On the instinctual life of sounds

Karol Szymanowski between ecstasy of sound and national style

Karol Szymanowski

European music at the turn of the century was dominated by an intoxication of sound. In the years that followed Richard Wagner, the orchestral pedal became a feature of excessive sound settings: the word "sound" itself was accorded a magical meaning and Paul Bekker even titled a book Klang und Eros (Sound and Eros). With an ironic undertone, Camille Saint-Saëns describes an episode in which a hysterical woman who worshipped Wagner fainted at the maestro's feet on hearing the E minor/C major chord progression in Siegfried that signals Brünnhilde's awakening. The shimmering world of the Holy Grail in *Lohengrin*; the lambent Venusberg music in *Tannhäuser;* the chromaticism in *Tristan* with its addiction to night and death; the magical sound of the *Ring* tetralogy – all these debilitating, rhapsodising, blossoming, fervent and erotically tinged forms of expression become condensed by the new generation of musicians into a metaphysics of sound that is a concurrent source of mystery and adventure, reverence and revelry, meditation and frenzy.

The Polish composer Karol Szymanowski, who was born in 1882 (the year Wagner died), must also be included in the group of sound erotomaniacs. If we consciously exclude Szymanowski's creative period in Poland, then many of his works – despite all their differentiation in terms of form, structure and instrumentation – are absolute emanations of sound. Szymanowski's cousin, childhood friend and later librettist Jaros□aw Iwaszkiewicz recounts that the word "sound" was one of Karol's favourite expressions. Accordingly, the "miraculous sound experience", the "intoxicating spheric apparition of sound" becomes a primordial theme in Szymanowski's oeuvre that is already committed to rituals and ancient symbols. "Sensuous, hazy and sultry" are the most common descriptions used in reviews at the time, and Iwaszkiewicz writes at one point that such "outrageously metaphysically improper music" as Szymanowski's had never been known before. Iwaszkiewicz also described the songs of an infatuated muezzin whose texts were written by him as radiating "sultriness and the scent of musk", attributes that are reminiscent of the fin de siècle, décadence, Jugendstil and orientalism.

Polish lack of openness and Viennese bohème, Catholic strictness and the Dionysian.

Szymanowski's character is indeed swathed in something of the aura of a bygone artistic ideal which has its foundations more in mystery than in industrious creativity, and more in morbidezza than in motivity, searching for profound layers of existence rather than enjoying life with a robust enthusiasm for music-making. Biographically, this existence comprises a Polish lack of openness and Viennese bohème, Catholic strictness and the Dionysian, ecstasy and ascesis. And given that Szymanowski's colourful and fascinating existence was in actual fact exposed to the seeds of disintegration – he was facing death in the form of an insidious tuberculosis – the proximity to Thomas Mann's type of artist becomes astoundingly clear. However, although Karol wallowed in Wagnerian sounds on the piano as a boy and later also abandoned himself to *Tristan* excesses, even spending time as a patient in Davos, the Magic Mountain, his music, with its unconditional postulate of beauty, does not reflect an ailing young man or even a character that was

hostile to life, but a personality who is struggling to achieve an individual form and expression similar to his great contemporaries.

It is a need for self-expression that is repeatedly described as ecstatic and is therefore associated with Scriabin. However, although Scriabin could be called a constructor and programmaticist of sound ecstasies, in Szymanowski's works ecstasy is treated more haphazardly, coming from within and unfolding out of the misterioso at the beginnings of the movements in a fever curve that rises continually, discharging itself in a vocal and instrumental apotheosis. Examples can be found in the violin concertos which Szymanowski wrote for the brilliant violinist Pawel Kocha□sky, in *Symphony Nos. 2* and *3,* in the opera *King Roger,* as well as in the orchestral songs, the string quartets and the piano music.

Despite all this hedonism of sound and the rich wealth of colour, however, there is a preference for darkness and melancholy. Szymanowski absolutises the nocturne mood of his compatriot Chopin; his inventiveness of sound flees the "treacherous day", just as his chromatically rambling, expansive tunes grow further and further away from tonality. Szymanowski's very own sound sphere is a mysteriously iridescent Song of the Night, free-floating at a clear height or bathed in a mystical darkness, leading up to the "Grandioso". It is music that combines the Tristan motif with the vocal and sound anthems of Daphnis et Chloé, purple/violet, in sultry air and a "mixture of night and light, black and bright".

Even the young Szymanowski must have felt that the society to which he belonged was coming to an end.

Karol Szymanowski was born in Tymoszówka, Ukraine, and was therefore a Russian citizen; like Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov he came from the landed aristocracy, the cultural class of small and mid-sized landowners.

Biographer Stanis□aw Golachowski writes: "The Szymanowski family differed from their milieu in the high level of their artistic culture," and continues:

“The prerequisites for his standard of music were already created by the parents of the composer. Karol’s father was outstandingly musical. He was responsible for the musical training of Karol and his siblings, which was based on the best traditions of European music. Only works of the great composers, above all Mozart and Beethoven, were played on the Szymanowskis’ grand piano. This training encouraged Karol’s musical development to grow in the most beneficial direction because he was able to learn about the best works in music literature while still a child. Even the young Szymanowski must have felt that the society to which he belonged was coming to an end. The family’s ultimate ruin after the October Revolution affected him not only materially but above all emotionally, as shown in his letters from the period between 1917 and 1920. He tried to save as much of his culture as possible in his music.

Jaros aw Iwaszkiewicz recalls several observations that relate less to the music and more to his cousin’s role as an outsider within the family. The image emerges of an adolescent dandy who cleverly hides his increasing introversion from the outside world. There is his polite yet cold detachment from any maternal guidance in religious matters, and there is also his early appreciation of heathen antiquity, coupled with a tendency towards stylisation and narcissism. In the darkened salon in Tymoszówka he poses as a dying Petronius Arbiter based on Sienkiewicz’ novel Quo Vadis, simultaneously symbolising his own role in life and in art; for the moment his behaviour manages to shock his strait-laced Polish aunts who deem him a “tainted person” and an “amateur composer”.

Before Szymanowski entered life as a fully developed artist, he collected impressions, as it were, in order to be able to provide his cult of beauty with content that is as rich as possible. His future mission would be “to guide the Philistine with a benevolent and wise smile to the worlds of beauty”. In order to be able to fulfil this, the young Karol trod the path of Oscar Wilde, or rather Dorian Gray. For Warsaw around 1900, this lifestyle was unusual enough; Szymanowski was regarded as one of the “best-dressed” young men in Poland and he did not behave like a docile student at the Conservatoire, but like a “rich young man from Ukraine”, not as a composer of songs, but as a heart-breaker who dedicates songs to his numerous conquests.

His national colouring: a combination of aestheticism and the cult of beauty.

And so this was no energetic reformer, writing about the movement of the waves along the Danube in his notebook like Leoš Janáček; this was a young man who made Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy his gospel, enthusiastically studied the music of Chopin and Scriabin and searched for the land of the Greeks with his soul. An artist who took the future national colouring of his music from aestheticism and the cult of beauty. Iwaszkiewicz rather pompously called this cult a "religion of love" yet fittingly associated it with illness: "Before this religion had become refined as a result of the many years spent travelling, with unforgotten impressions in Sicily and Africa, with the contemplative observation of art in Italy and finally with the many lonely years of war, and before it could bear fruit such as King Roger, this mysterious enigma of love and tolerance, where amor and caritas merge into one, his cult of the beauty of life took on disturbing, sometimes vulgar forms. By this I mean that the tuberculosis, whose seed had always existed inside Szymanowski's organism, made its own contribution towards a certain ecstatic agitation. Basically, the most essential element of his art, the 'pression' of which the critics occasionally speak and which at times pushes back the boundaries of conventional music aesthetics, is above all his eroticism."

The fact that this erotic flair already makes itself felt in Szymanowski's early works is indeed initially not only a symptom of the illness, but also of the era. Under the influence of the erotomaniacs from Bayreuth, only very few composers were still writing "simple tunes". Scriabin sketched his ecstatic Poème and Grieg composed a piece for piano titled *Erotik*. Strauss indulged in erotic love scenes and Ravel developed his orchestral style which Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt associated with "a preoccupation with copulation" and "Eros in sound". Even Schönberg, who was not known for acquiescing to this style, allowed himself to be inspired by Strauss to write impassioned music for Pelléas und Mélisande; later, it was he who formulated the expression "instinctual life of sounds".

In order to become more closely acquainted with European modernity around 1900, and even Wagner, Szymanowski was forced to study the music for himself. Golachowsky writes: "People in Warsaw knew hardly anything about Wagner and his artistic heir Richard Strauss. For the Polish composers who had reached artistic maturity at the time, Mendelssohn was a role model worthy of imitation." Henryk Opiensky characterised the musical situation in Warsaw at the time as follows: "Wagner's *Tristan* was a myth and familiarity with it could only be harmful."

What was harmful for some would become an elixir for Szymanowski. In order to escape the academicism at Warsaw Conservatoire, the four composer friends Grzegorz Fitelberg, Ludomir Rózycki, Karol Szymanowski and Apolinary Szeluta formed a group that soon called itself "Young Poles". As there were hardly any performances of Wagner's or Strauss' music, the society organised its own private performances from piano scores.

The enthusiasm for German music was not at all shared by Warsaw's conservative musical heavyweights. Szymanowski, who was now influenced by Max Reger and had written a symphony which he himself called a "harmonic and orchestral monstrosity", lost the reputation he had gained from his early chamber music and lyricism as a result of this kind of "hyper-Germanness". To use a witticism by Oscar Wilde, whom he admired so much – after this disappointment, Szymanowski did not enter a monastery; instead, he turned to operettas. Of course, Lottery for Husbands, as the piece was called, was not a success.

In his *Symphony No.2* in B flat major, Szymanowski sublimated Strauss' influences on him and began to merge them with his personal style. Some transitions, surging passages and final cadences seem to have been taken directly from *Zarathustra* and *A Hero's Life.* However, Strauss, who was excellent at creating effects, would have been unlikely to begin a symphony with such intimate chamber music; the real Szymanowski is shown in the chromatic disguising of the theme by obscuring the structure with polyphonic superimposition and dynamic overexpansion, and ultimately in the gradual increase in movement. The Symphony in B flat major was the crowning achievement in Szymanowski's second creative period. Even though it was forced to yield to his later orchestral works with regard to its value, it still remained the most outstanding symphony of contemporary Polish music. And even if the entire wealth of new musical ideas in the symphony were disregarded, the level of compositional technique alone displayed by Szymanowski in this work would irrevocably have crowned him Poland's principal composer.

What was harmful for some would become an elixir for Szymanowski.

Szymanowski looked for new possibilities for performance and publication. Remembering a defining experience with *Lohengrin* in his youth, he turned to Vienna, which at the time was the centre of European music life.

On 18 January 1912 a concert took place in the Großer Saal at the Musikverein in which only Szymanowski's works were played: Grzegorz Fitelberg performed *Symphony No.2* with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and Artur Rubinstein played the *Piano Sonata No.2* in A major. Two months later Szymanowski signed a 10-year contract with Universal Edition. UE director Emil Hertzka was extremely fond of Szymanowski, as can be seen in the large number of letters exchanged and their unusually heartfelt manner of communication until Hertzka's death in 1932. As Hertzka was passionate about opera, he also tried to interest Szymanowski in this genre despite his introversion. As a result, Szymanowski wrote to his friend Stefen Spiess: "I am beginning to think more and more about an opera – purely for career reasons – it would be very important. I am also postponing my personal plans in the long term and am beginning to look for a finished, dramatic text."

As the first major opera published by Hertzka and UE was *The Distant Sound* by Schreker, Szymanowski began to show a particular interest in his works and described the next opera *The Music Box and the Princess* as beautiful and also "full of poesy and expression", despite "ambiguities and inconsistencies". Later he was full of anticipation while waiting for the opera *The Stigmatised.* Szymanowski felt a certain affinity for Schreker, – given their mutual pull towards the misterioso, to frenzy, ecstasy and rapture, which manifests itself in an immaterial sound, vague murmuring, undulation and glistening: an evocation of sounding spheres. The beginning of the *Violin Concerto No.1,* one of Szymanowski's most popular works, most closely corresponds to the cleverly mixed trill of sound from several instruments in the Stigmatised prelude. After the introductory pizzicato of the solo instrument, a ripple of sound develops in the strings, punctuated by brief, decorative motifs from the wind instruments. Harp glissandi and piano figures increasingly distort the initially tonal sound. Then the violin intones its meandering, yearning, expressively climactic lyrical theme in a high register. This immaterial singing on the violin in a high and very high register becomes a specific detail of Szymanowski's sound.

“I am beginning to think more and more about an opera – purely for career reasons ...”

Karol Szymanowski

“If Italy did not exist, then I could not exist either. I am neither a painter nor a sculptor, but when I go through the rooms in museums, the churches and the streets, when I look at these grand and proud works that look down upon all that is stupid, low-level and insensitive with an eternally clement and cheerful smile – when I call to mind all these generations of the most beautiful, most ingenious people, I feel that living and working are worthwhile ” Szymanowski awarded programmatic content to his impressions of Italy and particularly of Sicily, and then – most importantly – put them on stage in the opera King Roger.

In addition to the concerto, it is the three-part cycle *Mythes* for violin and piano in which the composer developed a new Impressionistic style of chamber music. The first piece in Mythes is called *The Spring of Arethusa* and refers to the spring which has its source in the harbour at Syrakus. Tradition holds that there is a connection under the sea between the spring and Arcadia in Greece. The violin cantilena again unfolds in a high register over the glistening, chromatically changing wave-like figures in the piano accompaniment.

Szymanowski’s mystical sound emerges in his second creative period which was during the war years between 1913 and 1918. The piano cycle *Masques* was composed in close proximity to *Mythes;* the former presents character portraits in *Scheherazade, Tantris the Buffoon* and *Don Juan’s Serenade*. With his style of piano playing ranging from ostentatious to expressionist, and its sound hypertrophy that is already visually communicated on three staves, the *Masques* are the counterpart to Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit.* Several other musicians with a sensitivity to sound had also already been interested in the figure of the storyteller Scheherazade: the works range from Schumann’s melancholic piece for piano and Rimsky-Korsakov’s colourful symphony to Ravel’s songs, and Szymanowski extends the repertoire with a dreamy impression embellished by altered, broadly-arpeggiated chords.

The gesture of mysterious elevation, which becomes Szymanowski's unmistakable sound cipher, is also found in his third, national period, although this is no longer as confusing and freely sweeping, being instead classicistically subdued: his *String Quartet No.2* from 1927, in which the composer uses folkloristic themes from his ballet *Harnasie,* returns to the mystical beginning in a reminiscence; this time the shadowy sounds only exist in simple ostinato semiquavers comparable to Schubert's *Unfinished*. The cantabile theme arches above this extremely delicate layer of sound in an expansive curve.

The introductory misterioso reaches its highest density in *Symphony No.3, The Song of the Night,* which Szymanowski composed for solo tenor, choir and large orchestra in 1914–1916 to verses from the medieval Persian poet Dschalal-ad-din Rumi. Again, the lyrical violin part unfolds in a high register over an altered wind chord: this "cantabile molto espressivo" string writing undulates on the characteristic tritone interval, up and down like a large nocturnal bird. This first section with its veils of mist seems like a symphonic farewell from the Romantic symphonies which – from Beethoven to Mahler – indirectly take the words of the creation account as their motto: "And the spirit of God hovered over the waters".

Schreker drew hope for his opera career from the performance of Strauss' *Salome,* which he attended in Graz. And during his first stay in Vienna, Szymanowski also felt an urge to write "his" Salome, as he had already set both *Salome* and *Penthesilea* to music in the form of songs. Starting in 1912 plans for *Hagith* were mentioned in letters exchanged by the composer and UE, and these soon developed into a single-act work with lavish instrumentation. Apart from their stylistic details, *Salome* and *Hagith* are also linked by the fact that their drastic content was not suitable for court theatres.

Strauss' "Salome" opened the door to the Orient for him and thus to musical colour that was to be ground-breaking for his future personal style.

This experience was significant for Szymanowski in a different respect: it opened the door to the Orient for him and thus to musical colour that was to be ground-breaking for his future personal style. Three cycles were composed starting in 1914 which could be called highlights of orientalised song: *Love Songs of Hafiz, 6 Songs of a Fairy-Tale Princess* and *Songs of an Infatuated Muezzin.*

Ravel is supposed to have responded to the suggestion that he should use Arabian motifs in his music with: "If I were ever to write something like that, then it would be more Arabian than all of this here!" Szymanowski could also rightly claim to have found an authentic sound in his Hafiz songs that extended far beyond the arabesques and chinoiseries of his day. The Indian pianist and composer Sorabji described the Hafiz songs as "music of radiant spiritual clarity, of a sublime ecstatic expression", adding that "these songs are not the product of a costumed European, but the creation of somebody who is spiritually akin to us, who communicates to us in music that we instinctively recognise as the quintessence of Persian art."

If the opera *Hagith* paved the way for the song cycles, then these in turn form the preliminary stage to Szymanowski's principal dramatic work: the opera *Król Roger.* And here it is particularly the lyrical centrepiece of the work that theatricalises the Hafiz sound: *Roxana's song.* Enchanted by the suggestive power of the handsome Shepherd, Roger's wife starts to sing her enticing coloratura. The occasional accusation that Szymanowski's music is esoteric can best be countered with Roxana's song. Its voluptuous melismas that twist upwards and lean hauntingly towards the minor keys create a decidedly intense earworm.

In 1918 Szymanowski wrote to Hertzka: "I have thought a lot about the theatre now, and I have reached the conclusion that "opera" as such is almost at an end. This is why I am so very much interested in what Schreker intends to say in his new opera!" In a letter he later added: "Would it be impossible to receive a piano score of The Stigmatised? Schreker always interests me the most, as an artist, but also as a person!" This interest, in particular in Schreker's principal work *The Stigmatised,* would bear fruit: in 1918, the year in which this opera was premiered, Szymanowski began to write his King Roger.

Both operas, loosely speaking, focus on the victory of unfettered sensuality over order and compulsion. At the end of *The Stigmatised* the handsome seducer Tamare Vitellozzo tears his chains apart "with huge strength". The symbolic importance of this scene must have impressed Szymanowski because towards the end of Act 2 in *King Roger,* the stage direction for the fettered

herdsman reads: “He tears his chains apart and throws them at the King’s feet.” In both operas, this analogy corresponds to the tendency to allow the Dionysian principle of rapture, ecstasy and dissolution to increasingly win out over the Apollonian strictness, which is represented in *The Stigmatised* by art and in *King Roger* by the power of the church.

Szymanowski – the master of ecstasy, mysticism and misterioso. These stylistic characteristics did not exactly correspond to the composer’s self-image.

Szymanowski – the master of ecstasy, mysticism and misterioso. These stylistic characteristics did not exactly correspond to the composer’s self-image, whose declared artistic ideal was “the polyphony of the fugue”. Of course he also had a strict idea of form and a structural consciousness, with a polyphonic style trained through Bach and Reger and an occasionally complicated rhythm with an affinity to Bartók and Stravinsky. The beginning of *Violin Concerto No.*1 could be called an ideal intermediation between Schreker’s misty sound and the clear transparency of Petrushka. Likewise, the three piano sonatas, which all end in an extended fugue, also mediate between the Romantic dramatic style of Liszt’s Sonata in B minor and the harsh martellato style of Bartók’s sonatas.

The turnaround in European art after the First World War, which was characterised by the transformation of subjective tendencies into a new “objective” artistic ideal, left its mark on Karol Szymanowski as well, although it certainly cannot be said that he changed his style. His penchant for objective forms and content is striking, however, as is a growing tendency towards a national consciousness. The years between 1920 and 1925 saw the composition – in addition to *King Roger* – of the *Słopiewnie Songs,* the three *Lullabies*, the *Nursery Rhymes,* the delightful ballet grotesque *Mandragora* and the *20 Mazurkas* for Piano op.50, culminating in the *Stabat Mater* for soloists, choir and orchestra which Szymanowski had written as a “farmer’s requiem” for folk religion. At the same time, he began to work on the large ballet pantomime Harnasie, in which he memorialised the life of the people in

the Polish Tatras and the Podhale culture. All these works are redolent of mythical themes, a rejection of gestures drunk with beauty and death, and a shift towards more concrete, national and folklorist themes.

When you consider that the composer turned down a composition post in Cairo in favour of the gruelling position as Director of the Warsaw Conservatoire, which was ruinous for his health, then you can only call this behaviour tragic patriotism. Yet that is also part of Szymanowski's colourful personality: a dialectic of artistic individualism and proximity to the people, extravagance and a social sense of responsibility.

—

Wolfgang Molkow