



THE
LISZT SOCIETY

Newsletter

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2014 SUBSCRIPTIONS

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ARTICLES FOR THE NEWSLETTER

I receive a constant trickle of letters for publication in the newsletter for which I am very grateful (please keep them coming!) but it would also be very gratifying if more members would write articles and/or reviews. Please do seriously consider if there is a Liszt related subject that you would like to share with other members through writing a short piece for publication in a forthcoming newsletter. All offerings will be very warmly welcomed!

Many thanks.

Jim Vincent

EVENT REVIEW

Dinner Recital - Thursday 23rd January 2014 The Forge Music and Arts Centre, London

There was a splendid turn-out for this event – an audience of almost seventy members of the Liszt, Wagner, Berlioz and Alkan Societies. Sincere thanks are due to Mr Peter Leppard of the Wagner Society for organizing this year's event and to all the players for arranging and playing what proved to be a highly original and adventurous programme.

The recital began with Liszt's *Bénédiction et Serment – Deux motifs de Benvenuto Cellini de Berlioz*, S.628 played by Christopher Smith and Leslie Howard (piano, four hands). I have to admit that this piece has never struck me as being of particular musical interest. I find that the chosen themes are not especially suited to piano transcription and the overall effect is, to my ears, a little on the dull side. Despite the valiant playing of both performers, it came over as a slightly “pedestrian” opening to the evening.

Much more engaging were the two Berlioz songs that followed. Firstly, *Le jeune pâtre Breton*, op. 13/4, and, secondly, *La captive*, op. 12, arranged for the very attractive combination of tenor (Neil Latchman), cello (Patrick Tapio Johnson) and piano (Leslie Howard). The balance among the musicians was excellent and in the second song, in particular, Neil Latchman brought a considerable amount of characterization to the vocal part.

A real rarity came next: the *Grand Caprice sur las marche de l'Apothéose de la Grande Symphonie funèbre et triomphale de Berlioz*, op. 58, composed by Thalberg and played by Coady Green. This exceptionally difficult piece was played with enormous energy and conviction by Coady Green but I am afraid even that could not persuade me of this piece's musical worth. In my opinion it is a disappointing and rather charmless work, which is a great pity as some of Thalberg's music has a good deal of charm, for example, the Piano Concerto in F minor and the *Fantasy on Don Pasquale*, which, although too long, has many beautiful pianistic passages (as played by Earl Wild in his famous 1968 recording of the piece). I am not at all sure that the Berlioz *Symphonie funèbre* was suited, as a vehicle for transcription, to Thalberg's elegant and aristocratic temperament.

Mark Viner and Coady Green then played another formidably difficult work – Alkan's *Grande Fantaisie sur Don Juan*, op. 26. The two pianists played this work with tremendous élan and virtuosity and with a remarkable sense of togetherness. They really did seem to be entirely of one mind throughout this long and taxing piece, ultimately bringing it to a thrilling conclusion. My only negative comment is that the Alkan was not helped in being preceded by the Thalberg. The two pieces – both long, loud and immensely demanding – were too similar to be programmed together and would have benefited from the inclusion of a contrasting piece in between.

The perfect contrast was provided by two works for cello (Patrick Tapio Johnson) and piano (Leslie Howard) who played Liszt's *Die Zelle in Nonnenwerth*, S. 382 and then Liszt's transcription of *O du, mein holder Abendstern – recitativ und romanze aus Wagner's Tannhäuser*, S.380.

These were both highly enjoyable. Patrick Tapio Johnson played very musically and sensitively throughout and was accompanied by Leslie Howard with an exquisite touch. Liszt was almost obsessed with *Die Zelle* and wrote numerous versions of the piece for all sorts of different combinations of instruments. It is a remarkable piece, ranging from nostalgic reminiscence to profound meditation and the performers gave a searching account of the work. The lovely main theme of the transcription from *Tannhäuser* was also passionately conveyed.

The Tannhäuser excerpt led on well to Rhonda Browne's (mezzo) rendition of *Weiche! Wotan! Weiche!* from Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, very ably accompanied by Coady Green.

This was simply stunning! I am sure it must have been difficult for Rhonda coming on stage "cold", as it were, with presumably no opportunity to warm up backstage (which led, I suspect, to the very occasional slightly sharp note), but from the first she captivated her audience with the intensity and passion of her performance. She has a superb voice which can produce beautiful sounds in all registers and a lovely tone all the way from *ppp* to *fff*. But it is her dramatic intensity that makes her such a presence on stage. She has an ability to express emotion and meaning through the voice and through facial expression and physical gesture which is very rare and which results in an utterly compelling and moving performance even when the meaning of the text may be unknown to her audience.

The thrilling emotion of the *Rheingold* excerpt was followed by the more intimate, but no less romantic, world of Wagner's songs, set to the words of Mathilde Wesendonck. We heard *Der Engel*, *Schmerzen* and *Träume*. We are in the musical realm of *Tristan and Isolde* here – the same chromatic harmonies and often very similar musical motifs. These were deeply moving interpretations of these songs, especially in *Träume* where the sense of yearning was almost tangible. What more can one say? It was a wonderful experience to hear such music performed in this way.

Unfortunately, I was unable to be present to hear the last piece on the programme where Leslie Howard played Wagner's *Kaisermarsch*, WWV104 as transcribed for piano by Carl Tausig. This piece was composed by Wagner and transcribed by Tausig in the last year of Tausig's life (1871).

As an encore (again, I was not present), Rhonda Browne came back to the stage and sang "I Want to Sing in Opera", an old British music-hall song.

The recital was followed by a dinner, engendering a good deal of social interaction between the members of the various societies and bringing the evening to a highly successful close.

Jim Vincent

CD REVIEW

The Sound of Weimar - Volumes 4 & 5

As I mentioned in my reviews of the first three volumes, the conductor in this "The Sound of Weimar" series is Martin Haselböck (who has also recorded Liszt's organ works for the same label). The orchestra is the Orchester Wiener Akademie, numbering around 40 players on period instruments.

Volumes 4 and 5 contain the following works: *Tasso – Lamento e Trionfo*, the epilogue to that piece – *Le Triomphe Funèbre du Tasse*, *Héroïde Funèbre*, *Die Ideale*, *Prometheus*, *Festklänge*, *Hamlet* and lastly *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe*.

Tasso is often taken too fast with the central section (which is supposed to sound like a minuet, but is not written as one) losing detail and clarity. That is not the case here! The violent outbursts near the beginning of the piece, after the slow melancholic introduction really makes you jump due to the ferocity! As elsewhere in this series, the whole piece holds together very well. Special mention goes to the strings in their downward flights about 2 minutes into the piece. There is enough *rubato* here to ensure that the transition to the sad theme, a Gondola's song, seems like a logical continuation to what has come before. It is unusual to have the epilogue to the piece recorded on the same set of discs as the remainder of the symphonic poems and its inclusion on this disc is a welcome bonus. By that stage in his career, Liszt's harmonic language had evolved and the piece is very sparsely and lightly

orchestrated. It is also written in Liszt's late style and the playing from the orchestra manages to extenuate the sadness inherent in the music.

Sadness in a different way also pervades the next piece - *Héroïde Funèbre*. The piece is basically an extended funeral march with a slightly less mournful central section. One problem with modern orchestral recordings is that they put too much emphasis on the unusual scoring - especially on the percussion so that one concentrates on that and not on what the strings and horns are doing which is usually the main theme. Here, the whole piece is very well balanced and so you hear the piece as a unified entity and no one section is unnecessarily favoured. The tempo is quite swift compared to some other recordings and so the sadness is actually not too tragic and overwhelming. This may not appeal to some listeners (or Liszteners!) but I personally like this way of playing it! The central section is especially well played and is mournful and beautiful at the same time.

Die Ideale is often criticised as being too long and episodic. It is essential when this piece is played that the relationship between the themes is clear; for example, when the main tune in F major (at 3'43") reoccurs toward the end of the piece it must be memorable enough for the listener to realise this. In this case, the trumpets blaze out the main theme in a way that is totally unforgettable! Liszt's sanctioned cuts are not taken here (fortunately) and with the swift tempo, the piece holds together very well. The details (which are often lost in modern instrument recordings) are as clear as they could be and the whole piece is excellently played and recorded.

Prometheus starts very violently before settling down and ends with a fugal section. The writing in this section makes great demands, especially on the strings, but that is not at all apparent here. Another superb performance and, as I've said before in all of these reviews, the smaller period instrument orchestra sound helps to bring out the clarity and detail which Liszt packs into his orchestral works.

I have a soft spot for *Festklänge*. It is a jolly and fun work which bounces along happily in B flat major most of the piece. This orchestra really seems to bring out the Polish aspects and rhythms of this work and it is superbly played and recorded.

The penultimate track here is *Hamlet* – a strange late work with a ghostly mysterious pallor seemingly drifting across the music. The period instruments seem to make this more noticeable than often observed in modern recordings. Muffled trumpets and muted strings produce some very creepy sounds with infrequent outbursts from the full orchestra. Liszt's use of chamber scoring seems to be very apparent with the period instruments heard here. When things do get going properly at about 5 minutes, the clarity of the recording and the use of period instruments helps to point out the layered nature of the music with the trumpet calls seemingly in front of the strings and the woodwind off to one side.

Lastly and rather appropriately, is *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe* – the final symphonic poem. Liszt was well into his old age when he wrote this and this is apparent from the orchestral style which is much reduced and, unlike some of the earlier pieces, much less bombastic. The work is divided into three sections. The first section, *Die Weige*, is lovely, almost naïve music which floats in the middle to high registers of the strings and the top of the woodwind. Here the pace is quite fast so the music does not seem to drag like it can do on other recordings. The central section is a wakeup call with violins leading the section entitled "The struggle for existence". Very strangely, here the tempo is slower than many other recordings I have heard which makes the details stand out well. This is especially noticeable at about 3 minutes where, in other recordings, you sometimes cannot hear the 'cellos playing their fragment of the tune. That is not the case here! The final section is made up of themes heard elsewhere and this is again slower and more nostalgic sounding than some other recordings I have heard. The trumpets get one last loud section (at 4'53") before the music heard at the outset brings the piece to a quiet and peaceful conclusion. This is probably the best recording I have heard

of this work which often suffers from a loss of clarity in the sparse textures. Obviously, playing on period instruments here really pays dividends.

This really is the best set of the Symphonic poems that I have heard but I do have one minor criticism, I have recently found out that Martin Haselböck and the Orchester Wiener Akademie have actually played the vast majority of Liszt's orchestral works in concert in the hall where these discs were recorded. Seeing as there is quite a sizeable chunk of music which has never been recorded before, it strikes me as odd that they couldn't have stretched to another CD with the unrecorded works on it. I'd really like to hear how Liszt orchestrated *Le Hymne du Pape* and the four Schubert Marches! It is a shame that the record company do not appear to have seen fit to record these as well as none of them have ever been recorded and they could have claimed a first recording.

However, I also recently found out that the same forces have recorded Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies and the arrangements of Liszt for organ and orchestra for the CPO label, which I assume are taken from the same series of recordings so perhaps all is not lost!

I understand from the MDT website that there is now a boxed set of all 5 CDs available at a reasonable price but you can also find it very cheaply via iTunes and Amazon via their mp3 buying sites, if you would rather have a computer file rather than a physical disc.

Jonathan Welsh

Liszt in Vienna - and "The Game of Chess"

A friend of mine, recently visiting the Belvedere Museum in Vienna, came across a painting by the 19th Century painter Josef Danhauser entitled "The Game of Chess" (sometimes known as "The Chess Party").



Danhauser was not highly appreciated in his day and, sadly, even less now. He tended to paint rather moralistic works, much influenced by the 18th century English painter William Hogarth. "The Game of Chess" represents a game played between a banker by the name of Escalles and a Hungarian noblewoman whose name I have been unable to trace. Apparently,

the noblewoman (or her lover) was heavily indebted to the banker and could not pay. Hence, it was agreed that if she defeated him at the chess board the debt would be considered as discharged. She duly did so! The attitude of amazement on the part of the banker at being beaten by a woman is rather hilarious. The theme of woman's victory over man is emphasized by the presence of a statue of Queen Omphale with her slave and future husband, Hercules. The chess game took place in Vienna in 1838 and the painting was completed in 1839.

And what has all this to do with Liszt? Well, it is almost certain that the elegant, rather foppish, figure seated on the footstool next to the noblewoman represents Liszt. I think it is undisputable that it is Liszt. It certainly looks like Liszt and Liszt was in Vienna in April and May 1838. Also, his proximity to the piano seems to be conclusive. He appears to be holding a palm leaf – a palm awarded to him, perhaps, by the noblewoman. Everything about Liszt's adoring pose rather suggests that he may also have been one of the noblewoman's lovers.

A painting by Danhauser that may be better known to members is the work shown below entitled "Franz Liszt Fantasizing at the Piano", dating from 1840. It is an imaginary scene and the identities of those present are not entirely certain. Liszt sits at the piano surrounded by, from left to right, seated, Alfred de Musset or Alexandre Dumas, père, George Sand and Marie d'Agoult. Standing, from left to right, are Hector Berlioz or Victor Hugo, Niccolò Paganini and Gioachino Rossini. A bust of Beethoven stands on the Graf grand piano, a portrait of Lord Byron on the wall and a statue of Joan of Arc on the far left. The painting is in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin.



Jim Vincent

Liszt in Luxembourg

Members will be interested to hear that a largely Italian-produced documentary-drama is planned on the subject of Liszt's time in Luxembourg. Volume 9 of the Liszt Society Journal, published in 1984, contained an extensive account of Liszt's various visits to Luxembourg, the last of which occurred in July 1886, shortly before Liszt's death, and this article has provided a great deal of the background information for the film. That article was mostly the work of Liszt Society member Jim Penning who has made an exhaustive study of the subject and who will also have input to the film. Jim Penning also co-authored (with Jean-Claude Muller) a very comprehensive article on "Franz Liszt's relationships to Mihály Munkácsy and Luxembourg", which will also provide much detail for the film.

The screenplay for this documentary drama will be written by Fabio Campus, who is a professor of music history and who has written many other screenplays on musical subjects, notably Richard Wagner. The Director is Marco Serafini.

It is intended that the story will begin with Liszt's arrival at the Castle in Colpach where he stayed with the Munkácsy family. There he gives an interview to a young Luxembourg journalist, eager to know more about the personal aspects of Liszt's eventful life. This will be intercut with flashbacks to Liszt's earlier life, especially his days in Rome, and will form the core of the film.

The film ends with Liszt's last concert given in Luxembourg-City on July 19th 1886, before he leaves for Bayreuth, ten days before his death.

Further updates will appear in future newsletters as and when more information becomes available on the progress of the film and its release date is known.

Jim Vincent

Liszt on YouTube

I am sure that many members will have explored the vast archive of filmed piano performances that can be found on YouTube. There is, of course, much music by Liszt to be found there. Here are some of my personal favourites.

Firstly, one can watch the complete Transcendental Studies played live by Boris Berezovsky at La Roque d'Antheron in France in 2002. For sheer stunning virtuosity these are hard to beat. But there is a great deal of delicate touch here too – witness his gentle rendering of *Paysage*. Some listeners might find his approach slightly on the cool side but I think these are remarkable and unforgettable performances by any standard. Incidentally, my favourite versions of these works are those by Claudio Arrau recorded in his mid-seventies, some of which can be found on YouTube, although only in audio.

One can see a filmed performance of Arrau playing Ballade No. 2 at Avery Fisher Hall, New York, in 1983. This is Arrau near the end of his life when his playing achieved an extraordinary depth and profundity. Every note seems to have significance and I find it a deeply moving account.

There is also some rare footage of Van Cliburn playing (possibly in Moscow?) the Liszt transcription of Schumann's *Widmung*. It is unfortunate that the recording appears to have been edited in parts and so one does not get the full piece, but it is still well worth hearing for Van Cliburn's wonderful combination of delicacy and elation. No other recording that I have come across quite achieves this.

Marc-André Hamelin fans can experience a full Liszt recital given at Merkin Hall in New York on the 16th April 1996. This is filled with truly astonishing playing. There are too many individual pieces to list them all separately but Marc-André includes several Hungarian Rhapsodies, a number of Transcendental Studies, *Un Sospiro*, Apparition No. 1, and some of the later works such as *Nuages Gris*. Best of all, though, perhaps, is a truly magnificent account of the *Reminiscences de Norma* which has one on the edge of one's seat! All in all, this is a superb demonstration of Lisztian piano playing and cannot be recommended enough.

Finally, I would urge members to hear Jorge Bolet's playing of the Petrarch Sonnet No. 104. This performance has all the beautiful sound quality and touch that Bolet was famous for in the later stages of his career and is simply ravishing. If you do not have the time or the inclination to look at all the above-mentioned pieces then please do try to watch the Bolet performance – it is quite unmissable!

Oh, and as an encore, try experiencing the utterly unbelievable and hair-raising account of the *Grand Galop Chromatique* by Georges Cziffra. Extraordinary!

The YouTube archive is so enormous that these recommendations can only touch the surface of it. If members have their own favourites, not mentioned above, then please do write to me about them so that those can also be highlighted in a forthcoming newsletter.

Jim Vincent

MEMBERS' LETTERS

Dear Sir,

I read the review of the Liszt Society Piano Competition (Newsletter No. 113 December 2013) with great interest and I very much agree with the following words:

Firstly, I have been to many recitals of Liszt's piano music where I have wanted to cry out "Too loud, too fast, too much pedal! – more delicacy, please, more clarity!" I believe it is often forgotten that the pianos that Liszt would have played during his performing career, and indeed for much of his life thereafter, would have been much smaller, both in physical terms and in terms of their tone and power, than the modern day "concert grand". This can be easily verified by listening to demonstrations of pianos dating from Liszt's day at such institutions as the Royal Academy of Music Museum in London. I can vouch for the fact that to hear Liszt played on an 1840 Erard is a revelation!

I know how it feels to play Liszt on such instruments, since I am not only a modern piano player, but also a harpsichord/fortepiano player. In fact, I perform Liszt on period pianos, and the audience loves it. If the Society ever organizes an event including recitals with Liszt's music on fortepiano, please tell me, because I would be willing to participate.

Thirteen years ago, I wrote my degree dissertation on Liszt's pianos. Since then, I have continued looking for information on the subject, and am currently working on my PhD dissertation, which deals with Liszt's performance practice. I hope that when it is ready it will be a useful document for every pianist that wants to approach Liszt's music with a deep understanding of its meaning. I know it is quite an ambitious task, but I hope that almost 28 years of immersion in the figure of our composer will bear fruit!

Miriam Gómez-Morán

Dear Sir,

I was very impressed by the articles in the last newsletter (no. 113 December 2013) about the final of the Liszt competition and about Vladimir Horowitz. I agree largely with the comments made about the latter – my mother bought one of his RCA LP records with Chopin's Second Sonata, First Ballade and a nocturne upon it. It also contained Liszt's *Au bord d'une source* and Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6. Although I was only 5 or 6 at the time it made an enormous impression upon me and was my introduction to Liszt. However, if the reference to his interpretation of *Vallée d'Obermann* relates to the version I think it does (played very quickly) then I'm afraid I will have to disagree strongly! I thought it was a travesty of the piece and indeed of the pianist's own art. (I have always thought Arrau's interpretation to be divine.) However, that is only my opinion and I would be interested to hear the views of other members.

Colin Hargreaves

Dear Sir,

I believe that there are a number of Liszt's piano works that would make ideal transcriptions for organ - for instance, *Pensées des morts*. I wonder whether any member who possesses the necessary skill to carry out such a transcription would be willing to undertake this venture. I, for one, would be delighted if such a transcription were to be made available (and possibly published in the music section of a future *Liszt Society Journal*?). I also intend to draw the interest of Professor Bönig to it. He is the cathedral organist of Cologne cathedral, the organ of which, with its two high pressure stops, has no doubt the potential of realizing the "Sprechchor" "de profundis", one of the most touching passages of the piece (as played by Brendel). No doubt Birmingham Anglican Cathedral or St Paul's Cathedral, London, will have similar organs of this potential. I shall let Professor Bönig know that I have written to the Liszt Society on this matter.

On another issue, Liszt's music has given rise to a considerable number of what I might call "exophoric works" i.e. imitations in his style by other composers, parodies in a jocular way, either taking Lisztian figurative work and adapting it, occasionally filled with direct quotation, or music written in or extrapolating his musical syntax.

I suggest that such works might be collected and perhaps issued on a CD, thereby complementing the total recording of Liszt's works. The sort of works I have in mind are:

PILLNEY, Karl Hermann, *Eskapaden eines Gassenhauers. Parodistische Variationen für Hörer mit Sinn für musikalische Eulenspiegelereien. Für Klavier zu zwei Händen Thema mit Variationen* (FALL, Richard, (Musik), BEDA, (Text), Lied "Was machst du mit dem Knie, lieber Hans"), Ausgabe für Klavier zu zwei Händen, Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel 1968, ²¹⁹⁷⁹, containing "Variation 10. "Liszt"". (Alternatively, for four hands, or for orchestra).

(CD: SCHERZER, E. G., (piano), *NORDWESTDEUTSCHE PHILHARMONIE/ALBERT*, Werner ANDREAS (Dir.), Köln: EMI 1969; Köln: Electrola 1988. EMICDZ 7 673612.)

VOLKMANN, Joachim, *Variationes humoris causa. Vierzehn Stilübungen über "Ein Männlein steht im Walde"* für Klavier zweihändig, Wiesbaden: Breitkopf 1966, containing Variation 14, "Rhapsodie".

ZIPP, F., *O du lieber Augustin. Metamorphosen eines Gassenhauers im Stil berühmter Komponisten*, Kassel: Edition Merseburger 2034, containing "Variation 10: à la Franz Liszt". Impromptu.

(CD: ZIPP, F., (composer), ZIPP, F., (pianist), *O du lieber Augustin. Metamorphosen eines Gassenhauers im Stil berühmter Komponisten*. Kassel: Edition Merseburger 2034. Variation 10: à la Franz Liszt. Impromptu (5'33).)

OCHS, S., *s'kommt ein Vogel geflogen. Ein deutsches Volkslied im Style älterer und neuerer Meister für Pianoforte humoristisch bearbeitet*, Reprint-Ausgabe, Franzpeter GOEBELS, ed., Mainz: Schott 1983.

GURLITT, C., *Ach du lieber Augustin. Humoristische Transcriptionen von CORNELIUS GURLITT op . 115*, Reprint- AusgabebyFRANZPETERGOEBELS,MAINZ:SCHOTT1893.

This list is far from complete, of course, and could also include parodies such as those of Victor Borge. If any other members have suggestions to add to the list I should be interested to hear them.

Mit saisonalen Grüßen

Rüdiger Pfeiffer-Rupp

(writing from Cologne Old Town amidst some New Year carnival noises of drums)

Dear Sir,

A few days ago it was good to hear the great pianist Rudolf Buchbinder interviewed on BBC Radio 3's "In Tune" programme. He said that he had 38 editions of the Beethoven sonatas – including the original edition – and that the Liszt edition was the most faithful to Beethoven's fingerings. Even the so-called authentic Urtext editions have editorial modifications.

Edi Bilimoria

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