

Elgar's CROWNING GLORY

The Violin Concerto comes home for a centenary celebration

Elgar

Violin Concerto, Op 61^a. Cadenza
accompagnata^a. Crown of India – Interlude^a.

Polonia, Op 76

*Tasmin Little *vm*

Royal Scottish National Orchestra /

Sir Andrew Davis

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Selected comparions:

Ehnes, Pbilh Orch, A Davis (1/08) (ONYX) ONYX4025

Shaham, Chicago SO, Zinnman (12/08) (CANA) CC06



A sequence of distinguished non-British violinists have recently offered new versions of Elgar's Violin Concerto – Zehetmair (Hallé,

8/10), Shaham, Ehnes, all of them deeply understanding – but it is refreshing to have another version, marking the work's centenary, from a favourite British player. The contrasts are illuminating, not least with Ehnes, who like Little has Andrew Davis as his conductor.

The most striking difference comes in the finale, where Ehnes, like Shaham, treats the rapid figurations fiercely. Little, on

the other hand, finds an element of wit in the fast-moving figuration, leading to a more tender treatment of the lyrical contrasting sections. All three play with ample vibrato, and Little and Ehnes bring authentic *portamentos* to various phrases, though never excessively.

As to timing, Little and Ehnes are roughly similar in the first movement, with Shaham some 30 seconds quicker, all three allowing for warmly expressive phrasing. In the slow movement the timings of all three are similar again but Shaham in his live broadcast performance is dangerously pauseful in the second subject (at 2'16"). Yet Little stands out in playing a degree more delicately, though there is a case for the slightly more robust approach of both Ehnes and Shaham.

The nub of any performance lies in the long accompanied cadenza in the finale, where depth of meditation is an essential. There all three of these artists play with a free expressiveness which never reflects the technical problems but suggests improvisation. Overall in the finale Shaham is markedly faster, with Ehnes a minute slower than Little, though all three sustain their speeds magically.

Between these versions a key comparison lies in the couplings. Shaham has none, while Ehnes has the Serenade for Strings. The new version scores palpably in the extra interest of the fill-ups, the first a version prepared by Elgar himself for the 1916 recording of the accompanied cadenza, greatly reduced in length and given a harp in addition to the group of strings. Again Little's playing is masterly, as it is in the brief interlude that Elgar wrote for his masque at the time of the 1911 Durbar in Delhi, *The Crown of India*.

Crowning the whole project is a stunning performance of Elgar's 1916 tribute to beleaguered Poland during the First World War. It consists of a sequence of Polish themes including a nocturne by Chopin, a Polish fantasy by Paderewski, dedicatee of the work, and the then Polish National Anthem. It may be a simple pot-pourri of melodies but Elgar plainly regarded it as a challenge to his supreme orchestral gifts. Andrew Davis brings out all the natural swagger in these patriotic themes and is helped not just by virtuoso playing by the RSNO but by recording that is outstandingly vivid even by Chandos's highest standards. **Edward Greenfield**