Szymanowski’s Third Symphony: Tradition and the Orient

John Pierce O’Reilly
University of Manchester

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Abstract
Karol Szymanowski believed his Third Symphony to be the “deepest and best of everything” he had written at the time. Completed in 1916, the work sets words by Persian poet Rumi; the choice of text indicative of the composer’s interest in the Orient as a source of both musical and philosophical inspiration. In exploring the Symphony’s poetic and musical content, this paper considers the extent to which the Third Symphony both reflects this Oriental influence, and epitomizes the compositional procedures of Szymanowski’s middle-period. Further, this paper places the Symphony within the context of contemporaneous European Art Music, and examines Szymanowski’s engagement with Polish national, as well as wider European, musical traditions.

Keywords
Szymanowski, Orientalism, Szymanowski Symphony No. 3, Eroticism, 20th century music
Szymanowski’s Third Symphony: Tradition and the Orient

John Pierce O’Reilly
Year III – University of Manchester

Karol Szymanowski believed his Third Symphony, subtitled *Song of the Night* and completed in 1916, to be the “deepest and best of everything” he had written at the time.¹ The work sets words by the Persian mystic poet Jalal al’Din Muhammad Rumi (in a translation by Tadeusz Miciński) in a single tripartite movement. The choice of text is indicative of Szymanowski’s interest in the Orient as a source of both musical and philosophical inspiration, also made evident in the score of the Symphony itself. In exploring the Third Symphony’s poetic and musical content, one can consider the extent to which the work epitomizes the compositional procedures of Szymanowski’s middle-period, and how it reveals the composer’s contemporaneous Weltanschauung, as well as exhibits his engagement with national, European, and Oriental musical traditions.

The Symphony’s text is derived from Rumi’s *Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz*, a collection of lyric poems written in dedication to Shams al’Din Tabrizi, the poet’s mentor and perceived “chosen mouthpiece of the Deity.” Wightman highlights that verses from the *Divan-i* are addressed “as much to Shams” as to God. This complicates the dialogue between the speaker and the addressed ‘Divine Beloved,’ given the patent eroticism with which the relationship between man and God is frequently expressed, and indicates an inherent homoeroticism in the writing, imparting the poetry’s sensual language with new meaning.

Whether Szymanowski was aware of Rumi’s apparent homosexuality is uncertain, but the eroticism, ecstasy, and sensuality of the poetry was certainly not missed by the composer, as is demonstrated in the Third Symphony. The Symphony features two immense climaxes at figures 19 and 94, both of which engender a sense of sustained ecstasy. This is achieved largely through a kind of static dissonance present throughout the work, generated by percussion ostinati and the prolonging of the dissolution of climactic harmonies, as well as the presence of a pedal-note on C (Example 1). Downes interprets these climaxes as seeming “to promise a joyful release of erotic expression in which a sensual moment is so magnificently heightened that it might be indestructible.” This interpretation, although not based on evidence found by directly engaging with the score, acknowledges Szymanowski’s intentions to imbue the work with the sensuality

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present in the text. This effort to reflect the poetic in the musical can also be seen in the employment of the aforementioned pedal-note on C, which manifests a motion-in-stasis throughout the Symphony in both the macro and the micro. That the pedal-note opens and closes the work, while featured in both climaxes, gives an aural impression of perpetuity, and diminishes any sense of large-scale harmonic progression, producing the effect of static dissonance. This could mirror what critic Kaikhosru Sorabji terms the “blend of ecstasy and languor” he feels innate to Persian poetry.⁶ On a smaller scale, the opening bars of the work, Example 1, exhibit this ‘blend’ in a more localized way. The violin line, whose melodic and rhythmic development creates a sense of progression, is attenuated by the stasis of both the pedal-note and the presence of symmetrical chord structures (whole-tone collections based on the pedal C), as well as a general lack of movement towards a cadence.

The Orient’s influence on the Symphony also extends beyond the poetic and symbolic to the purely musical, demonstrated most clearly in the work’s middle section (figures 25 to 72). Wightman identifies Szymanowski’s use of the rast and babarsburak ajnas (four and five note tetrachords extracted from the

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Arabic note system) in the clarinet solo at figure 28 (bars 152-154). He also regards the motif at bar 127 (Example 2) as deriving from “the medieval modal system,” although he offers no indication of which particular mode(s) Szymanowski employs. As demonstrated in Example 2, this motif derives more directly from the Maqam Saba Zamzam. Maqamat (plural of Maqam) are melodic modes upon which much of Middle-Eastern music is based, and comprise the aforementioned ajnas.

Example 2: Szymanowski, Third Symphony, op. 27.

Example 3 highlights the presence of this same Maqam in the violin melody earlier in the work. The harp ostinato at figure 22 enharmonically restates this same melody, arguably foreshadowing its more evident employment in bar 127.

Example 3: Szymanowski, Third Symphony, op. 27

In Middle-Eastern music this Maqam is often used as modulatory material. By employing it in a transitional part of the Symphony, Szymanowski displays an awareness and nuanced understanding of Arabic modes and their traditional function. Although Jim Samson feels that the Symphony’s engagement with Persian classical music

8. Ibid.
is somewhat superficial, the presence of *Maqamat* supports the notion that Szymanowski endeavoured to offer a more perceptive rendering and give “in musical terms…the essence of Persian Art.”

The presence of Oriental elements in the Symphony is symptomatic of a more general interest in exotic subject matter in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, present both in Szymanowski’s oeuvre as well as in wider artistic spheres. That Persian art was in tune with Szymanowski’s artistic sensibility is demonstrated not only by his choice of text for the Third Symphony, but also his earlier engagement with the poetry of Hafiz in the *Love Songs*, Op. 24. Furthermore, *Efebos*, the composer’s lost novel written between 1917-19, and detailed in Szymanowski’s letters, was reportedly akin to the Third Symphony in its attempt to “invoke a Greco-Roman past.” Szymanowski deemed it a “Symposion.” Such a label draws comparisons with Plato’s *Symposium*, illuminating the homoerotic content of the former and supporting Maciejewski’s reading of *Efebos* as an “apologia pro vita sua.” Maciejewski also highlights the Jungian influence in *Efebos*, namely in its presentation of homosexuality as descended from “past cultures,” and “within the range of ecstatic

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sexual variations” rather than a moral issue.\(^\text{14}\) It is arguably possible to extrapolate from the presence of such Jungian thought in *Efebos*, that it could also be found in others of Szymanowski’s works, including the Third Symphony. This offers a possible incentive for Szymanowski’s use of Persian text and incorporation of Middle-Eastern musical techniques in his score; the Symphony’s invoking of the ecstasy inherent in poetry from an ancient Oriental culture could be demonstrative of Szymanowski’s attempts to justify his own homosexuality, in a musical “apologia pro vita sua.”

Given this, it is relevant here to briefly consider the writings of Edward Said in exploring Szymanowski’s choice of the Orient as a “location of home truths.”\(^\text{15}\) Using Flaubert as his exemplar, Said remarks upon the “uniform association between the Orient and sex,” as well as the Orient’s suggestion of “not only […] fecundity but sexual promise […] untiring sensuality [and] unlimited desire” in much late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century literature.\(^\text{16}\) Such observations illuminate similar themes in Szymanowski’s engagement with the Orient; in exploring Middle-Eastern culture, the composer arguably hopes to explore and elucidate his own sexual inclinations, eliciting the ‘self-discovery’ experienced by other Orientalists.\(^\text{17}\) However, for some composers, including Szymanowski, the Orient is not necessarily concerned exclusively with the erotic and the sensual. Said argues that Mozart's *Magic Flute* and *Abduction from the Seraglio* “locate a particularly magnanimous form of humanity in the Orient,” and it was this humanity, rather than the “modish habits of “Turkish”

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14. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
music,” that drew Mozart “sympathetically eastwards.” It is this perhaps secular humanity to which Szymanowski also may have been drawn, which would explain his avoidance of a religious subject in a large-scale choral work (the Third Symphony). Opting instead for an Islamic text, the work is open to interpretation as either a “union with Godhead,” or alternatively, a more humanistic view of “God as present through man and his sensual world.”

Said also explores the use of the Orient in defining Europe as its contrasting image, with European culture “gain[ing] in strength and identity” by “setting itself off against the Orient.” The extent to which Szymanowski’s Orientalism participates in this trope through his attempts to define Polish music, and whether this was intentional or not, is difficult to establish. However, discourse on a national ‘Polish music’ was certainly something the composer engaged with. In the 1920 essay *Thoughts on Polish Criticism in Music Today*, Szymanowski censures the contemporaneous critics’ favouring of “the problematic ideology of ‘Młoda Polska,’” and their efforts to block “the path to any influence that might reach us from either the West or the East.” In the same article, the composer offers a vision of Polish music as “national in its Polish characteristics,” but not faltering in its endeavours to attain universality, rejecting the ideas of “Polish music as…the solidified ghost of the polonaise or mazurka” in favour of a “joyous…care-free song of the nightingale trilling in a

18. Ibid, 118.
scented Polish May-night.” This last piece of imagery is extremely reminiscent of Rumi’s poetry; the Third Symphony could be interpreted as an exhibition of Szymanowski’s envisioned Polska Muzyka, being, along with the Violin Concerto, Op. 35, his most significant work at the time of the article’s publication. The Orient in Szymanowski then functions not as Polish art’s foil, but as a novel image to “enrich [the] minds” of his audience.

Christopher Palmer describes the Third Symphony as a “halfway house between Wagner and Messiaen,” which not only highlights the influence of the East (anticipating Messiaen’s later exploration of Eastern music), but also solicits an exploration of the work’s relation to musical styles both contemporaneous and preceding its composition. Palmer draws a useful, albeit somewhat superficial, comparison between the Third Symphony and Act II of Tristan und Isolde, the latter presenting the “first large-scale orchestral Song of the Night in music,” and therefore “significant in respect of Szymanowski’s genealogy.” Although it is only a “poetic burden” that Palmer feels associates the Third Symphony and Tristan, Szymanowski’s score owes much to the legacy of both Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian Romanticism. Downes highlights the prevalence of goal-directed lines throughout the Symphony, the “crucial [melodic] shaping” revealing the “enduring legacy of Romantic melodic process.”

The opening violin line, quoted in full in Example 4, is exemplary of such a melodic process, with the highest note (in the fifth bar) accentuated by tension-laden ascending chromatic movements.

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25. Ibid, 56.
26. Downes, Szymanowski, 84.
throughout, all of which long to be leading notes, and are burdened with Wagnerian yearning.

The immense climaxes of the Third Symphony have invited comparisons not only with Wagner, but also with similar procedures in Mahler. Moreover, the use of a chorus likens the symphony to Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloe*, further situating it within the context of early twentieth-century symphonic writing. More revealing, however, is the relation of the work to the music of Skryabin, chiefly his *Poème de l’extase*. Although Szymanowski’s Symphony and Skryabin’s *Poème* both utilize whole-tone procedures, they do so in a markedly different way. Downes highlights that whereas Skryabin’s treatment of whole-tone harmonies “demands climactic resolution,” Szymanowski’s Symphony lacks such an obligation; while both works conclude in C major, their respective processes of arrival are somewhat different, illustrating Szymanowski’s unique treatment of both tonality and harmony in the Third Symphony.²⁷

Wightman perceives the Third Symphony as representing “an extreme reaction to the preceding ‘Germanic’ era,” confirmed perhaps by Szymanowski’s own “organic horror of ‘symphonic

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²⁷. Ibid, 35.
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poem’ (as a title).” However, this is contradicted by Szymanowski’s own writings and the procedures of the Symphony. Indeed, the immense climaxes of the work could have been driven by textural, rather than musical inspiration, and could be seen as pertaining to the literary argument rather than the musical. In addition, Szymanowski’s own description of the music of Wagner, Strauss, and Schoenberg discusses “vertical sounds coming to the fore,…creating arbitrary resting-points which provide a general background for the saturating lyricism of the music,” and goes on to discuss the prevalence of ‘color’ in the music. One could convincingly describe the Third Symphony in these terms, thus illustrating the importance of the preceding ‘era’ to the music, against which it was said to rebel.

Szymanowski’s Third Symphony not only exhibits the composer’s engagement with the Orient at its zenith, and his employment of this to enrich his compositional modus operandi, but also represents an artistic and personal enlightenment. Indeed, Wightman recognizes Op. 27 as an “extreme point beyond which the composer could not realistically proceed.” Stephen Downes furthers this, identifying Szymanowski’s “main compositional problem in the 1920s” as the unsuccessful attempts to recreate the “exquisite balance of dynamism and stasis,” or “the Sufistic and the Slavonic,” achieved to such effect in the Third Symphony. The concurrent political atmosphere, however, must also be

29. Ibid, 175.
32. Downes, Szymanowski, 84.
considered. After Polish independence in 1918, Szymanowski assumed the role of the country’s leading ‘nationalist’ composer and, in doing so, abandoned the Orient as a location of inspiration. Although Middle-Eastern influence would permeate the scores of his later Violin Concerto, Op. 35 and his opera King Roger, Op. 46, as well as the masterly control of tempo and flexibility present in this Symphony, from then on, “like the hero of his opera,” Szymanowski was forced to “ignore the siren-like calls of the East.”\textsuperscript{33}

Bibliography


