



Franz Liszt: Sardanapalo - Mazeppa

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CBC Radio February 6, 2019 (Robert Rowat - 2019.02.06)

source: <https://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/20853/sard...>



It's a little-known fact that Franz Liszt, famed composer of symphonic poems and virtuosic piano works, actually tried his hand at writing an opera.

And now, thanks to an intrepid musicologist, a willing conductor and a cast that includes Canada's Joyce El-Khoury, we'll be able to listen to the world premiere recording of Sardanapalo, set for release on Feb. 8.

Liszt got as far as sketching out the first act of his opera, based on Lord Byron's Sardanapalus, before abandoning the project in the mid-1850s.

A few years ago, musicologist David Trippett sought out Liszt's sketches and notes for the opera at the Goethe and Schiller Archive in Weimar, Germany, and spent three years translating and fleshing them out. His reconstructed score then enabled Staatskapelle Weimar to present the first-ever concert performances and recording sessions of the opera's first act, which took place in August 2018 under the direction of Kirill Karabits. The cast comprised soprano El-Khoury as Mirra, tenor Airam Hernández in the title role, and baritone Oleksandr Pushniak as Beleso.

"It's through-composed with a meaty orchestration," explained El-Khoury to CBC Music, pointing out the influence of Richard Wagner on Liszt. "But the vocal lines are in an Italian bel canto style. It is evident from his vocal writing that Liszt loved the voice."

The role of Mirra is a particularly satisfying sing, as El-Khoury explains.

"Constantly pulled in two directions, the character has an abundance of the magical ingredient for the stage: conflict. This is expressed in the music Liszt wrote for her, and it demands every tool in a singer's arsenal. Even in this one extant act, the tormented passion and complexity of her existence is laid bare. Being a slave who was forcibly removed from her homeland, and then, in an ironic twist of fate falls in love with her captor, King Sardanapalo (probably the destroyer of her family), the opportunity to show this inner conflict is theatrical gold to a dramatically alert singer."

El-Khoury credits musicologist Trippett for making the whole thing possible. "He was very communicative from the start, generously offering his knowledge about the piece over emails and Skype calls," she recalls. "Once we arrived in Weimar for the concerts and recording, David coached us and helped us form the characters, carefully having considered Liszt's wishes. He was present during the recording sessions giving notes, feedback and encouragement. No one knows the piece as intimately as David does, so it felt like somewhat of a direct line to Liszt himself."

In addition to her Violettas (La Traviata), Tatyanas (Eugene Onegin) and Mimis (La bohème), El-Khoury has lately made a specialty of reviving and recording forgotten operas by Gaetano Donizetti: Belisario (released in 2013), Les Martyres (released in 2015) and L'Ange de Nisida (to be released in March 2019).

And her album *Écho*, which has been nominated for a 2019 Juno Award, also features excerpts from obscure operas alongside more familiar ones.

This process of (re)discovery is thrilling for El-Khoury, who says, "there are no traditional norms to adhere to (or be expected to adhere to) and no so-called traditions associated with the pieces," she says. "It is, in short, liberating. I now try to bring this sense of freedom to my other roles as well. It has helped me step outside the box and visualize what my voice, personally, has to say."

concerti - Das Konzert- und Opernmagazin 31. Januar 2019 (Roland H. Dippel - 2019.01.31)

source: <https://www.concerti.de/rezensionen/kiri...>



ALBUM DER WOCHE

Italienisches Opernabenteuer: In „Sardanapalo“ verbindet Liszt glänzend erfundene Melodien mit den zukunftsweisenden Orchesterfarben seiner sinfonischen Dichtungen.

ALBUM DER WOCHE

Full review text restrained for copyright reasons.

Der neue Merker 05.02.2019 (Dr. Ingobert Waltenberger - 2019.02.05)

source: <https://onlinemerker.com/cd-franz-liszt-...>



Kirill Karabits leitet eine in allen Gruppen großartig disponierte Staatskapelle Weimar. Aller Glanz und Können dieses erstklassigen Orchesters ist besonders in der der Operneinspielung vorgelagerten Aufnahme der Sinfonischen Dichtung „Mazeppa“ zu genießen.

Full review text restrained for copyright reasons.

Gramophone February 2019 (Tim Ashley - 2019.02.01)

source:

<https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/lisz...>



An immensely important issue, this is the first recording of the performing edition by British musicologist David Trippett of *Sardanapalo*, the only projected opera by the mature Liszt of which substantial material survives. Its genesis remains to some extent shrouded in mystery. Byron's 1821 play *Sardanapalus*, about the sensualist Assyrian king who immolated himself and his mistress after failing to quell an insurrection,

was among the subjects that Liszt was contemplating, as early as 1842, to mark his return to opera, his only previous work in the genre being the juvenile *Don Sanche* of 1825. Why he chose *Sardanapalo* over, among others, Byron's *Corsair* and an opera about *Spartacus*, is seemingly unknown. We also have scant information about *Sardanapalo*'s librettist, an unnamed Italian poet suggested by the Princess Cristina Belgiojoso after attempts failed to procure a text from the French playwright Félicien Mallefille. Nor has the full libretto survived: the only extant portions are those to be found in the manuscript.

Liszt seemingly began composition early in 1850 and was still working on the score in the winter of 1851/52. At some point shortly afterwards, however, he abandoned the opera, probably because his librettist was either unable or unwilling to undertake revisions to the second and third acts. The manuscript itself, meanwhile, though familiar to Liszt scholars, was long deemed too fragmentary for reconstruction. Trippett's painstaking research, however, revealed that in essence what we possess is a draft piano-vocal score of the complete first act, albeit with some key signatures omitted and a handful of gaps in the accompaniment; there are also a number of cues for orchestration, which Liszt apparently intended to entrust to his assistant Joachim Raff. Trippett consequently decided there was 'just sufficient' to undertake a performing version, and his edition caused something of a stir when it was first heard in Weimar last August, conducted by Kirill Karabits, with the cast we have here.

It is indeed extraordinary and in some respects unique. Commentators familiar with the manuscript have often dubbed it 'Meyerbeerian'. The opera might better, however, be described as through-composed bel canto, at times echoing Bellini, at others pre-empting 1860s Verdi (*Forza* in particular comes to mind), though the melodic contours and chromatic harmony are unmistakably Liszt's own. Dramatically straightforward and uncluttered, it falls into four distinct sections: an introductory chorus for *Sardanapalo*'s many concubines; a colossal scena for *Mirra*, the king's slave-girl mistress; a love duet for the central couple; and a final trio in which *Mirra* and the Chaldean soothsayer *Beleso* attempt to persuade the unwilling king to go into battle after news of the insurrection breaks. Though the opening chorus repeats its material once too often, the rest of the act is beautifully shaped, while Liszt's fluid treatment of bel canto structures – blurring boundaries between recitative, aria and arioso in a quest for psychological veracity – reveals an assured musical dramatist at work.

He makes no concessions to his singers, though, and his vocal writing is taxing in the extreme. Joyce El Khoury is pushed almost to her limits in *Mirra*'s scena, with its big declamatory recitatives, interrupted cavatina (it fragments as mounting desire for her captor obliterates memories of a life once lived in freedom) and vast closing cabaletta. Her dramatic commitment is never in doubt, though, and there's a ravishing passage later on when she pleads with the king to put aside his aversion to military conflict, her voice soaring sensually and ecstatically over rippling harp arpeggios. Airam Hernández sounds noble and ardent in the title-role, wooing El Khoury with fierce insistence and responding to Oleksandr Pushniak's stentorian *Beleso* with assertive dignity. The choral singing is consistently strong, the playing terrific, and Karabits conducts with extraordinary passion. Trippett has carefully modelled his orchestration on Liszt's works of the early 1850s, and it sounds unquestionably authentic when placed beside the exhilarating performance of *Mazeppa* that forms its companion piece. Throughout there's a real sense of excitement at the discovery and restoration of a fine work by one of the most inventive of composers. You end up wishing that Liszt had somehow incorporated operatic composition into his extraordinary career, and wondering what the course of musical history might have been if he had.

Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk MDR Kultur - Sa 02.02. 20:05 Uhr (Bettina Volksdorf - 2019.02.02)

source: <https://sputnik.de/mediathek/radio/mdr-s...>



BROADCAST

Liszts Sardanapalo aus Weimar auf CD

Sendebeleg siehe PDF!

Note 1 - Neuheitenheft Februar 2019 (- 2019.02.01)

source: <https://www.note1-music.com/opencms/expo...>



Überfällig

Der assyrische König Sardanapalo, der als Hedonist Wein und Konkubinen den Staatsgeschäften vorzieht, und der ukrainische Volksheld Iwan Mazeppa, der nach Leid und Erniedrigung ruhmvoll stirbt: konträrer könnte man sich zwei Protagonisten wohl kaum vorstellen. Die literarisch-dramatischen Vorlagen von Lord Byron und Victor Hugo dienten Franz Liszt als Inspirationsquelle, wobei die Oper Sardanapalo nach Byron leider Fragment blieb. Die zeitgleich in Weimar entstandenen Werke repräsentieren die Ideen des Komponisten im Ringen um eine Vereinigung von Literatur und Musik. Auf der einen Seite die Modernisierung der italienischen Oper, auf der anderen die Weiterentwicklung der Sinfonik. Das Manuskript zu Sardanapalo umfasst lediglich den ersten Akt, weshalb das Material 170 Jahre lang im Weimarer Goethe- und Schiller-Archiv schlummerte. Erst 2017 wurde die Niederschrift von David Trippett an der University of Cambridge entziffert, editiert und orchestriert. „Die erhalten gebliebene Musik ist atemberaubend – eine einzigartige Mischung aus italienisch beeinflusstem Gefühlsüberschwang, kühnen harmonischen Wendungen und Seitenwegen“, beschreibt Trippett die Komposition. „Es gibt nichts Vergleichbares in der Opernwelt. Das Werk ist durchflutet von Liszts charakteristischem Stil und birgt zugleich Elemente von Bellini und Meyerbeer, in denen immer wieder auch Wagner zu erkennen ist.“ Kirill Karabits hat das Fragment mit der Staatskapelle Weimar für AUDITE erstmals eingespielt, mit dem Orchester der Stadt, für welche die Oper einst gedacht war. Das Label setzt damit die verdienstvolle und vielbeachtete Veröffentlichungsreihe von Werken der großen Komponisten und Weimarer Kapellmeister fort.

The Guardian Thu 7 Feb 2019 (Erica Jeal - 2019.02.07)

source: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/f...>



Franz Liszt: Sardanapalo, Mazeppa review – lost opera of glittering scope

Musicologist David Trippett skilfully reconstructs a Liszt opera fragment, illustrating the composer's fertile musical mind

Kirill Karabits conducts this [Mazeppa] and Sardanapalo with pace and purpose, and his singers are strong if not subtle.

Full review text restrained for copyright reasons.

[The Times](#) February 8 2019 (Geoff Brown - 2019.02.08)
source: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/times...>



When El-Khoury's volatile soprano shoots skywards, wildly dramatic, you wonder what heights were left to breach in the unwritten acts. Airam Hernández (Sardanapalo) and Oleksandr Pushniak (soothsayer Beleso, the grown-up in the room) contribute forcefully, although not as much as Karabits's orchestra, on excellent form, weighty with piercing brass and thrusting strings. Liszt's symphonic poem Mazeppa, thrillingly performed, valuably fills out this most special and historic release.

Full review text restrained for copyright reasons.

[Thüringer Allgemeine](#) 09. Februar 2019 (Wolfgang Hirsch - 2019.02.09)
source: <https://www.thueringer-allgemeine.de/web...>



Weimarer Staatskapelle widmet sich Liszts „Sardanapalo“

Die mit Spannung erwartete Weimarer Weltersteinspielung des „Sardanapalo“-Fragments ist nun im Handel. Generalmusikdirektor Kirill Karabits zeichnet den tragischen Weg des Heerführers klar, straff und überaus sinnlich mit Klängen nach.

Karabits und seine glänzend aufgelegte Weimarer Staatskapelle und Chor zaubern mit köstlichen Farbtupfern eine prickelnde Orientatmosphäre, vor allem kosten sie die zahllosen, durchaus strapaziösen Spannungsbögen weidlich aus.

Full review text restrained for copyright reasons.

www.prestoclassical.co.uk 8th February 2019 (Katherine Cooper - 2019.02.08)
source: <https://www.prestomusic.com/classical/ar...>



Recording of the Week

Kirill Karabits conducts the world premiere of Liszt's Sardanapalo

It's undeniably thrilling stuff, and by this stage I found myself so caught up in the drama that I was itching to crack on with the next four acts...until I remembered that they'd never materialised. Sardanapalo may be 'the claw of a lion' rather than the entire majestic beast (to borrow a phrase from one of Wagner's letters to Liszt), but it's definitely worth a visit.

Full review text restrained for copyright reasons.

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