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**FRANZ LISZT**  
Piano Concertos Nos. 1 & 2; Totentanz  
Arnaldo Cohen (piano)

São Paulo Symphony Orchestra

John Neschling

BIS- 1530(SACD)  
Reference Recording - Concertos: Richter (Philips);  
Totentanz: Brendel (Philips)

*Artistic Quality* **10/10** *Sound Quality*

It's often thought that critics work in isolation, and that a published opinion is merely the subjective impression of one individual. Maybe some do work that way, but I consider myself extremely fortunate to be in communication with colleagues or partners at CT.com and elsewhere--some of the most dedicated and knowledgeable people in the field. We enjoy discussing the merits of various recordings, and particularly before we give a disc a 10/10 rating we often consult to see if we agree. This is reflected, for example, in the "International Consensus" Disc of the Month selections, but that is only the tip of the critical iceberg. When it comes to repertoire very frequently recorded, such as the Liszt piano concertos, we often try to be extra careful, to be particularly clear about our reasons for awarding a new release our highest accolade.

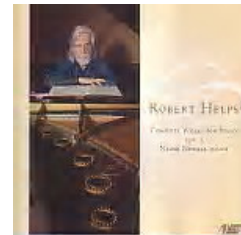
In this particular case, I had an extensive discussion with my colleague Christophe Huss, who operates CTFrance.com. We both agreed that these performances were unusually excellent, with Christophe a bit more enthusiastic about them than I was. Clearly, Arnaldo Cohen is an exceptional Liszt pianist; he tackles all three works with consummate virtuosity and intelligence. Rapid passagework, such as the scherzo section of Piano Concerto No. 1, truly sparkles. The cadenzas in Totentanz are brilliant without turning noisy or vulgar. The Second Concerto possesses a rare cogency arising primarily from Cohen's ability to inflect a phrase without slowing down for effect or sacrificing the long arc of melody.

I thought, however, that the end of Totentanz didn't quite match the manic sense of fun characteristic of Brendel's astonishing performance with Haitink on Philips (one of the very best recordings he ever made). Christophe felt that this minor deficit was more than outweighed by one other critical factor. Many of the most highly acclaimed recordings of these concertos, he pointed out, feature big-name soloists accompanied by big-name conductors and orchestras who play with, at best, a certain casual indifference. This is, after all, pianists' music. In this case, we have a lesser-known conductor and orchestra, but they play with as much conviction and intensity as the soloist, and bring an equal amount of character and personality to their contributions. The result is a true partnership of equals, a rarity in Liszt's piano music, yet surely what he intended in these colorfully and very precisely scored pieces (how many piano concertos do you know that give specific cautionary advice in a footnote to the triangle player?).

Listening to these performances yet again, and making some spot comparisons with a few other favorite versions, it's clear that Christophe was right. And this

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*Today's New Reviews*

**SAINTE-COLOMBE**  
"Les Voix Humaines"--Susie Napper,  
Margaret Little (bass viol)  
Atma

**BELA BARTÓK**  
Los Angeles Philharmonic  
Gustavo Dudamel  
Deutsche Grammophon


**DIETRICH BUXTEHUDE**  
Suzie LeBlanc, Catherine Webster  
(soprano); Matthew White (alto); Pascal  
Charbonneau (tenor); Thomas  
Meglioranza (bass)  
Les Voix Baroques  
Atma

**IGOR STRAVINSKY**  
Jennifer Frautschi (violin)  
Philharmonia Orchestra  
Robert Craft  
Naxos

**WILLIAM MATHIAS**  
Gervase de Peyer (clarinet); Osian Ellis  
(harp); Peter Katin (piano)  
New Philharmonic Orchestra  
London Symphony Orchestra  
David Atherton  
Lyrita

fact, together with BIS's typically state-of-the-art SACD multichannel engineering, led us both to agree to give this disc our highest recommendation. I decided to tell the story in this way because I think it says something useful about what a 10/10 means: a performance that is first of all generally excellent, but that also contains something extra, a positive quality not to be found in competing versions (at least not quite to the same degree). It doesn't mean that everything about it is "the best" in direct comparative listening (a silly notion to begin with), and of course everyone will have their own personal preference in this music--but if you try this disc you will surely hear the qualities described above, just as we did, and hopefully will be similarly impressed.  
[8/1/2007]

--David Hurwitz

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