



Franz Liszt: Sardanapalo - Mazeppa

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Genuine discovery – a beautiful lost opera

This is a remarkable discovery that shows Liszt's natural voice in opera. What an eye-opening recording! The music is thrilling – an opera composed at the peak of its time. Liszt's lyrical voice is clear in its melodic and harmonic fingerprints, and yet the music is constantly surprising – from the opening Italianate chorus with its melodious, twirling waltz to Beleso's dark timbre and moments of Wagnerian drama.

Listening to this disc, I was emphatically persuaded that Liszt was capable of composing opera, and of shaping psychological drama on the stage. It comes from one of his most productive periods (1849-52), i.e. right in the middle of his career, at the same time as the two piano concertos, the first four symphonic poems, the B-minor sonata, revisions to the Dante Sonata and Totentanz, sacred choruses, Lieder, psalm settings etc.

There are four scenes, lasting 52 minutes. After the ethereal prelude (redolent of the Prelude to Lohengrin, with its characteristic woodwind and high strings) we move straight to the opening chorus of concubines. It's tantalizingly situated between Bellini and Verdi, but with more exploratory, chromatic harmony.

Scene 2 is for soprano alone. And what a feat of stamina, drama and coloratura it is. Mirra is angry at her situation: torn in two directions, between her love for the king, and his destruction of her homeland. Soaring lines, v moving in the lead up to the cabaletta. The final cadenza is sumptuous.

Scene 3 features a love duet between tenor and soprano, as they work out their feelings towards one another. Tension rises throughout (often through well-paced harmonic steps) with occasional moments of lyrical release, particularly the central march in 'sotto il tuo sguardo'. It's gripping stuff, and the closing climax is surely one of the finest in any opera from this period.

Scene 4 sees the entrance of the bass-baritone Beleso, who keeps urging the King to take his royal duties seriously, and go to war. It's richly dramatic, almost Wagnerian stuff. There is also a stunning soprano aria here ('Oh perché, perché') from Mirra, and the final trio transforms this music into a high-paced, rousing finale. (What could possibly have followed this in Acts 2-3???)



For the performance there can only be praise – clear, at times beautiful and thoroughly committed. The orchestration is rich and thoroughly idiomatic, and the Weimar orchestra makes a terrific case for this rediscovery. All in all, it is a remarkable first recording that adds fascinating new colors to Liszt's identity. Surely it can't be long before others join it.



Giacomo Meyerbeer

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Reviewed in the United States on May 7, 2019

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