

Karol Szymanowski – Violin Concerto No.1 Op.35 (David Oistrakh) [1960]

Written by bluesever

Monday, 26 October 2009 14:26 - Last Updated Tuesday, 27 May 2014 21:29

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David Oistrakh – violin Leningrad Philharmonic Kurt Sanderlig - conductor

Szymanowski hit upon his own style only after a long travail through which he learned from other composers -- Wagner, Strauss, and Scriabin at the beginning, then Stravinsky, Debussy, and Ravel in his mid-period -- and this has been held against him. But if it is said that Wagner or Stravinsky won victories for music, for "progress," then Szymanowski is their rightful inheritor for he understood their originality, almost clairvoyantly, from the start and was able to assimilate and refine their contributions, turning them into his own highly individual purposes. This is nowhere more apparent than in the Violin Concerto No. 1, the apogee of his middle period works.

Exempted from military service because of a childhood leg injury, Szymanowski sat out most of World War I on the Ukrainian family estate Tymoszkówka, immersed in a fabulous inner world compounded by memories of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine remains in Sicily and North Africa, nightly music making -- Szymanowski's sister Stanisława was an accomplished soprano, while the great violinist Paweł Kochański visited frequently -- and a deep absorption in literature, with Nietzsche, Goethe, and modern Polish writers pre-eminent. Among the latter, Tadeusz Miciński held a special place, and his surreal, seemingly hallucinogenic poem "May Night" suggested the fantastic soundscape of Szymanowski's Violin Concerto No. 1 -- "I wandered once through the colonnades that Abderrahman made for his beloved, in the amethyst night of Shéhérazade, with talismans burning in the sky...Pan plays pipes in the oak wood, a lilting melody for dancing Ephemeredes, tangled in amorous embrace, eternally young and sacred...." Szymanowski had already dealt with Shéhérazade in the first of his piano Masques (1915-1916), and the literary reference is made explicit by quotation of Shéhérazade's opening bars in the concerto, composed over the summer and autumn of 1916.

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The concerto's single, unbroken arch opens with skittering "night music" ushering the listener immediately into an eerie, alluring psychic terrain soon dominated by the violin's entrance. The solo instrument, in its incantatory, rhapsodic, melodic profusion, is the psychopomp in this Dionysian exploration, calling up and crowning ever more rapt timbral miracles from a Promethean orchestra of virtuoso players, augmented by exotic percussion and whelmingly eloquent divisi strings. The thematic material is handled cunningly, with certain intervals prominently looming amid inversions and retrogrades, though these are always expressive -- indeed, only analysts and the quickest of musicians recognize them -- and never suggest the tense academicism of the same tropes employed by a Reger or a Schoenberg. Taken with the fantasticated, intoxicated atmosphere throughout, these technical devices impart unity to a constantly developing exposition that has left sonata form behind. Four great, extended episodes rise ever more climactically to an impassioned cadenza (largely supplied by Kochanski) before a fifth and grander climax tops all to vanish in a detumescently triste coda.

A scheduled performance of the concerto in St. Petersburg under Siloti, with Kochanski as soloist, was canceled amid the tumultuous events leading to the Russian Revolution. The premiere was given in Warsaw, November 1, 1922, with Józef Oziminski as soloist. ---Adrian Corleonis, Rovi

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