

KAROL SZYMANOWSKI

Dr David C F Wright (1996)

Karol Maciej Korwin-Szymanowski was born at Tymoshovka in the Ukraine on 3 October 1882.

To put him into historical context, he was born the year after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II by revolutionaries, and when, in the Sudan, Muhammed Ahmed claimed to be the Islamic saviour, the Madhi. It was when the first hydro-electric plant came into being in Wisconsin, USA, and after the defeat of the British in the first Boer war.

Chopin had been dead for 33 years, Bruckner was 56, Brahms was 49, Elgar was 29, both Mahler and Paderewski were 22 (the latter was already teaching at the Warsaw Musical Institute) and Debussy was 20. Bartok was born the year before Szymanowski who was three years older than Berg and Szymanowski was a year older than Webern.



Victoria was the queen of England, Chester Alan Arthur was president of America and Clement XII was Pope.

Ukraine came under Polish rule in the sixteenth century as a result of which many fled and formed resistance groups, the Cossacks for example. In the eighteenth century, Ukraine became part of Russia but declared its independence in 1918 but its capital, Kiev, was occupied by Soviet troops and the Ukraine was established as a Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922.

Karol's father was Stanislav (1842 - 1905). He married Baroness Anna Taube (1853-1943) in 1874. She was of Swedish origin but her family has been associated with Polish Lithuania and, consequently, endowed with Polish nobility in 1572.

The newlyweds lived at Orlowka near the Kiev railway line. Four of their five children were born there namely Anna, Feliks (who became a fine pianist), Stanislaw and Zofia. The exception was Karol who was born at Tymoshovka at the manor house and estate of his grandfather, Feliks, who died in 1889 leaving the estate to Karol's father. Felix's ancestors had been awarded nobility over 300 years earlier for their services to Poland.

Tymoshovka was a large village with about 1500 inhabitants at the time of Karol's birth with over 300 farms and smallholdings, mills, forges, brickyards and a fire brigade. The Szymanowski estate was luxurious and commensurate with the service the family had given to the Polish nation in the past. The manor house was full of treasures. Not only had the Szymanowski family been ambassadors for Poland but they had nurtured the art and culture of the nation. Both Liszt and Tausig visited Stanislav, who was a lover of music and both a pianist and a cellist. Three of Stanislav's female cousins were competent musicians.

Karol was neither strong nor healthy as a child. He had sustained a leg injury which presented problems all his life. He was very intelligent and exceptionally gifted. He was educated by visiting tutors and, before he reached his teenage years, he was fluent in French, German and Russian. His interest in music and philosophy was immense. It was the German, Gustav Neuhaus, who encouraged Karol in his studies in music being a fine musician and well versed in German literature teaching the boy the value of literature and the rudiments of music.

The influence of philosophy came from Neuhaus who imparted the teachings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche upon the young man. Schopenhauer taught the individual will was the force in human nature but that art was not subservient to the will. Art was greater than the human spirit and art was subject to any laws or morals. Nietzsche repudiated Christianity and ethics as well as democracy and spoke of the death of God. Both philosophers were pagan and emphasised that an artist could do no wrong and was not subject to laws, morals or decency. Art was supreme and unassailable.

Such teachings had influenced Wagner and it took hold on Karol. Nevertheless, Neuhaus introduced the boy to Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Chopin. Karol saw his first opera which was Dargomizhsky's *Rusalka*. He also saw Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla* and Weber's *Oberon*. But the highlight was seeing Wagner's *Lohengrin* in Vienna in 1894. He became fascinated with Wagner and other music dramas purchasing vocal scores. He was encouraged by his sister, Stanisława, who was a fine singer even at a very young age. She was first rate in songs by the German romantics and sang excerpts from her brother's juvenile opera *The Golden Peak*. He wrote other songs for her but most of these were lost in the destruction of Tymoszwowska by the Bolsheviks in 1917 along with the loss of his piano sonatas, in G minor and F sharp minor respectively, and the Sonata in E for violin and piano.

Szymanowski's first acknowledged work was his *Nine Preludes for piano, Opus 1*, which date from 1900. It is clear that Chopin stands behind these pieces and were acknowledged after Karol had performed them before Neuhaus and Bronisław Gromadski, another family friend, who not only visited the manor but the Szymanowski's other house in Elizavetgrad where they also held many musical evenings.

In the autumn of 1901, Szymanowski left for Warsaw. He had written his *Six Songs to words by Kazimierz Tetmayer, Opus 2*, and the *Etudes for piano, Opus 4*.

Warsaw was stimulating. It had an opera house, music institutes and societies and the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra. But Poland was a partitioned country with the three occupying powers of Russia, Prussia and Austria.

Karol took lessons with Marek Zawirski for harmony and with Zygmunt Noskowski for counterpoint and composition. Noskowski was one of the first pupils at the Warsaw Institute of Music in 1861 and had studied with Moniuszko. Noskowski was born 2 May 1846 in Warsaw and after studying in Warsaw went to Berlin to complete his studies. He became the director of the Warsaw Music Society in 1881 where he remained until 1902 and from 1904 to 1907 was the conductor of the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra. He was a fine composer in his own right. He wrote three impressive symphonies - A major (1875), C minor (*Elegiac*) (1880) and F major (1903) three string quartets, three operas, *Livia Quintilla*, *Wyrok and Zemstra*, four vaudevilles, a Piano Quartet, symphonic poems including *The Steppes*, Opus 66, of 1896 many songs including a song book for children, Opus 34. However, his music was criticised for its non-compliance with the times and to be out of sympathy with the feelings of Poland. It is probably true to say that he taught most, if not all, the ensuing generation of Polish composers. He died in 1909.

Szymanowski was befriended by a fellow student, Ludomir Rozycki (1884-1953) and together they played piano duets of orchestral works particularly the symphonic poems of Richard Strauss with an emphasis on the finest of them namely *Death and Transfiguration* and the superb *Im Heldenleben*. Rozycki went on to compose mainly for the theatre which works Szymanowski was to criticise without mercy and thus terminate the friendship.

Rozycki composed seven operas, two ballets including *Appollo and the Maiden*, incidental music, eleven symphonic poems, two piano sonatas, a violin sonata, a cello sonata and an impressive String Quartet, Opus 49, dating from 1916.

While in Berlin in 1905, Szymanowski was introduced to Grzegorz Fitelberg (1879-1953) and a lasting friendship began. While Fitelberg's major contribution to Polish music was predominantly as a conductor he was also a composer. He composed two symphonies, symphonic poems and chamber music. He conducted the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra from 1907, the Vienna Opera 1911-1914 and in Petrograd and Moscow 1914-1920 returning to the Warsaw Philharmonic in 1923 and conducting the Warsaw Radio Orchestra from 1935. His son, Jerzy (1903-1951) was also a conductor, emigrating to Paris in 1933 and to the USA in 1940. He composed a symphony, a piano concerto, a cello concerto and five string quartets, the fourth won the Coolidge Prize in 1936.

With Szymanowski, Grzegorz Fitelberg set up the Publishing Group of Young Polish Composers. This came into being in the autumn of 1905 with financial support from Prince Lubomirski. As well as the three already mentioned, the other members of the group included Apolinary Szeluto and, from 1907, Mieczyslaw Karłowicz. The group only lasted until 1911 and, thereafter, Szymanowski signed a contract with the publishers, Universal.

The early works of Szymanowski was subject to hostility, the chief complaint was that it was too Chopinesque. Annoyed, Szymanowski began to compose deliberately avoiding any such influences as shown for example in his Symphony no. 3, Opus 27, subtitled Song of the Night, written between 1914 and 1916, which sets Czech translations of thirteenth century Persian texts. It has been said that he composed his String Quartet no. 1, Opus 37 in 1917 because Chopin never wrote one and Rozycki had just written one. But his was not a snub at Chopin. Szymanowski honoured him all his life. The other criticism of Szymanowski and the Young Polish School of Composers was that their music was showing Germanic influences imitating Wagner and Richard Strauss whereas loyalty to national music was deemed appropriate.

The String Quartet has a scherzo in which the first violin part is in A major, the second in F sharp, the viola in E flat and the cello in C, adding up to a diminished seventh. This makes for an interesting essay in polytonality.

Between 1905 and 1912 Szymanowski composed the Concert Overture in E, Opus 12 (1905), the Symphony no. 1 in F minor, Opus 15 (1907), the Symphony no. 2 in B flat, Opus 19, (1908), Penthesilea for soprano and orchestra, Opus 18, (1907), Romance for violin and piano, Opus 23, (1909), Piano Sonata no. 1 in C minor, Opus 8, (1905), Piano Sonata no. 2 in A minor, Opus 21, (1907) and the Twelve Songs, Opus 17 (1907).

In 1912-13 he composed his first opera Hagith, Opus 25 to a libretto by Felix Dorman. It is in one act and was produced in Warsaw in 1922.

The Symphony no. 1 was premiered in March 1909. Grove describes it as gigantic but insincere, more orgiastic than musical and the composer withdrew it as he did his Piano Trio, Opus 16

At this time Szymanowski was not a nationalistic composer but sought freedom in his work. He also had humanitarian concerns at this time particularly a concern for public health in Warsaw. The Russian sector was rife with cholera, smallpox, tuberculosis, venereal disease and a high suicide rate as well as violent deaths. Wages were low and conditions dire.

This was also the time when he fell under the influence of another philosopher, Auguste Comte, who believed that science and its methods were always to be adopted and all religious and moral beliefs were to be abandoned. Change was everywhere and all the changes were rebellion against traditional values.

If we amalgamate all the philosophies that affected Szymanowski we have a society without God, without law, morality and the new and unquestionable belief that whatever an individual did in the

arts was totally acceptable and not subject to any laws or principles of decency. Painters and sculptors had had this philosophy for centuries eschewing any suggestion that nudity in art was indecent. Art had no such restrictions. Art could justify indecency and immorality.

As well as the Young Polish Group of Composers, there was its literary counterpart known as Young Poland and Arthur Gorski wrote about Polish society stating that it was disillusioned with life and that ties between the individual and the dictates of society and morality must be loosened. There must be protest against the organised mass. He said, "We must withdraw from such society and its life and look for more durable values." The movement was called the anti-positivist movement and its manifesto was published in Krakow on 1 January 1899 by Stanislaw Przybyzowski who wrote, "Art has no aim; it's aim is itself. It is a reflection of the Absolute, the individual's soul. Art stands above life itself and knows no limits or laws. To foster patriotism, social instincts or morality in art is to humiliate art. Therefore Art is the superior religion and the artist is a High Priest. He is holy and pure regardless if he commits terrible crimes in the pursuance of Art."

A Polish poet, Jan Kasproicz, was a member of this literary group and Szymanowski set three of his texts as the Three Fragments of Kasproicz, Opus 5. His next work was a setting for soprano and orchestra of Salome, Opus 6, to a text by Kasproicz.

All these philosophies are pagan and encourage immorality and possible anarchy. One no longer wonders why world war resulted particularly in view of the Godless philosophies of Germany.

In 1911, Szymanowski spent time at Tymoszwka and visited Austria, Italy, Scilly, North Africa and, of course, Germany in order to feed his desire to reinforce his pagan philosophies. But he studied the cultures and primitive beliefs of the countries he visited. He was very interested in Scilly and returned there in 1914 calling it a 'divine island' an expression he also used for Biskra and Tunis in North Africa. His temporary interest in Islam was to confirm his objection to Christianity and its morals. His opera, King Roger, is based on the life of the twelfth century ruler of Scilly. It is in three acts and was premiered in Warsaw on 19 June 1926.

He also wrote an operetta, Lottery for Gaining a Husband, which was left unfinished and it has never been performed.

His travels resulted in his style developing a personal style in which North Africa and romantic Italy especially appeared. Latterly, his music was influenced by the great Stravinsky although, at first, Szymanowski dismissed him as a composer of brutal music. In 1924, Szymanowski wrote an article about Stravinsky to correspond with the Russian composer coming to Warsaw to be the soloist in his Concerto for piano and winds.

Szymanowski wrote, "Stravinsky is a great sensation. He has and continues to play a truly remarkable role in the history of music. He revalues ideas about musical aesthetics. Today, Igor Stravinsky really is the greatest living musician. His music is not of the banality of expressionism, impressionism or any other manifold metaphysical banalities. In Germany, such inner confusion can be found in the works of Mahler and, in Russia, in the music of Scriabin. Stravinsky treats of the inexorable artistic duty."

Perhaps the influence of Stravinsky is not always apparent in the work of Szymanowski. It may be that Debussy and Ravel provide more obvious influences but in matters of texture and harmony Szymanowski is so very different from these French masters.

The First World War saw the production of many important works of Szymanowski including the Symphony no. 3, the superlative Violin Concerto no. 1 Opus 35, Demeter for contralto, female chorus and orchestra, Opus 38, Agawa for soprano, female chorus and orchestra, Opus 39, the String Quartet no. 1, Opus 37, Three Myths for violin and piano, Opus 30, the Piano Sonata no. 3, Opus 36, Metopes

for piano, Opus 29, Twelve Piano Studies, Opus 33 and Masques for piano, Opus 34. This surge of industry may be due to his rejection for military service because of his injured leg.

But disaster struck in the summer of 1917. The people of Tymoszwowka had feared both revolution and the unruly Bolsheviki. They attacked the Szymanowski manor and burned it to the ground. Prior to this, the Szymanowski had rescued as much as they could to take to their house in Elizavetgrad. The Bolsheviki destroyed much of the village of Tymoszwowka and, being an ignorant organisation, destroyed much of the art and culture of the area and elsewhere.

Szymanowski sank into understandable depression which hindered his ability to compose. Instead he took up literary work but writings were not confined to musical topics. In 1905 he had written a prose poem, *The Last Farewell*, on the death of his father. In 1918 he wrote a novel, *Efebos*, as well as collaborating with Jaroslaw Iwaskiewicz on the libretto for *King Roger*.

The war years were lonely. Many of his male friends were elsewhere and by June 1919 the Red Army was in control and the Austrian defenders were in disarray. Szymanowski's loneliness was also due to his homosexuality and his missing suitable male paramours.

In September 1918, Elizavetgrad was occupied by a White Russian force. Szymanowski wrote two anti-revolutionary tracts, *History and Music* and *To the Russian Intelligentsia*. In the first he urged the beauty of music and dismissed those who advocate the 'beauty' of revolution. The second article condemns the faulty thinking that leads to revolution and states that the national and religious affairs of the state form the basis of a country's identity which cannot be allowed to die. He had, obviously, revised his views. These articles reveal his desire for the Polish nation and he left the Ukraine in 1919 arriving in Warsaw on Christmas Eve. He was 37.

A concert of his music in January 1920 disappointed him. He felt that the Polish people should have shown more interest in his music. To add to this, the hostilities between Russia and Poland had increased. He may have been frustrated because he could not join the Polish Army. For a short while patriotism took over. He wrote a march which the Warsaw Philharmonic played in August 1920 and there were other patriotic marches and songs. Szymanowski was being converted to things Polish and taking on aspects of nationalism: He composed incidental music both for *Mandragora* and *The Bourgeois Gentleman*.

He took up his pen again to write *On Contemporary Music in Poland* in which he said that opinion could not adapt to the new situation in which music found itself. Did artistic criticism have a valid role? Was criticism itself an art? He also wrote that critics and reviewers had to fully understand the music before they could even think about writing about it. Art was beyond the reach of those who did not comprehend its structure, skill and purpose. The artist is far superior than any critic or reviewer and being a mere music lover not being able to read or fully understand music disqualified anyone being a critic or reviewer.

Szymanowski travelled extensively around this time visiting Paris, London and New York performing in concerts of modern music. He baffled many with his views and deep-seated philosophy. Like Sir Michael Tippett, listening to Szymanowski's somewhat unnatural use of words with long phrases was both exhausting and confusing. These philosophies could not be expressed in simple terms. Words had different meanings than its usage by ordinary but intelligent people and were nigh impossible to understand.

Back in Poland, Szymanowski's articles had caused great offence and the press took this up. People always react with great indignity and venomous personal attacks on authors when their own position or beliefs are under siege or questioned or, worse still, if they are proved wrong.

That Szymanowski answered back in his article, *My Splendid Isolation*, published at the end of November 1922 may not have been wise. Like Chopin, Szymanowski took an anti-Semitic stance absurdly proposing that Ravel and Milhaud were Jewish. It is incredible to contemplate such nonsense. Changeability is never productive. Szymanowski had referred to Stravinsky as a composer of savage and brutal music singling out Petroushka as disgusting and repellent and yet, in 1924, wrote of Stravinsky's genius. He often said, "I hate Germans" but spent a lot of time with them and their philosophies.

The distinguished composer Alexander Tansman wrote a detailed article about Szymanowski in 1922 probably the first major article about him.

I have always found Szymanowski's piano sonatas (1905-1917) to be bizarre and very seriously flawed both structurally and thematically. They baffle to the point of annoyance and these feelings are not confined to me. The critic, Stanislaw Niewiadomski, was to complain about their complexity and compositional problems revealing the disturbed state of mind of the composer. The works may be progressive and experimental but their logic and coherence is non-existent. His use of tonal extremes from double fortissimo to double pianissimo in the same bar is wildly eccentric and serves no purpose at all. The music is wayward. The fact that a great pianist, Arthur Rubinstein, played the second sonata does not make it a good piece.

With his writings and the piano sonatas Szymanowski distanced himself. In his early days he had composed works which has a nationalistic flavour such as the *Variations in B minor on a Polish Folk Tune*, Opus 10, of 1904 but in the following sixteen years his music had been influenced by the various countries and cultures of his travels. Clearly his view of Polish nationalism oscillated.

His early music was criticised for being Chopinesque and he responded by 'changing gear' and received criticism. But in the Spring of 1920 he became interested in the traditional music of southern Poland and these influences appears in *Słowieńce* (Wordsongs) for voice and piano, Opus 45, of 1922, in the first of the twenty *Mazurkas* for piano, Opus 50, and the ballet *Harnaise* which depicts the history of the people of the Polish mountains and is a work of gorgeous melodies, emotional depths and truly rapturous music.

Szymanowski spent more and more time in Zakopane and its region and eventually made his home there, although maintaining a flat in Warsaw. He found many new friends and worked with them to help maintain their rural life and culture. He was befriended by Julius Zborowski, the curator of the Tatra Museum and by Bartek Obrochta whose demeanour was that of an ancient Tatra highlander. As Zakopane was a health resort it welcomed visitors who were fascinated by the colourful and often spectacular folk weddings as well as other aspects of the culture. The dancing and folk music employed bagpipes, fiddles and bass and was usually improvised around a folk tune. The hints of this music in *Harnaise*, Opus 51, provoked a 'storm from the critics who believed that the inclusion of this music in an orchestral score would lead to the destruction of the Tatra way of life. Bartok protested saying that folk music must not be dressed up as art music. *Harnaise* was premiered in Prague on 11 May 1935.

On 1 November 1922, the *Violin Concerto no. 1*, Opus 35, was premiered by Josef Oziminski with the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra under Emil Mlynarski. It is the darling of all violin concertos ravishingly beautiful, rapturous, ecstatic, passionate, dramatic and simply stunning.

The *Stabat Mater* was completed in 1926 and premiered in 1929.

Szymanowski's activities from 1926 to 1932 were largely in the field of musical education. In 1927 he became the director of the Warsaw conservatory, a position he held until 1929 then becoming the Rector of the State Academy of Music which had just been formed. He took every opportunity to revive the musical culture of Poland. His conversion was now complete.

The re-establishment of Polish culture had been previously hampered by the partition of Poland and the consequential influences of the occupying forces. All music colleges had been closed by the Russians after the 1830 uprising and later efforts to reopen such institutions were suppressed as the occupying powers who felt this would cause Polish culture to re-emerge with a resurgence of national ardour which could lead to rebellion and conflict. Around 1858, the Russians did consider some sort of music colleges and held consultations to set this in motion which generated arguments, disputes and ill-feeling. Some private individuals began teaching out of impatience and the virtuoso violinist Apolinary Katsi obtained a licence to teach privately because of his close association with the Russian Court at St Petersburg. Eventually, Katsi established the Warsaw Institute of Music in a rundown building which had been used for all sorts of purposes over many years from a fortress to a hospital, a boarding school for young women to an army barracks, from a gum factory to the cult of Apollo which advocated and practised homosexuality and narcissism and which took over Britten's life. The Institute opened in 1861 with a course lasting six years. The first examinations were held in 1867 and one of its first graduates was Noskowski.

Szymanowski took up the directorate in 1927 with a series of far-reaching reforms in an evolutionary way rather than a revolutionary way taking into account the national heritage and the achievements of contemporary music. He reformed the financial aspects and the system of grants and it seems that he was feared as an administrator. He was not happy that the orchestral studies and that the orchestra was both led and conducted by an oboist and so he appointed Grzegorz Fitelberg as director of all orchestral studies and concerts. Many concerts were subsequently given under his direction which brought in needed funds. As for Szymanowski he said that he was hated and, of course, the other great problem was the dirty and dilapidated building itself.

There were personal problems and these were related to his homosexuality, his Elgarian arrogance, his heavy drinking and the decline of his health as he was suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis. In December 1928, he arranged six months leave to take a rest cure at Edlach near Vienna mainly for his alcoholism. But he returned to Warsaw the following March but by July it was clear that he had to resign. He went to Edlach again in August and was annoyed by his medical treatment and admitted to a sanatorium in Davos in Switzerland where he stayed until May 1930.

In 1930 the University of Krakow conferred upon him a PhD (*honoris causa*).

Little composition was produced during this time. It is clear that the String Quartet no. 2 was composed in spasmodic bursts. For the opening of the Academy in November 1930 he composed *Veni Creator*, Opus 57. He gave lectures on music and education in music as well as writing about it extensively. He espoused his views that music was a great unifying force, the basis for social order, that music removed petty divisions and that it was spiritual. Music, like all other art, was a religion and in music there was redemption from all the views and ills of the world. Music was heaven, somewhere in the sky where the non-existent God was supposed to live. Music should not be encumbered with religion or morality for it is higher than any religion or moral views. In simple parlance, his philosophy was that nothing an individual did for the sake of art was subject to any law or morality and so, as an example, if a painter produced a work of sadism or sexual activity, however perverse, it was not subject to censorship because it was art which was an untouchable and holy creation and could never be wrong or improper.

Like Benjamin Britten, Szymanowski's homosexuality was also narcissistic with his excessive and erotic interest in himself which, with his amorality, made him a bizarre person as it did with greater force with Britten who was a member of the Apollo cult and had delusions of grandeur. Elgar was equally megalomaniac with his repugnant sexual perversions. Such musicians had this concept, which is shared by royalty and those of noble birth, that all they do and say is right and not subject to law or morality.

One of Szymanowski's Myths for violin and piano is entitled *Narcissus*.

The Polish government was known as the Sejm. In the 1930s it had become somewhat dictatorial. Other organisations including some members of the army were at odds with the Sejm and the government began to crack down on possible insurrection and passed a decree giving them power to introduce new legislation without consultation. Rights to strike were outlawed but censorship was allowed to express itself forcibly and yet freedom to assemble for any purpose was severely restricted. In January 1932, the government closed the Academy of Music students and staff went on strike and took other action and were sacked.

Szymanowski was in Zakopane at the time and, hearing of this, sent in his resignation. He threw himself into composing his Symphony no. 4, Opus 60 (the Sinfonia Concertante for piano and orchestra) and the Violin Concerto no. 2, Opus 61.

The Symphony no. 4 shows Szymanowski's skill as a contrapuntalist and, as Humphrey Searle points out 'it combines the influence of Debussy impressionism with a modern contrapuntal technique. That is to say, that though his orchestral writing is brilliant and complex, it often contains a good deal of decoration and accompaniment which is not of strictly contrapuntal interest.'

In his last months, Szymanowski sketched an introduction to an autobiography but he succumbed to his lung disorder and died at Dr Dafour's clinic at Lausanne on 29 March 1937. At his bedside was his devoted sister Stamsława and his secretary Leonia Gradstein. His body was embalmed and buried with the men of merit at Skalka on 7 April 1937. His heart was placed in an urn but it was destroyed in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

As a composer Szymanowski cannot be pigeon-holed. He was an independent not belonging to any school.

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