

Liszt's *Élégie* for Cor Anglais

Jeremy Polmear meets Dr Leslie Howard to talk about the original version of the *Élégie* S.130.



Leslie Howard is a virtuoso pianist, composer and arranger, a conductor, teacher, writer and editor: but most of all he is a Liszt fanatic. He is the only pianist to have recorded all of Franz Liszt's solo piano music, a project of 94 CDs that earned him not only the accolade of being the finest living exponent of Liszt, but also getting him into the Guinness Book of Records.

This was evident when I met him in his Edwardian London home, lined with scores, books and CDs. By far the most scores were by Liszt, and there were also photographs around the piano. 'Liszt loved to be photographed,' said Leslie 'and look at this one; he is just walking off a step. Holding that pose must have been very difficult, given the technology of the time.'

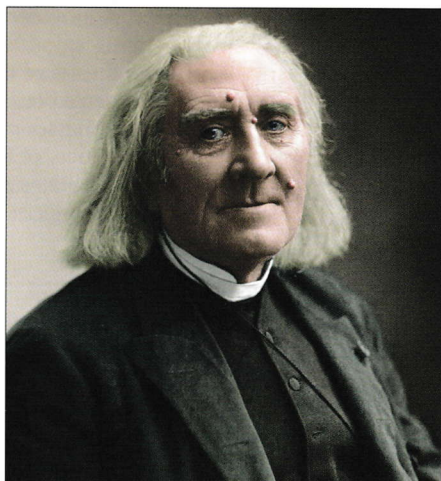
Leslie's enthusiasm continues unabated, and that total of 94 CDs has now become 99 thanks to his explorations of libraries and collections from Europe to the US to New Zealand. 'Shortly to become a century, though that was never the purpose.' Noticing a stack of box sets of Inspector Morse on the table, I asked Leslie if there was something of the detective about him. 'Yes', he replied. 'I'm amazed that so many pianists buy a printed edition of a piece of music and accept it as the definitive version; so a note badly written by the composer or copyist gets misinterpreted by the engraver, and stays wrong, sometimes for centuries. The only way to see what the composer might have meant is to look at the manuscript.'

I was beginning to see that Leslie Howard is something of a Liszt figure himself, but I asked what appealed to him about the music. Strangely, it was not a piano piece but the *Faust Symphony* at the age of 13 that he decided was 'one of the ten best

pieces of all time', an opinion he still holds. But what about the piano music, how does that retain its spell? 'What I find, playing Liszt, is that in every piece he does something unpredictable: he was a fearless experimenter. He never stopped trying new things, and he rarely repeated himself.' This experimentation prompts another gripe that Leslie has with music editors: some of Liszt's more avant-garde writings were toned down by the more conventional editors.

But down to brass tacks: what about this *Élégie*? 'I had recorded a version for piano solo, but I knew from his letters that there were earlier, unpublished versions, so I went looking and eventually found it in a folder in the library in Nuremberg. It was dated earlier than the 'official' version of the *Élégie* which was scored for cello and piano, with optional harp and harmonium. But underneath the final bars is a note in Liszt's writing saying *Cor Anglais*, and indicating the transposition needed for the part. We don't know why a cor anglais version never got printed, but that is a standard way of indicating an instrumental part. I am certain that this is what Liszt had in mind. If you look at the music, it works really well on the cor; there is no pizzicato or double-stopping whereas the later published version has a mini-cadenza for cello at the beginning that just wouldn't work on a wind instrument.'

Pretty good evidence then, but since nineteenth-century chamber music for cor anglais is so rare, we looked around for supporting factors. The instrument had already been given major orchestral roles by Rossini, Berlioz and Wagner, and Liszt



Franz Liszt

might have known the solo works of Carlo Yvon and Antonino Pasculli. But Leslie felt no need of this. 'Liszt himself wrote beautifully for cor anglais in *Orpheus* and in the *Dante Symphony*. His writing for oboe is great, too, in *Les Préludes* and the *Faust Symphony* also for bassoon. He evidently preferred double reeds to single.'

I began to feel that Leslie was talking more like an oboist than a pianist. 'That's because I played the oboe: a Louis thumb-plate. When I was about 13, an inspired teacher decided it was about time I became a proper musician!' And was it useful? 'Yes, it was a useful source of income in the early days, playing the likes of *Kismet* and *Kiss Me, Kate* in pit bands. But more importantly, it taught me how to phrase, and how to breathe. No pianist should start the *Hammerklavier* without taking a breath.'

We then considered the other instruments, the harp and harmonium: they are marked *ad libitum*, but add an extra dimension to the recording that Leslie and Nicholas Daniel have made. The harp is perhaps not unexpected, but Leslie pointed out that Liszt was the first composer to annotate music for the new pedal harp, a system copied by other composers. But what about the Harmonium? 'Liszt had one: a huge one with a piano inside and two keyboards. They were used a lot in the nineteenth century, and were a useful portable substitute for an organ.'

So there we have it: a piece by a major nineteenth-century composer conceived for the cor anglais, which has now re-surfaced alongside the existing cello version. One final question for Leslie: did he like the piece? 'Yes, I like it; it is always interesting harmonically. It is straightforward, in the sense that it has eight and sixteen-bar phrases, which is rather unusual for Liszt; he normally started and then went where his imagination took him. But that also gives it an advantage over some of his other pieces: it is easier to hum!'

The premier recording has been made by Nicholas Daniel under the auspices of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Details are at www.oboeclassics.com/digital. The sheet music may be obtained from www.juneemersonwindmusic.com.