Scharwenka

Piano Music vol. 1 Piano Sonata no. 1 in C sharp minor op. 6; Impromptu in D major op. 17; *Five Polish Dances* op. 3; Polonaise in C sharp minor op. 12; 'Eglantine' Waltz op. 84; Polonaise in F minor op. 42; Valse-Caprice in A major op. 31

Piano Music vol. 2 *Romanzero* op. 33; Sonatine in E minor op. 52 no. 1; *Two Polish Dances* op. 29; Piano Sonata no. 2 in E flat major op. 36

Seta Tanyel *pf*
Helios CDH55131 (63 minutes: DDD) and CDH55132 (66 minutes: DDD)
Notes included.

The Complete Chamber Music Piano Trio no. 1 in F sharp minor op. 1; Violin Sonata in D minor op. 2; Cello Sonata in E minor op. 46a; Serenade for violin and piano op. 70; Piano Quartet in F major op. 37*; Piano Trio no. 2 in A minor op. 45†

Seta Tanyel *pf* Lydia Mordkovitch *vn* Colin Carr *vc* Levon Chilingirian *vn**† Ivo-Jan van der Werff *va** Garbis Atmacayan *vc**†
Hyperion Dyad CDD22046 (2 discs) (153 minutes: DDD), £6.99 each
Notes and translations included.

A young American in Berlin, Amy Fay, was under no illusions: 'there *is* something interesting and romantic about being a Pole. The very name conjures up thoughts of revolutions, conspiracies, bloody executions, masked balls, and, *of course*, grace, wit and beauty!' What spurred her to this effusive description were concert performances by the pianist Xaver Scharwenka. 'I find myself looking at him and saying to myself with a certain degree of satisfaction: "He is a Pole". Why I should have this feeling I know not, but I seem to be proud of knowing Poles' (quoted in Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History*, New York, 1954, p. 539). In the 'handsome' Scharwenka she saw 'clear, olive complexion, oval face, hazel eyes and brown silky hair . . . which falls about his head in a most picturesque and attractive fashion'. Fay's identification of what it meant to be 'Polish' in the circles of mid-nineteenth-century artists and dilettantes presents the apparently conflicting image of a roaring lion of the keyboard who has erotic charms of a strikingly feminine character. Her assumptions concerning Scharwenka's national identity are, however, far from revealing the whole picture, but the quality of apparent paradox is telling (and the issue of 'Polishness' in this context is one which demands analytical scrutiny in a full-length essay). Scharwenka was born in 1850 in Samter/Szamotuły, a small town near the city of Posen, now Poznań in the Wielkopolska region of western Poland, but then part of Prussian lands. Like the Silesian Wrocław/Breslau just a little to its south, this is a city whose complex historical mix of ethnic and national connections represents a 'microcosm' of the shifting cultural boundaries that map 'Middle Europe' (see Norman Davies and Roger Moorhouse's magnificent *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City*, London, 2003). Scharwenka's upbringing and education would have marked him as

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assuredly Germanic (he studied with Kullak at the Neue Akademie der Tonkunst in Berlin). His career as a pianist relied to a large extent on his reputation as an interpreter of the music of his 'compatriot' Chopin, but in his compositions, with their obvious debts to Schumann, Brahms, Chopin, and Liszt, the issue of national identity, hybridity and allusion is a source of much of the music's interest.

These discs from Hyperion, reissues of recordings which first appeared in the mid-1990s on the Collins Classics label, are highly worthy attempts to resuscitate interest in Scharwenka, whose music slipped into almost complete neglect once pianists had stopped revelling in the Lisztian bombast of the B flat minor Piano Concerto op. 32 (1877) as a vehicle of transcendental virtuosity (a late example is the volcanic 1969 recording from Earl Wild with the Boston Symphony under Erich Leinsdorf for RCA (SB 6815)). At the heart of these discs lies the work of Seta Tanyel, whose pianism exudes all the required technical wizardry and an equally crucial ability to persuade in sentimental lyricism.

The Piano Sonata no. 1 in C sharp minor op. 6 (1871), a conventional four-movement design (there is no Lisztian four-movements-in-one synthesis, but a ghostly recollection of the first movement provides a transition from the slow movement into the finale), already displays the eclectic mix of Scharwenka's style. The rhetoric of the sonata's opening material is derived from Chopin's scherzos, but this Allegro passionato becomes obsessed with repetitions of this material which tend to overwhelm the sections of lyrical contrast and thus undermine formal balance. Tanyel's playing, however, is especially fine in the demonic second movement, and in the catastrophic collapse of the sonata's final climax she hurls the torrent of notes at the listener with compelling urgency. Less successful is the cantabile slow movement, where Scharwenka is unable to sustain a consistent level of inspiration in the expressive melody. Scharwenka's 'Polish' mode appears in the two Polonaises opp. 12 and 42, which are pale shadows of the Chopin examples, and the *Five Polish Dances* op. 3. The first of the latter set, in E flat minor, became a huge money-spinner for the composer and his publisher, Breitkopf & Härtel, largely because it tapped into the bourgeois view that a certain level of pianism was a desired feminine accomplishment. As Loesser said, Scharwenka wrote 'quite a number of rather piquant Polish dances but it was only the one in the sombre key of E flat minor, leading off with undifficult heavy chords, that captured the girls' (p. 544). Success was surely also partly assured because its combination of the opening's bathetic-tragic tone with the central section's Chopinesque lyrical melody is one which closely matched the 'Polish' image held by Fay and others. The other pieces on volume 1 of the piano works, the Impromptu op. 17 and the Valse-Caprice op. 31, are salon pieces which demonstrate Scharwenka's consummate skills in the demands of popular pianism: figures of ardent passion, melancholic entreaties, filigree textures and climactic cascades of notes are all in reliable hands here. The impression, however, is that here these composer's hands have no distinguishable fingerprints.

The best of Scharwenka's piano music in this selection is on the second disc. The *Romanzero* op. 33 (1877), in particular, are pieces of notable worth and beauty. Again, one can easily point to inspirational sources in Brahms (the dedicatee), Chopin and Schumann, but here the result is of high quality. As Martin Eastick says in his liner notes the set is 'in the nature of a fantasy in four movements'. The second movement is recalled in the third, and the

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overriding impression is of a 'multi-piece' (tonally closed in F sharp) in which tensions between fragment and whole, and between technical virtuosity and lyrical poeticizing, lead to a beguiling complex of moods more subtly counterpointed than in many of Scharwenka's works. The disc also contains more *Polish Dances*, op. 29, and a Sonatine in E minor op. 52 no. 1 (1880) whose deliberately simpler piano writing is a reminder of the teaching career that Scharwenka successfully pursued first in Berlin and then in the United States (there is a *Methodik des Klavierspiels*, Leipzig, 1907). The disc ends with the ambitious, large-scale Sonata no. 2 in E flat op. 36 (1878) where, although Scharwenka is once more overtly displaying his cosmopolitan heart, it is nonetheless worn on a sleeve with enough tricks and imaginative ideas up it to sustain interest for most of the piece's half-hour.

The double disc of chamber music includes a similar mix of pieces. The Piano Trio no. 1 and Violin Sonata op. 2 are the legacy of studies with Kullak in Berlin. The highpoint here is the 'Romanze' second movement of the sonata, whose passages of lyricism are beautifully played by Lydia Mordkovitch. The Cello Sonata op. 46a is a later piece of more consistent quality, finely performed by Colin Carr. His interpretation of its alternations between passionate outburst and melancholic tenderness makes a persuasive case for this 'high' Romantic cello sonata as an occasional alternative to Brahms. And if violinists are looking for a fresh piece of salon sentimentality for the repertoire, then the Serenade op. 70 might serve well.

The second disc of chamber music is devoted to the Piano Quartet in F op. 37 and the Piano Trio in A minor op. 45, both works from the late 1870s, Scharwenka's most productive compositional period. The Trio is by far the more successful piece. The Quartet's expansive movements too often betray a dependency on the striking or charming qualities of individual ideas being able to compensate for dull developmental procedures and formal conservatism. In the Trio, by contrast, the wide range of 'topical' reference, including Lisztian demonic shadows and will-o'-the-wisp Schumannian scherzos, is more consistently engaging. The Adagio second movement is one of Scharwenka's finest creations: its opening chromatic counterpoint and expressive, yearning dissonance dissolve into a delicately ornamented lyricism in the sentimental salon style which, if one can take all the added sweetener, is expertly handled. The playing, from Levon Chilingirian (violin), Garbis Atmacayan (cello) and again Seta Tanyel at the piano, is unreservedly commendable. The finale, according to Eastick's notes, 'bears distinct evidence of the composer's Polish character'. It is a *con fuoco* Dionysian romp. Amy Fay would have swooned, but the source of Scharwenka's intoxicated swagger is a cocktail of Polish vodka supped in a German Bierkeller.

These recordings are an admirable undertaking, thoroughly deserving of reissue. The uniformly fine performances of this neglected repertoire are a valuable contribution towards widening our understanding of the musical culture of 'middle' Europe in the mid- to late nineteenth century.

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