Franz Liszt: Künstlerfestzug - Tasso - Dante Symphony

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Gramophone (Tim Ashley - 01.04.2020)

GRAMOPHONE

Written in 1857, Liszt's Künstlerfestzug was originally planned as a grand pièce d'occasion to accompany the unveiling in Weimar of the famous double statue of Goethe and Schiller that stands in front of the National Theatre, where Liszt (and indeed, more recently, Kirill Karabits) served as Kapellmeister. In the event, the premiere was shelved until the centenary of Schiller's birth two years later, by which time it had become the Prelude to Friedrich Halm's melodrama Vor hundert Jahren, for which Liszt provided incidental music to accompany the dialogue between allegorical figures representing Germany and Poetry, narrating the writer's life and celebrating his achievement.

It was not revived, however, until last year's Schiller anniversary, when Karabits performed the complete work, first in Weimar, then with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in Poole. The critical response was guarded (regrettably, I didn't hear it), though Karabits has now given us the premiere recording of the Künstlerfestzug on its own as the first work on his latest Liszt album. Though we're not dealing with a lost masterpiece, it's by no means negligible. There are echoes of the march from the first movement of the Faust Symphony in both the thematic contours and ceremonial tread of the opening statement, while a lyrical, introspective horn melody, representing Schiller himself, forms an effective point of repose at the centre. Avoiding stodgy solemnity and keeping it light on its feet, Karabits propels it forwards with graceful urgency, and brings terrific energy to the final peroration, where the playing is virtuoso and the Weimar brass, excellent throughout, sound splendidly gleaming and triumphant. With its companion pieces we are on more familiar ground, though Karabits is perhaps on a less sure footing. Darkly brooding strings, really intense and grieving, get Tasso off to a fine start, though the performance turns episodic later on – always a danger with this work – and one misses the greater coherence and drama of Masur and the Leipzig Gewandhaus (EMI, 11/81) here. Apart from a couple of moments of thin violin tone, meanwhile, A Dante Symphony is beautifully played and the unusual combination of women's and children's voices in the final Magnificat is particularly striking. Karabits gives us a notably baleful account of the opening 'Inferno' with an extremely sensuous Paolo-Francesca love scene, though the 'Purgatorio' again seems discursive when placed beside Noseda, altogether more intense and purposeful with the BBC Philharmonic (Chandos, 8/09), or the extraordinary emotional and spiritual refinement of Sinopoli with the Dresden Staatskapelle (DG, 11/98), still my first choice for this remarkable score. The Künstlerfestzug makes the disc essential listening for Lisztians, but for the other works you perhaps need to look elsewhere.

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