

## A Liszt able to surprise us

.A review by Stefan Drees, 05.09.2007

Liszt, Franz: Concertos for piano and orchestra, Nos. 1 and 2

Label: BIS Records, Released: 17 July,.2007

Interpretation: : ★★★★★

Sound quality: : ★★★★★

Repertoire choice: ★★★★★

Encarte: ★★★★★

It is a long time since I enjoyed a new rendition of well-known pieces of music as much as I did this

recording of Liszt's most famous compositions for piano and orchestra that is, Concerto No.1 in E flat major S124 and Concerto No.2 in A major, and also "Dance Macabre" S121 (Totentanz), much played, but unfortunately too often interpreted without due care. This recording surprised me with its richness and

brilliant

and made me sit up and listen a second time to the Bis label's SACD. Praise goes not only to the soloist Arnold Cohen who has shown himself to be a competent interpreter of Liszt, but also to the São Paulo Symphonic Orchestra's gripping performance under the leadership of John Neschling, Cohen's version stands out because of its exceptional accuracy, and because of the depth of sonority and musicality inherent in these 'concertante' compositions. The center of his attention is the interaction between

the continuous breaks in the music and his extremely organic interpretation of both compositions each of which constitutes one movement, but embraces various segments. As a consequence, Liszt's concertos produce a great variety of images and sensations; carefully constructed phrases, that come close to rhetorical speech and poetic rambling, alternate with the diabolical fury of sonorous cascades. This shift between imposing bravado and sensitive expression of timbers in some passages generates - for example, in the slow movement of Concerto No.1 and at the beginning of Concerto No.2 - an

admirably intimate manner of playing that transforms the 'Dies irae' in 'Dance Macabre' into a flowing round of images.

What is a little worrying about this recording - more so in the stereo than in the surround version - is the lack of salience given to solo instruments. It is difficult to identify the subtle 'pizzicato' of the strings in the concertos or to follow some of the entrances of the woodwinds which are muffled by the sonorous cascades of the piano. Perhaps there should have been

more careful editing during the final mixing stage, because the sound is only well balanced during the 'tutti' passages. It is a pity, because the orchestra's performance is excellent. Its intonation does not weaken at any moment, and the articulations and accents remain extremely precise under John Neschling's baton. As a result, the music gains greatly because it remains crystal-clear throughout. Also perfect is the balance during the marvelous dialogs between the pianist and the orchestra's soloists.

Some of the most beautiful moments of the recording are certainly when we hear, for example, the intimate

duet between the piano and the clarinet in Concerto No.1 and the slow movement with the cello and the

piano in Concerto No.2. All in all, the recording is full of surprises, among which Cohen's unpretentious

interpretation and the orchestra's performance stand out. This makes clear once again that the long established European orchestras should not be viewed as the as a criterion for everything to do with the technical level of performances. It is a shame, therefore, that the recording is limited to these three renditions, because the important, but rarely played "Malédiction" for piano and string orchestra, composed before them, could have been included. There was certainly no lack of space in the CD.

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