THE OPERATIC PIANIST
II
ANDREW WRIGHT, PIANO
## THE OPERATIC PIANIST II

**ANDREW WRIGHT, piano**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alfred Jaëll (1832-1882)</td>
<td>Réminiscences de Norma after Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835)</td>
<td>11:17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835), transcribed by Andrew Wright (b.1967)</td>
<td>Col sorriso d’innocenza from Il Pirata</td>
<td>3:06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sigismund Thalberg (1812-1871)</td>
<td>Fantasie sur Mosè in Egitto after Giacchino Rossini (1792-1868)</td>
<td>15:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Richard Wagner (1813-1883), transcribed by Franz Liszt (1811-1886)</td>
<td>Lohengrin’s Admonition (‘Athmest du nicht mit mir die süssen Düfte?’) from Lohengrin</td>
<td>4:37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Andrew Wright (b.1967)</td>
<td>Paraphrase on Verdi’s ‘Miserere’ from Il Trovatore after Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)</td>
<td>5:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864), transcribed by Theodor Kullak (1818-1882)</td>
<td>Cavatine de Robert le Diable (12 Transcriptions, Op. 6)</td>
<td>5:07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)</td>
<td>Concert Paraphrase on La mort de Thaïs after Jules Massenet (1842-1912)</td>
<td>8:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Franz Liszt (1811-1886)</td>
<td>Fantasy on Themes from Rienzi after Richard Wagner (1813-1883)</td>
<td>7:57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**total playing time:** 67:45

* first commercial recording
Like its predecessor, *The Operatic Pianist*, this selection focuses on the recreative art of transcription and paraphrase. In the mid-19th century, such works held a considerably more prominent place in musical life than nowadays, when they have largely been consigned to the realms of historical footnotes. In the developing age of the travelling virtuoso, and predating the gramophone, these pieces served two primary functions. Firstly, they enabled familiar (typically operatic) themes of the day to be heard without the necessity of visiting the opera house itself, and secondly, they provided the pianist with attractive material for public performance.

By far the most significant contributors to this area of the repertoire were Franz Liszt (1811-1886) and Sigismund Thalberg (1812-1871). Between them, they wrote well over a hundred such pieces. The rivalry between these two composer-pianists was to have profound implications for the development of pianistic technique and texture as we know it today. Despite the acclaim accorded both men during their lifetimes, posterity has awarded fame to Liszt and obscurity to Thalberg, principally due to the former's greater compositional invention and ingenuity. This disc seeks to combine the famous and the infamous with the virtually unknown and the long-forgotten.

Thus we begin with a highly obscure paraphrase by the composer Alfred Jaëll (1832-1882). Whilst Jaëll enjoyed considerable fame during the 1850s, embarking on a lengthy and successful tour of America, he is nowadays at best a very minor and virtually unrecorded musical footnote in the history books: if his name attracts a flicker of recognition from the connoisseur, it is probably as the husband of the pianist and pedagogue Marie Jaëll (1846-1925, *née* Trautmann), whose compositions have attracted some attention lately. Jaëll studied with Czerny and Moscheles, and was on friendly terms with Liszt, who wrote warmly of his playing.

His *Réminiscences de Norma*, based on the opera by Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835), arguably bears some resemblance to Liszt's epic paraphrase, but is a little shorter and incorporates the famous aria *Casta diva*, which Liszt chose to omit. Compared to
the approximately contemporaneous treatment of *Casta diva* by Thalberg, Jaëll presents it in a more overtly romantic manner, whereas Thalberg remains in a world at least residually influenced by classicism.

Continuing with Bellini, the aria *Col sorriso d’innocenza*, from *Il Pirata*, may be viewed as somewhat of a precursor to the aforementioned *Casta diva*, even down to the mutual *con flauto* introduction. With this in mind, I opted to arrange the aria in a restrained manner similar to Thalberg's approach to *Casta diva* (see the sister and predecessor disc to this one, DDA 25113). In general, the transcription is fairly literal, and more specifically it is in effect a study in voicing the weaker fingers of the right hand, within which the melodic line typically resides.

Theodore Leschetizky (1830-1915) is now primarily renowned as a pedagogue, but in his time he was also known as a pianist and a composer with a significant corpus of works, including a piano concerto, two operas, and a multitude of salon pieces to his name. One of his few compositions which has survived in the periphery of solo piano repertoire is his ingenious left hand only reworking of the sextet from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. As with Jaëll's *Réminiscences de Norma*, the writing suggests the composer was familiar with Liszt's paraphrase (for two hands!) of the same source material.

Thalberg's *Fantasie sur Mosè in Egitto*, on the opera by Giachino Rossini (1792-1868), is one of the great, and notorious, behemoths of the operatic paraphrase tradition. 1830s Paris was awash with celebrated pianists - Liszt, Thalberg, Chopin, Alkan, Kalkbrenner, Herz and Pixis being perhaps the most renowned - and ultimately the rivalry between Liszt and Thalberg, fomented by numerous press articles agitating for the superiority of first one, then the other, led to the Princess Cristina di Belgiojoso staging the social coup of 1837 by arranging for both pianists to perform at the same musical event in her celebrated salon. Despite there being a number of other famous musicians performing - the violinist Christian Urhan being but one of them - the event was viewed as a *de facto* duel between Liszt and Thalberg to determine the preeminent pianist in Paris, if not the entire world.
Both pianists performed flamboyant virtuoso paraphrases and arrangements: Liszt offering his *Fantasy on Niobe* (an opera by Giovanni Pacini, wildly successful in its time, but now almost forgotten) and a solo piano arrangement of Weber's *Konzertstück*, whilst Thalberg contributed his *Fantasy on God Save The King* and additionally *Moses*, with which he had captured the attention of the concert-going public, largely through the spectacular finale which gives the illusion of three hands playing simultaneously - the bass notes, the melody, and the all-enveloping arpeggiation. *Moses* became such a success that, when Thalberg was spotted attending a recital given by the pianist Theodor Döhler, the audience would not allow the performance to go ahead until Thalberg had personally performed it - at another man's recital!

Returning to the duel, biographers have tended to give Liszt the victory, but the supporting facts are less clear. The Princess’s oft-cited quote is diplomatically ambiguous: “Thalberg is the first pianist in the world — Liszt is unique”. Jules Janin wrote in the *Journal des Débats* a few days later: “Never was Liszt more controlled, more thoughtful, more energetic, more passionate; never has Thalberg played with greater verve and tenderness. Each of them prudently stayed within his harmonic domain, but each used every one of his resources. It was an admirable joust. The most profound silence fell over that noble arena. And finally Liszt and Thalberg were both proclaimed victors by this glittering and intelligent assembly. It is clear such a contest could only take place in the presence of such an Areopagus. Thus two victors and no vanquished; it is fitting to say with the poet *et adhuc sub judice lis est.*" What we can infer is that, whilst Liszt was normally the considerable superior of rival pianists, Thalberg represented serious competition to his crown.

Wagner's *Lohengrin* received its first performance at Weimar in 1850, with Liszt conducting. Wagner himself was unable to attend, having been obliged to go into political exile in Switzerland following the revolutionary unrest in Dresden in May 1849, where he had aligned himself prominently with leftist and anarchist groups, going so far as to design street barricades. During this period of upheaval in Wagner's life, Liszt was a considerable support to him, both championing his music
and assisting him financially. Wagner wrote to Liszt, "Bring out my *Lohengrin*! You are the only one to whom I would put this request, to no-one but you would I entrust the production of this opera; but to you I surrender it with the fullest, most joyous confidence". This shimmering arrangement of *Lohengrin’s Admonition*, taken from Act III, provides something of a contrast to *Moses*, not only in terms of mood but also in terms of approach, being essentially a fairly literal transcription rather than a free paraphrase.

In my paraphrase on Verdi’s *Miserere* I sought to combine a close replica of the original aria with colouristic and technical devices similar to those used by Liszt, Thalberg and their pianistic contemporaries. Heavy bass chords are used to simulate the bells of Verdi’s introduction, and subsequent thematic material is liberally embellished with tremolandi, arpeggios, trills, passages in thirds, and interlocking alternate hand chords and octaves, culminating in a frantic *moto perpetuo* prior to the coda. This composition began life as an improvisation where such influences sprang naturally into place.

Meyerbeer’s *Robert le Diable* was one of the great Parisian operatic successes of the 1830s - consequently it is perhaps unsurprising that many pianists (Liszt, Thalberg, Pixis, Henselt and Adolfo Fumagalli spring to mind) wrote paraphrases on themes therefrom. Liszt’s *Valse infernale* is the only one which has really endured on the fringes of solo piano repertoire, though its considerable difficulty perhaps ensures that it remains there. What is little known is that Liszt also wrote a transcription of the Act IV *Cavatine*, and less-known still is the existence of an arrangement of the same *Cavatine* by Theodor Kullak (1818-1882). Kullak was a composer-pianist, and had been something of a child prodigy. He is now primarily known for his efforts as a pedagogue: his *The School of Octave Playing* is still considered significant in the field. Most of his piano music has fallen into desuetude (with the possible exception of his piano concerto), so it is a considerable pleasure to present this previously unrecorded rarity, which is nonetheless characteristic of much music composed with polish and evident affection by "minor masters" of the era.
Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) wrote a fair few transcriptions, but is far less associated with operatic settings than his predecessors - perhaps because by the end of his long career the genre had already fallen somewhat out of critical favour, for reasons probably including an increasing preoccupation with the sanctity of the printed text and a greater tendency towards "intellectualised" concert programmes. Here we find high melodrama from the denouement of Massenet's Thaïs; the second half of the paraphrase features a reworking of material the listener would more usually associate with the famous Meditation but which returns in the opera during the closing death scene. It is perhaps not overly imaginative to draw comparisons here with a Francophone Liebestod. Remarkably, for a composer of such renown, this appears to be a first commercial recording.

The programme concludes with a flamboyant piece of Lisztiana: a paraphrase from Liszt's more mature years but one which represents something of a throwback to the Liszt of the 1830s. Liszt wrote the Fantasy on Themes from Rienzi in 1859, and his then son-in-law (and one of his favourite pupils) Hans von Bülow was entrusted with the premiere performance. Of course, history makes us aware of a certain irony here, in that Wagner was directly responsible for the end of von Bülow's marriage, a series of events which was to seriously test both Liszt's diplomatic skills and his respect for Wagner. The Rienzi Fantasy contains three primary themes from Wagner's opera, two of which are present in the associated overture. The famous "prayer" theme is much to the forefront and becomes heavily embellished before ending in a tumultuous flurry of octaves and chordal hammer-blows.

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My thanks are due to all the people who contributed towards the making of this disc: in particular I would like to thank Graeme Watt for his skill and patience during the editing process, and Kenneth van Barthold (1927-2016) and Nicholas Pope, without whose advice and encouragement there can be no doubt the project would not have reached fruition. This disc is dedicated, with fond remembrance of many stimulating hours spent discussing music and much more besides, in memoriam Kenneth van Barthold.

AW
THE PIANIST

Andrew Wright was born in Dundee, Scotland, and showed an early interest in music, having his first piano lessons at the age of seven, and giving his first public performance at the age of eleven. Further lessons followed with Dr William Stevenson and latterly with Kenneth van Barthold and Nicholas Pope. In addition to his performing career, Andrew has an active interest in composition and improvisation, and has featured some of his own works in his recital programmes.

During his studies, Andrew acquired a conviction that much of the conventional repertoire is over-exposed, and that there are many hidden gems to be found in the works of lesser-known composers. This belief resulted in him making a detailed study of the minor figures of 19th-century and early 20th-century pianistic history.

This study culminated in 2014 with the release, to critical acclaim, of “The Operatic Pianist”, an album of transcriptions and paraphrases taken from opera. The album included not only established arrangements by Liszt, but also lesser-known pieces by Thalberg, the world premiere of Martucci’s Concert Fantasy on Verdi’s La Forza del Destino, and a selection of three self-penned paraphrases. Of these paraphrases, MusicWeb International commented: “.. hyphenated Wright takes its place alongside hyphenated Liszt and Thalberg, and that represents something of a Himalayan challenge to Wright’s credentials. It’s a measure of his aplomb that his own transcriptions fail to wilt even in the glare of such declamatory historic precedent.”

Andrew has given a multitude of recitals featuring a wide variety of such operatic transcriptions and paraphrases. He also includes lesser-known etudes and compositions within his performance repertoire, and has given recitals at numerous venues throughout the United Kingdom.
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THE OPERATIC PIANIST

Verdi-Martucci:
Concert Fantasy on La Forza del Destino

Bellini-Thalberg:
A te, o cara
Bellini-Wright:
Fantasy on La Sonnambula

Wagner-Liszt:
O du mein holder Abendstern

Wagner-Liszt:
Isoldes Liebestod

Wright:
Thalbergiana

Verdi-Thalberg:
Concert Fantasy on La Traviata

Bellini-Thalberg:
Casta diva

Meyerbeer-Wright:
Concert Fantasy on Robert le Diable

DDA 25113

“Impressive playing as Andrew Wright walks in the footsteps of the 19th century pianist-composer giants, including some no-holds-barred creations of his own.” ★★★★☆ - Jessica Duchen (BBC Music Magazine)

“Formidable playing … Wright displays great sensitivity in this lovely performance… beautifully done. There is writing of some virtuosity which Wright throws off with panache and abandon. This is a disc to sit back and enjoy while marveling at the many moments of virtuosity.” – Bruce Reader (The Classical Reviewer)

“The operatic melodies are part of the cultural vocabulary, as is the ornate, virtuosic garb in which they are presented. This Scottish pianist sells the repertory in question to listeners without cheapening it. He’s a very capable pianist too … these sincere, well-prepared performances have much in their favour” – Raymond Tuttle (Fanfare)
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ANDREW WRIGHT
"THE OPERATIC PIANIST"