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Reviews

9.1 The Oeuvre and Aesthetic Ideas of Igor Stravinsky

Alicja Jarzębska, *Strawiński. Myśli i muzyka* [*Stravinsky. Ideas and Music*], Musica Iagellonica: Kraków 2002.

Witold Lutosławski wrote in 1962: “the *oeuvre* of Stravinsky combines such a great part of the essence of his time that I often think and speak of ‘an era of Stravinsky.’” Alicja Jarzębska quotes these words in the Introduction to her book (p. 14), which is a new reading of both the music and the aesthetic position of the author of *The Rite of Spring* and *Symphony of Psalms*. The book (508 pages with an English abstract and photographs) consists of two extensive parts (complemented by a “Timeline of Life and Works” and a “List of Igor Stravinsky’s Works”) that form a coherent and comprehensive whole. Part One presents and discusses “Stravinsky’s Ideas on Music;” Part Two presents an analysis and interpretation of the composer’s music based on a new and original method inspired by cognitivism.

Stravinsky’s philosophy of art, discussed by the author in the first part, was dominated by the idea of beauty, associated, in his verbal-musical pieces, with an ethical aspect. Stravinsky stressed that he understood the process of composition — as a quest for, and a selection of, ideas — in terms of everyday toil, which could be pleasure-giving if it led to a satisfying artistic goal. The development of the artist’s views is examined from their early stage within the sphere of Russian influence (Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakoff, the “Mir

Iskustva” group and the ideas of the acmeist movement, aspiring towards classical fullness and maturity), or that of Johann Sebastian Bach, through a criticism of the Romantic philosophy of art and the rejection of the Modernist imperative of “historical necessity” of progress, to an understanding of art in terms of a Christian vision of the universe. According to the author, Stravinsky “deplored the significant impoverishment of art, including music, in his contemporary and secularised world, a result of the artists’ failure to express the existential relationships that only happen between man and his Creator” (p. 220). Seen as the “father of modernism,” the composer was adamant that his music was neither *moderne* or futuristic (he described apologists of progress as “*pompiers*”); that he only wrote for the present. He upheld the opinion that it is a matter of artistic choice to maintain the connection between creative activity and the ancient idea of beauty, identified with a harmonic association of the similar with the different — a constant element in European culture.

The new analysis of the structure of Stravinsky’s music presented in the second part of the book is based on an ongoing discussion about the functioning of the composer’s work in the reception of the listener. New categories were needed that would take into account, in the words of the author, “the highly characteristic effect, in (Stravinsky’s) music, of discontinuation (or stratification) of musical ideas and the impression of repetitive musical systems associated with similar tone qualities. A research method derived from cognitivism, employing theories of cognitive schemes and studies on cognitive psychology of music, has proven itself useful” (p. 261). In the cognitive approach, a work of music is treated as a coherent whole, with various relationships between its similar and different parts, identified at ever-higher levels of hierarchy.

The author shows in her analysis and interpretation that the wealth of structural realisations in Stravinsky’s work is in fact the result of his repeated use of several basic units of structure, existing within hierarchically composed [layers?] and differentiated musical entities. She calls these basic elements *partons* (from Latin *pars* = part) and divides them into three kinds: isodiastematic (stable pattern of pitch), isorhythmic (repetitive model

of rhythmical values) and isotimbral (associated with repetitive relationships between the means of performance). *Partons* combine into higher-level units — *hyperpartons* — and create multilayered musical structures that emerge from the “play” of musical patterns both similar (constant value) and different (variable value). This approach to the problem of Stravinsky’s *oeuvre* finds support in a statement by the composer himself, to the effect that, in his quest for material, he concentrated either on interval structure, rhythmic relationships, or timbre.

The analytic-interpretative strategy proposed by the author allows one to grasp the relationships between stability and change in terms of both tone and musical time division. The highly meaningful title of the book’s 12th chapter, “*Noble simplicité* and the beauty of musical structure” identifies the characteristic feature of Stravinsky’s music, since his stylistic idiom was based on the idea of order. It is apparent, according to the author, “in the meticulous selection of a limited number of musical ideas, their hierarchical differentiation and in the balanced relationships between the constant and the variable — the relationships highlighted by the principle of proportion and broken symmetry, itself a manifestation of the composer’s favourite aesthetics of ‘dynamic calm’” (p. 404).

The author concludes with the thesis that Stravinsky’s music, irrespective of its diversity in tone and genre, was held together by the artist’s powerful personality (to achieve “unity in diversity”); she also proposes a new perspective on his creative evolution. She enumerates six phases of development: (1) *initiation* (1898; 1903–1908); (2) *quest for a new way of shaping the musical continuum* (1909–1911); (3) definition of own aesthetics and composing *metiér* (1911–1919); (4) continuation of European pre-Romantic musical tradition (1920–1939); (5) dialogue with American culture (1940–1951) and (6) dominance of vocal-instrumental music to religious texts and adaptation of the twelve-tone technique (pp. 419–420).

The book by Alicja Jarzębska is a kind of compendium; it brings valuable insights to the research into Igor Stravinsky’s aesthetics and music, offering a comprehensive base of documentation and sources, and a penetrating analysis and interpretation. Moreover, while meeting all the requirements of an

academic study, it is also a text which can be read for pleasure, and which encourages the reader to listen to, and to experience, music.

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translated by the author

9.2 Karol Szymanowski – “the Poet of Sounds”[§]

The songs of Karol Szymanowski and His Contemporaries. Edited by Zofia Helman, Teresa Chylińska and Alistair Wightman. Translated by Alistair Wightman and Anne Desler from *Pieśni w twórczości Karola Szymanowskiego i jemu współczesnych. Studia pod redakcją Zofii Helman.* Kraków: Musica Iagellonica, 2001. 2002 by the Polish Music Centre, University of Southern California. Polish Music Series, vol. 7. Polish Music Centre at USC, Los Angeles, 2002.

Poetry and music symbiotically blossoming into an ideal art in Karol Szymanowski’s songs — this seems to be the main motto of this valuable collection of 18 essays presented at the Symposium in Zakopane which commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of Szymanowski’s death. Indeed, many of the authors of the essays in this volume underline in their analyses Szymanowski’s deep sensitivity not only to music, but also to poetry. He manifested a highly developed artistic ability of combining these two arts, and, moreover, in his songs, he did not restrict himself to imitating the existing cultural or musical motifs, but expressed them in an individual, intuitive and unique musical language, capturing their essence. The poetic text supports his musical language — the latter judged by the composer to be insufficient as a means of expression. Literature was a powerful source of inspiration for Szymanowski who even felt the need express himself in writing, in order to free his inner world. He was highly skeptical about his own writing skills; however, this did not mean that he passively incorporated other poetic inspirations into his music. On the contrary, a chosen poetical text was subjected to a thorough aesthetic scrutiny during the selection process. The same may be observed in the composer’s attitude to the translations of poems to which he composed music; their poetical essence was much more important to him than being faithful to the original. It is well known, that the composer influenced the

[§] Term “the poet of sounds” was used by Teresa Chylińska in the introduction to *The songs of Karol Szymanowski and His Contemporaries*, Los Angeles, 2002, p. x.