, S. 216

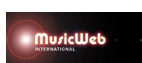
aud 97.761

EAN: 4022143977618



www.musicweb-international.com (12.10.2023)

Quelle: <https://www.musicwebinternational.com/20...>



I've long been a fan of Liszt's Faust Symphony and up until recently it was my favourite of his two symphonies. In fact, it was Kirill Karabits's recording of the Dante that made me appreciate that work more than the Faust. Anyway, here the Staatskapelle Weimar turn their attentions to the Faust and, as a bonus, another first recording of a late work by Liszt in an orchestrated version by his pupil Alfred Reisenauer and revised by Kirill Karabits. I'd read about this orchestration of the 3rd Mephisto Waltz somewhere but, up until now, it had remained unrecorded and unheard.

As I had expected from the recording of the Dante, the performance of the Faust Symphony is muscular and powerful – but there is also a delicacy when that is required. The first movement, subtitled “Faust”, starts with a twelve-tone row, played fairly slowly and mysteriously, leaving you wondering where the music will go next. However, once the initial tune gets going, the tempo picks up rapidly. The orchestra positively explodes from the speakers with the following “Allegro impetuoso”, which sets off at a tremendous pace with the first of several themes that permeate and create the movement. The details captured by the excellent recording here make Liszt's clever writing for orchestra stand out very clearly and also highlight the difficulties in the orchestral parts for the performers. However, this clearly doesn't faze the orchestra as they cope marvellously with all the complications that Liszt throws at them. The music slowly evolves into muted runs in the strings which abruptly stop with a lovely “Affettuoso poco andante” section. This slowly morphs into a section that generates what has been termed the “Pride” motif, which shows Liszt as his most bombastic. This doesn't last long and is transmuted and mixed with themes from earlier in the movement to create something entirely different. Somehow, Liszt (and Karabits) manage to contain all this tension and we get a repeat of the “Allegro impetuoso”, then the twelve-tone rows return, about fourteen minutes in. This section serves as a bridge to the remainder of this long and complicated movement that is broadly in sonata form – all of which means that the themes which have already been heard are varied and changed and wound up neatly in an effective and unexpected quiet conclusion.

The second movement, “Gretchen”, opens with the violas and oboes sinuously playing her theme with beautiful accompaniment by the remainder of the orchestra. Much of this movement is gentle with some lovely writing and playing; however, there is a more strident section in the middle which is again very well judged. Unlike the first movement, the timing here is slightly slower than other performances I am familiar with but the music does not drag at all. Towards the end of the movement,



just before the violas reappear with the “Gretchen” theme, there is a beautifully recorded moment where the orchestra falls silent aside from a harp. It is magnificently captured here. This is the sort of performance in which you can completely lose yourself and be swept away by the music; I defy any Liszt haters not to be enthralled by it. The movement ends peacefully as the music evaporates into the ether.

In complete contrast to the ending of “Gretchen” the third movement, “Mephistopheles”, is a portrayal of the devil, starting with a jolt. It is very cleverly constructed, made up mostly of thematic transformations of the music heard elsewhere within the symphony, but with the addition of a self-quotation from Liszt’s early work for piano and orchestra, Malediction. In fact, the only theme not mutated during the progress of the movement is “Gretchen” (at 8’41”) – showing that Mephistopheles has no power over her. This respite does not last long and the sardonic themes return quickly and continue their development. There is some tremendously exciting playing here – the tension inherent in the music is racked up as the piece progresses with scurrying playing in the strings, clever fugal modifications and changes in tempo and orchestration. The work doesn’t really stop here, but slowly crystallises down to a very foreboding couple of bars in which the organ, violins, cellos and double basses hold a note while the chorus and, slightly later, the tenor soloist emerges from the gloom. Both chorus and soloist do a brilliant job here and are marvellously integrated into the orchestra as they sing various passages from the “Chorus mysticus” in which Faust is redeemed. The tenor Airam Hernández is especially good; his voice suits this piece extremely well.

The performance of this symphony is brilliant in every way. I am also very familiar with Liszt’s own two piano version (S647 in Searle’s catalogue) and listening to this recording makes me appreciate the way that Liszt handled that arrangement. The clarity of this performance enables me to mentally connect the music in that two piano version with the orchestral version better than any other I have heard.

There is almost no information in the notes about the orchestration of the Third Mephisto Waltz which is a shame, as I would have liked to have known more about it. However, in comparison to Liszt’s own orchestration of the Second Mephisto waltz, I would say that Reisenauer / Karabits’s arrangement works extremely well indeed – it’s also got some details in the scoring which stand out better than they do in the piano version. It’s a dark, ironic, sarcastic piece – made even darker by the very interesting novel orchestration which is very much in Liszt’s later style. As an aside, it’s a pity Liszt never finished the fourth of this series of works although Dr Leslie Howard’s completion in the Hyperion set gives an excellent idea of what he might have intended. It is conceivable to orchestrate that, too, which would be a most interesting work to hear.

There is some wonderful playing here, the orchestra works well as an integrated whole and you can really hear all the details. The recording is extremely clear and sounds especially good over headphones. Overall timings for the symphony are about average but especially in the first movement, the rhythmic drive propels the music forward in a way that makes time pass more quickly. The cover notes are fascinating and give lots of details about the symphony (although as I said earlier, there is almost nothing about the waltz, sadly). I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know this recording and hope that these forces will record more of Liszt’s orchestral works as there is still quite a lot that has yet to be recorded.

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Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Faust Symphony

Mephisto Waltz No 3 (orch. Alfred Reisenauer, Kirill Karabits)

Airam Hernández (tenor)

Herren des Opernchores des Deutschen Nationaltheaters Weimar; Herren des

Landesjugendchores Thüringen;

Staatskapelle Weimar/Kirill Karabits

rec. 2022, Congress Centrum Weimarhalle, Weimar, Germany

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