



Franz Liszt: Künstlerfestzug - Tasso - Dante Symphony

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The important news here is the world premiere recording of Liszt's *Künstlerfestzug zur Schillerfeier* (Artists' Gala Procession for the Schiller Celebrations), S 114, given in its original orchestral version of 1857–59. Some may be familiar with the piece in its arrangement for solo piano made by Liszt in 1860, which was then published as S 520. The piano version has been recorded more than once, including by Sergio Monteiro on Volume 43 of his Naxos survey of Liszt's complete piano music. The piece is drawn from and based on themes from Liszt's choral cantata *An die Künstler*, S 70/1–3.

Plans for the work to be performed at the unveiling of twin memorial statues of Goethe and Schiller in 1857 apparently fizzled, but a second opportunity arose two years later when festivities were planned for celebrating the centenary of Schiller's birth in 1759. Liszt's 11-minute opener to the Schiller shindig begins with two attention-grabbing chord strokes reminiscent of Beethoven's *Overture to Coriolanus*. From there, the piece sweeps on through Wagnerian bluster and pomposity, eventually working its way into a swaying, lilting nostalgia that sounds freakishly like something by Richard Strauss that wouldn't be written for yet another 50 or 60 years. The predominant impression this listener has of Liszt's pageant overture is that it's loud and lurid, grandiose rather than grand, and ceremonious rather than ceremonial—in other words, full of itself, and definitely not choice Liszt, which may explain why it has not been previously recorded.

Familiar from many fine recordings, and of far superior musical quality, are Liszt's tone poem No. 2, *Tasso, Lamento e Trionfo* (final version 1854) and his *Dante Symphony* (1857). Karabits's *Tasso* may just be the most dramatically intense, exciting performance of the work I've heard. The standard CD I'm reviewing from is so gripping, it's hard to imagine how much more stunning the HD download from audite.de can be. Karabits conducts his Weimar orchestra as a painter applying paint to a canvas, mixing the palette of instrumental colors with his baton for maximum brilliance, depth, translucence, and aural impact. The orchestral portrait that emerges is not one of a particularly subtle or nuanced Impressionistic painting, but one of the almost blinding colors of a Gauguin or van Gogh. While the vividness of the performance may be visceral, even primitive, the playing is as disciplined and virtuosic as any you will hear from orchestras with far greater name recognition than the Staatskapelle Weimar. Much the same can be said of Karabits's *Dante Symphony*. Never have the Gates of Hell been thrown open with such baleful barking as in this performance of the first movement, titled "*Inferno*." The first few bars will stop your heart, or restart it, if it's already stopped.

If nothing else, Karabits is a master of both the affect and the effect. But there is more to his art than that. His control over the orchestra is ironclad. Passages in

unison, where a string section, violas or cellos, play by themselves, they are so together they sound less like multiple players than like a single player amplified to sound like many. It takes meticulous rehearsal and precise direction from the podium for an orchestra to play and sound like that.

I have a feeling this release will be showing up on my 2020 Want List. As of right now, it's the best orchestral disc of the year I've heard, and it may be hard, if not impossible, to beat.

