

Karol Szymanowski – String Quartets (Varsovia Quartet)[1982]

Written by bluesever

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String Quartet No. 1 in C major, Op. 37

1. *I. Lento assai* 00:08:15
2. *II. Andantino semplice (In modo d'una canzone)* 00:06:10
3. *III. Vivace* 00:04:46

String Quartet No. 2, Op. 56

4. *I. Moderato, dolce e tranquillo* 00:08:18
5. *II. Vivace, scherzando* 00:05:03
6. *III. Lento* 00:05:58

Performer:

Varsovia Quartet: Boguslaw and Krzysztof Bruczkowski, violins Artur Paciorkiewicz, viola Wojciech Walasek, cello

Szymanowski wrote his String Quartet No. 1 in the autumn of 1917, during one of the most difficult periods of his life, when the revolutionaries and the Soviet communist party escalated their activities against landowners, forcing him and his family to leave their Tymoszkówka estate. Composed in Elisavetgrad and regarded as one of Szymanowski's most inspired works, it had clearly been influenced by those dramatic events. The form of the String Quartet follows the traditional sonata cycle, with Allegro as the first movement, a slow second movement and Scherzando alla burlesca as the finale. There is no final fugue, though; Szymanowski had intended to write it, but never did. The music which fills this structure is at times extremely bold and new both in sound and harmony. The first movement introduces an interesting colour effect, produced by a melody played with the use of flageolet tones accompanied by tremolos, double trills or playing near the bridge (*sul ponticello*). The third movement uses a polytonal technique (each of the instrument parts having another key signature), *nota bene* serving to achieve a humorous, or even a grotesque, effect.

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In 1922 String Quartet No. 1 won the first prize (of 500 thousand marks!) in chamber music contest of the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment. Just before the work's publication in 1925 Szymanowski dedicated it to the French musicologist and editor of the journal "La Revue Musicale", Henry Prunières.

Dedicated to a Zakopane couple the composer had befriended - "For Dr Olgierd and Julia Sokołowski" - Quartet Op. 56 is considered one of the most difficult and avant-garde of Szymanowski's works both in terms of structure, technique, and expression. The three-movement arrangement follows in general the traditional form. The first movement, resembling a sonata allegro, has two themes, one serene and melodious, the other expressive and abounding in new, complicated chords. The other two building blocks - the vigorous, impetuous scherzo in the middle and the double-themed fugue in the finale, combining the slow part with an expressive culmination - have clearly been inspired by the Podhale folk music. In addition to the lead, "mountaineer" motif, the second movement brings a quote from the brigands' song Pocciez chłopcy from the second act of Harnasie. The ballet - more specifically, the Sabała tune from the end part of the Taniec zbójnicki / Brigands' Dance - has also inspired the main theme of the finale fugue, its second theme using the Podhale scale.

The Quartet's complicated architecture is matched by equally sophisticated colour effects produced, one on hand, by a number of modern, dissonant and sharp chords and, on the other hand, by rare articulatory combinations (such as flageolets of three instruments) and a changing, lively polyphonic texture.

String Quartet No. 2 Op. 56 was first performed by the Warsaw String Quartet in Warsaw on 14th May 1929. Undeterred by its technical difficulty, many other quartets have incorporated the work in their repertoires, notably the Borodin Quartet (whose early interpretation can be heard on the LPs released by Polskie Nagrania and Muza in 1961 and 1962), the Wilanów Quartet, Varsovia Quartet, Amati Quartet, Camerata, Dafô, Karol Szymanowski Quartet and the Silesian Quartet. The work was first published by Universal Edition in 1931. ---Anna Iwanicka-Nijakowska, culture.pl

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