Franz Liszt: Sardanapalo - Mazeppa

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CBC Radio (Robert Rowat - 2019.02.06)
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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."

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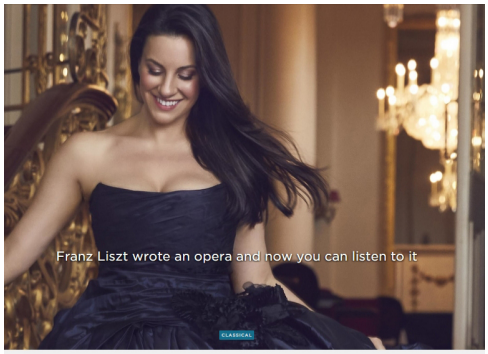

By Robert Rowat

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Here's an excerpt:

Duet: 'Sotto il tuo sguardo'
From Act 1, scene 3 of *Sardanapalo* by Franz Liszt
Joyce El-Khoury (soprano) and Airam Hernández (tenor)
Staatskapelle Weimar, dir. Kirill Karabits
Audio

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Watch for the release of Sardanapalo on Feb. 8 on the Audite label. Details here.