Chopin

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor op. 11
Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor op. 21

Nikolai Demidenko
The Philharmonia
Heinrich Schiff *cond*

Hyperion (Helios) CDH55180 (73 minutes: DDD), £6.99
Notes and translations included.

The Chopin piano concertos belong to that sector of the repertoire that pianists, musicologists and critics all consider to be rather well understood (just ask us). These pieces are audience favourites because of the beautiful pianistic writing, pianists' favourites because they place the spotlight squarely on the soloist virtually throughout, and even conductors grudgingly appreciate them because of the relatively simple orchestral parts – a Chopin concerto on the programme means that the conductor can devote more valuable rehearsal time to the Strauss or Prokofiev work in the second half. Critics tend to be a tad condescending to these concertos; no new light shines upon the soloist–orchestra collaboration (or dialectic), but the pieces are too popular to be dismissed out of hand. Scholars tend to be measured in both their admiration and their critique. Here is the magisterial Tovey:

> The first movement of the E minor is built on a suicidal plan which Chopin's adored master, Elsner, must have at least approved if not actually taught, since it is to be found in two earlier works and can hardly be conceived to have resulted from natural instinct. The F minor Concerto, though not a powerfully organized work, has no fatal flaw; and its style is the perfection of ornament. … We may frankly concede that Chopin knew nothing at all about the orchestra…'[1]

More recent scholarship highlights the link between these pieces to the post-classical 'brilliant style' tradition; they are part of a larger family of soloistic vehicles intended for personal use by composer–pianists, which would also include works by (among others) Weber, Moscheles and Mendelssohn. Structural and orchestrational issues are now regarded more leniently, particularly considering the practical limitations (orchestral rehearsal time and skill, for example) facing young virtuosi of the 1820s and 1830s seeking to make their way. So Chopin has left us these post-classical brilliant concertos – popular, attractive to pianists and audiences alike, and a sure-fire programming choice. In a word: warhorses.

My reaction to the recording under consideration was a surprise even to me, and is coupled with some embarrassment that I had not been aware of it when it first came out in 1993. Baldly put, this is some of the best playing I can recall hearing in years. It is playing of the greatest subtlety, but without the self-

[1] Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis, III: Concertos* (London, 1936), 103.

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aggrandizing athleticism and machine-gun delivery that characterizes so many readings of these pieces. From the piano entrance of the first movement of the F minor concerto (composed first, and placed first on this recording) forward, the complete rhythmic command and independence of lines is astonishing, reflecting the awareness of Chopin's celebrated tempo rubato. Tempos are flexible throughout both concertos, in order to profile a theme or passage of contrasting character, an ornament, a dance rhythm, an entrance, or a phrase elision. Conductor and pianist both accommodate the inflections of the main theme and the decorative writing ('the perfection of ornament'). More brilliant passages move forward with appropriate good humour and abandon. The balances and delineation of multiple lines are achieved with a kind of time-suspending limpidity, and – I'm fully aware that I'm raving here – the elegance, insouciance and finish of Demidenko's passage work sometimes takes the breath away. The sound of the piano is never ugly or even percussive; it sings and dances within a prevailingly soft dynamic range, much celebrated in Chopin's salon performances but more problematic in a concerted work. Here, there is seemingly no contradiction.

The orchestral support provided by Heinrich Schiff and the Philharmonia is almost as astonishing as Demidenko's playing. Since no one seems to have informed Maestro Schiff and the orchestra of the conventional view that these were incompetent, throwaway parts, they play as if the repertoire could hold no greater wonders for them. So the smallest local accommodations of the soloist's rhythmic freedom sound thoroughly rehearsed and completely organic, and the sense of dialogue – yes, in Chopin concerti – is inescapable. In these pieces, after all, the piano's versions of the themes are quite properly translations for piano, capricious and decorated, which means that they can easily be mistaken for (and played like) mere display, hundreds of pearly notes issuing from the instrument. Not so here; the orchestra and piano offer idiomatic commentary on each other's ideas, accompanying each other, collaborating in an almost Mozartean way never expected with 'brilliant' concertos. Alternatively, in, for example, the *Larghetto* of the F minor concerto, the passagework becomes the pianist's ruminative response on what came before in the orchestra. When, in the return of this movement, a splendidly played bassoon obbligato entwines the piano's melody – it is hard not to think of the adolescent Chopin entering his own portrait of the young Konstancia Gladkowska, a singer and friend from music school who is the subject of this movement – it is as if we had never heard the piece before.

Demidenko's consummate pianism is paired, in this recording, with an orchestra that is likely far better than any that accompanied Chopin himself and a conductor for whom 'accompaniment' means the highest level of collaboration imaginable. For this reason these pieces become something much better than what they have usually been considered to be. This leaves us with the unanswerable question of whether the combined artistry of Demidenko, Schiff and the Philharmonia players only temporarily persuades us that mere virtuoso vehicles are better than they actually are, or, rather, if they are underrated masterpieces of the concerto genre, and if a century and a half of more or less predictable interpretations have simply dulled listeners' senses to the point where our evaluation of the pieces themselves is a casualty of lowered expectations. So, then, are the Mendelssohn concertos better than they have hitherto seemed, or are those by Weber? The question clearly has to be reopened. For now this recording of the Chopin concertos has my full recommendation, and, in fact, my awe.

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As a postscript, I note that Demidenko's recording of the four Chopin Ballades and the B Minor Sonata, made just three and a half months earlier with the same producer and recording engineer, is entirely different. It is thunderous, relentlessly athletic, and (to me, at least) infinitely less interesting – in fact, even occasionally unpleasant. To me, the two recordings sound as if the pianist had entirely rethought his approach to the piano (or perhaps his steroid intake) between them, and the difference in approach between the two recordings is utterly inexplicable.

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Delius

Marche Caprice
Summer Evening; Winter Night (Sleigh Ride); Spring Morning
American Rhapsody
The Walk to the Paradise Garden
Two Pieces for Orchestra: On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring; Summer Night on the River
A Song before Sunrise
Fantastic Dance

Royal Scottish National Orchestra
David Lloyd-Jones *cond*
Naxos 8.557143 (64 minutes: DDD), £4.99
Notes in English and German.

Through their picturesqueness, variety and general popularity, the miniature orchestral works of Delius have been a favourite 'theme' for many recording companies over many decades. The interpretations of Beecham, fascinating not only for their energy and insight but also for their direct connection with the composer, are available on digitally remastered CDs from SOMM; a 'must' for any Delius acolyte. But there have been numerous others, from Anthony Collins (Decca), Vernon Handley (Classics for Pleasure), Charles Mackerras (Argo), William Boughton (Nimbus), Richard Hickox (on both EMI and Chandos) and John Hopkins (Records International). This latest recording from Naxos with David Lloyd-Jones and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra is yet one further contribution to this catalogue, though it does also provide a useful contextual foil to an earlier recording on Naxos (8.553535) by the same conductor with the English Northern Philharmonia that featured larger works such as the *Florida Suite*, *Over the Hills and Far Away* and the final scene from *Koanga*. A distinctive element of this CD is, however, its chronological 'commentary' of Delius's development as a composer, covering a period from 1887 when Delius was a student at Leipzig until a year before his death in 1933 when receiving physical help from Eric Fenby at Grez-sur-Loing.

The earliest period of Delius's output is here represented by *Marche Caprice* and the *Three Small Tone Poems*, heard here as a group for the first time. The

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