



Site review by Polly Nomial October 26, 2010

Performance: Sonics (MC):

The first recordings on SACD for Polonia, the Interlude from "The Crown of India" and the alternative cadenza from the Violin Concerto complement a stunning début on the medium by Tasmin Little in arguably the greatest British violin concerto ever written.

On SACD, there is only one other version of the violin concerto to have been issued (Elgar: Violin Concerto etc. - Hilary Hahn - now deleted) but this would in any case sweep the board even if all, including the recent Ehnes, the currently available RBCD versions were to be reissued on SACD! Although it is far from a "straight" reading, Little's has the great advantage of not wearing her heart on her sleeve - this is heartfelt but not exhibitionist playing and Elgar's music benefits greatly as a result. Nor does Sir Andrew Davis allow the orchestra to emote too much whilst retaining a wonderful sense of nostalgia - his accompaniment feels as though it was for all times. Where many allow their sense of rhapsody to break this concerto into bleeding chunks of great beauty, Davis and Little combine to bring a sense of unity rarely found in this work.

In particular, the central slow movement is played so touchingly that time seems to stand still and the rapt hush at the close is extremely poignant indeed. There also deft, quasi comic, touches where Little's violin appears to laugh in delight at the writing that Elgar has gifted us. A positive gain is also the more disciplined than usual approach to an Elgarian sound from Sir Andrew Davis, allowing the Royal Scottish National Orchestra to play out more than is usual whilst still letting the solo line shine over winningly. The intonation from all parties at times makes other partnerships sound amateurish, especially at times of great technical difficulty; a slight complaint might be that it all sounds a little too easy! But that would be unfair for there is little, if anything to cavil at.

As a couple encores, Little presents an "Alternative Cadenza" for the violin concerto - with a harp part reconstructed from the original 1916 recording - and the Interlude from "The Crown of India" Op. 66. The cadenza was re-written for the debut recording as Elgar (probably correctly) felt that the technology of the day would have not conveyed the subtleties of the cadenza accompaniment adequately so he bolstered them with a harp; it is this that Gwawr Owen (harpist) has transcribed from the recording, so that we can now properly hear the effect that Elgar heard nearly 100 years ago. Naturally, the "Alternative Cadenza" is played with as much authority as the conventional version and both renditions make time stand still in these hands; the one shame is that we can't programme our players to suit our fancy. The Interlude is beautiful as a composition and is played with touching simplicity by all concerned.

Polonia only has one other account on SACD at present, transcribed for organ, so this version has no real competition to date. Sir Andrew Davis and the RSNO relish their time in the spotlight and helpfully the wonderful notes identify with timings the various sections that Elgar borrowed and those that he gave fresh. This is of altogether a more extrovert type of music and this is reflected in the approach from the performers; brilliant biting brass add their weight to the organ that underpins the cushion of string sound. Written in tribute to the oppression Poland suffered at the beginning of C20, it makes one wonder how Elgar would have reacted had he lived to see how the western Allies left Poland to its horrible fate as part of the Eastern Bloc.

The sound is the characteristically rich Chandos patina but with added clarity afforded by sumptuous and flattering MCH balances. At once the sound is clear, bright and deep with a wide sound-stage that places everyone solidly in front of the listener. Fortunately, for all the very quiet moments, this was recorded in studio conditions, so there are no audience participation issues to consider. The one technical quibble I have is that with playing that so utterly floors the listener, bigger gaps should have been considered (not that they are too short but sometimes the spell just wants to linger).

It is wonderful to have followed Little's career from playing the Korngold concerto with my county youth orchestra back in the early-1990's to watching her Prom's appearance with the Ligeti concerto (BPO/Rattle) and now this - recommended wholeheartedly.

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