Karłowicz, Szymanowski - Violin Concertos (Plawner) [2005]

Mieczysław Karłowicz - Violin Concerto in A major Op. 8 *1 I. Allegro moderato 13:29 2 II. Romanza. Andante 8:59 3 III. Finale. Vivace assai 7:06*
Karol Szymanowski - Violin Concerto No. 1 Op. 35
4 I Koncert skrzypcowy op. 35 Violin Concerto No. 1 Op. 35
Piotr Pławner (violin) Zielona Góra Philharmonic Orchestra Czesław Grabowski – conductor

I dare say there is at least one name most music lovers will have encountered in the heading for this disc: the name of Szymanowski. Karłowicz, though not a negligible figure, has not made a name for himself on a level with that of his compatriot. This is a pity, because although his idiom is comparatively conservative, his writing possesses a lively awareness of melody. His songs are particularly well regarded in Poland, as is this concerto, his only output in the genre.

Cast in three movements the concerto weaves a path of “vigour and inventiveness”, as the useful liner notes put it throughout the lengthy thirteen-minute first movement. Virtuoso technique is called for, particularly in the first movement cadenza, but it the composer’s rich sense of melody that is the major concern. Indeed, if one knows the works of composers such as Wieniawski, then in Karłowicz it is possible to detect the link between his oeuvre and that of Szymanowski’s more individual style. The second movement, which follows almost unbroken from the first, is a soft and soulful Romanza – and here the soloist must appear as both the poet and his beloved wrapped into one. The finale contrasts the atmosphere nicely, with a perky classical rondo.

Soloist. Orchestra and conductor are all new to my hearing. In recent years we have grown used to a rich stream of musical talent from Eastern Europe becoming better known in the West. The Poles, along with the Czechs, have beaten the path that musicians of other countries are steadily following. This is a state of affairs I can only applaud when the playing on offer on

this recording is as assured and gutsy as the Karłowicz concerto shows it to be. Pior Pławner's playing is polished, but not overly so. There are a few moments towards the end of the third movement when he sounds in danger of veering slightly from true pitch. There is no indication on the packaging that this is a live recording, and the orchestral ensemble is too 'together' to indicate a live performance in progress but in building to the work's climax Pławner gives the feeling that it might be helps to heighten the excitement. All this after he has dashed of a fearsomely intricate first movement without worry and beguiled with the beauty of his tone in the second. He is recorded forward of the orchestra, though not so far forward as to sound in a separate acoustic. The orchestra acquit themselves favourably throughout, bringing dashes of individual colour to specific lines – the winds make a valuable contribution in this way. Czesław Grabowski leads it all with compelling conviction.

Szymanowski's Violin concerto no.1 has been the subject of many recordings in recent years. To all intents and purposes a single movement work, it was written very much with the assistance of violinist Paweł Kochański, who himself scored the single cadenza. Szymanowski was clear about its place – along with Mythes – in establishing his personal style.

Whilst the soloist naturally plays an important role, it is the orchestra and conductor who establish with their brief tutti passages and accompanying sections the framework that the soloist works within. Czesław Grabowski and the orchestra take a marginally more spacious view of the work than is sometimes encountered: Kaja Danczowska and Warsaw National Philharmonic under Kazimierz Kord on CD Accord ACD 026-2 (see review) come in a bit faster than the present version. Individual flexibilities of chosen tempi are small, and each version is persuasive in its own way. Overall though I prefer the extra punch that the CD Accord version has. But should one compare the present recording to Jennifer Koh and the Grant Park Orchestra under Carlos Kalmar (Cedille CDR 90000 089), then Pławner and Grabowski are much to be favoured – Kalmar gives his orchestra too much room to relax into, after which they cannot be pulled into shape with sufficient speed.

I like the clear voicing that the Zielona Góra Philharmonic gives to line and texture within their playing. It leaves both bodies of sound stated and subtle shadings hinted at. Pławner takes the high wire act of Szymanowki's solo line very much in his stride, but for me his reading does not quite evince the emotional qualities contained in Kaja Danczowska's recording. Her recording remains my first choice for the concerto.

A recommendable disc for the pair of violin concertos presented; they are played with spirit and adventure. ---Evan Dickerson, musicweb-international.com

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