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KAROL SZYMANOWSKI

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1883-1937

FOR thirty years the creative genius of Karol Szymanowski illumined the cultural life of Poland. From the moment when, in 1905, he made his appearance for the first time as the composer of charming piano *Preludes* (Opus 1), his splendid gifts were duly appraised, and men saw in him rightly the heir of the ideals of Chopin. The prophecy was ventured that his art would lend fresh lustre to Polish music, and would draw on him the attention of the whole world.

He was only twenty-two at the time; but the *Preludes* had been written before the age of eighteen, when this capacity to express himself in such perfect, though relatively modest forms, could not as yet have come from any teacher of theory. In point of fact, he owed it exclusively to his own unfailing instinct, and to the rarely artistic atmosphere in which he grew up on the family estate Tymoszwka, in far-away Ukraina. Bach and Beethoven, Chopin and Wagner, the masters whom his musically endowed father esteemed so highly, were the composer Szymanowski's only teachers. Knowledge of their masterpieces, and the exploring of the secrets of their skill in composition, prepared him at an early age for the hardest tasks, and for setting himself the highest of goals.

Along with these small piano pieces went early the composing of songs. The first poet to inspire them was Casimir Tetmayer—then the Coryphæus of the Polish lyric, "poet of love and sadness, of unsatisfied cravings, and of bacchic intoxication." Six of his subtle lyrics, with varying descriptive *motifs*, found the due response of musical inspiration in the nature of the young Szymanowski, already disposed to melancholy meditations. The very choice he made of the poems revealed the level of his own artistic appreciation. The songs appeared later as Opus 2. The dimensions of the composer's talent, firm and sure already in expression, were further shown by melodies he now wrote to *Three Fragments* from the works of Kasprowicz. In these we find an elemental power of dramatic expression bursting forth, the ardour of religious transport, and the use of folk-motifs raised to the plane of the fantastic. These songs became known as Opus 5. Into this lofty view of the world, which drove Szymanowski to follow in life the path of the highest artistic ideals without fear of storms or obstacles, the work of another poet, Wacław Berent, melted at once; notably one poem, *The Swan*. With this composition Szymanowski uttered his artistic *Credo*.

Very soon, however, he was to be drawn into the magic circles of his poetic transpositions of the world of the senses, into a kaleidoscopic acquaintance with seas and stars, people and spirits, angels and dragons, by still another Polish writer, the quite irrational singer of Young Poland, Tadeusz Micinski. Here the musician found materials for two lyrical cycles—Opus 11, four songs, and Opus 20, six songs. Not only the works, but perhaps even more the personal influence of Micinski made a deep impression on the young musician, shook up the furniture of his spirit, and reinforced his search for the boldest ideals of composition. Thus, as we see, his genius was to grow out of the very soil of the nation's culture and traditions; in that from the outset it took to its bosom the ennobling work of the poets of his own day, and so identified itself with the spiritual atmosphere of the Poland all about him. Alone of the musicians of his time, Szymanowski, by the generic weight of his abilities, could do justice to the poetical creations of four men—Tetmayer, Kasprowicz, Berent and Micinski.

In 1902 he came to Warsaw. In that same city, where the genius of Chopin had evolved, Szymanowski now underwent a severe training in counterpoint. His teacher was the eminent composer, Sigismund Noskowski. The result was that, when in 1906 he gave new proof of his aims as a musician in a series of larger works, there was no lack of voices proclaiming his gifts as those of a genius. From now onward his personality showed itself with increasing clearness in all kinds of musical creations, produced from one year to another: his piano *Etudes* (Opus 4) his first *Sonata* for the piano (Opus 8), his romantic *Sonata* for piano and violin (Opus 9), his admirable *Variations* on a folk-melody (Opus 10), and a number of new songs. One could easily infer from these early productions, that the young artist had in his ideals no shadow of the commonplace, no cheapness of technical mediums. As with every outstanding master of music, so with him: one saw from the start the fulness of his individuality and the bold evolution of his style unfolding themselves around an axis all his own, around the crystallisation of his own spirit.

The style of the works belonging to this early period, brought Szymanowski in certain respects nearer to Chopin and to Wagner; in others, however, nearer to Schumann and Brahms. To Richard Strauss as well, for instance in the *Concert Overture*, and in his first *Symphony*. In his earlier songs one finds features recalling

Rachmaninov, while his later ones remind us of Max Reger. Nevertheless, even with all these elements of kinship, the language of the new composer's works was of his own invention. They were all born of an innate necessity to create music, of the inevitable, compelling need for expression of a typically romantic spirit. This does not imply, however, that he failed to acquire for himself a technique in counterpoint which might make one's head go round.

The year 1911-12 opened for him the path to fame in the wider world, when in Berlin, Leipzig and Vienna the two works were performed that revealed his creative powers in their maturity: the *Second Symphony* (Opus 19) and the *Second Sonata* for piano (Opus 21). These two compositions, a masterly synthesis of the sonata's form with that of the *Variations* and the *Fugue*, represent a shining light in music in the closing years of pre-war Europe. They are like a splendid bridge between the legacy of the æsthetic of Bach and Beethoven, and the spirit of modern art.

I

Karol Szymanowski was a wondrously rich personality, composed of a variety of elements. The fine intellect of the composer did not exclude from his soul those emotions whose roots are in religion. It is to this side of his nature that we owe the appearance, even in his early years, of a number of moving lyric pieces with a religious content. For kindred reasons there found entrance into the mind of this typical west-European musical genius currents that arose in the musical East. It was the profound poet of ancient Persia, Hafis, whose delicate verses drew the Pole to the mysterious charm of the Orient, and aroused him to write a number of unusually subtle songs. Later on, Djelaleddin Rumi was to unfold the mystical tones of his *Song of the Night* before Szymanowski's imagination, and he at once proceeded to incorporate them in his *Third Symphony*. At a later stage he became an unrivalled interpreter of the musical idiom of the East. The heights of his art in this respect are found in *Songs of the Mad Muezzin*, the words of which were written for him by the Polish poet, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. This fame, as the inspired singer of the Orient, did not come, however, from any wearisome studies carried on by the author in the field of Eastern music. The *motifs* used for these works were assembled by his own intuition. Their variety seems to us almost incredible: whether on the side of melody, or in their singular harmonies and the strange nuances of their rhythms.

Until the outbreak of the Great War, Szymanowski spent most

of his time in the cities of central Europe. He travelled much, but settled in Vienna in 1911, and remained there two years. The famous music firm, *Universal-Edition*, had undertaken to publish all his new pieces as soon as they were finished. For the summers he always returned to the still country-side of Ukraine, where he toiled diligently at composition.

To the works already mentioned, belonging to this early period of production, belongs also an opera. It was written in Vienna, and the author could ascribe its writing to his sojourn there. The libretto for *Hagith*—such was its name—was the work of a Viennese poet, Felix Dörmann; the theme was taken from the Old Testament. Everything in the words was done in a drastic, glittering style, recalling Wilde's *Salome*. The hero is the old king, the David of the Scripture, but unnamed. Between him and his son, Prince Solomon, stands Hagith, who, in defiance of the royal will, is afterwards stoned. She has orders from the High-priest to surrender herself to the aged monarch, in the hope that thereby his powers may be restored. Nonetheless she succeeded in preserving her maiden honour, desiring that the speedy death of the king may hasten the accession of the prince, with whom she had fallen in love at first sight. Solomon was banished to the borders of the kingdom; but he was only leaving the city when he heard of his father's death, and of the verdict of stoning for Hagith. He hurried back to save her, but he was too late.

Szymanowski was hoping that his opera would be performed in the *Hofoper* in Vienna. He finished it in 1913, equipping the parts with all the richness of musical instrumentation then at the disposal of a group, at whose head stood Strauss himself. In his style the Pole had the models of *Salome* and *Elektra* before him; yet he wove into his works wholly original concepts, and in places he achieved the charm of rare beauty of melody, together with an arresting mastery of construction of thunderous harmonies. Thanks to the war, the première of *Hagith* was not celebrated till 1922, and then in the Grand Opera in Warsaw.

The tragic years 1914-1918, and the first two years of the Bolshevik revolution, Szymanowski spent in Russia, in fearful circumstances that grew worse from week to week. Toward the end of 1919 he succeeded in escaping from this Hades, and in returning home to Warsaw. Here he arrived with a whole treasure of new works, among them the *Third Symphony*, with tenor solo and

Chorus, to the words of Djelaleddin Rumi's *Song of the Night*, a *Violin Concerto*, and a *Cycle* of three violin compositions, *Myths—The Fountain of Arethusa*, *Narcissus*, and *Pan and the Dryads*. During this time he had also written the *Third Sonata* for piano, twelve *Etudes* for piano, a *String Quartet*, several new songs, and two large cycles of piano pieces: *The Metopes* and *The Masques*. To the former belong *The Isle of the Sirens*, *Calipso*, *Nausicaa*, the fruit of a journey to Sicily in 1914 and of the reading of the *Odyssey*; to the latter *Scheherezade*, *Tantris the Buffoon*, and *The Serenade of Don Juan*.

If of the first period of Szymanowski's writing we may say that in spirit he belonged to the Romantic camp, but in form to classical models, about the works he brought back to Warsaw in 1919 it must be said that they are the resultant force of romantic foundations wedded to impressionism. His pre-war compositions could be reduced to the common denominator of German musical ideals, as we know them from Bach to Reger. His stay in Paris in 1914, his contacts with French civilisation and his separation from the German centres toward which he had hitherto gravitated, brought about an orientation in other directions and toward other models and ideals. Not only did French letters and painting attract him, but also the impressionism of Debussy's school: the lightness of his colouring, the subtlety of his musical pictures, not to mention their freedom from the academic, and from the ballast of traditional habits and mannerisms. For a talent so many-sided and dynamic as Szymanowski's, this discovery amounted to a new lease of creative freedom. It opened up for him gateways to hitherto unknown possibilities in the realm of ways and means in composition. This was at once revealed both in his piano and his violin works, published after his return to Poland. He now broadened the scope of his virtuosity to a fantastic extent; to what would seem to be the utmost limits of capacity in the human fingers. What Debussy achieved with the help of two pianos (the three compositions *En Blanc et Noir*, unknown to the Pole when he wrote *The Metopes* and *The Masques*) was now seen to be but a part of the technical richness of these works, only a fragment of the scale of colouring they possessed. There followed also, in this new period, a complete emancipation of his harmony from the bonds of tonality and consonance. In this respect the art of Szymanowski has rivalled the extremest conceptions of Stravinsky and Schönberg, at the same time anticipating the ultra-radicalism of Darius Milhaud in that swaggering, grotesque work, the *Fugue* in the last part of the *Violin Quartet* (Opus 37).

The impression made by the appearance of the new piano

compositions was enormous. Nevertheless, everything they offered that was new had its starting point in the composer's earlier piano pieces, where we had always admired his truly demonic impetus in achieving effects. No one could foresee, however, that even the violin works of this second period would introduce us to a wholly new world of technical conquests, and one discovered by Szymanowski himself. It is a fact that the *Concerto* with Orchestra accompaniment, Opus 35, based on the poem *May Night* by Micinski (something the composer did not tell us in the published edition) was an epoch-making occurrence almost on a plane with the first appearance of Paganini's work. One is frankly astounded that a musician, who never had a violin in his hand, should succeed in acquiring all the secrets of technique of this instrument which only a violinist can fathom, and in raising them to a degree that reminds us of nobody else except the great Italian.

Just as the closing work of Szymanowski's first period was an opera, so also a dramatic creation completed the second. This time, however, it was not something thrust upon him by his environment, as was *Hagith*, but the voice of a spirit calling from the depths of his own yearnings: which then became the expression of his lofty ideal of composition, saturated with the worship of beauty in its most detached form. It was, moreover, the voice of faith in the saving mission of this beauty for humanity. The first outlines of the work came upon the author during his stay in Sicily in 1914, its background being the ancient culture of the island—Greek, Arabic and Christian. Later he saw clearly before him the figure of King Roger II, around which there wove itself a most original tale, symbolic throughout. The title assumed was the name of the king, but a second was added, *The Shepherd*. This shepherd was the emissary of Dionysus, the god of joyous beauty, born of the sea-foam and the sun's rays. With the help of his friend Iwaszkiewicz, Szymanowski wrote the *libretto* himself, getting thereby his own arrangement of the action. We are taken first to the Capella Palatina in Palermo, glittering with golden mosaics, then to the palace court-yard of the Sicilian caliphs, and finally to the ruins of the antique theatre at Taormina—backwards through the three ages of Sicilian history. We witness scenes, whose content symbolises the deliverance of humanity from the tyranny of ossified Byzantine formalism, into the understanding of the divine sense of all that is—including man himself. On this background of most effective stage

arrangements, combining to give the beholder a fairyland of colour and contrast, there are revealed the composer's profoundest desires, given expression toward the end in the words of the king himself, as he is being initiated into the Dionysian mysteries. As a production *King Roger* stands by itself. From every point of view it is an exceptional work. How can one indicate its significance? For my part, I do not hesitate to place it over against *Parsifal*, and on an equal footing. We saw it on the stage for the first time in Warsaw in 1926. Since then it has been performed in several other centres on the continent.

II

The whole productive career of Szymanowski has arranged itself as if according to a pre-conceived plan: as if some provision had been made for him at the outset by an overseeing Providence, whose instrument he has since then been. He came home after the war as the Singer of the East and the West, as the interpreter of ancient myths, and of Dionysiac mysteries. Like Ulysses, he returned after long journeys among strangers in order to become, during the last decade of his life, "the troubadour of the unsullied purity of Polish national tradition." For some time he sought the way to the sources of those musical elements in which the spirit and instinct of the Polish people had been revealed in its real form. For years his health had been causing concern, and its demands drove him now to Zakopane, to the life-giving slopes of the Tatra mountains.

He was thus coming back, fortunately for us, to the spring from which he had drawn the beautiful theme of the *Variations* (Opus 10) in his earliest years. Now he would drink from it once more. During months and years of residence in Zakopane, his musical imagination was powerfully influenced and moulded by the incomparably original *motifs* to be found in the dances and songs of the Highlanders—*Gorale*. The fateful lot of the tubercular victim was to work for good, for the fulfilling of a mighty mission to Polish music. Seeking in these High Carpathians healing for the disease that was consuming him, Szymanowski found there wondrous impulses to a fresh flowering of his art.

The first work to become the expression of this new phase was the cycle of six songs, with piano accompaniment, published in 1923 and called *Stopiewnie*. The words were those of the poet Julius Tuwim. The title itself, a neologism made up of the two words *słowo* and *pienie* ("word" and "song"), prepares us for the originality of these curious creations of a daring poet, creations that are a play on sounds, on parts of speech having no logical content, but

which flow together in a stream of rhythmical unities and mingle in a girdle of changing colours. The raw materials of Tuwim's verses compelled the composer to adopt elements of musical language, which are fitted to them as if by a genius. There is nothing like them in our musical literature, either vocal or instrumental. The tune-motifs had to be no less original than the yoking of the poet's syllables to them. Szymanowski did not shrink from this labour of an excursion into unknown regions of musical experiment to seek out these new mediums, which could only be found in the hidden reaches of his own genius. His instinct for composition gave him the thread of Ariadne. The other end of it was tied to the primitive, to the barbarities of the Highland music, which by its very difference from that of other central European stocks, attracted the composer as the promised land of Polish music. He distilled the style of *Słopiewnie* out of the raw themes, the discordant songs and dances of the Zakopane region; and he created in this new cycle of lyrics an artistic work, unique and wholly his own.

His soul being thus soaked in the melodies of the *Gorale*, Szymanowski could now begin to carry further the task begun a century ago by Chopin: that of raising the folk-lore of Poland in our time to a significance for humanity as a whole. New evidence of the boldness of his doings was soon seen in the dances that now began to appear, one after the other, *Mazurki* (Opus 50). Here the author was able to emancipate himself from the influence of Chopin, which can be felt in all other composers of mazurkas in the second half of the 19th century. This was possible, thanks to the transporting of the typical Polish dance from the plains of Mazowia to the highlands of the Tatras. Here he imposed on it characteristic rhythm *motifs* that flowed from his spirit in the presence of the upland meadows under the granite cliffs; on which shepherds and maidens boldly improvise new songs, or repeat again those that have been handed down from the past.

Three real masterpieces were in time to be the result of Szymanowski's converse with the folk-music of the Tatras. The first was one which grips the inmost soul: a great religious composition, *Stabat Mater*, set to a Polish version of the original Latin, and written for solo voices, a mixed choir and orchestra. The theme of this work has no immediate connection with Highland music, but the Lechite (i.e. old Polish) spirit of the music flowed undoubtedly from the heart-felt attachment to folk-art that absorbed the whole being of the artist. It was written in 1925-26. Its style is a clever harmonising of archaic mediums of melody with a wholly new

conception of the demands of liturgy, freed from all the official formulas of church music. After the Paris performance in 1929, the eminent French critic, Coeuroy, did not hesitate to assay *Stabat Mater* as one of the most original religious compositions ever written.

In 1926 Szymanowski became Director of the State Conservatory in Warsaw. Two years later, however, he laid down the office, both for reasons of health and because of his desire for greater freedom in his enterprises as composer. Though his illness had not yet revealed itself openly, it was already making havoc with his organism. In spite of this, he nevertheless succeeded in adding to the work that had transported him into the sphere of religious meditation, a second masterpiece of a diametrically opposite nature. It was a ballet, with Tatra life as background, which united *motifs* from the legendary past with episodes from the life and customs of today. In its outlines, the scenery of the work was of the author's own making. Its title, *Harnasie*, was taken from the name given to the fierce Tatra bandits of long ago. The composer had listened much during his years at Zakopane to these robber stories; and at times he had been witness, during parties in the Goral cottages (whether those of betrothal or wedding), of how the legend of the quarrelsome past can become a no less quarrelsome reality in the present. Love, envy and the will to vengeance on a rival get the better of the usually calm tempers of the mountain folk, to the violent shedding of blood. Something of the verve of these sturdy dwellers under the Tatras was imparted to Szymanowski as he wrote the parts for the ballet. The music has something in common with features of *Słopiewnie*. Out of it there breaks forth the rhythmic vigour of the actual Highland dances; in structure it recalls the architectural compactness of the Goral cottage. These are marks we do not find in the author's earlier works, which were often dissolved in the mists of his own contemplative nostalgia.

In 1929 his illness took on tragic proportions. For nearly a year he had to go out to Davos, whence he came back in seemingly better health, thanks to careful treatment. He could thus accept the Rectorship of the newly opened Academy of Music in Warsaw, whither he would travel for short sojourns from Zakopane. But he did not neglect composition. From this time dates his powerful hymn *Veni Creator*, to a poetic paraphrase of Wyspianski; and a new instrumental masterpiece, the *Fourth Symphony*, with *Piano Concerto*. He wrote this, thinking of himself as the artist of the

Concerto; hoping in this way to come into closer personal contact with the musical world, and no longer make but rare appearances as accompanist to his own songs. (Their best interpreter has always been the composer's own sister, Stanisława.) Again, in the writing of this *Symphony*, Szymanowski owed much to his intimate knowledge of Highland music, from whose blood and bone many a *motif* was drawn here also. Nevertheless this work is far more than just a musical poem on the life of the men who pasture their sheep among the granite cliffs of the High Tatras. It is a part of Nature herself: of the rocks that lose themselves in the clouds, of the winds that burst upon and tear up the forests by the roots, and of the silence that can become sound both when the sun is shining, and when only the stars are visible.

III

In this sketch of the genius of Szymanowski we cannot close without at least a few sentences about the literary side of his work. Only in ripe years did he begin to write, at first by fits and starts, as when he helped with the text of *King Roger*. His need for expression showed itself in 1922 in the form of polemics with the Warsaw critics, who were unfavourably disposed to his post-war style. At once we saw the striking talent of the writer, based on broad cultural foundations, and wielding a splendid pen. He showed rare trenchancy of defence in his arguments; he would go over to the attack with unexpected moves, and would grip the reader by the profundity with which he stated the problem. Later he shone as an essayist in his study of Chopin, published in 1925: in whose well-written pages he recorded the most effective comments on the significance, for the history of Polish culture, of that master's art. In his capacity as Rector of the Academy he published a treatise on *The Educational Rôle of Music in the Social Order*, which was both broad in concept and thorough in its detail. In addition, he took the field in a number of other matters pertaining to the cultural life of the capital—for instance, in questions related to modern music in general and to religious music in particular.

His last years brought a steady decline in physical fitness, and a growing consciousness of the approaching end of his struggle for health: a condition of things he sought by all means to hide from others. Nor did fate spare him still other vexations quite apart from this, his chief one. After one year, the Academy he founded was transformed into something different. He withdrew from it, since neither its character nor its structure suited his convictions.

Even his material circumstances were not easy, for his poor health hindered him from serious work. He lived in a modest log cottage in Zakopane, leaving it from time to time for concert tours which took him to a growing number of neighbouring countries. Everywhere he was met with unanimous expressions of recognition, and with admiration for his work. In November, 1935, he left Zakopane—for good. He lived to see the enthusiastic reception of his *Harnasie* in Paris in April, 1936. Afterwards he spent some summer months in Warsaw, never free from illness; and he left in the autumn for southern France in a hopeless battle with tuberculosis. From thence they brought him back—almost in his last agony—in the closing day of March, 1937, to Lausanne. Here he breathed his last on 29 March.

It is not easy to express in a brief paper all that Szymanowski's work in general signifies as art, and how great is its richness of content. I should like to express this difficulty more precisely, as well as to show how far afield in the world of metaphors one must go to make manifest the inexpressible, by citing some comments made by the Neapolitan critic, Guido Pannain. They are taken from his study of the Pole's work:

"Szymanowski is an author out of the *Thousand and One Nights*. I do not know who taught him his mastery of tone, but it surely must have been a magician. There is something of Nostradamus and Cagliostro in this passionate charmer, with the sweet smile of a woman, the hands of a Liszt, the mind of a Wagner, and the heart of a Debussy. He is as though a descendant of Chopin, whom some Kipling's fancy has initiated into the secrets of the Jungle. A hunter for diamonds, who has descended deep into the mines of the orchestra. The professor and the poet have clasped hands in this man, and shaped in him a chord of a new kind. He is the Romantic spirit, soaked in Impressionism, and hung on the skeleton of a gladiator."

In pregnant and clear-cut terms the same French critic, André Coeuroy, has made the following observations, summing up the art and influence of Szymanowski:

"He has performed the miracle of weaning Polish music from expressing itself in non-Polish musical language. He is the creator of constantly recurring subtleties in the symphony, in chamber music, in song and in opera. He is the first Pole since Chopin who has revealed the essence of creative genius. The whole art of

Szymanowski is based on logic, though not necessarily of the traditional kind. There is something Latin about his music. His nature is of that of dreamings, of lofty soarings, of magnificence and of intimacy, all of them expressed in the free language of today."

On the diploma, D.Phil. honoris causa, which we gave him in the name of the University of Cracow in December, 1930, the reasons were set forth for this, so well deserved, distinction. We saw in him one of the most daring propagators of contemporary music, one who has enriched the treasure of our national culture, a Master who, in the lofty understanding of his mission and with a heroism worthy of his genius, has always held aloft the banner of the highest ideals, has never lowered the plane of his inspiration to meet the likes and dislikes of the crowd, but has encouraged others, and drawn them after him by noble example.

As one who from the start ventured to draw the attention of others to the greatness of this genius, who was glad to prepare the way for his music because of faith in its historic mission; finally as one who helped to bear his coffin to its last resting-place in the vaults reserved for distinguished Poles in the Skalka church in Cracow, I bow my head before the spirit of him we have lost, as before one who has lighted up all our lives by the splendour of his genius.

Krakow.

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