

by Gareth Baard



Loreto Aramendi, *Brahms, Franck Liszt, Cavanle-Coll*
Organ of Santa Maria San Sebastian



Loreto Aramendi's 2014 double-CD recording on the CavailleColl Organ of Santa Maria San Sebastian is a fine example of absolute musicianship, sound technique and utter command over the instrument. The recording features a selection works from the heart of the romantic period by Liszt, Franck, Tournemire and Brahms — all of whom produced a significant output for the organ.

Aramendi is the main organist at the Basilica of San Sebastian, situated in Basque country of Spain. Her initial music studies began at the Conservatoire of San Sebastian in piano, harpsichord and organ followed by organ studies at the National Regional Conservatoire of Bayonne. This was followed by further organ studies with Jean Boyer and Louis Robilliard at the National Conservatoire of Lyon followed by further studies in Paris at the National Regional Superior Conservatoire.

A regular performer with the Basque Symphony she has also given solo recitals in Europe and the USA. In addition to her work at the Santa Maria she is a professor at the F. Escudero Conservatoire in San Sebastian.

The Cavaille-Coll organ of Santa Maria was built in 1863 and prior to this recording (6-9 November 2014) was un-restored. The organ can be considered one of the extraordinary creations of Cavaille-Coll, of similar calibre to Saint Sulpice and Saint-Ouen. The organ is acoustically complete from the bass to the treble with all the characteristics of the 'French Symphonic' organ of Cavaille-Coll from fiery reeds through to full but subtly diverse foundations stops. The organ is a complete instrument for Romantic music and has served complete justice to all the works on this beautiful recording.

The recording opens with Charles Tournemire's Choral Improvisation on *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, a work with an interesting birth. In 1930-31 Tournemire recorded the works of Cesar Franck along with five improvisations on 78 rpm records at Sainte Clotilde. It was later in 1956-58 that Maurice Durufle, Tournemire's disciple, using the 78 rpm record, patiently transcribed the five inspirational improvisations into

musical notation. The most impressive sounding being that of *Victimae Paschali Laude*.

Cesar Franck's Prelude, Fugue and Variations along with *Piece Heraque* also feature on the recording. Aramendi's rendition of these works remains faithful to the musical score with accurate execution and 'lyrical' playing of the haunting melodies of Franck. The Santa Maria organ is known to be one of the most suitable for Franck's music and in these recordings one can only close the eyes and imagine the sound soaring from the tribune of Sainte Clotilde with Franck himself at the console.

Though Brahms' output for the organ is not by any means large it is still significant in its own right. Aramendi captures the full essence of the Brahms' Choral Preludes, full of emotion and expressive quality. These were written in 1896 during a tormenting time for Brahms with the death of Clara Schumann and around the time of his first symptoms of hepatic cancer which was to prevail the following year - this melancholic emotion that Brahms wrote into the music is brought out superbly in Aramendi's performance. Unfortunately only three chorales feature on the recording - *Herzlich tut mich verlangen, O Welt, ich muss dich lassen* and *Herzlich tut mich erfreuen* - all of which are registered to perfection and performed with a sense of maturity and respect for the Brahmsian style.

The Prelude and Fugue in g minor written in 1856/57, though only published after his death, precedes the Choral preludes by 40 years. Therefore taking on a completely different feel it is often compared to the North-European toccata in the style of Bach, particularly to Bach's own Prelude and Fugue in g minor, BWV 535. Aramendi achieves an exciting delivery of the work, though not the most memorable fugue subjects, with varied registration and a general lightness in her touch through-out the work.

The final work to feature on the recording, which has an entire CD dedicated to it, is Liszt's Fantasy and Fugue on the choral *'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam'*. This is a marathon of a piece for even the best of organists.

The work is based on a chorale of the same name from Giacomo Meyerbeer's Opera *Le Prophete* from 1849. With a playing time of about 30 minutes the work comprises of three sections: Fantasy, Adagio and Fugue all played as uninterrupted movements. Using a very advanced harmonic language lavished with chromaticism it opens with an intensely agitated fantasia. The adagio develops the main choral theme through expressive and lyrical variations. The fugue reaches the climax of development with a fantastic coda on 'full organ'. Aramendi uses the San Maria organ to its capacity using almost every single stop combination. She delivers a striking performance that rings through the entire Basilica throughout the marathon of a work.

Overall this is a very sound recording with accurate yet exciting playing on the stunning Cavaille-Coll instrument. I would recommend this recording to anyone with an appreciation for Romantic-period music. It is available via Loreto Aramendi's website (www.loretoaramendi.com) for €18.