

# SZYMANOWSKI

IWONA SOBOTKA  
NFM CHOIR  
NFM WROCLAW PHILHARMONIC  
GIANCARLO GUERRERO

**KAROL SZYMANOWSKI (1882-1937)**

1 Uwertura koncertowa E-dur op. 12 (2. wersja / 2nd version, 1912-1913) 13'06  
Concert Overture in E major, Op. 12

Pieśni księżniczki z baśni op. 31 na sopran i orkiestrę\* (1915) [17'53]  
Songs of a Fairy Princess, Op. 31 for soprano and orchestra\*  
(sł. / text by Zofia Szymanowska)

2 I. Samotny księżyc / Lonely Moon 4'25

3 II. Słowik / Nightingale 2'52

4 III. Złote trzewiczki / Golden Slippers 2'46

5 IV. Taniec / Dance 1'46

6 V. Pieśń o fali / Song of the Wave 3'44

7 VI. Uczta / Feast 2'17

III Symfonia „Pieśń o nocy” op. 27 na sopran, chór i orkiestrę (1914-1916) [24'42]  
Symphony No. 3 ‘The Song of the Night’, Op. 27 for soprano, choir and orchestra  
(sł. „Mewlana” Dżalaluddin Rumi / text by ‘Mawlānā’ Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, przekł. pol. / Polish trans. Tadeusz Miciński)

8 Moderato assai 7'52

9 Vivace, scherzando 7'32

10 Largo 9'17

CZAS CAŁKOWITY / TOTAL TIME 55'42

\* Karol Szymanowski opracował na głos i orkiestrę tylko trzy pieśni z cyklu: nr I, II i IV (1933), pozostałe trzy opracował Bruno Dozza: nr III, V i VI (2011-2012). / Karol Szymanowski arranged for voice and orchestra only three songs from the cycle: nos. 1, 2 and 4 (1933). The remaining three were arranged by Bruno Dozza: nos. 3, 5 and 6 (2011-2012).

**WYKONAWCY  
PERFORMERS:**



**IWONA SOBOTKA**  
sopran / soprano

**GIANCARLO GUERRERO**  
dyrygent / conductor

**CHÓR NFM / NFM CHOIR**

Lionel Sow – kierownictwo artystyczne  
Chóru NFM / artistic direction of NFM Choir

**NFM FILHARMONIA WROCŁAWSKA  
NFM WROCLAW PHILHARMONIC**

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NFM CHOIR  
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GIANCARLO GUERRERO

'I and God...'

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An orchestral debut, one of numerous song cycles and finally a short yet massive vocal-instrumental work. Years spanning their dates of inception: twelve. Significantly greater span – between the dates of their premieres, interspersed by greater and lesser historical events, most notably the First World War and both Russian revolutions, along with a series of personal trials and reappraisals of the artist's spirituality, as well as bad luck and unfavourable circumstances.

What – apart from the author – links these works? Seemingly very little, yet certain common threads can be found. Among them that each of the three works is linked to a degree with some kind of specific literary text. 'Some kind of' that is to say different in each instance. *Songs of a Fairy Princess* is a clear example of a 'musical setting'. Symphony No. 3 subtitled 'The Song of the Night', has at its core the text of a Persian mystic, yet is fundamentally an instrumental work capable of being performed without voices.

What about the Overture? In keeping with the spirit – or manner – of the era, the first version of the work was preceded by a poetic motto from the poem *Witeź Włost* by Tadeusz Miciński (1873–1918), a close friend of the composer, a cult figure in today's slang and in yesterday's stricter definition, a type of 'magus', and one of the leaders of Polish modernism at the turn of the 20th century. In the climactic point of his verse Miciński wrote about 'the proud and brutal triumph' of his hero, not quite the legitimate descendant of a Nietzschean superman. Later – like in Mahler's Symphony No. 1 – the motto disappeared. Perhaps just as well. Triumph? Undoubtedly, even infused with pride, however bloody sacrificial stones or any brutality are nowhere to be found in the sunlit E major of the Overture.

Commentators generally refer to three aspects of the work: that it is youthful and immature, that the composer borrows from Richard Strauss and that the orchestral sound is massive and rather heavy. True regarding Strauss; like in the works of many contemporary composers, the moustached face of *Till Eulenspiegel's* creator peers out of almost every bar. The opening unisono 'rocket' is already reminiscent of *Ein Heldenleben* or – to me more so – of *Don Juan*. Likewise the density of the work's orchestral textures is – or rather was, seeing that only a second slimmed down version has survived to our times – above average. Be that as it may, as an orchestral debut this is a masterpiece.

Szymanowski makes his debut in imitation of Strauss' orchestra; only the somewhat older Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876–1909) reaches the same result, albeit gradually in his very Straussian *Oświęcims* (*Stanisław and Anna Oświęcim*) through less expansive works, though far more original like *Lithuanian Rhapsody* or even *Returning Waves*. (Earlier he borrows – paying back with interest – from Tchaikovsky in the Violin Concerto, and after the *Oświęcims* departing from Strauss in *A Sorrowful Tale* only to return to Strauss in *Episode at a Masquerade*).

Szymanowski's several-minute-long work (performance durations vary considerably) is composed with remarkable economy. It is structured in sonata form with an inverted short reprise and developed motifs both in the opening and middle sections. We have the required two themes; if you like, first the more 'masculine' then the 'feminine' which in effect undergo so many metamorphoses that would horrify conservative 'gender' vanquishers.

Material economy is counterbalanced by formal wealth: modulations, permutations and finally contrapuntal harmony. There is much going on but without exaggeration: it is a rip-roaring overture, *an opening*, rather than a full-scale symphonic poem. In essence – a formal development of a single gesture. Perhaps for this reason in the Polish People's Republic, the first bars of the Overture were often used in Television and the Polish Film Chronicle to illustrate openings, receptions, ribbon-cutting ceremonies and generally elevated moments in public life. (At least for home affairs, as for all contacts with friendly nations – since none other existed – if I remember correctly, Tchaikovsky's Second Piano Concerto was reserved).

Concert Overture was one of the calling-cards of the wide-ranging group 'Young Poland in music' through which Szymanowski, Grzegorz Fitelberg, Ludomir Różycki, and Apolinary Szeluto tried to demonstrate their art with marked success to Polish and foreign audiences. The work's first version with the Warsaw orchestra was conducted by none other than Fitelberg on 6th February 1906; a slimmed down revision – on 13th March 1913 in Vienna by Oskar Nedbal, generally remembered as an operetta composer (including *Polish Blood*), yet valued during his lifetime as a conductor and viola player. He was to come into contact with Szymanowski on several occasions extending the group of Czechs honoured for promoting Polish music.

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Christopher Palmer, the author of a brief and excellent Szymanowski monograph, refers to *Songs of a Fairy Princess* written in 1915 as a 'family affair'. In fact not the first in the large and close-knit Szymanowski family, where artistic professions, or at least ambitions, were common and practical collaboration frequent. The words were written – with brotherly inspiration – by the youngest of the siblings, Zofia. According to Teresa Chylińska, in her monumental biography of Szymanowski 'the twenty-two year old Zofia Szymanowska was at the time going through a period of youthful "storm and stress"; considerably talented, she studied singing in Kyiv, turned her hand to amateur dramatics, but above all was interested in poetry: she translated French verses and wrote her own, naturally for herself (...)' Karol, having created his groundbreaking instrumental cycles, the famous 'three Ms' (*Myths*, *Metopes* and *Masques* composed more or less concurrently with our songs), wanted to enrich his newly developed style and by the same token broadened cultural horizon with vocal music to which he lacked suitable texts. So having extracted from his sister-poetess her experimental rhymes, he proposed she write something specially for him. Zofia arranged a set of seventeen miniatures of which Karol chose six that form today's well-known cycle.

It is sometimes said that the sibling princess of the Szymanowski family comes from the Orient, is a compatriot of Hafez, Rumi or an infatuated muezzin. There is even talk (Adam Neuer, in tow with Bartosz Dąbrowski) of Scheherazade. Some see in the miniatures' form allusions to the Persian Rubaiyat. This is not beyond the bounds of possibility; however, Teresa Chylińska points out that barring some superficial parallels in the instrumentation or ornamental solo part, in essence there is little of the East here. The Princess is simply . . . from a fairytale, also quite European, even specifically taken from Andersen as in *Nightingale* or *Song of the Wave* (related to *The Little Mermaid*). However, let us add that any talk of 'musically setting' the Dane is difficult: Andersen's short works

are not mere fairytales but rather stories with a clearly defined philosophical or moral message. Here this is lacking: 'Zioka' Szymanowska simply paints a series of miniatures, constructs straightforward metaphors. Her composer brother follows faithfully in her footsteps creating a cycle of noteworthy uniformity. And despite the unremarkable texts, the work in its entirety is considered to be one of the best examples of word and music integration in Karol's copious song output.

The original version of six songs was written for coloratura soprano – the 'profession' of Stanisława, sister of both authors – with piano accompaniment. Eighteen years later the composer orchestrated three of them: the pensive and nebulous *Lonely Moon*, clearly heralding *Roxana's Song*, *Nightingale* with unmistakable correlations to Stravinsky's opera of the same name and the Spanish sounding *Dance* – which version features on this recording. The orchestration of the remaining three came about on the initiative of Iwona Sobotka. The orchestration was made in 2011–2012 by Bruno Dozza, Italian composer working in Spain. Independently and almost simultaneously the same was done by Finnish conductor Sakari Oramo. Both the Szymanowski and Dozza versions (I have not managed to obtain the Oramo version) do not rely on a simple transcription but rather on a significant enhancement not only in terms of tone-colour but also of texture by highlighting characteristic features of specific tonal structures and at the same time a highly imaginative tonal prolongation of the piano part – as if reverberating real or imagined 'echoes' and resonances. (That was my impression while listening to and reading the score, and I was delighted to read in Bruno Dozza's commentary that 'that was exactly what he had in mind . . .') At the same time, it is very Szymanowskian to call to mind connotations with not only Ravel or Stravinsky but also with sections of lyrical timbre associated with representatives of the second concurrent trend: Berg and Schoenberg – we can easily find analogies (taking into account the entirely different

aesthetic background) to *Erwartung* or *Wozzeck*. The closing *Feast* however contains fragments which could quite easily find a place in say, *Harnasie* if its Podhale fundament were to be ignored.

There also exists a somewhat opposite version: an arrangement for solo instrument, namely depriving the work of its textual phonetic layer but at the same time revealing additional aesthetic and historical perspectives. So in 2007 the violinist Piotr Pławner created a version of *Songs of a Fairy Princess* for his instrument. Danuta Gwizdalanka, author of a recent book on Szymanowski, wonders why nobody had come up with the idea earlier, considering the work's close relationship with *Myths* for violin.

The earlier mentioned bad luck which plagued some of Szymanowski's works, namely delayed premieres relative to their inception, also did not spare our two-man orchestrated version. The work's first performance planned in Wrocław was prevented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The premiere held in Berlin on 22nd October 2021 was performed by the city's Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester conducted by Michael Francis with soprano Iwona Sobotka as soloist. In Wrocław the work received its premiere not until 25th March 2022 – with the same soloist accompanied by the NFM Wrocław Philharmonic under the baton of Giancarlo Guerrero.

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Symphony No. 3 was composed during the same war years as the songs. Written intermittently, it was completed in 1916 with echoes of war only heard in the distance in the family home in Tymoszkówka. The author of the text, named ex post *The Song of the*

*Night*, was the thirteenth century Sufi mystic, philosopher and – borrowing the term from Christianity – priest, 'Mawlana' Jelal-ad-Din Rumi. (There are several ways of writing his name; I have chosen this one for phonetic ease and to highlight the intricacy associated with his surname and sobriquet, which simply means 'Roman', in this instance 'Byzantine'.) He came from central Asia, belonged to the Persian cultural circle, worked mainly in Konya in today's central Turkey and is widely known as the likely founder if not the inspiration behind the whirling dervish movement.

It is said that Szymanowski's artistic orientation was greatly influenced by his trip with Stefan Spiess to Italy including Sicily in 1911 and three years later to North Africa; that it aroused his interest in Islam, in the rich Sicilian cultural complexity and in the South and Orient in general. There is no doubt however that the composer, whose interests were wide-ranging, from astronomy to botany, from religions and philosophy to culinary art, was already well-read in the East; as was expected from a recent son of Young Poland. Neither is there any evidence that the composer explored native Persian, Arabic or Turkish music. On the other hand, his Mediterranean peregrination had a formative effect on his... sexual orientation. From the point of view of what we know today and taking into account the realities of the times, there is no doubt that Karol from Tymoszkówka's homosexuality was basically organic but activated by cultural factors encountered in the broad-minded South. In particular Italy, where same sex relationships were not restricted from as early as 1889, a rarity, compared to other countries, which drew travellers to its shores. Like Szymanowski wrote to Spiess, somewhere along the line he 'gave up all passive resistance'. The axe had fallen.

Chronologically earlier familiarity links Symphony No. 3 with Tadeusz Miciński. The text of 'O, sleep not, dear friend, this night' paraphrased by Miciński was printed in 1905 among other Rumi ghazals by Warsaw's famous Symbolist periodical *Chimera*.

Szymanowski had this issue and admitted to finding it highly interesting even though at first it did not yield any musical results. Another clue – and probably more than mere coincidence – comes in the form of Miciński's unusual, visionary, erudite, formative and expressionistically philosophical novel *Xiqdz Faust* (Faust the Priest). It is here that – in 1913, or perhaps earlier! – the author puts two fragments of Rumi's ghazals onto the lips of his female protagonist, Imogen, of which the beginning and end are exploited in the Symphony, whereupon Imogen, Miciński's Małgorzata and the Eternal Femininity, plays on the piano 'notes of Karol Szymanowski's symphony'.

The history of the work's performances is complicated. The premiere was originally planned for November 1916 in Saint Petersburg, at the time Petrograd. It was to have been conducted by Alexander Siloti (this has become the accepted form of writing his Italian sounding surname, although Russians and Ukrainians write it as Ziłoti, and Italians – Ziloti), however due to problems with the translation of the poetic text, the premiere was moved to December, then to January and eventually cancelled. Soon after came revolutionary chaos and the Symphony had to wait for post-war times. The work's world premiere in London in November 1921 had an ersatz character: the choir was substituted by the organ, the soloist by a cello. A similar performance took place in Warsaw. Not until seven years later in Lviv did 'The Song of the Night' receive its first full performance.

Initial reactions to the work were varied. Warsaw critics spoke at length about its unusual complexities. Conversely the London critic grimaced at its simplicity bordering on childishness. Both examples pertained to the version without choir; however, knowing several performances of the work, I would hazard a guess that the Warsaw performance was ... simply lacking in precision thus giving an impression of greater complexity than warranted by actual fact ...

In essence, like the Overture, Symphony No. 3 is economically structured. A clearly defined three-movement architecture, with vocal parts (with or without text) on either side and an instrumental middle section (in which the choir performs episodically and only *bocca chiusa*), actually two hymns – or one, comprising an introduction and an appropriate torso – as well as a lively dance-like scherzo in between. In fact the musical material can be described as a mosaic of short melodic-cum-rhythmic cells, cleverly juxtaposed and enclosed within extraordinary instrumentation, whose sumptuousness 'everybody' draws attention to. Here is a theme to think about on a personal level: following a Warsaw performance of my *Symphony of Hymns*, originally inspired as a kind of homage to Szymanowski's works, one of the English critics referred to the presence in my piece of a blurring of borders between orchestration and form, typical of Polish music. I did not quite know what he had in mind until I thought of Symphony No. 3, where the orchestration indeed contributes to a formal co-creation, to a greater degree than in the works of say Scriabin, Debussy, Stravinsky, or Schoenberg. Maybe a familiarity in the UK with Szymanowski's works, as well as for example Penderecki's early compositions led the Englishman to this generalisation.

I suspect Julia Weissberg, the Russian critic and composer, had the same in mind when she spoke of Szymanowski the artist and man saying: 'this is not a noun, only an adjective'. (Her husband Andrey Rimsky-Korsakov, son of Nikolai, further added: 'Maybe even an adverb ...') This occurred in Petrograd in 1916 when she could not have been familiar with the Symphony, but both could have been thinking of certain traits regarding a convergence of 'pure form' – not in the sense used by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, a writer, painter, philosopher and Szymanowski's good friend, but rather traditionally musical – and tone colour, *disegno* and *colore*, which may have been a variant of contrast between form and content. Be that as it may, Symphony No. 3 is Szymanowski's first composition, where its author did not rework the instrumentation.

In commentaries to the Symphony, I have often come across associations with Oliver Messiaen's montage techniques; this seems plausible, although the Frenchman's works have decidedly sharper and more incisive contrasts while Szymanowski's rely on smooth transitions and narrative continuity.

Finally a somewhat technical issue, albeit of great significance. Much has been discussed about the performance practice and context of the Third Symphony's solo part. The PWM Edition and Universal authoritative editions clearly indicate a tenor, not a word about soprano. In Miciński's work the subject is male. Bethge's paraphrase doesn't solve the problem, neither does the Persian original – considering that there are no grammatical genders in Persian. Christopher Palmer points out that Szymanowski probably knew that Rumi gathered his erotic experiences mainly from men (he was in fact married, not that it mattered, particularly at the time – despite being decidedly prohibited by the Koran). Therefore a male subject is absolutely appropriate. Furthermore, in some fragments – particularly in the phrase 'You a Soul, while we are ailing . . .' – as evidenced by the tenor in unison with the choir's tenor group.

All this is true . . . except that Szymanowski's attitude towards the Symphony's forces was quite liberal. Performing the piece with organ instead of choir and cello instead of soloist was down to a requisite compromise; but – in the first place: he authorised a performance with soprano, what's more his own sister. In post-war practice the soprano version was also often exploited: particularly by Stefania Woytowicz. In the second place – I have read the opinion of a distinguished musician, a witness to the said substitutive productions, who definitely preferred the instrumental versions which he found pure, less pompous and unencumbered with the questionable poetics of the Polish paraphrase.

There's not a man living who could please everyone. To avoid finishing on a sour note, one more small but significant detail related to the Symphony. One of the most memorable fragments of the work is the beginning of the finale, opening with the second hymn's solo phrase: 'How quiet. Others sleep . . . / I and God are alone together this night!' This 'I and God' Szymanowski expresses in the most simple and accurate manner: an upward octave leap. 'Octav-Wunder', a complicated (like the 'mystery of the Holy Trinity'?) paradox of perceiving the frequency ratio 1:2 as two sides of the same coin, was most probably intentionally exploited. Even if it wasn't, it works perfectly.

Rafat Augustyn  
Translated by Anna Kasprzyk