Karłowicz

Returning Waves op. 9
A Sorrowful Tale op. 13
Episode at a Masquerade op. 14

BBC Philharmonic Orchestra
Gianandrea Noseda *cond*

Chandos CHAN 10298 (60 minutes: Recorded in 24-bit/96 kHz: DDD), £12.99
Notes and translations included.

This is the final instalment of Gianandrea Noseda and the BBC Philharmonic's complete recordings of the orchestral music of Mieczysław Karłowicz. These discs inevitably raise comparisons with Jerzy Salwarowski's pioneering 1983 recordings of the complete symphonic poems with the Silesian State Philharmonic Orchestra, reissued on Dux in 1999.[1] Karłowicz's music is fascinating and remains too little known outside the circles of Polish specialists and enthusiasts of *fin de siècle* pessimism. It is to be hoped that these new recordings will serve to widen the appreciation of this significant body of work, the finest in Polish early twentieth-century symphonism, whose qualities are comparable in many ways with the slightly later and better-known works of Szymanowski. The three symphonic poems presented on this disc, which share certain programmatic preoccupations, include some of the composer's most accomplished music.

Karłowicz wrote to the musicologist Adolf Chybiński on the programme of his *Returning Waves* op.9 (1904): 'Amidst the bitter thoughts of a man who was being preyed upon by his fate and who was drawing to the end of his days, memories suddenly revive of the springtime of his life, irradiated with the sunny smile of happiness. Pictures pass one another. Everything vanishes however and bitterness and sorrow grip the tired soul in their claws.'[2] Leszek Polony suggests that Turgenev's *An Unhappy Girl*, with its tale of unfulfilled love, acted as a model for the programme. In this scenario death plays no consolatory role. In response, Karłowicz's music is, as Alistair Wightman suggests, a 'dark, materialistic contrast to earlier eschatological symphonic poems' such as Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* (one of Karłowicz's favourite pieces).[3] The 'waves' in the title refer to the returning figures that define the nostalgic tone of the work. Karłowicz was fascinated by seascapes, an inspiring combination of sublime and tragic in the eternally re-shaping and returning waves.[4] Whether appearing as tidal surges,

[1] Mieczysław Karłowicz, *Poematy Symfoniczne* (DUX 0132/0133, 1999).

[2] Letter of 20 April 1904; quoted in Polony's 'Preface' to the score, *Complete Edition, Vol. VI* (Kraków: PWM, 1988): xv. Polony's monograph, *Poetyka Muzyczna Mieczyslawa Karłowicz: Program literacki, ekspresja i symbol w poemacie symfonicznym* (Kraków: PWM, 1986) remains the best survey of Karłowicz's orchestral music.

[3] Alistair Wightman, *Karłowicz, Young Poland and the Musical Fin-de-siècle* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996): 41.

[4] See Wightman, *Karłowicz*: 39–40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whirlpools, maelstroms or absorbing murmurings, in all their manifestations wave forms are ephemeral – they always die – they always sink into the bottomless abyss of the ocean or crash onto the coast. They are a perfect natural image for the melancholic and the pessimistic. The sublime, which in the Strauss provides a route out of suffering and nostalgia to apotheosis in an afterlife of heavenly fulfilment, in Karłowicz's profoundly nihilistic world-view is a totally negative experience. In this way his alliance lies with Turgenev's dismissal of the utopian-romantic hopes of redemption. The work evokes post-Straussian formal processes of intensification co-existing with the freezing of returning musical images, as the sublime and tragic co-exist with the decadent and lifeless. The structural returns heighten the question of how music might create an illusion of pastness. They also heighten questions of form and coherence, of part–whole relationships in a world of deformation, recollection and denial.

The pessimistic tone of the opening is generated by a mournful brass chorale followed by a yearning, miniature wave-form melody on cellos and horns, which characteristically echoes two of Karłowcz's most important models: Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony and Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*. Noseda immediately coaxes a notably rich tone from the cellos and achieves excellently balanced inunciations from the brass. There is a stronger sense of organic connection between phrases than is achieved by Salwarowski. There are then fleeting comforts of the nostalgic images of the image of 'Her' – the programme describes how 'the youthful figure of a girl who seemed to be meant for him appeared standing in the sunshine'. This second theme, amorously shaped in G♭, is expertly played by the Philharmonic's first clarinettist, though the soloist is so prominent in the balance that when the orchestra takes up melodic work it sounds rather feeble for a short while. There is also a dimension of the 'Ideal' or otherworldly attached to the image of a Dionysian waltzing dandy that follows, but the pessimism of nihilism crushes any hope of a positive outcome. When the waltz gains renewed vigour – in the programme we read that 'black diamonds of eyes flashed; oblivious of the world, he flung himself after them in a whirl of desires, torments and frenzy' – it emerges from narcissistic self-reflection, but only to end in a deathly collapse. Noseda's performance in this section is especially suave and polished. There is a seductive sheen from all parts of the orchestration: Salwarowski's Silesian orchestra is more edgy in tone, more suggestive of the possibilities that the image is about to self-destruct. 'Her' theme nostalgically returns, but this is merely a precursor to the work's most pungent interpolation by fragments or shards of powerful Tristanesque dissonances, the flash of diamond eyes turns to a death-laden glance as the musical narrative reaches the crisis at the heightened threat of disintegration. Noseda's extremes of seduction and potential destruction are persuasively articulated.

The pessimistic narrative of *A Sorrowful Tale* op.13 (1908) compares closely with *Returning Waves*. Both works display similar overall trajectories – from lament, through preliminary strivings and collapses, to redemptive images of the amorously lyrical and hedonistic dance, leading to crisis, catastrophe and an inevitable return to the lamenting opening. Karłowicz's eternal longing is one that leads to total, obliterating despair and self-destruction. In *A Sorrowful Tale* we enter into a mourning process, but as this is unsuccessful the inevitable result is a descent into melancholia, with potentially suicidal consequences. Polony describes the work as a 'musical study of Young Poland's melancholy'; the work

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

moves from nihilism to the first manifestation of expressionism in Polish music.[5] The programme presents the 'psychology of a suicidal man', a 'struggle between the desire for life, which recalls visions of beautiful moments from the past, and the *idée fixe* of suicide' which leads to the victory of the latter and 'nothingness'. (Karłowicz's original 'realist' idea to have a pistol shot at moment of death was replaced by the Tchaikovskian symbolic tam tam.)

The work's opening invokes *lugubre, sordino*, chromatically related mediant chords, which have a long romantic tradition of evoking melancholic, mythic realms. The first melodic gesture outlines a shape reminiscent of the 'Ideal' theme from Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*. A melancholically falling seventh motif, a gesture with a rich semiotic history (including the main theme of the hero's tormented yearning in Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* Symphony and familiar motifs of erotic yearning from *Tristan*) is prominent. These two features are important seeds of future materials. As one might now expect from this disc, the performance from the BBC Philharmonic of this emotive music is smooth and poignantly articulated. The motif that immediately follows in the horns is one that Polony identifies as a motif of 'tragic fate', a 'foreboding of the inevitable catastrophe', which 'appears always in culminations or crisis points like a tragic memento'. It is a signal of the 'final catastrophe'.[6] The will to develop new forms is always threatened with crushing annihilation or inevitable dissolution. The expressions of anxiety and despair, which leads Salwarowski to push his Silesian Orchestra to the limits, are under Noseda pungently and clearly realized.

The succeeding *Moderato assai*, which marks the beginning of *Steigerung* (intensification) processes to an existential scream, builds from a forceful chord in the strings. The first scream is followed by a long, post-Tchaikovskian climactic descent. A contrapuntal working-out of the mournful melodic materials is accompanied by oracular brass chords and falling chromatic upper voices, which gradually decline as the texture thins and the dynamic diminishes. This leads to the reprise of the opening *lugubre* chords. For Polony, this is a 'Tristan-like apotheosis of love leading to an ecstatic culmination in B major', and Wightman hears a 'blissful transfiguration of the second theme and a diatonicized version of the previously chromatic descent'.[7] A pastoral-idyllic episode – kaleidoscopic orchestral colours and promising dominant chord formations – then suggests the bucolic. But these amorous images prove to be momentary comforting illusions. The vision dissolves away in trilled chromatic descents to the return of mourning chords. The return generates another long lead-up to a second existential cry – but this time the seemingly inevitable pessimistic trajectory is interrupted by a fleeting eight-bar recollection of the eschatological alternative. When it inevitably comes, the second and fatal scream is a cataclysmic return of the dissonance that pervaded the opening section of the piece. Sinking variants of the mourning gesture then lead to the final *lugubre* chords, a dissolution especially well controlled on this disc.

[5] Leszek Polony, 'Karłowicz – *A Sad Story*: A Musical Study of Young Poland's Melancholy', preface to the score: 16. This was probably spurred by the suicide of the writer Józefat Nowkiński, on whose dramatic poem *Biała gołąbka* ('The White Dove') Karłowicz wrote an overture and incidental music. On wider resonances of the suicide theme see Henryk Anders, *Mieczysław Karłowicz: Życie i dokonania* (Poznań: Abos, 1998): 483.

[6] Polony, 'Karłowicz – *A Sad Story*': 19.

[7] Wightman, *Karłowicz*: 83; Polony, '*Karłowicz – A Sad Story*': 19.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As in the symphonies of Sibelius, Tchaikovsky and Mahler, it is possible to hear a macro-narrative operating across Karłowicz's symphonic poems. Karłowicz's final, incomplete symphonic poem, *Episode at a Masquerade* op.14 (1908), has been heard as a retreat from *A Sorrowful Tale*'s expressionistic trauma. The programme promulgated by Chybiński has often been compared with Turgenev's *Three Meetings*, but this has been disputed. The image is of a banal Dionysian assembly recollected by the saddened lover – strengthened, the lovers become 'forgetful of the world', but the brutal orgy breaks the thread of their reborn love. Dionysus no longer holds such powers. He is to be found mingling and merging with the 'boisterous' crowds of 'yelling clowns'. A glittering preludial *maestoso* with the calls of horns and trumpets moves into a main first subject whose initial energy and vigour soon dissolves into *dolce* solo chromatic lines. This is a paragraph into which Noseda launches with relish. The music suggests attempts at revivification before *quasi meno mosso* chromatic sliding in which the tendency to inertia hints at sensual langour. Karłowicz's enervated version also foreshadows the transformation of the energetic theme at the *Andante*, which initiates a long passage of erotic lassitide and yearning. Again, Noseda manages the post-Wagnerian art of transition between extreme states with masterful control. 'Her' theme, by contrast with *Returning Waves*, is not one of happy beauty. She is presented in melancholic B♭ minor, a melody that again higlights the suave tones of the BBC Philharmonic's woodwind section. After 'Her', the yearning erotic music returns, leading to a climax before dissolution towards the return of Her theme, now *molto lento*. The pianissimo recollections of the Dionysian motif dissolve and dissipate so that the return of the opening *Allegro maestoso* is an abrupt one – it is not a recapitulation that sounds like a resolution or outcome of organic developmental process. The thread of structural connection breaks down, raising the morbid threat of decadent disintegration into sensual particulars. Fitelberg's completion of the final section of the work, though its merits as an 'accurate' prediction of how Karłowicz might have continued are questioned, does contain one structural decision that seems especially appropriate and adroit. In the recapitulation it is not 'Her' theme that returns transfigured but a fortissimo and molto largamente version of the *Andante* version of the main theme, that which had initiated the passage of lassitude now leading to a *morendo* ending in G. So the seductive, sensuous version of the Dionysian leads once more to unfulfilment, to amorous, spiritual and material denudation and subjective abandonment.

For Tim Ashley, reviewing the disc in *The Guardian*, Noseda's performances are 'faultless, though the mood of unrelieved introspection makes for difficult listening'.[8] There is more range of emotional reference than Ashley admits (guaranteed by the inclusion of *Episode at a Masquerade*) and the disc is full of immediately rewarding pleasures. Salwarowski's Silesian recordings remain invaluable and are assured of historical significance. Salwarowski has a profound knowledge of Karłowicz's music, but the orchestral playing and recording quality offered to Noseda will sway many in favour of the BBC Philharmonic's persuasively coherent performances.

Stephen Downes
University of Surrey

[8] *The Guardian*, 2 Dec. 2005.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press