



Liszt - The Organ Composer

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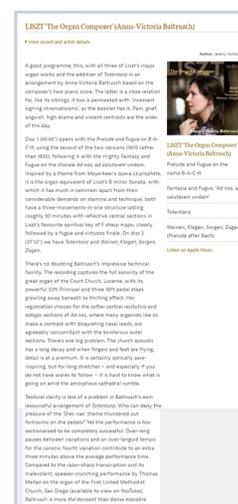
GRAMOPHONE

A good programme, this, with all three of Liszt's major organ works and the addition of Totentanz in an arrangement by Anna-Victoria Baltrusch based on the composer's two-piano score. The latter is a close relation for, like its siblings, it too is permeated with 'incessant sighing chromaticisms', as the booklet has it. Pain, grief, anguish, high drama and violent contrasts are the order of the day.

Disc 1 (46'46") opens with the Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H, using the second of the two versions (1870 rather than 1855), following it with the mighty Fantasy and Fugue on the chorale Ad nos, ad salutarem undam. Inspired by a theme from Meyerbeer's opera Le prophète, it is the organ equivalent of Liszt's B minor Sonata, with which it has much in common: apart from their considerable demands on stamina and technique, both have a three-movements-in-one structure lasting roughly 30 minutes with reflective central sections in Liszt's favourite spiritual key of F sharp major, closely followed by a fugue and virtuoso finale. On disc 2 (37'33") we have Totentanz and Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen.

There's no doubting Baltrusch's impressive technical facility. The recording captures the full sonority of the great organ of the Court Church, Lucerne, with its powerful 32ft Principal and three 16ft pedal stops growling away beneath to thrilling effect. Her registration choices for the softer central recitativo and adagio sections of Ad nos, where many organists like to make a contrast with disquieting nasal reeds, are agreeably concomitant with the boisterous outer sections. There's one big problem. The church acoustic has a long decay and when fingers and feet are flying, detail is at a premium. It is certainly sonically awe-inspiring, but for long stretches – and especially if you do not have scores to follow – it is hard to know what is going on amid the amorphous cathedral rumble.

Textural clarity is less of a problem in Baltrusch's own resourceful arrangement of Totentanz. Who can deny the pleasure of the 'Dies irae' theme thundered out fortissimo on the pedals? Yet the performance is too sectionalised to be completely successful. Over-long pauses between variations and an over-languid tempo for the canonic fourth variation contribute to an extra three minutes above the average performance time. Compared to the razor-sharp transcription and its malevolent, speaker-crunching performance by Thomas Mellan on the organ of the First United Methodist Church, San Diego (available to view on YouTube), Baltrusch is more thé dansant than danse macabre.



LISZT 'The Organ Composer' (Anna-Victoria Baltrusch)

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Author: Jeremy Nicholas



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Prelude and Fugue on the name B-A-C-H

Fantasia and Fugue, 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam'

Totentanz

Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen (Prelude after Bach)

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