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The Many Masks of Karol Szymanowski: a discussion of his two piano triptychs

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Abstract: This article explores the relationship between Karol Szymanowski's two piano triptychs – *Métopes*, op. 29, and *Masques*, op. 34 – and the literary characters evoked by each of their movements – the Sirens, Calypso and Nausicaa (from Homer's *Odyssey*), Sheherazade (from *The Arabian Nights*), Tristan (from Hardt's play *Tantris le Bouffon*), and Don Juan (not associated to any specific source by the author). The article discusses various strategies used by the composer to convey his subject matter, from obvious visual depictions to hidden structural parallelisms, thus demonstrating how he used both the content and the form of the literary narratives as inspiration.

Keywords: Szymanowski; Piano; Program music; Literature.

As Muitas Máscaras de Karol Szymanowski: uma discussão de seus dois trípticos para piano

Resumo: Este artigo explora a relação entre os dois trípticos para piano de Karol Szymanowski – *Métopes*, op. 29, and *Masques*, op. 34 – e os personagens literários evocados por cada um de seus movimentos – as Sereias, Calypso e Nausicaa (da *Odisséia* de Homero), Sheherazade (das *Mil e Uma Noites*), Tristão (da peça *Tantris le Bouffon* de Ernst Hardt) e Don Juan (o qual não foi associado a uma fonte específica pelo autor). O artigo discute várias estratégias usadas pelo compositor para expressar seu conteúdo, desde óbvias representações visuais até paralelismos estruturais escondidos, demonstrando dessa forma como ele usou tanto os temas como as formas das narrativas literárias como inspiração.

Palavras-chave: Szymanowski; Piano; Música de programa; Literatura.

Karol Szymanowski's two piano triptychs – *Métopes*, op. 29, and *Masques*, op. 34 – were composed in 1915-16, during his so-called Impressionistic period, with each of their six movements being named after a particular literary character: the Sirens, Calypso and Nausicaa in the earlier triptych (all of whom Odysseus met in his attempt to return to Ithaca, as described by Homer), and Scheherazade, Tantris (a.k.a. Tristan), and Don Juan in the latter one. By presenting a variety of ways of how to creatively explore and transcend their subject matter, these pieces are excellent examples of musical works inspired by other artistic genres. Although they are not mere program music, they do have a few unmistakably and fairly interesting programmatic moments; however, they are also portrayals that offer sharp insights into these characters' often contradictory psyches and deceptive motivations, with each movement evoking a unique and meaningful atmosphere. Furthermore, Szymanowski seems at times to achieve what Bruhn (2000, p. xvi) calls “musical ekphrasis,” a characteristic found in pieces that use as their source of inspiration *both* the content and the structural elements of the original work of art, thus transmuting its essence to another medium and creating an independent work that will remain deeply and intrinsically connected to the original one, but without being inferior or subservient to it.

Discussing a piece of music that makes an explicit reference to an extra-musical source does present some difficult choices. As philosopher Etienne Souriau remarks, “there is something odd, and even disturbing, in second-hand inspiration” (*apud* BRUHN, 2000, p. xv). Bruhn (2000) elaborates on this idea by asking:

[I]s there a risk that the ‘representation of a representation’ might (...) come out as a merely derivative, bloodless response? What do artists mean when they say that the new work can be cherished alone, but fully understood and appreciated only in light of the earlier work on which it reflects? (BRUHN, 2000, p. xv)

Many people may choose to circumvent this question by basing their understanding purely on a work's musical qualities, considering the extra-musical inspiration to be merely a scaffold used by the composer during musical construction that can be safely discarded afterwards by the listener.

This, however, reflects two common biases toward program music, the assumptions that (1) there is a direct proportionality between the level of programmatic detail used in a piece and the importance of knowing its program, and that (2) there is an *inverse* proportionality between the level of programmatic detail and the musical quality of a piece. In other words, if a piece is deemed to be extremely good, then it is assumed that its extra-musical sources can be safely regarded as an unessential curiosity, as mere points of departure for the composer's imagination, and, therefore, not entirely worthy of being carefully studied by a performer/listener. And vice versa: if a piece closely follows a detailed program, it is thought to have less power to stand on its own legs, and a greater knowledge of the program is hence necessary in order to appreciate it; the piece is thus considered to have an inferior musical quality – because it is considered to be subjugated to an extra-musical design. In this continuum, the triptychs' artistic importance would diminish as the importance of reading their literary sources would increase. Since approximately 75% of Szymanowski's oeuvre had some kind of non-musical inspiration, it is also interesting to ponder how this bias might have affected posterity's reception of Szymanowski.¹

It is certainly treacherous and artistically unsatisfactory to establish precise transliterations between *each* musical element and their presumed literary counterparts; however, as Hepokoski (1992, p. 136) argues, part of the aesthetic experience is that listeners and performers should at least try to establish what the music may suggest, since “forging musical and literary-pictorial interrelationships is fully within the spirit of the game. (...) If we wish to play, we must abide by the rules; otherwise we are playing a different game or redefining the original one to suit our own purposes”.² Furthermore, a composer does not even need to provide a program in order to make a composition programmatic, especially if the stories and characters are in public currency; as Walton comments, “mere titles often suffice to provide [an] essential factual skeleton and make music patently representational – and even narrative” (*apud* BRUHN, 2000, p. 27). Working in the field of literature, Genette has also argued that titles are authorial ways to frame the reception of the work, “condition[ing] the way in which the text proper is to be perceived” (*apud* HEPOKOSKI, 1992, p. 137). They are therefore “part of the game of reading,” and unavoidably evoke certain images, sounds, feelings and concepts in the reader's/listener's/performer's mind. If titles are enough to evoke some sort of programmatic association (whether vague or precise, whether resembling a narrative in its temporality or a snapshot in its latent descriptiveness), then it logically follows that the original work of art is not as discardable as some may assume, especially considering that different people bring different levels of knowledge about certain cultural products. Thus, the name “Nausicaa” will instantly evoke a specific, association-laden image in someone familiar with Homer and with the Classical Antiquity (as it would have been the case with Szymanowski himself). Someone familiar with art history might also remember Rembrandt's masterful engraving or Ruben's evocative painting of the meeting between Odysseus and Nausicaa. Likewise, the name Tantris will, by itself, naturally evoke in the knowledgeable listener some Wagnerian associations that will inevitably be reflected on his/her perception of the music. Although the discussion below will not present a full analysis of each movement due to space constraints, it will pinpoint specific examples from each one that demonstrate the singularity and variety of the approaches used by Szymanowski in his masterful character depictions.³

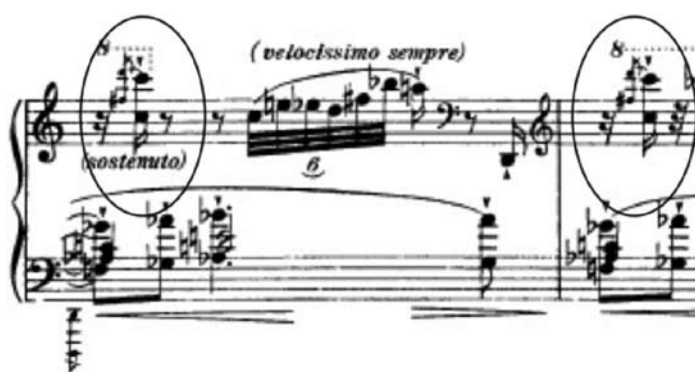
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Ancient ruins cast a profound spell in Szymanowski, who spent a great of time during his trips looking at their austere and ageless beauty, specially in Sicilian locations such as Paestum, Taormina, and Selinus. These ruins provided the original spark behind the composition of *Métopes*, op. 29; in Greek architecture, metopes are spaces found on Doric friezes where mythological scenes were usually engraved. Szymanowski's metopes have been described as "sensitive evocations of three contrasting facets of womanhood" (WIGHTMAN, 1999, p. 153). Palmer (1983) aptly wrote that

[T]hese classical evocations are quite lifeless (in a non-pejorative sense) – highly polished, hard and exquisite, essentially cold and remote. They express a temper original, delicate and aristocratic, disdainful of the facile and the commonplace. (...) [T]hey are as things transfixed in endless night, icy and phosphorescent. (PALMER, 1983, p. 48)

This distant quality is certainly designed to capture in sound the impression of those ancient engravings Szymanowski saw in Sicily, as his music seems to recreate the remoteness and coldness of the carved stone (while also being able to convey the immediacy and corporality found in Homer's poetry). Since he was inspired *both* by the form of his imagined metopes and by the content of the stories, this is one attribute that can qualify these pieces to receive Bruhn's designation of "musical ekphrases".

The 1st movement provides an acute portrayal of the Sirens, alluring but destructive. Odysseus had been warned of their danger, but he wanted to experience it first-hand, so he asked his shipmates to tie himself up to the mast and to put wax into their ears. The Sirens from Antiquity were no mermaids; traditionally depicted as half-bird and half-woman, they accompanied their songs with instruments such as the lyre and the double-flute, as it can be seen in several pictorial representations found in ancient pottery and engraving. Szymanowski's awareness of this tradition seems evident by the fact that his right-hand figurations, besides conveying the waves and spray of the ocean, and punctuating the seasickness created by the Sirens' hypnotic melodic, also suggest bird-calls at times (Example 1). Their lyres are also heard throughout the piece (Example 2).



Example 1: *L'île des sirènes*, bars 7-8.



Example 2: *L'île des sirènes*, bar 5 and bar 62.

The form of the piece consists of the following sections: A (bars 1-6), B (with a melody in two parts, b. 7-13 and b. 14-35, reaching a mini-climax in b. 31) C (b. 36-47) B¹ (b. 48-60, reaching the piece's climax in the cadenza of bar 60) C¹ (b. 61-66) A¹ (67-71) e B² (b. 72-84, also mixed with material from C in b. 76 e 80-81). The form, which could thus be summarized as somewhat ternary (aB – cB¹c¹ – a¹B²), allied to its dynamic structure, in which B¹ has a clearly distinct character in relation to the other sections, creates an impression of Odysseus' ship as it approaches the Sirens from afar, gets dangerously close to them, and then goes away, listening to their song from the distance once again. Szymanowski gives the listener a vicarious experience of Odysseus' sensations, as he is first attracted to the Sirens' hypnotic melody, and as he later loses his mind, furiously trying to escape the ropes that kept him safe. The second part of theme B acts as the main communicator of the duplicity found between the Sirens' façade and their inner motivation; this lullaby-like melody begins in a pleasant and enticing manner, but, when it appears again in the middle, it has been transformed into a sinister and violent melody (Example 3); the figurations that earlier seemed to depict the splash and swing of the ocean now are replaced by turbulent waves hitting against the ship. This transformation (which is quite evident to the listener) includes a faster tempo, a crescendo towards the piece's climax, sharper dissonances, and some brutal-sounding sonorities. The original appearance of the Sirens' theme, by contrast, was mellifluous, soft, *cantabile ed affetuoso*, its accompanying tremolos almost inaudible, as a veil of sound enveloping the melody, something very different from the desperate tremolos that almost drown the melody in the middle section. The strong pictorial sense present in the piece's climax is completed by the way in which Szymanowski uses strong pedal notes possibly representing the stability of the mast from which Odysseus wants to free himself (Example 4). Then, when the original melody returns at the end of the piece in its original, placid guise, one cannot listen to it as before. Even though the notes are identical, the Sirens' duplicity has been revealed, and the threat behind their allure is now evident.⁴

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system, at the top, consists of two staves. The upper staff features a melodic line with a slur over it, and the lower staff has a tremolo accompaniment. Above the first staff is the instruction 'ben marcato la melodia' and below it is 'pp'. The second system, below the first, also consists of two staves. The upper staff continues the melodic line, and the lower staff has a more active tremolo accompaniment. Below the second system is the instruction 'cresc. molto.'. Arrows point from the first system to the second, highlighting the transformation of the melody and the increase in volume and intensity.

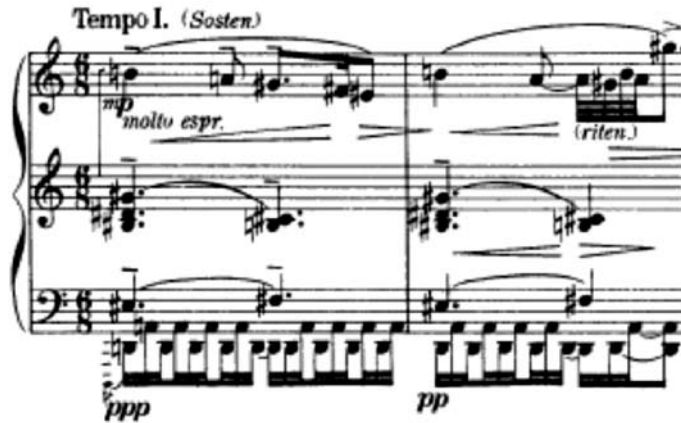
Example 3: *L'île des sirènes*, bars 13-15 (1st system), and bars 50-51 (2nd system).

The image displays a musical score for 'L'île des sirènes' (bars 53-58) by Karol Szymanowski. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a prominent bass line. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with the instruction 'ff con passione'. The second system shows a melodic line in the right hand and a complex bass line in the left hand. The third system shows a melodic line in the right hand and a complex bass line with a 'fff' dynamic marking. The fourth system shows a melodic line in the right hand and a complex bass line with a '3' marking. Several measures in the bass line are circled in red, highlighting specific rhythmic and harmonic patterns.

Example 4: *L'île des sirènes*, bars 53-58.

While the Sirens' motives were basically negative, Calypso is a more ambivalent character. She saves Odysseus after his ship sinks, and ultimately helps him return home after keeping him seven years on her island as her lover, even though she only allows him to go because of an order from the gods. Calypso's cave, where Odysseus spends his nights,

is lusciously fertile and inviting, but he passes his days on a rock, staring at the sea and weeping. Homer (1996, p. 34) ironically describes his situation as “unwilling lover alongside lover all too willing” (in Fagles’ translation), and Szymanowski captures this contradiction perfectly with a mosaic of melodic fragments, from which three stand out: one – with its tritone-encompassing trajectory – that seems to represent his longing to go home, while the other two demonstrate Calypso’s voluptuous charm and the hedonistic lethargy of her lifestyle (Example 5, 6, and 7).⁵



Example 5: *Calypso*, bars 12-13.

Example 6: *Calypso*, bars 37-38.

Example 7: *Calypso*, bars 48-49.

The nymph Calypso is a test for Odysseus’ resolve; Kohler believes that his ultimate redemption comes by refusing her offer of immortality, preferring instead to return

to his home and to his wife Penelope (*apud* BRUNEL, 1992, p. 890).⁶ As Stanford (1992, p. 51) writes, “[b]etter (...) the severest sufferings of war or sea-voyaging than that perfume-drugged lethargy, that voluptuous sloth, even with a goddess to love and tend him”. The piece gradually alternates and combines those melodic fragments, reaching a moment in which Odysseus’ theme starts to get more intense (Example 8) and culminates into a very impassioned climax (Example 9), as if demanding the nymph to allow him to go home; however, his will to return (represented by his theme) is temporarily mollified at the end (Example 10). Thus, Szymanowski provides us with only a snapshot taken sometime during those seven years, and Odysseus is still in the island and in Calypso’s arms when the piece finishes.⁷



Example 8: *Calypso*, bars 55-58.



Example 9: *Calypso*, bars 68-69.



Example 10: *Calypso*, bars 84-88.

The princess Nausicaa, on her turn, is an entirely benefic character. She goes to the river with her maids to wash her clothes; after they finish, they dance and play with a ball, which ends up falling into the water, causing the women to scream and to wake up the na-

ked Odysseus, who had been shipwrecked there – again – after a 20-day trip from Calypso’s island. The maids start to flee, but Odysseus immediately uses his famous eloquence to appeal to Nausicaa’s sense of pathos, describing how his misfortunes had brought him there, while also demonstrating at the same time (by the way he speaks) that he is of noble descent. Kohler comments on how Odysseus must have felt the “the freshness and joy of talking to a real woman rather than a witch or a nymph” (*apud* BRUNEL, 1992, p. 890). There is a mutual attraction between the characters, but this does not proceed beyond a friendly flirtation; as Stanford (1992) points out, Penelope would forgive Odysseus’ infidelity only with half-goddesses, because of the danger inherent in refusing their amorous advances, the legends of Antiquity being strewn with poor victims who had not complied with an immortal’s desires.

Szymanowski’s piece is a sequence of dance-like sections that perfectly capture the youth and vitality of Nausicaa (see, for instance, Example 11, 12, 13). Towards the end of the piece, there is one passage in particular that has puzzled many commentators, with an abrupt return of the theme from the previous movement (*Calypso*) that represented Odysseus’ lament and longing for home (Example 14). Scott (1985) considers it a nostalgic echo from the previous movement, but, considering the *fortissimo* context in which it appears, this is hardly convincing.⁸ Downes (1996) suggests that it means that both Calypso and Nausicaa are similar in their vanity and narcissism, but such similarity does not stand a closer scrutiny of Homer’s text, nor does it seem to be reflected by the musical content. Yet Palmer (1983) proposes that Odysseus is now in Nausicaa’s power, just as he had been in Calypso’s previously, but this ignores the radical difference between these two characters’ motives and actions. The key to understanding this clear programmatic moment is the realization that this theme stands for Odysseus’ sorrow and longing. It is marked *mesto* – which means sad, mournful – in one of its appearances in the 2nd movement, and it indeed has a nostalgic feeling that could hardly be missed. When it reappears in the last movement, then, it clearly stands for Odysseus’ speech to Nausicaa (see lines 165-197 of chapter 6 of the *Odyssey*), in which he once again laments his situation, this time more desperately but also in a dignified, grand manner, typical of a well-born person, something that it is perfectly reflected in the music.



Example 11: *Nausicaa*, bars 1-3.



Example 12: *Nausicaa*, bars 19-20.



Example 13: *Nausicaa*, bars 34-36.

Then, if we go back two pages in the music, there is a playful and rhythmical passage that suggests the women playing with the ball (Example 15). This passage becomes gradually faster and louder until a powerful arrival in the bass followed by a shriek in the high register (Example 16), which could very well represent the ball falling in the water, and the maids' scream, which wakes Odysseus. The passage immediately following this shriek (and preceding Odysseus' speech/theme) clearly then sounds as a representation of the maids fleeing the scene (Example 17),⁹ with the exception of Nausicaa, who stays behind and listens to Odysseus' theme, and then intertwines *her* own theme – from the beginning of the movement – in a dialogue with his (Example 18).



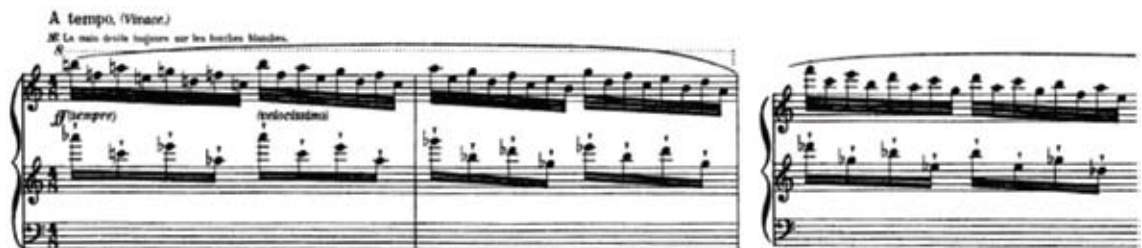
Example 14: *Nausicaa*, bar 88.



Example 15: *Nausicaa*, bar 73.



Example 16: *Nausicaa*, bars 79-80.



Example 17: *Nausicaa*, bars 81-83.

Nausicaa's original theme (from the beginning of the movement)



Odysseus' 'lament' theme
 Example 18: *Nausicaa*, bar 89-90.

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Szymanowski's wish to 'reveal by concealing',¹⁰ which had already been evinced in the depiction of the Sirens' duplicity, is explored even further in the *Masques*, which were fittingly dubbed by the composer himself as 'insincere music.' Thus, Shéhérazade's stories are colorful, but one notices her unmistakable tactics of stalling for time; Tristan pretends to be a buffoon, but his grotesque hilarity alternates with a tragic inner core; Don Juan tries to seem sincere in his multiple serenades, but his true intentions are humorously displayed to the audience, and his demeanor also betrays a certain hollowness and desperation at times. Orga (1996, p. 6-7) poetically described *Masques* as "a cycle rich in super-charged nerve-end exposure and narrative improvisation, (...) its remote sound galaxy wonderfully reflecting a prism of melody and cadenza, the voluptuous and the delirious, gilded mirrors and glassy splinters."

Scheherazade is the archetypal narrator, someone who is able to hold an audience captive through her sheer ability to create a story in which the narrator's own voice

gets lost and in which the suspense never ceases to exist. She presents a sequence of events that range from the unabashedly sensual to the dazzlingly fantastic, from the idyllically pastoral to the graphically violent. However, Scheherazade is not the only narrator in the book; multiple characters *inside* her stories also display an irresistible penchant for narrative. And, just as Scheherazade narrates in order to postpone (and ultimately cancel) her execution, the same death-avoiding pattern happens with many of the other loquacious characters that are introduced. As Todorov (2006, p. 233) writes, “If all characters tell stories, it is because this action has received a supreme consecration: narrating equals living. (...) Narrative equals life; absence of narrative, death.”

Todorov (2006) also elucidates how the techniques of digression and embedding are used in the *Arabian Nights*, creating a pleurably dizzying effect at times. Thus, in the story of the bloody chest, there are five levels of narration:

Scheherazade tells that....
Jaafer teels that...
the tailor tells that...
the barber tells that...
his brother (and he has six brothers) tells that... (TODOROV, 2006, p. 231)

This technique is made even more interesting by the fact that some inner narratives may be abandoned, thus never reaching a conclusion. It is as though the function of such incomplete story is simply to introduce its own inner story. The effect on the reader is an amalgamation of suspense (as one expects the return of an interrupted story, expectation that is not always fulfilled), and a pleasant realization that one is sinking deeper into the narrative abyss. Borges, always a lover of circularity, was particularly appreciative of the six hundred and second night, in which a story is, after a while, is finally embedded by itself, creating a potentially endless narrative – i.e., a character inside a deeply embedded tale starts telling the story of the first narrative, which would logically contain the same inner narratives again, and so on (TODOROV, 2006, p. 231).

What makes Szymanowski’s piece fascinating is the fact that he was able, whether instinctively or knowingly, to recreate this design through a magnificent sleight of hand, creating perhaps the best example of musical ekphrasis in both triptychs. The piece’s structure displays an intriguing series of overlapping sections that seem through-composed and improvised at first. Some of these interrupted sections are very short. Some will be picked up later in the piece. Others will not. This, evidently, correlates perfectly with the structured of the *Arabian Nights*, as previously described.¹¹ It can be also related to Morson’s concept of “sideshadowing,” in which multiple narratives are presented, but some of these are red herrings that are ultimately not fully developed (but give the initial impression that they *could* be developed). Morson, describing Tolstoy’s use of this procedure, delights in its similarity to real life, in which we always have a multitude of possible futures, of which only a few are realized (*apud* KAWABATA, 2000, p. 31).¹² Thus, Szymanowski’s non-repeated material could have been developed in many different ways, creating the same aesthetic feeling of being “unplanned and contingent” that Tolstoy achieves in his works.

Just as Rimsky-Korsakov did in his symphonic poem, Szymanowski uses a framing device that stands for Scheherazade herself, skillfully commencing and interrupting her story; this passage is found in the very beginning and very end of the piece (Example 19). Similar to the effect Rimsky-Korsakov achieves in his violin-recitatives that represent Scheherazade,¹³ Szymanowski here also creates a sense of “suspended time”, enveloping the listener in a lethargic cloud of mesmerizing sonorities (incidentally, this passage is also

reminiscent of Scriabin's 5th piano sonata). When this section finishes, one feels that something is finally happening, with a story beginning already *in medias res*. The constant contrast between stasis and movement – basically a contrast between sections that have a clear 'tonal' goals against sections in which superficial filigrees disguise an essential stillness – is part of the piece's ethos (and also a characteristic of Szymanowski's "Impressionistic" style). Kawabata's (2000, p. 31) assertion that "time is a composer's plaything" could indeed not be truer than in Szymanowski's music.

However, Szymanowski takes the structural parallel a step (or many steps) further than Rimsky-Korsakov. If we eliminate the non-repeated narratives, we could conclude that the piece is structured as an arch ABCDCBA. This is an *a posteriori* conclusion, though. For a first time listener, it is difficult to grasp the return of CBA, since it comes after a long interval, interpolated with much inconsequential material. If one includes all the smaller-level narrations, the form of the piece could be conceptualized somewhat like this: A e fg BhB¹ i C Dh¹D j e¹ l C mB A Bar numbers: 1 12 44 87 143 192 225 294 300.¹⁴

"A" (Example 19) stands for Scheherazade's own voice, the framing device discussed before. "B" (Example 20) is a sinuous melody played over a left-hand trill, "C" (Example 21) is an animated tale that is interrupted right after its climax (Example 22), and "D" (Example 23) is a languorous interlude. Of course, it is perhaps appropriate that we remind ourselves that literary-musical parallels do not need to be taken to the ultimate degree in order to be considered valid. Musical logic sometimes trumps narrative logic. In other occasions, though, musical logic felicitously complements narrative logic. There is a striking and undeniable similarity between Szymanowski's structure and the digression/embedding technique used in the *Arabian Nights*, even if we cannot push the similarity to the utmost extreme (which would most certainly have detracted from the piece's musical value).

Example 19: *Shéhérazade*, bar 1.

Example 20: *Shéhérazade*, bars 44-45.



Example 21: *Shéhérazade*, bars 60-62.



Example 22: *Shéhérazade*, bars 123-126.



Example 23: *Shéhérazade*, bars 142-149.

The piece's 2nd climax arrives after the return of B (Example 24). This climax sounds obviously unresolved: after a long buildup, Szymanowski arrives at a dissonant chord, played *sfff*, at the limit of the piano's dynamic range. This chord seems to get stuck, and is repeated a few times, alternating with repeated fifths in the bass, without being followed by any kind of resolution. Then, a radically different texture (with *pianissimo* tremolos) emerges from underneath, and tries to divert our attention elsewhere. The piece will soon be over, and, after being totally engrossed in the stories for a while, we start to hear Scheherazade's voice again.¹⁵ The passage following the climax clearly does not seem like a logical continuation of the narrative, but is rather another overlapping interruption, creating a cliffhanger that will certainly be resumed in the following night. Like King Shahryar, we have become captives of Scheherazade's absorbing tales, and are left with the curiosity of wandering what will happen with this interrupted story.



Example 24: *Shéhérazade*, bars 274-278.

However, as in *Calypso*, we are only shown a snapshot of Scheherazade's story, only one night; unlike Rimsky-Korsakov, Szymanowski does not provide us with the book's happy ending, in which her life is spared, perhaps because modern art was experimenting with open narratives, and/or perhaps because he was skeptical of happy endings during the height of the First World War (when this piece was composed). Reading Szymanowski's pessimistic comments about the war, one indeed cannot help but wonder whether he did not feel a sense of impotence at the thought that he, unlike Scheherazade, would *not* be able to save his inner world – the essence of his self – from the brutality of life by using his musical-narrative prowess.

Szymanowski's source for *Tantris le bouffon* was an expressionist play written by Ernst Hardt, which brought back some elements of the medieval tale found in the epic poems by Gottfried von Strassburg and Thomas of Brittany (which would later be appropriated and condensed by Wagner's quasi-religious opera about "endless yearning" and death as the "sole redemption"¹⁶). Tristan, after being banished from King Mark's realm, marries a different Isolde (Isolde of the White Hands), regrets it, and then returns to King's Mark realm in several disguises.¹⁷ However, Hardt distorts the original legend to make it extremely gloomy, nightmarish, grotesque, sardonic and hysterical; he relishes in describing many gruesome details, such as when Isolde is given to the lepers as a gift from King Mark (who is certainly not the fairly benign and dignified character from Wagner's opera). Hardt's Tristan returns disguised as a leper at first, and then as a buffoon; he has shaved his hair, beard, and eyebrows, and is but a shadow of what he was ten years ago (the last time the lovers had met). Isolde, who is still furious at his betrayal, does not recognize him (or perhaps, as it is slightly hinted sometimes, she semi-unconsciously refuses to recognize him, because of his broken vows to her?). She only accepts that the buffoon was indeed Tristan when it is too late, after he has left the castle. Tristan's old dog, Husdent, who had become a beast in the meantime, is the only one to recognize him, and, in the final scene, Isolde, from the ramparts, sees them walking towards the horizon.

Wagner's legacy is especially noticeable in the slow sections of Szymanowski's music, which have a late-Romantic redolence and a similar feeling of unquenchable longing (Example 25). The slow sections also clearly represent the 'night-music' that stays in stark contrast to the 'day-music' of falsehood, pretension, and courtly life in the faster sections, also following Wagner's example.¹⁸ Szymanowski perfectly captures the crazed mood of Hardt's play in his music as well, alternating moments of extraordinary lyricism with others of acid humor, in which one may hear the savage barking of Husdent in piercing clusters (Example 26), and in which Tantris becomes almost suicidal in his delirium.¹⁹ The music – at turns grotesque, disturbing, spasmodic, unpredictable, violent, sorrowful, amorous, and

melancholy – is able to superbly recreate the moments in which Tristan – or rather Tantris – seems to entertain the court as a jester (Example 27), followed by passages in which he pleads with Isolde (Example 28), and other moments in which he reminisces about their former love (Example 29).

(a tempo) riten. a tempo (poco avviv.) riten. Poco meno dolce espress. Anc

Example 25: *Tantris le bouffon*, bars 42-46.

Vivace (non troppo)

Example 26: *Tantris le bouffon*, bars 54-55.

Allegro moderato capriccioso e scherzando Marcato e non legato poco rit. rallent. e dimin.

Example 27: *Tantris le bouffon*, bars 24-27.

Meno mosso espr. p dolce p sempre rallentando riten.

Example 28: *Tantris le bouffon*, bars 28-30.

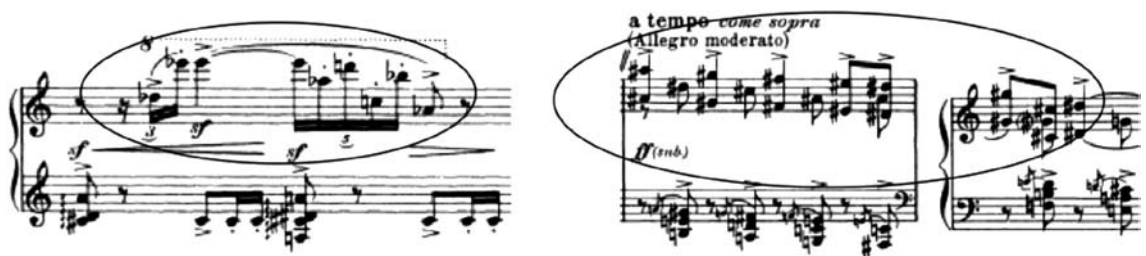
Meno mosso (quasi adagio) rallent. (a tempo) rallent. (a tempo) riten. p dolce pp (m.d.)

Example 29: *Tantris le bouffon*, bars 40-42.



Example 30: *Tantris le bouffon*, bar 91.

Tantris le Bouffon is a clear example of what Brown (1992, p. 88) refers to as “the unstably ironic or elegiac character that seems inescapable” in the Modernist aesthetic of that time.²⁰ The dialectic between these two forces seem to suggest that a synthesis might be possible, and, that, if one is unaware of the play’s ending, a satisfactory resolution could be reached (perhaps another *Liebestod*?). After the shattering and short climax, though – which represents the moment in which Isolde finally recognizes him, with the love theme from the middle section being taken up *fortissimo* (Example 30) – one realizes that this is one of those cases of a narrative gone terribly wrong; quoting McClary (1997, p. 26), it is as though “the protagonist-detective dies, Dracula triumphs, or the heroine gets her bodice permanently ripped.” The piece ends in utter dejection, as Tristan walks away, throwing fragments of his buffoon costume and of his buffoon melodies on the road. Two of his previous buffoon motives are discarded at the end of the piece (bars 103-108),²¹ before being interrupted by a few *secco* chords (Example 31 and 32).



Example 31: *Tantris le bouffon*, bar 3 and bars 34-35.



Example 32: *Tantris le bouffon*, bars 103-105.

Alongside with Odysseus, Don Juan – “a perennial type who is almost bound to provoke strong feelings for or against him and who invites constant re-interpretation as moral views and social circumstances change” (SMEED, 1990, p. 149-50) – is probably the character who underwent the greatest number of literary avatars in history. Some of the most famous versions that explored the chameleonic aspects of this inveterate womanizer include Molina’s, Molière’s, DaPonte/Mozart’s, Lord Byron’s, Lenau’s, George Bernard Shaw’s and Tolstoy’s.²²

Szymanowski never associated this mask with one particular author (WIGHTMAN, 1999, p. 165). Zent (1988) hears in its mandolin-strumming an explicit reference to Mozart’s *Deh vieni alla finestra*; however, Szymanowski’s character is not exactly the defiant *bon vivant* that Da Ponte and Mozart created, displaying at times the sort of sincere desperation and world-weariness found, among other later sources, in Lenau’s play (the inspiration behind Richard Strauss’ symphonic poem).²³ Gray (1984) suggests that Szymanowski’s conception of the character was mainly affected by Byron’s work (whom he admired), and his piece indeed displays a Byronesque sense of humor and a picaresque, episodic quality similar to the tone of Byron’s poem. More likely than not, Szymanowski is – consciously or unconsciously – referencing Don Juan in all of the many facets that had been explored *ad nauseam* throughout the centuries, and that had become part of society’s collective unconscious.

This piece is remarkable in its humor, bravado, passion and melancholy. The program itself seems rather clear: a sequence of serenades that grow in intensity, gradually allowing us to peek through Don Juan’s ‘masks’, displaying the anguish that lies behind his empty pursuits.²⁴ However, his despair never becomes as serious as Tantris’, and Szymanowski creates a figure that inspires both pathos and laughter. This piece was dedicated to Rubinstein, and Downes (1996, p. 64) finds that “its overblown rhetoric [and] showy virtuosity (...) establish a relationship between the character of Don Juan and that of the virtuoso pianist based on their shared flirtation with narcissism.” Its repeated refrain, which circles around a Db (Example 33), and the piece’s form, which suggests a rondo, have also been described as symbolizing the character’s self-centeredness.²⁵



Example 33: *Sérénade de Don Juan*, bars 2-5.

The ending – with its precipitous acceleration towards the final *hollow* fifths (played *sfff*), and the sensual but *aflitto* section that preceded it (Example 34) – seems resolute and yet phony, and one cannot avoid thinking that the story is once again left unfinished. It is – of course – also a very appropriate *musical* ending for such an intense and challenging cycle for the pianist, thus once again reminding us of the cross-purposes between musical and extra-musical demands.

Example 34: Sérénade de Don Juan, bars 135-143.

*

In the descriptions provided above, Szymanowski's penchant for story-telling and character-development is clearly demonstrated. While some movements were explored in greater depth than others, and although many other examples could be suggested, those presented so far are sufficient to demonstrate how his music mirrors the original stories in both explicit and, sometimes, very subtle ways. Szymanowski is also able to simultaneously immerse himself (and ourselves) in the stories while commenting on the characters' real motives from an observer's viewpoint, creating the unique combination of reality and falsity that lies at the bottom of these characters' psychological conflicts and that spurs the composer-narrator to tell their stories.

Since music is perhaps nothing more than "a kind of disinterested language that merely suggests certain concepts and precepts and does not necessarily describe anything specifically" (HERTZ, 1987, p. 31), one should not peremptorily claim these interpretations to be anything but what they are – interpretations.²⁶ Nonetheless, both from the interpreter's and the audience's perspective, the importance of exploring the literary and artistic tradition behind each of the characters has certainly been made quite clear. While the pieces could be listened as 'pure' music, there are several immediate, profound, and yet partial-

ly inscrutable ways in which a performer's inspiration and a listener's experience may react if, as Hepokoski (1992) suggests, they fully accept the game proposed by the composer, thus achieving a more holistic artistic experience, one that would not have been possible otherwise.

Endnotes

- ¹ I have discussed elsewhere several reasons for Szymanowski's secondary status (CESETTI, 2009).
- ² "The genre [of program music] exists, *qua* genre, solely within the receiver, who *agrees* to create it reciprocally by *indicating his or her willingness* to play the game proposed by the composer." Furthermore, "there are certain 'absolute music' questions that may not be asked [in program music]" (HEPOKOSKI, 1992, p. 137).
- ³ For a fuller discussion of these pieces and of Szymanowski, please see my doctoral paper, found at the McGill eScholarship website. My performance of both triptychs in one of my doctoral recitals can also be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQOzXdKZWpg>. The scores of both pieces are in public domain and can be found at http://imslp.org/wiki/Category:Szymanowski,_Karol
- ⁴ I.e., the memory of the middle section's horror has inoculated the listener against the original attraction of the Sirens' melody (as a performer, this can be heightened by playing the return of the theme at the end in a less attractive, almost perfunctory way). It is always interesting to notice how music's temporality can make a melody sound different depending on the place in which it occurs (and in relation to other musical events).
- ⁵ While there are other fragments in the piece, these three melodies are the ones that return more frequently, and there is also a certain 'tonal' stability in their utterances (i.e., there are clearly defined tonal centers in them), something that is not as present in the more fleeting fragments.
- ⁶ Odysseus is thus a precursor of Tannhäuser.
- ⁷ After the climax (bars 68-72), the energy subsides, as the themes from examples 6 and 7 return. Then, in bar 84, the theme of Odysseus' longing briefly appears, but, as it can be seen in example 10, it slowly dissolves into a peaceful added-6th major chord in *ppp*, thus temporarily forgetting about his suffering.
- ⁸ Of course, there is a radical difference between saying that it represents a nostalgic echo *from the last movement*, as he does, and saying that it represents Odysseus' nostalgia for his homeland.
- ⁹ As Brown (1992, p. 258) comments in relation to Kuhnau's *Bible Sonatas*, "fighting, pursuing, flight, dancing, and other action involving definite types of physical motion have always been favorite subjects, (...) simply because music can represent motions with some accuracy."
- ¹⁰ "Szymanowski attempted to reveal, or perhaps paradoxically conceal (...) a certain philosophical or psychological depth [in *Masques*]" (ZENT, 1988, p. 51).
- ¹¹ This overlapping procedure, incidentally, also reminds one of the nested dolls (*matryoshka* dolls) common in Russia and many Eastern European countries.
- ¹² "Our lives have not been authored in advance, but are lived as we go along. (...) This notion of temporality dispenses with linear narrative, instead opening up a multitude of alternative vistas where anything might happen."
- ¹³ As described by Kawabata (2000).
- ¹⁴ Bar numbers for the remaining, 'less important' sections are: f – 23, g – 34, h – 54, B¹ – 61 (the defining motive actually begins in bar 64), i – 71, h¹ – 160, j – 180, l – 204, m – 284.
- ¹⁵ It is tempting to compare this to the commonplace cinematic strategy of having a voice-over at the beginning of a movie, which soon disappears (being replaced by the acting of the story itself), and then returns at the end, after the viewer had become so engrossed in the story as to partially forget the narrator. Of course, sometimes the voice-over also punctuates the movie at a few moments, something that could be felt in *Shéhérazade* as well, particularly in some moments that seem more 'narrative', in contrast to others that feel more 'dramatic'.
- ¹⁶ The composer's own words (*apud* SCRUTON, 2004, p. 29).
- ¹⁷ As Scruton (2004, p. 28) remarks in relation to this episode in the original tale, "[Tristan] falls into the great sin against love, which is to regard the object of love not as unique, irreplaceable, and predestined, but as amenable to substitution."
- ¹⁸ Besides these similarities, Wightman (1999, p. 168) also shows one theme that Szymanowski borrowed from the opera, albeit significantly altered.
- ¹⁹ Zent's (1988, p. 49) description of Tantris' behavior is particularly apt: "his capricious dancing, weird and spasmodic motions, unpredictable modulations of voice, distorted and sorrowful countenance, witty remarks, and sharp barbs."
- ²⁰ As he says, "the music always seems to be saying one thing and meaning another," something related to what Hardy once described as "the ache of modernism" (*ibid.*).
- ²¹ I interpret them as being "discarded buffoon melodies" because: (1) they were previously used in Tristan's buffoon passages – fast, boisterous, humorous, and grotesque. (2) At the end, they are briefly recalled in a very slow and soft manner. Since, at the end of Hardt's play, Tristan and his dog are seen by Isolde walking towards the horizon, I find it irresistible to imagine that he would probably be taking off parts of his buffoon costume and throwing them along the road.

- ²² As in *Odysseus* and *Tristan*, he was also subject to radically different views: “[p]erceptions of Don Juan have veered between seeing him as a villainous libertine and a near heroic idealist” (SMEED, 1990, p. x). Smeed meticulously discussed dozens of versions in his book, and many more still had to be left out.
- ²³ This desperation and world-weariness can be heard in the way in which the serenade keeps getting interrupted, and then repeated in more forceful dynamics, thicker textures, and more agitated figurations.
- ²⁴ Brunel (1992, p. 336) comments on Juan’s constant “readiness to put on a mask. He is a man of many disguises.” In Szymanowski’s music, we can hear a frequent alternation of these masks, as the gallant gentleman, the imperious aristocrat, the supplicant inamorato, and the brash youth each take their turn.
- ²⁵ Downes (1996), Palmer (1983), and Wightman (1999) make this point.
- ²⁶ Hertz was talking here about Baudelaire’s famous article on Wagner, in which he presents Wagner’s, Liszt’s, and his own description of the overture to *Lohengrin*. While each of them provided a different narrative, the main general outlook of their descriptions was eerily similar.

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