

Bruckner - Symphony No. 3 (arr. piano Four-Hands Mahler/Krzyzanowski)
Liszt - Les Préludes (Liszt's arr. for piano duo)

Piano Duo: Marialena Fernandes, Ranko Marković
Gramola CD no. 98948

AS THOSE who have been to the last couple of Bruckner Journal Readers Conferences will attest, it is always intriguing to have the opportunity to hear Bruckner symphonies in versions for piano. It is not merely the historical fact that this is how the composer would have expected the majority of the audience to get to know the works in the first place, in the days before recordings were available, but it is also the revelations available from this unusual slant on the work. In many ways the structure of the melodic and harmonic texture is laid clear in way that is often not so apparent in the full orchestral sound, and different voicings and events come to the fore which previously didn't register so strongly, and which can then inform and enrich one's listening to the orchestral performance.

One of the many difficult choices for the performers is whether to try and imitate the orchestra, or to try and make the best of it as a work for piano. The first recording of it, that by Evelinde Trenkner and Sontraud Speidel on MDG Gold from 1994 (MDG 330 0591-2), presents the work with considerable power, and plenty of pedal, in this way suggesting the strength available to the full orchestra. Marialena Fernandes and Ranko Marković in this present recording are generally lighter in touch with a more pianistic approach to the work. In the opening there is a livelier rhythmic sense and more purposeful progress. Trenkner and Speidel seem to ensure that they play together by keeping the rhythm firm, whereas Fernandes and Marković have a remarkable musical sympathy one with another which allows them to vary the tempi with great warmth and expressive effect.

The extraordinary performance of Deno Sequi and Gerhard Hofer (available from www.abruckner.com, BSVD-0110) is in a class of its own, a live event with plenty of audience noise and resonant acoustic, and at times they fail to come in together at all - but for all that it is an absolutely gripping performance, with much lyricism and plenty space for the music to breathe, and a palpable sense of occasion. You are with them all the way and it's hard not to stand up and applaud with the recorded audience when they finish.

If one wished to choose between these three performances then this new one on Gramola label is unarguably the best recorded and the best played. Although Trenkner-Speidel have much dramatic power, at times their interpretation lacks interest and imagination, there's not a lot of lilt to the frequent dance-like passages, and their rushed presentation of the closing statement of the motto theme fails to reflect the large scale and aspiration of the work. Fernandes and Marković pace the final pages with the same sensitivity to small changes in tempo that informs their performance throughout, the last bars are very exciting indeed. Possibly the high incessantly repeated four rising quavers (on violins in the orchestral original) are too dominating at the expense of the middle and bass texture, but they progress indomitably to the final statement of the symphony's main theme which is given with a grandeur worthy of its blazing inspiration.

In November 2006, Fernandes and Marković performed this work at a joint meeting of Bruckner Journal readers and the Gustav Mahler Society UK, which took place in the grand surroundings of the Austrian Ambassador's residence in London. Those lucky enough to have attended need have no doubts that this recording lives up to the quality of the performance on that occasion: it's been a long wait, but now they have a memento of very special event - with the added 15 min. bonus of a very stirring performance of Liszt's own version of *Les Préludes* for piano duo.
Ken Ward

