

NAXOS

Mieczysław  
**KARŁOWICZ**

**Symphonic Poems • 1**

**Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra**

**Antoni Wit**



## Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876-1909)

### Lithuanian Rhapsody · Stanisław and Anna Oświęcimowie · Episode at a Masquerade

Although he left the merest handful of compositions at his seemingly accidental death in an avalanche while skiing in the Tatra Mountains, Mieczysław Karłowicz yet ranks among the most important Polish composers of the generation that came to be dominated by Karol Szymanowski. Born into a wealthy academic family at Wyszniaw, in what is now Lithuania, he trained as a violinist but, after his arrival in Berlin, where he studied between 1895 and 1901 with Henryk Urban, turned increasingly to composition. Several sets of songs and piano pieces represent his earliest published work, but the *Serenade for Strings* (1897) demonstrates no mean grasp of larger musical forms; an ability that was further consolidated by incidental music for Jozafat Nowinski's drama *The White Dove* (1899-1900), the *Rebirth Symphony* (1900?-1902) whose compact four-movement design is pointedly overlaid with an ambitious conceptual programme, and the three-movement *Violin Concerto* (1902) which proved to be his last composition that was not determined by extra-musical considerations.

The remainder of Karłowicz's brief career was taken up with a series (though not intended as such) of symphonic poems that between them evince a strong attraction to the pantheistic and existential tendencies such as he had no doubt absorbed from the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, along with the quality of solitude and the pivoting between fervent affirmation and stark despair which by then had become a natural corollary to such thinking. The three works on the present disc are the third, fourth and sixth of that loose sequence.

Written in the latter half of 1906, and given its première by Grzegorz Fitelberg in Warsaw on 25th February 1909 (just seventeen days after the composer's death), *Lithuanian Rhapsody* had a genesis that goes back to 1900 when Karłowicz collected much of the material while on vacation at his family estate. He stated, "I tried to pour into it all the grief, sadness and eternal chains of this people whose songs had filled my

childhood", and a sense of nostalgia mingled with regret is everywhere apparent.

Out of sepulchral gestures in lower woodwind and strings emerges an undulating motion that prepares for the first melody, which sounds evocatively on flutes and clarinets. The remaining woodwind and strings gradually enter to fill out the instrumental texture, before the work heads into its second section with a more expressive theme that is shared between the strings, though latterly adorned by some piquant woodwind contributions. This ushers in a short-lived climax, before drawing into a third section of languorous repose. A serene melody now appears on strings, casting its beneficent aura over proceedings, before a sudden flourish brings the fourth section and a lively new theme (audibly related to the previous melody) that leads to the work's principal climax. This subsides relatively quickly, and the fifth section returns to the opening melody and also to the melancholic environs from which the work emerged and in which it now concludes.

Written during the greater part of 1907, and first performed by the composer in Warsaw on 27th April 1908, *Stanisław and Anna Oświęcimowie* was to become the most successful, both critically and publicly, of Karłowicz's symphonic poems and went on to retain a place in the Polish orchestral repertoire until long after his death. It was inspired by a painting by Stanisław Bergmann, which draws on the seventeenth-century legend concerning the incestuous love between two siblings. Stanisław at length journeyed to Rome where he gained the Pope's blessing on their union, only to return home to find his sister dead. He himself died soon afterwards, and they were buried in the chapel at Krosno. Karłowicz evokes this sad tale in a piece drawing on elements of sonata design to give it formal focus and expressive consistency.

The work is launched on strings and brass with impetuous music that soon assumes a more sinister hue on lower woodwind before easing into the expressive melody that is first heard on oboe. Commented on by

the other woodwind and horn, this presently migrates to the full orchestra where muted brass sound a note of incipient danger, before heading into a fervent climax on the oboe melody. Dying down slowly, a pensive pause is reached before the central section sees first an intensive reworking of the initial music, then the radiant reappearance of the oboe theme on woodwind and strings. Uneasy gestures on muted strings and bass clarinet at length provoke the work's main climax, in which the thematic material becomes irredeemably tinged with tragedy. From here, a funeral march sets out with stark phrases from the upper woodwind and strings over a tolling accompaniment; building to a culmination of anguished inevitability, this soon subsides into a sombre postlude that closes the work in duly fatalistic terms.

Karłowicz's final symphonic poem, *Episode at a Masquerade*, has a complex and uncertain history. The composer had worked on the piece from October 1908 until his death the following February, leaving an autograph which apparently extended for 473 bars. Fitelberg took this in hand in the summer of 1911, working on a completion for over two years that finally had its première in Warsaw on 11th February 1914. Unfortunately the autograph disappeared during the Second World War, making it impossible to deduce from the extant sketches just how 'interventionist' his completion really is. Even the title is not confirmed in Karłowicz's correspondence, though his contemporaries agree that its subject-matter revolves around the tense encounter between estranged lovers and their inability to

sustain a rapport in the surrounding activity. Karłowicz treats this as an extended sonata form, whose reprise and coda are realised by Fitelberg with great imagination if not necessarily in accordance with the composer's actual intentions.

The work opens with an innate sense of occasion, flourishes on brass and percussion heralding a suave theme that unerringly conjures up an opulent scene. Extensively decked out with subsidiary detail, this at length leads into the more relaxed transformation of its main motifs, building gradually to what seems likely to be an expansive restatement of the theme, but which is suddenly cut short to reveal an altogether more sombre and introspective theme on violas and lower woodwind. This unfolds at some length, creating an aura of becalmed emotion, before an oscillating flute figure presages a full restatement of the second theme on strings. This tapers away to a handful of solo strings and harp, from where elements of the initial theme now begin to filter through. A pause, then the opening music bursts in with a vengeance; investing the work with a renewed sense of momentum as it moves towards a climactic restatement of the first theme, but now suffused with the pensiveness that informs its successor. For this reason, any real affirmation can only be short-lived, and the music heads into a lengthy epilogue recalling both of the main themes against a pervasive melancholy that sees the work through to its distinctly fatalistic close.

**Richard Whitehouse**

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## Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra

### The National Philharmonic of Poland

The first performance of the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra took place on 5th November 1901 in the newly opened Philharmonic Hall under the artistic director and principal conductor, Emil Młynarski. The soloist was the world-renowned pianist, composer and future statesman Ignacy Jan Paderewski, and the programme included Paderewski's *Piano Concerto in A minor* and works of other Polish composers, Chopin, Moniuszko, Noskowski, Stojowski and Żeleński. In the succeeding years the orchestra won a high reputation, collaborating with leading conductors and soloists, until the outbreak of war in 1939, the destruction of the Philharmonic Hall and the loss of 39 of its 71 players. Resuming activity after the war, the orchestra was conducted by Straszynski and Panufnik, and in January 1950 Witold Rowicki was appointed director and principal conductor, organizing a new ensemble under difficult conditions. In 1955 the rebuilt Philharmonic Hall was re-opened, with a large hall of over a thousand seats and a 433-seat hall for chamber music, recognised as the National Philharmonic of Poland. Subsequent conductors included Bohdan Wodiczko, Arnold Rezler and Stanisław Skrowaczewski, and in 1958 Witold Rowicki was again appointed artistic director and principal conductor, a post he held until 1977, when he was succeeded by Kazimierz Kord, serving until the end of the centenary celebrations in 2001. In 2002 Antoni Wit became general and artistic director of the Warsaw Philharmonic – The National Orchestra and Choir of Poland. The orchestra has toured widely abroad, in addition to its busy schedule at home in symphony concerts, chamber concerts, educational work and other activities. It now has a complement of 110 players.

### Antoni Wit



Antoni Wit, one of the most highly regarded Polish conductors, studied conducting with Henryk Czyz and composition with Krzysztof Penderecki at the Academy of Music in Kraków, subsequently continuing his studies with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. He also graduated in law at the Jagellonian University in Kraków. Immediately after completing his studies he was engaged as an assistant at the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra by Witold Rowicki and was later appointed conductor of the Poznan Philharmonic, collaborated with the Warsaw Grand Theatre, and from 1974 to 1977 was artistic director of the Pomeranian Philharmonic, before his appointment as director of the Polish Radio and Television Orchestra and Chorus in Kraków, from 1977 to 1983. From 1983 to 2000 he was the director of the National Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra in Katowice, and from 1987 to 1992 he was the chief conductor and then first guest conductor of Orquesta Filarmónica de Gran Canaria. In 2002 he became General and Artistic Director of the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra. His international career has brought engagements with

major orchestras throughout Europe, the Americas and the Near and Far East. He has made nearly a hundred records, including an acclaimed release for Naxos of the piano concertos of Prokofiev, awarded the Diapason d'Or and Grand Prix du Disque de la Nouvelle Académie du Disque. In January 2002 his recording of the *Turangalila Symphony* by Olivier Messiaen (8.554478-79) was awarded the Cannes Classical Award in Midem Classic 2002. In 2004 he received the Classical Internet Award and was nominated for a Grammy for his Naxos recording of Penderecki's *St Luke Passion* (8.557149), with a further nomination in 2005 for Penderecki's *Polish Requiem* (8.557386-87). Antoni Wit is a professor at the F. Chopin Academy of Music in Warsaw.

Although he left the merest handful of compositions at his seemingly accidental death in an avalanche while skiing, Mieczysław Karłowicz ranks among the most important Polish composers of his generation. The final years of his brief career were taken up by a series of six symphonic poems, the third, fourth and sixth of which are included on this first disc of these works. Alternating between fervent affirmation and brooding melancholy, these impressive late-romantic works are notable for their colourful and imaginative orchestration and fresh and original harmony.

Mieczysław  
**KARŁOWICZ**  
 (1876-1909)

**Symphonic Poems • 1**

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|----------|---|--------------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Stanisław i Anna Oświecimowie</b><br>(Stanisław and Anna Oświecimowie), Op. 12             | <b>22:43</b> |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Rapsodia litewska</b><br>(Lithuanian Rhapsody), Op. 11                                     | <b>19:36</b> |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Epizod na maskaradzie</b><br>(Episode at a Masquerade), Op. 14<br>(completed by Fitelberg) | <b>28:22</b> |

**Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra • Antoni Wit**

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