

Elgar Violin Concerto – Tasmin Little & Andrew Davis [Chandos]

Reviewed by: Peter Joelson

Elgar: Violin Concerto in B minor, Op.61

Alternative Cadenza for the Violin Concerto [for Marie Hall's 1916 recording]

The Crown of India, Op.66 – Interlude

Polonia, Op.76 Tasmin Little (violin)

Royal Scottish National Orchestra

Sir Andrew Davis

Recorded 24-26 May in Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow

CD Number

CHANDOS CHSA 5083

Duration

75 minutes

In 2010 it is a hundred years since Elgar's Violin Concerto had its première performance in the Queen's Hall, London on 10 November, with dedicatee Fritz Kreisler playing the solo part on his Guarneri del Gesù violin of 1741 with the composer on the podium conducting the Philharmonic Society's orchestra. The booklet accompanying this release from

Chandos includes a photograph taken of the composer during the rehearsals, and the excellent essay by Andrew Neill quotes Kreisler's telling comment to the composer: "You have written an immortal work". And so it has turned out. Elgar's Violin Concerto has never been more popular, and in this centenary year has had many performances, most notably, perhaps, by Nikolaj Znaider during his world tour playing Kreisler's instrument. Tasmin Little has had the concerto in her repertoire for some years – I remember an interview on BBC Radio 3 during which she told of her consulting the manuscript and discovering differences in details in the writing from the published version – and this fine new recording joins a number of excellent releases with considerable honour.

The long orchestral opening with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Sir Andrew Davis gives more than a hint of what is to come. Davis understands fully the importance of the organic ebb and flow so intrinsic a part of Elgar's writing, and the RSNO responds perfectly, the brass especially notable with honeyed tones. Tasmin Little's first entry, a magical piece of writing, is a moving moment. She is set rather further back and more naturally than Znaider in his otherwise superb recording, and her slightly smaller tone is more at one, I think, with the essence of the work. The 'Windflower' theme, named after Elgar's close friend Alice Stuart Wortley, has that more feminine touch to it. Little, like Znaider and Kennedy, takes a long view of the work, taking time for the themes to germinate and blossom.

However, the second movement is not too slow, where the writing can cloy in less sensitive hands, and the nobilmente section is exquisitely done. The extensive last movement in several sections has a substantial cadenza as its focus, accompanied by the thrumming of the string section, music almost painful in its beauty, and Little's playing brings out this loveliness magnificently. The triumphant and confident ending is also superbly done, soloist, conductor and orchestra as one. The RSNO is on top form throughout, and if it yields to Staatskapelle Dresden under Sir Colin Davis in Znaider's recording, sounding bronzed, burnished and ripe, it is not by too much. Tasmin Little's is as satisfying a performance as one could hope for.

The concerto's discography has many very fine recordings. Albert Sammons recorded in 1929 gives a swift performance, beautifully played but rather bluffly accompanied by Sir Henry Wood. Yehudi Menuhin can be heard on several recordings, the most famous and valuable being under the composer, recorded in 1932. Two other 'historical' recordings deserve serious consideration, ones I cannot do without, Heifetz with Sargent, sounding well in Mark Obert-Thorn's transfer on Naxos, and Alfredo Campoli's lovely performance with Sir Adrian Boult recorded for Decca in 1954. Of the more-modern recordings, Nigel Kennedy's with Vernon Handley, an expansive reading with Kennedy balanced fairly well back, has much to say. Znaider's is a superb account, the soloist too spot-lit though. Gil Shaham's is a fine account recorded in Chicago under David Zinman, and James Ehnes, also with Sir Andrew Davis, is thoroughly engrossing.

Tasmin Little's recording has the bonus of the reconstruction of the cadenza made for the first if abridged recording of the concerto set-down by Marie Hall in 1916, for which Elgar added a harp as the recording methods did not reproduce the strings' thrumming effectively. The parts were reconstructed by Gwawr Owen through listening to that early recording, and is here an appendix and not for programming into to the concerto itself.

Also included on this Chandos release are the delightful Interlude from The Crown of India, a delectable miniature, and the rarely included Polonia, written for the Polish Relief Fund and dedicated to Paderewski, musician and political leader, and first heard in 1915. With its quotations of Polish composers' works and Polish folk-tunes, and including an organ, it makes quite an impression especially with Davis and the RSNO producing a big, full-fat sound for the epic conclusion.

Chandos has produced an extremely fine-sounding result which I was able to audition through both the high resolution stereo and multichannel programmes of this hybrid SACD release. Ambient sound is just about at the right level, the rear channels of the multichannel mix containing just atmosphere and adding to the three-dimensional quality of this fine recording. More importantly, Tasmin Little is excellently balanced. This release has given enormous pleasure, a highlight of 2010.