

## **Maria Szymanowska and the Evolution of Professional Pianism**

*by Slawomir Dobrzanski*

Today's pianists, preoccupied with a grueling daily regimen of scales, arpeggios, etudes, etc. and equipped with an enormous piano repertoire ranging from Rameau through Chopin to Ligeti, rarely spend much time thinking about who created their profession. In fact, most piano connoisseurs and historians rarely venture beyond the early 20th century, or, more specifically, beyond the start of the Recording Era. Nevertheless, the evolution of professional pianism remains a fascinating area of inquiry. For instance, what, we may ask, are the differences and similarities between early 19th century pianists and the pianists of our time?

The life and career of Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831), one of the first pianists "(to take) Europe by storm," provides surprisingly good source material for the making of such comparisons.

In contrast to that of today's pianists, Maria Szymanowska's musical education did not take place at any official music school. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, public music education in Warsaw was still in its infancy (the first professional music school there opened only in 1809); secondly, such education was at the time inaccessible to women. Given such circumstances, Szymanowska's piano instruction took place at her home in Warsaw, with two unknown piano teachers, Lisowski and Gremm. It is widely assumed that she took advice from Chopin's teacher, Józef Elsner, from Karol Kurpinski, conductor of the National Theatre, and from Chopin's organ teacher Franciszek Lessel, a student of Haydn.

Maria's parents, following their daughter's unusual interest in music, began inviting renowned musicians into their home whenever such artists performed in Warsaw. These important houseguests included singer Angelica Catalani (known to have presented the young Frederic Chopin with a gold watch in recognition of his talent), Prince Antoni Radziwill (cellist, composer, and Chopin's future friend), pianist Daniel Steibelt, Napoleon Bonaparte's Kapellmeister Ferdinando Paer, violinist Jacques-Pierre-Joseph Rode, and many others. For Szymanowska, personal contacts with such famous artists constituted a primary source of her education. Moreover, due to the absence of professional artist management at the time, these contacts were also crucial to the development of her musical career.

A striking element of Szymanowska's life is her strong personal calling to be a pianist. Such an emotional force seems to be the universal factor common to musicians of all centuries and generations. Meanwhile, personal sacrifices are often an unfortunate factor in musicians' lives. For Szymanowska, it was family life that she had to forego. To fulfill her aspirations of becoming a professional musician she was forced to undergo a divorce (her marriage lasted hardly a few years) from the father of her three children. Szymanowska's subsequent artistic voyages through Europe, during which she was hailed as one of the musical celebrities of the era, must have simultaneously been painful periods of separation from her children. Yet, no traces of regret regarding the choice of her career are seen in Szymanowska's correspondence.

Beginning around 1815, Szymanowska gained more and more recognition as a pianist, initially performing in private venues only. Her professional philosophy was remarkably similar to that of young pianists of today: that one successful concert will spawn more and more concerts. Indeed, Szymanowska quickly established herself in the Warsaw musical scene. The years between 1818 and 1827 marked the pinnacle of her career. In 1818 she went to London, giving concerts exclusively for closed circles of connoisseurs there. In 1820 she played in Berlin, where she met the influential music activist Carl Friedrich Zelter, who was to subsequently become an

active supporter of her career. Szymanowska toured Russia in 1822, where she befriended Johann Nepomuk Hummel and John Field. In recognition of her talent, Tsar Alexander I bestowed upon her the honorary title of "First Pianist of the Royal Princesses Elizabeth and Maria."

In 1823, Szymanowska appeared in concerts in the Ukraine, playing solo with Polish violinist Karol Lipinski. In June of the same year, Szymanowska left Poland for a three-year trip to Western Europe. It was the longest trip she ever undertook. Her itinerary took her to Austria, Germany, France, England, the Netherlands, and Italy. In Marienbad, Austria, Szymanowska became a close friend of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In Berlin, she met the Mendelssohn family and pianist Friedrich Kalkbrenner, who was later to offer piano lessons to Frederic Chopin. Szymanowska's grandest successes took place in Paris and London, where she received highest praise from the most important musical authorities of the time: Anton Reicha, Luis Jadin, Francois Boieldieu, Ferdinand Ries, Ignaz Moscheles, Muzio Clementi, John Baptist Cramer, Gioacchino Rossini, and others. Her trip to Italy brought yet another important acquaintance, the famous composer of piano polonaises, Prince Michal Kleofas Oginski.

In January and February of 1827, Szymanowska gave two recitals in Warsaw after returning home from Western Europe. As Chopin's letter from the time suggests, the composer was probably present at one of these concerts. In the summer of 1827, Szymanowska moved her residence to Moscow and subsequently to St. Petersburg. She remained active as a pianist, but did not travel any more. Instead, she turned her St. Petersburg apartment into one of the most important intellectual and artistic salons of that city. Among her closest friends of the time was the poet and Chopin's friend, Adam Mickiewicz, who later became the husband of Szymanowska's daughter, Celina. Maria Szymanowska died quite suddenly, in July 1831, of cholera. July 2001 170 years marked since her death.

Szymanowska, in her early years, received invitations to play concerts mainly through letters of recommendation. She obtained such letters from John Field, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Gioacchino Rossini, Prince Oginski, and the Prince of Cambridge, among others. Later in life, her well-established reputation preceded her. During her lifetime she must have appeared in approximately a hundred concerts - sixty-two of them well documented. This number of concerts seems rather small by today's standards - recognized virtuosos nowadays play around fifty or more concerts a year. However, this limited "productivity" of 19th century musicians can be attributed to the travel conditions of the time - in those days it took sixty-four hours to travel a distance of two hundred miles, i.e., from Boston to New York City, for example. Today, it is possible (and it happens!) for an artist to play a concert on Tuesday in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and play another one on Thursday of the same week in Positano, Italy.

More than half of Szymanowska's concerts were inaccessible to the general public. The idea of a public concert was just emerging. Today, concerts that are closed to the public don't have as much importance in an artist's career as they did before. Szymanowska's largest audiences were in Leipzig (700 people), and in Warsaw (1200 / 900 people). Today, a live concert, broadcast via television, can attract more than 10 million viewers. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, since very few professional concert halls were available, public concerts usually took place at town halls or in local theatres. Interestingly, at the time the very concept of a piano recital itself did not exist either. Though Szymanowska usually performed as the main star of the evening, she nevertheless had to share the stage with local musicians, frequently accompanying them on the piano or on the organ. Such a state of affairs had its impact on performance repertoires. Usually, concert repertoires of the time consisted of combinations of musical works that are incomprehensible to us today.

For example, the program of a concert at one of the Countess Dierzhavina's palaces in St. Petersburg, in April 1827, reads as follows:

- "1. Overture from the opera *Anacreonte* by Cherubini, performed on two pianos, eight hands, by Messrs. Reinhardt, Meyer, Hartknoch, and Mrs. Szymanowska.
2. Concerto for harp will be performed by Mr. Schulz.
3. The first Nocturne by Field, to the words by Petrarca, Ms. Gebhardt singing
4. Remarkable Rondo by Hummel will be played by Mrs. Szymanowska
5. A solo on violin will be played by Mr. Boehm
6. Romance from *Othello* will be sung by Ms. Gebhardt
7. Potpourri from *Freisschuetz* will be played by Mrs. Szymanowska "

The fact that virtuosos of the time did not perform from memory differentiates even further our contemporary musical scene from that of the early nineteenth century. Clara Wieck-Schumann and Ferenc Liszt are usually considered responsible for establishing this particular performance practice. Yet it seems possible that Szymanowska was the first musician ever to perform from memory. In her June 1823 recital in the city of Poznan, Szymanowska performed by heart her own composition, *Caprice sur la Romance de Joconde*, which caused a sensation in the local press. Today, we are dealing with a different situation, with recitals not played from memory being extremely rare. Also, they often attract unflattering attention from the press.

As is the case with today's pianists, Szymanowska also had to confront a different piano each time she performed. However, her situation in that respect was even more difficult. In her time, two piano mechanisms prevailed in Europe: the lighter, Viennese mechanism was omnipresent in Eastern and Central Europe, while the English mechanism, with heavier action and darker sound, dominated the Western third of the continent. Aspiring pianists in, say, Lithuania, would not be able to practice on a piano with an English mechanism, unless they traveled to Western Europe. Szymanowska faced such an instrument for the first time in Warsaw in 1806. It was a piano presented to Józef Elsner by the Erard Company of Paris. Szymanowska and many others, according to Elsner, were simply shocked with the heaviness of the piano's action. Twenty years later, returning from her European tour, Szymanowska brought to Warsaw her own piano with an English mechanism, which was widely heralded by the local press.

In contrast to today's piano world, almost every 19th century virtuoso was simultaneously a composer as well. This fashion lasted well into the twentieth century - even pianists such as Artur Schnabel, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, and Joseph Hofmann considered composition an important factor of their musical activities. Szymanowska composed more than a hundred works, most of them for solo piano. The majority of them were published in 1819 by Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig. As a composer, Szymanowska showed considerable skill and invention. Unfortunately, she lived at a time directly preceding the appearance of the greatest of romantic composers: Chopin, Liszt, Berlioz, and others. Their achievements quickly overshadowed Szymanowska's considerable inventiveness. Yet, her compositions greatly influenced Chopin's musical language, which in turn ensured for Szymanowska a firm place in European music history.

There is yet another striking difference between today's musical world and the musical environment of the nineteenth century. In those days, professional musicians seemed much closer to other artists, poets, painters, and writers. Music then appears to have been connected much more strongly with the other arts than it is today. Szymanowska, for example, developed close personal bonds with other musicians (John Field, Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Mikhail Glinka), poets (Johann

Wolfgang von Goethe, Adam Mickiewicz, Alexander Pushkin), painters (Aleksander Orłowski), and writers (Ivan Krylov, Julian Korsak). Today, in the era of specialization, musicians rarely interact with other artists; worse - they frequently are too busy to even attend concerts and listen to fellow musicians.

Szymanowska's biographers, researching concert programs, reviews, memoirs of her friends and acquaintances, even reports of the secret police, recovered a document that clearly ties Maria Szymanowska, the early nineteenth century Polish celebrity and virtuoso, with other musicians across history and geography. It is a description of a moment right before Szymanowska's concert in Vilnius, in the winter of 1827, left to us by a young Countess von Heildesheim. Szymanowska, a few minutes before going on stage, asked the Countess's mother for a hug and a benediction. The Countess asked:

"Is it possible, Madame, that after so many successes in Paris, London, and even in Milan's La Scala, that you are simply NERVOUS to play in our town?"

Szymanowska replied, in French: "The audience remains always demanding, everywhere."

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