

# Hyperion's Commitment to Franz Liszt

**F**ranz Liszt: astonishing 19th-century pianist who composed dozens of flashy virtuoso showpieces, but remembered mainly because his beneficence kept the impecunious Richard Wagner in wiener schnitzel.

Well, that's one picture of Liszt. You might have thought we didn't need another, but suddenly we're getting one in vivid stereo. With the publication of Alan Walker's three-volume, 1,600-plus-page biography on the one hand, and Leslie Howard's mammoth project to record the complete piano music (Hyperion) on the other, Liszt is undergoing a major re-examination.

The new view may well be that Liszt was the central musician of the 19th century, as well as a determining influence on the 20th. He lived long enough (1811-1886) to receive encouragement from Beethoven and give it to Debussy. He invented the symphonic poem, perhaps his era's most significant new genre, and wrote (as no less an authority than musicologist Carl Dahlhaus avers) the century's greatest oratorio, *Christus*. His B-minor Sonata, and its one-movement form, became the pattern for much 20th-century music. He wrote the first explicitly atonal music—his *Bagatelle sans tonalité* of 1885—and some of his last works were so harmonically bizarre that no one bothered to publish them until the 1950s, when serialism finally made them seem tame.

As Liszt put it at the end of his life, facing the almost universal rejection of his final works, his aim was to "hurl my lance into the boundless realms of the future." With Leslie Howard's exhaustive series of recordings (expected to reach to between 85 and 90 discs), that future has undoubtedly arrived. It is probably, as Hyperion claims, the largest recording project ever undertaken by a single artist.

Volume 53 of Howard's CDs—the complete music for piano and orchestra on four and a half discs (actually four discs and a bonus) (Hyperion CDA67401/2 and CDA67403/4, ★★★★★)—may prove to be the series' climactic centerpiece. Howard counts 17 works for piano and orchestra, left by Liszt in various stages of completion and disarray. Besides the two well-known numbered concerti, there are a *Concerto Pathétique*, a concerto in E-flat, and a "Malediction" Concerto in E minor, all dating from the 1830s. Several other large works are based on music by other composers: a fantasy on Beethoven's *Ruins of Athens*, another on themes of Berlioz's *Lelio*, a *Polonaise brillante* by Weber, and best of all, Liszt's masterful transcription of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasie*. In his obsessive scrupulousness, Howard even includes, here in its first recording, a set of variations on a Bellini tune by several composers, including Liszt, Chopin, Thalberg and Czerny, and—as the bonus disc—a concerto on Hungarian themes by Liszt's star student

Sophie Menter, on which Liszt probably collaborated. If you can find a single measure for piano and orchestra by Liszt that's not included here, the Liszt Society's got an honorary membership with your name on it.

The miscellany reveals an attitude toward music-making that makes 20th-century purists squirm, which is probably why Liszt's reputation remains so slippery. Liszt spent his life making music by any means necessary, with a disregard for sources that flouts our cherished paradigm of authorship. Yet the *Lelio Fantasy* is arguably an improvement over Berlioz's flawed hodgepodge of a music drama; and Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasie* adapts beautifully, with every theme and solo just where you'd want it in a concerto. Liszt's freewheeling methods were more typical of the 19th century than we want to remember, and these odd corners of his repertoire are worth flushing out as a corrective to our anachronistic notion of the single-author masterpiece.

Nevertheless, the discs won't do much to contradict the view that the two numbered concerti are Liszt's best. The lesser-known work I came to love most is an instrumental *De Profundis* from the 1830s, one of Liszt's many musico-religious impulses; much of the lovely opening material is based on a liturgical chant, although the piece culminates in a polonaise whose incongruity leaves even the scholarly Howard nonplussed.

The Australian virtuoso Howard is at his best making Liszt growl. One thing that separates Liszt's piano music from that of Schumann, Chopin, Brahms, et al., is that there is more music to it than just the notes on the page; it transcends the keyboard, piling up resonances in rumbling blurs that turn the piano into a menacing noise machine. You need to get beyond the notes to achieve such effects, and Howard does.

The playing is passionate, but not always brilliant.

One wishes the treble themes in the famous First Concerto would sparkle a little more, and feel as tossed off as one imagines Liszt playing them. Impeccably in command, Howard is a heavy Liszt pianist, which is often, though not always, the ticket.

Quibbles aside, the mammoth amount of scholarship that pulled this 330-plus minutes of music together, driven by an insatiable Liszt fanaticism, achieves its goal. It proves that our statue of Liszt needs not only a good polishing, but a higher pedestal. ■



By Kyle Gann