

# THE DIAPASON

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## New Recordings

**Franz Liszt—A Hungarian Rhapsody: Organ Works and Transcriptions. Gail Archer, organist. Available from <www.meyer-media.com>, \$13.00; also available through the performer's website: <www.gailarcher.com>.**

*Am Grabe Richard Wagners; Pilgerchor aus Tannhäuser; Präludium und Fuge über das Motiv B.A.C.H.; Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen; Fantasie and Fuge über den Chorale 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam'.*

It takes a great technique to play the organ works of Liszt; Gail Archer is certainly up to the task and does so brilliantly on this new recording. The recording was made in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the composer's birth in 1811. It was recorded on the magnum opus of the Gress-Miles Company, which resides in the chapel of Vassar College. This large instrument of four manuals and 99 stops occupies the same space as the 1904 organ, which allowed for the hand-carved façade by the original Boston architects of Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge.

Gail Archer holds a DMA in organ performance from the Manhattan School of Music, studying with McNeil Robinson; she also earned an artist diploma from the Boston Conservatory, where she studied with James David Christie and Jon Gillock. Her active teaching career has her as Professor of Organ at the Manhattan School of Music, Chair of the Music Department at Barnard College of Columbia University, and Adjunct Artist in Music at Vassar College.

Probably no performer/composer has received as many "mixed reviews" of his artistry as has the 19th-century artist Franz Liszt. Renowned throughout Europe for his virtuoso skill at the keyboard, it was reported that technically he was the most advanced pianist of his age. Certainly by the 1840s he was considered to be the greatest pianist of all time. It was Liszt who gave us the solo piano recital, played always from memory—which has now become standard among pianists in both solo and in concerted performances—and who played a major role in popularizing many orchestral works by transcribing them for the piano. At his recitals the majority of music always centered on his own works—paraphrases, and transcriptions.

There was a time when Liszt's music was considered superficial, and that its main purpose was technical display over musical substance, but it is now generally accepted that many of his ideas—from thematic transformation of motives across various movements to create structural unity, his embrace of program music, his development of the symphonic poem, and his compositional "innovations" (whole-tone scales, parallel diminished and augmented triads, unresolved dissonances)—had a great positive influence on such 20th-century composers as Béla Bartók, Claude Debussy, and Maurice Ravel. As far as organists and organ music is concerned, Liszt no doubt had an influence on such important composers for the instrument as César Franck and Max Reger.

The organ music of Liszt dates from 1849 to the end of his life, but was mostly written when he was living in Weimar, a city with a rich tradition of organ music. There are only three extended works, all brilliantly played on this recording: *Ad nos ad salutarem undam*, *Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H*, and *Weinen Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*.

The *Prelude and Fugue on B-A-C-H* is one of many works that uses a succession of notes (B-flat, A, C, and B-natural in German musical nomenclature) to form Johann Sebastian Bach's family name. Besides Bach himself spelling out his name in many compositions (most notably at the end of his *Canonic Variations on 'From Heaven Above to Earth I Come'*), Robert Schumann in 1845 first wrote six fugues for organ, pedal piano or harmonium as his Opus 60. Liszt's work dates from 1855, and was near and dear to the composer's heart, since he revised it in 1870 and further arranged it for piano in 1871. Here the fugue is actually embedded as a section of the fantasy, and not a piece on its own as found in the later Max Reger work of 1900. It is a piece that can, in the wrong hands, succumb to hollow virtuosity, but Dr. Archer's approach is always first at the service of the music. Further, the work can sound loosely improvisational in less stellar performances, but her reading of the work makes the listener aware of the strict formal foundation upon which it is built, without losing the joy of the spontaneous nature that one can imagine Liszt wished to present.

*Ad nos ad salutarem undam* is based on an original melody taken from the first act of Meyerbeer's grand opera, *Le Prophète*, which premiered in Paris in 1849. The opera was greatly popular, hailed by both critics and audiences alike, and Liszt capitalized on its popularity by responding with an original work based on Meyerbeer's thematic material. One year later Liszt wrote this original organ work. "Ad nos," as it is called among organists, is an extended fantasia, followed by an adagio section, and concluding with a complex fugue. In this monumental work, Archer exploits the resources of the Vassar organ well and presents this multi-sectioned work as a coherent and satisfying musical statement, which is no small task indeed.

Concluding this musical trinity of major works is the set of variations on a theme from the first chorus in Bach's Cantata BWV 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (Weeping, lamenting, worrying, fearing). Bach himself later transcribed this music and used a good portion of this first chorus as the *Crucifixus* of the *Mass in B Minor*. This is a later work of Liszt, which he composed in 1882 after the death of his daughter. Having these three major works of Liszt so clearly and dramatically played on this recording is a real treasure.

Rounding out this disc are two works inspired by Liszt's son-in-law, Richard Wagner. It is nice to have included here the seldom-played and poignant *Am Grabe Richard Wagners*, one of the shortest original organ works that Liszt wrote, in May of 1883, four months after Wagner's death in Venice. Also included is the famous Pilgrim's Chorus from *Tannhäuser*. This work exists in a number of versions—for organ solo, string quartet and harp, and for solo piano.

And as mentioned earlier, some of Liszt's most important contributions to the keyboard literature for both piano and organ are the transcriptions of operatic and symphonic literature. In an age long before digital communication, the Beethoven symphonies were transmitted in great part by the piano transcriptions that Liszt made of these seminal works. Notably, Liszt transcribed just one excerpt for organ from Wagner, the Pilgrim's Chorus from *Tannhäuser*.

This is a highly recommended recording for the serious lover of the organ works of Franz Liszt. The only complaint here is the lack of program notes, and no information whatsoever about the organ, which many purchasers of these recordings look forward to reading. However, enjoy this recording with many repeated listenings for the ultimate effect of embracing this music.

—David Wagner  
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