

celestial harmonies

Johannes Brahms
Piano Concerto № 1 d-Minor op. 15 (1858)

Sándor Falvai, pianist
Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra
Zoltán Kocsis, conductor

Franz Liszt
Trois odes funèbres S. 112 (1860-1866)

Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra
Zoltán Kocsis, conductor

Celestial Harmonies 14333-2 (2 CD)

Robert Schumann
Phantasie C-Major op. 17 (1839)

Franz Liszt
Grande Sonate pour le Pianoforte S.178 (1853)

Sándor Falvai, pianist
Celestial Harmonies 13312-2

German recording producer/music publisher and founder of the well-respected Celestial Harmonies label, Eckart Rahn, recently celebrated his first fifty years in his profession, having produced his first (then vinyl) album in August of 1966. As a present to himself on the occasion, he gave himself *carte blanche* to record whatever he wished, wherever he wished, whenever he wished...whatever would suit his fancy.

One of his favourite musicians for a long time had been the Hungarian master pianist Sándor Falvai whose playing he knew since the days of communism in Hungary; Falvai had had his debut recital at Carnegie Hall in New York in 1978, and Rahn had come across an excellent review of it in The New York Times. Trying to buy something by/with Falvai, he found the first Brahms piano concerto on the Hungarian state label Hungaroton. That was all it took to make Rahn a Falvai fan.

Sometimes things can take some time...it took Rahn thirty-five years to connect by writing to the Liszt Academy in Budapest whose director Falvai had been for some years much earlier on. The Academy's office knew that Falvai didn't use a computer, and they sent the message on to Falvai's daughter Katalin who turns out is a pianist as is her father. Then it came to light that Falvai's second daughter Anna is also a pianist, and since their mother is a pianist as well, the Falvai family might be a unique case in the history of Western classical music...Katalin grew up listening to her mother practicing in the room to her left and to her father in the room to her right.

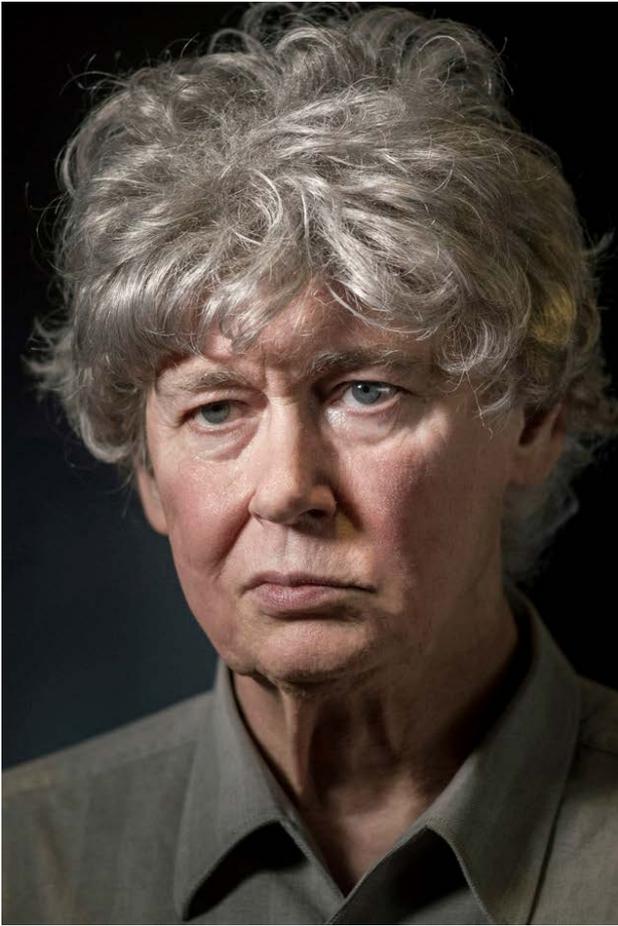
Katalin offered her help to talk to her father about a recording for Celestial Harmonies. Rahn went to Hungary to meet, and the Falvais turned out to be the most generous and welcoming hosts; Falvai was clear from the outset that he wanted to record the Schumann Phantasie and the Liszt Sonata, two of the most difficult works in the repertoire. In between, Katalin said with some emphasis that Rahn—whilst in Budapest—should meet Zoltán Kocsis, her teacher and supervisor for her Ph.D. which Rahn was happy to do.

Falvai, Kocsis and Rahn immediately struck up a co-operative relationship, and a friendship had developed over time since.

Rahn had heard Kocsis and his Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra with the Brahms First Symphony in concert, and he knew Falvai's Brahms First Piano Concerto on record—soon all this jelled into the proposal to record the first Brahms concerto with Kocsis, Falvai and the HNPO.

But something more special, something rare, something more original seemed to be missing. Again, turning the clock back for thirty-five years, more or less, Rahn remembered hearing a widely unknown Liszt work, *Trois odes funèbres*, a work very beautiful in its melancholic character, on the Bavarian Radio in Germany. He wrote himself a reminder not to forget this ever. It was now the time to remember; luckily, Kocsis was very much in agreement to record a widely unfamiliar and very moving work by one of Hungary's greatest composers.





The last known photograph of Zoltán Kocsis, taken on October 5, 2016; he was rehearsing Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin* with the Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra in Budapest

Kocsis was a Hungarian musician following a long tradition of great Hungarian conductors; Fritz Reiner, Antal Doráti, Georg Solti, George Szell, Eugene Ormandy or Ferenc Fricsay come to mind. As was Fritz Reiner, Kocsis was a pianist turned conductor. Just that Kocsis wanted to stay in Hungary "to build the sound" (Kocsis) of his beloved orchestra.

Trois odes funèbres had been published first in a less than perfect edition—thirty years after Liszt's death—in 1916. The three parts had been separated in two different volumes and the main title had been omitted altogether. It soon became obvious that one might have to look elsewhere if one were to accomplish the feat of performing a work, dear to the composer's heart, but not accessible as a credible score. Particularly the first part, *Les morts – Oraison*, needed to be reviewed carefully. Rahn could locate the autograph in France, and Kocsis was very happy with what he could see now. Kocsis: "We analyzed the autograph together, and one could follow the history, just by comparing colours: first of all, it was obvious from the hand-writing that it was Liszt's. the score was written with black ink, and one could see two levels of editing, adding and clarifying, one with a grey pencil and another generation of corrections with a blue pencil."

Especially the harp part Kocsis thought much more beautiful than the one in the printed edition. Kocsis decided not to go with the version already recorded but to record *Les morts – Oraison* anew; he was certain that no other recording existed that's true to the autograph, and he had come to love the piece very much.

Liszt had written that he wanted the three parts performed together but his wish was not always respected. Likewise, Liszt had written in his will that he wanted the first two pieces of the trilogy, *Les morts* and *La notte*, to be played at his funeral. Once again, his wish remained unfulfilled.

But now we were all happy with what had been accomplished. The double CD with the Brahms concerto and Liszt's odes received a very favourable reception. But then fate struck; as an almost cynical irony Kocsis passed away at the relatively young age—at least for a conductor—of just 64, on the Sunday, November 6, 2016, following the release of his last recording. Liszt had composed a major work, accepting death as inspiration, and Kocsis got closer to the composer's wish to have the trilogy performed together and to see *Les Morts* and *La notte* played at the funeral.

Liszt's *Trois odes funèbres* became Kocsis's swan-song, a deep and great work graced by the contribution of a wonderful man and musician.