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THE LOST romantics

Jonathan Plowright unearths buried treasure within a collection of neglected Polish chamber music

MY EXPLORATION INTO the long-forgotten works of the Polish composers of the Romantic era started purely by accident just over a decade ago when I discovered a piano concerto by Sigismund Stojowski languishing on the upper library shelves at the Royal Academy of Music. I had always been interested in the music of his famous compatriot, Ignacy Paderewski – particularly in his Nocturne, which I had first played when I was about 10 years old. Impressed with the piano writing of this composer I had never heard of, I set about investigating his work further and found another piano concerto (with the help of Hyperion’s Mike Spring), and many

fine solo pieces. I have since recorded a number of these works. Henryck Melcer and his fiendishly difficult piano concertos followed shortly afterwards – and then I was introduced to the ‘Zs’.

My first encounter with the wonderful Piano Quintet by Julius Zarebski was when I was invited to perform it in Poland with the Szymanowski Quartet in 2008. I was immediately captivated by both the music and my fellow performers. Speaking to members of the quartet, I realised the music was quite well known in Poland but was rarely, if ever, performed elsewhere, which seemed extraordinary to me. It had also, apart from an old radio recording

on Sony by Wladyslaw Szpilman (‘The Pianist’ in the Roman Polanski film), only ever been recorded a couple of times in Poland.

Zarebski died relatively young, at the age of 31. He was, by all accounts, a phenomenal pianist; he is said to have been Liszt’s favourite pupil. But as a composer, unlike his compatriot Paderewski (not to mention Chopin), he was largely overlooked for various reasons, the main one being the very short compositional period of seven years leading up to his death in 1885 – the year he wrote his one major chamber work, the Piano Quintet. Unfortunately, this wasn’t published until nearly 50

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years later, and so was never heard in the height of the Romantic period.

The piece I chose to partner this work on my Hyperion recording – the Piano Quartet by Wladislaw Zelenski – is even more obscure – and yet, to me, more deserving of attention. Zelenski was a well-known and respected teacher and he neatly tied in with my first two Polish discoveries; as well as having been a major influence in Stojowski's musical career, Zelenski was responsible for introducing him to Paderewski, resulting in their lifelong friendship. His compositional output was extensive and includes operas, symphonies, chamber pieces and songs. However, this music is hardly ever played even in Poland, let alone anywhere else. Not much has been written about him, either: only one biography in Polish and a few mentions in relation to his teaching other prominent musicians.

So why has it taken so long for this music to escape the confines of Poland? As explained by Polish music expert Adrian Thomas in his excellent CD notes, much of the music written in Poland in the second half of the 19th and turn of the 20th century was lost in the turbulent times of occupation and partition. Both these works were written after the unsuccessful January Uprising of the Polish against the Russian Empire in 1863 and the brutal reprisals that followed.

The two works clearly show the different characters of the composers – the 'Lisztian', flamboyant, forward-looking style of the young virtuoso Zarebski and the more sentimental and traditional Romanticism of the mature Zelenski.

Zarebski's piano writing is technically demanding in this quintet – not in a soloistic or virtuosic sense, but in a more subtly skilled way that is very difficult to achieve successfully. The thick texture of the writing is hard to control and the many harmonic changes that go

against the rhythmic metre can catch you out very easily.

As with a lot of piano chamber music, it is far too easy for the piano to drown the strings. And as this is particularly big-scale writing for the piano, it has to be controlled, while at the same time not held back. Nowhere is this more challenging than at the very beginning of the whole piece: the quiet piano accompaniment has thick rumbling tremolo-effect chords in the most resonant low register, while at the same time, the two single string lines must be played quietly.



Also, there are very few places in the whole piece when the piano isn't playing. In fact, the first single bar's rest isn't until just before the end of the second movement. The last movement presents difficulties of its own and has probably the most demanding writing in the whole piece. Starting with a reprise of the previous movement – marked 'presto' – this movement could easily have a tendency to run out of control. Zarebski marks the real start of the movement 'allegretto' and writes the piano accompaniment in such a way – large chords with jumps of two octaves

between them, descending semi-quaver octaves in the right hand – that holds back the momentum of the strings. It's an exciting and effective technique if successfully executed.

The Zelenski, by contrast, is lighter in style and mood, reminiscent of Chopin or Mendelssohn, and from a pianist's point of view, much easier and more liberating to play. The music is much less thickly scored, allowing all parts to be heard clearly and without a struggle for a dynamic balance between the instruments. As far as the piano writing is concerned, I think the middle section of the sublime second movement is the most powerful on the whole disc, and yet also allows for the most delicate of touches.

The third movement is the most piano-led of all the music on the CD and feels naturally easy to shape, while the fourth movement, on the whole, also lies beautifully under the hands in a continuous tarantella movement. An odd quirk of Zelenski's writing, which is something I have also since noticed in his Piano Concerto, is his tendency to alter his left hand arpeggio accompaniments unexpectedly, and quite disconcertingly, in the opposite direction – as if he had forgotten to add a vital note of the harmony to the chord and goes back to correct it. Conversely, this does give the impression of free-flowing movement.

Personally, I feel that these two works stand comfortably side by side with the current mainstream chamber repertoire, and hope these recordings might go some way towards convincing others to play them. After all, there are more 'lost' Polish Romantic composers yet to be discovered, including another 'Z'...♪

Jonathan Plowright's disc of the Zarebski Piano Quintet and Zelenski Piano Quartet, with the Szymanowski Quartet, is out now: Hyperion CD67905. His next CD for Hyperion's Romantic Piano Concertos series is out in April and features concertos by Zelenski and Zarzycki: Hyperion CD67958