

**CHOPIN:** *Piano Concerto 2; Fantasy on Polish Themes;*

**LUTOSLAWSKI:** *Little Suite;*

**MONIUSZKO:** *Overture to The Raftsman* Martin Labazevitch, p;  
Beethoven Academy Orchestra/ Ewa Strusinska—Delos 3463—  
67 min

Beethoven Academy Orchestra draws its mostly young personnel from some of Europe's best music schools, so we can take as granted its technical excellence, if not its expressive power. Ms Strusinska takes no chances here, doesn't push her young virtuosos to any extremes, producing sober, streamlined accounts of everything.

Moniuszko's Weberian overture to his opera *The Raftsman*, after a tranquil pastoral introduction, bustles along winsome and efficient, uneventful, a model of the conductor's approach. Two-thirds in is a storm, played so politely it wouldn't frighten the most faint-hearted child. It's a pleasant piece and has more to offer than revealed here.

Pianist Labazevitch injects more fire into the two concerted works, rushing the tempos in some passagework to build excitement; orchestra and conductor gamely, calmly follow his lead. I'm still smitten by Emanuel Ax's 1997 recording of these works, played with ravishing delicacy on a restored 1851 Erard (N/D 1998), and I adore the more recent string quintet-accompanied Gianluca Luisi (S/O 2011), perhaps the richest and warmest piano I've ever heard. Labazevitch is excellent, though; and the orchestra is refined and perfectly balanced with the piano—no spotlighting. The gap between I and II is too short.

The endearing Lutoslawski suite is more of the same: stately beauty and balance over intensity. The recent Chandos SACD (M/A 2013) of this work, played by BBC Symphony under Edward Gardner in astonishing, vivid surround sound, puts Beethoven Academy in the shade. This work does not reward reticence.

Beautiful, honest sound, and gorgeous piano. Come on, Maestro, let these young virtuosos tear into this music; they can handle it. I'm confident they've got technique to burn. WRIGHT