



Liszt and found

George Hall traces the remarkable rediscovery of a forgotten opera by the great Hungarian pianist-composer

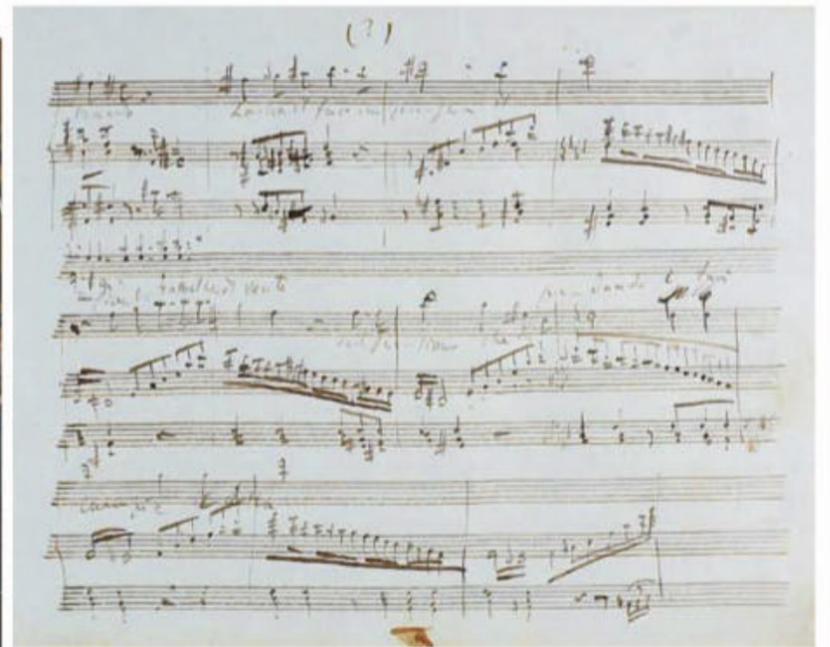
There was a point in Liszt's career when he sought to exchange the life of a travelling virtuoso and the world's best-known pianist for that of an established composer and conductor. A successful opera, Liszt decided, would be a crucial step along this new path. However, his plans didn't unfold as he had hoped. It wasn't until 2018, over 130 years after the composer's death, that an entire, 50-minute act of *Sardanapalo* was finally premiered. It was an extraordinary event. This was Liszt's only mature opera, and its belated appearance alters our view of one of the great figures of 19th-century music and of his unrealised potential as a dramatic composer.

Liszt's only previous foray into opera was when he was not quite 14; *Don Sanche* is regarded as juvenilia, and its authorship is still to an extent disputed. Fast forward to 1845, and the composer was considering various possibilities when he selected *Sardanapalo* as his subject – a semi-





Never too late: Liszt's 1850s opera is belatedly premiered in 2018; (above) part of the score of *Sardanapalo*



legendary Assyrian king memorialised in 1821 by Lord Byron. The poet intended his play to be read rather than acted, but it inspired several other works of art, notably Delacroix's 1827 painting *The Death of Sardanapalus*, a (mostly) lost cantata on the same theme by Berlioz and an extant one by Ravel (*Myrrha*, 1901). It also sparked at least half-a-dozen operas; even Verdi briefly considered the subject.

The first librettist Liszt approached proved hopelessly dilatory, while the second, an unknown contact of the well-connected saloniste the Princess Belgiojoso, never submitted a final version for Acts 2 or 3. It is perfectly possible that this individual's failure to deliver the revised text put an end to the project, as Liszt abandoned the opera in 1852.

However, he did set the first act some time from 1849-51, writing a 115-page sketch that was long dismissed as too fragmentary to do anything with. Cue David Trippett, a senior lecturer at Cambridge University and

CANDY WELZ, GETTY

“ Byron's play *Sardanapalus* inspired works of art by Delacroix, Berlioz, Ravel and Liszt, plus at least half-a-dozen operas ”

an accomplished pianist whose academic specialisms include Wagner as well as Liszt. He examined the surviving score thoroughly, along with a 36-page prose scenario, and his conclusions were rather different. 'The vocal parts are complete and continuous,' he wrote in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* in 2018. 'They contain most of the libretto text as underlay, and make sense as a narrative whole. The piano score is also *de facto* continuous.'

Based on his close study of Liszt's compositional methods, and with the assistance of three specialists in Italian, from this sketch Trippett made a full-orchestral performing edition that has brought us as close to Liszt's conception as we are ever likely to get.

'I read that a British musicologist was working on a manuscript which he found in Weimar, and of course I reacted immediately,' says Kirill Karabits, who conducted *Sardanapalo's* premiere last August. 'So we contacted David and a few days later we had a date for a performance.'

'It was very important for me that the Weimar Staatskapelle participated in this, because it was Liszt's own orchestra [from 1848-58],' explains Karabits. 'Since I have been in Weimar, and especially since I've done this piece, I've become a strong supporter of Liszt's symphonic music: we are currently working on recording the two symphonies. I will champion Liszt's music throughout my life and career – that's for sure.'

The Weimar event featured soprano Joyce El-Khoury, tenor Airam Hernández and baritone Oleksandr Pushniak in the three title roles, and both this premiere and subsequent airings in Italy were acclaimed. *Sardanapalo* is 'an entirely convincing drama,' wrote critic Stephen Pritchard for *Bachtrack*, 'packed with incident and bursting with thrilling vocal and orchestral colour.'

And a new recording on the Audite label of the first performance means Trippett's edition of Liszt's opera can be widely heard. 'It was a matter of giving the piece a good, honest first reading' ▶



Great impression: Rufus Wainwright mimics Verdi at his own opera premiere

Hidden talents

Unlikely opera composers

Franz Schubert Even in his lifetime, only two of the famous lieder composer's operas were put on. But there are ten completed examples, and *Alfonso und Estrella* and *Fierrabras* have both enjoyed major productions in recent years.

Alma Deutscher There aren't many 11 year-olds who have two operas to their name. When *Cinderella*, which followed *The Sweeper of Dreams*, was premiered in 2016, *The Daily Telegraph* described it as a 'lively comic opera' (see p96).

Scott Joplin The king of piano rags, Scott Joplin also wrote two ragtime operas, but only *Treemonisha* still exists in vocal score; it is occasionally performed and has been recorded.

Pierre Boulez Despite his infamous remark about blowing up opera houses, Boulez discussed projects with several librettists. He complained that they always died before a joint work could be produced.

Rufus Wainwright The singer-songwriter is a passionate opera fan who has thus far produced *Prima Donna* (2009) and *Hadrian* (2018) – though the critics remain cool.

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Top of the Liszt: conductor Kirill Karabits thanks Joyce El-Khoury

without doing anything too elaborate – that's not the purpose of this disc,' reflects El-Khoury.

So what is a Liszt opera like? His piano works are renowned for their virtuosity and visionary quality; his orchestral works for their programmatic and progressive elements. For *Sardanapalo*, Liszt turned to Italian opera, a world from which he had already cherry-picked ideas for works like his piano *Réminiscences des Puritains*, inspired by Bellini's *I Puritani*.

The plot is very much in the spirit of other operas of the era, with the action set in the king's chambers in the royal palace at Nineveh around 650BC. A chorus of concubines attempts to raise the spirits of King Sardanapalus's favourite slave, Mirra, conflicted by her genuine love for the king who is nevertheless the conqueror of her people; even his entreaties fail to allay her insecurity and unhappiness. The priest and royal adviser Beleso enters to warn Sardanapalus against ignoring the perils that surround him as he continues to lead a life of luxury rather than taking on the imminent threat of those who would depose him.

Broadly following the regular structural apparatus of an Italian opera of the period, Liszt built his opening act out of traditional elements such as an *Introduzione* for the chorus and Mirra, a conflicted scene and aria for Mirra, a duet between her and Sardanapalo in which the king attempts to convince her of the purity of their love, and lastly a trio finale in which Beleso intervenes with his criticisms of the king and Mirra and Sardanapalo respond to his warnings.

Since Liszt didn't receive the rest of the text, the consequent action – which sees Sardanapalus and Mirra die in a conflagration

ordered by the king to evade his enemies – was never set to music. To Byron's hope the inferno would represent 'not a mere pillar formed of cloud and flame, but a light to lessen the ages', Liszt added his own (presumably symbolic) aim of 'setting fire to the entire audience'.

'I knew about the Italian themes in his music and that Italian culture played an important role in it, but I never knew that he had tried to compose in the Bellini style – because in a way that's what *Sardanapalo* is,' says Karabits. 'It's an interesting mixture – a kind of *bel canto* experiment involving his own musical language, his own harmonies, and the particular kind of emotional impact that he makes.'

El-Khoury agrees: 'I was just so stunned there was a Liszt opera that nobody knew existed. I was sent the score and I looked at it and I thought it had so many *bel canto* qualities. If Wagner had written *bel canto*, this is what it would have sounded like. Liszt writes some very Italianate phrases and he has written out cadenzas, but there are moments at the end where it's very Wagnerian. I've never heard anything quite like it, to be honest.'

Liszt had a firm intention to produce the opera, and as one of the most famous musicians in Europe, he was even able to be specific about planned dates and locations in his correspondence. It didn't happen, but even though *Sardanapalo* wasn't heard in his lifetime, we now know that it's a work that would have made a highly distinctive contribution to the repertoire of 19th-century opera. 🎧 *Audite's recording of Liszt's Sardanapalo will be reviewed in the April issue*