



Franz Liszt: Sardanapalo - Mazeppa

aud 97.764

EAN: 4022143977649



Gramophone (Tim Ashley - 01.02.2019)

Quelle: <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/lisz...>

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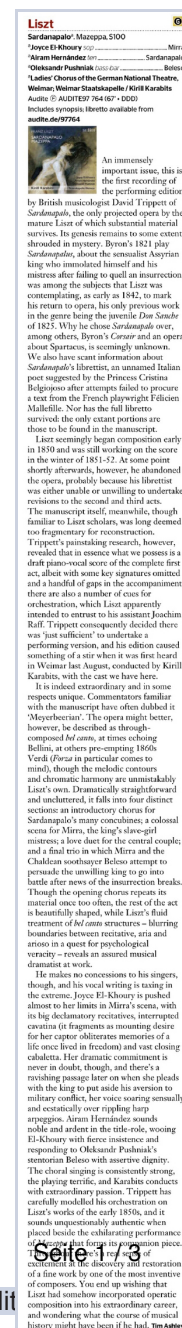


An immensely important issue, this is the first recording of the performing edition by British musicologist David Trippett of *Sardanapalo*, the only projected opera by the mature Liszt of which substantial material survives. Its genesis remains to some extent shrouded in mystery. Byron's 1821 play *Sardanapalus*, about the sensualist Assyrian king who immolated himself and his mistress after failing to quell an insurrection, was among the subjects that Liszt was contemplating, as early as 1842, to mark his return to opera, his only previous work in the genre being the juvenile *Don Sanche* of 1825. Why he chose *Sardanapalo* over, among others, Byron's *Cain* and an opera about Spartacus, is seemingly unknown. We also have scant information about *Sardanapalo*'s librettist, an unnamed Italian poet suggested by the Princess Cristina Belgiojoso after attempts failed to procure a text from the French playwright Félicien Mallefille. Nor has the full libretto survived: the only extant portions are those to be found in the manuscript.

Liszt seemingly began composition early in 1850 and was still working on the score in the winter of 1851-52. At some point shortly afterwards, however, he abandoned the opera, probably because his librettist was either unable or unwilling to undertake revisions to the second and third acts. The manuscript itself, meanwhile, though familiar to Liszt scholars, was long deemed too fragmentary for reconstruction.

Trippett's painstaking research, however, revealed that in essence what we possess is a draft piano-vocal score of the complete first act, albeit with some key signatures omitted and a handful of gaps in the accompaniment; there are also a number of cues for orchestration, which Liszt apparently intended to entrust to his assistant Joachim Raff. Trippett consequently decided there was 'just sufficient' to undertake a performing version, and his edition caused something of a stir when it was first heard in Weimar last August, conducted by Kirill Karabits, with the cast we have here.

It is indeed extraordinary and in some respects unique. Commentators familiar with the manuscript have often dubbed it 'Meyerbeerian'. The opera might better, however, be described as through-composed bel canto, at times echoing Bellini, at others pre-empting 1860s Verdi (Forza in particular comes to mind), though the melodic contours and chromatic harmony are unmistakably Liszt's own. Dramatically straightforward and uncluttered, it falls into four distinct sections: an introductory chorus for *Sardanapalo*'s many concubines; a colossal scena for Mirra, the king's slave-girl mistress; a love duet for the central couple; and a final trio in which Mirra and the Chaldean soothsayer Beleso attempt to persuade the unwilling king to go into battle after news of the insurrection breaks. Though the opening chorus repeats its material once too often, the rest of the act is beautifully shaped, while Liszt's fluid treatment of bel canto structures – blurring boundaries between recitative, aria and aria in a quest for psychological veracity – reveals an assured musical dramatist at work.



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He makes no concessions to his singers, though, and his vocal writing is taxing in the extreme. Joyce El Khoury is pushed almost to her limits in Mirra's scena, with its big declamatory recitatives, interrupted cavatina (it fragments as mounting desire for her captor obliterates memories of a life once lived in freedom) and vast closing cabaletta. Her dramatic commitment is never in doubt, though, and there's a ravishing passage later on when she pleads with the king to put aside his aversion to military conflict, her voice soaring sensually and ecstatically over rippling harp arpeggios. Airam Hernández sounds noble and ardent in the title-role, wooing El Khoury with fierce insistence and responding to Oleksandr Pushniak's stentorian Beleso with assertive dignity. The choral singing is consistently strong, the playing terrific, and Karabits conducts with extraordinary passion. Trippett has carefully modelled his orchestration on Liszt's works of the early 1850s, and it sounds unquestionably authentic when placed beside the exhilarating performance of Mazeppa that forms its companion piece. Throughout there's a real sense of excitement at the discovery and restoration of a fine work by one of the most inventive of composers. You end up wishing that Liszt had somehow incorporated operatic composition into his extraordinary career, and wondering what the course of musical history might have been if he had.

Liszt

Sardanapalo: Mazeppa, 5100

*Joyce El-Khoury sop. Mirra

*Airam Hernández ten. Sardanapalo

*Oleksandr Pushniak bass bar. Beleso

*Ladies' Chorus of the German National Theatre,

Weimar; Weimar Staatskapelle / Kirill Karabits

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