PART I

The captive muse

1 Szymanowski and his legacy

In May 1935, Karol Szymanowski reached the Latvian capital, Riga, as part of what turned out to be his last major concert tour. Although the performance of his *Symphonie concertante* for piano and orchestra (1932) failed to materialise, he did accompany his sister, the soprano Stanisława Szymanowska, and the violinist Wacław Niemczyk in two recitals of his songs and chamber music. Coincidentally, the twenty-two-year-old Witold Lutosławski was also in Riga to perform his Piano Sonata (1934) as part of a student exchange concert. Tantalisingly, this was to be the one and only meeting between two of the major figures in twentieth-century Polish music.[1] Lutosławski later recalled: 'Szymanowski was extremely kind to our small group. He came to our concert, we walked around the town together and accompanied him to Radio Riga . . . After our concert, Wacław Niemczyk told me: "Karol liked your Sonata very much; however he wouldn't say it to you."'[2]

Two years later, on Easter Sunday, 29 March 1937, Szymanowski died aged fifty-four in a Swiss sanatorium, the victim of long-term tuberculosis. For some time, Szymanowski had felt neglected in Poland. As he wrote from his rented home, 'Atma', in the Tatra mountain resort of Zakopane in 1934:

> Polish officialdom (the Government) repeatedly refuses to recognise me. They do so only when I am needed for propaganda purposes, as it is impossible even for them to deny that amongst creative artists (not virtuosi) I alone (and not solely amongst composers but in other fields as well) have already acquired some reputation abroad . . . The fact is, they care nothing for me here, and that I could die without anyone lifting a finger.
>
> My funeral will be a different story. I am convinced it will be splendid. People here love the funeral processions of great men.[3]

His prediction was correct. The ceremonies began in Warsaw (Lutosławski recalled that 'the performance of the Stabat Mater during Szymanowski's funeral celebrations, in the Holy Cross Church, was for me a truly unique experience which I even find difficult to describe'[4]) and ended in Kraków, where he was laid to rest in the crypt of the Pauline church on Skałka, alongside other Polish luminaries such as the playwright, poet and painter, Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907). Barely a month later, the memorial concert in Warsaw's Philharmonic Hall – which included the Third

Symphony (1916) and Second Violin Concerto (1933) – was virtually empty.[5]

Lutosławski's funeral in 1994 was in marked contrast to the pomp that attended Szymanowski's last journey. Every effort was made to keep it low-key, only a hundred or so mourners marking the interment of his ashes in Warsaw's Powązki Cemetery in an area where other Polish composers and musicians are also buried. There was a palpable sense that his death on 7 February quietly but firmly marked the end of an era as significant to Polish music in the second half of the twentieth century as Szymanowski's had been in the first half. And yet Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933), arguably the best-known composer of the next generation, reportedly eulogised Lutosławski as having been the greatest Polish composer since Chopin, effectively relegating Szymanowski to the second rank. While his may have been an isolated opinion, it nevertheless questioned the commonly held view that Szymanowski was the first worthy Polish heir to Chopin. But, as Szymanowski's letter of 1934 indicates, his position in Polish musical life was never comfortable and the reception of his own compositions and progressive ideas was frequently hostile or indifferent – he was more likely to be feted on his trips abroad, be it in Prague, Paris, New York or Riga.

Szymanowski was essentially an outsider. His life up to 1919 was spent mostly far from Warsaw, at the family home in Tymoszówka in Ukraine (which up to the end of the First World War was part of the Russian-controlled sector of Poland). A period of study in Warsaw (1901–5) was followed by prolonged stays in Vienna and a number of journeys to Italy, Sicily and North Africa (1911–14), as well as to Paris and London shortly before the outbreak of war in 1914. In the early years of the twentieth century, Szymanowski's detachment from Warsaw's sluggish musical establishment provided the impetus to attempt a re-energisation of the city's musical life on a number of occasions, the first of which occurred at the conclusion of his studies. With a few contemporaries, he formed a group called 'Young Poland in Music' ('Młoda Polska w muzyce'). It was modelled on the fin-de-siècle movement in literature and the visual arts, 'Young Poland', which had flourished in Kraków with Wyspiański as its leading light. The other members of 'Young Poland in Music' were the composers Ludomir Różycki (1884–1953), Apolinary Szeluto (1884–1966) and Grzegorz Fitelberg (1879–1953); Fitelberg, however, rapidly changed tack and developed into one of Poland's leading conductors and advocates of new music (he became sufficiently well known to be chosen to conduct the premiere of Stravinsky's *Mavra* in Paris in 1922). Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876–1909), whose symphonic poems displayed the most advanced musical idiom among young Polish composers, maintained a loose association with the group, but he

died in an avalanche in the Tatra Mountains before he could achieve his full potential.

The group's inaugural concert in Warsaw on 6 February 1906 included Różycki's symphonic poem after Wyspiański, *Bolesław the Bold* (1906), Szymanowski's *Variations on a Polish Folk Theme* for piano (1904) and his *Concert Overture* (1905), with its clear indebtedness to Richard Strauss's *Don Juan*. Strauss was regarded, alongside Wagner and Reger (and also, in Szymanowski's case, the Russian composer Scriabin), as a central model for the regeneration of Polish music. With the lack of publishing outlets in Warsaw, the group established its own company under aristocratic patronage in Berlin and the members variously furthered their studies both there and in Dresden, Leipzig and Vienna. They had no joint manifesto, however, and soon went their separate ways, Szeluto into virtual obscurity and Różycki into increasingly conservative compositional idioms. The mantle of responsibility for reinvigorating Polish composition fell therefore onto the shoulders of Szymanowski and Fitelberg.

Szymanowski's wanderlust in the years preceding the First World War opened up completely new vistas, notably the music of Debussy and Ravel as well as Stravinsky, whom he met in London in 1914. Among the new works he heard in these years were *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Daphnis et Chloé*, *Petrushka* and *Le chant du rossignol*: 'Stravinsky (of Russian Ballets fame) is a genius – I am terribly excited by him and as a consequence I am beginning to hate the Germans.'[6] Equally powerful was the impact of Mediterranean culture, which led to his first 'Arabic' work, *Love Songs of Hafiz* for voice and piano (1911), and which culminated in the evocative Sicilian story of the opera *King Roger* (1918–24). These outside influences, combined with the continuing influence of Scriabin, only served to emphasise his otherness within the Polish context, especially as late nineteenth-century Germanic idioms were beginning to take a hold amongst his compatriots. With the enforced isolation and disruption during the war and the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917, the works of Szymanowski's middle period – *Myths* for violin and piano (1915), Third Symphony, First Violin Concerto (1916), First String Quartet (1917) – remained hidden from public view. These pieces have long been regarded as among his finest achievements. They demonstrate his ability to meld high romanticism with the subtle harmonic shadings and instrumental textures of recent French music (Stravinsky's influence at this point was less marked than in the 1920s). Perhaps most significantly, he seemed to have shed the structural formalities of earlier symphonic works, such as the Second Symphony (1910), and developed a wondrously seductive developmental process that was both static and mobile. Not unsurprisingly, this potent filtering of Strauss and Scriabin

through the prism of Debussy, Ravel and early Stravinsky proved to be peculiarly personal and one that in the event had few resonances for other Polish composers.

For the remaining twenty years of his life, Szymanowski continued to follow an independent compositional path, with the crucial proviso that from 1921 onwards, starting with the song-cycle *Wordsongs* (*Słopiewnie*), he once more refiltered his innate expressive sensuousness through a prism, this time that of indigenous Polish music. Certainly, there is an element of a novel exoticism here, but Szymanowski's purpose was clear: to provide musical leadership in the creation of a specifically Polish identity for the newly emergent nation (at the end of the war Poland had become independent for the first time in over a hundred years). An important by-product of this shift was Szymanowski's renewed attempt to find common ground with Polish audiences; his wartime compositions had been lukewarmly received in Warsaw in 1919. By writing his set of twenty Mazurkas for piano (1926) he signalled his links with a genre synonymous with Chopin, although their rough-hewn harmonic language is far removed from that of his predecessor. The Stabat Mater (1926) connected with older Polish choral and sacred traditions, while the ballet-pantomime *Mountain Robbers* (*Harnasie*, 1923–31) was the most vivid example of his fascination with, and absorption in, the song and dance idioms of the *góralski* (highlander) folk traditions of the Tatras. *Mountain Robbers* may be seen as the most overt Polish tribute to the example of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring* and *Les noces*. Younger composers were more intrigued by Stravinsky's music from the Octet onwards, and this move towards a pared-down, cooler expressive palette is also reflected in Szymanowski's last orchestral works, the *Symphonie concertante* and the Second Violin Concerto.

Given the new social-political context within Poland, it seems extraordinary that, once more, Szymanowski was acting more or less alone in drawing so intensively on his native traditions. None of his near-contemporaries was half as interested in defining afresh the nature of Polishness in music. As examples of a forgotten generation, whose copious oeuvre of the inter-war period has almost totally disappeared from the Polish repertoire, three figures stand out: Witold Maliszewski (1873–1939), a former student of Rimsky-Korsakov (and teacher of Lutosławski) who remained true to his Russian training, later incorporating some Polish folk influences; Eugeniusz Morawski (1876–1948), whose music was partly influenced by French impressionism (he studied composition and painting in Paris); and Piotr Rytel (1884–1970), more notorious for his anti-Semitism and newspaper criticism unsympathetic to Szymanowski than for the post-Wagnerian

flavour of much of his music. A renewal of interest in the output of this generation may yet unearth compositional achievements to set against those of Szymanowski, but at this distance in time it seems an unlikely prospect.

One of the striking aspects of Szymanowski's life at the end of the 1920s was his willingness to take on the daunting task of improving the Warsaw Conservatoire (1927–9); for two further years he was Rector of its successor, the Warsaw Academy of Music (1930–2). He revitalised the teaching staff, not without resistance and resentment, and most accounts credit Szymanowski with leading tertiary music education in Poland into the modern world, even though it gave him less time to compose.[7] His public utterances on music education are, in essence, a defence of his progressive reforms and reinforce his image as an inspirational figure for musical patriotism. In his rectorial address of 1930, he called for the attainment of a 'consistently high artistic standard of national culture, with its own special colour and expression, which not only illuminates and moulds the spiritual character of a nation, but also shines far beyond the frontiers of the state as a visible, indestructible symbol of its creative strength'.[8]

Szymanowski's adoption of a public profile, initiated in musical terms in 1906 with the formation of 'Young Poland in Music', took a much more polemical turn with his articles of the 1920s, beginning with the first of several attacks on the entrenched conservatism of Polish musical life, 'On Contemporary Musical Opinion in Poland' (*c.*1925–6). His critical spats with Rytel and others show his determination to stand his ground, even though he clearly felt that he was often in a minority of one. More fascinating is the totality of his rejection of German music ('the art of yesterday') – and, by implication, strong elements of his own pre-war beliefs. Like most Poles, he abhorred Schoenberg, although the extent of his acquaintance with the music remains uncertain and he was capable of a relatively measured assessment of the German tradition.[9] When Szymanowski turns to non-German music, he can still be critical: his idolisation of Stravinsky (1924)[10] and Ravel (1925)[11] is balanced by a sharply etched discussion (1924) of Les Six ('I have not abandoned hope for the future well-being of Milhaud, Auric and Poulenc'[12]) and of Satie ('that old immoralist and *farceur*'[13]).

Szymanowski writes with the greatest fervour on ethnic music. His much-quoted essay 'On Highland Music' (1924), for example, is a passionate appeal to save what he perceived as the rapidly eroding highlander culture around Zakopane. Elsewhere, his championing of Chopin is strikingly eloquent. Even when responding to an article by Bartók on the origins of folk music (1925), he cannot resist setting the argument within the German context, asserting that

> Thanks to its mighty breadth and its continuing irreplaceable value, the great century-and-a-half (from Bach to Wagner), while not ceasing to be, in the noblest sense of the word, a 'nationalistic' expression of the Germanic spirit, thrust upon all of us an obligatory aesthetic canon and universal ideal of such weight that it crushed individual upsurges of creativity to evolve in their own way (Chopin), and became in fact the *international* musical ideal.[14]

The juxtaposition between the German tradition and the lone voice of Chopin is a recurring theme, as in his unsentimental essay of 1923:

> . . . great music can be based on foundations other than those of the ever-shrinking circles of German 'emotionalism'. That liberation must rest first upon the elevation of the artistic qualities of ethno-musical traits of other national groupings. This involves not only 'formal' qualities, but the very 'spirit' of the music, its deepest substance. This process has already been accomplished in France and Russia, and what an enormous role Chopin's music played in this process! . . . I should like the 'transformation of values' which Chopin initiated a century ago to become at last an accomplished fact in Poland.[15]

Szymanowski 'reads' Chopin in contemporary terms and this filter deliberately reinforced Szymanowski's own experience. There is a palpable sense of Szymanowski struggling to achieve not only Poland's musical identity but also his own, and his was not to be the last such creative struggle in twentieth-century Polish music.

The 'transformation of values' in the newly independent Poland was an uphill task. On a material level, progress was patchy. Polish Radio began broadcasts in 1926, but few new scores found publishing outlets in Poland itself. Concert life, however, certainly had its crowning moments. While it is true to say that Warsaw continued to be the main musical centre, Kraków, Poznań and Lwów also had successful professional operatic productions and concert seasons (Honegger's *Le roi David* and Janáček's *Jenůfa* received their Polish premieres in Poznań in 1926). In Warsaw, there were Polish premieres of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1921) and *Siegfried* (1925), Ravel's *L'heure espagnole* (1925), Strauss's *Salome* (1931) and Křenek's *Jonny spielt auf* (1934). Ballet productions were created for Stravinsky's *The Firebird* and *Petrushka* (1922) and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (1926). New orchestral repertoire included, although not to universal acclaim, Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* in 1922 and the First Chamber Symphony a year later. Polish premieres of other contemporary pieces included Prokofiev's 'Classical' Symphony (1923), Weill's Violin Concerto (1927), Shostakovich's First Symphony (1929), Berg's Three Orchestral Pieces (1930), Bartók's

Third String Quartet (1931) and Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* (1937).

Nor was Warsaw off the map in terms of international performers. It welcomed, especially in the 1930s, conductors such as Kleiber, Horenstein, Krauss, Mitropoulos, Klemperer (*Petrushka*, 1934), Walter, Furtwängler, Markevich and Ansermet (Berg's Violin Concerto and Stravinsky's *Jeu de cartes*, 1938). Instrumental virtuosi included Schnabel, Arrau, Heifetz, Serkin, Gieseking and Kempff, alongside Polish players such as Huberman, Kochański, Szeryng, Haendel and Balsam.[16]

Arguably the most riveting occasions for Polish audiences were the visits of composer-performers. Milhaud and Poulenc came to Poland in 1922 and Prokofiev played his Third Piano Concerto and a solo recital in Warsaw in 1925, the first of several visits over the next decade. Stravinsky played his Concerto for Piano and Winds in 1924, Ravel came to Warsaw to hear Marguerite Long play his G major Concerto in 1932, Hindemith played his Konzertmusik for viola and orchestra in the same year, and Rachmaninov performed his Second Piano Concerto and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* in 1936. The strangest event was the brief visit of the American composer Henry Cowell, who gave a recital of his experimental piano music in March 1926. In April 1939, Warsaw was also the venue for the annual festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), when Polish audiences had the opportunity to hear a wide range of new music from across Europe, although the planned visit of Webern to the festival did not materialise.

The spasmodic appearance of new foreign works on Polish concert programmes, coupled with an educational environment at tertiary level which did not begin to cater properly for composers until the late 1920s, provoked the younger generation, like the 'Young Poland in Music' composers before them, to look further afield for stimulus. This time, however, with Szymanowski's active encouragement, up-and-coming composers went to Paris rather than Berlin. The reasons for this were several. France, and particularly Paris, had long been a magnet for Polish artists. The insurrection against the Russians in 1830–1 led not only to Chopin's enforced exile in France but also to that of many literary figures as part of the so-called 'Great Emigration'. Szymanowski's own espousal of French musical idioms as an alternative to the pre-war dominance of German symphonism was also a factor. But the overwhelming attraction appears to have been the freshness, vivacity and aesthetic clarity of new French music, of Jean Cocteau and 'Les Six', of Stravinsky and neo-classicism.

In 1926, a group of Polish music students in Paris formed the 'Association des Jeunes Musiciens Polonais à Paris', which mounted concerts of Polish

music (including performances of pre-twentieth-century works) and acted as a focal point for the younger generation. Like many of their American contemporaries, most of the composers among them had come to study with Nadia Boulanger, although some went to Paul Dukas, Albert Roussel and Charles Koechlin. In the period up to 1939, well over a hundred composers and performers became members of the Association. Most returned to Poland at the end of their studies and played a part in Polish musical life during and after the Second World War. Of these, Stanisław Wiechowicz (1893–1963), Tadeusz Szeligowski (1896–1963), Jan Maklakiewicz (1899–1954), Bolesław Woytowicz (1899–1980), Piotr Perkowski (1901–90), Zygmunt Mycielski (1907–87) and Grażyna Bacewicz (1909–69) warrant closer inspection. Both Wiechowicz's *The Hop* (*Chmiel*, 1926), a popular dance stylisation of a well-known wedding song, and Szeligowski's *Green Songs* (*Pieśni zielone*, 1930), whose harmonic language and treatment of thematic material have strong links with Szymanowski, separately reinterpret their Polish roots. Maklakiewicz, whose music was also influenced by Szymanowski's example, showed evidence of stronger archaistic tendencies (*Cello Concerto on Gregorian Themes*, 1928) and an interest in oriental culture (*Japanese Songs*, 1930). Perkowski's insouciant Sinfonietta (1932), closer to Poulenc than Stravinsky, is less overtly Polish in tone; in complete contrast, Woytowicz's *Poème funèbre* (1935) is unusual not only for its dark-hued language, but also for being an isolated example, at the time, of a piece with a direct relation to an historical event, namely the death of the charismatic inter-war Polish leader, Marshal Piłsudski. Chamber music was an active element in the 1930s and included Woytowicz's First String Quartet (1932), Bacewicz's Wind Quintet (1932) and Mycielski's Piano Trio (1934).

For some other Polish composers, life abroad proved too alluring. Among those who remained in France were Aleksander Tansman (1897–1986), one of the first to arrive in Paris after the end of the First World War (he became a French citizen in 1938), and Antoni Szałowski (1907–73). Tansman was a rare example of a Polish emigré who established a successful international compositional career. His inter-war music is characterised by strong jazz and neo-classical idioms (the Second Piano Concerto, 1927, shows a kinship with Gershwin, Ravel and Poulenc), as well as wistful references to Polish folklore. Of particular interest are the string quartets (nos. 2–4, 1922–35), whose combination of lyricism and vigour anticipates Bacewicz's quartets. Fate has been less kind to other emigré composers, whose music remains comparatively unknown.[17] Szałowski, for example, is remembered mainly for his Overture (1936), which is a particularly vivacious example of a common Polish approach to neo-classical procedures. It eschews

the hard-edged radicalism of Stravinsky's gestural and motivic dislocation in favour of a more traditional thematic continuum, a tendency which was eventually to reach its apogee in Lutosławski's Concerto for Orchestra (1950–4).

There remained a number of composers who, for various reasons, did not participate in the general traffic between Poland and France. Some chose to study elsewhere: Czesław Marek (1891–1985), Józef Koffler (1896–*c.*1943–4) and Andrzej Panufnik (1914–91) preferred Vienna; Jerzy Fitelberg (1903–51), son of the conductor, went first to Berlin, where he studied with Franz Schreker, before succumbing to the lure of Paris. Bolesław Szabelski (1896–1979), Roman Palester (1907–89) and Lutosławski were educated only in Poland, although Palester visited Paris in 1936 and Lutosławski planned to study there but was thwarted by the start of the Second World War. Marek's contact with Poland after settling in Switzerland in 1932 was negligible, and Jerzy Fitelberg further distanced himself by moving from Paris to New York in 1940. Panufnik's graduate studies abroad (1937–9) were particularly interesting in view of his later career. He concentrated on conducting (with Felix Weingartner in Vienna and Philippe Gaubert in Paris) as well as taking the opportunity to hear new pieces (in Paris, for example, he heard Berg's *Lyric Suite* and Bartók's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*). More tellingly, he devoted many hours to studying the music of the Second Viennese School: 'With passion and enthusiasm, I read virtually all the printed scores, played them on the piano, analysed them in detail and contemplated them long and deeply. The composer to whom I felt closest was Webern.'[18]

From this group of composers, Palester and Koffler came to be regarded in the 1930s as two of the most significant. Each had several works performed at ISCM festivals and each was committed to the goal of regenerating Polish music through stretching its horizons (in this sense, Szymanowski was an inspirational figure, though more for his stand on musical principles than in terms of style). Of his *Symphonic Music* (1930), performed at the ISCM Festival in London a year later, Palester later averred that 'in this score there was not a trace of Szymanowski, just a little Stravinsky and mostly Hindemith'.[19] His knowledge of contemporary European music was broad – when his folk-inspired *Dance from Osmołoda* (1932) was performed at the ISCM Festival in Barcelona in 1936, he was able to hear Berg's Violin Concerto and Bartók's Fifth String Quartet. Palester rapidly became an energetic activist for new music, especially in the SKP (Polish Composers' Association) from 1932, playing a significant part in the organisation of the 1939 ISCM Festival in Warsaw and Kraków, and writing trenchant articles.[20]