



Tully Potter Collection

Liszt: Catholic of convenience?

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Choral music

Insightful restoration

LISZT: CHRISTUS
Ed. David Friddle

Bärenreiter Urtext BA7680a vocal score £21.50

In his own rather strange and convenient way, Liszt was a genuinely religious man in a century when many great composers – Schubert and Berlioz, Wagner and Verdi, and later Brahms – were agnostic. Yet unlike his Austrian contemporary Bruckner, one of the exceptions, whose ardent and modestly held faith permeated all his work, Liszt's Catholicism was expedient and sentimentally applied, often as a superficial veneer for the exuberant showmanship of his virtuosity. It provided a mystical dimension which, even in our present musical climate, appeals and sells to infatuated captive audiences.

Liszt's serious religious interest did, however, lead him to formidable efforts to reform Catholic church music, to modernise in line with what he then saw, rightly, as man's changing attitude toward God, and a need for bold musical intervention on behalf of the church. Though his creative and technical gifts were not quite up to the task, his stamina certainly was. His two gigantic, consecutive works, the story of the 13th-century Princess Elizabeth of Hungary, and the life of Christ (*Christus*), must be acknowledged as being among the most outstanding oratorios of the 19th century. Apart from a couple of masses and a setting of Psalm 13, Liszt had not been greatly attracted to writing church music. Each oratorio was five years in the making, *Christus* being completed in 1867 and published by J. Schuberth & Co in 1872.

It is cast in three parts: a 'Christmas Oratorio', within which the 'Three Holy Kings' he later arranged for piano four hands; 'After Epiphany', which includes the Pater noster; and the 'Passion and Resurrection' with its huge half-hour setting of the Stabat mater,

also optimistically incorporated as one of the four-hand piano arrangements of 1873.

The editor of this new edition for Bärenreiter, David Friddle, apparently found the Schuberth edition unreliable, containing, as Liszt acknowledged, a fair number of inaccuracies which even he failed to adjust. These led Friddle back to the only fair copy in the Goethe-Schiller Archiv in Weimar, and his impressive edition is, as he admits, 'a good faith attempt to restore the several layers of expression that were inadvertently peeled away from Liszt's initial outpouring...'

Friddle has provided a useful extended essay as a Preface, drawing on the authoritative insights on 19th-century performance practice of Riemann, Grove and the more recent *Classical & Romantic Performing Practice* by Clive Brown. Liszt's slurs in the vocal parts are articulation. It is very handsomely produced; the Pater noster is even printed with Liszt's alternative single statement (...*deliver us...*). The Preface itself could have been more carefully proof-read, with several errors that should not have passed eyes vigilant enough with the music ('Sheperd's Song' [*sic*] on the contents page, for instance). But we are given a note on the International Phonetic Alphabet employed throughout, distinguishing German- from English-speaking Latin, and a glossary of Liszt's more unusual directives.

The duration of the entire work is given as 163 minutes, with useful timings of all the separate parts, though the evidence of the few extant recordings suggests this to be some 20 minutes short overall. Doráti on Hungaroton and Helmuth Rilling with the Krakow Chamber Choir and Gächinger Kantorei (Brilliant Classics reissue) both run to 182 minutes, and the most recent welcome issue earlier this year, Roman Kofman and the Czech Philharmonic (MDG), is 175. Cuts can be made, and this vocal score indicates clearly all those approved by Liszt and included in the later 1874 Schuberth edition.

PATRIC STANDFORD