The Many Masks of Karol Szymanowski: A Commentary on his Piano Triptychs

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à 19 h
Conférence-récital de doctorat

Durval Cesetti
piano
classe de / classe of
Kyoko Hashimoto

THE MANY MASKS OF SZYMANOWSKI:
A COMMENTARY ON HIS PIANO TRIPTYCHS

Métopes, opus 29 / Op. 29
L'île des Sirènes
Calypso
Nausicaa

Masques, opus 34 / Op. 34
Shéhérazade
Tantris le bouffon
Sérénade de Don Juan

Salle Redpath

Redpath Hall
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Sunday, January 18, 2009
7:00 p.m.
Doctoral Lecture-Recital

KAROL SZYMANOWSKI
(1882-1937)

K. SZYMANOWSKI

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INTRODUCTION

Karol Szymanowski’s music has fascinated me for a long time. The first time I encountered his name was in Artur Rubinstein’s autobiography, which recounts how they first met and narrates many anecdotes about their friendship. At the time, I was living in Brazil, and was unable to find any recordings of his music. Nonetheless, Rubinstein’s ardent praise of him (“a master!”, “a great Polish composer!”, “a powerful, original personality”\(^1\)) made me very curious, and I did not abandon my desire to keep looking for his music. Then, when I moved to Montreal in order to start my undergraduate degree at McGill University, I was finally able to find many recordings of his works at the school’s library.

I vividly remember how his music touched me in a unique way in those first contacts. There are composers who might sound unapproachable and strange at a first listening, but whose repeated acquaintance makes one understand and profoundly admire their pieces. My relationship with Szymanowski was not at all like this; his music sounded immediately so fresh and vibrant, colored in a way I had never heard before, and it spoke to me directly, in spite of its undeniable complexity. Yet, this very complexity also kept me enthralled. I remember listening to *Masques* literally 6 times in a row, paying close attention to all those intricate layers and textures, connecting the many thematic materials and trying to understand how the piece was structured, while achieving a richer emotional depth with each listening as well.

Unavoidably, I started learning and performing some of his works. Years later, by the time I was applying for my doctorate, my familiarity with his music had made

\(^1\) *My Young Years*, p. 126.
Szymanowski a strong contender to become the main topic of my forthcoming degree. While doing my research, I not only became even more appreciative of the bountifulness and the expressive power of his art, but also came to admire him as a person. His letters, as well as the biographies written about him, show an individual with a strong integrity of character, with a remarkable humanness, softness, decency, and boundless imagination. At the same time, my growing acquaintance with his non-piano music – his magnificent violin concerti, his deeply moving Stabat Mater, his bewitching Songs of the Infatuated Muezzin, his intriguing and remote string quartets – made me increasingly dumbfounded at the fact that Szymanowski was not better known, even among classical musicians who are otherwise quite well-versed in 20th-century music.²

One important aspect of Szymanowski’s artistry – and another element that attracted me to his music – is the fact that his imagination was constantly spurred by literature, mythology, history, and other extra-musical factors. The two piano triptychs – Métopes, op. 29, and Masques, op. 34 – that will be discussed in this paper provide an opportunity to explore his use of literary-musical connections. Therefore, after presenting a biographical sketch of the composer in the first part of this paper, my discussion of the triptychs in the second (and final) part will allow me to also explore the literary characters that were their inspiration. I will discuss how these characters have been appropriated by several authors (and composers), and how an in-depth understanding of them might help performers and audiences to reach a fuller appreciation of the pieces.

² In order to explore this issue, I wrote an article that proposes many reasons why Szymanowski’s music has not become part of the mainstream (yet?). In it, I suggest that a composer’s reputation hinges not solely on the quality of his/her music, but on several non-musical and societal factors as well, including many contingencies. While this is not the main topic I will explore here, some of my main arguments can be gleaned from the first part of my paper, which presents a biographical sketch of Szymanowski’s life. “The Narrative of a Composer’s Biography: Szymanowski, Anxiety of Influence, and Other Factors that Affected his Perception by Posterity.” The Musical Times (2009), forthcoming.
The final part will also approach the triptychs from several angles. I will present descriptions of Szymanowski’s music, discuss how certain musical passages are suggestive of the literary background, and describe some personal insights regarding how these pieces can be best performed. As a pianist, I find that my actualization of the pieces has become more acute as I became better aware of all the factors that I will present in this paper. However, the connection between the literary characters and one’s interpretation of this music is not easily approachable and describable. There is an ineffable quality to a performer’s (and a composer’s) inspiration, and, just as Szymanowski wisely avoided any written program to elucidate what each musical element means, it is treacherous to try to carefully analyze the pieces in order to establish definite answers about these issues. Any kind of analysis must be counterbalanced with a healthy dose of imaginative wandering. Thus, I do not aspire to a quasi-scientific precision in most of my commentaries. This is a performer’s paper, displaying a performer’s intuitions, and taking a performer’s license to be somewhat imprecise at times.

I have tried – in my past performances and discussions of the triptychs, and in this paper as well – to simply create connections between Szymanowski’s art and the works that had inspired him, between my eyes already accustomed to his music and other people’s initial perceptions of it, between the past that neglected his oeuvre, and a possible future that might yet redeem it as fully as it deserves. A performer is a conduit between the composer and the audience, and this role – which I cherish in the concert stage – is also what I aim to assume in this text.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF KAROL SYMENOWSKI

Karol Szymanowski was born in 1882 of a Polish aristocratic family who lived in Tymoszowka, a region that belongs nowadays to the Ukraine. His father’s family name comes from the village of Szyman, and, among his ancestors, one finds members of the Polish Parliament, advisors to the king, important clergy members, landowners, and even one of Napoleon’s generals. Part of his paternal family was also connected to the Kiev nobility through marital ties that had brought them to regions distant from the centre of the Polish nation. Karol Szymanowski also had a German ancestry through his maternal ties to the Barons von Taube.

Szymanowski’s family was highly cultured and deeply involved in the arts; from a young age, Szymanowski was surrounded by writers, painters, and musicians. The Tymoszowka country estate has been described as “an oasis of culture, so elevated, so subtle, in plain words so enthralling, that not only in Ukraine, but in the most cultured parts of the world, it would have formed an island, different from and superior to the

3 Orga (Karol Szymanowski) introduces the information about the general, while the rest of Szymanowski’s family ties is explored by Wightman (Karol).
Szymanowski’s father played the piano and the cello, and had close contact with many renowned artists of the time, such as Liszt and Tausig, who had been guests at his own father’s house. Szymanowski’s maternal uncle, Gustav Neuhaus, had a music school in Elizavetgrad (where Karol studied), and his son, Henryk, would later become a famous pianist himself, and teacher of Richter, Gilels, and Lupu at the Moscow Conservatory. Szymanowski’s four siblings were also involved in the arts: his older sister studied at the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw, his middle sister became a singer (performing many of Szymanowski’s works), his younger sister was a poet and writer, and his older brother was a pianist and composer of operettas and light music.

Szymanowski’s younger sister wrote an autobiographical work in 1977, in which she describes how all her siblings “went through periods of elevated ecstasy and poetic inspiration, the results of which were sentimental verses or gloomy dramas, full of dungeon chains, blood and corpses.” Szymanowski was himself a voracious reader, and seriously dabbled in writing until his teenage years. He had badly injured his left knee when he was five years old, and had to be home-schooled, something that increased both his introversion and his appetite for literature. His intention of becoming a writer was however abandoned when, at the age of 15, he attended a performance of Wagner’s

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4 The description is Gromadzki’s, and it has been quoted by many authors, such as Yang (The Variations), p. 3, and Wightman (Karol), p. 5.
5 Much of the information presented here comes from the magistral biography of Szymanowski written by Wightman, who collected and translated much information that was only available in Polish sources until then.
6 Karol used some of her poetry in his pieces, and she provided French translations for other works of his.
7 Wightman, Karol, p. 13. Entitled The Story of Our Home, her book is regrettably only available in the original Polish, but Wightman extracts much of its valuable information.
8 Wightman, Karol, chapter one (“Ancestry and Early Years”).
Lohengrin in Vienna, which he later described as “the shock which disturbed my equilibrium.”

When discussing the life of Szymanowski, it is important to remember that, since its partition in three parts in 1795, Poland was a country that existed but in the spirit of its people. Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire – each controlling a part of the territory – had intended to make the country vanish from the map, forbidding aristocrats to use its name in their titles, brutally repressing any demonstrations of patriotism from the masses, and trying to de-nationalize the spirit of the Polish youth. While there were cultural thaws at certain times in the different regions, the situation would only really change after the First World War, when Poland was allowed to be reunified under the Treaty of Versailles. Nonetheless, the repression actually made Polish people even more earnest in guarding their common cultural identity; it can indeed be argued that the reunification was only possible because, in spite of the odds, the Polish people managed to keep their sense of unity even throughout the fiercest periods of repression.

Music played a vital role in this, but a role that also required it not to pursue the artistic trends that were sweeping Europe, leaving Polish culture in a backwards and provincial state. As Palmer puts it, “the price of nationalism in the creative arts was a freezing of natural growth and development and an ignorance – almost a denial – of the progressive currents gaining momentum elsewhere in Europe.” Moniusko, the most famous late 19th-century Polish composer, successfully stirred patriotic emotions, but his artistic development was severely stunted by the country’s vicissitudes. Polish music was

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10 Both Breckenridge and Cruz-Peres provide useful backgrounds of Polish history during that time.
11 Szymanowski, *p. 11.*
then “an oblique political demonstration.”\textsuperscript{12} Moniusko’s nationalistic operas were doubtlessly necessary in keeping Poland’s cultural identity alive, but this sort of art – to which Szymanowski felt a deep aversion – also kept Polish music in an insular and somewhat xenophobic state during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

Situated in a crossroads region that had never been entirely Polish, Tymoszowka was a very diverse place, with Germans, Armenians, Jews, Cossacks, Tartars, Russians and Poles all coexisting relatively peacefully. Szymanowski’s father, though, was deeply resentful of the Russians since the 1863 repression; he refused to socialize with his Russian neighbors, which, alas, even prevented him from meeting famous artists such as Pushkin and Tchaikovsky, who once sojourned in a neighboring estate.\textsuperscript{13} However, Szymanowski himself did not share his father’s feelings. Being born in “splendid isolation”\textsuperscript{14} from mainstream Poland at Tymoszowka certainly helped Szymanowski become a very cosmopolitan individual, and made him feel as an outsider to the Polish establishment throughout much of his life. Therefore, even though Polish culture at the time was wary of any foreign influences, Szymanowski’s attitude would become diametrically opposed to that.

It might be appropriate at this point to briefly interrupt the chronological exploration of Szymanowski’s life, in order to further discuss his cosmopolitanism, and how it affected his art. Due both to his natural sensibility and to his early musical training, it is not surprising that Szymanowski preferred foreign authors writing in

\textsuperscript{12} Breckenridge, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{13} Wightman, Karol, p. 6 and p. 78.
\textsuperscript{14} This would be later the title of one of Szymanowski’s most famous essays, describing how he felt isolated from the Polish music establishment after the WWI.
foreign styles. If he were to align himself with the patriotic art of the Polish *fin de siècle*, he would be betraying his own artistic integrity. However, his cosmopolitanism was not restricted to his music. His cousin Iwaszkiewicz (who became a famous author) described him as a “homo universalis”; Szymanowski defended, throughout his life, in both his music and in his writings, a Pan-European society that could freely partake of its common artistic, cultural and social heritage.

Thus, rather than chauvinistically associating his art with patriotic feelings, as many of his contemporaries did in their own compositions, Szymanowski was drawn to the artistic philosophy of *Young Poland*, a literary group who (in spite of its own slightly contradictory goal of creating a new “Polish” style) adamantly opposed the idea that art should have any other aims besides its own artistic expression. Throughout his career, Szymanowski indeed would practice in his music what he preached in his writings, generously absorbing all artistic tendencies that interested him. He believed it to be the composer’s duty to explore all musical developments, regardless of their origin; as he asked once, “are we terrified of foreign influences? Are we really that sickly now?” For him, international art was not a threat, but rather a fertilizer that would allow Polish

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15 As one can note in the biographies written about him (and in his own writings), the only Polish composer from the past who Szymanowski admired was Chopin. Decrying most of Polish music written in the 19th century, Szymanowski frequently expressed his deep admiration for several German, French, Italian, and Russian composers.

16 “I believe that in spite of all the terrible things which are happening in the world today, there exists some mysterious means of mutual understanding amongst men, some straightforward, purely human solidarity which is supra-national, and this exists precisely in the sphere of the most elevated intellectual, aesthetic and – above all – ethical matters. (…) I myself, for want of a better word, have called this ‘Europeanism’.” Szymanowski’s interview with Michal Choromanski, found in Szymanowski, *Szymanowski on Music*, p. 340.

17 Szymanowski set to music many texts of members of this group, which was also the inspiration behind the creation of the *Young Poland in Music*, a group of composers that provided Szymanowski the support to have his early pieces published and performed (both in Poland and elsewhere).

music to leave its feeble state and finally grow unimpeded. “Let our music be national but not provincial. (...) Let all streams springing from universal art mingle freely with ours.”

Indeed, he was even reluctant to idolize Chopin because of Chopin’s nationality, despite his obvious and avowed admiration for him. During the 1910 celebrations of Chopin’s centenary, Szymanowski wrote in a letter one of the main tenets of his artistic philosophy: “one does not debase Bachs and Mozarts, pass over Beethovens and Wagners so as to be able to shed more easily Polish tears over the grave of our one genius. (...) If one is a musician, one should be one always and everywhere. I don’t give a damn [sic] for this taste for commonplace patriotism!” Another interesting anecdote relates to a series of concerts organized in Vienna in 1910-11 by Fitelberg, a renowned conductor whose friendship with Szymanowski was fundamental to publicize his music in the early years of his career. Szymanowski complained that his symphony was to appear after a concert in which a symphony by Padereweski had been performed. In a letter, he wrote that “[p]atriotism in the artistic field, for us in particular, is an impossible absurdity. This hideous symphonic buffoonery has harmed us all exceedingly (...) For what sort of idiot will want to hear a second Polish symphony on 18 January?”

Szymanowski’s sense of himself as an “outsider” was further compounded by the fact that the Polish establishment was not ready for the way in which he embraced many

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19 He wrote once that “a real, deep understanding of French music is (...) one of the preconditions for the development of our own music” (quoted in Klimazewska, p. 11).
20 Wightman, Karol, p. 243.
21 Which were doubtlessly a propitious occasion for Polish society to indulge in effusive, self-aggrandizing nationalistic pride.
22 Quoted in many places, as in Wightman, Karol, p. 84. The continuation of the letter still says: “Ah, these cursed Wyciankas, these obereks, these fa-la-las are the curse of our art. (...) If Italy did not exist, then I also could not exist.”
23 Wightman, Karol, p. 103.
foreign tendencies in his music; this flagrant miscegenation became fodder for much of
the criticism he received during his lifetime in Poland, criticism that was then perpetuated
after his death in other countries as well. As Samson wrote, Szymanowski “was accused
of everything from incompetence to ‘intellectualism’, but the criticism most widely
applied (…) was that the composer succumbed uncritically to the seductions of foreign
influence.”\textsuperscript{24} For instance, early in his career, a critic accused him of being a “parrot
vainly imitating the voices of Wagner and Strauss,” and, on a different occasion, said that
he “does not have the right to be called a composer, only a copyist. And there is no
Pantheon for copyists.”\textsuperscript{25} Years later, Szymanowski wrote an answer to another critic:
“He does not see my real face behind these masks, which, one after another, he would
have me wear, and asserts that I really do not have a face of my own at all.”\textsuperscript{26} Even a
recent commentator who enjoys his music keeps alive this unbecoming perception of him
by describing his career “as a journey from one sphere of influence to another in his
lifelong quest to find his own stylistic voice”\textsuperscript{27} (thus giving the impression that his
compositions did \textit{not} have his own stylistic voice), and another author comments on how
he has been depicted as “a composer obliged by the poverty of indigenous traditions to
wander aimlessly among the byways of contemporary European music.”\textsuperscript{28}

Elsewhere,\textsuperscript{29} I presented many reasons why Szymanowski’s reputation solidified
as a minor figure after his death; while many of these reasons are personal, such as his
aversion to openly publicize his works, his reluctance to compose under commissions, or

\textsuperscript{24} Samson, \textit{The Music of Karol Szymanowski}, p. 204.
\textsuperscript{25} Wightman, \textit{Karol}, p. 54 and 69.
\textsuperscript{26} Szymanowski, \textit{Szymanowski on Music: Selected Writings}, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{27} Breckenridge, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{28} Samson, \textit{The Music}, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{29} “The Narrative of a Composer’s Biography: Szymanowski, Anxiety of Influence, and Other Factors that
Affected his Perception by Posterity.” \textit{The Musical Times} (2009), forthcoming.
his congenital shyness, one main reason was this perception of him as someone who did not have a strong authorial voice, someone who simply went along with the flow. This idea of originality being the litmus test to define the value of art is pervasive in Western culture. According to Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” theory, a strong creator is supposed to Oedipally grapple with his ancestors, to appropriate and disfigure their traditions, and to ultimately come up with something that can be recognized as uniquely his. Anyone who does not achieve this standard is neglected as a weaker talent.

Interestingly, Szymanowski himself was well aware of his own anxiety of influence; despite being an artist who humbly absorbed all sorts of influences, he too felt the societal urge to claim his artistic independence. He complained once, for instance, of the critics who say that “everything I do has already been done before me by Schoenberg, Debussy, Skryabin e tutti quanti!” At another time, he also claims, against the evidence of his music, that he was influenced by Skryabin only in his early compositions. However, he also once admitted that he was “afraid of the all-too-powerful influence of Strauss’s music. (...) I find myself unwittingly succumbing to its influence.” It is interesting, though, to superimpose such comments with his belief that a truly beautiful act is “to create constructively rather than to destroy and annihilate even (...) [something] now outworn;” in this, he expresses his artistic credo of synthesis between the old and the new, something diametrically opposed to Bloom’s martial metaphors of conquest.

Most biographers have divided Szymanowski’s output into three periods: in the earlier (“Romantic”) period, he was still heavily influenced by his upbringing in German

30 Quoted in Wightman: Karol, p. 238.
32 Cruz-Peres, “The piano sonatas”, p. 199.
33 Wightman, Karol, p. 233.
music, and his compositions were also colored by Chopin and Skryabin; in the middle ("Impressionistic") period, he reveled in his newfound passion for French music and used extra-musical narratives as a tool to free himself from academic straightjackets.\footnote{Cruz-Peres seems to be the exception, presenting four periods – Warsaw, Viennese, Impressionistic, and Nationalistic. This greater nuance convincingly separates his early period into two phases, the first one more connected with Chopin, Skryabin, and the 'older' Germans, while the second one is under the influence of Strauss and Reger. The Piano Sonatas of Karol Szymanowski, p. 16-18.} \footnote{In fact, he used extra-musical narratives in all his periods, but in the middle one they were more frequent, and he was not as reticent in publicly accepting them. Wightman believes that "the explicitly programmatic content of Mythes marked a new departure for the composer," who became thereafter more self-assured in his artistic visions. Karol, p. 144.} Finally, in the final ("Nationalistic") period, after the reunification of Poland in 1917, he realized that he had to adapt if his pieces were to be valued in his own country;\footnote{Since Szymanowski’s previous works were not well appreciated in the new Poland (as it can be read in his biographies), and since he was in serious financial difficulties, it is not difficult to surmise the necessity of this adaptation, which was thus not solely motivated by artistic desires.} his solution was to forge a new style that would incorporate some elements he admired from Bartok, Stravinsky, and from a regional folk style found in the Tatra mountains. This new nationalistic style also provided a cleaner presentation that would be more in tune with the Neue Sachlichkeit that was in vogue in the arts after the First World War.\footnote{Kijanowska presents a succinct description of how the “New Objectivity” ideals appeared in the works of composers as diverse as Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Schoenberg and Hindemith.}

Even though any division of this sort is by nature forced, Szymanowski himself thought of his career in this way,\footnote{Samson, The Music of Szymanowski, p. 89.} describing in his correspondence how different events and situations allowed him (or forced him) to reach these new artistic phases. However, this division into three periods is slightly misleading, and it should imply neither a clean break nor a smooth transition between styles; rather, each new influence was added on top of the previous ones, sometimes presented side-by-side in the same piece, and sometimes coloring each other. Szymanowski’s music takes the appearance of a palimpsest, constantly acquiring new influences that, superimposed to old ones, create a
unique combination that lives in spite of (or because of) its contradictions. As Orga pointedly describes, Szymanowski’s art constantly “transcends/denounces its early Teutonic allegiances”\(^{39}\) – present in his fondness for counterpoint (his three piano sonatas end with a fugal movement, for instance) and in his full-blooded passages that betray more traditional harmonic organizations\(^{40}\) – even as he moves towards different spheres of influence. His “French” textures also make cameo appearances in some later works, and he never really abandons the greater harmonic diversity that French music provided him. In his so-called Impressionistic period, to which the piano triptychs belong, one often finds quasi-tonal passages that are goal-oriented and counterpoint-based in a Germanic fashion, located alongside other passages that consist of ethereal, motionless, shimmering Impressionistic dissonance.

Furthermore, some authors\(^{41}\) have also noticed two elements that can be distinguished behind Szymanowski’s many masks: first, he always kept a heightened sense of sensuality and ecstasy in his music. He has indeed been described as “the greatest twentieth-century exponent of the ideal of musical intoxication.”\(^{42}\) The second element is his necessity to find refuge in his art from the harsh reality of the world,\(^{43}\) often through a connection to some extra-musical element, creating an “interior landscape”\(^{44}\) peopled by exotic and literary figures. Szymanowski’s character was essentially connected to the past, and disgusted by the advance of modernity and its

\(^{39}\) Orga, \textit{Karol}, p. 4.
\(^{40}\) See Samson, “The Use of Analytical Models in the Analysis of Szymanowski’s Harmonic Writing.”
\(^{41}\) Notably Samson and Scruton.
\(^{42}\) Scruton, “Between Decadence and Barbarism,” p. 10.
\(^{43}\) Szymanowski described art as “a flower clinging to the stinking hide of everyday life.” Quoted in Wightman, \textit{Karol}, p. 192.
\(^{44}\) The expression is Samson’s.
horrors. During the First World War, he remained secluded in his country estate, reading and composing feverishly, creating these sonic worlds in which he could forget the news he would receive from the battlefields. *Masques* and *Metopes* (from his Impressionistic period) were both composed in this situation, shortly before the Russian Revolution uprooted Szymanowski’s life completely, with the Bolsheviks confiscating all of his family’s properties (their house “plundered and burnt to the ground”, his pianos “wantonly thrown in the lake”). The family moved to uncomfortable quarters in Elizavetgrad, and he spent the next two years without being able to compose anything, dedicating his time instead to writing a few essays and his homosexual novel *Efebos*, which would be almost entirely lost during the next World War.

In 1920, Szymanowski finally organized a concert in Warsaw to present some of the pieces that he had composed during his extraordinarily productive war years. When fewer than 600 people showed up, he finally realized that “the European climate of my art does not suit this local provincialism. (…) For such an artistic luxury as myself, Poland has neither the time nor the need.” The disappointment was evidently compounded by his dire financial circumstances; for the first time in his life, he needed his compositions to be successful in order to provide for his and his family’s subsistence.

The artistic metamorphosis he would undergo in the coming years – towards the “Nationalistic”, or, to use Szymanowski’s preferred epithet, “lechitic” style – can be

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45 Still, while Szymanowski was certainly no iconoclast, he was no musical Luddite either; one can sense in his works a constant and fertile struggle to reconcile a nostalgic allegiance to the past with a desire to explore new territories.”

46 Orga, p. 1.


48 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, lechitic is the “name given by some linguists to certain West Slavonic languages (Polish, Kashubian, Slovincian, the extinct Polabian) showing characteristic features in common and sometimes held to have once formed a single sub-dialect within the Slavonic group. Also as adj., of or pertaining to the Lechs or their language.” The *Encyclopedia Britannica* adds that
interpreted in different ways. Perhaps his concoctions of exotic and sensual inner worlds could simply no longer survive, his private refuge having been shattered by the forceful intrusion of the real world, necessitating him to enter a crisis that would eventually lead him to embrace his roots and exchange his private persona for a public one in the new Poland. As Tang rightfully comments, it could simply be a matter of adapting to reality, by providing the art that the fledgling country demanded; after all, “for a composer, personal recognition means survival.”  

Szymanowski’s relationship with his nation was undoubtedly a conflicted one, and it remains somewhat enigmatic despite his many public and private utterances about it. In spite of his pan-nationalistic viewpoints, however, it may be honestly assumed that some of the enthusiasm generated by the rebirth of Poland as a political entity, after 122 years, would genuinely affect Szymanowski somehow. Palmer generously thinks that he was truthfully inspired by the idea of helping Polish society to achieve greater cultural expression. Indeed, Szymanowski wrote essays about the role of music education in the new country, and his decision, in the late 1920s, to become the director of the Warsaw Conservatory (and later of the short-lived Warsaw Academy) – even though he had a more lucrative offer from the Cairo Conservatory, and even though he could perhaps have been fêted as one of the leading composers of his day had he moved to Paris or Vienna in the 1920s – certainly suggests that his nationalistic period was also partially motivated by a genuine desire to serve his nation, even if this desire also happened to be self-serving at the same time.

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these “languages and dialects were spoken along the Baltic in an area extending from the lower Vistula River to the lower Oder River.” Therefore, by using this adjective, Szymanowski was once again alluding to a pan-national identity, thus evading a pure “nationalistic” feeling even in his outwardly nationalistic compositions.

49 Tang, p. 44.
Szymanowski’s personal motivations are undoubtedly complex and multifarious, as he was always a nuanced individual, someone whose positions cannot be distilled into simple statements. Downes suggests that his shift towards this new style should be attributed to what he considers to be the composer’s narcissism, with its need for personal accolades.\textsuperscript{50} Scruton, in turn, thinks that this development was bound to come anyway, since “no art can exist on a diet of pure volupté;” Szymanowski’s middle-period “erotic fervor” would have to be appeased somehow, and exploring a new style allowed him to do that.\textsuperscript{51}

Another idea, persuasively presented by Samson, argues that the overt change of styles actually permitted a hidden continuity: Szymanowski’s discovery of the folk music of the Tatra mountains was essential for his transmutation, because it meant that he would not have to abandon his craving for exotic materials; in fact, he simply exchanged his previous exoticisms for another kind. Nonetheless, one should not doubt the sincerity of his affection for the music he heard in his trips to Zakopane,\textsuperscript{52} as it can be attested by anyone who reads his correspondence; it is also true that this material was necessary to provide him the spark his inspiration needed to regain its former vigor. While there were probably many reasons – musical, personal and political – that led him down this path, it

\textsuperscript{50} Downes finds Szymanowski’s narcissism to be expressed in some musical characteristics, such as the tendency of some of his pieces to gravitate around a main sonority (as in the \textit{Fontaine d’Arethuse}), or in Szymanowski’s fondness for lullaby rhythms, which suggest the “narcissism of the sleeper […] who wishes to] withdraw from the hazards of the outside world […] [and] halt the ravaging effects of the passage of time.” Another piece of evidence that helped Downes’ indictment was a detailed account of Szymanowski’s toiletries. “Szymanowski and Narcissism”, p. 66.

\textsuperscript{51} This is simply a personal preference of Scruton, who considered Szymanowski’s middle period to over-indulge in a sensual atmosphere sometimes, and to have lots of ‘charm’ but not much substance. Scruton’s favorite Szymanowskian work, the \textit{Stabat Mater}, comes from the Nationalistic period. Scruton, “Between Decadence and Barbarism,” p. 168.

\textsuperscript{52} Cho provides a thorough description of the Tatra mountains region, which, because of its isolation, started attracting more visitors in the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century (especially artists, ethnographers, tourists, and people interested in its health resorts).
is undeniable that there is greater continuity between styles than it would be noticed at first.\(^{53}\)

In discussing Szymanowski’s exploration of folk material to construct a Polish style, the next question is \textit{how} he used this material, and whether he did it in an attempt to portray it accurately, or as a springboard for something else. The answer to this can be found when Szymanowski praised Stravinsky for using folk material but “discarding the folksy garb,” which allowed him to mine “the priceless ore from which he forged his greatest visions.”\(^{54}\) Following Stravinsky’s model, Szymanowski was interested in sublimating his folk sources, “crystallizing elements of tribal heritage,”\(^{55}\) and recreating them in another form. While he filled a notebook with folk melodies,\(^{56}\) his main interest was not ethnomusicological; as Palmer facetiously mentions in relation to his ballet \textit{Harnasie}, his style resulted in the cross-fertilization between culture and agriculture.\(^{57}\)

In spite of obtaining slightly greater recognition in his native country during his Nationalistic years, Szymanowski still felt the animosity of many important people of the Polish intelligentsia (he indeed had the knack for getting involved in innumerous arguments and antagonizing many critics and musicians throughout his life). His financial troubles were made even worse by his refusal to accommodate to his new situation – for instance, he could not envision himself living without a personal cook and a valet. His

\(^{53}\) In Samson’s words, Szymanowski “had an excellent ‘cover story’ for his use of this music as a symbol of the nation. Its real appeal, however, was once more its potential as an exoticism – a world of presumed innocence and vitality which could stand muster as an alternative reality, again suggestive both of ancient roots and of Dyonisian escape.” \textit{Szymanowski and Polish Nationalism}, p. 136.

\(^{54}\) Quoted in Tang, p. 41.

\(^{55}\) Kosakowski, p. 9.

\(^{56}\) As mentioned by Cho, p. 12. The notebook was lost in 1944.

\(^{57}\) By this, Palmer means to say that Szymanowski used melodies and sonorities he had heard amongst peasants, but he stylized and refined them in a way to better suit his artistic ideals (as a member of a highly cultured elite). For instance, he would add extra dissonances, subtle harmonic colors, and extremely complex rhythms that were not found in the original music that had inspired him.
health was deteriorating quickly as well – he was a heavy drinker and smoker – and he died at 55 during one of his many trips to health spas. Artur Rubinstein, one of his lifelong friends, remarked bitterly on how the Polish government threw a lavish and pompous funeral for Szymanowski, after having refused to give him a financial stipend during his difficult years.

Had he lived longer, it is quite possible that the world would have witnessed yet another stylistic metamorphosis. He was already shifting towards a more tonal, “neo-classical” style in some of his final compositions, such as the *Symphonie Concertante* for piano and orchestra, which he composed with the ulterior goal of performing it himself throughout Europe, and earning some well-needed cash. Ironically, the busy performing schedule of his final years, besides allowing him little time to compose, probably accelerated his demise as well. While Szymanowski’s life was cut pitifully short, this brief account of it makes it seem even shorter. In spite of the necessary selectiveness of this narrative, though, one is still able to capture some of the essential facets of this intriguing person who, as Samson writes, “represent[ed] the twilight of an era much more than the dawn of a new age.” 58 As the lights of that era faded, Szymanowski, who had already been eclipsed by more forceful figures during his lifetime, gradually went into deeper oblivion. However, in recent decades, some authors and performers have started to unearth much of what had been lost, and, nowadays, his music is starting to receive a better chance to be appreciated the way it deserves.

58 *The Music of Karol Szymanowski*, p. 204.
EXPLORATION OF THE TRIPTYCHS AND THE LITERARY CHARACTERS

Discussing a piece of music that makes an explicit reference to an extra-musical source presents some difficult choices. As philosopher Etienne Souriau remarks, “there is something odd, and even disturbing, in second-hand inspiration.”\textsuperscript{59} Brühn elaborates on this idea by asking: “is 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?”\textsuperscript{60} 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 scaffolding used by the composer that can be safely discarded afterwards.

In order to proceed with this discussion, it is helpful to first arrive at a workable definition of “program music”, in order to avoid any confusion as to whether Szymanowski’s triptychs qualify to this status or not. Evidently, narrower definitions require a greater number of different labels to describe different strategies of dealing with extra-musical sources. However, I am less interested here in categorizing these fine nuances than in simply establishing a broad definition to help us understand why it is important for a performer/listener to be aware of the literary characters that inspired Szymanowski, perhaps answering Brühn’s question about why these pieces can only be ‘fully understood and appreciated’ in light of the works that inspired their creation.

A piece of music inspired by an extra-musical source can have different aims: to thoroughly narrate a story, to represent different characters or actions in its different

\textsuperscript{59} Quoted in Brühn, p. xv
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
themes/sections, to simply try to evoke a particular mood, or to use the source as a point of departure for something else. However, regardless of the narrative, dramatic, atmospheric, and/or pictorial character of a piece, and regardless of how much specific programmatic detail can be found in it, my broad definition of program music includes any piece that somehow makes an explicit connection to an extra-musical source.\footnote{In this way, Szymanowski’s triptychs can be considered as programmatic, even though the composer never established a detailed program for his music (something that this paper also does not provide).}

A composer indeed does not 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.”\footnote{Paraphrased by Brühn, 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.”\footnote{Paraphrased by Hepokoski, p. 136.} 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.

The importance of establishing this is that, if titles are already enough to evoke some sort of program (whether vague or precise, whether resembling a narrative in its temporality or a snapshot in its latent descriptiveness), than it logically follows that the program is not as discardable as it might be assumed, especially considering that different
people bring different levels of knowledge about certain cultural products. Thus, the name “Nausicaa” (the title of one of Szymanowski’s movements) 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 a number of Wagnerian associations. Yet, not every performer or listener will have the same artistic knowledge and background (that the composer did), and the title itself will then not be enough to create these associations that are naturally part of the piece. Thus, even if there were no other programmatic associations that could be conjectured from the music itself, a familiarity with the original work would be necessary for a fuller appreciation of the work’s communicative potential.

It might be treacherous and artistically unsatisfactory to establish precise transliterations about what each musical element means in relation to the original works; however, as James Hepokoski 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.”65 The optimal experience of Szymanowski’s triptychs, therefore, requires that both artists and listeners do not ignore

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65 “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, p. 136-37.
the elements that fueled and guided his imagination. This perception is a cornerstone for this paper.66

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Szymanowski’s two piano triptychs – *Métopes*, op. 29, and *Masques*, op. 34 – were composed in 1915-16, during his so-called Impressionistic period. Each of their six movements was named after a particular literary character: the Sirens, Calypso and Nausicaa (all of whom Odysseus met in his attempt to return to Ithaca) in the earlier piece, and Scheherazade, Tantris (a.k.a. Tristan), and Don Juan in the later one. Both triptychs explore varied ways to present their subject matter; while each of the original narratives do evoke a unique atmosphere for each movement, there are also a few unmistakably programmatic moments, as we will see; Szymanowski at times goes even beyond the content of the narratives, and uses their structural elements to shape the music. The pieces also provide sharp insights into the characters’ often contradictory psyches and motivations.

Szymanowski was deeply enthralled by anything ancient, Eastern, and/or exotic.67 However, this is not the usual Orientalism that pervades the works of turn-of-the-century composers; several authors concur that Szymanowski’s depiction of the Orient is a special one, almost revealing an insider’s perspective (despite the fact that it bypasses any

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66 An interesting idea, not related to this paper but worth considering, is the creation of “tandem readings of literary and musical works,” even when there is absolutely no original connection between them, as Kramer suggests, in order to find unintentional and coincidental parallels that may shed light in both works. This strategy has been successfully used by McClary, who compared a Schubert impromptu to a fairy tale by Andersen, and by Jordan & Kafalenos, who looked at a Brahms intermezzo in relation to a short story by Henry James. See Kramer, “Dangerous Liaisons” (which also describes the article by Jordan & Kafalenos) and McClary, “The Impromptu that Trod on a Loaf.”

67 Szymanowski was an extremely well-read person, and, among the books that he read in the 1910s, one finds the works by Tadeusz Zielinski (a specialist on ancient Greece), Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, the tragedies of Aeschylus, Stanislaw Wyspianski’s *Achilleis* and *Acropolis*, Walter Pater’s *Denys L’Auxerrois*, Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, and Charles Diehl’s *Promenades archéologiques en Mediterranée*. See Wightman, *Karol* (which also lists other books not related to the Classical Antiquity).
ethnomusicological desire to be “authentic”, preferring instead to aim towards a general verisimilitude of character. They take the lead from Sorabji, for whom Szymanowski was no “European in Eastern fancy-dress, but one who, by a penetrating clairvoyant’s insight and sympathy, an astonishing kinship of spirit, succeeds in giving us in musical terms what we instinctively know and recognize as the essence of Persian art.”

Szymanowski loved Iranian Sufi mysticism, setting some of Hafiz’s poems in two song cycles (in a German translation by Hans Bethge, who was also responsible for Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*), and using a poem by Rumi (in a Polish translation by Micinski) as the basis for his deeply spiritual and original 3rd Symphony. Describing *Des Hafis Liebeslieder*, Wightman points out the delicacy of Szymanowski’s stylizations, which create a “result infinitely more subtle than, for example, the cliché orientalisms exploited by Balakirev (…) and even Ravel in his *Shéhérazade*” (a work that he would only hear in 1920, that is, after the Hafiz songs and after composing his own piece about the Arabian Nights heroine).

Szymanowski’s middle period was spurred not only by his contact with French composers, and by his readings of texts from the Antiquity and from Eastern sources, but also by a series of trips that he took to the Mediterranean, especially to Sicily and to Northern Africa. These trips allowed him to rediscover himself as an individual, and gave him more freedom to explore sides of his compositional personality that had not been tapped yet. He also found greater assurance in himself; earlier in his career, he was often reticent about naming his pieces according to their literary inspirations, but now he was

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68 Quoted in many sources, such as Wightman, *Szymanowski and Islam*, p. 126. Stuckensmidt also mentions how Szymanowski’s shows “a profound inward kinship with Oriental poetry and mythology” (p. 43), and Chylinska praises “his unerring intuition [that] succeeded in extracting and generalizing the most basic qualities of oriental music” (p. 17).
able to proudly abandon his past claims to create “absolute” music. His trips intensified the interest he already had in exotic and faraway lands, and inspired him to turn (partially) away from his Germanic background, and compose a kind of music “that does not fade away at the voluptuous blue sea and the brightness of the Mediterranean sky nor (... turn yellow and then pale as all German music does.”

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,” since each movement represents a female figure whom Odysseus met in his voyage home, as described by Homer in the Odyssey. Palmer

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70 The quote is Nietzsche’s, who also decreed that “il faut méditerraniser la musique”. Mentioned by Wightman, Karol, p. 134.
71 As Szymanowski himself wrote in his letters (as noted by Wightman, Samson, Palmer, among others).
72 Illustration found at www.mlahanas.de
73 Wightman, Karol, p. 153.
aptly wrote that “these 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. (…) They are as things transfixed in endless night, icy and phosphorescent.”74 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.75 According to what we know, however, he did not see specific metopes depicting the Sirens, Calypso, and Nausicaa (even though subjects from the Odyssey were commonly used in ancient art and architecture). Nonetheless, since he was inspired both by the content and by the form of his imagined metopes, these pieces could partially qualify to receive Brühn’s designation of “musical ekphrases”.

Palmer’s description is relative, though; in comparison with the more direct Mythes (Szymanowski’s previous triptych for violin and piano, also mythology-based), and with the more expressionistic Masques, Métopes certainly inhabits a very different world, one in which human passions are seen as transitory ephemera that yet are able to leave faded testimonials of their existence as the eons pass. However, their “coldness” is also pregnant with emotion (intentionally veiled feelings can actually be more powerful than freely expressed ones). Evidently, this contradiction is something that will also depend on the performer’s ability to express it (performances that emphasize each

74 Palmer, p. 48.
75 It would be misleading to push this analogy too far, arguing that the musical structure mirrors the architectural structure of the metopes. The similarity is created more through suggestion than through actual and conscious mirroring. Many factors may seem to contribute to the suggestion of coldness and remoteness found in these pieces: their harmonies (which are in general subdued in comparison to his other works, such as Masques), their dynamic range (a substantial amount of time is spent in pianissimo textures), their often circular melodies (i.e., they do not “go anywhere”, but circle around a note or simply repeat a fragment a few times), and their accompaniment patterns (with tremolos and trills that create a patina of sound that at times seems to keep the music hidden from direct view, perhaps partially erased by the passage of time).
extreme can make the piece sound either overly-Romantic, or as boring, watered-down Debussy). Szymanowski is also able to create a dual impression, because the listener is presented the personality of the women from Odysseus’ vantage point, thus catching a glimpse of the protagonist’s feelings as well.\footnote{I.e., by depicting the female characters, Szymanowski seems to give the listener the vicarious experience of being Odysseus in those situations. For instance, the listener can feel Odysseus’ attraction (and later his horror) towards the Sirens, or his longing to be home during his exile at Calypso’s island.}

Homer’s \textit{Odyssey} is one of the foundational works of Western society, one about which innumerable exegeses have been written, and many more will be. Its influence is also evident in the innumerable other literary works that somehow adopted the character of Odysseus (or Ulysses), and adapted it for their own purposes. While the scope of this paper prevents a full description of this fascinating subject, a brief outlook is certainly interesting. This might lead us slightly off-topic, but a greater understanding of the Ulysses tradition can certainly inspire performers/listeners to better appreciate Szymanowski’s pieces (and, if it does not, it is still quite an engrossing subject). Even though \textit{Métopes} is directly based on Homer, Szymanowski would probably have been indirectly influenced in his conception by some of the metamorphoses undergone by Odysseus in the following millennia (although, it is important to reiterate, the pieces do not refer to Odysseus directly).

Part of the \textit{Odyssey}’s appeal is its physicality, its descriptions that seem so immediate to the senses, its tactile but archaic portrayal of the contact between human beings and the surrounding world (a characteristic that certainly attracted Szymanowski the sensualist). Another part of the \textit{Odyssey}’s fascination lies in the character of Odysseus himself, a marvel of complexity and psychological depth. Homer, who describes him in a fairly positive manner (although, of course, he lived in a world with a
very different morality than ours, where looting, for instance, is considered perfectly acceptable and even expected), calls him a “man of many turns”, and, along the ages, he indeed took turns

as a sixth-century [BC] opportunist, a fifth-century [BC] sophist or demagogue, a fourth-century [BC] Stoic; in the middle ages he will become a bold baron or a learned clerk or a pre-Columbian explorer, in the seventeenth century a prince or a politician, in the eighteenth a philosophe or a Primal Man, in the nineteenth a Byronic wanderer or a disillusioned aesthete, in the twentieth a proto-Fascist or a humble citizen of a modern Megalopolis.77

In his book, Stanford explores the reasons why Odysseus has been pliable to such countless adaptations. Whereas, say, Achilles’ main attributes are his courage and physical prowess (which are uncomplicatedly and commonly understood as positive traits), Odysseus’ main attributes are much more varied and complex, allowing them to be interpreted in many different ways, easily turning from virtue to vice. As Kohler describes, “[s]kill becomes cunning or scheming, flexibility baseness and obsequiousness; reserve turns to hypocrisy, defiance to lies. The mocking smile becomes the hideous grin of the deceiver, satisfied that his plan has worked as he had planned. Politeness becomes pitiless, cruel cynicism. Odysseus’ character turns from dual to duplicitous.”78

He is Athena’s favorite mortal. She tells him: “[t]hat’s why I can’t forsake you in your troubles – you are so civilized, so intelligent, so self-possessed.”79 This very intelligence is what sets him apart from other Greek heroes; Odysseus, the strategist, does not mind using methods that others would find contemptible, such as disguising himself as a woman, using tricks rather than brute force, and postponing combat if his chances

77 Stanford, p. 4
79 Homer, p. 297 (Book 13.376-77).
would be better later. His intelligence, however, also opened him to radically different interpretations; in the Classical Antiquity, other authors (such as Euripides, Aeschylus and Virgil) portrayed him as a scheming, dishonest villain. Odysseus the wanderer was then condemned to Hell by Dante, who did not consider his incessant intellectual curiosity\textsuperscript{80} to be a positive trait that a God-fearing person should have (Faust would later become a better symbol for the dangers inherent in the desire to know). However, the Renaissance came along, and Odysseus could suddenly become a representation of the human spirit’s unquenchable adventurousness. Shakespeare, meanwhile, in \textit{Troilus and Cressida}, creates an ambivalent picture of a two-faced, Machiavellian political figure.

In the Romantic age, Goethe strongly identified himself with the figure of obstinate Odysseus during a trip to Sicily (in spite of some attempts, he did not conclude a planned play about Odysseus and Nausicaa). While Homer’s \textit{Odyssey} was essentially a centripetal narrative of a character who desires, above all, to return to the domesticity of his native land, Ulysses’ centrifugal instincts are more attractive to most Romantic authors. Thus, Tennyson took Ulysses as a personal symbol for the never-ending desire to search new horizons rather than settling down. Rather than remaining by “this still hearth (...) with an aged wife,” he yearns “with desire to follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost thought of the human thought.” He embraces all difficulties that may come his way, and affirms that his will is still strong, and will allow him “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”\textsuperscript{81}

In the \textit{Republic}, Plato had described a scene in which the souls of dead heroes decide how they would like to reincarnate. Agamemnon chooses an eagle, and Ajax a

\textsuperscript{80} “Ye were not form’d to live the life of brutes
But virtue to pursue and knowledge high.” Quoted in Brunel, p. 897.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
lion, but Odysseus simply wants “the uneventful life of an ordinary man,” desire that is finally fulfilled by Joyce, who transforms him into “a decent man, tout court.” In this classic of modern literature, Ulysses, “above the putrid fumes and vulgarity of Dublin, emblematic of the whole modern world,” comes across “as a man who by prudence and endurance, can overcome the dangers and disasters of life.” Many other appearances of Odysseus would deserve detailed attention by the interested reader, such as Pascoli’s haunting poem, Kazantzakis’ bulky epic, or Hauptmann’s grotesque play (the latter one, incidentally, being in a similar vein to Hardt’s travesty of the Tristan legend, used by Szymanowski in *Masques*). At this point, though, it is opportune to move our focus specifically towards the three female characters that Szymanowski chose to represent in his music.

First you will raise the island of the Sirens, those creatures who spellbind any man alive, whoever comes their way. Whoever draws too close, off guard, and catches the Sirens’ voices in the air — no sailing home for him, no wife rising to meet him, no happy children beaming up at their father’s face. The high, thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him, lolling there in their meadow, round them heaps of corpses, rotting away, rags of skin shriveling on their bones… Race straight past that coast! Soften some beeswax and stop your shipmates’ ears so none can hear, none of the crew, but if you are bent on hearing, have them tie you hand and foot in the swift ship, erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast so you can hear the Sirens’ song to your heart’s content. But if you plead, commanding your men to set you free, then they must lash you faster, rope on rope.

Homer, *Odyssey* 12.44-60 (trans. Robert Fagles)

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83 Stanford, p. 214.
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. As some authors\textsuperscript{84} have pointed out, 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: \textit{L’île des sirènes}, bars 7-8

Their lyres are also heard throughout the piece:

Example 2: \textit{L’île des sirènes}, bar 5

\textsuperscript{84} Wightman, Palmer, and Samson, among others.
Example 3: *L’île des sirènes*, bar 62

The Sirens’ exterior façade also contrasts with their inner motivation; their lullaby-like melody begins in a pleasant and enticing manner, and only later (in the middle section that starts at bar 48) is transformed in order to reveal their sinister intentions:

Example 4: *L’île des sirènes*, bars 13-15 (1st system), and bars 50-51 (2nd system)

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85 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, is mellifluous, soft, *cantabile ed affettuoso*; its accompanying tremolos should be almost inaudible, as a veil of sound enveloping the melody, something very different from the desperate tremolos that almost overwhelm (drown?) the melody in the middle section.
When the original melody returns in 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.  

One of Odysseus’ main qualities – and one that was considered typical of the Greek spirit – was his intellectual curiosity, his desire to hear new things, to know how other people lived. Even though the Sirens’ iconography along the ages gradually lost many of their original attributes, it is interesting to notice that their main attraction was not originally sensual, in spite of their self-described “honeyed voices”, but the fact that they promised to offer information about everything that happened in the world. For Odysseus, this was an irresistible offer, and that is why he asks to be tied to the mast, rather than putting wax in his ears like his crew does. Since it would be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to convey this intellectual attraction in music (which, after all, is a sensorial art that commonly relies on its seductive power), since the Sirens had already been transmuted into femmes fatales in most pictorial representations done after Antiquity, and since sensuality was a defining characteristic of Szymanowski’s music, this original feature of Homer’s story is not reflected by the music.

A strong pictorial sense is present in the piece’s climax, in which Szymanowski certainly suggests Odysseus’ struggle to free himself, with strong pedal notes possibly representing the stability of the mast:

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86 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’ and 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).

87 “To put it in modern jargon, the Sirens guaranteed to supply a global news-service to their clients, an almost irresistible attraction to the typical Greek whose chief delight, as observed in the Acts of the Apostles (xvii. 21), was ‘to tell or to hear some new thing’.” Stanford, p. 77.
Example 5: 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 she ultimately helps him return home after he spends seven years on her island, even though she only does that 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 ironically describes him as “unwilling lover alongside lover all too willing,” 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.\footnote{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.}
Calypso is a test for Odysseus’ resolve; Kohler believes that his redemption comes by refusing her offer of immortality. As Stanford 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 with greater vigor, reaching a climax in which Odysseus’ theme becomes very impassioned; however, his will to go back home seems temporarily mollified towards the end. Thus, Szymanowski provides us with only a snapshot taken sometime during those years, and Odysseus is still in the island when the piece finishes.

Example 9: *Calypso*, bars 85-88

Once they reached the banks of the river flowing strong where the pools would never fail, with plenty of water cool and clear, bubbling up and rushing through to scour the darkest stains – they loosed the mules out from under the wagon yoke, and chased them down the river’s rippling banks to graze on luscious clover. Down from the cradle they lifted clothes by the armload, plunged them into the dark pools and stamped them down in the hollows, one girl racing the next to finish first (...) 

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89 In Brunel, p. 890. Odysseus is thus a precursor of Tannhäuser.
90 Stanford, p. 51.
91 After the climax (bars 68-72), the energy subsides, as the themes from examples 7 and 8 return. Then, in bar 84, the theme of Odysseus’ longing briefly appears, but, as it can be seen in example 9, it slowly dissolves into a peaceful added-6th major chord in ppp, thus creating the impression that he temporarily forgets about his longing in Calypso’s arms, as described in this paragraph.
And once they’d bathed and smoothed their skin with oil, they took their picnic, sitting along the river’s banks and waiting for all the clothes to dry in the hot noon sun. Now fed to their hearts’ content, the princess and her retinue threw their veils to the wind, struck up a game of ball. White-armed Nausicaa led their singing, dancing beat (…) The ball – the princess suddenly tossed it to a maid but it missed the girl, splashed in a deep swirling pool and they all shouted out – and that woke great Odysseus. (…) So Odysseus moved out… about to mingle with all those lovely girls, naked now as he was, for the need drove him on, a terrible sight, all crusted, caked down with brine - they scattered in panic down the jutting beaches.

Homer, *Odyssey* 6.95-152, trans. Robert Fagles

The princess Nausicaa 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 ultimately falls into the water, causing the women to scream and wake up the naked Odysseus, who had been shipwrecked there – again – after a 20-day trip from Calypso’s island. Odysseus immediately decides to use his famous eloquence to appeal to her sense of pathos, describing how his misfortunes had brought him there, but also demonstrating at the same time 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.”92 There is a mutual attraction between the characters, but this does not proceed beyond a friendly flirtation; as Standford points out, Penelope would only forgive Odysseus’ infidelity 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 a immortal’s desires.

92 In Brunel, p. 890.
Szymanowski’s piece is a sequence of dance-like sections that perfectly capture the youth and vitality of Nausicaa. Towards the end of the piece, there is one passage in particular that has puzzled many commentators, when this melody from the last movement (*Calypso*) – which I interpreted as representing Odysseus’ nostalgic lament – abruptly returns:

Example 10: *Nausicaa*, bar 88

Scott considers it a nostalgic echo from the previous movement, but, considering the *fortissimo* context in which it appears, this is hardly convincing.³ Downey 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 proposes that Odysseus is now in Nausicaa’s power, just as he had been in Calypso’s previously. For me, the key to understanding this clear programmatic moment is the realization that this theme stands for Odysseus’ lamentation. It is marked *mesto* – which means sad, mournful – in one of its appearances in the 2nd movement, and it indeed has a sorrowful, nostalgic feeling that could hardly be missed. When it reappears in the last movement, then, it clearly stands for his speech to Nausicaa, in which he once again laments his situation, this time more

³ 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 (which is my view).
desperately but also in a dignified, grand manner, typical of a well-born person, something that it is perfectly reflected in the music.

“Here I am at your mercy, princess – are you a goddess or a mortal? (…) Only yesterday, the twentieth day, did I escape the wine-dark sea. Till then the waves and the rushing gales had swept me on from the island of Ogygia. Now some power has tossed me here, doubtless to suffer still more torments on your shores. I can’t believe they’ll stop. Long before that the gods will give me more, still more. Compassion – princess, please! You, after all that I have suffered, you are the first I’ve come to. I know no one else, none in your city, no one in your land. Show me the way to town, give me a rag for cover, just some cloth, some wrapper you carried with you here.”


Then, if we go back two pages in the music, there is a playful and rhythmical passage that suggests to me the women playing with the ball:

Example 11: *Nausicaa*, bar 73

This motive becomes gradually faster until a powerful arrival in the bass followed by a shriek in the high register, which could very well represent the ball falling in the water, and their scream, which wakes Odysseus:
Example 12: Nausicaa, bars 79-80

The passage immediately following this shriek (and preceding Odysseus’ speech/theme) clearly sounds to me as a representation of the maids fleeing the scene.\footnote{As Calvin Brown 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” (p. 258).}

Example 13: Nausicaa, bars 81-83

with the exception of Nausicaa, who stays behind and listens to Odysseus’ theme, and then intertwines her own theme with his:
This seems a much more plausible understanding of this key moment in the cycle, and, for a long time, I was puzzled that nobody else shared at least my understanding of the returning theme as representing his nostalgic lament, until I found a recently released CD in which the liner notes provide a similar (albeit not nearly as detailed) explanation.

There are many others literary-musical parallels that could be made, some of which would definitely be less convincing than others. The importance – or veracity – of specific interpretations is not as important as the performer’s/listener’s intention and willingness to propose interpretations, regardless of whether they might be farfetched at times (thus acting according to Hepokoski’s guidelines). By carefully thinking about the different literary characters, and reflecting how they may be expressed in the music, one achieves a sharper perception that automatically improves one’s appreciation of the

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95 Didier van Moere, Szymanowski.
96 Vide pages 30 and 31.
music.\textsuperscript{97} In my own performances, I find that thinking about these connections – whether they are true or not (a moot point, since none of them can be “proved”) – stimulates my performer’s mind to achieve greater clarity of expression, larger diversity of colors, and richer emotional depths.

There are certainly two extreme kinds of programmatic suggestions that can be made (and a whole spectrum in between these extremes): those that try to associate a very specific narrative scheme to a musical passage (such as the preceding example), and those that simply associate a general attribute of a character to the music (as when I connected a theme with Calypso’s voluptuousness). For the first kind, one must certainly overcome the common prejudice of having an inverse proportionality between specificity and musical value; even a very specific interpretation of events (as the one I suggested in the passage from \textit{Nausicaa}) can be highly satisfactory artistically – and not simply a gimmick. When I perform that passage, I feel a certain dramatic power in my performance by actively and vividly imagining the scene that I consider it to represent. Through my highly unscientific research methods (i.e., playing the passage to people twice, and asking which version they prefers), I have anecdotally discovered that listeners also perceive this difference in my playing when I actively engage in these pictorial imaginings.\textsuperscript{98} So, the following logical question is: should I, as a performer, tell the listeners what I think a specific moment represents? Or should I emulate the composer’s

\textsuperscript{97} It is important to notice that this is also true in cases (such as Szymanowski’s triptychs) in which one might not find necessary to establish a detailed program that ‘explains’ every aspect of the music.
\textsuperscript{98} Of course, I am not suggesting that imagination alone is sufficient to bring out a successful interpretation; what I am arguing, though, is that imagination can intuitively give the performer new ideas about how to make the music sound more convincing, ideas that might have been harder to conceive otherwise. The performer still needs a certain musical maturity and technical apparatus to fulfill these ideas.
own tacit approach, and let the listeners appreciate my improved performance result without telling them how I achieved it?\textsuperscript{99}

There is no definite answer to this question. There are many extra-musical tools that my performer’s mind uses in order to inspire me to achieve a more vivid and moving performance, and most of them are probably too personal or too insubstantial to be useful to someone else. However, in some cases, when I consider my extra-musical connections to be actually quite verisimilar (such as those I mentioned before), I find that the listeners can profit from knowing them, which can inspire them to have a more vivid and moving experience of the work as well.\textsuperscript{100} This does not need to be seen as an imposition I make on their experiences, as the listeners certainly have the choice to make whatever associations they desire (and even none whatsoever).

In the less specific way I mentioned above, in which programmatic suggestions only serve to associate general attributes of the characters to the music, it is fundamental for a performer to keenly understand the drastic difference between the characters Szymanowski uses: the Sirens, Calypso, and Nausicaa. Each movement of the triptych has the potential of being perfectly differentiated from the other two, and the composer’s titles give us their specificity. However, I have noticed in some recordings of Métopes that pianists in general tend to blend the three movements in a similar wash of sound, whereas my performance delineates the contrast between them in a much sharper way (of course, the number of inter-movement similarities will always exceed the number of

\textsuperscript{99} As the saying goes, it might be better to eat the sausage than learning how the sausage is made.\textsuperscript{100} Of course, this is also a tactic that piano teachers often use in order to inspire their students to achieve a more convincing performance (even when the extra-musical object is an invention of the teacher’s imagination). Not all extra-musical suggestions can be useful, though; in a similar manner to what I described above, some might be too personal or insubstantial to be useful to other people, in which case it might be more efficient to invite the student to make up his/her own imaginings.
differences, since the movements do belong to the same piece by the same composer. By comparing my performance to some recordings of this piece, I am making a subtle point, but an important one nonetheless). A similar contrast could possibly be achieved by a performer who does not approach the literary works, but it is much easier – and arguably more faithful to the pieces’ raison d’être – by doing it so. The clear, association-laden mental picture of each literary character guides the performer’s instincts to make subtle changes in tone-production, in timing, in voicing, etc. The combined effect of these subtle changes then creates a clearly delineated flavor for each movement. Once again, though, the delineations will be more acutely perceived if the listeners also share a common understanding of the literary characters.

Similar revelations will continue to be explored as we move on to the next piano triptych Szymanowski wrote during his WWI-imposed isolation: Masques, op. 34.

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Szymanowski’s wish to “reveal by concealing”, \(^{101}\) 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 poetically described Masques as “a cycle rich in super-charged nerve-end exposure and narrative improvisation, (...) its

\(^{101}\) The expression is Zent’s.
remote sound galaxy wonderfully reflecting a prism of melody and cadenza, the voluptuous and the delirious, gilded mirrors and glassy splinters.”

Scheherazade is the archetypical 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. Some people may regard Scheherazade as representative of female intelligence overcoming sexist domination; thus, Kawabata argues that Scheherazade “sets herself up in contention with patriarchy and triumphantly wins life, not just for herself, but for all womankind. Her coup d’état is all the sweeter, for in the act of making herself a narrating subject, she de-objectifies herself: she refuses to be the Sultan’s sex object and victim, refuses to be deflowered and disposed of.”

This perception of Scheherazade as a feminist liberator, though, while somewhat valid (but anachronistic), needs of course to be counterbalanced by the fact that the stories of the Arabian Nights – narrated by Scheherazade herself, it is important to remember – can be extremely misogynist at times.

Scheherazade is not the only narrator in the book, though; 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 writes, “If all characters tell stories, it is because this action

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102 Orga, p. 6-7.
103 Kawabata, p. 37.
has received a supreme consecration: narrating equals living. (…) Narrative equals life; absence of narrative, death.”\textsuperscript{104}

Todorov also elucidates how the techniques of digression and embedding are used in the \textit{Arabian Nights}, creating a pleasurably dizzying effect at times. Thus, in the story of the bloody chest, there are five levels of narration:

“Scheherazade tells that…
Jaafer tells that…
the tailor tells that…
the barber tells that…
his brother (and he has six brothers) tells that…”\textsuperscript{105}

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 will logically contain the inner narratives again, and so on).\textsuperscript{106}

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. The piece’s structure displays an intriguing series of overlapping sections that

\textsuperscript{105} Todorov, p. 231  
\textsuperscript{106} Mentioned by Todorov, p. 231.
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.\footnote{This overlapping procedure, incidentally, also reminds me somewhat of the nested dolls (matryoshka dolls) common in Russia and many Eastern European countries.} This 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 giving 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.\footnote{“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.” Quoted in Kawabata, p. 31.} 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 could be interpreted to stand for Scheherazade herself, skillfully commencing and interrupting her story; this passage is found in the very beginning and very end of the piece:

![Example 15: Shéhérazade, bar 1-5 (the same passage will reappear at bar 300)](image)
Similar to the effect Rimsky-Korsakov achieves in his violin-recitatives that represent Scheherazade, 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 Skriabin’s 5th piano sonata). When this section finishes, one feels that something is finally happening, with a story beginning already in medias res. The contrast between stasis and movement, usually paralleling sections with clear “tonal” goals against sections in which superficial filigrees disguise an essential stillness, is part of the ethos of this piece (and also a characteristic of Szymanowski’s “Impressionistic” style). Kawabata’s 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:

\[
A \ p_{qr} \ B \ t \ B^1_u \ C \ D \ t^1 \ D \ v \ p^1_w \ C \ x \ B \ A
\]

Bar numbers: 1 12 44 87 143 192 225 294 300

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109 As described by Kawabata, “The Narrating Voice.”
110 Bar numbers for the remaining, ‘less important’ sections are: q – 23, r – 34, t – 54, B1 – 61 (the defining motive actually begins in bar 64), u – 71, t1 – 160, v – 180, w – 204, x – 284.
“A” stands for Scheherazade’s own voice, the framing device shown before. “B” is a sinuous melody played over a left-hand trill, “C” is an animated tale that is interrupted right after its climax, and “D” is a languorous interlude. The examples below show, respectively, a few bars of “B”, “C”, the climax found at the end of “C”, and “D”:

Example 16: Shéhérazade, bars 44-45

Example 17: Shéhérazade, bars 60-62

Example 18: Shéhérazade, bars 123-126
Example 19: Shéhérazade, bars 142-149

Of course, it is perhaps appropriate that we remind ourselves that literary-musical parallels do not need to be taken to the nth degree in order to be considered valid. Kawabata comments on how Rimsky-Korsakov himself admitted, for instance, that the restatement of earlier material in the last movement of his symphonic poem “had no narrative significance.” Musical logic sometimes trumps narrative logic. In other occasions, though, musical logic felicitously complements narrative logic. There is a striking 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).

Although Shéhérazade does seem through-composed and improvised, Szymanowski’s clever use of some specific sonorities and rhythmic patterns helps to invisibly unify the music. Furthermore, there are a couple of motivic connections among the sections, which, besides fulfilling a musical function by creating a cogent structure in spite of such complex form, can also represent the recurring motives and formulaic sentences that constantly reappear in different stories of the Arabian Nights.

111 Kawabata, p. 30.
112 Zent provides a useful description of this in his analytical study of the piano triptychs.
This small fragment, for instance, appears in several episodes during the piece (and, sometimes, serving as a small-level motivic connector between different episodes):

Example 20: *Shéhérazade*, bar 34

Example 21: *Shéhérazade*, bars 35-37

Example 22: *Shéhérazade*, bars 85-87
Example 23: Shéhérazade, bars 128-131

Example 24: Shéhérazade, bars 168-169

Example 25: Shéhérazade, bars 252-253

Example 26: Shéhérazade, bars 274-278
The last example happens right at the piece’s 2\textsuperscript{nd} climax, which arrives after the return of B. This climax sounds obviously unresolved: after a long buildup, Szymanowski arrives at a dissonant chord, played \textit{sff\textsuperscript{f}}, 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 \textit{pianissimo} tremolos) emerges from underneath, and tries to divert our attention elsewhere. The piece will soon be over, and, after being engrossed in the stories for a while, we start to hear Scheherazade’s voice again.\textsuperscript{113} The passage following the climax clearly does not seem like a logical continuation of the narrative, but rather as 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.

However, as in \textit{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. Reading Szymanowski’s pessimistic comments about the war, one indeed cannot help but wonder whether he did not feel a

\textsuperscript{113} I would be tempted 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 in 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 \textit{Shéhérazade} as well, particularly in some moments that seem more ‘narrative’, in contrast to others that feel more ‘dramatic’. It is very difficult to firmly conceptualize what exactly distinguishes a narrative from a dramatic passage, though, since this is largely a personal impression.
sense of impotence at the thought that he, unlike Scheherazade, would not be able to save his inner world – the essence of his self – by using his musical-narrative prowess.

Each day is followed by another one,/ and then another day, and after each/ comes night. Thus runs my life’s long chain of beads,/ all black and white, endless, and all the same. (…) The wind/ swept all the covers from my bed and left/ me cold and trembling. Branches beat the wall/ above my head like demons of the storm./ The owls kept screaming in the groaning eaves/ and whispered like lost souls in agony! (…) For here black clouds obscure the sun/ and hang close to the ground; they fly along/ like mighty ghosts. The earth smells damp and makes/ me shiver – Ugh – ! (…)

Lord Tristan has kept true unto my name/ at least – if not to me! ’Tis now the tenth/ year that I mourn for him! In countless nights/ of endless agony have I repaid/ those other nights of happiness and bliss./ Through age-long days now beggared/ of their joy/ I have atoned for all the smiles of yore./ Unkindly have ye dealt with me, sweet friend!/ Disloyal Tristan! (…) Am I to sit within a cage and watch him kiss her? Listen to him call his wife “Isolde”?/ Was this his sweet design, or does Isolde/ the Snowy Handed crave my golden hair/ to make a pillow for voluptuous hours? (…)/ And will he lay us both within the self-same bed?/ Caress and kiss us both at once throughout/ the night’s long, heavy hours? In other days/ more modest was thy Lord in his desires. (…) Lord Tristan, whom I once did love/ and who returned my love in youthful years – /if he stood before me here, I should/ not recognize his face behind the mask/ of cowardice which he has worn of late./ His faithlessness sticks to him like black slime!/ Go tell him that! – I hate him in this mask!/ He was so loving and so true when first/ I knew and loved him! God shall punish him!

Hardt, Ernst. Tristan the Jester (trans. John Heard Jr.)

The medieval legend of Tristan and Isolde, whose primary written sources are the epic poems by Gottfried von Strassburg and Thomas of Brittany (only fragments of their works survived, but they conveniently complement the missing parts of each other), was originally about an adulterous relationship that undermined the feudal order and challenged the conventions of courtly love. Since then, Tristan has been manipulated and reinvented by many authors (although not quite as often as in the case of Odysseus and
Don Juan). Schaefer comments on how the different versions present “two poles: some see only a single story of adultery, while others see the fullness of human love.”  

The original story had many twists and turns, but the myth has been forever appropriated by Wagner, who condensed it to its most essential elements, and added a quasi-religious significance by having the characters renounce their lives through their love. The composer described his opera as a story of “endless yearning, longing, the bliss and wretchedness of love; world, power, fame, honor, chivalry, loyalty and friendship all blown away like an insubstantial dream; one thing alone left living – longing, longing unquenchable, a yearning, a hunger, a languishing forever renewing itself; one sole redemption – death, surcease, a sleep without awakening.”

Scruton, following Tanner’s footsteps – who considers Tristan und Isolde as one of “the two greatest religious works of art of our culture,” alongside with Bach’s St Matthew Passion – regards the opera as a parable of spiritual redemption through sacrifice. As he correctly points out, Isolde is not the only one to mysteriously accept death in the end as a way of ending life’s endless yearning; Tristan in fact throws himself at his enemy’s sword in the end of the 2nd act, and entreats Isolde to come join him in the realm of night-death. Much has been written about Wagner’s Tristan, a piece that would

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114 Brunel, Companion to Literary Myths, p. 1127. Dante was one of those who had the former view, sending Tristan to Hell among ‘those who make reason the slave of their appetites.’
115 Quoted in Scruton, Death-devoted heart, p. 29.
116 Quoted in Scruton, Death-devoted, p. 13.
117 Scruton writes that, “[b]y accepting death through an act of sacrifice, we transcend death and raise ourselves above the mortal condition that imposed this fate upon us” (p. 49). “Because we live in a morbidly unheroic world – a world of cost-benefit calculation, in which gods and heroes have no place – we are driven to regard our own existence as some kind of cosmic mistake. If it is to have a meaning, this can come only through a gesture that throws all calculation aside, that recklessly disregards both cost and benefit and freely embraces its own absurdity” (p. 10). Wagner indeed considered art as a conduit for religious feelings that had become stultified by traditional religion: “It is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion, inasmuch as the mythical images which religion would wish to be believed as true are apprehended in art for their symbolic value, and through ideal representation of those symbols art reveals the concealed deep truth within them” (p. 7).
become a beacon in the history of Western music, and about its metaphysical and
philosophical underpinnings. After its composition, any further incarnations of this myth
would necessarily be seen through its prism.

Thy body is a gleam of silvery light
Cast by the full moon in the month of May
Changed to the snowy marvel of thyself.
Thou art a garden wild wherein there grow
Deep purple fruits that stupefy and yet
That make one burn! Thy body is a church
Of rarest marble built – a fairy mount
Where sounds the music of a golden harp. (…)
Glare not at me! I’m but a fool, a poor
Mad fool – a wretched fool that wished to tell
you tales to make you laugh! (…)

Isolde: I hear a raven’s croak; I feel
The icy breath of some strange body when
Thou standest burning by my side, thou fool!
Thou pallid ghost!

Yet has thou oft embraced these limbs upon thy journey o’er the wide
And purple sea along the starry way of our great happiness – just thou and
I, alone in blissful loneliness! And thou
Hast often listened to this voice when it,
In the deep forest, called the nightingales,
Alluring them to sing above thy head,
And like them whispered in thine ears
Soft words that made a wave of passion flow,
Sweet and voluptuous, through thy burning veins!

Hardt, Ernst. Tristan the Jester (trans. John Heard Jr.)

Szymanowski’s source for Tantris le bouffon was an expressionist play written by
Ernst Hardt, who brings back some elements of the original tale: 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. However, Hardt’s distorts the original legend to make it extremely gloomy, nightmarish, grotesque, sardonic and hysterical; he relishes in describing many gruesome details of his own creation, 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 it was indeed him 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 27: Tantris le bouffon, bars 42-46

As Scruton 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.” Death-devoted Heart, p. 28.
The slow sections also clearly represent the ‘night-music’ that stays in stark contrast to the ‘day-music’ of falsehood, pretension, and courtly life, also following Wagner’s metaphor.\textsuperscript{119}

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 hears the savage barking of Husdent in piercing clusters, and in which Tantris becomes almost suicidal in his delirium.\textsuperscript{120} 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,

\textbf{Example 28: Tantris le bouffon, bars 24-27}

followed by passages in which he pleads with Isolde,

\textbf{Example 29: Tantris le bouffon, bars 28-31}

and other moments in which he reminisces about their former love:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{119} Besides these similarities, Wightman also shows one theme that Szymanowski borrowed from the opera, albeit significantly altered. \textit{Karol}, p. 168.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Zent’s 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” (p. 49).
\end{itemize}
Example 30: *Tantris le bouffon*, bars 40-41

*Tantris le Bouffon* is a clear example of what Marshall Brown refers to as “the unstably ironic or elegiac character that seems inescapable”\(^{121}\) in the Modernist aesthetic of that time. 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 might represent the moment in which Isolde finally recognizes him, with the love theme from the middle section being taken up *fortissimo* –

Example 31: *Tantris le bouffon*, bar 91

one realizes that this is one of those cases of a narrative gone terribly wrong; quoting McClary, it is as though “the protagonist-detective dies, Dracula triumphs, or the heroine gets her bodice permanently ripped.”\(^{122}\) The piece ends in utter dejection, as Tristan

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\(^{121}\) Brown, “Origins of Modernism: Musical Structures and Narrative,” p. 88. 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.”

\(^{122}\) McClary, p. 26.
walks away, throwing fragments of his buffoon costume and of his buffoon melodies on the road. The following examples show two of his previous buffoon motives, and how they are discarded in the end of the piece, before being interrupted by a few secco chords:

Example 32: *Tantris le bouffon*, bar 3 and bars 34-35

Example 33: *Tantris le bouffon*, bars 103-108

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123 I interpret them as being “discarded buffoon melodies” because: (1) they were previously used in Tristan’s buffoon passages – fast, loud, 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 in the road.
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”\(^{124}\) – is probably the character who underwent the greatest number of literary avatars in history.\(^{125}\) (Smeed meticulously discussed dozen of these in his book, but many more still had to be left out.) This inveterate womanizer fulfills a didactic moral purpose in Molina’s original play (El Burlador de Sevilla);\(^{126}\) other early works emphasize his villainy even further, increasing Don Juan’s caricatural aspect. Molière is the author who finally starts to give him greater complexity; in his play, Don Juan is a rational character who “tirelessly analyses himself.”\(^{127}\) He defends himself by saying that he follows natural instincts, which partially excuses some of his actions; furthermore, his refusal to repent even in the face of eternal damnation gives him “a certain obstinate nobility, [as h]e remains true to himself.”\(^{128}\) Molière also introduces the issue of class, contrasting the depraved but eloquent aristocrat against the inherently good but inarticulate lower class (represented mainly by the servant).

DaPonte’s Don Giovanni is comical and tragic in different scenes, and, as Smeed points out, “has the advantage of beautiful and seductive music to give him a degree of appeal to anyone who is not a tone-deaf and uncompromising moralist.”\(^{129}\) Mozart’s music also added new dimensions that were not found in the libretto, inviting new

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\(^{124}\) Smeed, p. 149-50.

\(^{125}\) 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, p. x.

\(^{126}\) Smeed finds that audience members would “have had an ambivalent attitude towards him, enjoying his unscrupulous ruses yet finding comfort in the thought that, at the end, divine justice is meted out to him” (p. 4).

\(^{127}\) Smeed, p. 10.

\(^{128}\) Smeed, p. 12.

interpretations of the character, such as Hoffman’s, who transformed Juan into a tragic idealist. Earlier, he had been someone

who wickedly transgressed against the moral norm. But according to the Romantic view of the world, a view which sees the man of imagination and sensibility as consumed by transcendental longings of which the ordinary man – the ‘Philistine’ – has no conception, the heroic rebel may be expected to act according to his own criteria. If these involve an unrelenting and self-defeating quest, even one which harms his fellows, he becomes a tragic figure, but not necessarily (…) a wicked one.\textsuperscript{130}

Lord Byron takes a different route, using Don Juan – again, due to his reliance on ‘natural’ instincts – as a foil to lambaste and poke fun at British society,\textsuperscript{131} while also displaying an ironic affection (or an affectionate irony) towards his protagonist. Lenau takes Hoffman’s direction a step further and turns Juan into a full-blown hero fighting against bourgeois morality. George Bernard Shaw creates a victim who is “disillusioned with all forms of pleasure,”\textsuperscript{132} whereas Frisch makes him transfer his love of women towards… geometry. Tolstoy – alongside many others – sees similarities between Juan’s myth and Faust’s, and skillfully merges both characters, and there are hundreds of his other incarnations that I have not mentioned here.

| I fly satiety and the weariness of pleasure and keep myself fresh in the service of beauty, causing the one woman pain in my enthusiasm for the whole species. The breath of a woman, today the aroma of spring, may perhaps oppress me tomorrow like the air of a prison. When I wander in constant change through the multitude of beautiful women, my love for each is different. I do not wish to build temples out of ruins. Yes, passion is forever new. It cannot be carried over from one woman to another; it can only die in one place to be reborn in another and, if it knows itself truly, it knows nothing of remorse. Just as every beauty is unique, so too is the love that pleases her. Up and away in search of new conquests as long as the fiery pulse of youth beats! (…) |

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{130} Smeed, p. 32.
\item \textsuperscript{131} “Don Juan’s role seems to be chiefly that of an outsider against whom the absurdity, artificiality, corruption and hypocrisy of English high society can be measured” (p. 36).
\item \textsuperscript{132} Smeed, p. 69.
\end{itemize}
It was a splendid tempest that drove me on. It has spent itself and silence remains. All wishes, all hopes are dead as stone. Perhaps a lightning flash from regions above which I despised has struck a mortal blow to my powers of loving, so that my world suddenly became a gloomy desert. Perhaps not – the fuel is all consumed and the hearth becomes cold and dark.

Lenau, *Don Juan*\(^{133}\)

Szymanowski never associated this mask with one particular author.\(^{134}\) Zent 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).\(^{135}\) Gray 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

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\(^{133}\) Quoted by Smeed, p. 139. These two fragments (along with another one) are found in the score of Richard Strauss’ homonymous symphonic poem.

\(^{134}\) Wightman, p. 165.

\(^{135}\) I hear this desperation and world-weariness in the way in which the serenade keeps getting interrupted, and then repeated in more forceful dynamics, thicker textures, and more agitated figurations.
lies behind his empty pursuits.\textsuperscript{136} 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 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.”\textsuperscript{137} Its repeated refrain, which circles around a Db,

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Example 34: Sérénade de Don Juan, bars 2-5}
\end{quote}

and the piece’s form, which suggests a rondo, have also been described by a few authors as symbolizing the character’s self-centeredness.\textsuperscript{138}

The ending – with its precipitous acceleration towards the final hollow fifths (played sfff), and the sensual but aflitto section that preceded it –

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{136} Brunel comments on Juan’s constant “readiness to put on a mask. He is a man of many disguises" (p. 336). 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.
\textsuperscript{137} Downes, “Szymanowski and Narcissism”, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{138} Wightman, Palmer, and Downes make this point.
\end{quote}
Example 35: **Sérénade de Don Juan, bars 135-143**

seems resolute but 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.

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In the descriptions provided above, Szymanowski’s penchant for story-telling and character-development is clearly demonstrated. Many other examples could be suggested, but I believe those presented so far are enough to demonstrate how his music mirrors the original stories in many explicit and in many subtle ways, and how it also converses with other artistic works that explored those characters. Szymanowski is able to simultaneously immerse himself in the stories and comment 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,”139 one should not peremptorily claim these interpretations to be anything but what they are – interpretations. Nonetheless, as a pianist, reading about these characters and stories has certainly helped me achieve something that would not have been possible otherwise. In this paper, therefore, I have endeavored to discuss the immediate, profound, but partially inscrutable ways in which a performer’s inspiration and a listener’s experience may respond to those literary narratives.

In his superb biography, Alistair Wightman describes how he coincidentally discovered Szymanowski’s music. He then affirms: “I cannot help but believe that my life would have been infinitely the poorer without this happy accident.”140 So would have mine. If, someday, someone else – besides the members of my advisory committee – happens to run across this paper and read it, I hope this happy accident will also be able to enrich this person’s life, through a greater understanding of Szymanowski, of his artistry, and of the way in which a deeper involvement with those literary characters may increase our appreciation of his magnificent piano triptychs.

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139 Hertz, p. 31. Hertz is 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.
140 Wightman, Karol, p. xiii.


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