Paderewski - Piano Concerto Polish Fantasy Overture (1999)

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op.17 33:44 *1. I. Allegro 16:10 2. II. Romanza: Andante 9:16 3. III. Allegro molto vivace 8:14 4. Fantaisie polonaise sur des themes originaux, Op.19 21:02 5. Overture 9:45* Janina Fialkowska - piano
National Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra Antoni Wit - conductor

Ignacy Paderewski's Piano Concerto belongs with the finest works of Romantic nationalism, right up there with the similar works of Grieg, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninov. The reasons for its comparative neglect are simply unfathomable: it has great tunes, is very well orchestrated, and sounds like a blast to play. The Polish Fantasy is equally attractive, and would make a very welcome change of pace in concert from the endless parade of Paganini Rhapsodies and other such warhorses. The principal competition for this new release comes from Koch, where Eva Kupiec and conductor Hugh Wolff turn in lyrical, affecting performances of both works (there's also a Hyperion disc that I find comparatively uninteresting). Janina Fialkowska has more steel in her tone, and plays both works with less "Chopin" and more "Prokofiev" than her compatriot, and this suits the music, which is vintage turn-of-the-century stuff, very well. I find her approach particularly compelling in the finale of the concerto where her firm articulation and slightly more relaxed tempo gives the music more strength of purpose and direction than does Kupiec. Naxos also includes a bonus in the form of the rarely heard Overture, and Antoni Wit's conducting is easily as fine as Wolff's. My one reservation concerns the recording: the tone of piano becomes somewhat clattery in the keyboard's upper octaves, and this is particularly noticeable in the final measures of the concerto's outer movements, where Paderewski really piles on the treble. It's a small drawback in what is otherwise a highly recommendable enterprise. ---David Hurwitz, classicstoday.com

It seems only a short while since I reviewed another recording of Paderewski Piano Concerto and Polish Fantasy, sufficiently endearing and popular show pieces to justify David Doughty's claim, in his excellent notes, that 'they still hold a place on the edge of the pianist's repertory today. 'Lovers of the Grieg and, at a lower level of inspiration, the Anton Rubinstein piano concertos, need look no further for easily digested passions and confidences and, in the Polish Fantasy, for flamboyant, ethnic, Lisztian colouring.

Since her early fraught career as a protegee of Artur Rubinstein, the Polish-Canadian pianist Janina Fialkowska has broadened her style, and her performances of both works are as affectionate as they are masterly. Here the considerable qualities that marked her first Chopin and Liszt RCA discs are extended into an altogether more dazzling relish and brio, even a touch of dare-devilry. She plays the Piano Concerto's second subject with a special sense of its intimacy and spins off Paderewski's icing-sugar figuration with an open-hearted delight in its sparkle and charm. The cadenza in particular is unfurled with great brilliance and the sort of improvisatory flair that in the past sometimes eluded her, and the final sprints of both works are given with a genuine rush of adrenalin.

Such enthusiasm is infectious, and Fialkowska is excellently partnered by her orchestra and conductor. So although I would never want to be without Earl Wild's coruscating Elan recording of the Piano Concerto, Fialkowska's quality, shining through Naxos's unrealistically close sound, is sufficiently ebullient and individual to sweep aside all possible accusations of dilute romanticism.' ---Bryce Morrison, gramophone.co.uk

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