

Now imagine, if you will, that Bartók is completely unknown, and that a youthful pianist discovered his music. An album follows, in which juvenilia from his teens are mixed haphazardly with short, important pieces from his middle and late periods. Worse, the disc starts out with an extremely early and conventional Romantic piece that is likely to lose anybody's interest in a very short period of time. Feliks Nowowiejski (1877–1946), of course, isn't Bartók, but this largely unknown Polish composer whose mature career spans the first three decades of the 20th century deserves better exposure than he receives on this release.

The quality of the works presented here is as startlingly variable as their ordering is unsystematic. The three Ballades are only intermittently interesting. The Gavot is commonplace and overstays its welcome. (It's probably a very early piece, since the interest in Baroque/Classical pastiches peaked toward the beginning of the century; but it's difficult to tell, since the only clue to the dates of composition are occasional references made in the enthusiastic but disorganized and mildly informational liner notes provided by the pianist.) The March Under the Banner of the Peace and the Gen. Dowbór-Kuśicki Military March are blandly clichéd to the point of silliness, which was apparently not the composer's intention.

Late Nowowiejski is far more interesting. The three Polish dances and two mazurkas, written in the 1930s, are fascinating works that display a strong influence of Szymanowski. The music is a bracing mixture of folk-influenced mottos treated enharmonically in a fashion that at times obliterates any sense of key, while remaining easy on the ear despite constantly shifting rhythms. The two preludes (the first heard in two manuscript versions, with substantial changes in meter) date from 1915, and again feature a Romantic musical language fragmented across an ever-shifting harmonic landscape. These are pieces that command attention both through their striking material and through its powerfully transformative treatment.

The young Polish pianist Magdalena Adamek is at her best in the composer's weakest works. Where the rhythm and forward movement are consistent, the mood assertive and unchanging, Adamek delivers the goods effectively. But as the pianist writes in her liner notes, "I am not a calm person," and in the later pieces she regularly rushes. There's a sense of wanting to get to the declamatory passages as quickly as possible, with important phrases along the way quickly tossed aside. Matters aren't helped by the recorded sound, which is close and extremely dry. The results sound unattractively cramped with attendant mechanical noise.

There's more Nowowiejski available from MDG and CPO, but it's organ music. That leaves this disc (and future items in this series) as the sole representative of the composer's piano works. Given that Nowowiejski's music is, to all intents and purposes, unknown, I suspect one or two volumes drawn from his later works might have made a far more effective introduction to the composer's music than the hodgepodge of pieces presented here. Still, you don't have other choices available if you want to get to the captivating material that he wrote late in life.