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Tasmin Little on working out for Karol Szymanowski

by [Clive Paget](#) on November 2, 2017 (1 days ago) filed under [Classical Music](#) | [Orchestral](#) | [Comment Now](#)

The British violinist talks about her new Szymanowski and Karłowicz album, Limelight's Recording of the Month.

You've recorded quite a bit of Szymanowski lately. What attracts you to his music?

There are many aspects to Szymanowski's writing that I find appealing. First of all, I love his evocative harmonies! They are rich and sensual for much of the time, but he also has the ability to weave a fine thread of melody that can be utterly haunting! I guess it's this juxtaposition that I find very exciting and which really draws me in.

Was he a taste you acquired recently, or have you been into his music for a long time?

I've loved his music since I was a young girl. I remember my father had found a broadcast of a lunchtime recital given by the violinist Dong Suk Kang and, at the end of the concert, he played the *Romance* and the *Notturmo e Tarantelle*. I was immediately hooked! I found the *Romance* immensely moving, the *Notturmo* smoky and atmospheric, and the *Tarantelle* about as wild as one can get! I was so smitten that my father immediately bought me the sheet music to both pieces. Of course, they were way beyond my capabilities at that point in time but, as soon as I was able to, I got straight to learning them!! It's a pity that the *Romance* is not more often played. It is monumentally difficult both for the violin and the piano, and for such a short piece, it packs a lot into its brief span of time. The piano writing is utterly overwhelming at times – in the best way possible, of course!!! I'm glad that the *Notturmo e Tarantelle* is now finding its place in the repertoire – not before time...

For listeners unfamiliar with his music, would you suggest Szymanowski shares characteristics with more mainstream composers, or is he a complete 'one off'?

People often liken his music to Debussy and also to Scriabin. I agree with this, as all three composers share a sense of impressionism, evocative harmonies as well as the ability to create powerful climaxes in their sound world. I do think that Szymanowski was also inspired by Franck, particularly in the violin and piano sonata where he also uses Franck's compositorial tool of motifs which are interlinked and which bind the work together as a whole. But obviously Szymanowski has enough of his individual voice not to be confused with any other composer.

Some listeners can find Szymanowski's music 'mystical', even elusive. Is that ever true with these two concertos?

I would say that is definitely true of the first violin concerto – there is far more elusive impressionism in this first concerto than there is in the second. The solo violin spends a lot of time floating up in the highest regions of the instrument in the first concerto and there is often a sense of other-worldliness and improvisation in a rather elusive way. At times it's almost as if the violin isn't propelling the musical line along in any way, but is gently musing around it.

There's quite a contrast between the First and Second Concerto. What do you imagine Szymanowski was trying to say that was different about each of them?

I don't feel that either concerto is in any way programmatic and both of them have their individual structure which is based around sections, rather than the traditional format of, say, Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. The main difference between the two works is the violin writing. As I mentioned earlier, the first concerto demands a great deal of fantasy and improvisation from the violinist and it is mostly (but not entirely) in the *Tutti* sections where the main thrust of the action takes place. The second violin concerto is entirely different and contains a great deal more dialogue with the orchestra. In addition, the violin line drives most of this concerto and the *Tuttis* are not as substantial in length as in the first concerto, although they are no less powerful. But the violin is the main narrator in the second concerto and the writing is a great deal more earthy and overtly rich – even rustic! I feel that there is more description of landscape in the second violin concerto, with its modal section and wild dance theme in the second half. Of course, the other aspect that is dramatically different between both pieces is the way that they end. The first concerto disappears in a puff of smoke, but the second ends in a crazy tidal wave of rapturous energy!

How different is his writing for the violin with orchestra compared to the chamber works you recorded last year?

The main difference in writing is the way he styles the violin and piano sonata, which is a very early work. The writing in this piece is almost Romantic/Brahms-like, so it's a far cry from where he ended up, both harmonically and also texturally. In fact, this is one piece which, if you heard blind, it might be hard to pin down who had written it. I really love the sonata, but you get the sense that this is a work written by a young man who is still finding his true voice. However, as soon as we get to the *Romance*, *Notturmo e Tarantelle*, we are on more familiar territory in terms of his compositional style. The piano writing is a great deal more orchestral and colourful in an impressionistic way. You really get the feeling he knows how he wishes to write for both instruments and it's totally confident, harmonically, melodically and technically.

And is he technically difficult?

Yes, most definitely!!!! It's physically challenging in every way – even to sustain the fine web of melody up in the stratosphere demands huge control. Then, of course, there is a great deal of energetic writing, so a workout in the gym is often called for...!

How did you come across the Karłowicz, and what made you pick it as the companion work to the two Szymanowski concertos?

I was introduced to the Karłowicz when I was invited to play it twice in Warsaw around 15 years ago. I began to learn the piece and wondered immediately why it was not more often performed. Sometimes, when a piece is neglected, you can see why when, say, you get to the last movement and the composer has clearly run out of ideas. But, with the Karłowicz, this is certainly not the case. Obviously, this is not a work of the same complexity as the Szymanowski concerti, in terms of the harmonic writing and even the structure of the concerto; but this is precisely why I believe it works, as I think it provides a beautiful foil for both of the other pieces. I enjoy the ease of being on more familiar territory in terms of a more traditional concerto style and it is simply glorious, romantic, virtuosic, fun music. When I first performed it in Warsaw, my dressing room in the hall overlooked the apartment block where Karłowicz had lived for a while in his all too brief life. I feel sad that his tragic untimely death meant that we have very little of his output to enjoy.

What next for you in the recording studio?

Piers Lane and I have recorded all three Brahms sonatas. Having played them together for many years it was a joy to put them on disc. Well, of course, it goes without saying that it's always a joy to put anything down on disc with Piers!

Tasmin Little's Szymanowski and Karłowicz album, out now on Chandos, is *Limelight's* Recording of the Month in November. Read our [review](#).