

Chant de Roxane from King Roger

Karol Szymanowski

The Polish composer Karol Szymanowski wrote the opera *King Roger* in the mid-1920s, having been inspired by his travels to the Mediterranean in 1911 and 1914. The opera is set in the twelfth century and the plot revolves around the enlightenment of the Christian king of Sicily by a shepherd. It is Roxane, the king's wife, who implores the king to give the shepherd a chance to explain his pagan beliefs. After an introductory violin cadenza, the *Chant de Roxane* is filled with languid, yet intensely chromatic melodies. In her song, Roxane is pleading for the shepherd's life and fails to mask her own response to the visitor. We hear Szymanowski's unique harmonic language, rooted in his countryman Chopin's innovations and further influenced by contemporaries Wagner and Debussy. Szymanowski's own sister played the role of Roxane at the premiere performance in Warsaw in June, 1926.

Karol Szymanowski (1882–1937) was born in the village of Tymoszwowka in the Kiev Governorate of the Russian Empire (now Tymoshivka in Cherkasy Oblast, Ukraine). He studied music privately with his father before enrolling at the Gustav Neuhaus Elisavetgrad School of Music, and from 1901, he attended the State Conservatory in Warsaw.

Since musical opportunities in Russian-occupied Poland were quite limited, Szymanowski travelled throughout Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and the United States. He was influenced by the music of Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss, Max Reger, Alexander Scriabin, and the impressionism of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. He also drew much influence from his countryman Frederic Chopin and from Polish folk music.

Szymanowski was the most celebrated Polish composer of the early twentieth century. His best known orchestral works are four symphonies and two violin concertos. His stage works include the ballets *Harnasie* and *Mandragora* and the operas *Hagith* and *Król Roger (King Roger)*. For solo piano he wrote *Masks*, *Metopes*, two sets of etudes, and twenty mazurkas. Most of his chamber music is for violin and piano. Best known of these are *Myths*, *Violin Sonata*, *Nocturne* and *Tarantella*, and *Romance*. Additionally, he composed two string quartets, a number of orchestral songs, and the choral works *Stabat Mater* and *Veni Creator*.

Szymanowski was awarded the following distinctions: The Officer Cross of the Polonia Restituta Order; the Officer Order of the Italian Crown; the Commander Order of the Italian Crown; the Honourary Plaque of Reggia Accademia di Santa Cecilia; the Commander Cross of the Polonia Restituta Order; and the Academic Golden Laurel of the Polish Academy of Literature. He was also a Doctor Honoris Causa of the Jagiellonian University, Kraków and an honorary member of the Ceske Akademie Ved a Umeni, the Latvian Conservatory of Music in Riga, the St Cecilia Royal Academy in Rome, the Royal Academy of Music in Belgrade, and the International Contemporary Music Society. In 1935, he was awarded the National Prize for Music.

In 1994, EMI launched a recording of three compositions by Szymanowski: *Litania do Marii Panny*, *Stabat Mater*, and *Symphony No. 3* with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Simon Rattle, conductor. Another world-famous conductor, Charles Dutoit, recorded both the violin concertos with the Orchestre Symphonique de Montreal with Chantal Juillet as soloist. Recordings of the concerti were released by Decca in 1994.