Romantic Violin Concerto – Vol. 4

Moszkowski

Violin Concerto in C op. 30
Ballade in G minor op. 16 no. 1

Karłowicz

Violin Concerto in A op. 8

Tasmin Little *vn*
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra
Martyn Brabbins *cond*
Hyperion CDA67389 (73 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

The independent British label Hyperion Records released the fourth in its series of Romantic Violin Concertos in 2004. It features the Violin Concerto in A major op. 8 by the little-known Polish composer (and geographer) Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876–1909), and by the German (though of Polish descent) pianist and composer Moritz Moszkowski (1854–1925), the Ballade in G minor op. 16 no.1 and the Violin Concerto in C major op. 30. While Moszkowski's piano music has featured on three previous Hyperion releases, this is Karłowicz's first appearance, although his other orchestral works have enjoyed a recent revival on Chandos Records. The Moszkowski violin concerto has already received some public attention, having been previously recorded by Thomas Christian (violin) with Christian Simonis conducting the Bamberger Symphoniker on Koch Schwann (2000); the Karłowicz concerto was released in 2001 on the Polish label CD Accord, where the soloist was Konstanty Kulka with the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra in a performance that differs little from his previous recording of 1979 on Olympia. Another recording of the Karłowicz was made by Edward Zienkowsi (violin) with Takao Ukigaya conducting the Pomorska Philharmonia on the Thorofon label (1993). The opportunity, therefore, to hear a more recent and expert interpretation of these obscure Romantic works is to be welcomed.

Having these two concertos on the same disc invites obvious and useful comparisons. While both concertos are in the Mendelssohnian tradition, a tradition that promotes a balance between solo virtuosity and orchestral interest, they exhibit the late nineteenth-century preoccupation with instrumental skill employed for expressive rather than demonstrative purposes. And, while both composers can be regarded as culturally Polish – Karłowicz was born in Lithuania then under Russian rule, and Moszkowski in Wrocław (known at that time by its Prussian name, Breslau) then in Prussian Silesia – both concertos are in a cosmopolitan tradition similar to the Tchaikovsky and Bruch concertos. Indeed, both composers came from wealthy families and travelled widely during their youth receiving musical education in various musical centres, most notably in Berlin. Regrettably, neither made much of a contribution to music in the

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twentieth century as Karłowicz was killed in 1909 and Moszkowski suffered various crises from 1910 onwards (which included the death of his wife and daughter) that precipitated a drastic decline in his fortunes, not least after his investments in Russian and German securities plummeted after the outbreak of war in 1914, which led to his last years being spent in poverty. He died in Paris on 4 March 1925 in almost complete obscurity.

Moszkowski was a renowned piano virtuoso, a capable violinist and conductor, and a much sought-after teacher (he was the teacher of Josef Hofmann and Wanda Landowska; Beecham also went to him for lessons in orchestration in 1904). Best known for his *Spanische Tänze* for piano duet (a work to be found in every amateur pianist's library and still a best-seller for its publisher), Moszkowski's reputation as a salon composer of lighter, uncomplicated melodious works has endured, but this appraisal should rightly be revised in light of the works on this CD. In the 1880s he turned his attention increasingly to composition subsequent to a nervous disorder that necessitated his retirement from the concert stage, and by the mid-1880s he began to gain recognition as a conductor and composer, not least with his symphonic poem *Jeanne d'Arc* at the Philharmonic Society in London. Moszkowski wrote a number of works for violin with piano or orchestral accompaniment. The Ballade (dating from the early 1870s) is an adaptation of one of the two *Concertstücke* for violin and piano (the other being a Bolero) and is a substantial work at over eleven minutes. Typical of its narrative genre, it is episodic in form and alternates long melodic passages with contrasting dramatic material. While the violin dominates this work it is devoted to melody and decorative elaboration rather than extrovert display. The opening and closing sections contain the best music while much of the other material is perfunctory.

Moszkowski's Violin Concerto (1883) was dedicated to Emile Sauret, who gave it its premiere in Berlin. The 'Allegro comodo', although in a sonata form with two contrasting themes, has no pretensions to symphonic seriousness, but is in a rhapsodic vein similar to the Ballade from which it takes its introductory material. The work is dominated by the solo violin and has a number of short cadenzas dispersed throughout. The work is charming and demonstrates a seemingly inexhaustible melodic invention. If there is any criticism of this movement it is that it relies too much on exact and sequential repetition with a tendency to orientate phrases towards an imperfect cadence. The 'Andante' is testimony to his considerable lyrical talents and is clearly the finest movement on this disc. Its romantic nature is due not only to its expressive melody but also to the orchestral writing, which is often playful, operatic and, at times, intertextual. It is in such moments that Moszkowski demonstrates his potential for dramatic portrayal. The finale (marked 'Vivace') is a rondo that alternates the initial *perpetuum mobile* with more narrative gestures, for example where the soloist takes up a gypsy-like theme. It is regrettable that the material of the orchestral introduction, which is so rhythmic and attractive, is not used again.

Karłowicz's hope of becoming a concert violinist was dashed in 1895 when Joachim refused to take him on as student. The composer himself admitted that he did not have the personality for solo performance, although he did conduct his own works in Berlin, Vienna and Warsaw. Aside from a few student works for violin and piano this is Karłowicz's only major contribution to the violin repertoire. It was his first mature work subsequent to his musical studies in Berlin, where he conducted it in 1903 with his former violin teacher, Stanisław Barcewicz, as soloist.

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The Violin Concerto (1902) is classical in its formal outlines. The *Allegro moderato* is cast in a clear sonata form with a brief cadenza appearing before the recapitulation. After the striking orchestral introduction, which invokes the famous opening of the Tchaikovsky B♭ minor Piano Concerto, the violin states the majestic first theme that contrasts well with the ensuing subdued orchestral material. Indeed, there is drama throughout this first movement that never loses momentum, interest or impact. The lyrical Romanza ('Andante'), which emerges seamlessly from the 'Allegro', is in ternary form. It is concerned primarily with melodic statement but in a more clear-cut manner than the Moszkowski. Indeed, it resembles the Moszkowski on more than one occasion especially in the return of the first section where the violin engages in decorative counterpoint to the orchestra. Ironically, it is moments such as these that give Karłowicz a more nineteenth-century gloss. The finale ('Vivace assai') is a rondo, and contains two obvious cyclic references to the Allegro. It too resembles the narrative style of the Moszkowski in the manner in which the violin is presented as a protagonist encountering different situations as if on a journey.

Tasmin Little's performance of the many technical difficulties is exemplary, especially in the finale of the Moszkowski. Her attention to beauty of tone is evident throughout, and nowhere is she more focused than in the slow movement of the Moszkowski concerto. Perhaps she is too careful in the cadenza of the Karłowicz, where she projects a consistent and full tone in the double-stopping rather than offering a flashy display at breakneck tempo. In each work she is sensitively accompanied by Brabbins, who not only offers very flexible tempi but is ready to seek out the dramatic potential and subtle orchestral colours in the orchestral writing that others might ignore. The balance between the orchestra and solo violin is impeccable and one hears details in the score that were not audible in previous recordings.

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