

Karol Szymanowski;

The flash of two years--Impressionist music ?

Prologue~Impressionism

Could anyone suppress the sigh of admiration if they watched one of Monet's series of "Water lilies" painted in his later years ? It is said that the artist had the Japanese-style garden with a pond and a bridge built at the backyard of his house in order to produce this series of work. Every primary color covers the canvass and creates the genuine beauty that alone makes it possible to move people with the color itself.

It was in 1874 exhibition for anonymous artists that Claude Monet entered "The Impression: Sunrise", and from the title the innovative movement called "Impressionism" appeared in the history of art. We can regard the word "Impressionism" both as a movement and as a category of arts. The movement contained so much fresh ideas that its influence prevailed immediately to every category of arts which had already lost fresh creativity; paintings, of course, poetry, literature and music as well.

The definition of this new style of arts was comparatively easy for almost all the categories of arts but music, and due to this sort of difficulty, it has been made hard to identify what is Impressionist music. It can not be denied that so many musicologists had tried to work out the simplest and the clearest definition, in spite of their struggles there has not appeared the decisive one yet.

On the other hand, however, the identification of Impressionist music is sensuously easy enough for the people to categorize what kind of music they are now listening to. The reason of which might be explained that Impressionist music appeals rather to sense than to reason or rational part of mind.

Unfortunately enough, there has not been published a book which gives obvious definition to Impressionist music, and the latest one that I read was Stefan Jarocinski's "Debussy, Impressionism et Symbolism", in which the author mainly describes Debussy and his music as symbolistic rather than impressionistic. Despite the fact that the author was a Polish, it gave me a kind of complicated impression

that he does not refer much to Karol Szymanowski who was one of the most eminent composers in his own country after Chopin.

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, "We can show what we can not describe", so we had better abandon the idea of the definition of Impressionist music. Of course I know enough that it is impossible to apply only one <-ism>: to one composer, because as he/she matures, the style changes, which will explain the reason why I sub-titled this essay "the flash of two years".

Adding to the changes of the composers' style, the musical performances vary also in style in accordance with their formations. Debussy's "Images for Orchestra" and "Images for Piano", for example, will give audiences quite a different impression. So, if I intended academically precise argument, I would have to analyze all the musical formations one by one, however, my major intention here is to re-consider the violin/piano works composed in what is called impressionistic style, Szymanowski's precious violin music, which has had few opportunities to be described in details so far.

Karol Szymanowski

Karol Szymanowski (1872–1937) began his music career under the influence of post-romantic composers, M. Reger, R. Strauss, R. Wagner in particular, which may have been necessary for him to understand the basic formation of music. We must not forget that he studied Scriabin together with those German musicians. As to Arnold Schönberg, although he finished writing "Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured night)" and "Pelléas und Mélisande (Pelleas and Mellisande)" before Szymanowski was in the beginning of his twenties, it has not been clarified yet whether he heard those works written in what is called expressionistic style.

Since Szymanowski was a child he was fond of literature, particularly Greek myths, which might have given him introspective tendency. After he heard Debussy in the Paris Exposition held in 1889, his preference to the impressionistic music might have been fixed deep in his mind, I dare say, subconsciously.

As he grew older, he gradually became conscious of what he should do, and began to compose music. He went to Italy to learn music more, and visited the Mediterranean districts to see the ruins of old Greek and Roman Empires.

In fact, the influence of the past culture made shapes as a violin/piano work Mythes

op. 30 and two triptychs for the piano, Metopes op. 29 and Masques op. 34. These three works are called Szymanowski's 3M, and the letter M also associates with the Mediterranean Sea where Szymanowski visited twice and felt the breeze of the ancient times firsthand.

Impressionist music of Szymanowski

All of a sudden, however, in 1915, after a year when the first World War arose, Szymanowski composed two impressionist music for violin and piano, "Notturmo and Tarantella Op. 28" and "Mythes Op. 30". From that year to the next, the flash of two years, he produced a series of so-called Impressionist style music.

"Notturmo and Tarantella Op. 28" apparently assumes the nature as a show-piece, however, predicts what is to come. In Notturmo, the violin weaves a melody making the best of decorative techniques characteristic of the instrument; double-stops, high register notes, harmonics, trills and tremoli, which are all the outer effects of impressionist music on the violin. Habanese appears in the middle of Notturmo, and the penta-tonic phrase recalls oriental atmosphere, which makes one of the representative characters of impressionist music. Szymanowski must have seen people dance with the rhythm of Tarantella, the most vehement rhythm in Italy, when he twice visited there.

"Mythes op. 30"

Without this triptych, what shall we be able to call impressionist music? There exists everything that impressionist music on the violin demands. Here, we might be able not only to characterize the impressionist music but also to generalize it. The work consists of three parts, each of which has no relation to the others, "The Fountain of Arethusa", "Narcissus" and "Dryads and Pan".

Szymanowski's preference to literature, Greek mythes in particular, is so conspicuously expressed in this work that it may not be worthless to give a brief literary description to each part.

"The Fountain of Arethusa"

--Arethusa is a nymph who was pursued by the river-god Alpheus, and changed by Diana, the goddess of hunting, into a fountain in the small island of Ortygia, near Syracuse. Alpheus fell in love so much with Arethusa that he was said to flow under the sea and come to the surface of Ortygia.

"Narcissus"

--Narcissus is a beautiful youth with whom the nymph Echo fell in love. But Narcissus did not return her love. To avenge what she regarded as a rebuke to herself, Venus, the goddess of love, caused him to become enamored of his own reflection in the waters of a stream. Unable to embrace or kiss the image, he pined away until he was changed into a flower, the narcissus.

"Dryads and Pan"

--Dryads are wood nymphs and the spirits or souls of trees. They were immortal; each Dryad came to life and died with her tree. Pan is the god of wood, fields, and shepherds. He is represented as having two small horns, flat nose, and the lower limbs of a goat. He was very fond of music and enjoyed dancing with the nymphs. But he was also mischievous and frightened people who walked through the forests at night.

Here, almost all the technical functions of the violin, glissandi, spiccati, portamenti as well as above-mentioned ones, were most effectively used. However, as to the multi-scale sound effect made by the contrast between the black keys and the white ones of the piano, is it indispensable to express the stir of a fountain? How about the high-register tones for Narcissus? And the harmonics for Syrinx? If the composer only intended to describe the things and the atmospheres, he could do without these affluent techniques.

Is Szymanowski a real Impressionist ?

In fact, when you hear Debussy's piano works, you will be amazed how simply he depicts the outer things. One of Debussy's innovations is the introduction of non-functional harmonies, which in result liberated the scales fixed by the conventional music theories. This will be compared with the liberation of colors in Monet's paintings.

In that meaning Debussy ought to be called Impressionist Musician, not merely because he depicted the atmospheric things, the sea, the clouds, the winds, and so on, and preferred non-German cultures, the oriental one as the impressionist painters did, and old Greek one in his piano works in particular. Debussy liberated the idea fixed by the tradition or the orthodoxy as Monet did, so his works assume a kind of brightness, clarity and simplicity.

While, in the case of Szymanowski, what is most important is not the impressions caused by outer things but the inner images reminded of by the subconsciousness.

As he tries to describe outer things, his mind depresses into introspect, and the music assumes darkness, and unhealthy, sensual tendencies.

In "The Fountain of Arethusa" he seems to describe the fountain itself, but what he expresses is his inner vision itself. If not, is such high register effect necessary? These overflowed trills, for example, do they not reveal his unstable state of mind? Does he not scream with the high register tones as Edvard Munch did in his painting, "Scream"? When the violin plays spicato, does it not frighten you as if a demon's whisper?

The violin sings its own melody with the every function of its voice, while the piano sounds non-functional harmonies. The more functional, the more rich and abundant be melodies on the violin. While, the less functional, the richer sonority have harmonies on the piano.

In "Narcissus", his disconsolation represents Szymanowski's, doesn't it? If not, the melody on violin need not assume such weariness, languidness.

Why do these two instruments, the violin and the piano, have to insist itself, denying the conventional way of collaboration? If you listen to the music which these two instruments create, however, you surely will find how exquisitely they have succeeded in collaboration in quite a new and unique style.

Szymanowski actually did not have successors, however, when we listen to Bartok's two sonatas for violin and piano, we can find that these two works were composed under the influence of Szymanowski's. We shall have to consider the Szymanowski's influence on Bartok once again in the item of the concerto.

Impressionist and Expressionist

As I mentioned above, his expression sometimes assumes grotesque taste, abundant trills which are often heard in Scriabin's later works, for example, and I pointed out his inclination to introspect. Another example is heard in his Piano Sonata No. 2. The Fuga Theme in the second movement which contains a trill in such a short passage appears something funny and grotesque, just like Bartok's "Wooden Prince" both of which text and music are nothing but grotesque.

Before I listened to Szymanowski's music carefully, I have taken it for granted that he appeared as an Impressionist composer during the flash of two years. Now I am

wondering that if he expressed his inner visions unconsciously, he should have been called Expressionist rather than Impressionist. At least he anticipated the former. In this meaning I remarked whether he heard Arnold Schoenberg's early works which are regarded as written in typically expressionistic style.

I have another reason to be doubtful about categorizing him as an Impressionist; his music reminds me of Oskar Kokoschka who, no one denies, is one of the representatives of Expressionist painter rather than of Monet, the genuine Impressionist. As Kokoschka expressed his inner visions without any decorations, his works were transformed by his subconscious states of mind, agony, doubt, uneasiness, sensuality, etc., into the ones in which shapes showed ugly deformation.

It is doubtless that Szymanowski had tried to take a style of Impressionist at least at first, however, he was not able to hide his another inclination to Expressionism, consciously or unconsciously, which he might chiefly extracted from Scriabin. When I consider Szymanowski, I can not help but to think that he might be an Impressionist and Expressionist.

If we had clear definitions of these styles in music, it would become far easier for me to categorize Szymanowski's output in the flash of two years, but in this statement, it only revealed more conspicuously difficult to confine one music in only one category in result. The following work, "Violin Concerto No.1" makes me confused more.

"Violin Concerto No. 1 op. 35" composed in 1916 presents a problem of great importance to orchestral music. Colorfulness. I cannot deny that we surely have colorful works: Scriabin's later works, "Prometheus" for instance, are well known for combining music and colors, again Bartok, he also designated the room colors in his opera "Bluebeard's Castle", and in one scene of "Miraculous Mandarin". And I admit that they surely make me feel colorful. But no other classical music, I have ever heard, seems to me as colorful as this concerto.

Is the correspondence of one color to specific tone or scale or harmony possible? As far as I am concerned, I could not but to say "No". However I can not deny that I feel colorfulness in some music as above mentioned. This violin concerto shows the best example. The colorfulness is one of the characteristics of the Impressionist music, because the term originated from the innovative movement in the field of paintings.

It goes without saying that the solo violin maintains all sorts of abundant techniques as shown in the works for violin and piano. The solo violin seems to sing apparently ignoring the orchestral support, but they dexterously collaborated each other. However, the "violin concerto No. 2" composed in 1932-33 has already lost such colorful taste, and Impressionist mood as well.

Conclusion

In the middle of this essay, I remarked that the characterization and the generalization of Impressionist Music might be possible, however, the former may be to some extent accomplished, I suppose, but as the latter, I can not but to say that it was impossible in my method that I tried in this writing. The generalization of Impressionism and Expressionism in music themselves may be impossible, because they originally occurred as the movements in the field of paintings, and we may only apply these terms to the music when the movements influenced the other genres of arts.

The difficulty of the generalization may also lie in the nature of music; it exists only in the natural flow of time, and disappears as time passes by. In the true meaning, it denies reproduction. Strictly speaking, once we experience the music, we will never be able to re-experience the same one. This is the most conspicuously different point from the other genres of arts. Due to this nature, the generalization of the sophisticated styles of music may be difficult or totally impossible. If another approach leaves room for its generalization, and I will try all the best to realize it someday.

Epilogue

When Szymanowski was in his twenties, the feelings of Polish nationalism still prevailed over the country. The Young Poland, a circle for artists, was organized in 1905 and a year after it gave the first concert when Szymanowski's "Concert Overture" was performed. From then, Polish nationalism grasped Szymanowski all through the life, but in 1915(33 years old) to 1916(34), the flash of two years, his impressionistic music flowered all of a sudden.

His preference to literature, adoration to old Greek and Roman Empires, introspective inclination, these might have driven him to create such musical works that no one ever had produced nor could produce but Szymanowski.....the Impressionist music which anticipates Expressionist music

(END)

HIROSHI KAWANABE