Karol Szymanowski

Masterworks
for violin & piano; piano solo

Blanka Bednarz
violin

Matthew Bengtson
piano
CD 1

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Sonata for Violin and Piano in D minor, Op. 9 (1904)

1. Allegro moderato, patetico ................................................................. 9’44
2. Andantino tranquillo e dolce ............................................................... 6’36
3. Finale: allegro molto, quasi presto ..................................................... 5’53

Etudes, Op. 4 (1900-1902)

4. No. 1 in E-flat minor ........................................................................... 4’11
5. No. 2 in G-flat ...................................................................................... 2’05
6. No. 3 in B-flat minor ........................................................................... 4’29
7. No. 4 in C major .................................................................................. 4’23

8. Romance in D major for Violin and Piano, Op. 23 (1910) .............. 7’18

Métopes. Three poems for piano, Op. 29 (1915)

9. L’île des Sirènes .................................................................................. 5’50
10. Calypso .............................................................................................. 6’11
11. Nausicaa ............................................................................................ 4’51

CD 2

Myths. Three poems for Violin and Piano, Op. 30 (1915)

1. La Source d’Arethuse ................................................................. 6’09
2. Narcisse ................................................................. 7’32
3. Dryades et Pan ................................................................. 8’18

Masques. Three pieces for piano, Op. 34 (1915-16)

4. Sheherazade ................................................................. 9’58
5. Tantris der Narr (Tantris the Clown) ........................................ 6’07
6. Don Juan Serenade ................................................................. 6’32

7. “Roxana’s Song” from the opera King Roger (1918-1924) ............. 5’44
   arranged for violin and piano by Paul Kochański (1931)

8. Oberek, from Four Polish Dances (1926) .................................. 4’03

9-10 Karol Szymanowski-Paweł Kochański “L’aube” ......................... 4’34
   (Dawn, Świt) (1922)
   “Danse Sauvage” (Wild Dance, Dziki Taniec) (1922) .................. 4’34

11. “Bauerntanz” (“Harnasie’s Dance”) from the ballet Harnasie (1931)
   arranged for violin and piano (1931) ......................................... 7’11

CD 3

Total Time: 59’17

1-20 Twenty Mazurkas, Op. 50 (1924-25) ................................... 52’56

21-22 Two Mazurkas, Op. 62 (1933-34) ..................................... 6’21
Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

Early years (1882-1913)

Karol Szymanowski was born to a noble and patriotic Polish family (Korwin-Szymanowski) on October 3, 1882. He spent his childhood in Tymoszówka (now Ukraine) in a patriotic and highly cultured environment that encouraged intellectual curiosity, artistic activity, and open-mindedness. His father Stanisław played both piano and cello, and was Karol’s first piano teacher. All of his siblings exhibited artistic interests and talents, especially his sister Stanisława, a noted soprano. Limited in physical activity by a lame leg, Szymanowski developed a lively interest in the humanities, especially literature, and turned his attention to writing in his later years. The family’s close relationship with the Blumenfeld and Neuhaus families also contributed significantly to his development.

From 1901-1904, Szymanowski studied counterpoint, harmony, and composition with Zygmunt Noskowski in Warsaw. In 1905, with the conductor Grzegorz Fitelberg and two other colleagues, Szymanowski set up a “Publishing Company for Young Polish Composers” in Berlin. Its mission was to publish music and organize concerts by composers from “Young Poland in Music,” a group which became a part of the modernist Young Poland movements in visual arts and literature (ca. 1890-1918). Along with his Young Poland colleagues, Szymanowski was strongly influenced by a wide range of musical styles: Wagner, Richard Strauss, Reger, the Russian Mighty Five, Scriabin, and of course Chopin. Szymanowski stood out as the greatest talent in the group, garnering some composition prizes for several of his early piano works, but was sometimes criticized for his strong affinity for Germanic styles.

Over the next several years, Szymanowski’s compositional idiom evolved considerably. Just before the start of World War I, Szymanowski had important personal encounters with two of the leading modernist composers of this volatile era: Richard Strauss and Igor Stravinsky.
These meetings would prove to be symbolic of his changing sympathies and inspirational for his future direction. With his enthusiasm for German music on the wane, he found his former idol Strauss to be dull and lifeless, but meeting Stravinsky inspired him with fresh energy.

**Middle period (1914-1918)**

The major catalyst for Szymanowski’s new artistic direction was his extensive travel in 1914 with his friend and supporter Stefan Spiess to Italy, Sicily (especially Syracuse), North Africa, Rome, and Paris. His music would take on a highly exotic, otherworldly character, full of references to Greek mythology and to Persian and Arabic cultures. The encounter with cultures where homosexuality was traditionally more accepted was surely a liberating experience, and his newly-felt freedom is palpable in the sensuous quality of his new creations.

Szymanowski returned home just before war broke out; during the war years, he cloistered himself from that harsh reality and focused with extraordinary energy and enthusiasm on his new artistic direction. He spent much time in seclusion during WWI in Zarudzie, where he collaborated intensely with virtuoso violinist Paweł Kochański, who profoundly influenced his style of violin writing. Szymanowski had successfully cast off his strongest early influences and found a unique voice; his music would now earn recognition and acclaim from the highest echelons of the musical milieu, including plaudits from the likes of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Bartók.
Third (nationalist) period (1919-1937)

In 1919 Szymanowski returned to free Poland, full of anticipation and excitement. His new works were well received in London and Paris, as well as in Kraków and Lwów, where Kochański performed the new violin works. Yet the response in Warsaw was lukewarm, and Szymanowski felt disappointed and unappreciated. He travelled to America in 1921 with his friends Artur Rubinstein and Paul and Zofia Kochański. Kochański was quite successful there and settled in New York. Szymanowski, however, felt awkward and out of place, although he did benefit from introductions to many noted musicians and supporters of the arts. The first American performances of the First Violin Concerto with Kochański in New York and Philadelphia under Leopold Stokowski were triumphant events.

After another meeting with Stravinsky in London, Szymanowski was inspired to change direction once again, this time embracing Polish folk elements—especially folklore of the Kurpie, Podhale and Tatra regions. Meeting the acknowledged ‘father’ of Polish musicology, Professor Adolf Chybiński, in 1920 also left a deep impression. Szymanowski would become one of the most avid advocates of the mountaineers’ (góralśka) music. He admired its unique blend of rhythmic vitality, bold colors, and its earthy, primitive confidence. Szymanowski ‘discovered’ Zakopane, the ‘capital’ of the Tatra region, a place beloved by many artists. He soon decided to make Zakopane his home from 1922 until dire financial straits reduced him to a single residence solely in Warsaw.

From 1927-1932, Szymanowski became director of what would become the Chopin Academy and later the Chopin Music University in Warsaw. With his cosmopolitan outlook, he devoted considerable energy to the mission of improving Polish musical education. He brought many valuable changes and reforms, and earned the respect and admiration of students and a few like-minded, ambitious colleagues. Unfortunately, this work cost him the time he needed for composition and took a toll on his health.

Szymanowski spent his last years tragically indigent, in spite of the idealistic moral and financial support he had provided to aspiring artists during his years of professorship. Battling tuberculosis, he frequently had to travel to perform concerts to provide himself with some modest income, despite high fevers and the advice of his doctors. Szymanowski died in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1937.
Posthumous reception of Szymanowski’s music

Szymanowski is arguably the greatest Polish composer since Chopin, and certainly the towering figure in Polish music of his time. Various factors curtailed the wider dissemination of his music in the newly-independent Poland of the 1920s, including his focus on musical education, his deteriorating health, and the local opposition he encountered to his proposed reforms. His standing in the international sphere at the time was actually larger than in Poland, and his influence on many significant composers such as Bartók and Prokofiev can be readily traced. Although Poland took longer to recognize his stature, today Szymanowski is considered among the giants of 20th-century music. The strength of the Polish school of composition that emerged is a living testament to his legacy.

After his death, Szymanowski’s music, especially outside of Poland, continues to be performed rather rarely relative to its merits, mostly for practical reasons. This unfortunate neglect began in his own lifetime; personal reticence cost him many opportunities to promote his own career. The music itself presents practical challenges, such as the extravagance of his instrumentation in his orchestral works; orchestral parts have long been available only in hand-written form. Another practical reason is the level of technical difficulty in practically all his music. Szymanowski was a concertizing pianist, and his piano writing stretches the instrument’s timbral possibilities. It is extremely demanding and time-consuming to master. Szymanowski played only a little violin, in childhood, but through his close relationship with master violinist Paweł Kochański (detailed below), he produced a breakthrough also in that instrument’s technical and coloristic potential. His use of the Polish language in many of his vocal works – especially his opera King Roger and oratorio Stabat Mater – was a great boon for his national vision of Polish music, but continues to create obstacles for international promotion of his music in the most public genres. (Fortunately, Stabat Mater also exists in Latin.) In recent years, artists of high renown such as Simon Rattle, Valery Gergiev, Piotr Anderszewski, and Frank Peter Zimmermann have actively promoted Szymanowski’s music, bringing it once again to the well-deserved attention of contemporary listeners.
Both artists on this CD set have devoted themselves extensively to Szymanowski’s music in performance and research, and are honored to present these recordings as representative of their commitment to and admiration for this composer. The range of his style, the quality of his craftsmanship, and the breadth of his imagination are all on display in these selections.

**Paweł Kochański (1887-1934)**

Violinist **Paweł Kochański** debuted with the Warsaw Philharmonic at age 12, and became its concertmaster at 14. By 1909, he had concertized in Berlin, Leipzig and Vienna, and by 1916 he had taken over for the great Leopold Auer at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He was quickly acclaimed in the violin world and as a consultant and collaborator to composers such as Stravinsky and Prokofiev, for instance in Prokofiev’s Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major.

Upon travels to the USA in the early 1920s, Kochański found himself well suited to the American musical scene. In 1924 he became part of the first team of faculty of the new Juilliard School of Music. He and his wife Zofia made their home in New York City a welcoming meeting place for stellar personalities among intelligentsia and artists, among them Albert Einstein, Prokofiev, and Stravinsky.

A superb violinist, Kochański was most known and admired for a singing tone that was nuanced and malleable rather than conventionally powerful. He could achieve a wide range of expression and color in the softest of dynamics, and had a special affinity for double-stop techniques in the novel intervals of seconds, fourths and sevenths (such as in “Dawn”), not just the more typical thirds, sixths and octaves. He was highly innovative, inventing various novel techniques such as trilled glissandi. His own compositions reveal a certain predilection for the direct repetition of phrases (see “Dawn” and “Danse Sauvage”).

Correspondence and sketch material indicates a close collaborative relationship between Szymanowski and Kochański, with the latter taking an active role in some compo-
positions. Their creative collaboration extended well beyond mere technical consultation, with Kochański having at times the status of nearly a co-composer. Their collaboration was most active from 1914-15 at Zarudzie, away from the turmoil of WWI; the fruits of this work were the *Nocturne and Tarantella, Myths* and the *First Violin Concerto*. Kochański premiered most of Szymanowski’s violin works, including both concerti, for which he wrote the cadenzas. He also made several transcriptions of excerpts from Szymanowski’s operas.

A composer and arranger in his own right, Kochański influenced and inspired Szymanowski towards the full-fledged development of his middle period style, in both compositional and interpretive domains. Kochański’s creative input included ideas about proportions, characterization, formal organization, as well as some technical and coloristic innovations. Kochański’s editorial suggestions were eventually captured in published editions and transmitted in his performances, influencing an entire performance practice throughout generations.

**CD 1**

**Szymanowski’s Early Period works (1901-1913)**

Szymanowski’s earliest compositions date from 1896, but are lost except for the Preludes, Op. 1 for piano. His early extant works exhibit traits of late Romantic style, in their expressive cantilena, chromatic harmony, poetic sensitivity, and unity of motivic material. His highly emotional climaxes are particularly indicative of Scriabin’s influence. The Sonata for Violin and Piano, Op. 9 (1903-4) is the only early work for this combination of instruments, but Szymanowski would return to this pairing many times later in his career.

During the years 1906-08, Szymanowski incorporated poems by German modernists such as Dehmel, Mombert and Bierbaum in the song cycles Op. 13, 17, and 22. Their themes of loneliness, eroticism, and sensuality suggested musical ideas not far from
Schoenberg or Berg, with dense chromaticism, ambiguous harmony and linear textures. Szymanowski’s style had subtly begun to evolve. The grandest successes of his early period are the Symphony No. 2, Op. 19 and Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 21, large-scale works in four movements that culminate powerfully, if somewhat academically, in complex Reger-like fugues. Both works exhibit an intricate approach to cyclical writing, tight motivic cohesion, and masterful use of variation technique. Even here, glimpses of Szymanowski’s new and original ideas reveal themselves in the endless melodic lines (including solos in the violin’s high register), dense harmonies, sensitive lyricism, high emotionalism, and sense of the ecstatic.

Sonata in D minor, Op. 9 (1904)

Begun in 1903, the Violin Sonata reveals Szymanowski already as a master of the form, even though he was still a student. His use of cyclic references and tight thematic relationships is especially adept, and recalls the style of César Franck. The powerful opening gesture highlights a striking chord that is used as a motto at many crucial moments in this dramatic work. This impressive movement contrasts a passionate, sweeping first theme in large intervals against a tender, lyrical second theme with a more limpid rhythmic profile. A poetic violin cadenza, somewhat akin to Franck’s recitative style, opens the dreamy, sentimental second movement, which acts as a lyrical oasis in this otherwise stormy sonata. The contrasting middle section in pizzicato creates the movement into a slow movement-scherzo form, reminiscent of Brahms’s Sonata in A major. The third movement reveals Szymanowski’s love of Straussian opera, but also showcases his contrapuntal skills. In consultation with Szymanowski, the Polish violinist Irena Dubiska proposed certain alternate solutions in the third movement, chiefly its middle section, immortalized later by her pupil Eugenia Umińska in published editions by PWM (Polish Music Publishing House). In Polish performance practice, both the original and her altered versions are played, as well as a combination of the two, such as presented on this recording. The Coda acts as a satisfying culmination, as the “motto” chord of the opening returns to signal a triumphant conclusion, this time in D major.
Rubinstein and Kochański premiered the sonata in 1909 in Warsaw. From the beginning, the work has enjoyed favor with audiences, especially its middle movement. It is an attractive Romantic work, offering many memorable melodies, as well as a wide range of character and emotion, from tender lyricism and poetry to drama and passion. At the same time it explores the full range of both instruments in the grand 19th-century tradition, in true chamber-music partnership.

**Etudes, Op. 4 (1902)**

These Four Etudes are some of the most attractive of Szymanowski’s early piano works. Highly effective as concert pieces, they reveal the young composer’s harmonic and pianistic craft. The sources of stylistic influence in these works – notably Chopin, early Scriabin, and Brahms – reveal a fascinating diversity in the young composer’s musical tastes. Within the framework of a traditional Chopinesque form, he integrates these German, French and Russian styles into a single cohesive whole.

The first Etude in E-flat minor is a beautiful, unaccountably neglected masterpiece. Its sorrowful mood, suggested by its remote tonality, captivates us from the very opening measures, through its powerful central climax, to its deeply moving Coda. The technical challenge of the Etude relates to the very fabric of its musical material: intertwined duple sixths and triplet melodic strands in balanced counterpoint, often played all by a single hand. These materials might seem evocative of Brahms, but the suavely colorful harmonic progressions tend rather to suggest a French landscape, like the music of Fauré, who also favored this rhythmic combination. Surely this jewel of an Etude deserves to be among the standards of the repertoire.

Among the Op. 4 Etudes, the second Etude in G-flat is by far the most technically demanding, and requires both suppleness and endurance. It belongs squarely in the Chopin tradition, as a companion piece to the elder Polish master’s Etude Op. 10 No. 10, but here the technical challenge is elevated to an even higher level of difficulty. It would be virtually unplayable on an instrument with a heavy touch. The harmonic vocabulary has
become even more flexible and chromatic, but these novel chord progressions charm with their coy suggestiveness.

The third Etude in B-flat minor was Szymanowski’s early masterpiece, and would remain his most famous composition until his death. It has been widely performed and arranged for orchestra. Like Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in C# minor, its long-standing popularity made the composer famous but irritated him at the same time, as he was seeking to introduce the public to more recent and ambitious compositional achievements. The causes for this Etude’s popularity are not hard to discern: its songful melody tugs at the heart from the very outset; the debt to Scriabin’s Etude in B-flat Op. 8 No. 11 however cannot be denied! Much like the first Etude of Op. 4, it builds tension masterfully in a powerful arch, using Chopinesque left-hand scales to build to a big climax in massive chords. This engrossing drama is abruptly cut off at the high point, whereupon the final page wallows in a distinctively Polish melancholy.

The final Etude in C major returns to the polyrhythmic material of the first, but with a harmonic environment that leaves the world of Chopin far behind in favor of Richard Strauss. Szymanowski’s Etude heaves in waves of extravagant expressivity, in an opulent harmonic framework. The Concert Overture, Op. 12 is another similar, and perhaps less successful instance of extroverted Straussian gestures that would cause the older Szymanowski some embarrassment as he subsequently turned his back on that idiom.
Romance in D major, Op. 23 (1910)

This Romance, along with the Second Symphony and the Second Piano Sonata, exemplifies the best of the composer’s mature early period. Though not a long work, it exudes an extraordinary emotional richness and beauty. The aesthetic still recalls Reger, with dense chromatic harmonies, seemingly endless melodies spun out with large intervals, and frequent ecstatic culminations. The work demands both spatial grandeur and rhythmic flexibility; the heritage of Chopin’s rubato had imprinted itself deeply on a long line of Polish composers. Frequent ritardando indications in this period are easily open to misunderstanding; they are likely meant to be short-lived, although their intended duration is rarely explicit. The work ends with the violin hauntingly suspended in its highest registers, an important color of Szymanowski’s compositional language in the works to come. It also reveals Szymanowski’s attraction to an exotic, ecstatic sensuality, and his immense sensitivity to sound and color, what has been aptly dubbed an almost “pathological sensitivity.” The Romance was first performed in Warsaw in April 1913.

Middle-period works (1914-1918)

Having entirely cast off German musical influences, Szymanowski achieved a style that could rightly be considered “Impressionistic,” as much as anything written by Debussy or Ravel. French influences are paramount in his new musical language, as solidity of line has now given way to an imaginative, ethereal sound world full of novel textures and instrumental colors, often featuring the higher registers suspended on a delicate fabric. The intervals of tritones, 7ths and 9ths are predominant, in an environment of long sustained pedal points, shimmering trills, and tremolos. These features also point to another unmistakable influence, perhaps a more “Expressionistic” one: the late music of Scriabin, with its weakening of tonal implications, highly charged emotional atmosphere, and erotic subtext.

Although this new style marked a radical departure from his earlier post-Romantic idiom, there is never any feeling of experimentation or a learning curve. It is astounding how Szymanowski could churn out one masterpiece after another, right from the start, during
these productive years. In addition to the three triptych cycles presented here, sometimes referred to as the “M’s” (Métopes, Myths and Masques), his great works of the period include the stunning Love Songs of Hafîz, Op. 26, the Songs of the Infatuated Muezzin, Op. 42, the First Violin Concerto, Op. 35, the Third Symphony “Song of the Night,” Op. 27, and the opera King Roger, Op. 46. The quality and stature of these works alone are sufficient to earn Szymanowski’s place among the major cultural figures of his time.

*Métopes, Op. 29 (1915)*

The Métopes, the earliest of the three triptychs, depict characters from Homer’s *Odyssey*. Metopes are rectangular panels that fill out the spaces between the triglyphs on a Doric style frieze. Taken together as a collection, they depict the characters of mythology and tell a story; the metopes of the Parthenon are the most famous example. The reference to Homer’s *Odyssey* in Szymanowski’s metaphorical “Metopes” is especially appealing for a composer who had had some compelling recent journeys of his own. Also poignant is his selection of characters, the most seductive women in the tale, all of them forbidden temptations for the protagonist.

Oddly enough, the reception of these luxurious, imaginative works has been lukewarm right from the start. Szymanowski began this dubious tradition himself; while working on the Masques, he enthused that his new project “is worth more than those Odyssean pieces.” Did he really not appreciate this cycle, or is this quote simply the voice of a composer mostly enthusiastic about his latest project? Compounding the insult, his Polish biographer Teresa Chylińska criticized the Métopes as being over-written, asking for more color and refinement than a piano could hope to give. Mr. Bengtson encountered Szymanowski’s unique world for the first time through a chance encounter with Richter’s recording of the first two Métopes and was immediately captivated by these unique watery soundscapes.
The first piece, “The Isle of the Sirens,” refers to the famous episode (*Odyssey* Book XII) where Odysseus must navigate his ship despite the tempting distraction of the singing of these half-woman half-bird creatures. The elements depicted by Szymanowski’s “painting” are unmistakable: the shining droplets of water, the endless mellifluous siren song, the sharp bird-like talons, and the undulating watery tremolos. Since the title “Metopes” implies a sequence of events, the hero’s next encounter with the monster Scylla and the rocky whirlpool Charybdis seems significant too; at the climax, we can imagine the sound of a wayward ship crashing into the rocks, and follow Odysseus as he navigates safely past the danger. Much of this texturally elaborate music is written on three staves; the demands made on the pianist are great, but they are most satisfying to realize.

The second piece, “Calypso,” depicts the hero’s languorous stay on the goddess’s island for seven years (*Odyssey* Books V-VII). Calypso brings him into bed with her, desiring him strongly but as a forbidden treasure. When Zeus summons Hermes to order his release, she complains bitterly that goddesses are never permitted to be with mortals. Like the Sirens, Calypso enchants the hero with her singing, but for all the sustained tension, there is only one very brief climactic moment suggesting consummation. The striking features of this music are its languid pacing and the breathtaking sensual beauty of the sound itself, voluptuous even by Szymanowski's standards.

In all three triptych cycles, the third and final piece is lighter and more episodic in character than the other two. Nausicaa is the young daughter of King Alcinous of the Phaeacians. Szymanowski depicts her delicately with lithe, dance-like figures. In the *Odyssey*, Book V, Odysseus is discovered naked, shipwrecked on the shore while the young Nausicaa and her handmaidens are doing laundry. She is quite enamored of Odysseus, and takes care of him well, while avoiding any scandals or intrigues. The virtuosic Coda brings together motives from all three pieces, as a foggy, distant memory.
The mysteriously soft, bitonal conclusion is every bit as ambiguous as Odysseus’s response to these seductive female characters.

**Nocturne and Tarantella, Op. 28 (1915)**

The *Nocturne and Tarantella*, Op. 28, *Myths*, Op. 30 and Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 35 were all composed in Zarudzie, at the estate of Józef Jaroszyński. August Iwański, a fellow guest, relates how during the host’s absence Szymanowski and Kochański were enjoying a particularly good humor after consuming a bottle of cognac from the cupboard, and *Nocturne and Tarantella* was the product of that occasion. *Nocturne* evokes echoes of Szymanowski’s Mediterranean travels. In the outer sections, one hears “ancient” parallelisms of perfect fifths. Still more open fifths in the piano accompany lines of highly ornamental arabesque-like figuration in the violin, characteristically suspended much of the time in a stratospheric high register. The middle section is livelier in its rhythmic character. Sicilian- or Italian-sounding “mandolin” writing for the piano, Spanish flavoring, and percussive pizzicato in the violin arouse associations of flamenco. Certainly, *Nocturne* is a prime example of Szymanowski’s masterful use of color: between muted tones, stratified registers, undulating textures and Spanish-Italianate elements, it offers an opulent tonal spectrum.

*Tarantella* is brimming with vitality, athleticism and unbridled energy. The Tarantella genre (a virtuoso piece from the 19th-century character piece tradition) may be related to a vigorous mythical dance to rid oneself of the poison of a tarantula’s bite. Szymanowski’s work surely promotes that conjecture. It is among the most virtuosic of Szymanowski’s works, finding a moment of respite only in the more reflective, expressive middle section. The piano and violin mimic each other’s qualities. The violin is surprisingly percussive, with left hand pizzicati, accents, frequent double-stopping and ornaments against a drone. The piano provides its own rhythmic bite, but the use of tremolo patterns in the piano could be a suggestion of vibrato. If *Tarantella* looks more towards the past in its genre, its idiosyncratic technical demands definitely point towards the future.
CD 2

*Myths, Op. 30 (1915)*

The *Myths* form the centerpiece of Szymanowski’s violin/piano output, a highly successful product of his close collaboration with Kochański. On hearing “Arethusa’s Fountain” for the first time, Sergei Prokofiev was so impressed that he demanded Szymanowski and Kochański to repeat it immediately. The fact that the request came from the notoriously crusty Russian composer made it obvious to all in attendance that there was something extraordinary and unique in this music. Even 15 years later Szymanowski would write of the *Myths*: “Paul [Kochański] and I created in *Myths* and the *Concerto* [No. 1] a new style, new kind of violinistic expression, a thing of epochal significance.” (Letter to Zofia Kochańska, Davos, March 5, 1930. In Chylińska, *Dzieje Przyjazni* [History of Friendship], 1971, 242-3)

The *Myths* are a prime example of Szymanowski’s middle-period style. The piano writing is highly refined, and layered texturally: far from any mere accompaniment. Nor are the two instruments solely partners in terms of sharing musical thematic material. Their sound capabilities, range, colors, articulations, contrasts are used and combined in fresh new ways. Nothing here is for cheap effect—every choice, both musical and technical is in service of extraordinary music.

In *Myths*, Szymanowski drew on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. “Arethusa’s Fountain” is an actual spring near Syracuse in Sicily. The story is based on the myth of Arethusa, a nymph who is being pursued by the god Alpheus but does not want his advances. She flees and turns to the goddess Artemis for help. Artemis turns Arethusa into a fountain. From the first measures “Arethusa’s Fountain” must have fascinated Prokofiev with its fluid, “watery” piano texture, over which the violin is spun high in a stunning line. One can sense an exotic pentatonicism amidst the layering of black-key and white-key parts in the piano writing. In the dramatic middle section the listener can easily imagine the chase by Alpheus. After the culmination, the return of the violin’s opening melody in a low register perhaps illustrates activity underground. Alpheus does not give up: he transforms himself to be able to flow through the seas to join with his beloved. The violin writing in “Arethusa’s Fountain”
brings a unique collection of elements: double harmonics, trilled double-stops and trilled glissandi, and superbly coordinated colors such as *con sordino* and *sul ponticello*. The trills are far from ornamental—they are central to the character of chase—now insistent, then even violent, and finally like soft breaths.

In the well-known myth of Narcissus, we encounter a very different watery soundscape. In contrast to the flowing textures of “Arethusa,” in “Narcissus” one feels a static, throbbing depth, almost like a reflection in trembling, disturbed water. The superb cantilena of the violin seems to personify the feelings of Narcissus himself. Double-stops and parallel motion in perfect intervals contribute to the image of a mirror at the core of the myth. Two great climaxes evoke the duality and comment on a sense of suffering as well as of idealized beauty.

In “Dryades and Pan,” Pan (the God of nature, often associated with sexuality) is depicted pursuing nymphs. This series of tableaux is a more active scene than the two prior *Myths*. The movement opens in the violin with the first notated (and published) quarter-tone in the history of Western music. Evocative of insects buzzing in the forest evening, the quarter-tone asserts itself against the drone of an open string. (Bartók was inspired by this and later
included similar elements in his Second Violin Concerto and Sonata for Solo Violin). Piano chords punctuate the air sharply in the opening, indicating a more nimble quality of motion. Kochański’s imprint is strong, especially in the passages with trilled seconds. The intervals of both seconds and sevenths permeate this movement. In an extraordinary passage, Pan’s pipe can be heard far away in violin harmonics. Left hand pizzicati, percussive harmonics, and rapidly changing unusual techniques for both performers all contribute to the unique tapestry of colors that make Myths a seminal work of 20th-century music.

Masques, Op. 34 (1915-16)

The Masques rank among the most successful of Szymanowski’s piano works and are also among the most frequently performed. The title “Masques” may be hard to understand at first, because he composed the three pieces in reverse order and his programmatic intentions evolved as he worked. He began with the idea of composing parodistic, “insincere” pieces. The concluding “Serenade of Don Juan” is far removed from the probing character portrait of Mozart’s opera; instead, it reduces the formidable Don to a neurotic, hysterical Spanish guitar-playing nomad. His theme circles around and around, inevitably returning to the same repeated D-flat, but in the episodes he races about from one frenzied adventure to the next. Although he makes big amorous gestures, it is hard to believe this ranting Don could ever hope to conquer anyone. Instead he seems often to be taking rapid flight and getting himself out of trouble. A bizarre but extroverted showpiece, this work was dedicated to Artur Rubinstein and has attracted a significant following by generations of Polish virtuosi.

The middle work, “Tantris the Clown,” is no “insincere” parody, but rather a masterful character portrait of a masked persona. Tantris (Tris-tan with inverted syllables) is an authentic part of the original Tristan story; in Wagner’s opera too, Tristan meets Isolde first while masked as the clown Tantris. In Szymanowski’s piece, the clown face is front and center from the beginning, skipping around with lively, riotously entertaining gestures. This clown music alternates with episodes of increasingly lyrical, heartfelt and even painful outpourings until we come to feel the clown’s face as a mask, while the authentic character inside is
pained and love-sick. Matters come to a head in the passionate conclusion, an overwhelming catharsis of operatic emotion. In the quiet and poignant Epilogue, the clown music is heard, distorted and off in the distance, clearly subordinate to the melancholy underneath, until the final A minor is clearly predominant over the repeated G-flat major chords.

By the time Szymanowski began composing the first piece, “Sheherazade,” the idea of a masked character was nearly lost altogether. Szymanowski spins the famed tale of *1000 Nights* with inspiration and passion; this dramatic and compelling work is one of his greatest achievements. The world of Sheherazade is a companion to the First Violin Concerto, with which it shares some musical material. The tale of Sheherazade is naturally episodic in quality, since each tale must keep the king’s ongoing interest in order for the protagonist to protect her life. This episodic quality is shared by many pieces in his middle period. As we follow the various threads, we are dazzled by the endless tapestry of colors. Every transition is smooth and dramatically convincing. Szymanowski’s accomplishment was greatly admired by the often acerbic critic Kaikosru Shapurji Sorabji, who remarked: “Here is no European in Eastern fancy dress, but one who, by an astonishing kinship of spirit, succeeds in giving us in musical terms what we instinctively know and recognize as the essence of Persian art.” (Sorabji, Mi contra Fa, Da Capo, p. 184)

“Roxana’s Song” from the opera *King Roger* (1918-1924), arranged by Paul Kochański (1931)

Szymanowski was not alone in considering his opera *King Roger* an outstanding work; it is still regarded as one of the key modern operas of the early 20th century on account of its poetic symbolism, unique expressiveness and distinctive tone colors.

The opera treats the subjects of religion and faith in institutionalized and personal dimensions. In Sicily, ca. 1050, a mysterious and mesmerizing young man, the Shepherd, is condemned to death. Impressed by the Shepherd, King Roger frees him and orders him to stay at the palace. In the middle act, in “Roxana’s song” the queen pleads for the Shepherd – “Sleep, King Roger’s bloody dreams” – in vocalise. Roxana, her advisor Edrisi, and others fall under the Shepherd’s spell. The King grows suspicious and orders the Shepherd to be
imprisoned again. The Shepherd breaks free, and Roxana and her entourage follow the Shepherd away from the palace. With her departure, King Roger abdicates and sets on a journey to find Roxana that proves to be a metaphorical quest for truth and faith. In the third act, the emotional climax and reconciliation are achieved when the Shepherd reveals himself as Dionysus and King Roger is enraptured, so that harmony and unity are restored at last.

“Roxana’s song” combines tremendous internal tension inside the seeming calm, the archaic “ancient” sound and haunting colors, Oriental ornaments and melismas, sense of mystery, and Arabic-Persian scales with their successions of minor thirds and half-steps. This most famous song from King Roger is also performed in arrangements with orchestra and choir, for piano alone, for cello and piano, and in this arrangement by Kochański for violin and piano (1931).

Late Works (1919-1937)

Szymanowski’s third period (1919-37, opp. 47-62) is often described as nationalistic, while his last years (1927-37, opp. 56-62) were, essentially, a summation of his achievements. The trend to incorporate national and folk elements in ‘art music’ was strong at this time, but Szymanowski was likely also motivated by a yearning for reconciliation with his country, where his European outlook had not always been warmly received. Elements of Tatra mountain (Góralska) music appear most prominently in the 20 Mazurkas, Op. 50 and in the Ballet Harnasie, Op. 55 (premiered 1936). On the other hand, Stabat Mater, Op. 53 (1925), for soprano solo, mixed choir and orchestra is cast in a stylized archaic form evoking an ancient religious music. Although his choice of materials suggest a turn towards simplicity away from decadence, the emotional impact of these works is, if anything, further intensified.

During his years in academic administration, Szymanowski composed only a few works. In the remaining years of his life he composed the three-movement Symphonie-Concertante, Op. 60, having himself in mind as piano soloist, in hopes of producing some additional income. This fine work and the Violin Concerto No. 2, Op. 61 (1932-33) effectively synthesize Szymanowski’s entire compositional arsenal. This Second Concerto is also dedicated to Kochański, and testifies to Szymanowski’s fascination with Podhalean
music. The final two Mazurkas, Op. 62 (1934), reflect the mood of desolation and illness which besieged Szymanowski at the end of his life.

**Oberek, from *Four Polish Dances* (1926)**

Szymanowski was approached by Oxford University Press to compose a set of dance pieces for a compilation entitled “Folk Dances of the World.” He offered a set of four pieces representative of Polish traditions: a Mazurka, Krakowiak, Oberek and Polonaise. Among this collection, the *Oberek* is the most interesting: a mature masterwork with a harmonic vocabulary on a level with the Mazurkas, Op. 50. It can be rightly considered a companion piece to that collection.

The Oberek is a traditional high-spirited whirling dance for couples, which served as one of the folk sources for Chopin’s Mazurkas. Szymanowski’s *Oberek* is full of repetitious, accented phrases, lively syncopated cross-rhythms, sonorous drone basses and vivid dynamic contrasts. The middle section is in an unusually lean texture, marked by sinuous melody and a repetitious, start-and-stop rhythmic figure. All energy seems nearly lost when the opening *Vivace agitato* returns as a bolt from the blue. The outstanding moment in this piece is the haunting Coda, which juxtaposes expressive legato melody with galloping dance rhythms, in the most piquant harmonic environment.

**Szymanowski-Kochański — *L’aube* and *Danse Sauvage* (1922)** (*“Dawn” and “Wild Dance”)*

“Dawn” and “Wild Dance” are a very rare successful instance of “composition by committee”: Kochański was responsible for the violin parts, while Szymanowski provided the piano parts. Each piece shows characteristics of Kochański’s playing and compositional style. “Dawn” is brimming with “finger-twister” double-stops, however lyrical in character. The presence of perfect fourths and fifths and the frequent alternation of larger and more compact intervals contribute to a sense of openness, of a “rising sun.” The colors, from muted hues to soaring lines, are all carefully selected. “Dawn,” while attractive on its own, is especially alluring when followed by “Danse sauvage.” This “Wild Dance” is
virtuosic, full of rustic earthiness, athleticism and a new element in later Szymanowski: humor. Kochański’s tendency to repeat phrases directly is apparent. His inclusion of scalar passages most clearly differentiates his writing from that of Szymanowski. He enjoys shifting technical devices in close succession: *sul ponticello*, folk-like bourdon bowings with open string drones, percussive *pizzicato*, and *legato* phrasing. Kochański’s techniques would gain in popularity with future generations of composers.

*Bauerntanz* ("Peasant Dance") from the ballet *Harnasie* (1931), arranged for violin and piano (1931)

As an honorary citizen of Zakopane, Szymanowski enjoyed a relationship with the Tatra Mountaneers (Górale) that was rare among outsiders. He was present, for instance, at weddings and christenings. The Górale sang and played for him their *Sabalowe nuty* (songs of Sabala, a famed mountain musician who was the originator of many Górale tunes). Szymanowski was especially inspired for his ballet score after serving as Best Man and companion on a mission to invite guests to the wedding of Jerzy Rytard (an outsider) with the Góralka (mountain girl) Helena Rojówna.

*Harnasie*, Op. 55, is a ballet-pantomime in three scenes, for tenor, mixed chorus and orchestra. The story is set in the Tatra Mountains. A bride-to-be (betrothed to a boy from the village) and Harnaś (HAR-nash, a mountain robber) fall in love when they see each other on a meadow (*hala*). Nonetheless, she goes through with the planned wedding… almost. Harnaś and his band kidnap her from the wedding, and take her to live with Harnaś in the robbers’ den. Szymanowski used as many as nine folk melodies in the ballet, among them the notorious “*W murowanej piwnicy*” (in Stone-built Basement: a bandits’ dance). While the melodies are stylized and interwoven into Szymanowski’s dissonant harmony and multi-voice textures, they will be familiar to any Polish ear.

This transcription of *Bauerntanz* ("Peasant Dance") is based on numbers 9 (*hala*) and 8 ("Harnasie’s entrance,” a dance) from the Ballet. The opening slow section is suggestive of the girl’s and Harnaś’s calls to each other over a distance. One does not expect a “classically” beautiful sound in these calls, heard over suspended drones, with the piano
(as orchestra) echoing in parallel perfect sonorities so characteristic of the region’s folk singing. The mountain singing is throatier, raspier, with “modulated” intonation (“mistuned” to a classically oriented ear and yet entirely expected in the idiom). In the Allegro that follows, the vitality and raw energy of the robbers’ dance startle and thrill the senses, transporting the listener to the vivid world of ‘krzesany’ dance in which ciupagas (mountaineers’ axes).

Jan Lechoń beautifully wrote of Harnasie: “This is a masterpiece of Polishness which is strong and dignified, which draws on the folk culture but does not flatter coarseness, which lifts this folk culture to the rank of great art, exactly as was achieved by Chopin.”

CD 3

Twenty Mazurkas, Op. 50 (1924-25)
Two Mazurkas, Op. 62 (1933-34)

Revitalizing the Solo Piano Mazurka

For much of his life, Szymanowski could hardly be said to show Polish nationalistic pride. He escaped the provincial musical culture of his homeland to pursue his musical and philological education in Europe, and maintained a cosmopolitan perspective on the arts. He looked down on the rather simplistic “nationalism” of composers who wrote mazurkas that were clearly derivative of Chopin’s style. Whereas Chopin’s works were highly original and exotic – even experimental – for his time, the mazurkas of these followers sounded old-fashioned. The young Szymanowski considered the genre “a cliché-ridden, fossilized form that is condemned to death in art music.”

Some of his friends, nevertheless, badgered him to compose in a genuinely Polish manner. The composer’s change of heart followed the events of World War I, when Poland was at last a unified country; the sweep of nationalistic fervor there was overwhelming. Rather than mimic Chopin, however, Szymanowski adapted his own rich and complex musical language, with its harmonic and textural sophistication, its keen sense of instrumental color and timbre, and its often feverish emotional content.
To accommodate the apparently limited scope of a mazurka, Szymanowski often reduced the thickness of his textures, but the thumbprint of his unique sound-world is unmistakable. He embraced elements of Stravinsky’s nationalistic style, and found his own inspiration in the folk music he heard at Zakopane. This extraordinary mixture of ingredients produced mazurkas of startling originality and unquestionable significance. They are his most immediately approachable piano compositions.

These 22 mazurkas strike the proper balance between a progressive reinvention of the idiom and a grounding in tradition. In particular, they blend an ideal mixture of “Classicism” and “Romanticism” that Szymanowski admired in Chopin. They tend to adhere to traditional formal organization, without sacrificing the composer’s characteristic improvisatory spontaneity (Op. 50 No. 9 and Op. 62 nos. 1 and 2). They conjure up vivid images of the lively spirit of the Tatra mountaineers – especially the even numbered Op. 50 mazurkas – but avoid explicit quotation of folk materials (the lone exception being the opening line of Op. 50 No. 1, a kind of incantation).

The harmonies are magnificently rich and complex – at times posing the most complicated theoretical questions (generally the odd numbers from Op. 50, especially nos. 3 and 9, and Op. 62 No. 2), but foundations in tonality are retained. Often, open bagpipe fifths ground the harmony while conjuring up images of folk music. Even though each mazurka is less than four minutes in duration, each is original and distinctive enough to stand on its own in performance.

An amazingly wide range of moods and compositional procedures can be found in Szymanowski’s mazurkas. There are some simple mazurkas (Op. 50 Nos. 1, 13 and 15), but Op. 50 No. 12, in particular, is conceived on such an epic scale as to belie the apparent lack of pretension in the mazurka genre. There are thick textures, crammed full of strident discords (Op. 50 Nos. 8, 10, 12 and 18), but also plaintive single-voice lines (Op. 50 No. 13, Op. 62 Nos. 1 and 2). There are some very complicated, intuitively formed harmonies that defy theoretical description, but also the most elementary of cadential progressions (both can be found in Op. 50 No. 9). One finds tragedy, struggle and conflict, moments of whimsy and humor, passages of great sensual beauty, and also some good old-fashioned lively dancing.
Performing the Szymanowski Mazurkas

Although Szymanowski’s mazurkas have received some attention by pianists, outstanding performances of this music are rare. To reveal the rich stylistic palette of this music, a performer must be equally at home with the textural refinements of Debussy and Ravel, the hyperemotionalism of Scriabin, the elegance of Chopin, and the pungent, acerbic rhythms of Bartók and early Stravinsky. Further, (s)he must be able to shift quickly from one mood to another, shaping the transitions while preserving the continuity of the music.

Szymanowski has achieved a dazzling – and perhaps unprecedented – mélange of styles in these mazurkas. Capturing this requires both a free-wheeling imagination and a fastidious attention to detail. Because of the frequent changes of tempo and the inherent inequality of beats in a stylized dance, the range of interpretive possibilities is quite broad. A free, daring, and improvisatory approach is essential to bring this music to life.
Violinist **Blanka Bednarz** is an alumna of the J. Kaliszewska Talent School in Poznan. She studied with Ben Sayevich at the University of Kansas (BM), and earned her MM and DMA at the New England Conservatory under the guidance of Eric Rosenblith, Michelle Auclair and James Dunham (viola).

Bednarz has appeared as soloist with a number of orchestras, among them the Hunan Symphony Orchestra, Connecticut Virtuosi, Sinfonietta Polonia, and Gettysburg Chamber Orchestra. She has performed in the USA, China, United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands and Lithuania, concertizing in venues such as Jordan Hall in Boston, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, Philadelphia Ethical Society, An die Musik in Baltimore, Aula UAM in Poznań, and Rundfunks Berlin-Lichtenberg.

Bednarz is an avid chamber musician, at times happily exchanging violin for viola. She is a regular at the Park City Beethoven Festival in Utah, and has appeared at the Highlands-Cashiers Festival and the Candlelight Series in Baltimore, among others in premiere of Jonathan Leshnoff’s quintet “Radiance”. She has collaborated with renowned artists—Barry Snyder, Rita Sloan, Brian Ganz, Richard Stoltzman, Adrian Levine or Joanna Kurkowicz, and with Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Chameleon Ensemble, Alarm Will Sound, Utah and Baltimore Symphonies. As violinist of Atma Trio she participated in numerous prestigious festivals—among them in Zakopane, Poland in the “Days of Karol Szymanowski,” in “Chopinesque Confrontations” or the Chanterelle Festival in Gołuchów, and in the USA at the International Festival “Chopin and Friends” in New York City and Chopin Festival in Miami on invitations of the Chopin Foundation of the United States, the Kościuszko Foundation, and the Karol Szymanowski Society. In 2011 Atma Trio’s pianist Dobrzanjski and Bednarz presented Szymanowski’s music at the Beijing Concert Hall, as part of the cultural program of Poland’s presidency of the EU, under the patronage of the Polish Minister of culture. Atma Trio’s CD, on the leading Polish
label Acte Préalable, was highly praised in *Muzyka 21*: “Excellent piano trios by Mendelssohn and Ravel in masterful rendition.”

In 2007-08, Bednarz was first violinist of the Vega String Quartet, in residence at Emory University in Atlanta (“marvelous foursome” – *Strad*). Currently an Associate Professor of Music at Dickinson College, PA, Bednarz taught at New England Conservatory Preparatory School, coached chamber music at International Musical Arts Institute, ME, International Music Institute and Festival (IMIF) in MD, Franklin Pond in Atlanta, and at the Gifted Music School in Salt Lake City. She has given master classes at universities and colleges across the USA, in Poland and in China. She is concertmaster of Sinfonietta Polonia (www.sinfoniettapolonia.pl).

Bednarz has been heard on Boston’s WGBH and Polish Radio. Her recordings can be heard on Capstone Records, A.W. Promotions, Acte Préalable, and Musica Omnia labels. Her playing has been hailed as “beautiful, mature and rich in color” (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland).

**Matthew Bengtson**, critically acclaimed as a “musician’s pianist,” commands an unusually diverse repertoire ranging from Byrd to Ligeti and numerous contemporary composers. An advocate of both contemporary and rarely performed music, he has concertized extensively in the US, and been presented in numerous European venues, in Mexico, and in numerous solo recitals at Carnegie Hall’s Weill Recital Hall. He has performed with violinist Joshua Bell on NPR’s “Performance Today” and XM Satellite Radio’s “Classical Confidential.”

Mr. Bengtson is lauded as one of the most persuasive advocates of the music of Scriabin and Szymanowski. On his complete Scriabin Piano Sonatas, the *American Record Guide* writes: “Big-boned pianism, rich tonal colors, and dazzling technique are on display here. Has
Scriabin ever been played better? Only Horowitz and Richter can compare,” while *Fanfare* magazine calls him “a Scriabinist for the 21st century… upon whom future generations can rely for definitive interpretations.” In 2015 he toured with the complete Scriabin sonatas, performed in the historic centennial “Scriabin in the Himalayas” festival in Ladakh, India, and is a co-author of an upcoming book “The Alexander Scriabin Companion” for Rowman and Littlefield Press.

Equally devoted to the music of Karol Szymanowski, he devoted his doctoral research to the Polish composer’s mazurkas. He has given numerous performances and lecture-recitals on this music. His article “The Szymanowski Clash: Methods of Harmonic Analysis in the Szymanowski Mazurkas” was awarded the 2003 Stefan and Wanda Wilk Prize for Research in Polish Music.

Mr. Bengtson studied piano as a Harvard undergraduate with Patricia Zander and worked with Stephen Drury and Robert Levin. He earned his MM and DMA at Peabody studying with Ann Schein, also studying harpsichord with Webb Wiggins and fortepiano with Malcolm Bilson at Cornell University. His recordings can also be heard on the Romeo, Arabesque, Griffin Renaissance, Albany and Navona record labels, and this recording marks his debut on the Musica Omnia label. Mr. Bengtson is currently Assistant Professor of Piano Literature at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theater and Dance.

Over the last dozen years, Bednarz and Bengtson have presented numerous recitals of Szymanowski’s duo and solo music across the United States, including a tour of the Midwest, performances at numerous universities in New England and the Mid-Atlantic, and at the Philadelphia Ethical Society for the Kosciuszko Foundation.
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