



Franz Liszt: Sardanapalo - Mazeppa

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Ferenc Liszt: Sardanapalo – Resuscitation of an operatic fragment



It is well known that Ferenc Liszt's oeuvre comprises only one complete opera: *Don Sanche*, composed in his adolescence, whose world première was in Paris on October 17th 1825, and altogether had four performances then. Modern revivals of the opera have been staged several times in Hungary (in Szeged and Miskolc), and even an LP was recorded in 1986. Less well known is that the composer had a relatively long period in his mature years as well (the decade between 1841 and 1851) when he was seriously preoccupied with composing opera. The seriousness of his plans is proven by numerous references in his correspondence, his readings on the subject, and by various librettos he ordered and partly even received, some of which have survived and can be studied in the Liszt-inheritance preserved in the Goethe-Schiller Archive in Weimar. However, we know of a serious compositional experiment, a musical notation, in the case of only one work, and that is *Sardanapalo* (*Sardanapal* or *Sardanapale*) – whose material is also preserved in the Weimar collection, and already Peter Raabe evaluated the musical sketch material in his manuscript catalogue of 1910/11 as a "major fragment".

Liszt's operatic plans, including *Sardanapalo*, have been examined by several scholars, and studies were already published decades ago. In 2017, however, it caused a sensation when an English music historian, David Trippett, announced that he had succeeded in reconstructing a complete, performable act of the opera with years of work (and with the help of his linguistic colleagues in terms of the libretto) from the autograph containing merely short references about the instrumentation, and noted only in sketch form and mostly in musical stenography. It was characteristic of Liszt's working method at that time that, in the first stage, he only prepared a piano (or vocal-piano) sketch of his orchestral or vocalorchestral works – or a so-called particella, a short score sketch – specifying at some points what kind of instruments he would like to see in the full orchestral score. After that he delegated the instrumentation to one of his composer secretaries, Joachim Raff or August Conradi. Liszt then thoroughly reviewed the score they had prepared and corrected or supplemented it at many points, and then had it copied out again, so that the final version, when completed, fully reflected his own concept. However, there was more

than one composition where the work of instrumentation was not completed (just as in the case of Sardanapalo, which Raff was supposed to orchestrate, but it never happened), or it was albeit done, but got stuck at one point, sometimes at a very advanced stage (as for example, Four Elements – Les quatre éléments, where the last steps necessary for a possible performance were completed by Géza Gémési in 2016).

On the occasion of the 2017 press announcement, details of the Sardanapalo reconstruction were posted on youtube as well, and on August 19th and 20th 2018, the full reconstructed opera act was presented and recorded in Weimar at the Neue Weimarlhalle Congress Centre. Prior to the event, Tamás Pallós had published a very informative article on the topic in the column "Our Recovered Values" in the weekly cultural magazine Mértékadó. The main reason why we are turning to the appreciation of the Sardanapalo-reconstruction exactly now is the fact that the programme schedule of this year's Spring Festival included the Budapest première of the work in a performance by the Weimar ensemble, which, however, could not come true unfortunately due to the epidemic situation, and we do not know if this highly anticipated concert can be made up for in the future. Nevertheless, for those interested in the topic, we are happy to recommend the CD recording that has been released in the meantime, and in addition to the opera act of just over fifty minutes, the disc also features the symphonic poem Mazeppa. Furthermore, we are in the fortunate position of holding in our hands the original score material that survives in one of Liszt's sketchbooks, registered in the Goethe-Schiller Archive in Weimar under the bookmark N 4, which was the basis of Trippett's instrumentation. The New Liszt Complete Edition by Editio Musica, namely, under publication for many years now in the excellent edition by Adrienne Kaczmarczyk, released this score at the beginning of March this year – perfectly timed for the planned Hungarian première – thus launching Series IX of the "New edition of the complete works by Ferenc Liszt", which is to feature "Vocal Works with Orchestra or with Multiple Instruments". The release of a series of supplement volumes for the two series of two-handed piano works is close to completion, and it is very gratifying that the publisher has not missed the opportunity to launch another series in parallel by publishing this particularly interesting and timely musical material. David Trippett, who is currently the person most familiar with the material, was invited to the publication, while the libretto was reconstructed by Marco Beghelli, assisted by Francesca Vella and David Rosen. The introductory study (in English, German and Hungarian) provides detailed information about the history of the work's origin, the problems with the libretto, and also raises the question of why Liszt abandoned composing the opera (although is not answered definitely). The critical commentaries (only in English already, as usual) also provide information on the theoretical aspects of the release, the nature of the musical source, and the reconstruction of the libretto. The critical notes themselves are very detailed (which is understandable and necessary for the publication of a material that survives only in sketch form). It is also very useful that after the score material, the complete libretto in rhymed form in Italian is also available, separately and in a complete form, along with prose translations in English, German and Hungarian. Facsimile reproductions of no less than six original score pages, provided with proper explanations, help us understand from what sources and how the publishers worked, what kind of typical abbreviations Liszt used, how he indicated instructions for the instrumentation etc.

The theme of Sardanapalus was very popular in Liszt's youth, especially after Byron, whom Liszt particularly revered, had published a poetic tragedy in five acts in 1821 with the title Sardanapalus, which he dedicated to Goethe. As early as 1827, Liszt obtained a complete French edition of Byron's works by Amédée Pichot, which later survived in the library of his son-in-law, Émile Ollivier. Liszt marked several volumes

of the series with underlinings and handwritten entries in the margins, including the 11th volume that contains Sardanapalus. According to the story, the fall of the last Assyrian king was due to his favouring the pleasures of life and love, and his naive love of peace. Liszt had a lot of trouble obtaining a libretto based on the subject and suitable for composing music. Eventually, with the help of Cristina Belgiojoso, an Italian princess living in voluntary exile in Paris, he managed to obtain a libretto by a poet whose name is unknown to us, which he found already good enough to start composing. The characters of the completed first act are Sardanapalo, his dearest concubine, Mirra and the royal adviser, Beleso, as well as the women's chorus, impersonating the other female prisoners of the ruler. Mirra's fate foreshadows the situation of Aida in a way: although she is a prisoner and is tormented by a longing for her lost homeland, she cannot hide from herself that she is impressed by Sardanapalo, and tender feelings have woken in her heart towards him. Liszt's musical interpretation for this is a very beautiful solo section composed for the soprano singer, wherein he masterfully weaves together the lyrical, dramatic and virtuoso parts, interestingly blending the traditional elements of Italian opera with his own characteristic modulations and bold harmonies. On the CD, Joyce El-Khoury performs the grandiose melodies, passionate recitatives, and coloratura elements with amazing security and authenticity. Sardanapalo, who would do anything to drive away the grief of his beloved and win her love, is a true grateful heroic tenor role, which Airam Hernández demonstrates accordingly. Their duet scene is particularly beautiful, wherein they get to the point, through Italian-like ariosos and passionate recitatives, when the girl confesses her love, too, and they unite in an ecstatic duet, at the end of which they sing the Italian melody unisono. All this does not happen in a conventional manner at all, and it is particularly interesting when Beleso, the ruler's adviser, played by Oleksandr Pushniak, a bass singer with a beautiful voice, unexpectedly appears at the pinnacle, calling upon the ruler why he does not focus rather on maintaining his power and his empire, which is threatened by enemies through betrayal. The peace-loving ruler answers: "I am not deceived by the easy boast of a fleeting glory. Every glory is a lie, if it must be bought with the weeping of afflicted humankind." Eventually Mirra joins the dialogue between the two men, and also encourages the king to fight: "If I am dear to you, show the world your valour!" This convinces Sardanapalo: the act ends with a great terzetto and the preparation of the royal army for war, with belligerent orchestral music and a march.

It was a fortunate idea to begin the Weimar CD recording with the Mazeppa symphonic poem, because if we listen to the Sardanapalo act right after it, it is easy to recognize what instrumentation pattern David Trippett followed during the reconstruction of the score. It is also clear that not only did Liszt know very well the language and instruments of contemporary Italian opera (Bellini, Donizetti, the young Verdi), but so does Trippett. An interesting, special blend is the result of intertwining the typical Italian opera style and Liszt's specific musical language, and we can only regret that we do not know of any musical composition material for the other two acts of the three-act libretto, for which Liszt recommended various amendments. "We do not know whether Liszt had already worked up some musical material for these missing acts in anticipation of receiving a revised libretto for Acts 2-3. None of this is notated in N4, in any case. The opera is not mentioned in his correspondence thereafter, and just as Liszt moved decisively onto new compositional challenges, he neither recycled nor destroyed the music for Sardanapalo" – Trippett writes. This is fortunate – because in this way we can be certain that Liszt could also have been a successful opera composer among the musicians of his age. We owe many thanks to David Trippett for the instrumentation, and the Weimar performers, led by the Ukrainian conductor Kirill Karabits, who shows an obvious commitment to Liszt. We can be grateful that they have introduced this precious piece of music to the world at such a high standard, with genuine empathy, and in an understanding interpretation

