

SZYMANOWSKI AND HIS STABAT MATER

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THE honors of the Liège festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music were shared by Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater*. As the latter will shortly be given in New York it is of interest to estimate its place in the evolution of the composer. Though it is not the last word in modernism it appeared in 1926 and represents the more recent style of its author. Of this little has yet been heard, or even seen; for unfortunately many scores remain in manuscript, e.g. the choral works *Demeter*, Opus 38 and *Agave*, Opus 41.

The *Stabat Mater* is divided into six numbers, and the distribution of the musical forces is made, as usual with Szymanowski, on a psychological basis. The sorrowing Virgin is depicted (in the first number) by soprano solo supported by female chorus and orchestra. Man's compassion for her (Number two) and his own fear of hell (Number five) are portrayed by baritone against the full choral and orchestral forces. Soprano and contralto soloists unite with these but on a subdued scale, to express the longing for Paradise (Number six).

This psychological tendency has led Szymanowski to draw his own material from the symphonic architecture of the Germans and from the impressionism of the Diaghileff entourage. But though he has absorbed much from these different sources, he has never really *belonged* in any group in particular; his position *vis-a-vis* the modernists has varied greatly, the fact being that Szymanowski like other Proteans of today has changed his skin or at least his garments more than once. He appeared first wearing the mantle of Chopin; then for a while he adopted a German garb and only later, when he followed the mode prevalent in the early war years, did he definitely enter the ranks of the modernists. Within the last decade, however, he has revived

fundamental elements of his temperament and created a new style which places him in a position of his own.

Each of the changes in style has been heralded by a change of abode. The early romantic preludes were written before he left Warsaw for Berlin in 1906. Then come the works of the Teutonic period, roughly, from Opus 9 to the *Hafiz Songs*, Opus 24. To his travels and wartime sojourn in Russia belong the impressionistic works from Opus 27 onwards. After his return to Warsaw there emerges the composer of today, about Opus 40, the intellectual Pole, with the wistful poetry of the Slav and the ornateness of the Oriental.

His art is the richer by these transformations. From the Germans, especially from Reger, he acquired a contrapuntal mastery and the power of thinking horizontally. We can cite the fugues in the third *Piano Sonata*, Opus 26 and the *String Quartet*, Opus 37; his skill with imitative devices, and his constant use of polytonal combinations, which are found in all his large works.

This matter of polytonality places Szymanowski very definitely. He has never been an atonalist. One cannot find a single passage to justify the appellation. For this there are two good reasons, his significant use of counterpoint and his individual manner of modulation.

Contrapuntal resources, and in particular polytonality, are utilized by the ornate imagination of Szymanowski toward ends quite different from those of Western writers. For him the separate voices not only contribute to a logical construction which will express the sum total of their component parts but they are also like the outlines of a filigree design, which diverge and converge again in a kaleidoscopic pattern. Thus he employs a linear method to achieve a vertical result, in contra-distinction to the modern followers of Bach, who by the same means arrive at a horizontal result.

In his early years he used successions of chords to accompany a vague and chromatic line as in the *Variations for Piano*, Opus 10, and the *Songs*, Opus 17. But he has gradually discovered that a far more varied and colorful picture can be painted by throwing into relief the clashes of independently moving parts. Therefore when he seeks simplicity he achieves it by the delicate inter-

weaving of tenuous lines—as in many charming numbers from the recent *Kinderlieder*. When he strives for magnificence he builds line upon line, key upon key, to the extremes of polytonality, as in the fifth number of the *Stabat Mater*.



Let us now consider his harmonic procedures. Here he shows himself polytonal in the sense of a developed diatonalism, again something remote from the practice of atonality. It is fortunate indeed that he has shed the harmonic trappings of his German period. He was in grave danger at that time of falling into the vague and sentimental sensuousness which has proved the bane of composers so disparate as Scriabin and Delius. This danger besets those who are weak in the principles of modulation and over-partial to chromatic harmony.

In the case of Reger and Strauss, who were then Szymanowski's models, the harmonic complexities are nothing but a variegated superstructure on a perfectly solid and usually diatonic foundation; but strike away the foundation, as the Easterner does, and sentimentality is inescapable. Witness the song, *Verkündigung*, from Opus 17, and the occasional nostalgia which still recurs in his work. But he was saved by his linear writing and by clarifying his manner of harmonization under the salutary influence of the impressionists. To appreciate the change, compare the theme of the variations in the *Second Symphony*, with the purely harmonic conception which commences at the words "*Fige plagas*" in Number three of the *Stabat Mater*. How delightful is the freshness of the latter, how remote from the hot-house atmosphere of the former!

Szymanowski's feeling for modulation compelled him also to discard entirely the Straussian method. This consists in balancing the keys on the dominant side of the tonic or central key against those on the subdominant side, in such an equipoise as to establish the desired center. But this assumes, of course, that the desired center will have been foreseen and Szymanowski, though a diatonalist, does not propose to settle matters in advance.

He elects to use key-centers rather as temporary footholds, which orient the progression for the moment. He even takes two

centers at once, so as to be able to oscillate between them and veer the movement whichever way he chooses. If we consider the inverted pedal point which follows the muttered prayers of the chorus in Number five of the *Stabat Mater* and generates the final climax, we see the upper strands passing normally from the center G \sharp to B, but no resolution is possible because the whole progression is forcibly deflected into C major by the imperious movement of the bass. Again (a simpler case) the famous *Chant de Roxane* from the opera *King Roger*, based also on a dominant pedal, should be resolved on some nearby center. But after rising a tone towards the climax, it wanders off quite unexpectedly, so that in retrospect the melody over its long pedal point seems like that Indian world which rests on an elephant who is seated on a crab—all of them suspended over nothingness!

The whole key-construction of the *Stabat Mater* shows an oscillation between the centres of A and A \flat . There is of course a psychological explanation for this. We may say that the episodes centered on A accompany the sufferings of the Virgin, the A \flat episodes the feelings and prayers of the beholder, and in one number, the second, both ideas and both centers are used at once in a double pedal E - G \sharp . While speaking of Szymanowski's harmony, which is perhaps the most important element in such a vertical writer, it is worth remarking that he employs the ancient cadence forms quite frankly.



Turning to the acquisitions of the impressionist epoch, we observe first its rhythmic development. A mere glance at the printed page is sufficient. How jagged and scintillating is the look of the cadenza in the serenade of *Don Juan*, how pedestrian appear the heavy groups of notes in the scores of the Reger period! And if we wish an example from the latest phase, how absolute is the ease displayed in the *Tagore* and *Muezzin* songs!

At this time also occurred his experiments in ornamental writing. Buried on his estate in the Ukraine, he composed the famous series of violin pieces which served as a model to Prokofieff and Stravinsky, for it was Szymanowski's settings from Pergolesi which appeared the first. Furthermore, the consecutive

seconds, seventh and ninths, the novel harmonies, the profusion of arabesques which bestrew the *Dryades* and *Narcisse* were original and most congenial to their semi-Oriental creator. The only side of his personality that remained unemphasized at this time was the lyricism of the Slav. But the ribaldry and buffoonery found plentiful expression.

We now come to the third period. Long past was his association with Reger; far off was the life in Russia and the quiet existence in the Ukraine. After the loss of his estates in the revolution Szymanowski became a wanderer and returned finally to live and be honored in Warsaw. As he himself says, "Every man, to realize his own nature, must go back to the land from which he comes."

By now his style is formed. He uses Slavic materials, the augmented fourth, the modal changes from the major sixth, third, seventh to the minor. More valuable yet, his vocal line has lost the vagueness of the early songs and become thematic—often it springs entire from some germinative phrase, as the melody does from the accompaniment in the beautiful second song of the *Muezzin* series.

Szymanowski does not seek to create or provoke a new esthetic; he is content to use his intellect in the service of his poetic and musical imagination. There are certain composers, de Falla, Bax, Kodaly, who spring from what are, in the musical sense, suppressed nationalities. The consciousness of their romantic heritage and the value of the unused musical material around them, attracts and occupies them. They create Spanish, Celtic, Hungarian works of art, only incidentally do they pose problems which are common to musical thought in general. Nevertheless by their stature among modern composers they have a contemporary interest. It is to this group that Szymanowski belongs. He even describes himself as a national composer. It is true, of course, that he has used the fashionable method of reverting to past models, as he did in reviving the set-piece opera form in *King Roger*, or when he ventured a setting of the outmoded verses of the *Stabat Mater*. But he did this not in order to find a modern solution to an archaic problem, but because the mood of the poem symbolized to him the sufferings and martyrdom of his country.