


## The Romantic Piano Concerto – 59

**Zarzycki** Grande Polonaise in E flat, Op. 7. Piano Concerto in A flat, Op. 17. **Zelenski** Piano Concerto in E flat, Op. 60.

**Jonathan Plowright** (piano); **BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Lukasz Borowicz**.

**Hyperion CDA67958** (full price, 1 hour 1 minute).

Website [www.hyperion-records.co.uk](http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk)  **Producer** Jeremy Hayes. **Engineers** Simon Eadon, Dave Rowell. **Dates** June 28th and 29th, 2012.

Hyperion's 'Romantic Piano Concerto' series began two decades ago with Paderewski and Moszkowski. Who foresaw – other than Hyperion itself, perhaps – that there would be 59 releases (thus far) and furthermore, that the 59th release would not at all sound like barrel scrapings?

This release returns to Poland. Both Aleksander Zarzycki (1834-95) and Władysław Zelenski (1837-1921) led the Warsaw Music Institute, with the latter taking the reins from the former in 1878 ... or not, as Adrian Thomas's otherwise helpful booklet note confusingly states at an earlier point that Zarzycki did not join the Music Institute until 1879. Zarzycki, Thomas writes, was a fine pianist, who performed the two works recorded here in the Salle Herz in Paris. If we remember him, however, it is usually for

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his violin music, specifically, for a G major *Mazurka*, whose most famous recording is probably the one by David Oistrakh and pianist Vladimir Yampolsky (Testament SBT1116).

Zarzycki was only three years older than Zelenski, yet his two works are more old-fashioned than Zelenski's Piano Concerto. (I will explain that momentarily!) The Concerto in A flat has just two movements, an 'Andante' followed by a somewhat longer 'Allegro non troppo'. The 'Andante', perhaps surprisingly, has little of Chopin to it, except in some of its pianistic filigree, but its passions are operatic – I would have written 'cinematic' had that medium been invented by then! I suspect that many a breast heaved and many a perfumed handkerchief waved in the Salle Herz as Zarzycki was performing it! After the 'Andante' flutters to a gentle close, the 'Allegro non troppo' begins heroically, perhaps even imperiously, and high drama is the order of the day. Again, while there are solo passages reminiscent of Chopin, the music as a whole is not in his style and is not even strongly Polish, unless the main theme's leaping intervals are meant to suggest, as Thomas proposes, a *krakowiak*. Well, it doesn't matter; this Concerto, while not a masterpiece, is tuneful and beautifully written for the piano.

Nor is the orchestra ignored; Zarzycki shows sensitivity and imagination here as well.

Judging from its lower opus number, the *Grande Polonaise* is an earlier work. In contrast to the Concerto, this work wears nationalism and the influence of Chopin on its sleeve. (One might well wonder why Zarzycki didn't compose an 'Andante spianato' to preface it!) It has quiet moments to set off its bravado, but its mood is positive and it seems to have little on its mind other than entertaining listeners.

If Zarzycki's contributions sound old-fashioned, it is likely because the composer was in his young twenties at the time, while Zelenski's Concerto dates from 1903, when he was in his mid-sixties. This is a full-scale work, 34 minutes in length, and one that put me in mind of Saint-Saëns. (The French composer's final piano concerto was composed only seven years earlier.) The initial 'Allegro maestoso' opens with a gently martial theme that has more to do with lead soldiers than with blood and guts. It is a striking beginning and, if Zelenski can't keep interest on the same level throughout the movement, that's a fault that even great composers occasionally share with him. It's mostly delightful, however. The second movement is a 'Thème varié' in which the mysterious and somewhat retro 'Thème' is

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subjected to several variations, including one that giggles in triplets. Here and elsewhere in this Concerto the solo writing is of daunting difficulty. (The booklet note does not say if Zelenski was a capable pianist, but this Concerto was composed for Ignacy a.k.a. Ignaz Friedman, who certainly was!) The closing 'Finale-Rondo' is an infectious Polish folk dance. It is based, it turns out, on the preceding movement's theme, but with its character completely changed so it sounds brand new. Clever Zelenski! What a lot of fun this music is!

With the exception of Zarzycki's Concerto, for which I can find no alternative version, these are identified as first recordings. Fortunately, pianist Jonathan Plowright believes in this music and he is sensitive to the stylistic differences across these three works – a more straightforward Classical approach to Zarzycki's music, and more subjectivity in Zelenski's Concerto. He is a virtuoso, but he doesn't push it in one's face: this is sensitive playing. The conductor Lukasz Borowicz, a natural advocate for Polish repertory, is a like-minded partner, and the orchestral work is well groomed and not lacking personality.

Hyperion's sound is bright and could be more detailed, but it doesn't inhibit pleasure.

*Raymond S. Tuttle*