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The nightingale in Karol Szymanowski's sound images

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It would be a good idea to deal seriously and acceptingly with other people's words about music. And it would be a good idea not to be shy or apologetic about our own. We can trust our imaginations, and our acculturations, more than we've often been told we can.¹

Lawrence Kramer

The complex nature of art song, always dependent in one way or another on the expressive richness and differentiation of poetic texts, means that there are no precisely formulated or formalised rules for its analysis. It is thus no accident that analytical concepts were developed in the twentieth century mainly in relation to instrumental and not vocal music, which might appear strange when one considers the enormous significance of song in European culture or, indeed, in any culture. And while no one and nothing stands in the way of applying those methods to vocal music, in practice such a transfer encounters fundamental diffi-

¹ L. Kramer, 'Signs taken for wonders: Worlds, music, and performativity', in S. M. Lodato, S. Aspdewn and W. Bernhart (eds), *Essays in Honor of Steven Paul Scher and on Cultural Identity and the Musical Stage*, Word and Music Studies, 4 (Amsterdam, 2002), 36.

culties, mainly because of the incompatibility of text and music, the two semiotic systems that make up a song. The relations between words and music are the most important indicators of the semiotic status of a song, the interpretation of its meanings and appropriate analytical proposals.²

The semiotic strategy of song analysis is based on the premise that meaning is created by signs and as a consequence is decoded by recognising the signs, their functions and the codes contained in the objects being described. The aim and method of this procedure of decoding meaning and the semiotic relationship between the text and the music can be found in an article by Kofi Agawu, who presents a very detailed, exhaustive and erudite analysis of Schumann's *Frauen-Liebe und Leben*, treating it as an example of a model of the semiotic interpretation of song that is orderly and methodologically consistent.³

A fundamentally different procedure is proposed in the hermeneutical approach, where meaning is not an inherent feature of an object, nor can it be reconstructed on the basis of the signs encoded in it. The hermeneutic strategy involves an interpreter who is not a decoder of signs, but a translator of the text immersed in the social or cultural convention. While the semiotic approach sees a text as a set of signs decoded by the researcher in the process of analysis, the hermeneutic approach understands meaning as a performative utterance which

² Kofi Agawu distinguishes four ways of understanding song as an intersemiotic combination of poetry and music: 1. A song is a total assimilation and 'dissolving' of the text by the music; that is, a structure in which all the components are changed into something purely musical, and its meaning is realised only in the musical layer. 2. A song is a non-conflictual, harmonious combination of words and music. 3. A song is a complex structure in which the words provide access to meaning while the music at most just supports the meaning of the text. 4. The identity of a song is not reducible to the words or the music, and the essence of the link between text and music is the relationship of mutuality between two independent systems that exist beyond the song; some aspects of the text can only be explained in linguistic terms, and some aspects of the music only in musical terms. Kofi Agawu, 'Theory and practice in the analysis of the nineteenth-century "Lied"', *Music Analysis*, 11/1 (1992), 3–36. Lawrence Kramer understands the relations between text and music as a conflict, and as an appropriating reinterpretation of the text by the music. The main instrument in this process is what is known as 'expressive topology', i.e. the deforming influence of the musical setting that causes the poem's meanings to be lost. The extending of words, melismatic deformation, repetition and dynamic accentuation cause a partial loosening of the phonetic and syntactic structure of speech and consequently the blurring of its meanings in the listener's experience. In this understanding, the poem is simply the raw material, shaped and interpreted according to the composer's own conception, which does not necessarily coincide with the poet's intention. See L. Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley, 1984), 125 ff.

³ Agawu, 'Theory and Practice'.

not only describes the existing reality but in a way shapes it.⁴ Lawrence Kramer quotes as an example of such an utterance Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Piano Sonata (*quasi una fantasia*) in C sharp minor, Op. 27 No. 2, which Adolf B. Marx interpreted as an autobiographical statement, the composer's expression of a heart broken by disappointment in love. The explanation proposed by Marx, although today generally regarded as evidence of the naivety of the nineteenth-century theorist, is exclusively a matter of interpretation, justifiable from the hermeneutic point of view, a certain way of perceiving music. Analysing the technical means employed in a work is also an acceptable component of the hermeneutic view. An example here is provided by the words used by Tadeusz Zieliński to characterise Chopin's Etude in C minor as an expression of the composer's turbulent feelings about the fate of the November Uprising:

Like a sudden and awe-inspiring hurricane, the final Etude in C minor (*Allegro con fuoco*) enters at this moment with the rousing energy of semiquaver passages in the left hand and the fiery passion of motifs and rhythms in the right. The name 'Revolutionary' given to it in later years [...] links the shattering, dramatic-heroic expression of this work with the events of the November Uprising in Poland [...] Alongside the Scherzo in B minor, it is the Etude in C minor that is the strongest trace of those experiences and thoughts [...] which focuses within it [...] a set of emotions close to what we might describe as the pathos of struggle, heroic bravura, tempest and anger, but at the same time acute drama, suffering and pain.⁵

Mieczysław Tomaszewski uses similar language when describing Chopin's Prelude in D minor: 'The prelude placed by Chopin at the close of his cycle, laden with passion and rage, can only be read as a revolt, as an heroic protest against death'.⁶

While the performative utterances of Marx, Zieliński and Tomaszewski do not reflect any objective reality, they may be, and most often are, understood and shared by others on the basis of a particular model or a set of models of subjectivity. Moreover, while often presented as universal, generally speaking they are a product of a particular historical period and a specific culture.⁷ In other

⁴ See Kramer, *Music and Poetry*.

⁵ T. A. Zieliński, *Chopin. Życie i droga twórcza* [Chopin: his life and creative path] (Kraków, 1993), 252.

⁶ M. Tomaszewski, *Chopin: The Man, his Work and its Resonance*, tr. J. Comber (Warsaw, 2015), 456.

⁷ Kramer, *Music and Poetry*, 39.

words, the shared understanding of a particular hermeneutic interpretation of a given work may have as its source an intersubjective modelling of subjective intuitions and perceptions that justify and to some extent objectify such an interpretation.

The subject of this article is a hermeneutic interpretation of two songs by Karol Szymanowski. Both songs feature a nightingale, which in the European tradition fulfilled various, often mutually contradictory, symbolic functions. On one hand, it could be a symbol of supreme earthly joy; on the other, of the deepest sorrow and despair. Its song, identified with lament and weeping, at the same time was associated with love in springtime. Homer uses the nightingale as a symbol of sorrow, quoting the story of Aedon, who had only one son and envied her sister-in-law, Niobe, her fertility. Her envy drove her to try to kill Niobe's eldest son, Amaleus, but by mistake she killed her own son, Itylus. Her suffering and despair were so great that the gods took pity on her and turned her into a despairing nightingale (Aedon in Greek). Aedon's lament emanates lyricism, expressing despair, distance and isolation, an intimation of death. It is also a reminiscence of love lost forever and eternally mourned.

The poetic image of the nightingale and its mournful song, incrustated with the Greek myth, was given a second life mainly in poetry and in song, particularly Romantic song.⁸ Karol Szymanowski also alluded to this myth in his 'Słowik' [The nightingale] from the cycle *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess]. He used a quatrain written by his sister Zofia, a poetical allusion to the myth of the nightingale or, rather, a succinct reminiscence of its content:

Ach! Zda mi się nieraz, że Bóg się pomylił
 Miast serca zamknął w piersiach mych słowika,
 Ach! Co milczy we dnie, a gdy noc nastanie,
 Miłosną w gwiazdne niebo bije pieśnią. Ach!

[Ah! It sometimes seems to me that God made a mistake
 Instead of a heart he enclosed a nightingale in my breast
 Ah! What is silent in the day, when the night comes,
 Beats against the starry sky with a love song. Ah!]

⁸ S. Żerańska-Kominek, 'Poetic images of nightingale in the art song: On some aspects of musical meaning', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Musicology*, 19 (2019), 117–134.

Example 2. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowik' [The nightingale] from the cycle *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess], Op. 31 No. 2 – seventh segment: birds II (ending), © PUBLIC DOMAIN

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system features a vocal line with the lyrics "Ah" and piano markings: *rallent. (a piacere)*, *a tempo poco vivace scherzando*, and *ppp*. The second system shows the piano accompaniment with markings: *(colla parte)*, *mf*, *cresc.*, and *string.*. The third system continues the piano accompaniment with markings: *ten.*, *poco sosten.*, *p*, *più p*, *sost.*, *a tempo*, *pp*, and *ppp*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 3. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowik' [The nightingale] from the cycle *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess], Op. 31 No. 2 – second segment: weeping I, 

a tempo (animato)

Ah Ah Ah

mp leggierissimo

dolce

f

(a piacere) *(sosten.)* *poco sosten.* *rallent.*

Ah Ah

p

f

Example 4. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowik' [The nightingale] from the cycle *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess], Op. 31 No. 2 – fourth segment: weeping II, © PUBLIC DOMAIN

Subito Tempo I.
Animato, Capriccioso.

rall. allarg. *(a piacere)*

pp *pp* *ppp* *mf* *dolce*

(sosten.) Sosten.

rallent.

p

Ah _____ Ah _____ Ah! _____

- knał w piersiach mychło - wi - ka. _____ Ah _____
- un vos si gnol bien sa - ge. _____
- te sondern ei ne Nach - ti - gall.

Ah! _____ Co mił, czy we dnie, a gdy noc na -
Ah! _____ Il se fait le jour et la nuit ve -
Ah! _____ Die schweigt am Ta - ge, doch wenn die

Example 5. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowik' [The nightingale] from the cycle *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess], Op. 31 No. 2 – sixth segment: weeping III, © PUBLIC DOMAIN

Sub. Tempo I.
Animato. Capriccioso.

The first system of the musical score features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with the syllable 'Ah' and is marked with a fermata and the instruction '(a piacere)'. The piano accompaniment is marked *mf leggierissimo*. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/8. The system concludes with the number 'U. E. 8598.'

(sosten.) Sosten.

The second system continues the vocal and piano parts. The vocal line is marked with '(sosten.)' and 'Sosten.' above it, and includes the syllable 'Ah' with a fermata. The piano accompaniment is marked *p*. The system ends with a double bar line.

rallent. (a piacere) a tempo poco vivace scherzando

The third system shows a change in tempo and mood. The vocal line is marked *rallent. (a piacere)* and then *a tempo poco vivace scherzando*. It includes the syllable 'Ah' and a fermata. The piano accompaniment is marked *mf* and includes the instruction '(colla parte)'. The system concludes with a double bar line.

Example 6. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowik' [The nightingale] from the cycle *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess], Op. 31 No. 2 – third segment: complaint I, 

Poco meno. dolce espr. (♩ = ♩)



— Zda mi się nie-raz, że Bóg się po - my - lił, miast ser - ca zam -
Dieu n'a pas mis un coeur dans mon sein je - ne mais il y mi -
 Manchmal bedünkt mich, daß Gott sich wohl irr - te, kein Herz mir schenk -

sub. pp dolciss.

rall. *allarg.* *pp* *ppp* *mf* *dolce*

Subito Tempo I. Animato. Capriccioso. (a piacere)

- knął w piersiach mychślo - wi - - ka. Ah
 - un ros - si - gnol bien sa - - ge.
 - te son, dern ei - ne Nach - - ti. - gall.

pp *ppp* *mf* *dolce*

Example 7. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowik' [The nightingale] from the cycle *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess], Op. 31 No. 2 – fifth segment: complaint II, 



Ah! Co miłczy we dnie, a gdy noc — na —
 Ah! Il se tait le jour et la nuit — ve —
 Ah! Die schweigt am Ta — ge, doch wenn — die

sta — nie mi — los — ną gwiazd — ne nie bo bi — je pieś — — nią.
 nu — e a — pel — le l'a. mour — de sa voix ra. di — eu — — se.
 Nacht kommt, so schlägt ihr Lie — beschluchen zu den Ster — — nen.
 8.....

It is easy to see that the sound material of 'Słowik' is quite limited and in fact consists of three repeating modules (see Example 8): the module illustrating birds (segment 1), the module of weeping (segment 2) and the module of complaint (segment 3). The arrangement of the modules demonstrates the homogeneity of the material and the symmetry of its disposition. The composer's effort seems to be concentrated on working out the sophisticated subtleties which differentiate the repeating modules. Let us add that the strict and clear formal order and symmetry of 'Słowik' stands in contrast to the sonoristic and rhythmic capriciousness of the piano part, which imitates the shimmering sound of bird choruses, the density of sound events taking place at a fast tempo that makes it difficult to establish the pitch, and the irregular complexity of their rhythms.

Example 8. Modular structure of K. Szymanowski's song 'Słowik' from the cycle *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess], Op. 31 No. 2.

Segments	Modules	Content
1	1	Birds
2	2	Weeping
3	3	Complaint
4	2	Weeping
5	3	Complaint
6	2	Weeping
7	1	Birds

The poem by his sister set to music by Szymanowski is a narration in sound of a myth which is altogether absent from Zofia's text and appears only as an allusion. In this musical version of the mythical tale, there are three protagonists: the 'real' nightingale, imitated in the piano part by the twittering triplets and sextuplets; the nightingale as a symbol of weeping, realised directly as the vocalise of a despairing mother changed into a nightingale; the lyrical subject uttering the words of the poem. This analysis demonstrates that the composer succeeded in including in his vocal miniature the whole content of a myth known from other sources, using musical means. These deconstructions of Szymanowski refer to the images, symbolic associations and musical gestures established in the European tradition, used by the composer to create his own individual version of a mythical story.

The analytical problem is totally different in the case of 'Słowisień', to a poem by Julian Tuwim. The text is full of neologisms and onomatopoeias concealing meanings which the reader has to guess, while in fact understanding, or intuitively sensing, the suggested images. The work has three sections. The first, covering 12 bars, is a description of a place, characterised by music in repeated three-bar polymetric phrases which we perceive as a mazurka made to sound unreal. The instability of the initial interval (C–A#, C#–A#, C–A) in the phrases that follow is an exceptionally beautiful, subtle allusion to a Chopin mazurka. The modal colouring is imparted to the mazurka phrases by the note A, which is an ornament to F# at the end of the phrase. The *pianissimo* dynamic, unhurried tempo and *dolce* expression indicate that the land of the mazurka is shrouded in mist, distant and unclear (see Example 9).

Example 9. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słopiewnie*, Op. 46 bis – Introduction: 'Land of the mazurka', © Copyright Universal Edition 1923, repr. Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne 1984.

Andantino dolce

The land of the mazurka, perhaps some kind of 'słowisień' (a neologism that triggers associations with nightingales and cherries), is described by Tuwim and expressed in music by Szymanowski through images of day and night:

W białodrzewiu jaśnie dzień słoneczno,
 miodzie złoci białopąłem żyśnie,
 drzewia pełni pszczelą i pasieczną,
 a przez liście kraśnie pęk słowisień.⁹

[neologisms bring associations with the sun shining through white trees, golden honey, trees full of bees, beehives, ripening cherry blossom glowing through the leaves]

⁹ Quotations from the poem follow the Ossolineum edition of Tuwim's poetry edited by Michał Głowiński (1969). There are other versions of the poem, which differ slightly in terms of lexis and punctuation (editor's note).

The image of the day constitutes the second, 16-bar part of the work, after the presentation of the ‘mazurka land’ (Example 10). The characterisation of that land continues in the part of the left hand, while the voice begins to recite the text. The declamatory vocal melody (F#–D–C#–B–C#–B–C#–D#) is a rhythmically simplified and thus slowed mazurka, intended as a parallel to the line of the mazurka phrase in the left hand (C#–A#–G#–F#–E#–D#–E–F#–C). The complementarity of the vocal and instrumental phrases, the latter sometimes delayed by a semiquaver in relation to the vocal melody, may be a reference to folk (perhaps Slavic?) polyphony. In the last five bars, Szymanowski has the piano play trills, which may be interpreted as an illustration of the sound of bees bustling around a flowering tree (see Example 11).

Example 10. K. Szymanowski, ‘Słowisień’ from the cycle *Słowieńce*, Op. 46 bis – first image: day,
© Copyright Universal Edition 1923, repr. Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne 1984.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the piece 'Słowisień'. Each system consists of a vocal line with lyrics in three languages (Polish, French, and German) and a piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 12-16) is marked 'sosten.' and 'pp'. The second system (measures 17-22) is marked 'poco rall.'. The third system (measures 23-27) is marked 'rall.' and 'ppp'. The piano part features trills in the final five bars.

System 1 (Measures 12-16):

sosten.

W bia - lo - drze - wiu jaś - nie dźmi slo - necz - no
 Dans les ar - bres le so - leil se mi - re
 Wei - sse Bäu - me glet - ssend Son - nen - glu - ten

pp

System 2 (Measures 17-22):

mio - dzie zło - ci bia - ło - pa - lem zys - nie, drze - wia peł - ni pszcze - ła i pa - siecz - na.
 miel - do - ré de su - cre et de dé - li - ces. Her - bes, fleurs, a - bellles, printemps et ru - ches.
 lieb - lich ü - ber - glänzt von Ho - nig - gol - de. Bie - nen - summen sieh aus Bie - nen - flu - ten

System 3 (Measures 23-27):

poco rall. *rall.*

a przez liś - cie kra - śnie pek slo - wiś - nie.
 Et les feuilless'em - pourprent de ce - ri - ses.
 leuchtet froh die hol - de Kir - schen - dol - de.

ppp

Example 11. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Stopiewnie*, Op. 46 bis – first image: day, bees, © Copyright Universal Edition 1923, repr. Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne 1984.



In the proposed interpretation, the first image of 'Słowisień' represents a summer's day, sunny and probably hot, in a land resonating with a mazurka but filled with the communal polyphonic singing of the local people. The trees are full of blossom, with bees busily attending to it. Their delicate but constant and monotonous buzzing supports the impression of the height of summer. In response to Tuwim's text, Szymanowski creates an image using three technical devices: 1. a modalised mazurka, 2. polyphony and 3. ornamentation that imitates the buzzing of bees (trills).

In the last part of the work, also 16 bars, the poet draws a poetic image of the evening or twilight:

A gdy sierpiec na niebłoczcu łyście,
w cieniu ciemnie jeno niedośpiewy:
w białodrzewiu ćwirnie i sreblisćie
słodzik słowi słowisieńkie ciewy.¹⁰

The moon is rising and the birdsong slowly fades away ('w cieniu ciemnie jeno niedośpiewy' – the sounds in this line suggest shadow, darkness and incomplete songs), illustrated by the composer with twittering motifs (quaver–semiquaver–quaver) in the piano part in the first six bars of the image. Out of this twittering, Szymanowski develops a vocal melody with the characteristic fourth B \flat –E \flat , whose interval structure is identical to the structure of the 'twittering' motifs in the piano part. Out of these 'niedośpiewy' ('incomplete songs') emerges the five-bar song of the nightingale, dominating the image, illustrated by clear, demisemiquaver sextuplet motifs. At this point, it is worth noting the deliberate progression of these motifs, beginning with the note A \flat on the words 'w białodrzewiu' ('in treewhiteness'), then half a second higher than A on the

¹⁰ See footnote 9.

sostenuto
ppp *poco cresc.* *allargando*
 ćwir-nie i srebr-łiś - cie sło - -dzik sło - wi
 un ttr - lir - li son - ne ros - -stg - noi chan -
 klingt aus Sil - ber - mun - de Nach - -it - gal - len
 38

poco meno rit. *Tempo I* *ppp* *allargando*
 sło - wi - -sień - kie cie - -wy,
 -ton - ne des ca - res - -ses!
 Kir - schen - wei - sse Wei - -se...
 41

ten. *pp* *ten.* *pp dolce* *ppp*

The image of the nightingale in 'Słowisień' is totally different from that in 'Słowik'. The nightingale in 'Słowik' is expressive, dynamic and constitutes a narration in sound of one of the most tragic myths in European culture. Illustration is a significant element of the song, but not the most important. Of fundamental significance is the drama of the mother-nightingale expressed in the three laments that constitute the musical content of the song. On the other hand, illustration is Szymanowski's main idea in setting 'Słowisień' to music. However, Szymanowski refers not only to the real nightingale, but to the topos of birdsong shaped in the cultural sound tradition. In 'Słowisień', the images of day and night are static, illustrative; they represent painting in sound. The nightingale appears here as a virtuoso of singing, a symbol of mastery and an element of the Polish landscape expressed in sound. The nightingale motifs in the song refer to the features of nightingale song established in the European tradition, associated with beauty, sweetness and the nightingale's status as a virtuoso of the avian world.

'Słowik' and 'Słowisień' are also very different from the perspective of the semiotic interaction between the text and the music. In 'Słowik', the poet's words serve as a suggestion for the music, which complements, or rather expresses, the content which is not given in the text but belongs to the domain of cultural

competence and is recognised by the listener on that basis. In ‘Słowisień’, the text and the music both retain full independence and also harmonise with one another, thanks to the asemantic and musical character of the text. The words do not compete with the music. Neither layer loses any of its expressivity; one complements the other, forging a homogeneous landscape they are made to share. Szymanowski quite openly imitates the poetic image created by Tuwim’s words by means of the set lyrics, devoid of any meanings that can be read from them directly. Szymanowski does not interpret Tuwim’s poem but repeats it, imitating it using means that belong to music. It would be difficult indeed to imagine a more intimate connection between music and poetry.

ABSTRACT

This article contains a hermeneutical analysis of two songs by Karol Szymanowski referring to the symbolism of the nightingale in European culture: 'Słowik' [The nightingale] from the cycle *Pieśni księżniczki z baśni* [Songs of the fairy princess], Op. 31 and 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słopiewnie*, Op. 46 bis.

KEYWORDS: nightingale, hermeneutical analysis, Szymanowski, song

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