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Karol Szymanowski and his “Modernist Romanticism”

Karolis Szymanowskis ir jo „modernus romantizmas“

Abstract

The analysis of Karol Szymanowski's works has shown – not only diachronically but also (predominantly) synchronically – that the musical language of the composer changes, which indicates evolution at the linguistic level; however, the values that belong to the level of poetics of music, construed in supra-linguistic and supra-technical categories, remained unchanged. The aim of this article is to indicate main principles and tendencies of Szymanowski's poetics.

Keywords: Karol Szymanowski, Polish music, romanticism, modernism.

Anotacija

Karolio Szymanowskio darbų analizė atskleidė ne tik diachroniškai, bet ir (daugiausia) sinchroniškai, kad kompozitoriaus vartojama muzikos kalba keičiasi, o tai nurodo lingvistinio lygmens evoliuciją. Tačiau vertybės, priklausančios muzikos poetikos lygmeniui, interpretuojamos ekstralingvistinėmis ir ekstratechninėmis kategorijomis, išliko nepakitusios. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra nurodyti pagrindinius Szymanowskio poetikos principus ir tendencijas.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Karolis Szymanowskis, lenkų muzika, romantizmas, modernizmas.

Karol Szymanowski, just like his predecessors – the Romanticists, was seeking external inspiration for his music. He found it in literature and poetry, mythology, painting and sculpture. He expanded the scope of Romantic aesthetics while continuing its basic objectives: to intensify musical expression and to reach the level of poesy. Szymanowski's music was also born from the rich “sonosphere”, established by the tradition of musical genres and musical rhetoric with its repertoire of meaningful gestures, well-known to competent, broadly humanistic artists, such as the author of *Stabat Mater* and *Harnasie*.

Szymanowski was a personality open to external impulses and his composing career passed through artistic phases during which he absorbed various styles and poetics. Initially it was neo-Romantic and symbolic music, later it turned impressionistic and artistic, only to adopt national music as its leading label. In his artistic evolution, the composer displayed interest in different stylistic trends, composing idioms, as well as universal, national and local Polish values. The phases were as follows:

1. in the *juvenile phase*, when he tended toward expressionism and was fascinated with Fryderyk Chopin's music, he showed interest in the post-Romantic legacy, which stemmed from his natural desire to draw from musical tradition;
2. in the *maturing and model-absorbing phase*, he exhibited influences of German modernism, particularly those of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss;
3. in the *individual style development phase*, he showed a sudden and explosive fascination with French

impressionism and symbolism as represented by the music of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, as well as with Oriental culture;

4. in the *culminating, national phase*, Szymanowski developed interest in Polish folk music and again in the music of Chopin – as a result of a new interpretation of it;
5. in the *folklore phase*, he reacted with strong resonance to the folk music of the Kurpie region and the Tatra Highlands, with their “fresh barbarity” stimulating the imagination;
6. in the *late, neoclassical phase*, the composer developed his artistic response to European vitalism and Stravinsky.

The influences indicated above were not just eclectic “calques” made by the erudite composer, but conscious choices made by the artist from a vast cultural repertoire, and not just that of European culture.

Szymanowski's artistic path may be called the path towards himself. It led through the phases of absorbing the world and unlimited gathering of cultural and personal experiences to the moments of shaking off the excess to further choices as well as more and more frequent and profound reflections on himself, human existence, the world and life. The exuberant, decadent emotions and the mystical oriental sensuality were supplanted by human feelings. (Tomaszewski 2002)

From the point of view of the genre, Karol Szymanowski was a Romantic who lived at the time of modernism. He was thus interested in the Romantic idea of “correspondence of arts” as well as in programme music. In one of the sketches

written in his notebook and planned most probably as a chapter for his "monograph on contemporary music", he writes as follows:

I do not mean the programme in the sense of a musical anecdote, but something much deeper – transformations reaching into the very essence of music. [In Romanticism] something strange occurred in the field of music. It turned into something meant for life (not a particular anecdote). It filled partially with alien content – contemporary and parallel, which was to constitute an integral and organic part of its fundamental expression. It absorbed elements of reality alien to it, but meant to make it more profound. They deepened it [...] externally and made it dependent on the psychology of the artist. At the same time, they distorted its key structural and formal elements, thus making it dependent on the external, even if most respectable, a priori idea. (Szymanowski 1984: 486)¹

The key role in this process is played by the profound "transformation" of music under the influence of extra-musical idea as well as a subjective element.

Romantic genotype

The Romantic idea of an artist's mission became a foundation of Karol Szymanowski's socio-musical world view. Let us mention his Romantic ancestors: Zygmunt Krasiński emphasized the necessity of Poland obtaining a "passport to Europe"; Cyprian Kamil Norwid saw European-ness as a category of constant tradition rooted in Greek and Roman antiquity. Polish Romantic writers presented a nation as an *individual* composed of body and soul, having its own thoughts, spirit, nature, and emotions. The national ethos has become integrally bound with the *sacrum* – it is from this domain that it has taken the Manichean distinction between good and evil to define a group of patriots. Polish values, at once national and universal, were expressed in two spheres: *historical* and *moral-spiritual*. For the Romantics, Europe, "the Motherland of Motherlands" was, above all, "the Europe of Nations". The Romantic idealism was based not only on emphasizing the diversity of the so-called national characters, but it also expressed a strong striving towards cultural rebirth and self-identification on a native level. An individual's strongly emphasized belonging to a certain nation, a particular place on Earth, became a condition and a yardstick of participation in the European universe.

Szymanowski advocated the notion of Romanticism in the wide sense. "Let us finally come to an understanding as to the meaning of words," he wrote.

If "Romanticism" in music is to mean an absolute unity and balance between a given work's form and content, than we

can agree on Romanticism. I might, however, venture to note that according to this rule, not only for example Bach, Mozart, Händel, and Gluck, but perhaps even Palestrina was a true Romantic with regard to his contemporaries. (Ibid.: 233)²

Principles and tendencies of Szymanowski's poetics

Stanisław Brzozowski, a critic of Polish modernism, writes:

We can understand a work of art only once we delve into it so deeply, so completely into the soul of its creator, that we are able to see it, see all its details, in an identical way that the artist has seen during the creation. (Brzozowski 2008: 91)

The term *writing through oneself*, being in the middle of the story told, has become established in modern literature. It is the notion of *textualization of personal experience*, of binding the object with the text. There is no doubt that Szymanowski "composed through himself", that he was in the centre of what he wanted to express through music, that his work was born out of an intensive living of his life. It is impossible to cut out the composer out of his work, which became a *document* of the various inspirations and experiences. Yuri Lotman notes:

The world of the author's «I» is the only world. It is not connected with the world of reality, nor with the world of any other individual. Thus, from a Romantic point of view, there is no possibility of an equivalence of his poetic world and a world seen by a different, a more prosaic individual. The Romantic system as a whole (from a Romantic point of view) does not bear recoding. (Lotman 1984: 294)

Because of the Romantic roots of Szymanowski and of his artistic viewpoint, his musical poetics is not only a *group of extralinguistic and suprarechnical historical norms* but also a vision and a programme for creators of a new high culture in the newly regained independence and a newly built reality. Maria Janion confirms the visionary character of the Romantic era:

For a nation which had lost its civic existence, Romanticism offered a vast, independent, and self-reliant spiritual land, but it did not stop at that. It also built a *vision of the future* [MJS] – of man, of Poland, of humanity, and had shown the ways leading to it. (Janion 2007: 21)

Szymanowski's individual style – style seen as a recognizable, personal, "authorial" value – is a result of *six main* tendencies, or *principles* of his poetics (see: Janicka-Słysz 2013), regardless whether "composing through himself" resulted in his sensual Violin Concerto No. 1, which belongs to the poetics of Colourism, or whether it is articulated through a symphonic vitalism of the folkloric ballet *Harnasie*.

1. Principle one: steady hand – technique

“When will it finally be understood that the tools of one’s own creation must be forged in one’s own labour and perseverance, and that all conservatories provide only primary hints for its achievement?,” asked Szymanowski in his 1920 article *Uwagi w sprawie współczesnej opinii muzycznej w Polsce* [*Notes Concerning the Modern Musical Opinion in Poland*], delivered after his final return to Poland.

When shall it be finally understood that “musical knowledge” and art theory in general is not a value detached from a work of art but – on the contrary – it is the most subjective, *intrinsic* [MJS], infallible sense of form, which is organically bound with the piece of art, and for which the short list of «theoretical notes» can only be a slight help. (Szymanowski 1984: 42)³

The issue of perfect mastery of the craft of composing – artistic technique – is the first tendency in Szymanowski’s poetics. He reaffirmed it, in the artistic *praxis*, in all of his works.

For the author of *Mythes* and *Masques*, mastering the technique was of fundamental *value*: it entails the memory of the ancient understanding of the term *ars* as *techne*. It is connected with the idea of a “*steady hand*”, with the necessary process of an objective disciplining of the imagination at a higher level of sound matter formation, of giving it a logical architectural or dramatic shape.

Fryderyk Chopin was for Szymanowski a symbol of the perfect *métier*: the steady hand of the author of the *Revolutionary Étude* has risen above the historical tragedy. Szymanowski wrote about his great predecessor and role model with high esteem:

An artful imagination has sketched the main directions and borders. It was only in those select bounds that his *métier* – the wonderful “craft” – has flourished in its formal perfection. (Ibid.: 97)⁴

2. Principle two: work united in its creator’s experience

Karol Szymanowski’s universe is construed *in an area of contrasts*: the musical work is created as *an alignment of oppositions*. In this case, however, it is not an artificial gluing together of different parts of an organism, but it is *a kind of synthesis*. Its elements are brought together by the idea of *the creator’s experience*. Szymanowski applies a post-Romantic term used in the Young Poland period: *wzruszenie* [sentiment].

The composer was influenced by the imperative of *unity of the work*, the identical nature of the content and form. At the same time he proved that the components of

“worlds marvelling at each other” can also form a coherent and organic whole. In this, his thinking resembles that of Chopin, whose idiom Mieczysław Tomaszewski classifies as *coincidentia oppositorum* – a “dynamic unity of oppositions” (Tomaszewski 2010: 17) existing also in the dimension: classical legacy – Romantic innovation, *datum* – *novum*. For Szymanowski, this *dynamics of oppositions, or contrasts* is displayed on the plane of the following binary oppositions: the classical *to be* – the Romantic *to become*, Romanticism (inherited tradition) – Modernism (forming a new tradition), the force of feelings – the order and discipline of form.

Later, the musical work begins its independent life. Szymanowski writes that:

... the “material” – expressing nothing but itself – conjured up out of a disobedient lump is a creation of a never-ending “plasticity” and “positiveness”, a creation organized according to its own internal logic [...]. (Szymanowski 1984: 92–93)⁵

3. Principle three: the primacy of expression

Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht states that in the notion of a musical work as formed by the European tradition, two opposing categories are expressed: emotion and *mathesis* (Dahlhaus & Eggebrecht 1992: 43). In Karol Szymanowski’s views and music, we can distinguish this pair of terms *in extenso*. Emotion is connected with emphasizing of the *expressive musical weft*, its aural assets. *Mathesis* implies a longing for an order of emotions, arranging them in a legible and logical architectural shape, bracketing the above-mentioned intellectualized discipline. The two categories meet and inspire each other. On the one hand, emotion undergoes the rules of symmetry and order, and becomes to an extent “mathematized”, like in *Słopiewnie*. On the other hand, *mathesis* takes an „emotionalized” form, like in *3 Fragments from poems by Jan Kasprowicz*.

Szymanowski’s music is always formed in the service of expression – established *a priori* by the composer himself. Its articulation is helped by the many expressive annotations in the text of the work – they begin to function on the same rights as the elements of musical work. They are also a sign for the potential performer, informing him or her how to read the expressive layer of the music. From the very beginning of his creative journey, Szymanowski aimed to *interiorize external experience* in the form of an intensified musical expression possessing a legible inscription, according to the fundamental assumption of the unity of the sign and its designate.

Eggebrecht explains:

A natural exclamation can come from feelings but not from the sound material. Laughter and crying, sighing and exclamations are always authentic. The “ah” and the “oh” of the soul

has no history. Constantly, with imperishable primitiveness, the emotions *impose themselves on music* [MJS], which derives from them genetically. They constantly and directly penetrate the music, searching for their own innate place and rights in this form of art. (Ibid.: 39)

Szymanowski's music has stemmed from this sense of *emotive authenticity*. In this sense one can naturally find a heritage of Romanticism, a pre-expressionistic fever of feeling. Fubini says:

In the Romantic idea, music therefore transforms from a hedonistic spectacle – although one not devoid of affection, feelings and emotions – into a *mythical celebration* [MJS] characterized also by religion and mysticism. (Fubini 1997: 256)

4. Principle four: remembering tradition and the imperative of novelty

As a humanist, an aesthete and an erudite that he was, Szymanowski expertly drew from the living cultural tradition, not only of European origins. The wide spectrum of his reading – from the classics into modernity, an interest in both musical tradition and the most contemporary trends in 20th-century music – proves that he did not intend to subvert the canon of high culture heritage, but that he wanted to *creatively expand* it. His intention was not revolution at all costs, meaning the destruction of values, but a more naturally historical process of evolution and – emphasizing the creative "I" – an enrichment of a *communal sense of culture*. He understood tradition in the sense of "propriety" and "ruthless discipline" (in association with the idea of *métier*; Szymanowski 1984: 192).⁶ Starting from the German tradition, having internalized this technical steady hand and the cultural awareness of the form, Szymanowski turned to Oriental exoticism and the French tradition. Thus the craft homegrown in culture met a sensual approach to a timbre of French provenience; *métier* entered *erotic sensuality*.

Szymanowski explains:

Artistic "traditionalism": a thorough and objective assessment of the marvellous past of our art is an inescapable starting point without which a *bona fide* musical culture does not exist. [...] Nevertheless, we cannot remain and deteriorate in stagnation of this wonderful past. (Ibid.: 200)⁷

He does not mean the copying of tradition, replicating its styles or imitation; instead, he aims at a creative processing and enrichment of the cultural canon.

Therefore, according to Szymanowski, there is no conflict between "remembering tradition" and modernity, the relationship between them is that of a *natural continuity*. He also viewed the problems of artistic development and the history of music in the same terms of continuity. He wrote:

Modern terms and aesthetic yardsticks seem to hit directly into fixed and traditional dogmas, favoured by European music of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, apparently demolishing incontestable values and creating revolutionary chaos. To a superficial observer they seem a hopeless misplacement of an aesthetic instinct, a wasteland leading to a dismal abyss of self-destruction. After a thorough look into the depths of the problem, a sharp and objective eye sees a thousandfold repetition of a ceaseless legend: one of a superficial revolutionariness of a new (for a given era) art, which is actually but a continuation, a natural consequence of unavoidable transformations in the history of humankind. (Ibid.: 169)⁸

5. Principle five: universality inscribed into a "racial" nationality

Regardless of the accepted division of Szymanowski's *oeuvre* with a separate national (or: "Lekhite") period, his whole art has precisely national character. The composer explained:

They can call my works *Métopes*, *Masques* or *Mythes*; they can be bad or good music, but one thing is certain: they have been written by a Pole. This is the feature emphasized most strongly by ... the French critics. (Ibid.: 84)⁹

His aspirations of being a "racial" Polish composer come together with Szymanowski's opinion that "art, if only it is genuine, will always be universal, even if it finds its expression in a most national form" (Szymanowski 1984: 440).¹⁰ Let us put aside the modern negative connotations of the term "racial", and focus on the issue of its repercussions in Szymanowski's musical poetics.

Karol Szymanowski understands the aspirations to be a "racial" Polish composer as:

- drawing from deep cultural sources;
- avoiding *in crudo* quotes from actual folk works, unless it is justified by the content of the work and conscious artistic assumptions (as exemplified by his own Podhale ballet, *Harnasie*) and avoiding the temptation of an outer appearance of folklore (Szymanowski claims that "folk art paper cuttings" are the nightmare of his times);
- emphasizing individuality and originality, while at the same time opening up to Europe and the world.

Szymanowski sees the sound culture as follows:

Music is somewhat an *aroma* of culture's flower. If the flower withers, all that is left is but a dead shape, a faded colour. Along with life out goes the smell, perishing irrevocably. (Ibid.: 110)¹¹

It is also essential that the elements taken from an authentic folk work are not contradictory to the elements

of personal style; that they are not a foreign body. Szymanowski observes:

In the Romantic era, authentic “folk” elements (of rhythmic and melodic nature) started to persistently infiltrate the “academic” music in the form of a certain stylistic “exoticism”. (Ibid.: 171)¹²

Therefore what he means is not an exotic but a deeply and genuinely experienced inspiration.

As an artist,” Szymanowski once said, “I have always been against borders between individual national arts. Art, if only it is genuine, will always be universal, even if it finds its expression in a most national form. (Ibid.: 440)¹³

Although Szymanowski assigned the new Polish music essential tasks aiming at strengthening the national identity, he realized the dangers of becoming involved in nationalism. That is why he wrote:

A substantial value of a masterpiece has its place where, in its creator, the ethnic person – a Frenchman, an Englishman or a Pole – ends and the Lone human begins, standing face to face with life as a metaphysical concept. (Ibid.: 209)¹⁴

6. Principle six: aesthetization – being on the side of beauty

Both in his life and in his work, Szymanowski was an aesthete: he despised ugliness, deformation of reality; all signs of turpism were foreign to him. That is why *aesthetization* became one of the principles of his poetics. He even aesthetized the “rugged” notes of the folk *Podhale* melodies, transforming them into high artistic beauty. The principle of “beautiful music” can provoke a question concerning the *principle of truth*. Eggebrecht states:

From a certain point of view, with Mahler or Schönberg and his school in mind, we can say that the place of “beautiful” art has been taken over by “true” art and that the more “true” music is, the less it is “beautiful”. (Dahlhaus & Eggebrecht 1992: 151)

Szymanowski was opposed to the trite, conventionalized beauty taken from the generally accepted aesthetic trends. While analyzing the viewpoint of Igor Stravinsky, he made a more general explication:

Stravinsky’s “modernity” consists of a fanatical war against all templates, against the already-stagnated “Beauty”, against the casual “prettiness” of sound. It is a ruthless *search* for permanent values and forging his own “form”, which is completely independent from neighbouring currents. Finally, it is a thus achieved novelty – worlds of substantial, masculine beauty, perhaps “yesterday” unknown. (Szymanowski 1984: 54)¹⁵

Stanisław Brzozowski writes:

The process of creating «truth» is only a part of a more general process of creating character. (Brzozowski 1910: 325)

We might also add: also of “creating” beauty. The truth of a masterpiece consists in “its equivalence as an expression of the state of the soul, not in its coherence to the so-called reality” (Brzozowski 2008: 94). So, what beauty? True beauty. Ignacy Matuszewski notes that Romanticism, in Poland and in Europe, took delight in “strong, irritating, intensive feeling and sensations” (Matuszewski 1965: 359), and neglected those more subtle and harmonious impressions, focusing on *dynamic beauty*. Through his views and work – apart from realizing strong emotions in his music – Szymanowski seems to complement this lack of harmonized feelings.

References

- 1 Based on Szymanowski’s article “O programowości w muzyce” [On Programme Idea in Music].
- 2 Based on Szymanowski’s article “Romantyzm w dobie współczesnej” [Romanticism in the Present Era].
- 3 Based on Szymanowski’s article “Uwagi w sprawie współczesnej opinii muzycznej w Polsce” [Some Observations Concerning Musical Opinion in Poland].
- 4 Based on Szymanowski’s article “Opuszczę skalny mój szaniec” [I Will Leave My Rocky Entrenchment], published in *Rzeczpospolita*, 8 January 1923, No. 6.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Based on Szymanowski’s article “O twórczości Wagnera, Straussa i Schönberga” [On the Work of Wagner, Strauss and Schönberg].
- 7 Based on Szymanowski’s article “Przemówienie inauguracyjne przy objęciu dyrekcji Konserwatorium Muzycznego w Warszawie, 1 March 1927” [An Inaugural Address on the Occasion of his Accession to the Directorship of the Musical Conservatory in Warsaw].
- 8 Based on Szymanowski’s article “Zagadnienie ‘ludowości’ w stosunku do muzyki współczesnej. Na marginesie artykułu Beli Bartóka. U źródeł muzyki ludowej” [The Question of Folk in Relation to Contemporary Music], published in *Muzyka*, 1925, No. 10, p. 8–13.
- 9 See reference 4.
- 10 Based on Szymanowski’s article “Współpraca narodów. Droga Karola Szymanowskiego” [The Cooperation of Nations. Karol Szymanowski’s Path], published in *Sowietskoje Iskusstwo*, 14 September 1933, No. 52.
- 11 Based on Szymanowski’s article “O potrzebie ratowania muzyki góralskiej” [About the Necessity of Protecting Highland Music], published in *Poradnik Muzyczny*, Łódź, 1947, No. 2, p. 1–2.
- 12 See reference 8.
- 13 See reference 10.
- 14 Based on Szymanowski’s manuscript “O sztuce narodowej” [On National Music].
- 15 Based on Szymanowski’s article “Igor Strawiński” [Igor Stravinsky].

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Santrauka

Karolis Szymanowskis (1882–1937) išplėtė romantiškos estetikos spektrą, pabrėždamas svarbiausius jo tikslus: intensyvinti muzikinę išraišką ir pasiekti naują poetikos lygmenį. Tai buvo išoriniams impulsams atvira asmenybė, ir šio kūrėjo karjera patyrė kelias menines fazes, per kurias Szymanowskis tarsė įvairius stilius ir poetikos rūšis. Iš pradžių jis kūrė neoromantinę ir simbolinę muziką, kuri vėliau tapo impresionistinė ir itin meniška, kol galiausiai prisijaukino tautinės muzikos elementus. Kūrybinės evoliucijos metu kompozitorius akivaizdžiai domėjosi įvairiomis stilistinėmis tendencijomis, kompozicinėmis idiomomis, taip pat universaliosiomis, nacionalinėmis ir vietinėmis lenkų vertybėmis. Szymanowskio sociomuzikinio požiūrio į pasaulį pagrindu tapo romantinė menininko misijos idėja.

Žvelgiant žanrinės perspektyvos žvilgsniu, Szymanowskis buvo modernizmo laikais gyvenęs romantikas. Nėra jokių abejonių, kad jis „komponavo per save“, kad atsidūrė centre to, ką jis norėjo išreikšti pasitelkęs muziką. Kūrėjo darbai radosi iš nepaprastai intensyvaus gyvenimo būdo. Neįmanoma pašalinti kompozitoriaus iš jo paties kūrinio – pastarasis tampa įvairių inspiracijų ir patirčių *dokumentu*.

Szymanowskio romantinės šaknys ir meniškas požiūris taškas lemia tai, kad jo muzikinė poetika yra ne tik *ekstralingvistinių ir ekstratechninių normų grupė*, bet ir savotiška vizija, programa, skirta naujos aukštosios kultūros kūrėjams naujai atgautoje nepriklausomybėje ir naujai sukurtoje tikrovėje. Szymanowskio stilius – atpažįstamas, asmeniškasis, autoritetingas – yra *šešių pagrindinių* tendencijų arba poetikos principų rezultatas. „Komponavimas per save“ pasireiškė visur – nuo jausmingo Koncerto smuikui Nr. 1, priklausančio spalvų poetikai, iki vitališko simfoninio folklorinio baleto „Plėšikai“ („Harnasie“).