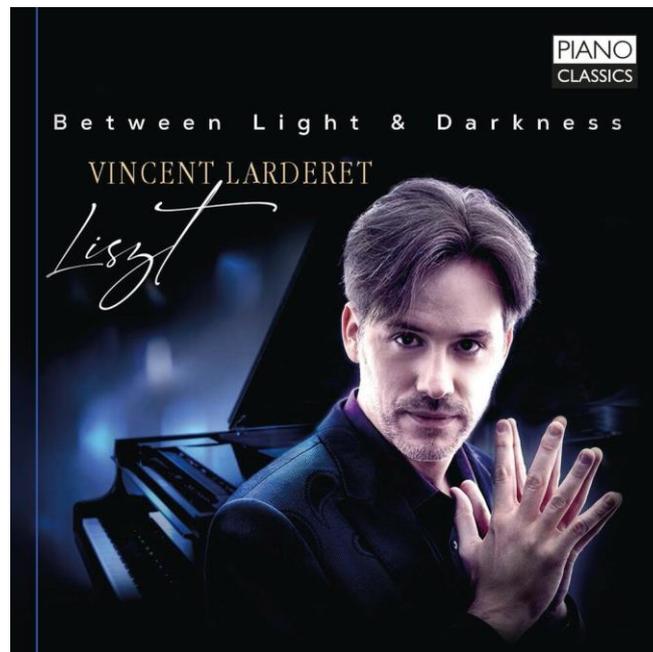




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**LISZT** *Après une lecture de Dante. La notte. Schlaflos! La lugubre gondola No. 2. Nuages gris. Ballade No. 2. R.W. – Venezia. Funérailles. Unstern! – Sinistre. En rêve* • Vincent Larderet (pn) • PIANO 10201 (2 CDs: 86:15)

4 stars



French pianist Vincent Larderet is new to me, but he claims a musical pedigree that includes Carlos Cebro, a pupil of Vlado Perlemuter, and direct studies with Bruno-Leonardo Gelber. The present Liszt recital, chosen for its dramatic contrasts, is of recent vintage (October 29–30, 2019) and features Larderet on a Steinway recorded at Schiedan Westvest Church, the Netherlands.huf

In his first encounter with “the infinite struggle that symbolized the profound duality of the composer,” Larderet performs the 1856 *Dante Sonata*, which came to Liszt both directly with *The Divine Comedy* and the title *Après une lecture de Dante* via Victor Hugo. Liszt includes the work as part of his second *Années de Pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage). In literature, the presence of Manichean dualism permeates virtually every century; but for the Romantics, the eternal struggle of light and dark, Good and Evil, manifests itself in music’s tonalities that could embrace the Plutonian shore and the Emyrean heights. Liszt compresses his drama into a single movement, a “Fantasia quasi Sonata,” a pun on Beethoven’s op. 27 that indulges much in a fantastical, rhapsodic character.

Larderet delivers the set of tritones that cast us into the depths of Inferno with a declamatory force that alerts us to the transformative nature of this Grund-Gestalt, or all-permeating motif. Centered in two tonalities, D Minor and F# Major, Liszt depicts a series of ecstasies, low and high, that eventually culminate in a spiritual transfiguration of the dark motive into exultant D-Major chords. Larderet’s color palette proves quite plastic, especially in the Heavenly, detached arpeggios and in the virtually ferocious, moral victory of the coda.



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Few pieces could travel so quickly from preceding light to almost utter darkness than *La notte*, conceived after a poem and a statue of Michelangelo. The immediate motivation for Liszt lay in the death of Liszt's daughter, Blandine. But between Michelangelo's lament, "I am happy for sleep, and more for being like a stone," and the valedictory words from Virgil's *Aeneid*, "And dying he remembers fair Argos," Liszt constructs a funereal tone-poem rife with tolling bells and a lovely, musing central section made more touching by the Hungarian scale and cadence meant to convey Liszt's fear of dying far from his homeland.

Larderet has included a series of late Liszt works, those whose musical experimentation well adumbrates the morbid, "pulverized" mentality of musical material in Schoenberg and Webern, lacking discernible melody or harmonic stability. Liszt once confirmed his exploratory ethos: "My sole ambition as a composer is to hurl my javelin into the infinite space of the future." *Schlaflos! Frage und Antwort* (1883) captures a restless night of dissonance and uncertainty that ends with a major-key sense of repose. The 1881 *Unstern! – Sinistre* testifies to Liszt's "Unlucky Star," an austere march without melody that finds no solace but only mounting, fierce frustration and rebellion, all caught in Larderet's cold and piercing tones. *En rêve* is a nocturne that dissolves into rarefied notes and detached trills characteristic of Liszt's last thoughts he was writing "Sketches for a Harmony of the Future." While in Venice in December 1882, Liszt saw a procession of black-draped funeral gondolas, and he felt an instant premonition of his son-in-law Wagner's death. The experience inspired *La lugubre gondola*, music in which the 6/8 pulse of the gondolier's barcarolle song becomes veiled in ghostly shadows. Two months later, Wagner died in Venice. Once more, Larderet projects forceful tritones, tolling bells, so as to invoke a grim procession subtle in its invocation of Tristan's "longing" motif.

*Nuages gris* points simultaneously to Debussy and Schoenberg, as these "gray clouds" play startling, obsessed dissonance against harmonies in whole tones. Larderet has the music dissolve at the coda in a most unnerving cadence.

Larderet includes two epic pieces, the first of which, the 1853 *Ballade No. 2* in *B Minor*, serves as a companion to the *B Minor Sonata*. The piece purports to be inspired by Gottfried Bürger's ballad "Lenore." This broad but through-composed piece allows Larderet to display bravura technique and a real panoply of keyboard color, chromatic, in cascades of broken octaves or plummeting and rising scales. More than once, we hear what would become a piece of the cadenza in Grieg's marvelous *A-Minor Concerto*.

The second of the epic pieces, *Funérailles*, belongs to the cycle of works Liszt composed (1845–1852) after poems by Alphonse de Lamartine, *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, dedicated to Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein. Both noble and poetic, the massive work commemorates those fallen in the 1848–49 Hungarian War of Independence. Many of Liszt's friends had died, including Count Lajos Batthyány; moreover, Chopin died a mere 11 days after the Count's execution. Larderet injects the requisite girth, tautness, and sensitivity into this tribute to the heroic spirit with an ardor and technical panache we like from Horowitz and Cziffra, admirable company, indeed.

When he learned of Richard Wagner's death on February 13, 1883, Liszt, still in Budapest at the time, wrote a third elegy, *R.W. – Venezia* that reflects a private and a public grief. Uncertain, dark tonality and a drained sense of energy proceed to a strident funeral procession. Three tolling bells mark a constant motif in Liszt's conception of human finitude, and Larderet approaches their significance with a resolve worthy of Mussorgsky.

**Gary Lemco**