

“It’s always really his own music”

Sakari Oramo on Szymanowski’s Six Songs of the Fairy-tale Princess

We are here to talk about Szymanowski’s 6 Songs of the Fairy-tale Princess, which you completed in 2012. How did you discover these songs?

Oramo: Initially, I discovered them as a song cycle for piano and voice, which my wife Anu Komsa sang. Then I subsequently learned that there is an orchestration by Szymanowski of three of the movements. Of course I wondered why he didn’t complete all six, because they seem to almost call for an orchestration. The texture is so rich and so imaginative, and somehow also funnily unpianistic in a way. Knowing Szymanowski’s other wonderful cycle for voice and ensemble, *Słopiewnie* – which is a slightly earlier piece that I’ve performed quite a lot of times – I thought: Why not embark on this trip and try and emulate Szymanowski’s style by orchestrating the missing three *Princess Songs*.

How did you start the process of orchestrating these songs? It must have been really difficult to plunge into these soundworlds, trying to recreate Szymanowski’s style in the missing songs?

Oramo: It was, absolutely. I immersed myself first in the existing orchestrations of the three *Princess Songs*, and made the decision to use the same orchestration, the same forces, that are used in the original ones. I also went through quite a few other Szymanowski pieces, including some bits of the operas, to look at the ways he was thinking orchestrally. What I found was quite interesting: there is no standard “Szymanowski way” of orchestrating, as there is a standard Ravel way, or a standard Debussy way, or a standard Richard Strauss way, even. In many ways you can always recognize an orchestration by Ravel, even if you don’t know the piece and see the score. Just by the way he lays out the chords and makes things happen. But with Szymanowski there are really so many different solutions for different situations, and I think that’s what made it a very difficult, but also a very, very intriguing task.

How did you come to these particular compositional decisions then?

Oramo: Once I started writing things down on music paper, I felt I had a kind of intuitive approach to it already. So the work itself went quite quickly. I didn't try out any different scenarios, I was quite sure that this should be a violin solo, this should be an oboe, this should be two trumpets, etc. for example. It felt almost as if there were no other option.

Do you know why Szymanowski only orchestrated three songs and left out the others?

Oramo: I don't, but I assume it was for purely practical reasons, perhaps the given length of an orchestral performance.

The performer really feels that she is singing out of her own experience.

Is there a connection in terms of content between the songs which were written on poems by Szymanowski's sister?

Oramo: Yes, the texts are clearly related to each other. There is this light and eerie, yet quite tragic princess figure that tells about her life and her experiences. I think what makes it really touching is that if the performer really feels that she is singing out of her own experience – because we all have those experiences, don't we? In that sense, I think Szymanowski beautifully shows his understanding of the female psyche in his music, if I may say so, because he assimilates so beautifully to these feelings.

Take for instance the last of the songs, which is a kind of a feast, which is happening in quite a merry and chaotic way, but then quite soon it dies down and the princess starts to think about what her life actually is and how she cannot be merry although the others are having fun.

Musically speaking we have a variety of different styles, we are at a crossroad

if you like in this cycle. There's a kind of clear mountain music influence, meaning the folk style of the Carpathian Mountains were Szymanowski spent most of his composing time. On the other hand, there is the European Modernism of the time, the influence of French music. But Szymanowski always uses it in a very intelligent fashion, not trying to create a pseudo-French atmosphere. It's always really his own music, he just uses elements from different styles, as I guess any great composer would.

Do you think that Szymanowski was influenced by what surrounded him? Nature, mountains, Eastern culture and all these very different cultural influences that he came across through his travels to Northern Africa for instance?

Oramo: I'm sure that influenced him, and also the fact that he travelled so extensively in a time when it wasn't completely usual; it also tells that he was very interested in other cultures, taking interest in different ways of life, and I think that's also something you can hear in his music. It is not this narrowly nationalistic closed-view feeling, but it's like the whole world is open, and that's what Szymanowski can bring to our days too.

But he wasn't a collector of music, like Bartók for instance.

Oramo: Not in that sense, or Enescu indeed as well. No, not to my knowledge, at least. He was more collecting experiences and influences rather than scientifically creating databases of music, which Bartók did, and which Enescu did as well. That's a value in itself, of course.

//and then translating it into music.

Oramo: Yes, into his own marvellous music.

Would you say that these influences which he gained on his travels to Northern Africa can be heard in the Princess Songs?

Oramo: Maybe not so much in the *Princess Songs* which I think are more influenced by North Eastern European music culture. There are of course other song cycles, like *The Love Songs of Hafiz*, which are very much impregnated by the Middle East and Szymanowski's travels there.

How would you describe the relation between the solo voice and the orchestra?

Oramo: It's interesting, because in the songs that Szymanowski himself orchestrated there is a feeling that he doesn't want to picture the text and the voice one to one in the orchestra, he rather wants to add almost like a dialogue-partner to the singer. I tried to follow the same road in my own orchestrations so that the vocal events are not directly projected in the orchestra, but rather that the orchestra adds another layer of material, which I think makes the overall shape and sound richer.

His sense of colour and drama, and the influence of his music, which kind of goes straight to the heart.

How significant are the Six Songs of the Fairy-tale Princess in Szymanowski's Oeuvre and, considering other songs that have been written around this time, by Mahler, Berg, Schönberg and Richard Strauss of course: which place do they have in their time in your opinion?

Oramo: Szymanowski was an entirely unique voice in his time. I think the fact that he is not as well-known as a songwriter as some of the other contemporary people – like Mahler, as you said, Berg, Schönberg, Strauss, etc. – is due to the fact that his complete oeuvre has a kind of sporadic character, he doesn't build big cycles of pieces that seem to belong together. All his symphonies are in very different modes. One of them is a piano concerto, one of them is a choral symphony, and the others are works of youth. So it's very hard to put him into a clear context.

And yet every time you hear Szymanowski's music you think "This is a completely unique voice." Very much looking for a direct expression, a sort of non-romantic, but very sensitive expression. And that's what I like enormously about his music, his sense of colour and drama, and the influence of his music, which kind of goes straight to the heart.

Do you think that writing the songs for piano and voice prepared Szymanowski for writing Król Roger for example?

Oramo: Yes, I'm sure. Although I can't see them as "finger exercises" for the opera, certainly he used all of the virtues that he discovered in his song cycles in *King Roger*, which I think is one of the fantastic great operas of the 20th century and would deserve to be played much, much more often, also in staged performances.

Has your own interpretation of the songs changed during the years? You premièred them in 2012 and have performed them a lot since then.

Oramo: Yes, my interpretations of everything change constantly. I'm not one of those musicians who lays down laws of how to perform music. Each time is a bit different and obviously always in accordance with the singer. Breathing with the singer is very important, listening to the text, letting the text happen in its own time and in its own articulation is quite important. Performing these songs is a really joyful experience.