

Božena Šteinerová and Liszt's *Vallée d'Obermann*

Thoughts following a Recital at the Hungarian Institute, Prague, 11.4.2012

We know, of course we know, that the *Vallée d'Obermann* does not exist except in the creative mind of the writer, Senancour. And yet this remote valley of the imagination, with its dreamed-for solitary aspect, its lakes and rushing streams, its promise of respite for the soul of a Wanderer, was brought to life in the most extraordinary way by Božena Šteinerová.

It is true that Liszt's greatest works have suffered at the hands of a never-ending procession of pianists anxious to reveal to the public their own technical prowess through his compositions, thereby not fully revealing to the audience a sense of the composer's meaning. But with Šteinerová a magnificent technique is only a starting point; the technique is the servant and also the communicator of a powerful intelligence and an imagination of great depth: a combination which elevates this Czech virtuoso to the highest level of artistic achievement in public performance.

Šteinerová acted as a conjuror, creating as if without effort a magical tapestry of evolving sounds and colours which spread out to cross every dynamic range. This world of sound was itself shot through with jangling, cimbalom-like overtones as Liszt's harmonic language refers simultaneously to an ancient music and points to the future to the works of Bartók and Kodály. Within this glittering backdrop she brought to life or rather, she dragged and pulled into existence powerful, breathing melodies as if they had emerged from a deep lake, rising to the sky so that we, the audience, were able to survey the dramatic panorama of *Obermann's* valley as if portrayed in a landscape as depicted by John Martin.

The performance of this work was a passionate act of creation which can only confirm Božena Šteinerová as one of the great and most imaginative interpreters of Liszt. One looks forward to hearing her perform the *Sonata* and *Chasse-Neige* and I for one would travel a long way to hear these.

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