“A Synthesis of the Sensual and the Divine”

Karol Szymanowski and his King Roger

“Imagine as a background the subdued gold and the stiffness of the mosaic forms or the Arabic filigree, and dances, too – what a barbaric but exquisite richness.” The Polish composer Karol Szymanowski tried to explain to his librettist Jaros□aw Iwaszkiewicz the Oriental worlds and the “Byzantine-Arabic palace interiors” he had before his eyes when he wrote his opera “Król Roger” (“King Roger”). The composer was speaking from his own experience. The atmosphere that resounded in his soul was one that he had experienced several times on visits to the island of Sicily. Since 1908, but especially 1910/11 and in 1914, Szymanowski traveled in southern Europe, where he visited the centers of Italian culture: “If Italy didn’t exist, then I couldn’t either.” But it was the island of Sicily in particular that fascinated him. There he found a historical melting pot of Greek, Roman, Arabic, Orthodox, and Catholic cultures. The Roman theater of Taormina, the Greek ruins of Syracuse and Segesta, and the remains of the Arabic period all stimulated his imagination. Here he found a world full of warmth and beauty, for which he had longed unconsciously when he was in northern Europe.

The culture that had influenced the composer most strongly when he was in Sicily was that of the Byzantine world of the French-Norman King Roger II, son of the Norman count Roger de Hauteville, who had attacked Sicily in 1060 and seized it from the Arabs. His government took on many of the dominant Greek, Roman, and particularly Arabic traditions, and it guided the island to one of its cultural high points. His son Roger II, who lived from 1095 to 1154, continued these traditions. His court in Palermo was the splendid center of his empire. The three populations of the island – Greeks, Arabs, and Latin Sicilians – lived in comparative harmony. Roger's grandson, Frederick II, would later try unsuccessfully to export this idea of a cultural melting pot to northern Europe.

In Palermo, Szymanowski visited the famous Palatine Chapel that Roger had built in gratitude for his coronation. This church is one of the marvels of Byzantine-Arabic architecture. Colorful mosaic biblical scenes against golden backgrounds cover the walls and cupolas, while the wooden ceiling is decorated with Arabic carvings. The building made a lasting impression on the 29-year-old Szymanowski, and this experience would form the core of his personal and artistic development from then on. What is striking here is less that a composer would be stimulated by architecture and the fine arts, than that these arts are in their essence the very expression of the world from which he had hoped to liberate himself, namely, the Christian world. What Szymanowski saw in Palermo reflected the proverbial rigidity of Byzantine art, of Oriental rites, and the dogma of absolute truth. The mosaics were created largely by Greek artists during the epoch of the second golden age of Byzantine art.

The ceiling of the chapel, produced by Arabic craftsmen, adds to the splendor of the building. The sweeping forms of the Moorish stalactites and carved coffers, recalling the ascendancy of Granada and Cordoba, form a counterweight to the strict Byzantine figures. The blending of Christian and Arabic cultures points to the older culture from which both developed, that of classical antiquity.

After his stay in Sicily in 1914, Szymanowski crossed the Mediterranean on his way to North Africa. Together with his friend Stefan Spiess, he visited Algiers, Constantine, Biskra, and Tunis. On April 11, he wrote from Biskra: "This place is truly divine..." The warmth and beauty that Szymanowski sought in the south meant something else to him, however. One of the reasons that he fled the north so regularly was his homosexuality. In Sicily and in North Africa he probably felt something of the relative freedom toward this form of eroticism.

The monuments and myths of southern Europe also influenced Szymanowski's idea of art. He began to turn away from the German tradition of Wagner and Strauss when in 1913 he encountered the work of Stravinsky, specifically his "Petrushka": "Stravinsky is a genius... I find him overpowering and consequently I am beginning to hate German music." When Szymanowski met Stravinsky in London several years later, he was increasingly convinced that he had to abandon the path of the late Romantic idiom of Wagner. French music and Impressionism, together with his experiences in the south, gained more and more importance in his musical thought.

Immediately after his return to Poland in 1914, Szymanowski worked on several compositions that are clearly influenced by his Sicilian and Arabic experiences, namely, the song cycle "Love Songs of Hafiz" and the Symphony No. 3, "Song of the Night". These were followed by the "Songs of the Infatuated Muezzin" in 1918, with texts by his cousin, the librettist, dramatist, and poet Jaros□aw Iwaszkiewicz.

Following the outbreak of the First World War, it became increasingly difficult for Szymanowski to maintain his connection to western Europe, and he turned more to Russia, in this very fruitful period he worked through his travel experiences in the pieces mentioned above. The October revolution of 1917 plunged Poland into civil war, under which the Polish-Ukrainian Szymanowski family also suffered. The family had to leave its estate in Tymoszówka

and move to Yelizavetgrad (Kirovograd). The house on the estate was torched, the setting of Szymanowski's carefree youth gone forever. In Yelizavetgrad, which he had always hated, he felt claustrophobic. He was now cut off from the East as well as the West. As he could hardly compose any longer, he dedicated himself to continuing his studies of Arabic and Sicilian history and culture. He also read Nietzsche's "Birth of Tragedy". It was not just that he wanted to assimilate his travel experiences: he was still dominated by an insatiable longing for the south.

In 1918, Szymanowski wrote to Iwaszkiewicz: "You have no idea how psychologically important it is to me, how much I need some kind of help or stimulation from outside in my present state – some kind of artistic pollination to continue my musical work." Szymanowski was referring to his studies in literature, but now something else had been added. The composer had begun to write a novel in which he hoped to give order to all his experiences and thoughts, and that would establish the intellectual groundwork for his continued musical creativity. Since at least 1917,

Szymanowski had been working on this novel, entitled “Ephebos,” and he would continue on it until 1919. The first part was ready for publication in 1919, whereas substantial fragments from the second part were merely sketched out. “Ephebos” is a psychological novel and a novel of ideas. This Greek word “ephebe” was used for a youth who had reached the stage of maturity. In the novel the young nobleman Alo Lowicki passes through several stages of maturity as a result of his encounters with different people. On his travels through Europe, and particularly in his encounter with Italian art, he discovers himself, and the reader follows his intellectual and artistic development through these experiences. The work has clear autobiographical features, and several of the figures in the novel are portraits of Szymanowski’s friends of this period.

The work’s fundamental ideas are found in two central passages in the second part of the novel. The first passage is the chapter “The Symposium,” the description of an exchange at night between several people in a Roman taverna. Just as in Plato’s famous “Symposium,” the participants converse about art, beauty, love, and eros, and the more the wine flows, the more fiery the discussions become. During this conversation the young Alo has a deep insight into his relationship to Marek Korab, a successful Polish composer who, like Alo, is living in Rome. Whereas Alo is still searching for his life’s values, Korab has already determined his own. Each of them is dependent on the other, and a secret bond of love connects them. It is reasonable to assume that both men embody aspects of Szymanowski’s personality.

The second passage treats an encounter between Alo and Korab, in which Korab doubts Alo’s love and finally rejects him. Alo leaves for Sicily, where in the Palatine Chapel in Palermo he undergoes a spiritual rebirth. The pain of loneliness causes his creative consciousness and his artistic abilities to develop. Finally, Korab encounters him in Sicily, so that their tender reunion can heal the divided psyche of Alo/Korab.

The love that was Szymanowski’s focus was love between men. “The Symposium” juxtaposes all manner of arguments for and against homosexuality. Following Plato, it is argued that relationships between men are superior to “normal” love, since the latter is above all biologically determined and serves procreation, while love between men is primarily about spiritual bonds, which also lead to creative achievements. Szymanowski wrote “Ephebos” to clear his still-guilty and tortured conscience. The novel was intended not simply as a response to his social environment, which could not accept his “idiosyncrasy,” it was also meant to explicate his own conflict of conscience and his battle with his innermost feelings. The composer recognized this when he remarked in his foreword that the novel dealt with

“the story of an ‘abnormal’ youth, on whom Nature had played a trick with his basic instinct”. In “The Symposium” Szymanowski’s view of life is seen for the first time, and it would soon determine the form of other works, in particular the opera “King Roger”. He believed that the mysteries of spiritual love could be experienced by means of sensual love.

In the novel the deeper significance of this love is treated at length. The fundamental motivation of human behavior lies, ultimately, in primal instincts. Human development consists essentially of a gradual liberation from instincts. The higher consciousness that results from this allows for a possibility of choice so that man can free himself from one of his most important drives, the sexual drive. In this way it becomes possible to choose “virtuous” love, and a feeling for beauty can also develop, since “a sense of beauty is love’s favorite son”. As was mentioned, he situates same-sex love between men further from the basic instincts than heterosexual love for a woman – though without concerning himself further with the drives and loves of women, including “the followers of the divine Sappho, who envy us from the depths of their souls”. The lengthy manuscript of the two-part novel “Ephebos” was destroyed by fire in 1939 when the apartment of Jaros□aw Iwaszkiewicz was damaged in a bombing. Iwaszkiewicz was living in Warsaw at the outbreak of the Second World War. It has been assumed that – apart from a few brief fragments – the whole work was lost forever. In 1981, however, the complete “Symposium” chapter was found in Paris, in a somewhat clumsy Russian translation, in the possession of one Boris Kochno.

In the spring of 1919, Szymanowski met the 16-year-old Kochno. This young Russian aristocrat, himself a poet, spent some time in Yelizavetgrad in the Ukraine, to which he had been sent as a soldier during the civil war. Szymanowski, who was in the middle of his work on the novel and the preparations for “King Roger,” fell in love with the young man. When Kochno left the composer in 1920 to continue his travels, he took with him a Russian translation of “The Symposium” that Szymanowski had prepared himself. Since this chapter belonged to the second part of the novel, which was written later, Kochno was very probably the one Szymanowski had in mind when he wrote his song of praise for the beautiful youth. [Kochno subsequently became Stravinsky’s secretary, and the librettist of his “Mavra”.] In “The Symposium,” the character of the Polish composer Marek Korab talks about Euripides’ play “The Bacchae”: “The ‘Bacchae’ impressed me deeply! This ideal, majestic theatricality, which has unfortunately long since been lost in the restless naturalism and cinematographic pseudo-psychology of today’s theater, proves to be extremely effective on stage... Moreover, its content is not so foreign to us; we can sense and grasp the blood that pulses in it.”

“The Bacchae” tells the story of King Pentheus of Thebes, who is led by the wine god Dionysos to a bacchanal, where he is torn apart by his own mother, Agave, in a Dionysian frenzy. Szymanowski first mentions “The Bacchae” in “The Symposium”. In the years 1916/1917 he wrote a cantata on Euripides’ drama.

Szymanowski’s choice of the less-polished Euripides over more subtle dramatists like Sophocles and Aeschylus is no doubt due to the fact that Euripides was the first to depict humankind in all its sensuality. Marek Korab, the composer in “The Symposium,” plans to write a musical drama based on “The Bacchae”. It is reasonable to assume that Szymanowski himself is speaking here. Indeed, it was while working on the novel that the idea to write an opera based on this play occurred to him.

Since, as a result of Austrian and German occupation, Yelizavetgrad had become part of the West in June of 1918, Szymanowski was able to invite his cousin Iwaszkiewicz to join him on his travels. Naturally, he also told him about the novel he was working on and of his readings in recent years, including Tadeusz Zieli□ski’s book “The Competitors of Christianity,” which debates Christian ethics. More important, however, was his suggestion to his cousin that they collaborate on a theatrical work. According to Iwaszkiewicz, Szymanowski hoped that it would “liberate him from certain religious, or perhaps more correctly, theological obsessions”. Although Iwaszkiewicz doubted that he could satisfy the composer’s demands for the content, he departed with the promise that he would prepare a first draft for a “Sicilian drama”.

A stubborn reality

The first ideas for a libretto revolved around the figure of Frederick II and his Sicilian court. Iwaszkiewicz’s first sketches correspond to the first and second act of the final opera. “This sketch simply dealt with the initiation of the story’s hero into the Dionysian mysteries and the presentation of the immortal Dionysos before the background of the ruins of the theaters in Syracuse and Segesta,” in the librettist’s words. The composer reacted

enthusiastically, though he noted that the Byzantine and Arabic worlds would also have to be worked into the drama. In response to that wish, the so-called "Arabic" second act would eventually be written.

In September of 1918 Iwaszkiewicz visited his cousin again, this time in Odessa, where the family was vacationing. There he gave him the "Songs of the Infatuated Muezzin," which he had written with Szymanowski's Oriental tales in mind. Shortly thereafter, the composer would set these poems to music, as a sort of exercise for the planned opera. Despite all the enthusiasm, the first problem also arose in Odessa. Iwaszkiewicz sensed that Szymanowski wanted to set out on a new path. They were agreed about the basic theme: the fusion of the story of King Roger with "The Bacchae" of Euripides. The librettist later remarked: "The philosophy of 'King Roger' is quite simple. It is based on a particular scene from Euripides' 'The Bacchae,' or more accurately, on Tadeusz Zieli□ski's interpretation of this scene."

Zieli□ski, who also prepared the translation of "The Bacchae" that would be so important for Szymanowski, pointed out that "in the scene with Pentheus with Dionysos in disguise, it is sensual arousal that draws Pentheus to the feast of the Bacchae, even though he seems to reject the cult of Dionysos and the frenzy associated with it." At the end of our century, the erotic aspect of this scene, in which Pentheus allows Dionysos to disguise him as a woman, is self-evident, but in Szymanowski's time this was a daring interpretation. A similar arousal will overpower Roger when he sees the mysterious shepherd and hears him tell about his orgiastic religion. This scene is key to the work. Before Szymanowski and Iwaszkiewicz parted again, they agreed on the division of labor. Szymanowski would establish the external framework of the Byzantine, Arabic, and Greek scenes, while Iwaszkiewicz would determine the characters and write the dialogue. The results would then be combined. In October 1918, Iwaszkiewicz returned to Warsaw, resuming work on the project. While Szymanowski awaited the libretto in Yelizavetgrad, he worked on the novel "Ephebos" and shortly thereafter met Kochno. In December 1919, the composer settled in Warsaw. He took up work again on the opera, which, in keeping with the composer's wishes, now had an Arabic central act as well as the Byzantine first act and the Greek third act. In March 1920, Szymanowski began with the composition of the first act, which went well for a while. In June of that year Iwaszkiewicz completed the libretto. In his version, the frenzied Roger follows Dionysos and his Bacchae, while his wife, Roxana, and the Arabic scholar Edrisi remain behind.

The change of residence and the revision made work on the opera more difficult for Szymanowski. Iwaszkiewicz, moreover, was no longer the receptive poet the composer had met in Yelizavetgrad and Odessa. He had

distanced himself from the composer's professed aestheticism. By October 1920 Szymanowski's sketches had progressed to the beginning of the second act, when he decided to take a trip to America. There, without consulting the librettist, he altered the end of the third act. Now, not Roger but Roxana follows Dionysos in his frenzy. Like Edrisi, Roger realizes at the last moment that following the mysterious god is not a solution to the problems of life. "Szymanowski changed the conclusion. Perhaps he did not understand the final rejection of the world, as I had depicted it," Iwaszkiewicz later remarked. "The religion of the Dionysian frenzy works on Roger as it does on Pentheus: merely on the senses, and thus Roger, although he follows the shepherd as far as the stage of the ancient theater, remains behind in the last scene of the drama, with his soul in conflict... Learning the truth about the cult of Dionysos had changed Roger inside."

On his return from America in May 1921, Szymanowski for the second time in his life met Stravinsky, who played sections from "Les noces" on the piano for Szymanowski. Inspired by his Russian colleague, Szymanowski now began to work motifs from Polish folk music into his works. Back in Poland, he pursued this path further. "At first, I didn't write anything, except for a few songs; I want to concentrate on completing my opera, but the going is hard. I have interrupted this work for too long, and it hardly interests me anymore," Szymanowski wrote shortly thereafter. The completion of "King Roger" would take until 1924.

Was it just the new Polish idiom that kept Szymanowski from completing the opera for so long? His song cycle "Slopiewnie" and his "Stabat mater" would seem, at first glance, to confirm this. Another explanation is suggested by the change in the libretto and Iwaszkiewicz's remark that he changed inside as a result of his encounter with the cult of Dionysos. The worship of Dionysos and the submission to ecstasy represent a necessary step in Szymanowski's development, living as he did with the conflict between his religious background and his homosexuality. The argument of the opera "King Roger," the juxtaposing of the law of the church with the freedom of love, was a vital necessity for the composer for this reason. In the opera's first act this contrast is clearly presented: The mysterious world of the shepherd is contrasted with the strict rituals of the Byzantine mass, with its church modes and choral parts. Whereas the rite of the church is associated here with the Apollonian and the "nomos," the shepherd symbolizes the Dionysian principle and the "physis". Still, Iwaszkiewicz said something else about the opera's theme there. He had written that its core was the contrast between intellectual and physical love, and the thesis that the mysteries of divine love could only be experienced through this sensual love and only brought to fruition by artistic achievement. Szymanowski may have succeeded in such artistic achievements, but it is

significant that the composer once said of his “King Roger”, “The problem this drama poses is, in a sense, the problem of my continued artistic existence.” Was he also able to experience the mysteries of divine love? Or, in other words, was he able to produce a synthesis of sensual and divine love? Iwaszkiewicz, who had distanced himself from Szymanowski during the twenties, gave another hint on this issue: “No doubt Szymanowski had his own form of religion, a religion of love. But before this religion had been reformed by the many years of travel, by the unforgettable impressions of Sicily and Africa, by the contemplative observation of art in Italy, and finally by the many years of isolation during the war, and before it could produce such fruit as ‘King Roger’ – this mystery of love and tolerance, where Amor and Caritas fuse into one – his cult of the beauty of life took on disturbing, even vulgar forms. In the final analysis, the most essential element of his art is... his eroticism.”

This remark points to yet another inner conflict. For Roger the discovery of the Dionysian as a necessary contrast to the Apollonian is a first step to liberation. When Szymanowski nevertheless does not allow Roger to follow Dionysos, it further suggests that man should not allow himself to be led by his basic instincts alone, but that he has to be liberated from those as well. This second liberation is particularly relevant to art and beauty, his work and music. At the same time, the composer associated this liberation with a metaphysical ideal of salvation. Does this perhaps mean the salvation from that which Iwaszkiewicz called “his eroticism”? Did he form a contrast between two types of love, rather than a synthesis? Did the ideal fusion between Alo Lowicki and Marek Korab perhaps not take place at all? And to what extent was the love between Alo and Korab a projection of Szymanowski’s love for Boris Kochno?

A few years before completing the opera, Szymanowski moved back to Zakopane, in the Tatra mountains. He wrote the “Stabat mater” and the “Litany to the Virgin Mary” shortly thereafter, religious works about the female icon of the absolute mother and of love as a sacrifice. Szymanowski, who took care throughout his life that the manuscript for “Ephebos” would never come into his mother’s hands, seems to have developed into an explicitly religious composer. Following a period with an international and Oriental direction, his discovery of his own religiosity led to a return to his Polish musical roots.

But was the discovery of the folk music of a highly isolated mountain community in southern Poland really connected with Szymanowski’s musical identity? If musical roots really play a role at all, then surely these are more likely to be found in the Ukraine. His youth was closely tied with Polish

Catholicism, but in the areas in which he grew up he also encountered the Russian orthodox church and its music, which is a direct continuation of the Byzantine liturgical vocal music. During the completion of “King Roger” – the work in which he wanted to settle accounts with Christian orthodoxy – Szymanowski seems in a sense to have found his way back to a kind of religious belief. He completed a circle, after a fashion, so that the echoes of the church modes in the “Stabat mater” and the “Litany” are no longer surprising.

In the Palatine Chapel, the place that seemed furthest from his origins, Szymanowski found a language in which he could confess his artistic and personal crisis. At the same time, however, perhaps unconsciously, he found in the Byzantine mosaics the Ukrainian childhood from which he wanted to free himself. On his long journey seeking genuine insight into beauty and art, he had employed many forces to create a counterweight to this Christianity. He long tried to move what seemed immovable, namely, to set love against the law. Still, in the very moment in which he tried to complete his daring effort, he was overcome by serious doubt. Stubborn reality seemed to force him to quiet acceptance, perhaps even resignation. Love, transformed into beauty and art, was supposed to be able to bring him salvation. But this salvation never came, and perhaps he realized that his program contained a contradiction. However much he wished to distance himself from primal instincts in order to reach a spiritually higher consciousness, he nevertheless remained the “‘abnormal’ youth, on whom Nature had played a trick with his basic instinct”. The salvation he sought would have to be found elsewhere. Szymanowski could not forget the south. Still, he left King Roger behind in the Greek theater in the third act: “And from my profound loneliness, / The abyss of my power / I rend my pure heart / And I offer it as a sacrifice to the sun!” Szymanowski, too, remained behind in his loneliness, but he found consolation, at least, in his music: ”Composing satisfies in me a need in a physiological, sensual, almost sexual way.”

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