

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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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.

final version of the libretto of *King Roger* to such an extent that he became its co-writer, together with his friend, the poet Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz.

This collection of essays ranges far beyond analyses of Szymanowski's output song by song: it brings much complex information about the context of their creation and the background to the works of Szymanowski and his contemporaries. The essays help us towards a better understanding of the poetical choices made by Szymanowski, and of his language of expression. Some of them bring out new, so far unexplored, aspects of Szymanowski's oeuvre; song cycles are examined as the turning points in Szymanowski's evolution as a composer; this includes such aspects as the use of the Franciscan idiom, or the poetry of Richard Dehmel, now forgotten, but once the inspiration not only for Szymanowski but also for Schönberg and Webern (Dehmel, on the other hand, was inspired by music to write some extremely musical poetry); or the discovery of the list of *Children's Rhymes* marked down on the manuscript of *King Roger* at the Library of Congress, or an unknown soldiers' song, and many other fascinating details of this kind.

The book underlines the uniqueness and the great value of Karol Szymanowski's music. However, reading these essays leads one to ask to some further questions. Szymanowski wrote many letters, poems and prose texts, and he did so in different languages. Should we regret the fact that he did not value his own writing more, and would not share his poetry with a wider audience? He only speaks a few of his own words in *King Roger*. A discussion of Szymanowski as a poet and as a writer is the one aspect which is missing from this collection, yet it might have provided a balance to the other thoughtful reflections, and help us to a deeper understanding of Szymanowski's thought and his work as a composer. A philological analysis of the composer's writings, in particular his poetry, collected so superbly in his *Writings (Pisma)*¹, and an examination of their artistic value, might enable us to reach new conclusions. It would perhaps be best for now to leave the last word to Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz who did attempt such a critical evaluation. He said about Szymanowski: "He was self-critical enough to describe his poems as "horribly awful things"; however they were not without significance as expressions of certain creative moods"²; and, talking about Szymanowski's

poems, he wrote “their weakness lies in remaining in the circle of banal pictures and conventional vocabulary; however, they are quite amazing as an ideological expression, and at the same time they have about them a poetic tone which reflects to a great extent Brémond’s ideas³, and which, in fact, constitutes their true poetic quality”.⁴

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Notes

- 1 *Karol Szymanowski — Pisma*, edited by Teresa Chylińska, Kraków: PWM, 1989, vol. 1 & 2
- 2 Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Książka moich wspomnień [The Book of My Remembrances]*, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1975, p. 264
- 3 Henri Brémond (1865–1933), French theoretician, critic, literary historian; he associated poetry with intuition and religious experience. Brémond claimed that the essence of poetry is an unknown, mysterious and unifying reality, and that each poem owes its poetic character to the presence and emanation of the transforming and unifying mystery, which he called “pure poetry”. Furthermore, according to Brémond, poetry emanates an elusive but overwhelming charm independently of the sense of the whole work; the nature of poetry surpasses discursive forms and is not reducible to rational consciousness (see note in *Karol Szymanowski — Pisma [Writings]*, edited by Teresa Chylińska, Kraków: PWM, 1989, vol. 2, p. 333).
- 4 Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Książka moich wspomnień [The Book of My Remembrances]*, op. cit., p. 265

9.3 On the Diffusion of Traditional Music Cultures in Warmia and Mazury

An essay-review of *Warmia i Mazury*, a five-volume collection of regional folk music consisting of:

- (i) Calendar and Wedding Songs
- (ii) Ballads and Social Life Songs
- (iii) Courting and Love Songs
- (iv) Family and Dance Songs
- (v) Religious and Popular Songs

Warmia i Mazury is the third part in the series *Polska Piesń i Muzyka Ludowa. Źródła i materiały [Polish Songs and Folk Music. Source materials]*. Editor-in-Chief: Ludwik Bielawski; Editor of song lyrics and descriptions of customs and rituals — Barbara Krzyżaniak; Editor of musical material