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Between the salon and the concert hall. Maria Szymanowska's artistic career from behind the scenes

Maria Szymanowska (1789–1831), a pianist and composer, one of the most prominent figures in the history of Polish music before Chopin. She became very famous as a pianist all over Europe in the 1820s. It was then that she was on a great concert tour that earned her recognition and fame. Her piano artistry was received with general delight: critics wrote enthusiastic reviews, while audiences showered her with rounds of applause. Her own compositions were also very popular. The nocturne *Le Murmure* became a lasting part of the salon music repertoire, while Schumann spoke favorably about her etudes.¹ The thriving career was brutally brought to an end by her sudden death. Maria Szymanowska died on July 25, 1831 during a cholera epidemic in Saint Petersburg. Her death left her family shattered (the pianist orphaned three children), and caused the artistic accomplishments of this exceptional woman fade into oblivion.

¹ See Robert SCHUMANN, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*, Martin Kreisig (ed.), vol. I, Leipzig 1914: 206: *thanks to their creative ingenuity and uniqueness, we deem these etudes the most remarkable of all that has been created by women musicians thus far. One must not, however, forget that they were written many years ago, and therefore, much of what would later be seen as common and ordinary should be perceived here as new and outstanding.*

Szymanowska's output has been attracting music historians' attention for a long time.² It is worth, however, taking a look at her artistic activity from a different perspective, through the prism of the music culture and its socio-economic factors. Winning a leading position in the world of pianists was not an easy task in the times of a rapid growth of virtuosity, and exceptionally difficult for a woman due to existing social restraints. Hence, the phenomenon of Szymanowska calls for propounding a few questions. What enabled the flowering of her talent? Did her performances in the salons have a considerable impact on the development of her career? What helped her to become known on the international music scene? Talent, diligence and perseverance in achieving her goals were undoubtedly Szymanowska's great assets. Nonetheless, all of these did not suffice to gain widespread fame. And so, the most important factors turned out to be the external ones, such as private patronage system and the support from her family and friends. Maria's parents supported their daughter in her artistic aspirations, and took care of her children after she had left for her European tour. Szymanowska also had extensive connections in the music world and could count on help of the influential aristocrats and townsmen. Without such support, her work could not have been successful.

It is very difficult to reconstruct the circumstances of Szymanowska's performances as the sources are rather sparse and incomplete. Still, an attentive look at the press from that epoch, the pianist's correspondence, and also her albums gives a general idea about those events. This article is based on Szymanowska's letters to her parents, written together with her sister Kazimiera and her brother Stanisław. They show unknown aspects of her concert activity, including her connections with the artistic and aristocratic circles, her wages, and even her presence on the stage. This correspondence casts a new light on

² Maria IWANEJKO, *Maria Szymanowska*, Kraków 1959; Igor Bełza, *Maria Szymanowska*, Kraków 1987; Irena PONIATOWSKA, *Styl brilliant i idee preromantyczne w twórczości Marii Szymanowskiej* [Stile brilliant and pre-romantic ideas in the music of Maria Szymanowska], [in:] *Historia i interpretacja muzyki. Z badań nad muzyką od XVII do XIX wieku* [History and interpretation of music: Research into music from the 17th to 19th century], Kraków 1995; Renata SUCHOWIEJKO, *Album Musical Marii Szymanowskiej* [Maria Szymanowska's Album musical], Kraków-Paryż 1999; Irena PONIATOWSKA, *Pieśni solowe Marii Szymanowskiej do tekstów Adama Mickiewicza* [Maria Szymanowska's Solo Songs to the Texts by Adam Mickiewicz], [in:] Teresa Brodniewicz, Maciej Jabłoński, Jan Stęszewski [eds.], *Mickiewicz i Muzyka. Słowa—Dźwięki—Konteksty* [Mickiewicz and Music. Words—Sounds—Contexts], Poznań 2000.

the pianist's career, showing the story from behind the scenes and the social context in which the music of the nineteenth century thrived.

Szymanowska's letters used in this article come from the Museum of Adam Mickiewicz collection, which is kept in the Polish Library in Paris. They were written by Maria, Kazimiera and Stanisław to their parents in Warsaw (catalog no. MAM 978). Moreover, two letters to Szymanowska: one from Pierre Rode (catalog no. MAM 969/71) and the other from François Boieldieu (catalog no. MAM 969/82) were used. The letters to parents, written in Polish, were translated into English. The original versions are not included in the footnotes. Both French letters remain in their original versions.

Maria Agata Wołowska was born on December 14, 1789 in Warsaw to a middle-class family. Just as any other lady from a good home, she received basic education, an important part of which was learning how to play the piano. However, she was quick to exceed the level of piano playing needed for home performances. Little is known about her music education. According to her biographers, her very first piano teachers were Antoni Lisowski and Tomasz Gremm (little known Warsaw pianists). Information about her studies with remarkable composers Józef Elsner and Franciszek Lessel are equally enigmatic.³ These lessons, however, were not regular instructions, but rather sporadic consultations on composition.

Some encyclopedias contain erroneous information that Szymanowska was John Field's student. It is quite unlikely as their relationship got closer only by the end of the 1820s in Saint Petersburg, which became Szymanowska's permanent place of residence. However, by that time, she already was a famous pianist and certainly did not need any piano lessons. Maria's music education was thus incomplete and unsystematic. As a woman, she could not study at the Warsaw Conservatory. She could only count on home schooling. Her first teachers gave her good rudiments of music education, but it was only thanks to her own work that she obtained such a high level of piano technique. Szymanowska was to a large extent a self-taught artist who incessantly perfected her skills.

The atmosphere of her family home exerted a great influence on her artistic growth. Mr. and Mrs. Wołowski were great music lovers, and their Warsaw

³ Teofil SYGA, Stanisław SZENIC, *Maria Szymanowska i jej czasy* [Maria Szymanowska and her Times], Warszawa 1960; Zbigniew SUDOLSKI, *Panny Szymanowskie i ich losy* [Young Ladies in the Szymanowski Family and their Lives], Warszawa 1982.

salon became a meeting place for prominent Polish and foreign artists, such as Józef Elsner, Karol Kurpiński, Karol Lipiński, Angelica Catalani, August Klengel, Daniel Steibelt, Ferdinand Paër, Pierre Rode to name a few. Being among such artists was conducive to shaping the young pianist's sensitivity. It enabled her also to make valuable connections that helped her later in her career.

Nonetheless, the path to her fame in Europe was long and filled with adversities. Maria decided to embark on a virtuosic career only in 1820, after the divorce with her husband Teofil Szymanowski. The biographers say that 'incompatibility of characters' as well as Szymanowski's lack of acceptance for his wife's artistic aspirations and her increasing involvement in the music life contributed to the break up of their marriage. By that time Maria had already won certain reputation as a pianist in Warsaw circles, while the songs to three *Historical Chants* by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz brought her fame as a composer. The publication of her *Dziela zebrane* [Collected Works] by Breitkopf in Leipzig in 1820 was an equally important event. This collection included such pieces as: *Vingt Exercices et Préludes*, *Caprice sur la Romance de Joconde*, *Dix-huit Danses*, *Six Menuets*, *Grande Valse*, *Six Romances*. Her publishing success was surprising since Szymanowska was only a beginner, and completely unknown in Europe. And although she had already been to Paris, Vienna, London and Berlin, those visits were of a rather social, and not professional character. The trips, however, allowed her to get to know music circles in those countries and to make new acquaintances.

Szymanowska's friends did not doubt that her talent deserved to be shown to the big world. In June 1820 Pierre Rode heartily encouraged her to come to Paris:

Le souvenir de mon séjour à Varsovie m'est toujours présent par le plaisir que m'a procuré votre connaissance [...] la réunion de vos talents, de votre bon gout, m'ont laissé une impression bien justifiée par celle que vous avez produite sur tous ceux qui depuis moi ont joui de l'avantage de vous entendre et de vous fréquenter. Plusieurs personnes dont le jugement ne peut être récusé, m'ont assuré que vous aviez atteint un degré de distinction qui devrait vous donner l'envie de quitter un peu Varsovie et de venir nous visiter à Paris.⁴

⁴ Pierre Rode to Maria Szymanowska, Berlin, June 27, 1820.

Szymanowska finally decided to go there in 1822. Her decision was influenced by both artistic as well as financial factors. After her divorce, the pianist raised her three children by herself—Helena (born in 1811) and the twins: Celina and Romuald (born in 1812). She was hoping that the profits from her concert tour would improve her financial standing and serve as a financial security for her children in the future. Yet, Szymanowska was aware that by embarking on such a far and long journey she was taking a big risk. She would travel into the unknown, without any guarantee of success.

Her journey lasted almost four years. At that time, Szymanowska visited such countries as Russia, Germany, France, England, Italy, Belgium and Holland. Her very successful debut in Saint Petersburg and Moscow was met with favorable reviews, earning her the title of the ‘*Première Pianiste de LL. MM. les Impératrices de Russie*’. The title later turned out to be a very useful ‘business card’ in the Western Europe. Maria’s two siblings travelled with her: a younger sister Kazimiera, who helped her with everyday matters and sometimes carried out her social duties, as well as her older brother Stanisław, who acted as her impresario. He would take care of the organizational and financial aspects of the tour, ensuring that funds at their mutual disposal were well managed. Kazimiera writes about his practical approach in her letter to their parents: “the master’s eye makes the horse fat, we prefer to look after all of our matters by ourselves”.⁵

During the times of Szymanowska, there were yet no professional artist management agencies. The way concerts were organized was based on a well-developed system of recommendations, where personal contacts and letters of recommendation played a key role. Thanks to this, the pianist was able to reach the influential people, who would help her rent a hall or distribute tickets. This system worked out very well and was incredibly effective. And so at the very beginning of the tour Kazimiera was already reporting from Berlin:

Marynia’s [a diminutive of Maria] concert on Wednesday, on the 10th of this month, will take place without any obstacles thanks to the kindness of count Brül.⁶

This ‘kindness’ was absolutely necessary, especially in the cities where Szymanowska performed for the first time. News of her successes spread very

⁵ Kazimiera to her parents, Leipzig, October 14, 1823.

⁶ Kazimiera to her parents, Berlin, October 2, 1823.

quickly in the press as well as in social circles. And as she was becoming more and more popular, she could count on organizational privileges in the cities she visited next.

Here, for example, is what happened in Leipzig in October 1823:

We are expecting a high turnout at our concert, as there is an unbelievable excitement in the city. [...] All of the concert directors, the most important local magnates approached the Sister during the Sunday concert, informing her that they were changing the rules just for her. Up till now, artists were allowed to use the hall only once a month [...] but they are giving us a hall (lighting included) to show how much they appreciate her talent [...] They offered a vehicle for the concert, yet we had already had one arranged by Mr. Limburg who waited for the Sister by the gate to lead her into the concert hall and also helped her to the piano.⁷

But also in the later years, when Szymanowska's position had already been established, she would never go on a tour without letters of recommendation. Even if she was to perform in a city in which she was already a well-known figure. Steadily, the circle of her acquaintances kept on widening. Social meetings and salon performances constituted an important element in the process of learning and getting familiar with the new environment. The collector's passion of Szymanowska also helped her to make new contacts. In her albums she would collect autographs of prominent artists and people from the society, and reciprocate by putting down her name in theirs. The exchange of autographs provided a wonderful pretext for gatherings and conversations.

Szymanowska's performances in Paris in 1824 were of invaluable importance for the further growth of her career. A successful debut in the Conservatory hall, widely covered by the local press, only confirmed her leading position in the world of virtuosi and paved the way for her further successes. In Paris, she could count on support of many musicians, including Pierre Baillot, Eloy de Vice, Pierre Rode, François Boieldieu. They helped her to make new friends and organize concerts. Stanisław mentioned it in his letter:

Baillot wrote to Eloi, to this violinist who had been in Warsaw to prepare a subscription concert for Marynia in the town of Abbeville, which is on the way to London, a one day ride from Paris. And so, we will play, take the money and continue our tour. All of the magazines were already writing about Marynia's trip to London, so they will know about her arrival in advance.⁸

⁷ Kazimiera to her parents, Leipzig, October 14, 1823.

⁸ Stanisław to his parents, Paris, April 12, 1824.

Eloy de Vice ensured that the audience turned up in droves in Abbeville, so the concert was successful from the financial point of view. Stanisław meticulously calculated: “having deducted the costs, we made over 400 francs.”⁹

Mr. Boieldieu was equally helpful and strove to make Szymanowska's performance in Théâtre Feydeau happen. The below mentioned letter is an evidence of that:

Madame, J'ai quelques personnes chez moi ce soir, et je suis bien privé en ne pouvant aller entendre votre répétition ce qui m'eût fait un extrême plaisir. Je veux cependant vous rendre réponse au sujet du Duc d'Aumont [...] Les intérêts du théâtre Feydeau exigent que ayant donné cette semaine 'La neige' mardi, jeudi et samedi, la semaine suivante [...] on donne ce même spectacle lundi, jeudi, et vendredi. Vous alliez donc recevoir une lettre de regrets, mais de refus, que j'ai prié Mr le Duc d'Aumont de ne point vous envoyer, et d'après tout ce que je lui ai dit de vous, de votre beau talent, c'est lui maintenant qui vous fait prier par mon organe de tâcher de remettre votre concert au 6 ou bien au 5 [...] Combien je désire que cela puisse s'arranger [...] allez lundi matin, je vous y engage, à 11h chez le Duc d'Aumont [...] C'est un très bon et excellent homme, dites lui que vous savez qu'il est le protecteur des arts, et des artistes, et que tous ceux de la capitale vous ont assuré que vous ne trouveriez qu'obligeance de sa part. Vous verrez combien il sera sensible à cela [...] c'est parce que j'ai l'honneur de vous connaître Madame, que je suis sur que, si véritablement vous ne pouvez faire autrement, vous obtiendrez de donner votre concert le vendredi. Aumoins je l'espère, je le désire ardemment et si vous voulez me faire bien changer votre jour, ce sera un grand embarras du moins. Recevez assurance, de mon entier dévouement et celle de tous mes sentiments qui vous sont dus.¹⁰

The composer was truly committed to organizing the concert, going above and beyond just doing a favor. Boieldieu not only advised the pianist how to include her concert into the program of the Théâtre Feydeau but also gave her some tips on how to pay a compliment to Prince d'Aumont! It is mentioned in the letter that the following artists were scheduled to perform in the concert: the singers Mr. Ponchard and Mme. Rigault, the violinist Pierre Baillet, and the cellist Louis Norblin. It is unknown whether the concert actually took place, as there is no information about the event in the press.

Before her trip to London, Szymanowska received plenty of letters of recommendation from her friends from Paris. She wrote about it to her parents:

⁹ Stanisław to his parents, London, May 25, 1824.

¹⁰ François Boieldieu to Maria Szymanowska, Paris [1824].

I have got a lot of letters, and the papers in London have announced my arrival. We will be trying to use our resources thoughtfully, as they say life there is very expensive. Pasta went to London one week ago. She is a strange but helpful woman.

Stanisław also confirmed it: “Cherubini, Baillet, Boieldieu gave us letters to the artists in London. Baillet also wrote to Eskudero, whom Marynia knew in Warsaw.” Whereas Kazimiera added: “Mrs. Tyszkiewicz and Prince Talleyrand gave the Sister very favorable letters to take to London.”¹¹

Extensive contacts in aristocratic circles increased chances of success, therefore Szymanowska looked to it with great care. A good reception in the salons served as a pass to big concert halls. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, salons functioned as a sort of concert agencies. It was there that people would get acquainted with one another, where opinions were formed and talents promoted. The pianist’s correspondence reveals that she did not have any direct contacts with the directors of the concert halls or theaters. Everything was done with the help of influential individuals from the society or famous artists. This allowed Szymanowska to sometimes save on the costs of the hall rental. She wrote to her parents:

Lady Rose, who hosted us yesterday at her ball, took care of a concert hall rental so I got it for free instead of having to pay for it 35 guineas, for which I feel not in the least offended. [...] Organizing concerts can be a very expensive feat. Fortunately, I do not have to worry about it because I get the hall for free and will not have it lighten up.¹²

Szymanowska would listen carefully to the advice from her fellow artists who were very familiar with the local environment. From Kazimiera’s account we learn about ticket prices in London and the habits of the audience:

The concert is to take place on June 10th in the very same hall where Rossini had earlier performed. And since evenings and balls are continuously organized in this hall, a few distinguished ladies talked the Sister into giving a concert before the dinner, and Mr. Cramer, who had given a concert in the very same hall three days ago to a packed house, convinced her even more so. Many ladies, starting with Mrs. Liewen, are willing to distribute the tickets, though the price cannot be higher than half a guinea. Cramer and Katalani do not charge more, while Rossini, whose price was higher, decided to lower it to one guinea just a few days before his concert, as the tickets were not selling well.¹³

¹¹ Maria, Stanisław and Kazimiera to their parents, Paris, 18 April 1824.

¹² Maria to her parents, London, May 25 1824.

¹³ Kazimiera to her parents, London, July 24, 1824.

The social life in the European big cities was carried on as usual. Balls, evening gatherings, parades, opera performances, and outings to the countryside and 'to the water' constituted its mandatory elements. An artist had to adjust to such seasonal attractions to secure an audience at the concerts. And so, Szymanowska would plan her concerts with great detail, taking all sorts of considerations into account. She explained to her parents:

I was also planning to organize a concert, at which Katalani and the local artists were willing to sing, but all of the Ladies and Students I know had left, and I do not want to risk an unsuccessful concert, not after a first, such a fine one, played to a great audience. We are leaving for Boulogne where I would like to bathe in the sea for 15 days. I have letters to take with me to Boulogne where I'm planning to perform.¹⁴

In the summer time, music life in towns would come to a standstill and be moved to health resort areas. Therefore, leaving for the seaside resorts was necessary and done not only for the pleasure of 'taking baths'. Maria, right before her trip to Boulogne, wrote:

in two hours we will be leaving from here via Douvres to Boulogne where I am planning to stay in order to bathe in the sea and take an opportunity to give a little concert. From there, in the first days of August, I am invited by Mr. Eloi to Abbeville where a fair is to take place. There will be a chance 'to sell' some passages by Hummel and Field.¹⁵

The pianist's first visit to London in 1824 was rather short. She arrived in April, while the season ended at the beginning of July. Szymanowska regretted not having come earlier as she missed an opportunity for better earnings. In May she wrote to her parents:

Today I gave three lessons, which means that I made over 3 guineas. Had I come in January, I would have had ten lessons a day. This is the way artists make a fortune.¹⁶

Stanisław and Kazimiera also wrote about it:

When it comes to Marynia's business, yesterday she had two lessons, one guinea each; we have already wrote to you about the one she has had for a few weeks now [...] hav-

¹⁴ Maria to her parents, London, July 5, 1824.

¹⁵ Maria to her parents, London 13 July 1824.

¹⁶ Maria to her parents, London, May 25 1824.

ing three lessons, one guinea per hour, we can count on a steady income till the end of our stay here.¹⁷

It was the private lessons then, for the most part given to the ladies from the society, that were the main source of income for the pianist. The money offered for the salon performances also constituted a considerable financial support. Kazimiera explains:

After her performance in the more prominent houses, Marynia is sent 10 guineas the next day. She will be attending this kind of evening gathering on Friday at Count Northumberland's.¹⁸

In another letter, written two years later, Kazimiera also mentions these 'money deliveries'.¹⁹

Szymanowska won great fondness and respect in aristocratic circles, and the acquainted ladies would often help her with organizational matters and shower her with expensive gifts:

Yesterday I bid farewell to Countess Kent. For a keepsake, she gave me a beautiful bracelet. It is a very thick chain of the most exquisite workmanship. It has three clasps studded with turquoises. The Countess gives me letters to take with me to Italy and promises to help me with lessons and concerts in the following spring. Count Leopold sent me 25 livres for Field's 'Roundel' that I had played at the concert in his house. Everybody is promising me a very good season in the next year. I just need to come here in February in order to get many piano students.²⁰

And so, from an artistic and financial point of view, her first stay in London turned out to be very satisfactory. Public and private concerts, along with lessons and expensive presents she had received, added up producing quite a considerable income. Szymanowska wrote:

It is with sadness that I am leaving London. Never have we received so many favors, courtesies and pleasantries 'avec accompagnement des guineas'.²¹

Stanisław, too, was very glad:

we are leaving tomorrow in high spirits, as we made it here. There is no doubt that the next year Szymanowska will earn a lot as this is a country where the longer you stay,

¹⁷ Stanisław, Kazimiera to their parents, London, May 24, 1824.

¹⁸ Kazimiera to her parents, London, July 24, 1824.

¹⁹ Kazimiera to her parents, London, May 19, 1826.

²⁰ Maria to her parents, London, July 13, 1824.

²¹ Maria to her parents, London, July 5, 1824.

the more you earn, provided that one is here as early as February. Benelli, the Theater manager, engaged Marynia to perform at the Concert Spirituel.²²

As planned, Szymanowska started her second season in London as early as February 1825.

With the costs of living lower than those in London, the winter season of 1824 Szymanowska spent in Italy. She explained it to her parents:

Our plan to spend the winter in Italy has not changed. It seems that for all reasons I cannot stay here because of the high costs of living and therefore I should go to Italy. At the beginning of my trip I was advised by one person whose opinion I should value especially. Boieldieu, whom I asked in a letter for advice as to what would be the best way of spending the winter season here, writes to me that Lafont is leaving for concert tour in Switzerland. I, too, could take advantage of that as I will be traveling to Italy via Geneva, but I would need some letters of recommendation for this city. Would you please ask countess Plater to arrange for letters from Mrs. Zamojska who is such a well-known persona in Geneva.²³

Szymanowska was planning her trips very carefully, paying close attention to her expenses. Rossini advised her to travel to Italy by a mail stage coach as this was the way which would allow her to save time and money. Kazimiera provided a detailed report about this travel:

Rossini gave Marynia plenty of letters for Italy. His wife and he, as well as many others are opposed to the idea of traveling by the mail stage coach from here to Geneva and then retaining a vettorino, or driver of a coach, for traveling throughout Italy. He says this way would let us travel no more than eight miles a day, which would be very time consuming, and we would not be able to save much anyway considering the costs of lodgings, breakfasts and lunches. A vettorino is responsible for providing travelers with a supper, et « j'avoue que je n'aimerais pas déjeuner et dîner avec un souper ». Rossini told us that if we stop for a few hours every day, it is only right that we eat, even if out of boredom; and if we travel by a mail stage coach we will avoid tavern expenses. Joking aside, the time is more precious than the money, and so to be in London by February, we will need to hurry back as early as January. Rossini assured us that it takes 8 days by mail stage coach and 30 by vettorino to get from Milan to Naples, which is a significant difference in travel time.²⁴

While in Italy, Szymanowska performed in many cities, because, as she explained to her parents:

²² Stanisław to his parents, London, July 13, 1824.

²³ Maria to her parents, London, July 13, 1824.

²⁴ Kazimiera to her parents, Paris, September 8, 1824.

it is good to keep on visiting various cities and be heard there as this way I will allow them to learn about 'il mio divino talento' as Italians call it [...] I will write to you from Parma where I hope to be playing at the court. Governor Bubna gave me the letters. I must admit that he is kind to me. On the day of my concert, which took place in the morning, a military parade was scheduled. Mr. Bubna ordered to cancel it so that the officers could attend my concert. And so we had a full house.²⁵

The governor must have been under a great spell of Mrs. Szymanowska since he called off the parade because of her concert.

In Italy, Szymanowska was received in a truly southern style. They wrote sonnets and hymns as tributes to her. The pianist was also met with a warm welcome from the Polish and Russian aristocracy. Kazimiera reported from Naples:

We are spending the evenings at Countess Galicynowa's or at Mrs. Perofska's, whom we know from Saint Petersburg. There are Poles there too, including Count Sanguszko, Abramowicz and Dernałowicz, a cousin of Sobolewski and Zabiełło families, and we would meet with them very often. Today we are dining at Countess Gerace's, and tomorrow evening Marynia is playing at the Russian ambassador's. Yesterday we spent an evening at Mrs. Potocka (Franciszek Potocki's wife) and Naryszkinowa, as they run the house and receive the guests together. On Friday, there is a rehearsal of a new ballet, so the concert is postponed until Monday, the 24th of this month; there will be more time to set up the hall; I will write after the concert.²⁶

Whereas Maria wrote from Milan:

We are having a wonderful time and we are staying in good health. I know Milan just like Waliców because we keep running in the city all day long. There is no dinner, ball or any sort of entertainment without our majesty not being invited. We never miss the theater, the so-called perfect Opera.²⁷

Szymanowska's stay in Italy was filled with concerts, visits to the opera and social events. The pianist was also thankful to the Polish artists for their warm welcome and help. In Milan she was under the care of Franciszek Mirecki about whom she wrote:

he would do me thousands of favors. He is a man of a great talent, extremely natural and oftentimes an eccentric. Italians acknowledge that he is very well versed in art and

²⁵ Maria to her parents, Milan, October 24, 1824.

²⁶ Kazimiera to her parents, Naples, January 18, 1825.

²⁷ Maria to her parents, Milan, October 24, 1824.

call him 'il bravo maestro Marecki'. At my concert, he came forward and helped me to the piano.²⁸

Michał Kleofas Ogiński, who met the pianist in Florence, was equally helpful. Here is what he wrote about her piano playing:

Many years ago in Warsaw I heard her play the piano with such perfection which, already at that time, was earning her one of the leading positions among the most prominent artists. I watched her again with an unspeakable pleasure in Florence. It was then that I learned that the constant work on her talent and the voyages have incredibly perfected her way of playing which seems to be impeccable even in the eyes of the most harsh critics.²⁹

The multiple accounts about Szymanowska paint a picture of a woman whose musical talent went perfectly hand in hand with her beauty and presence on the stage. A visual aspect is an important element of every artist's performance, and, in the case of the Polish pianist, it served as her additional trump card. The listeners would notice her charming beauty, unique clothing, unaffectedness and grace. Szymanowska's numerous portraits from the 1820s by various artists emphasize certain characteristic features of her physique: vivid dark eyes, nicely shaped, full lips, slightly protruding cheek bones, fair complexion, and slim figure. Through the portraits one may also follow the unfolding of Szymanowska's beauty, from the youthful freshness captured by Jacques, through the apotheosis of womanhood by Kokular, to the mature dignity by Wańkiewicz and Oleszkiewicz.

Being aware of her strong points, Szymanowska skillfully worked on her stage image. After her concert in Paris she wrote:

I would like to let the sisters know that the dress was a success. It was a white barège gown with wide sleeves, draped, my pin with antique ornamentation, bayadere on my neck, white barège with blue and gold trim. A superb blue barège turban.³⁰

She dressed fashionably and tastefully. She used to wear low-cut dresses, exposing her 'swan-like' neck and her 'alabaster' back, which Stanisław Morawski

²⁸ Maria to her parents, Milan 24 October 1824.

²⁹ Michał Kleofas OGIŃSKI, *Listy o muzyce* [Letters on Music], Tadeusz Strumiłło (ed.), Kraków 1956.

³⁰ Maria to her parents, Paris, April 12, 1824.

recalls in his memoirs.³¹ The favorite element of her attire were turbans, very fashionable in the 1820s. In his comments about his sister's wardrobe, Stanisław admitted that she looked beautiful in all of her dresses.³² Both stage and visual elements emphasized the expressiveness and complemented the overall impact of her artistic creation. Piotr Szalikow, a Moscow critic, put it in few words:

a painter saw in front of him a beautiful epitome of a woman, one that matched the ideal of Polyhymnia goddess.³³

At the public concerts Szymanowska rarely performed her own compositions. Her repertoire included primarily compositions in the brilliant style by such composers as Hummel, Klengel, Ries, Herz and Field. The critics praised her technical dexterity and gorgeous *cantabile* that was likened to the human voice or the sound of a violin. Szymanowska's performance was appreciated for her confidence and precision, subtlety and grace, refinement and balance. It was stressed that she could skillfully operate with contrasts, combining delicate performance with strong touch, classic restraints with romantic exaltation.

The pianist's renown was so great that sometimes her name served the publishers to promote newly published compositions. Kazimiera wrote from Leipzig:

Peters, the local music publisher, asked the sister to play Hummel's 'Rondo' as this way the piece would be in great demand.³⁴

This kind of advertisement used to be widely employed at that time. Publishers would eagerly include a name of a famous virtuoso on the front page, which attracted a potential purchaser. It was beneficial for the artist as well. Kazimiera wrote:

Hummel's 'Rondo', which Marynia played for the first time in Leipzig during her second evening there, entitled 'Rondo brillant de Hummel execute par l'auteur à St St Petersburg et par Mme Szymanowska à Paris', was published. Then a reprinted sonata by Boieldieu entitled 'Sonate de Boieldieu exécutée par Mme Szymanowska et

³¹ Stanisław MORAWSKI, *W Peterburku 1827-1838* [In Saint Petersburg 1837-1838], [in:] Adam Czartkowski, Henryk Mościcki (eds.), Poznań 1927.

³² Stanisław to his parents, Paris, April 12, 1824.

³³ Piotr SZALIKOW, [in:] *Московские ведомости*, 1822 No. 36.

³⁴ Kazimiera to her parents, Leipzig, October 14, 1823.

Mr Baillot' was released. Soon they will be printing 'Polonaise', 'Murmure', 'Dances' and some other Marynia's compositions.³⁵

Shortly after, 24 *Mazurkas* were also released, almost simultaneously in two publishing houses—at Breitkopf and Probst.

The collaboration with Peters also included distribution of Szymanowska's works. She wrote about it to her father:

Wishing for my compositions to get around the world a bit, I managed to ask Mr. Peters in Leipzig, who is the number one publisher now, to take my music on consignment and distribute it throughout Germany. Since he was fond of me, he agreed to it. So I am kindly requesting that you, Papa, with the help of Staś and Teoś, unpack all the scores that are in the trunk and send back everything that you find [...] Even though the shipping costs will be high, we shall recover the money by selling the music, which is in high demand here. Peters is not asking for the '6 Romances' and 'Le depart. Romance' since they do not sing in French in Germany, so sending the sheets is unnecessary.³⁶

Playing music in salons played an important role in the public life in the nineteenth century. It became a way of socializing, a source of pleasure and entertainment, while at the same time it provided an opportunity for people to be exposed to great art. Salon repertoire was quite diverse, starting with simple compositions of utilitarian character to the pieces with highest artistic qualities. Technical requirements were also adjusted to the abilities of the various performers, both amateurs as well as professionals. Szymanowska often accompanied the hosts of such gatherings on the piano, encouraging them to join in and make music together. Kazimiera recalls one music evening at the Duchess of Kent:

The duchesses have beautiful voices, and the prince Leopold is quite a good musician. They were overjoyed with the way Marynia accompanied them.³⁷

At another occasion, Kazimiera makes rather sharp comments about one dame who miscalculated her performing capabilities:

Yesterday evening we went to count St Antonio where there were many other guests, including Rossini and his wife. [...] We were killing ourselves laughing when, in the presence of Rossini, the hostess, fat as a [cow], along with the three other amateurs,

³⁵ Kazimiera to her parents, Paris, April 18, 1824.

³⁶ Maria to her father, Weimar, November 4, 1823.

³⁷ Kazimiera to her parents, London, July 5, 1824.

started to play Rossini's quartet so much out of tune that I have never heard such playing in my life.³⁸

Certain musical genres were especially popular with the salon artists. Songs and piano music, including numerous arrangements of famous opera themes, played a dominant role. The transcriptions took various forms and included variations, fantasies, *souvenirs*, *réminiscences* and *pot-pourris*. All are credited with making the opera repertoire widely known.

Szymanowska's music is deeply rooted in the salon culture, and while the piano miniatures constitute the majority of her output, she also wrote songs and some chamber works. As a composer she was very responsive to the audiences' needs. Her pieces also include music 'for use', e.g. *Dix-huit dances de différent genre composées et dédiées à Madame la Princesse Wiasemsky née Princesse Gagarin*. It is a collection of dance pieces that includes waltzes, anglaises, contredance, cadrils, cotillions, polonaises and one mazurka. These pieces were of a purely entertainment character. Moreover, the pianist composed occasional pieces for her friends from the aristocracy, e.g. she dedicated *Serenada* for violoncello and piano to Prince Radziwiłł, and *Marches* for piano to Prince Konstanty.

Outside of the stream of music intended specifically for home use are nocturnes, mazurkas, polonaises and etudes. The collection *Vingt exercices et préludes* demonstrates a high artistic level not only because of the rich technical means utilized, but also thanks to a wide range of expressive shadings. Robert Schumann said about the etudes that: "they are really good and useful, especially to practice passages, ornaments and rhythm."³⁹ They hold an important place in the evolution of the genre, just like her mazurkas and polonaises that show the process of departing from purely entertaining role of music, gradually acquiring more artistic qualities. In the final stage of her creative period, Szymanowska composed *Nocturne* in B-flat major which was most likely the piece Schumann thought of when he called the pianist a *Field among women*. In her late songs, composed to Mickiewicz's poems, national accents can be heard. Her contemporaries said that the composer was able to perfectly blend music with the spirit of the poetry of that great Polish writer.

³⁸ Kazimiera to her parents, London, July 24, 1824.

³⁹ Robert SCHUMANN, *Gesammelte...* (1914).

The letters of Maria Szymanowska and her siblings are very personal in character. They shed a light on this area of life that usually is very hard to penetrate by researchers. They also serve as a basis for certain general assessments as to the life and social status of the 19th century virtuoso. The press materials that are usually the main source of information reveal only the public dimension of the virtuoso's activity—concert halls, cities, names of the other artists performing along with him or her, program, audience's reactions. There are very few sources, however, that allow us to go deeper into the private sphere, affording us a chance to look into the daily life of a virtuoso and the story behind his or her activities.

The deep socioeconomic changes that had taken place in Europe in the first decades of the 19th century brought about completely new circumstances for art development. On the wave of the post-revolutionary emancipation, an artist gained a new social status. He became free and independent, no longer 'in service of his master', and broke free from the supervision of his patron. This freedom came with a price, however. The change in the social status brought new challenges for artists. They had to be able to find their way in the new environment and earn their living. It was not an easy task in the times when music became a common good and had to follow the rules of market economy. Music industry was blooming, which was primarily due to the needs and tastes of the audience, and the artists competed with one another.

A virtuoso not only gave concerts, but was also in charge of organizing them. Only very few artists could rely on the help of professional management agencies, which was quite expensive, too. Before modern forms of music life management were established, most of organizational and promotional tasks were an artist's responsibility. It was a virtuoso's duty to find a concert hall to perform at, cover the rental costs, arrange for lighting, prepare posters, have announcements published, sell tickets, and get the support of the local music community. Also, they had to arrange for decent lodgings in various cities and appropriate means of transportation for themselves. A virtuoso profession was very profitable, provided that an artist performed often and was able to fill big concert halls. And so he or she had to be constantly traveling and take care of the audience's needs.

From this point of view, and taking into consideration the peculiarity of the musical life in the 19th century and its socioeconomic conditions, the successes Szymanowska enjoyed gain an additional meaning as she managed to overcome

the social, cultural and economical barriers. The letters discussed above paint a picture of a strong, resourceful and self-conscious woman who is consistently working toward achieving her goals, a woman who is able to find her own place in the difficult reality of her time. It is quite surprising, especially that her real portrait differs from her idealized image as a 'Polyhymnia goddess with an alabaster back' that her biographers had accustomed us to. Szymanowska does not match the model of a talented artist of a nice demeanor, who plays sentimental music in salons for the dames from high society. She rather directs our attention towards more complicated aspects of life of the 19th century virtuoso and rich in nuances phenomena of the musical culture of that time.

Translated by Paweł Wróbel

Abstract

The phenomenon of Szymanowska calls for propounding a few questions. What enabled the flowering of her talent? Did her performances in the salons have a considerable impact on the development of her career? What helped her to become known on the international music scene? Talent, diligence and perseverance in achieving her goals were undoubtedly Szymanowska's great assets. Nonetheless, all of these did not suffice to gain widespread fame. And so, the most important factors turned out to be the external ones, such as private patronage system and the support from her family and friends.

This article is based on the letters written by Szymanowska, her sister Kazimiera and brother Stanisław to their parents. Moreover, two letters to Szymanowska: one from Pierre Rode and the other from François Boieldieu were used. The correspondence shows the unknown aspects of the artist's concert activity in Germany, France, England and Italy. We learn about her connections with the artistic and aristocratic circles, her wages, her presence on the stage. The letters cast a new light on the pianist's career, showing the story from behind the scenes and the social context in which the music of the nineteenth century thrived.

Keywords: Maria Szymanowska, virtuoso, concert life in the first half of the nineteenth century.