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Stanislaw Moniuszko: *Flis: Overture* Frédéric Chopin: *Piano Concerto N° 2 in F minor , Opus 21 – Fantasy on Polish Airs in A major, Opus 13* Witold Lutoslawski: *Little Suite*

Martin Labazevitch (Piano), Beethoven Academy Orchestra, Eva Strusinska (Conductor)

Recording: Krakow, Poland (July 2011) – 67'09

Delos # DE 3463 – Booklet in English and Polish



Classical music enthusiasts who enjoy a stretch of esoteric pieces bookending two of Chopin's most endearing works will find this Delos recording quite the catch with one caveat. The common denominator is Poland: composers, conductor and pianist. This translation captures a true spirit and ingrained quality of expressionism which carries the music forward in a beautifully, methodological manner. Dubbed the "Ambassador of Stalowa Wola," Eva Strusinska has achieved respect from her peers both inside native homeland as well as on the international scene. Under her leadership is the Beethoven Academy Orchestra (BAO) that was formed in 2003 featuring a group of top-ranked musicians carefully selected from some of Europe's leading musical *écoles*. BAO's musicianship is top-of-the-line.

A nicely balanced cross-representation begins with the prolific composer, Stanislaw Moniuszko and his overture to the opera, *Flis*

(*The Raftsmen*.) This was one of several successful operas, alongside Polish repertoire favorites *Halka* (1848) and the colorfully entertaining *Straszny Dwór (The Haunted Manor)* (1865). Strusinska draws a pleasing tempo from the BAO to carefully segment the composition's sonata form with purposeful clarity. Inside *Flis*, Moniuszko explored many artistic values which he picked up while moving around Europe during his life. The resultant yielded flavorful élan inside nationalistic respectabilities. Strings are in confident unison while the solo clarinet takes the stand in the few opening bars that is a tad unassured. Those familiar with *Straszny Dwór* will discern rudimentary modulations and contrapuntal skills found inside *Flis*. The piece is delightful, filled with color and character.

The take on Chopin's *Piano Concerto No° 2 in F minor* by Ewa Strusinka is generally well balanced and nuanced with the right amount of speed at the appropriate moments. A student at Ukraine's Odessa State Conservatory, Martin Labazevitch's dexterity is rapturous especially as he delves into the fabulous *Larghetto* with buttery fondness. Furthermore, he pleasantly refrains from overtaxing Chopin's conclusive *Allegro vivace* with shimmering grandeur and eloquent precision that could even rival that of Arthur Rubinstein.

Though the tables turn stylistically in the ensuing *Fantaisie*, Mr. Labazevitch, nonetheless, is keenly poised and adroit in tackling Chopin's amalgam of three distinctly different folksong/folkdance melodies. Chopin's ability to delight and dazzle inside this composition is heightened by Martin Labazevitch's confidence and charisma. Both Chopin pieces are accessorized by touches of sophistication and elegance.

Perhaps least known, Witold Lutoslawski pushes the musical timeline envelope into the 20th century with his four movement dance, *Little Suite*. Possessive of dissonant textures encased by neoclassical exploration, Bartók certainly surfaces, but there's a clearer presence of Aaron Copeland's *The Tender Land* in the

opening “Fujarka” (“A Pipe”.) Woodwinds have a nicely pronounced message of clarity inside the “Piosenka” (“A Song”) while staccato effects dig indelibly among the “Tanice” (“A Dance”), eliciting sporadic reminders of *El Salón México*. Though strident at times, Strusinska brings clairvoyant channeling that is erudite and unfettered of vagaries.

Delos has a small drawback: sound quality. Several attempts to listen via several playback mechanisms delivered uneventful and torpid results. The CD could use a bit of TLC to alleviate frustrating muffled imprints and tinny quality. Bass is anemic and lacks rich layering. To counter, liner notes by Professor Maciej Negrey are well written. Overall the album has great appeal, but the acoustical audio misses the mark from becoming a stand out recording.

Christie Grimstad