



Franz Liszt: Portrait of the Man and his Masterwork

Liszt Sonata in B minor

Barbara Nissman (pf)

Three Oranges Recordings 3OR-21, 2 DVDs



If anyone needs reminding that Liszt's Sonata in B minor is a landmark in the history of music and a spiritual odyssey of profound depth, they should turn to Barbara Nissman's DVD masterclass and recital. On the first of her two discs she traces, or rather relishes, the twists and turns of Liszt's extraordinary life. And if the manner is occasionally over-emphatic, her enthusiasm and insight are infectious. The facts she relates may be familiar, but her commentary is starred with a special sense of musical and, above all, human richness. She is quick to point out that even when Liszt's religious faith was tested to near breaking point, he remained steadfast and stoic in a hailstorm of controversy and incomprehension.

More than any composer, perhaps, Liszt was subject to vagaries of fortune, and like all true originals or pioneers he paid a heavy price, finding himself placed beside his beloved Wagner in opposition to the conservative camp represented primarily by Schumann and Mendelssohn. His superstar status (for Nissman he was the Elvis Presley of his day) encouraged accusations of superficiality. His admiration, indeed worship of Chopin was returned with biting scorn ('as a creator he is an ass'). Meanwhile George Sand, Chopin's mistress, saw his religious vocation as attention-seeking, his love of God and the Virgin Mary a pose.

For Clara Schumann there was 'too much of the tinsel and the drum' about him and his Sonata was beyond the pale: 'Nothing but noise and false modulations.' His decision to give recitals exclusively on his own heralded the start of the solo concert and was adduced as a further instance of exhibitionism. His legendary masterclasses, where students were advised to listen and learn from each

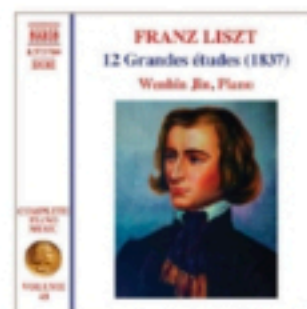
other, was yet another instance of an uncalled-for novelty. Overall, Liszt's range and brio, together with his very public celebrity – his flaunting of his bird of paradise feathers – was too much for all possible rivals. Always, through the murk of so much slander and political contrivance, you sense the presence of jealousy.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Liszt's life was clouded by self-doubt and depression (he retired from his career as possibly the greatest pianist of all time at the age of 36, seeing his 'success' as shallow and vainglorious). His final years showed a marked change from 'exuberance of the heart' to 'bitterness of the heart' mirrored in works 'grey with the pain of disillusionment' yet deeply prophetic, even when they were dismissed by his enemies as evidence of senility. Ignored and slighted before his death, he turned to alcohol for solace and confessed to 'weariness of living.'

Nissman's analysis of music she sees as her own spiritual barometer is admirably divided into sections – 'form and structure,' 'thematic transformation,' 'key relationships,' etc – where she lays bare a coherence beyond the understanding of Liszt's contemporaries, extending far into the future. Most of all, in her own concluding performance of the Sonata her playing shows a burning commitment and a special capacity to pass on the glory of Liszt's masterpiece. This DVD set is a vital tool to understanding.

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Barbara Nissman



Liszt Complete Piano Music, Volume 45: 12

Grandes études (1837)

Wenbin Jin (pf)

Naxos 8.573709, 72 mins



This Naxos issue (Volume 45 of their ongoing Liszt Complete Piano Music series) of the 12 *Grandes études* provides some illuminating insights. Liszt may have been a tirelessly fleet and productive composer, but he was no less tireless a reviser. The advance from the early prototype for the études is startling. Here in the second 1837 version, the rudimentary, Czerny-esque patterning of 1826 gives way to a massive Himalayan epic prompting Schumann's reservations concerning études of 'storm and dread.'

Forever the pragmatist as well as transcendental virtuoso, Liszt quickly realised the limitation of writing studies beyond the means of virtually any other pianist than himself, so that his final 1851 version clarifies and refines writing of an overwrought complexity. The general thinning of texture creates an altogether sharper glitter and focus (paradoxically the result is more rather than less brilliant), and this is the version preferred by virtually every Liszt champion – most notably Lazar Berman, György Cziffra and Daniil Trifonov.

In the 1837 version, Étude No 4 (later 'Mazeppa') commences *in medias res*, without its later storming introduction, whereas No 12 appears with a recitative-like opening later omitted in 'Chasse-neige.' Elsewhere the lavishly ornamented central sections of No 8 (later 'Wilde Jagd') and No 11 (later 'Harmonies du soir') are replaced by more contained writing, showing that economy as well as brevity is the soul of wit.

Wenbin Jin is a hard-working champion of his cause and even though his performances hardly spark with Berman's massive aplomb or Cziffra's thrilling if eccentric fire, he is a more than capable advocate, finely recorded.

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