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‘Słowisień’ by Karol Szymanowski – paradigmatic analysis and musical topoi

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Karol Szymanowski’s ‘Słowisień’ may be examined from the point of view of its melodic line, which turns out to be key for understanding the formal structure of the work. Hence I decided to use paradigmatic analysis, which demonstrates the internal coherence of the melodic material and makes it possible to trace the ways it is transformed.¹

In the opening three-bar phrase of the piano accompaniment, in the part of the right hand, one can distinguish four form-generating motifs: ‘a’, ‘b’, ‘c’, ‘d’ (see Example 1). These motifs often appear together, although at some points Szymanowski omits ‘a’, ‘c’ and ‘d’ and juxtaposes some variants of motif ‘b’ (e.g. in bars 7–9).

Motif ‘a’ consists of repeats of the same note in a dotted rhythm. It appears nearly always at the start of a phrase (except in bars 4–6 and 9, from which it is absent), but it is also used in the middle voice of the composition (e.g. in bars 17, 20, 36–38), where we have a variant with a change of rhythm and a grace note (see Example 2). Particularly in this form, separated from the initial phrase, its

¹ See J.-J. Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* (Princeton, 1990).

connotation with a bird call motif becomes very apparent. I will use here an analogy with the tit motif from the ending of the second movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6* in F major ('Pastoral') (see Example 3).

Motif 'a' often combines with motif 'b', which is based on the alternating use of a combination of descending third and ascending or descending second in semiquaver rhythm. The first two notes, which form the interval of a third, colour the whole phrase with the chromatic changes and lend it the features of a minor scale (minor third C–A), major scale (major third C♯–A) or quasi-oriental scale (C–A♯, C♯–A♯) (see Example 1).

In contrast to motifs 'a' and 'b', which appear independently only on rare occasions, motif 'c' is inseparably linked to motif 'b' and constitutes a kind of development of that motif in gruppetto form, describing the note E♯. Motif 'c' also does not undergo significant transformations, the only change being the addition of a grace note, which provides an element of oriental ornamentation. The same applies to motif 'd', which is in fact the ending of motif 'c', consisting of a stepwise inflection in a dotted rhythm (see Example 1).

Example 1. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słowieńskie*, Op. 46 bis – four motifs ('a', 'b', 'c', 'd') and their variants.

The image displays musical notation for four motifs (a, b, c, d) and their variants, arranged in a grid. The motifs are labeled 'a', 'b', 'c', and 'd' at the top. The notation is written on ten staves, each representing a different variant. The staves are labeled on the left with measure ranges: bb. 1–3, bb. 4–6, bb. 7–8, b. 9, bb. 10–12, b. 13, bb. 13–16, bb. 17–19, bb. 20–22, bb. 23–24, and bb. 25–28. The notation includes various musical symbols such as treble clefs, key signatures (one sharp, F#), and note values (semiquavers, quavers, and dotted rhythms). The motifs are characterized by chromatic changes and a quasi-oriental scale. Motif 'a' is a semiquaver pair (C, A), motif 'b' is a semiquaver pair (C, A) with a descending third, motif 'c' is a semiquaver pair (C, A) with a descending third and a grace note, and motif 'd' is a semiquaver pair (C, A) with a descending third and a dotted rhythm.

Example 2. K. Szymanowski, ‘Słowisień’ from the cycle *Słowieńce*, Op. 46 bis – variants of motif ‘a’.

bb. 17, 36–38

bb. 19, 22

bb. 23–24

bb. 23–25, 27

bb. 36–37

bb. 38

Example 3. L. van Beethoven, Symphony No. 6 in F major, Op. 68 (‘Pastoral’), movt II – tit motif (piano reduction), © PUBLIC DOMAIN

Example 4. K. Szymanowski, ‘Słowisień’ from the cycle *Słowieńce*, Op. 46 bis – variants of motifs ‘c’ and ‘d’.

c d

bb. 5–6
27–28

b. 12

bb. 12–13

Example 5. K. Szymanowski, 'Allah Akbar, Allah!' from the cycle *Songs of the Infatuated Muezzin*, Op. 42, bar 8.



The melodic shape of motifs 'c' and d may suggest some similarities with the characteristic quasi-oriental melismata which appear, for example, in Szymanowski's *Songs of the Infatuated Muezzin* (see Example 5). Thanks to this, the whole of the opening phrase of the composition acquires an oriental colouring.

Over the space of bars 36–38, we have a transposition upwards by a major second of motifs 'b' and 'c', but this does not significantly change the contour of the two motifs. Motifs 'a', 'b' and 'c' return in their characteristic shape in bars 42–44 (see Example 6, transposition marked with a rectangle).

Example 6. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słowieńie*, Op. 46 bis – transposition of motifs 'b' and 'c' and return of initial material, bars 36–45.

The vocal part introduced in bars 12–26 is based on two short motifs and their variants. Characteristic of motif 'e' is a descending minor third and a repeat of the note, while motif 'f' is a description of the note C# in seconds. Both motifs reappear further into the song (bars 35–40), but then based on other notes (see Example 7).

Example 7. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słowieńce*, Op. 46 bis – motifs 'e' (black frame) and 'f' (blue frame) in the vocal part, bars 12–26, 35–40.

The image displays two musical staves for the vocal part of 'Słowisień'. The left staff, labeled 'e', shows a sequence of notes from bar 12 to 26, with a black frame highlighting the motif 'e' (bars 12–13) and a blue frame highlighting the motif 'f' (bars 14–16). The right staff, labeled 'e f', shows a sequence of notes from bar 35 to 40, with a black frame highlighting the motif 'e' (bars 35–37) and a blue frame highlighting the motif 'f' (bars 38–40).

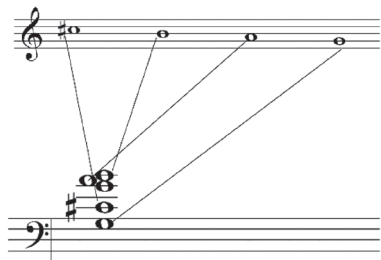
At first sight, the vocal motifs 'e' and 'f' do not show a significant link to the melodic material of the piano's right-hand part. On looking more deeply, however, one can discern the initial descending direction of motif 'e' and the gruppetto shape of motif 'f', which may be an analogy to motifs 'b', 'c' and 'd'. The similarities are intensified by the quasi-oriental melismata which appear in the vocal part (bars 35–36, 39–40). The characteristic descending minor third and the ambitus of the tritone between the first and last notes of motifs 'b' and 'e' point to substantial material analogies. A similar situation arises for the gruppetto motif 'f', which is parallel to motif 'c'. The use of only the opening formula of this motif, which I refer to as f^1 , is analogous to motif 'd'. Juxtaposing motifs 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e' and 'f' shows clearly how Szymanowski obtained motivic unity to the vocal and piano parts (see Example 8).

Example 8. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słowieńce*, Op. 46 bis – motivic unity of vocal and piano parts: juxtaposition of motifs 'a', 'b', 'c' and 'd' with corresponding motifs 'e' (black frame), 'f' (red frame) and 'f¹' – a fragment of motif 'f' (green frame), bars 1–8, 17–19, 25–27, 35–40.

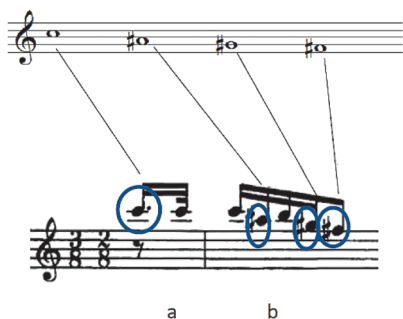
At this point, I would like to emphasise just how significant it is to show the coherence between the percussive chord in the part of the left hand and the melodic material in the part of the right hand. The accompaniment consisting of notes G3, C#4, G4, A4 and B4 turns out to be based on a whole-tone tetrachord which begins with the note C#4 (see Example 9). How then can it be linked to the material of the right-hand part, when the notes of the two parts are clearly not identical and do not coincide? It turns out that in the right-hand part the notes C6, A#5, G#5 and F#5 also form a whole-tone tetrachord, while the note B5 is only a stepwise inflection from the note A#5 (see Example 10). We are thus dealing with two whole-tone tetrachords, which Szymanowski used as the base material of his composition, and in this way the two plans of the right and the left hand are fundamentally linked to each other.²

² During analytical workshops, Marcin Krajewski suggested that this may have been Szymanowski's original idea, resulting from the positioning of the four fingers of the left and right hand on the keyboard, and it may have given rise to 'Słowisień'.

Example 9. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słowieńnie*, Op. 46 bis – ostinato chord in the part of the left hand and whole-tone tetrachord.



Example 10. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słowieńnie*, Op. 46 bis – motifs 'a' and 'b' in the part of the right hand and whole-tone tetrachord.



The musical material used by the composer in the short middle section of 'Słowisień' (bars 29–34) contrasts with the basic motifs 'a', 'b', 'c' and 'd' and with thinking in terms of whole-tone tetrachordal design. Szymanowski is now clearly relying on semitone-less pentatonic writing, both in the vocal part and in the piano accompaniment (see Example 11). The fundamental motif based on a pentatonic scale clearly emphasises the note B \flat 4 and the interval of a perfect fourth. An analogy to this motif can be found towards the end of the composition (in bar 41) on the words *słowisieńskie ciewy*, although now the motif (from bar 31) is transposed down by a minor second (marked in Example 11).

In the middle section, in the piano part, there appear additional E5 and G \flat 4 notes, which introduce characteristic colouring seconds, with the purpose of 'smudging' the clean pentatonic part and giving the accompaniment a 'percussive flavour' (see Example 12).

Example 11. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słowieńskie*, Op. 46 bis – pentatonic construction of the main motif of the middle section and its variants, bars 29–34.

bb. 29–30

b. 31

b. 32

b. 33

b. 34

bb. 29–30

b. 31

b. 32

b. 33

b. 34

Example 12. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słopiewnie*, Op. 46 bis, bars 29–34,
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in tempo

A gdy sierpieć na nieb-ie - czu - tyś - cie, wciemniem ciemnie je - no nie - za -
 Et quand la lune pa - rait dans les nu - a - ges, l'om-bre bleue fri - son - ne et
 Und rund grüsst der Mond vom Him-mels-grun - de, Schat-ten träu-men dun-ke-l, lis - peln

Summing up

Karol Szymanowski's 'Słowisień' represents a strictly homogenous composition in terms of the choice of scales and motivic material. The fundamental motifs 'a', 'b', 'c' and 'd' are used throughout nearly the whole of the song and are based on a basic musical idea derived from a whole-tone tetrachord. The characteristic chord in the part of the left hand that provides the model for the ostinato accompaniment is also based on a whole-tone tetrachord. Szymanowski either shortens or lengthens motifs 'a', 'b', 'c' and 'd' and often introduces chromaticism. The vocal melodic material is based on motifs e and f and their variants, which correspond to motifs 'a', 'b', 'c' and 'd'. Using very simple means, Szymanowski achieves an interesting colour spectrum, melodic variety and varied rhythm.

Motif a has a characteristic contour resembling a bird call and may be viewed in terms of a musical topos, which appears in music as early as the eighteenth century.³ This bird call weaves throughout the whole composition in different variants (including with a trill), which is a direct reference to the bird of the title – the *słowisień*. Motifs 'a' and 'b' are characterised by an arrangement typical of a mazurka, a dotted rhythm and a falling motif in triple time, while the next bar introduces duple time, thus disturbing the mazurka rhythm. This change from a triple to a duple metre is characteristic of the whole of 'Słowisień'. Motifs 'c' and 'd', which follow motifs 'a' and 'b', clearly indicate the quasi-oriental character of the melodic line. They may be regarded as belonging to the oriental

³ After Constantin Floros, Kofi Agawu distinguishes 'bird call' as characteristic of the music of Gustav Mahler. See K. Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (New York, 2009), 47.

topos familiar from such works by Szymanowski as *Songs of the Infatuated Muezzin* and *Love Songs of Hafiz*.⁴ The juxtaposition of birdsong, mazurka rhythm and quasi-oriental melodic line may be regarded as topical troping, whereby incongruent topos categories are joined together.⁵

Example 13. K. Szymanowski, 'Słowisień' from the cycle *Słowieńnie*, Op. 46 bis, version for voice and orchestra, bars 1–7, © Copyright Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne 1977.

The musical score for 'Słowisień' by Karol Szymanowski, bars 1–7, is presented for voice and orchestra. The tempo is marked 'Andantino dolce'. The instrumentation includes Flauto, Oboe, Corno in F, Pianoforte, Violino I and II, Viola I and II, Violoncello, and Contrabbasso. The score features various musical notations such as dynamics (pp, p, con sord., p espress., dolce marc.), articulation (laissez vibrer, sempre con ped, pizz.), and phrasing (3/8, 2/8, 3/8). The piano part includes a 'laissez vibrer' section and a 'sempre con ped' section. The strings play a rhythmic pattern with 'con sord.' and 'pp' dynamics. The woodwinds and brass parts have specific phrasing and dynamics.

The middle section of the work linked to pentatonic writing also suggests an oriental character. The situation is different with the interesting percussive piano accompaniment based on the notes G3, C#4, G4, A4, B4, with the characteristic grace note on note A. This interval, repeated many times, provides a background to the developing melodic line and introduces the space. The characteristic grace note in the low register and the chord in the middle register point to similar solutions in piano compositions by Debussy and Musorgsky (e.g. the beginning of 'The Great Gate of Kiev'), which may suggest the topos of the sound of bells, the so-called *bell motif*.⁶ It is worth mentioning here the instrumentation

⁴ Kofi Agawu writes of 'Oriental music'. See *ibidem*, 48.

⁵ R. Hatten, 'The troping of topics in the symphony from Beethoven to Mahler, in M. Tomaszewski and M. Chrenkoff (eds), *Beethoven 2: Studien und Interpretationen* (Kraków: Akademia Muzyczna, 2003), 83.

⁶ K. Agawu, *Music as Discourse*, 47.

of 'Słowisień' provided by Szymanowski himself in 1924. In the score, this chord is entrusted to the glassy timbre of the piano, while hushed strings quiver with *tremolo* (see Example 13). An association with some percussion instrument is very clear at this point, and it could be a little rustic bell or some other metallophone used in folk music. The chord accompanying the central pentatonic segment (bars 29–34) is instrumented in a similar 'percussive' way.

The melodic construction of this song seems to point to a technique typical of French music from the beginning of the twentieth century, characterised by variants and a smooth flowing quality. This results from Szymanowski's interest in the music of Claude Debussy and in the transformation technique, polymetre and variable accentuation characteristic of the style of Igor Stravinsky.

ABSTRACT

Paradigmatic analysis of Karol Szymanowski's 'Słowisień' demonstrates the internal coherence of the melodic material which turns out to be key for understanding the formal structure of the work. At the beginning I trace the ways it is transformed and next I assign topical categories to individual motifs. Szymanowski joins together birdcall, mazurka rhythm and quasi-oriental melodic line what may be regarded as topical troping. In my analysis I also use analogies between 'Słowisień' and 'Allah Akbar, Allah!' from the cycle *Songs of the Infatuated Muezzin* and I quote a passage from Szymanowski's orchestration of 'Słowisień' from 1924.

KEYWORDS: Karol Szymanowski, 'Słowisień', paradigmatic analysis, musical topic, birdcall, orientalism, topical troping

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