

CD REVIEW 49

KHATIA BUNIATISHVILI plays Liszt.
Sony Classical 88697766042
Liebestraum no 3
Piano Sonata
Mephisto Waltz no. 1 (The Dance in the Village Inn)
La lugubre gondola
Prelude and Fugue in A minor, after Bach BWV 543



Everyone is playing the Liszt sonata. It is the highest peak of piano sonatas. It is a tour de force and a magnificent sonata, the best ever written.

Khatia said that she was always aware that her first recording had to be a portrait of Liszt which would enable her to present as a unity many different elements within her soul. This claim to spirituality is based on her questions Was Liszt a genius? Why did he become a servant of God? Was his skill God given?

Her philosophising does not answer these questions but her performances do.

The famous Liebestraum no. 3 is breathtakingly beautiful in this performance. Liszt had a soul. He had a heart and it was a big one, too. This piece is often played with a mawkish syrupy flavour which diminishes it, but not here. One is transported to all that is beautiful.

The Liszt Sonata is a fascinating performance. The opening Lento is very slow and sinister followed by the allegro energico which is very powerful and fast. The dynamics in the agitato section are well observed and the cascades are magical and shine like glittering jewels. The first extended double octave passage has one tiny hesitation. The glorious grandioso theme caters for all accents and dynamics. In the first fugato section, if that is what it is, there is some rubato and the following a tempo section is marked piano in my score but it is not here. At another point a passage marked piano is played forte. The observation of staccato is welcome and when the dynamics increase the music becomes red hot. The fast passages are certainly fast with terrific excitement... two hundred miles an hour in a beautiful McLaren Mercedes on the flat.

In the Recitativos there is a lot of rubato and sometimes the pedal should be released to accommodate rests. The F sharp passage is very beautiful as is the Quasi Adagio section but I think this slow section is too episodic and that is Liszt's fault. The return of the allegro energico is welcome and is, in fact, sometimes fierce. I love the articulation on repeated notes. The Piu Mosso section is too heavy and loud and should be only forte. Liszt indulges into too many changes of tempo making the music to be stop and start music and it is somewhat indeterminate. How reliable this pianist is in the Presto section and what amazing fingerwork she has!

The Mephisto Waltz no. 1 is a tremendous work and for continuity is better than the Sonata. Faust and the Devil are here and the performance is at melting point. But it must be emphasised that Khatia has an enviable lyricism and her quiet playing is very poignant. The performance is so very good that one wishes that one was at this dance in the village hall.

La lugubre gondola was written when Liszt was aware that diatonic music was almost exhausted and he paved the way for the rich chromaticism in Wagner's masterpiece Tristan and Isolde and the highly disciplined world of twelve-note music so wonderfully used by Schoenberg, Berg and Webern which is a form of composition that many composers are not skilful enough to use and this is why they disparage it.

I can never see why Liszt had to arrange some existing keyboard works such as this Bach Prelude and Fugue which is more than adequate in its own original version.

The sound is excellent although I do shudder at the top notes of the piano sounding like broken glass.

This CD will sell well particularly after her Chamber Prom this August when she gave a sensational performance of Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata... simply phenomenal!

The Katin version of the sonata is still the best and Nino Gvetadze is quite superb and more subtle. But if it is raw excitement you want, this will not disappoint. It is worth its full price for the Mephisto Waltz!

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