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# The Scriabin Theme in the First Phase of Karol Szymanowski's Creative Development

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Raising this issue concerns the search for an answer to the question: what permanent features are to be found in the compositional language of Szymanowski, particularly in the early period of his development, since the ever-present changeability of particular formal solutions which he uses calls for some kind of counterbalance in the other planes of his musical language. One constructive answer to the question about such constant qualities has been provided by Józef Chomiński, who analysed them in a number of texts, including an extensive study entitled *Szymanowski and Scriabin*<sup>1</sup> dating from 1963. In it he described in detail the relationship of the compositional techniques of the two composers, including a list of features characteristic of a music theme present in some of Scriabin's works, and found in a similar form in some of Szymanowski's later compositions. In this article I shall refer to it as 'the Scriabin theme'.

The group of musicologists who were interested in the interrelationships between the compositional techniques of Scriabin and Szymanowski included, apart from Józef Chomiński, Zofia Lissa. In her article *Rozważania o stylu narodowym w muzyce na materiale twórczości Karola Szymanowskiego* [*Reflections on national style in music in relation to the works of Karol Szymanowski*], she draws attention to the significance of Scriabin in the creative development of Szymanowski. She sees Scriabin as an intermediary in the transfer of Chopinian models to the era when Szymanowski wrote his music<sup>2</sup>.

This theme also appears in her article *Szymanowski a romantyzm [Szymanowski and Romanticism]*<sup>3</sup>, although only as a side issue. It is worth noting that Stefania Łobaczewska in her article *Sonaty fortepianowe Szymanowskiego a sonaty Skriabina [The Piano Sonatas of Szymanowski and those of Scriabin]* did not raise the issue of kinship between these compositions<sup>4</sup>. Jim Samson in his monograph *The Music of Szymanowski* searched for parallels between the musical languages of these two composers mainly in material belonging to the second phase of the creative development of the Polish artist<sup>5</sup>. Tadeusz Zieliński discussed the relationship between the works of Scriabin and Szymanowski on a number of occasions in his monograph, pointing to the similarity of emotionality and creative sensitivity between the two artists, underlying the close kinship between many of their compositions primarily in the expressive plane<sup>6</sup>.

My aim in the present article is to supplement the claims made by Chomiński in his article referred to earlier. The point of departure here is to list, as completely as possible, those of Scriabin's compositions which might have potentially provided the model for the solutions employed by the young Szymanowski. Secondly, it seems important to establish the actual extent of the presence of the Scriabin theme in Szymanowski's work. Moreover, it is worth tracing the Scriabin thread in Szymanowski's writings and correspondence, to seek the composer's own views on the relationship between Scriabin's works and his own, or at least his opinion of Scriabin's music.

### **The relationship between Szymanowski and Scriabin in Szymanowski's correspondence and musical writings**

As we know, Szymanowski's correspondence from the years 1901–1902 (his early years in Warsaw during his studies) has not survived, while the few letters from the years 1903–1905 (when the model of what we refer to as the Scriabin theme was establishing itself in his work) contain no mention of Scriabin. The first such mention does not come until 1916, in a letter to Stefan Spiess: '[...] I have heard that Sasha Dubiansky wants to give a concert in the autumn with only Scriabin's works and mine, that is an excellent idea!'<sup>7</sup>.

Of course, Szymanowski's pleasure at having a recital built exclusively around his own and Scriabin's compositions does not automatically imply that the composer had a positive attitude to the work of his slightly older colleague. On the other hand, Szymanowski would have reacted differently if he had had decisive reservations about that work.

It is worthwhile to look at three short quotations from earlier letters by other correspondents, which throw an interesting light at the issue being discussed.

In 1907 Adolf Chybiński wrote to Zdzisław Jachimecki:

[...] Regarding Szymanowski and your admiration for him, I must draw your attention to the fact that, when you are dealing with the history music, you have to examine a particular figure against the background of its time; it is the same in the case of Szymanowski — you cannot put him on a pedestal, because if you knew all his pieces well, you would find there traces of influences of Chopin, Liszt, Reger, and particularly Scriabin [...]<sup>8</sup>.

We can only guess that what Chybiński had in mind was the strength and extent of the influences, and not their very existence, quite understandable in an early phase of a composer's creative development.

Three years later Jachimecki in his turn wrote to Chybiński: '[...] Szymanowski had already told me that Scriabin's Preludes are odious to him [...]<sup>9</sup>. Unfortunately we do not know whether this refers to a particular opus (it might have been opus 48 from 1905, which clearly differs in style from those composed during the first phase of Scriabin's career), or to all of Scriabin's preludes known to Szymanowski (and that would be quite incomprehensible). Since trying to make sense of this ambiguous statement is unlikely to produce useful results, I will not attempt an interpretation.

In 1913 Szymanowski (who at that time was staying in Vienna) heard from his mother that:

[...] The Neuhauses are delighted with Scriabin and his wife, they spent the whole evening with them there in the club — they say he is nice and that he played those pieces of his with great subtlety — they told him a lot about your compositions and he asked, and the Neuhauses and Tala asked me today, that you should send them to him in Moscow — nothing else, just your various compositions. His address is Ale-

xander Nikolayevich Scriabin in Moscow, naturally they said that his compositions don't touch yours, but that they are pleasant [...].<sup>10</sup>

It is truly difficult to decide whether the above opinion was quoted accurately. If so, it would be rather curious, or at least highly exaggerated. But perhaps it might be explained to some extent by an emotional claim which Neuhaus made five years later, that he 'likes Katot a lot more than Scriabin'<sup>11</sup>.

The first two quotations in particular (from letters written by the founding fathers of Polish musicology) give an excellent grounding for the declaration made by Szymanowski himself, which is crucial to our deliberations. It comes from a letter to Sasha Dubiansky, written after the concert in October 1916 which had been referred to earlier:

A propos what the critic wrote: I have wondered myself a number of times whether Scriabin had any influence on me. **The 'early' Scriabin on my first compositions, perhaps only the Preludes, undoubtedly yes. As to the later works, it seems to me, rather not.** Although I like many of his opuses (particularly some of the most recent ones) very much, generally I had too little enthusiasm for him for it to be possible. But to hell with him, together with the critic! (emphasis by A.Ch.).<sup>12</sup>

The first immediate question which comes to mind is: how can an artist be so profoundly unaware of such an extremely obvious relationship, noted by many researchers. It is difficult to doubt the sincerity of the statement, in view of the decidedly private character and highly emotional tone of the letter. It does seem to reflect truly the composer's inner conviction. One could expect that Szymanowski, who from the beginning of his creative development carried the burden of being branded a follower of Strauss and Wagner placed on him by the critics, and who was himself aware of these dependencies, would try to suppress even to himself any awareness of yet another close kinship.

Music journals provide a number of opinions which indicate that Szymanowski's attitude to the works of Scriabin was deeply ambivalent.

This ambivalence is already apparent in the article which began Szymanowski's foray into journalism, entitled *Uwagi w sprawie współczesnej opinii muzycznej w Polsce* [*Remarks on contemporary musical opinion in Poland*] dating from 1920. It talks of '[...]' the almost absolute cosmopolitanism of

at times weird, but deeply artistic, enchanting art of Scriabin.’<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that the statement about the ‘enchanting art of Scriabin’ was the only concrete piece of evidence provided by Chomiński to support his claim that Szymanowski’s attitude to Scriabin was decidedly positive.

The subsequent statements present evaluations which no longer show any trace of doubt as to the ranking. Thus a year later, in an interview entitled ‘Wojna otwiera drzwi polskiej sztuce’ [‘The war opens doors to Polish art’] given to the bi-weekly journal *Musical America* (print 8/9 April 1921) Szymanowski said:

I admire very much the new Russian music which, in my opinion, begins with Rimsky-Korsakov. It seems to me that Scriabin and Stravinsky represent that which is best in the contemporary school, especially the latter in his works for the stage [...] <sup>14</sup>

At the same time (1921) in a draft of an unpublished article entitled *Igor Stravinsky* the composer upheld his opinion and noted ‘[...] So far, various half-baked opinions here dare to cast doubt on the new values of the Debussys, the Ravels, the Scriabins, and are scared of neoclassicism!’<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, in an article of the same title published three years later (1924), Szymanowski compared the ‘conceptual — technical’ relationships in the work of Stravinsky and Scriabin, and judged the latter harshly:

[...] [in Stravinsky] the most essential beauty grew directly, in a way organically, from the very concept of ‘craft’, without meandering through the dark recesses of the soul, between the illusory phantoms of ‘expression’ or ‘impression’, or diverse ‘metaphysical’ banalities, which often lead — especially in the post-Romantic era — to tragic, and sometimes comical, conflicts between the ‘content’ and the ‘form’ [...]. In Germany, the classic example of such an inner misunderstanding within himself is Gustav Mahler [in the manuscript: ‘and even to some extent R. Strauss and A. Schönberg’], in Russia — in a certain manner — Alexander Scriabin.<sup>16</sup>

We should not, however, take into account Szymanowski’s chronologically last comment about Scriabin (interview in *Sygnaty*, November 1934), in view of the lack of authorisation of the final version of the interview, and the composer’s own remark regarding editorial cuts which, according to him, created the impression of ‘arbitrariness and lack of justification for opinions’<sup>17</sup>

when talking, among other things, about Stravinsky, Scriabin and Bach. The text of the interview contains the following sentence: 'There is a kind of sickly, penetrating swelling in his music and a fatal impossibility of fulfilment. Scriabin's music is tiring and irritating to the nerves.'<sup>18</sup>.

In an article entitled *Współpraca narodów. Droga Karola Szymanowskiego* [*Cooperation of nations. Karol Szymanowski's way*] published in the Moscow weekly *Sovetskoye Iskusstvo* [*Soviet Art*] in November 1933, Szymanowski indicated the two threads of thought important for the discussion undertaken in that article: the attitude to the works of Russian composers, and the significance for his own compositional technique of thinking in terms of themes-motifs. He said, among other things:

I know Russian music extremely well. I have always kept myself abreast of events which have been taking place within it. I must admit, however, that Tchaikovsky, and the 'Mighty Handful', and above all Musorgsky, are much closer to my heart than Scriabin. I regard Musorgsky's work as particularly excellent — he is so national in his character, yet so international, humanistic, in his deep musical ideas. In Scriabin, one feels a certain tearing away, a breaking away, swinging in the clouds. I have a very strongly developed feeling for the form, and I never experience any contradiction between that feeling and the musical ideas I try to express in my works. I think that each musical composition, regardless of the philosophical ideas, feelings or moods from which it originates, will always remain a work of 'pure music' — of course, if it is a work of art at all. My compositional ideas nearly always originate from melodic motifs.<sup>19</sup>.

Igor Belza in a letter to Kornel Michałowski has questioned the 'accuracy' of this interview, particularly on the basis of the comments relating to Scriabin, and the arguments he put forward are of a serious nature. However, taking into account the tone and the content of some other remarks (quoted earlier) by the composer, we may suppose that his meaning was not twisted to any great extent.

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the significance of form in Szymanowski's thinking and in his works; however, we should recall that his main postulate in this area was to always keep searching for new, non-banal solutions. In many of his statements the form is the synonym for all technical-musical categories, and not simply the architectonic qualities. Thus

a strong attachment to one model of a theme with a dominant characteristic interval progression might be interpreted as behaviour which contradicts his stated creative ideals.

However, this seemingly complex issue can perhaps be given a fairly obvious explanation. Thus, the adoption (or absorption) of Scriabin's motivic-thematic model happened at the very beginning of the creative development of the Polish composer. The shaping of his truly individual musical language (and by the same token, liberation from the bonds of foreign influences) took place finally at the beginning of the 1920s. This probably corresponds with the journey from a fascination with Scriabin's idiom to achieving a healthy distance, which would allow Szymanowski to shape freely his own creative identity. The surviving source documents seem to confirm this version of events. In a less serious vein, one might describe the negative comments about Scriabin's creative ideas as a self-critical review of Szymanowski's own path of development prior to 1920.

### **Compositional practice**

At the start one needs to provide a model of the Scriabin theme. It can be defined in terms of an attunement of the following features:

- (i) the rising direction of the melodic line (with a possible contrast in the second segment); change of direction within the main motif is rare;
- (ii) the basic interval cell (located in the frontal motif, or in the culminative segment of the theme) is the second (or seconds, usually two) + a larger interval (or intervals); the reverse system is also sometimes used (a large interval + a second);
- (iii) frequent punctuated rhythm in the basic interval cell;
- (iv) presence of progression expanding the thematic space, resulting in some cases in a widespread ambitus;
- (v) generally, being present in the more extensive works, in view of the large dynamic and form-creating potential.

Themes shaped in this way can be found in many of Scriabin's compositions; this feature is already present in works belonging to the first phase of his

Allegro moderato ♩ = 120

Fig. 2.1. Alexander Scriabin, *Symphony No. 1 in E-major* op. 26, 1st movement, theme I, bars 9–16, Cl.

development (i.e., until 1903); that is the phase which might have inspired even the earliest of Szymanowski's works with themes based on the Scriabin model. In this group of works we may count: *Symphonies No. 1* and *2* (see figure 2.1), *Piano sonatas — No. 1* (mainly movements 1 and 3), *No. 2* (primarily the first of the two movements), *No. 3* (all the four movements), *No. 4* (both movements), *Piano concerto* (in particular the typical theme of the finale), *Allegro appassionato* op. 4, *Allegro de concert* op. 18, *Fantasy* op. 28 and numerous more minor works (such as *Impromptus* op. 10, 12, 14, and in particular *Preludes* already from op. 11).

The fact that these compositions are so numerous allows us to suppose that Szymanowski must have come across the model of the theme characteristic of Scriabin's musical language. The earliest response to the phenomenon defined above can be found already in a number of *Preludes* op. 1 (Nos 1, 3, 6 and 9). However, we encounter its clearer formulation primarily in larger units of formal genres, mainly in sonata cycles or allegros, or their derivatives. The model is to be found in the following works of the Polish composer, originating from the first phase of his development:

- (i) *Piano Sonata No. 1 in C minor* op. 8 (1903–1904) — the outlying movements (see figure 2.2a)
- (ii) *Sonata for violin and piano in D minor* op. 9 (1904) — all three movements
- (iii) *Concert Overture in E major* for symphony orchestra op. 12 (1904–1905)
- (iv) *Fantasy in C major for piano* op. 14 (1905) — all three movements
- (v) *Symphony No. 1 in F minor* op. 15 (1906–1907) — both surviving outlying movements
- (vi) *Prelude and fugue in C sharp minor for piano* (1905, 1909) — both works
- (vii) *Romance in D major for violin and piano* op. 23 (1910) — highly transformed
- (viii) *Symphony No. 2 in B flat major for symphony orchestra* op. 19 (1909–1910) — majority of themes (see figure 2.2b)
- (ix) *Piano sonata No. 2 in A major* op. 21 (1910–1911) — majority of themes

The obvious and unanswerable question immediately arises here, of whether similar material formed the basis of *Trio for piano, violin and cello* op. 1906 from 1907, which had been withdrawn by the composer.

In the second period of Szymanowski's creative development, we can clearly discern a moving away from the model which had dominated a significant part of his earlier works. The change of the dominant direction of movement in the themes of many compositions (from rising to falling or oscillating) is extremely characteristic. Apart from *Piano sonata No. 2* op. 36 from 1917, we also find references to the Scriabinian model in works written two years earlier, *Narcissus* from *Myths* op. 30 and *Nausicaa* (and in a minor degree in *Calypso*) from *Metopes* op. 29. The themes or main motifs of compositions belonging to the third phase of the composer's development are constructed in a quite a different way. The group of vocal-instrumental compositions presents a totally separate issue — the interval cells described earlier can only be found in a few of them, while the extensively developed Scriabinian themes do not appear in these genres for obvious textural reasons.

a)

T. 9-16 Klar. Th. I

b)

$\frac{3}{4}$  Allegro moderato. Grazioso

*p dolce appassion.*

*dolce cre - scen - do poco f dolce*

*p*

*f dolciss.*

Fig. 2.2. a) Karol Szymanowski, *Sonata No. 1 in C minor for piano* op. 8, 1st movement, bars 1–8. b) Karol Szymanowski, *Symphony No. 2 in B flat major for symphony orchestra* op. 19, 1st movement, bars 1–16, Vno I solo.

## Conclusions

Finding a fairly widespread presence of the type of theme described above both in the works of Scriabin prior to 1903, and in Szymanowski's compositions prior to 1911, one has to ask the question: was Szymanowski strongly influenced by Scriabin at the beginning of his development as composer, and did he adopt Scriabin's manner of constructing a theme particularly in the group of traditional forms, i.e., sonatas? It seems that, in trying to answer this question, it might be helpful to examine the relationship between those two undoubtedly connected stylistic phenomena using the concept of intertextuality. Intertextual research in Polish literature studies has a long tradition, and, as a direct consequence of this, there exists an extensive literature on the subject. The fullest and most precise definition of intertextuality can be found in Stanisław Balbus's *Między stylami* [*Between styles*] and, related to it, *Intertekstualność a proces historycznoliteracki* [*Intertextuality and the*

*historical-literary process*] <sup>20</sup>. In spite of the fact that there are many differences in intertextual dependencies between the literary and the musical arts, there are certain general laws which function in a similar way in the worlds of both. One of the most important categories which form the basis of the concept of intertextuality (and at the same time adapts well to a discussion of musical space) is the intertextual technique, i.e.,

the stylistical-constructural feature of a work, which consists in its ability to evoke certain elements of contexts; these techniques are differentiated depending on the character and position of the appropriate indexical elements within the structure of the work [...], on their place of provenance, on the direction and manner of reference, thus, a quotation, a microquotation, a cryptoquotation, a structural quotation, a thematic allusion, paraphrase, reconstruction, imitation, pure evocation, 'inversion', caricature, falsification, reminiscence; then archaisation, dialectisation, exotisation, folklorisation etc. It is thus a manner of stylistic figure, based on the text's external links.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, one will not find all these ways of referring in music, but the majority of them have their legible musical equivalents. A little further on the author makes a comment about historical context, which seems to have key significance for the Szymanowski-Scriabin relationship.

Thus the Romantics, even if they referred directly to foreign models, even if they went so far as to imitate them, remained deeply convinced that they did «not imitate», because «originality» was a fundamental feature of Romantic creativity.<sup>22</sup>

In the fragment devoted to the 'Romantic intertextual breakthrough', the author expands the temporal space, accurately describing in his conclusion the situation also prevalent in music at the turn of the centuries.

In modernism, the conversationality of intertextual links, being «multidirectional» at that, and thus stylisation in all of the varieties, often quite new, becomes decidedly the leading literary key [...].<sup>23</sup>

Balbus emphasises the importance of 'the nature of intertextual and interstylistic links being a dialogue', substantiating the relationships which link works of art and creative languages, which can at times be very close.<sup>24</sup>

It seems that the case of Szymanowski's early works (i.e., still strongly rooted in nineteenth-century tradition), and the presence in them of certain

clearly discernible similarities to and analogies with the external phenomena, may be accurately described as a type of dialogue with that which was in existence already. Finally, it is worth recalling that, on changing his aesthetic stance, Szymanowski distanced himself from his early works and the models reflected in them. Having defined his own, separate musical language, he was able to evaluate calmly the legacy of his early years as a closed phase, through which it had been necessary to pass in order to achieve maturity, which means achieving creative independence.

### Notes

- 1 Józef Michał Chomiński, 'Szymanowski a Skriabin' ['Szymanowski and Scriabin'], in: *Studia nad twórczością Karola Szymanowskiego [Karol Szymanowski studies]*, PWM, Kraków 1969. It is worth noting that the issue of the relationship between the compositional language of Szymanowski and Scriabin does not receive such a perceptive description in the much earlier article entitled *Zagadnienia konstrukcyjne w sonatach fortepianowych [Structural issues in the piano sonatas]*, where one might expect a similar in-depth reflection. Józef Michał Chomiński, 'Zagadnienia konstrukcyjne w sonatach fortepianowych' ['Structural issues in the piano sonatas'], *Kwartalnik Muzyczny* 1948 Nos 21/22 and 23, reprinted in: *Studia nad twórczością Karola Szymanowskiego [Karol Szymanowski Studies]*.
- 2 Zofia Lissa, 'Rozważania o stylu narodowym w muzyce na materiale twórczości Karola Szymanowskiego' ['Reflections on national style in music in relation to the works of Karol Szymanowski'], in: *Z życia i twórczości Karola Szymanowskiego. Studia i materiały pod redakcją J.M. Chomińskiego [On the life and works of Karol Szymanowski. Studies and materials edited by J.M. Chomiński]*, PWM, Kraków 1960.
- 3 Zofia Lissa, 'Szymanowski a romantyzm' ['Szymanowski and Romanticism'], in: *Karol Szymanowski. Księga sesji naukowej poświęconej twórczości Karola Szymanowskiego [Karol Szymanowski. Proceedings of the Academic Session devoted to the works of Karol Szymanowski]*, ed. Zofia Lissa, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 1964.
- 4 Stefania Łobaczewska, 'Sonaty fortepianowe Szymanowskiego a sonaty Skriabina' ['Piano sonatas of Szymanowski and those of Scriabin'], in: *Karol Szymanowski. Księga sesji naukowej poświęconej twórczości Karola Szymanowskiego*, [Karol Szymanowski. Proceedings of the Academic Session devoted to the works of Karol Szymanowski], ed. Zofia Lissa, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 1964.
- 5 Jim Samson, *The music of Szymanowski*, Kahn & Averill, London 1980.
- 6 Tadeusz Andrzej Zieliński, *Szymanowski. Liryka i ekstaza [Lyricism and ecstasy]*, PWM, Kraków 1997.
- 7 Karol Szymanowski, *Korespondencja [Correspondence]*, vol. 1, 1903–1919, collected and edited by Teresa Chylińska, PWM, Kraków 1982, p. 467.
- 8 As above, p. 129.

- 9 As above, p. 213.
- 10 As above, pp. 400–401.
- 11 As above, p. 569.
- 12 As above, p. 478.
- 13 Karol Szymanowski, *Pisma [Writings]*, vol. 1, *Pisma muzyczne [Writings on music]*, PWM, Kraków 1984, p. 35.
- 14 As above, p. 357.
- 15 As above, p. 54.
- 16 As above, p. 138.
- 17 As above, p. 449.
- 18 As above, p. 451.
- 19 As above, p. 439.
- 20 Stanisław Balbus, *Między stylami [Between styles]*, Universitas, Kraków 1993. St. Balbus, *Intertekstualność a proces historycznoliteracki [Intertextuality and the historical-literary process]*, Kraków 1990.
- 21 As above, p. 156.
- 22 As above, p. 157.
- 23 As above, p. 160.
- 24 As above.