Liszt

TWELVE SYMPHONIC POEMS

Leslie Howard
Mattia Ometto
2 pianos
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)
Twelve Symphonic Poems
In Liszt’s Own Versions for two Pianofortes

CD1 72’36
1  Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne
   (Symphonic Poem No.1), S635  29’46
2  Tasso – Lamento e Trionfo
   (Symphonic Poem No.2), S636  17’39
3  Les préludes (Symphonic
   Poem No.3), S637  14’39
4  Orpheus (Symphonic
   Poem No.4), S638  10’13

CD2 72’09
1  Prometheus (Symphonic
   Poem No.5), S639  12’27
2  Mazeppa (Symphonic
   Poem No.6), S640  16’26
3  Festklänge (Symphonic
   Poem No.7), S641  18’56
4  Héroïde-funèbre (Symphonic
   Poem No.8), S642  24’03

CD3 77’25
1  Hungaria (Symphonic
   Poem No.9), S643  21’21
2  Hamlet (Symphonic
   Poem No.10), S644  13’34
3  Hunnenschlacht (Symphonic
   Poem No.11), S645  15’04
4  Die Ideale (Symphonic
   Poem No.12), S646  27’09

Leslie Howard and Mattia Ometto 2 pianos

Liszt’s pioneering series of twelve symphonic poems came to fruition during his time
as Kapellmeister at the court of the Duke of Weimar in the 1850s, although the
gestation of many of the pieces begins somewhat earlier. Liszt did not conceive the
final order of the works until all the pieces were ready for publication, but it is clear
that he thought of all twelve works as a gigantic cycle. He issued them in versions
for orchestra, for two pianos, and for piano duet. [A later version for solo piano was
prepared by a number of Liszt’s students, under varying degrees of scrutiny, revision
and alteration by the composer.] Of course, Liszt was not the first composer to write
programme-music, but his decision to produce this set of symphonic works, generally
related to established forms, and usually under the inspiration of extra-musical
works of art, spawned a vast literature by many imitators and successors well into
the twentieth century. Their influence upon composers as diverse as Wagner and
Tchaikovsky is plain to see and hear.

The two-piano versions of these pieces are no mere transcriptions: Liszt allows
quite considerable variance from the orchestral scores in order to make real duos,
ocasionally even adding some bars (as in Hungaria), omitting bars – especially
of untuned percussion (as in Ce qu’on entend), or transforming the material with
new harmonies instead of untuned percussion (as in Héroïde funèbre). As with his
monumental partitions de piano of the Beethoven Symphonies, he often makes an
informed trade of the letter of the score for the spirit of it, and happily gets all the
closer to the musical substance.

Ce qu’on entend sur la montagne (What is heard on the mountain) takes its title
from the eponymous poem by Victor Hugo. Although the piece echoes the poem in a
general sense, the musical narrative is much freer, and also incorporates new elements
such as the beautiful religious processional choral. This theme, which occurs in the
middle of the work and reappears at the end, takes little part in the rest of the musical
Orpheus is a real connoisseur’s piece, and shows Liszt at his most delicate, as well as at his most harmonically inventive. Once again, it is a piece first conceived as an overture to Gluck’s *Orfeo* (Liszt also wrote a short valedictory piece on the same theme to be played after the opera – extraordinary notion to put an 18th century work into a Romantic frame!), and it remains one of Liszt’s finest creations. It was a great favourite of Sir Thomas Beecham, who recorded it twice.

Prometheus is simply a marvel of symphonic construction: a sonata movement full of rigour, and commendably concise in its utterance. It began life as an overture to Herder’s play *Der entfesselte Prometheus* (*Prometheus in chains*), and subsequently was used as an introduction to Liszt’s *Prometheus Choruses* (also written to be given with Herder’s play, but later presented as an independent work with spoken links). The astounding opening theme of this work, with its trenchant rhythm, introduces a recitative-like theme which is transformed into the first subject proper. The second, winsome theme, marked by harmonies that shift by thirds, takes us to the development, and one of Liszt’s most skilful pieces of fugal writing – his contrapuntal expertise having been part of his technical armoury since his studies as a lad with Antoine Reicha.

Mazeppa, known to Liszt through both Hugo and Byron, led him to a musical homage, first in an extended version of one of his Grandes Études, and later reworked in the fourth of the Études d’exécution transcendante. For the symphonic poem, he decided that the rather abrupt coda of the piano piece would not sufficiently convey the fate of Mazeppa who, having been tied to a wild stallion, finally falls as if dead, but rises to become a great leader of men. Turning to music from his previously-composed *Marche héroïque* – itself a reworking of his *Arbeiterchor* (Workers’ chorus), Liszt fashioned a new and thoroughly uplifting conclusion to the musical story, including a last reminiscence of Mazeppa’s principal theme.
Hungaria is a very broad canvas of Hungarian life and music, and represents Liszt's largest single movement in homage to his national roots. The principal thematic material all springs from an earlier piano piece (later orchestrated): Heroischer Marsch im ungarischen Styl. That piece is in a simple sonata form; the later work is a vast rhapsody, still with elements of the sonata, but with much added fantasy and collateral thinking, culminating in a fine frenzy on a Hungarian melody also familiar from Brahms and Glazunov. Liszt has made a concerted effort here to produce a real virtuoso piece for two pianos.

Hamlet is the most noble of the symphonic poems. It is also the most forward-looking, musically. At some pains to delineate the character of the Danish prince, including the depiction of Ophelia as if through Hamlet's eyes, Liszt condenses much into little, and gives us some idea of the direction his later music would take. It was the last of the series to be completed, and the only one that was not performed in Weimar in the 1850s. The piece deserves comparison with Liszt's orchestral masterpiece, the Faust Symphony. It had a broader lease of life for a time as a very successful ballet created by Frederick Ashton for Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev. (For a time Liszt thought of the work as a possible overture to a production of Shakespeare's play, but it was never so utilised.)

Hunnenschlacht is the only one of the twelve symphonic poems inspired by a painting or, to be precise, a fresco by Wilhelm von Kaulbach. The gruesome battle this depicts is treated by Liszt in the stormiest way as far as the pagan warriors are concerned, whereas the Christians who ultimately triumphed are essentially airbrushed into chaste purity, represented by the plainchant Pange lingua gloriosi. Their victory is underlined by Liszt's inclusion of the organ in the orchestral score – the only time this instrument appears in the symphonic poems. (The very much later independent symphonic poem Von die Wiege bis zum Grabe (From the cradle to the grave) is a mighty funeral ode and, although it was planned as the first movement of a five-part symphony, and harks back to the sketches from 1830 of an unfulfilled Symphonie révolutionnaire, it is strongly connected to the events of October 1849 – similarly enshrined in music by Liszt in the same year, and in the same key – F minor – in his mighty piano piece Funérailles. Both works are déplorations of the execution of the Hungarian leaders of the failed uprising against the Hapsburgs. The piece is an extended funeral march, twice punctuated by solemn references to the chorus of La marseillaise, and the intense level of grief cannot be dispelled, not even by the breathtaking beauty of the lyrical second theme, whose arrival on the scene is much delayed. There is sheer despair in the crumbling harmonies of the coda. For its antithesis we must look to the following work:

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“Mattia Ometto is a pianist with a marvelous sensitivity, one of those artists whose responsibility is to make audiences perceive what real talent is”” (Aldo Ciccolini, pianist – Paris)

The winner of a vast array of national and international prize both in Europe and United States, Mattia Ometto is quickly establishing himself as an artist whose gifts hark back to the Golden Age of classical piano performance, gift that reflect
Leslie Howard

Annual re-engagements on 5 continents and a 130-CD discography attest to the burgeoning popularity of Leslie Howard, established worldwide as a concert pianist, composer, conductor, chamber musician and scholar. A citizen both of Britain and Australia - born in Melbourne but resident in London since 1972 - Dr. Howard has earned an extraordinary claim to immortality, having accomplished a feat unequalled by any solo artist in recording history - his 97-CD survey (for Hyperion) of the complete piano music of Franz Liszt. Accomplished within 14 years, it encompasses 300+ world premieres, including works prepared by Dr. Howard from Liszt’s still unpublished manuscripts, and works unheard since Liszt’s lifetime. This monumental project merited Dr. Howard’s entry into the Guinness Book of World Records, 6 Grands Prix du Disque and - all presented to him by the President of Hungary - the Medal of St. Stephen, the Pro Cultura Hungarica award, and a mounted bronze cast of Liszt’s hand. At an internationally telecast ceremony from Buckingham Palace, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II bestowed on Dr. Howard “Member in the Order of Australia” for his “service to the arts as piano soloist, composer, musicologist and mentor to young musicians.” Highlights of Dr. Howard’s 2004-2005 concert season included an extensive Asian tour, with recitals and master classes throughout China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. His triumphant return to America included his highly anticipated recital at the 2005 International Keyboard Institute & Festival in Manhattan, for which he received accolades from the New York Times. Dr. Howard also realised his dream to conduct Liszt’s monumental Oratorio Christus in a rare and much-praised revival in Leicester.

Leslie Howard has appeared internationally with many of the world’s finest orchestras, including the London Symphony, London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, BBC Philharmonic, English Northern Philharmonia, RTE National Symphony of Dublin, Hanover Band, Utah Symphony, Utah Philharmonic, Maryland Symphony, Mexico Philharmonic, Orchestra della Scala, and in Palm Springs with the american virtuoso Earl Wild.

Mr. Ometto performs regularly in Europe and United States. Following his recital debut in Paris at the Théâtre du Rond Point des Champs Elysées and in New York City at Carnegie Hall, he appeared both in recital and as soloist with orchestra in New York (Carnegie Hall, Bargemusic), New Jersey, Des Moines (Sheslow Auditorium), Boston (Rivera Hall), Venice (Gran Teatro la Fenice), Berlin, and also in Los Angeles with the Lyric Symphony orchestra, in Ankara (Turkey) with Academic Baskent Orchestra, in Vidin (Bulgaria) with the Vidin State Philharmonic Orchestra, just to name a few.

Broadcast of Mr Ometto’s performances and interviews have been heard on numerous radio stations, such as BBC London, Kulturradio Berlin, Rai International, Radiotre, Raitrade, Radio della Svizzeria Italiana, Radioclassica, Radio Romania, Iowa State Radio, Kanal B Ankara, WGBH Boston.

His discography comprises the critically acclaimed recordings of the complete set of Melodies by César Franck and Henri Duparc (Brilliant Classics) and the World Premiere Recording of the complete music for two pianos and piano four-hands by Reynaldo Hahn recorded with the legendary pianist and Liszt scholar Leslie Howard (Melba Recordings). Mattia Ometto and Leslie Howard are currently working on the recording of the Complete Music for two pianos by Franz Liszt (9CDs)

Born in Padua in 1982, Mattia Ometto graduated summa cum laude from the Venice Conservatory of music where he studied with Anna Barutti. Very active also as a teacher he gives master classes as a visiting artist at Drake University in Des Moines (Iowa), Redlands University, International Institute for Conductors in Vidin (Bulgaria) and Accademia della Musica in Padua.

Mattia Ometto is professor at the “J. Tomadini” Conservatory in Udine and at the "C. Pollini” Conservatory in Padua.
Grèmmophon, EMI Classics, Nimbus, Cala, Pearl, ABC Eloquence, Musical Heritage Society and Merlin labels

As a composer, Dr. Howard's works include an opera Hreidar the Fool, a ballet Fruits of the Earth, and numerous orchestral, choral and solo compositions. As an arranger, he has written completions for unfinished or unrealised works of Bach, Mozart, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Scriabin and Shostakovich. In 2003, Boosey & Hawkes published Dr. Howard's “New Corrected Edition” for the 2-piano score of Rachmaninoff’s 4th Piano Concerto (in collaboration with Robert Threlfall). He has also edited several volumes of Liszt Society Publications for Hardie Press and Editio Musica Budapest. With Michael Short, he has published Ferenc Liszt—a List of his Musical Works (Rugginenti, 2004) and he has two books in progress: Ferenc Liszt – A Thematic Catalogue and The Music of Liszt.

Dr. Howard’s performances of chamber music and lieder include collaborations with some of the greatest artists of our time, including the Amadeus, Britten and Endellion String Quartets, Salvatore Accardo, Augustin Dumay, Erick Friedman, Ani Kavafian, Benny Goodman, Charles Neidich, Steven Isserlis, Nathaniel Rosen, Torlief Thedeen, Geoffrey Parsons, Sir Thomas Allen, Yvonne Kenny and Dame Felicity Lott. He has been a featured artist at many international music festivals, including the American festivals of Santa Fe, Newport, La Jolla, Palm Beach and Seattle, and at such European festivals as Brescia-Bergamo, Como, Edinburgh, Schleswig-Holstein, Bath, Camden, Cheltenham, Warwick and Wexford.

Dr. Howard's discography includes many important world premiere recordings, such as the four piano sonatas of Anton Rubinstein, the 2nd and 3rd piano sonatas of Tchaikovsky, a 2-disc survey of Glazunov’s piano music, a 3-disc collection of Percy Grainger’s piano works and a 2-disc box with Reynaldo Hahn’s complete works for two pianos and piano duet (with Mattia Ometto). Also notable is the highly acclaimed disc entitled “Rare Piano Encores”, a Stravinsky disc with Abbado and the London Symphony, a disc of Scandinavian piano sonatas (Sibelius, Gade, Palmgren & Grieg), and the Granados Goyescas. Most prominent amongst his 97-CD Liszt survey is the first complete recording of all 17 works for piano and orchestra, including Dr. Howard’s reconstructions of the 3rd Piano Concerto, De Profundis, and Concerto pathétique. Dr. Howard's recordings appear on the Hyperion, Deutsche Grammophon, San Remo Symphony, Orchestre de Cannes, Budapest Philharmonic, Budapest Symphony, the orchestras of Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Queensland and Tasmania in Australia, and the orchestras of Pretoria, Cape Town and Zimbabwe in Africa. He has been soloist with such renowned conductors as Claudio Abbado, Adam Fischer, Roy Goodman, James Judd, Joseph Silverstein, Barry Tuckwell, Sir Charles Groves, Vernon Handley, Jerzy Maksymiuk, Elyakum Shapira, Jansug Kakhidze, Arthur Fiedler, Fritz Rieger, Alexander Lazarev, Hiroyuki Iwaki, and Sir Charles Mackerras.

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