

SCHARWENKA: *Piano Concertos 2 + 3*

Seta Tanyel, Hanover Radio Philharmonic/
Tadeusz Strugala Collins 1485 (Allegro) 79 min

"Energy, harmonic interest, strong rhythm, many beautiful melodies, and much Polish national character"—all this and much more is to be found in the music of Franz Xaver Scharwenka, writes HV Hamilton in the pages of *Grove's*. Donald Manikl in his review of Seta Tanyel's earlier disc of Scharwenka's First Concerto (July/Aug 1992) reminds us that this sort of effusive, heart-on-sleeve keyboard writing is "an exhilarating celebration of what the piano can really sound like when a skilled virtuoso-composer produces a brilliant vehicle aimed at nothing more (or less) than the pure enjoyment of soloist and audience." Why then is his music played so seldom in concert these days? The one piece you may still encounter on recital programs is the *Polish Dance*, a

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product of his 19th year and (as it turns out) one of many he was to write in his lifetime; yet this one piece came to be at once Scharwenka's "calling card" and his curse, much like the C-sharp minor Prelude of Rachmaninoff or Paderewski's Minuet in G. (Scharwenka had more practical reasons to regret writing the piece. After he sold it outright to Breitkopf and Härtel for the princely sum of five dollars, they turned around and issued the piece in every conceivable arrangement, netting nearly a million dollars in the process!) While Scharwenka was proud of his Polish heritage—and in a sense anticipated it, as the small town near Posen (or Poznan) where he was born in 1850 was at that time part of East Prussia—he spent most of his life in Berlin, where he formed his own music conservatory in 1881. It would not be amiss to find Polish dance rhythms in the final movements of both of these concertos, even though each bears only the rather non-committal designation *Allegro non troppo*.

The Second Piano Concerto, completed in 1880, was an immediate success both in Berlin and London, where he was greeted warmly by sell-out audiences before his recital career was cut short by the German war effort. The bustling introduction sets the stage in grand fashion; yet there is also a wealth of melodic richness, and one is not surprised to hear echoes of Chopin's First Concerto before the opening *tutti* subsides to make way for the assertive entry of the soloist. Chopin again comes to mind in the lyrical second subject, and we are reminded that Scharwenka was greatly admired for his performances of Chopin. Time seems to stand still in II, a lyrical outpouring of song that soothes the ear but in no way prepares the listener for what is to come: a sly, insouciant rondo that at first sounds like something from *Fiddler on the Roof* until the little curlicues give the game away; for peeking out from underneath the infectious, almost Yiddish-sounding tune—a close cousin to one used by Prokofiev in his *Overture on Hebrew Themes*—is the final movement of Chopin's Second Piano Concerto. The eminent romantic specialist Raymond Lewenthal enjoyed this last movement so much that he recorded it separately (but he could find nothing good to say about the rest of the concerto).

Seta Tanyel's splendid performance is the very epitome of the romantic soul. Hamilton in *Grove's* reminds us that Scharwenka was renowned for his beautiful tone; surely Ms Tanyel may be put in that company as well. By contrast Michael Ponti on Vox seems unduly clangorous, his air brusque and quite devoid of nuance, that delightful "Yiddish" rondo earnest but humorless.

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from its predecessor, years that saw a shift in emphasis from the soloist (as in the Third Concerto) to a work where piano and orchestra are much more integrated and also cyclical in form in the manner of Liszt. The stentorian horn call that opens the concerto may be heard in more subdued fashion near the end of the Adagio and is also miraculously transformed into a blithely effervescent rondo in the final movement. The horns are answered in assertive fashion by the soloist, and the similarity to the B-flat minor Concerto of Tchaikovsky is striking and causes one to wonder once again why this splendid score is not better known. Here I know of no recorded competition.

While the Hanover recording locale is not all that unflattering to the orchestra, the low end of the piano seems damped somewhat in 2, at times creating a bit of a scrim effect; 3 sounds better. The ensemble under Tadeusz Strugala offers warm and sympathetic support, though separation seems stronger side-to-side than front-to-back. Fortunately the ear soon adjusts. I have a feeling that Stephen Hough on Hyperion may need to look to his laurels when Ms Tanyel gets around to Scharwenka's Fourth Concerto.

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