



**Franz Liszt: Sardanapalo - Mazeppa**

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GRAMOPHONE



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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 arsis in a quest for psychological veracity – reveals an assured musical dramatist at work.

**Liszt**  
Sardanapalo/ Mazeppa, S100  
Joyce El-Khoury sop. ————— Mirra  
Aram Hernández ten. ————— Sardanapalo  
Oleksandr Pushniak bar. ————— Beleso  
Ladies' Chorus of the German National Theatre,  
Weimar/ Weimar Staatskapelle/ Kirill Karabits  
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Includes synopsis, libretto available from  
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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 captive obliterates memories of a life once lived in freedom) and sweet closing cabaretta. Her dramatic commitment is never in doubt, though, and there's a riveting passage later on when she pleads with the king to put aside his aversion to military conflict, her voice soaring sensually and occasionally over-rippling harp arpeggios. Aram Hernández sounds noble and ardent in the title-role, wooing El-Khoury with fierce insistence, at times responding to Oleksandr Pushniak's temerarious 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 *Don Sanche* that forms its companion piece.

**Page 1 of 3** 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. **Tim Ashley**

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**Liszt**

**Sardanapalo**. Mazeppa. S100

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