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THE OPERATIC PIANIST

ANDREW WRIGHT, PIANO

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1. Verdi-Martucci	*Concert Fantasy on La Forza del Destino* *	8.51
2. Bellini-Thalberg	*A te, o cara*	5.40
3. Bellini-Wright	*Fantasy on La Sonnambula*	8.00
4. Wagner-Liszt	*Recitative and Romance "O du mein holder Abendstern" from Tannhäuser*	7.42
5. Wagner-Liszt	*Isolde's Liebestod*	7.48
6. Wright	*Thalbergiana*	6.25
7. Verdi-Thalberg	*Concert Fantasy on La Traviata*	8.26
8. Bellini-Thalberg	*Casta diva*	6.25
9. Meyerbeer-Wright	*Concert Fantasy on Robert le Diable*	5.22
* *first commercial recording*	total duration	64.48

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Recording Engineer Graeme Watt
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(slightly adapted for this issue)
Original sound recording made by Andrew Wright and issued under licence
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THE ART OF OPERATIC TRANSCRIPTION

This disc focuses on the recreative art of transcription and paraphrase. In the mid-19th century such works held a much more prominent place in musical life than nowadays, when they have largely been consigned to the realms of historical footnotes. In the developing era of the travelling virtuoso, and predating the gramophone, these pieces served two principal 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 (18111886) 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 lifetime, posterity has awarded fame to Liszt and obscurity to Thalberg, principally due to the former's greater compositional invention and ingenuity. However, in the year of Thalberg's bicentenary, I felt it appropriate to include several rarely-recorded compositions by this forgotten and neglected composer.

Firstly, however, we begin with a youthful rarity by the Italian composer-pianist Giuseppe Martucci (1856-1909). Martucci was taught piano by Beniamino Cesi, a pupil of Thalberg, and, as a performer, earned praise from Liszt. He was to exchange the role of pianist for that of conductor, performing a wide exploration of the European musical repertory: indeed he gave the Italian premiere of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde.* In this composition, Martucci's piano writing demonstrates considerable familiarity with the discoveries of his illustrious predecessors: the filigree ornamentation, sharing of melodies between the hands, and interlocking octaves gesture are characteristic. The performance presented here is the first commercial recording of this paraphrase.

Paris in the 1830s played host to a remarkable selection of piano virtuosi – Liszt, Chopin, Thalberg, Alkan, Kalkbrenner, Pixis, Dreyschock and many others – and of these it was Thalberg who came to be Liszt's greatest rival for public acclaim, culminating in a celebrated "piano duel" in 1837. In contrast to the youthful Liszt, who was very much the flamboyant showman, Thalberg's credo was one of calmness and elegance at the keyboard. Despite this, he was possessed of a formidable technique, his particular trademark being the so-called "three-handed effect" – a textural device whereby the melody would be shared between the hands whilst, typically, the left hand would play rhythmic accompaniment and the right hand heavily ornamented figuration. Thalberg was fascinated by the process of producing singing lines on the piano and his op. 70, *L'art du chant appliqué au piano,* is a collection of famous vocal melodies rearranged for the piano. *A te, o cara,* from Bellini's *I Puritani,* presented here, forms the first piece within this instructive collection.

Both Liszt and Thalberg wrote substantial concert pieces on themes from Bellini's *La Sonnambula* (Liszt's is exceedingly difficult). My own composition is written in a manner which takes stylistic elements from both composers – Lisztian octave and chordal passages in addition to melodic passages embellished with Thalbergian filigree. The arpeggiated accompaniment surrounding the return of the main theme, the famous aria *Ah, non credea mirarti,* was a favourite device of Thalberg's.

Liszt's transcription of the Recitative and Romance *O*, *du mein holder Abendstern* from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* is unusually literal in his recreation of another man's music. Although Liszt had few qualms in embellishing and often expanding on much of the music he paraphrased, it is perhaps a mark of his respect for Wagner that (with the notable exception of the *Fantasy on Themes from Rienzi)* his arrangements of Wagner's music tended to be fairly straight transcriptions as opposed to fantasies and paraphrases. Liszt wrote piano arrangements of several sections of *Tannhäuser* whilst mounting a production of the opera at Weimar in 1849.

Liszt's transcription of *Isolde's Liebestod* is undoubtedly one of the greatest of all reworkings of operatic material for the piano. After Liszt retired from active concert touring, his compositional style matured considerably as he wrote less material designed specifically for public display. Liszt held Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in very high esteem, and here he recreates the final scene whilst taking a minimum of textual liberties. This work is in many ways testament to Liszt's ability to separate his admiration for Wagner's music from his feelings for Wagner the man. It was written in 1867, at which point the Wagner - Hans von Bülow - Cosima Liszt romantic triangle had escalated to crisis point and Liszt's personal relations with Wagner had become extremely strained.
My introduction to this corner of the repertory came through Earl Wild's 1964 recording of Thalberg's *Don Pasquale* Fantasy – a delightful performance which elevated lightweight music through charm and panache. Thus in *Thalbergiana,* an affectionate tribute, my principal thematic material is the closing theme from that particular paraphrase: it is presented in a series of variations interspersed with a minor key middle section of variations on a theme of Bellini's which I felt made an effective counterpart.

Thalberg's *Fantasy on La Traviata* (or *Grande fantasie de Concert sur l'opéra La Traviata de Verdi,* to give it its full, and somewhat portentous, title) is one of his later works, and it is interesting to see how, towards the climax, he almost completely eschews his speciality of arpeggiated "three-handed" effects (the most famous of which being the climax of his *Moses* Fantasy) in favour of some very Lisztian alternate octave/chord effects. This is not to say that the three-handed effect does not occur elsewhere; the section with a full page of right hand semiquaver octaves is a cunningly-written example. The connoisseur of Liszt and Thalberg may note that, post-1837 duel, Thalberg's arpeggio effects became very common in Liszt's writing (e.g. the *Norma* Fantasy). I suspect that both were impressed by the other's speciality and embraced the concept.

Returning to Thalberg's *L'art du chant,* Bellini's famous aria *Casta diva,* from *Norma,* is presented in a gentle – far removed from the pyrotechnics of the coda of *La Traviata* – but pianistically ingenious arrangement. Once again

Thalberg does not place the melodic burden solely on one hand: the vocal line is passed liberally from hand to hand during the final peroration, whilst the voicing of parts and maintaining a consistency of touch are of paramount importance throughout.

Closing the collection is my arrangement of themes taken from Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable,* including the celebrated *Valse Infernale.* The *Valse* and other extracts were much paraphrased in their time, Liszt and Thalberg being but two of the many composer-pianists who made arrangements. Liszt's is of particular notoriety; it was such a success that one Parisian audience refused to allow Liszt, performing in an all-Beethoven recital, to continue until he had played it. Wagner, in the audience and then working as a music reviewer, was scandalized. My paraphrase begins with a small musical joke: the opening gesture, interlocking octaves arranged into groups of tritones – the *diabolus in musica* of mediaeval myth – before proceeding to a selection of themes from the opera.

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THE PIANIST

Born in Dundee, Scotland, Andrew Wright showed an early interest in music and had his first piano lessons at the age of seven. Further study followed with William Stevenson and subsequently with Kenneth van Barthold and Nicholas Pope.

He has a particular interest in semi-forgotten composers of the Romantic era and has made a detailed study of 19th century piano transcriptions, a passion reflected in this recording.

My thanks are due to all the people who have 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 and Nicholas Pope, without whose advice and encouragement there can be no doubt that the project would not have reached fruition.

This disc is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Anne Robson.

Andrew Wright

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