

Anne Chen

p. 2

9.16.08

Francesca da Rimini: Symphonic Fantasia after Dante, Op. 32

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky composed this symphonic poem in a mere 3 weeks. Under the suggestion of the music critic, Henry Laroche, Tchaikovsky created this symphonic work on the most famous incident in Dante's *Divine Comedy* – the tragedy of Francesca and Paolo. Tchaikovsky dubbed this piece as a “symphonic fantasy.” On a letter to his brother, he wrote, “I have worked on it *con amore*, and I believe my love has been successful.” It was indeed an instant sensation. The symphonic fantasy premiered in Moscow on March 9, 1877. The first performance was received with much enthusiasm despite the fact that it was just five days after the premiere of *Swan Lake*. On YouTube, I enjoyed the vibrant air with which Gustavo Dudamel conducted to his Symphonic Orchestra of Venezuela. Although this recent performance in 2007 paled in comparison to Riccardo Muti and the Philadelphia Orchestra's concert, I believe that it was nevertheless well orchestrated and portrayed Dante's story with clarity.

In terms of music and theme, this piece shows a prominent influence of Liszt. Liszt's compositions oftentimes illustrate a gothic and devilish air which is much like the aura of Francesca da Rimini by Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky's depiction of the flames of hell with the usage of swirling chromaticism can also be traced back to Liszt. The perfect opening of the piece reflects the words “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,” and as Dante enters the Second Circle of Hell, the fantasia opens *Andante lugubre*. As Dante steps into the circle, he swoops into the maelstrom of despair and suffering. However, the horrible storm slows and a lull of horns, cornets, and trombones announce the reunion of Francesca and Paolo. While the storm abates, a heartbreaking clarinet solo rises above with the tempo of *Andante cantabile non troppo* leading us into the second section of the fantasia. Now we are presented with a clear view of Francesca and Paolo. The gentle yet passionate caresses of the lovers also carry a sense of urgency. The English horn and harps play a tune that alludes to Francesca's first meeting and sudden love of Paolo. But the caresses are interrupted; the despairing storm arises and breaks the lovers apart. Once again the movement regresses to *Andante cantabile*. The storm settles and we hear the poignant love song of Francesca which arises above the turmoil.