Karłowicz

Symphonic Poems – 1
Stanisław i Anna Oświecimowie Op. 12
Rapsodia litewska Op. 11
Epizod na maskaradzie (comp. Fitelberg) Op. 14

Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra
Antoni Wit *cond*

Naxos 8.570452 (71 minutes: DDD)
Notes in English and German.

As the centenary of Karłowicz's death recedes, we are in the happy position of being able to compare a number of recent interpretations of his very fine orchestral works. The revival of interest in his music over the past decade is due to the initiative of top-class Polish and British orchestras under the sponsorship of major record labels. The most recent offering comes from Naxos, which has released his six symphonic poems on two CDs (the first volume only is reviewed here) recorded by both the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra in 2006 (vol. 1) and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra (vol. 2) under Antoni Wit. The recording of two of the symphonic poems by the Warsaw Philharmonic in 2001 under Kord[1] was no competition for the BBC Philharmonic under Tortelier and Noseda (Chandos),[2] and the only complete Polish recording of his six symphonic poems dates from 1984.[3] This offering from Naxos is timely and significant.

Wit, who is managing (and artistic director of) the Warsaw Philharmonic, has set about recording many of the major works in the Polish canon under the sponsorship of Naxos. That symphonic repertoire received a vital boost in the arm in 1901 with the establishment of the Warsaw Philharmonic Hall. Poland finally had its own national hall and resident orchestra, and set about embracing the modern European idiom while also paying homage to its own conservative past. It also put Warsaw on the international map for visiting conductors. Karłowicz was in the thick of the inevitable cultural polemics over the 'national' versus the 'cosmopolitan', so much so that he eventually left Warsaw for the sublime solitude of the Tatra mountains where he found peace enough to compose and climb. Notwithstanding his tense relationship with the Warsaw musical elite, he and his music were central to the early history of the Warsaw Philharmonic, and his stature has remained undiminished despite his small output and the fact that he has been overshadowed by Szymanowski.

[1] *Mieczysław Karłowicz: Violin Concerto, Symphonic Poems (Eternal Songs Op. 10, Stanisław i Anna Oświecimowie Op. 12)*. Konstanty Andrzej Kulka *vn*, Kazimierz Kord *cond*, Warsaw Philharmonic, CD Accord, ACD 071-2.

[2] *Bianca da Molena, Serenade for String Orchestra, Op. 2, 'Rebirth' Symphony, Op. 7*. BBC Philharmonic, Gianandrea Noseda *cond*, CHAN 10171. *Eternal Songs, Op. 10, Stanislaw and Anna Oswiecim, Op. 12, Lithuanian Rhapsody, Op. 11*. BBC Philharmonic, Yan Pascal Tortelier *cond*, CHAN 9986. *Returning Waves, Op. 9, A Sorrowful Tale, Op. 13, Episode at a Masquerade, Op. 14*. BBC Philharmonic, Gianandrea Noseda *cond*, CHAN 10298.

[3] *Karłowicz: Intégrale des poèmes symphoniques*. Silesian Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, Jerzy Salwarowski *cond*, Le Chant du Monde LDC278966/7.

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Each of the three works on this CD received its first performance in the Warsaw Philharmonic Hall prior to the First World War. Sadly, however, Karłowicz never heard two of those performances. While he conducted *Stanisław i Anna Oświecimowie* (Stanisław and Anna Oświecimowie) to much critical acclaim he curiously forbade any performance of its predecessor, the *Rapsodia litewska* (Lithuanian Rhapsody), claiming that it was too difficult for any orchestra to perform. This was, in all likelihood, an attempt to prevent the conservative nationalist critics from claiming it and him as one of their own. As it happened, when it was performed just weeks after his death, the *Rapsodia* was acclaimed in overtly nationalist rhetoric, a nightmare come true for him. The conductor on that occasion was Grzegorz Fitelberg, a champion of the Young Poland group and a close colleague of Karłowicz. The *Epizod na maskaradzie* (Episode at a Masquerade), which remained as a sketch at the time of the composer's death, was completed by Fitelberg who also conducted its premiere in 1914. For those interested in hearing an 'authentic' performance of that work, Polish Radio (2003) released a recording of Fitelberg conducting it in 1951.[4]

While each of Karłowicz's symphonic poems contains dramatic interest and much beauty, perhaps his greatest contribution to the genre is *Stanisław*. One never feels that something happens too soon or too late, and even when he does indulge in long love scenes the orchestration is rich and full of interest. Wit's interpretation is expressive, dramatic and nuanced. While it surpasses any of the previous interpretations by Polish orchestras that I have heard, there are moments where greater tone control in the upper register of the clarinet would be welcome. Though it is gratifying to hear such details as the low wind notes at the very opening of the funeral march (the coda), overall it does not have the sonic presence of the Chandos recording wherein everything sounds so immediate and alive.

If *Stanisław* shows us Karłowicz's indebtedness to Wagner and Strauss, his *Rapsodia litewska* is of a decidedly Russian hue. For one thing, it was the only work that included folksongs. While these tunes, which he collected during holidays in his childhood estate in Lithuania, retain their clear outlines throughout the work, the accompaniment is always in flux, thus revealing his virtuosity in orchestral colour. The *Rapsodia litewska*, in four distinct sections, opens with a beautiful example of nineteenth-century landscape painting, replete with the techniques that depict the expansive plains of central and eastern Europe; the type of gestures that typify Borodin's *In Central Asia* and Webern's *Im Sommerwind*. It is very important, therefore, to create a sense of space and depth in the orchestral texture. While this performance is thoroughly enjoyable, there are too many accents in the lower strings in the opening section: rather than shimmering like leaves in the distance they tend to draw attention to themselves and thereby distort the distinction between foreground and background. This is only a minor complaint, however, and I welcome the adherence to the tempo markings.

The *Epizod na maskaradzie* is a curious work. It has some very moving and hypnotic music, but it also contains many threadbare clichés and banal sequences. For those wishing to follow a narrative or enjoy a series of colourful tableaux, as with the other two works on the CD, this work is confounding and, at times, very disappointing. Given that it was finished by another hand, it works best if

[4] *Polish Conductors: Grzegorz Fitelberg*, Grzegorz Fitelberg *cond*, Polskie Radio, PRCD 184-5.

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one approaches it as an orchestral étude rather than a symphonic poem. Wit's performance is quite long at just over 28 minutes (a good 8 minutes longer than Fitelberg's recording) as he takes his time over the long slow central episode. Indeed it is hard not to blame him for lingering so beautifully on its eroticism, as it contains the best music of the whole piece. Would that Fitelberg had ended it there! The literal repetition of the opening is an unwelcome intrusion and demonstrates that Fitelberg's completion of the sketch was workmanlike rather than inspired. You will be forgiven for thinking that your CD has skipped, such are the jolts and jumps from one rendition of the opening theme to another. While the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra under Wit is at its best, we miss a sense of panache and easy virtuosity. It is high time to start showing off.

Michael Murphy
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Martucci

Complete Orchestral Music – 1
Symphony No. 1 in D minor Op. 75
Notturno Op. 70 No. 1
Andante Op. 69 No. 2
Canzonetta Op. 65 No. 2
Giga Op. 61 No. 3

Andrea Noferini *vc*
Orchestra Sinfonica di Roma
Francesco la Vecchia *cond*

Naxos 8.570929 (69:38 minutes: DDD)
Notes in English and Italian

Complete Orchestral Music – 2
Symphony No. 2 in F major Op. 81
Theme and Variations Op. 58
Tarantella Op. 44 No. 6
Gavotta Op. 55 No. 2

Lya De Barberlis *pf*
Orchestra Sinfonica di Roma
Francesco la Vecchia *cond*

Naxos 8.570930 (69:44 minutes: DDD)
Notes in English and Italian

Complete Orchestral Music – 3
Piano Concerto No.1 in D minor Op. 40
La Canzone dei Ricordi

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