

Szymanowski's First Violin Concerto in the Light of Charles Taylor's Concept of Epiphany

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Analyzing music in the light of the concept of epiphany

In his remarkable book, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, the philosopher Charles Taylor has coined the term “epiphany” to describe the role played by the work of art since the beginning of the nineteenth century. While he borrows this term from James Joyce, Taylor uses it in a broader sense than Joyce. His initial definition of what constitutes an “epiphany” is our starting point.

What I want to capture with this term is this notion of a work of art as the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals.¹

To get a better understanding of what Taylor means, I will summarize the chapter where he develops this concept. He begins with a warning: the revelation brought about by the work of art should not be equated with a reading of the intentions of the author or of the composer. “The work

¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 419.

must be understood independently of whatever intentions the author has formulated in relation to it..."²

Certainly, before the nineteenth century, there have been works of art which were intended to convey a "higher spiritual reality." But this was achieved through the mediation of allegories, therefore by referring to realities outside the work of art itself. There lies the basic difference between these works and those of the Romantics: "The work remains the locus of revelation, and of something of ultimate significance, but it is also utterly self-contained and self-sufficient."³

Allegories are replaced with symbols, and these are totally fused within the work of art. This is clearly expressed by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, quoted by Taylor: "A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing or a familiar principle."⁴

With the advent of Romanticism, not only are allegories shunned in favour of symbols, but the relationships between the work of art and the morally good undergo a deep transformation. The work of art belongs to the universe of the aesthetic, which is deemed by nineteenth-century authors to be of a higher order than that of morality.

For Schiller... the aesthetic offers a higher fulfilment than the merely moral, because the moral only realizes one side of us, form and not matter, while beauty can make us whole, give us harmony and freedom.⁵

In Taylor's view, the creative imagination, which is the source of the work of art, becomes "the locus of moral sources."⁶ This reliance on the creative imagination not only for the production of the work of art but even for its spiritual and moral valuation induces "a subject-centeredness which is much more insidious than the thematic penchant for

2 Ibidem, 420.

3 Ibidem.

4 Ibidem, 421.

5 Ibidem, 422.

6 Ibidem, 426.

self-expression”⁷ usually ascribed to the Romantics. Thus “a certain subjectivism is inseparable from modern epiphanies ... we can't escape the mediation through the imagination.”⁸

The emergence of the epiphanic character of the work of art in the Romantic era has achieved a change of paradigms which has proven irreversible: “There are strong continuities from the Romantic period ... right up to the present day. What remains central is the notion of the work of art as issuing from or realizing an ‘epiphany’...”⁹

With these points in mind, we are ready to substantiate Taylor's initial definition. Epiphany is this aspect of a work of art through which it becomes the locus of a manifestation which, via the mediation of symbols, makes present, in its own unique way, a transcendent reality—a reality which would otherwise remain inaccessible—and which, since it is a product of the creative imagination, defines, as it reveals, its own moral universe. This epiphanic function is found not only in works belonging to the Romantic era, but is a significant characteristic of works of art to this day.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, music analysis has distanced itself from compositional theory and from aesthetics in order to focus on the structures and operations inherent to the work, without any interference from or inferences to considerations outside the composition itself. Recent researches in musical scholarship have adopted a more inclusive standpoint and fresh openings are being made to the influence of philosophy and psychology. In my knowledge, the concept of epiphany, as it was brought to light by Charles Taylor, has yet to yield its fruits in the field of music analysis.

On the one hand, those analysts would agree with Taylor in emphasizing the immanent character of the epiphany: “The locus of epiphany has shifted to within the work itself.”¹⁰ But, on the other hand, because it is epiphanic, the artwork “remains the locus of revelation, of something of

7 Ibidem, 429.

8 Ibidem, 428.

9 Ibidem, 419.

10 Ibidem.

ultimate significance.”¹¹ This revelation is not purely subjective. In fact, it is not subjective at all, because “in the work of art, the universal term is inseparable from, is identified with, its instantiation. A beautiful object is a particular which carries universal import.”¹² Therefore, from this perspective, the kind of objective, detailed scrutiny which the analyst prefers should logically lead to a clarification of those epiphanies “where something of great moral or spiritual significance becomes manifest.”¹³ This is certainly a challenge that too many analysts have been wary of facing. Let us turn now to an examination of what this concept of epiphany can tell us about the First Violin Concerto Op. 35 of Szymanowski.¹⁴

The epiphanic implications of the poem

In many respects, the First Violin Concerto holds a unique place within the composer’s output. In the present perspective, three aspects of this work must be singled out: the fact that it is likely to have been inspired by a poem, its orchestration, and its form. Szymanowski frequently found inspiration in poetry, but, within the genre of the concerto, this case is probably unique.

According to Jachimecki, the composer’s first biographer, the concerto had some programmatic basis in *Noc majowa* (May Night), a poem by Tadeusz Miciński. Although there are no primary sources which corroborate this assertion, Szymanowski did not deny the fact, and the poem certainly affords some insight into the fantastical atmosphere of this nocturnal evocation.¹⁵

11 Ibidem, 420.

12 Ibidem, 421.

13 Ibidem, 423.

14 Karol Szymanowski, *Gesamtausgabe / Complete Edition*, vol. 3: *Violinkonzerte / Violin Concertos* (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1985).

15 Alistair Wightman, *Karol Szymanowski: His Life and Work* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 177.

The connections with the poem are enigmatic and the composer himself did nothing to clarify them. Beyond the first nineteen measures—we will come back to these later—the Concerto is not an explicit translation into music of the route followed by the poem. In my view, this is where Taylor's concept of epiphany can be illuminating. The Concerto shares the epiphanic implications of the poem without treading the same path.

Noc majowa is the work of Tadeusz Miciński, a poet considered to be a major representative of the Symbolists, a significant trend in literature, poetry and the graphic arts in Poland at the turn of the twentieth century. The nocturnal atmosphere that it evokes is a staple of this aesthetic trend. It closely connects the Concerto with its contemporary, the Third Symphony Op. 27, subtitled "Song of the Night."

In another paper, I have analysed the epiphanies that this Third Symphony embodies, including a detailed analysis of the implications of the poem by Rumi used by Szymanowski.¹⁶ As you know, the poem is sung in the Symphony, such that the links between its symbolic content and the music are made explicit. The Violin Concerto does not allow for such an approach and the rapprochement with the poem is certainly more enigmatic.

One of the favourite themes of graphic arts was the nocturne, better adapted to a pantheistic view of nature and apt to seize hold of its spirit. In graphic representation, night is favourable to the intensification of symbolic meanings and of subjective sensory experiences, to an intensification of nostalgic atmospheres and to reflection on the meaning of human life.¹⁷

Noc majowa evokes a night scene teeming with life, similarly with the poem by Rumi used in the Symphony. We are immersed in an hospitable and immensely fertile nature. A mysterious wedding ceremony is evoked, to which mythical characters of various provenances are invited:

16 Paul Cadrin, "Karol Szymanowski and Richard Strauss: Of Diverging Epiphanies," *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes* 24/2 (2004), 29–43.

17 Irena Kossowska, "L'esthétique du 'noir et blanc': l'art graphique et le dessin du symbolisme polonais," in *Le Symbolisme polonais*, eds. Francis Ribemont, Maria Gołąb, Xavier Deryng (Paris: Somogy Éditions d'art / Rennes: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2004), 127–162. Transl. by the author.

Shéhérazade from Persia, Grif and Łabędź from the Kashubian region, and the Norns, the fairy godmothers of fate in Germanic mythology. Trees, birds, fishes, and insects participate in the excitement. “The Polish symbolic nocturne draws its source not so much in the experience of the eye but rather in the exploitation of emotions.”¹⁸

While music shares with the visual arts its fascination with the night, it allows for a very different kind of evocation. From the painter’s perspective, the sensory experience of nocturnal scenes is subdued, it rests on suggestions and allusions shrouded in darkness. Hearing, on the contrary, is intensified in the dark. Sounds are highlighted in the night. Thus, the evocation of Nature by music is substantially different from that of painting.

Two different levels of significance are discernible in the Concerto: the first nineteen measures, which return briefly at measures 148–154 and 645–648, on the one hand, and the rest of the Concerto, on the other. In the words of Didier van Moere, the first measures “bring us into a festive nature, bustling with thousands of bird calls evoking the *Firebird* and anticipating on Messiaen...”¹⁹ Following such an opening, one would expect the rest of the work to be a musical analogue of the poem. Obviously, this is not the case. In the perspective that we have adopted here, these short segments are the only concessions to allegory. The rest of the Concerto resolutely moves into the world of symbols.

This immersion in nature carries erotic inferences, as is to be expected in the climate of the era and notably in Szymanowski’s music. Stephen Downes has written:

This was a climate dominated..., on the philosophical plane, by Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean ideas—with the former characteristically pessimistic in allying erotic ecstasy with death and the latter, by contrast, affirming the life-giving physical vitality of Dionysian passions.²⁰

18 Andrzej Turowski, “Peindre la nuit,” in *Le Symbolisme polonais*, eds. Francis Ribemont, Maria Gołąb, Xavier Deryng (Paris: Somogy Éditions d’art / Rennes: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2004), 183–86. Transl. by the author.

19 Didier van Moere, *Karol Szymanowski* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), 229. Transl. by the author.

20 Stephen Downes, “Eroticism,” in *The Szymanowski Companion*, eds. Paul Cadrin, Stephen Downes (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 73.

While death is present in the poem from its very beginning, I am inclined to think that this Schopenhauerian aspect of eroticism has little to do with the Concerto, which is all about “the life-giving physical vitality of Dionysian passion.” This is particularly obvious in the dance episodes interspersed in the work.

This nocturnal atmosphere is full of life and welcoming to the human presence represented by the solo violin. So welcoming, in fact, that the soloist is granted an extensive cadenza. It does fulfill Joseph Kerman's vision of cadenzas in the modern concerto:

No longer transgressive, no longer carnivalesque, they are set apart from the rest of the discourse by affording the solo a private place, as it were, from which he or she can address the audience more directly, perhaps more intimately, rather than working with and through the orchestra.²¹

Further epiphanic dimensions of this symbolic human presence are found in the orchestration and, to a notable degree, in the form, as we will soon see.

The Orchestration

The Concerto is scored for a very large orchestra. In my knowledge, prior to this work, there is no concerto in the literature that calls for a comparable complement of instruments. This and the Second Concerto are the only ones in the genre with a piano part. The percussion section is substantial, and few concertos require a comparable number of woodwinds, brass, and harp.

By displaying such a rich palette of timbres, Szymanowski depicts a lavish universe bristling with sounds and colours. The importance granted to the percussion section, in particular, is certainly a by-product of the emancipation of the composers' palette at the beginning of the twentieth century.

²¹ Joseph Kerman, *Concerto Conversations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 76.

While it plays a significant role in defining the sense of the work, the voice of the soloist, which is the human element in the scene, is bathed in the sounds of Nature, represented by the orchestra. It is humankind lending meaning to Nature in which it is immersed. The soloist is not the Romantic, intrepid hero fighting for his life or for a noble cause, as was the case especially since Liszt. It is in this sense that one can consider Szymanowski's concept of the concerto to be symphonic, as is also obvious in the *Symphonie concertante*.

Szymanowski was fully aware of this when he wrote to Emil Hertzka, on the 9th of July 1918: "...it is properly speaking a symphonic work for a rather large orchestra with solo violin, although it gives the impression of a concerto..."²²

On this question, Joseph Kerman writes the following:

One doesn't have to think very long about Mahler's orchestration to understand why Mahler never wrote a concerto. Karol Szymanowski did, and the orchestra in his two violin concertos is about the richest to be found in the concerto repertory. The orchestral particularity here is color rather than mass or power or discourse — kaleidoscopic color. The problem with these unquestionably distinguished works is not that you can't hear the violin; you always can; but the orchestra is always so much more interesting.²³

This statement calls for some qualifications. That the orchestra is more interesting than the violin is a subjective evaluation that I cannot share. It has been said that this Concerto is not the most technically demanding in the repertoire. This factor may inadvertently have influenced Kerman in his evaluation of the importance of the violin part. The point he may have missed is that the soloist, here, is not a hero, bravely holding his ground against threatening forces. The core epiphany is not that of a struggle from which the soloist must either rise victorious or fall in martyrdom.

We know that Szymanowski was concerned with the balance between the soloist and the orchestra. This can be understood in the following

²² Karol Szymanowski, *Correspondence, Volume 1: 1902-1919*, ed. and transl. Alistair Wightman (Amazon Kindle Cloud Reader, 2016), 607.

²³ Kerman, *Concerto Conversations*, 85-86.

statement in a letter to the Kochańskis' following the premiere of the work, which was given by Ozomiński and the Warsaw Philharmonic under Emil Młynarski: "And imagine, Pawełek, that the violin is always on top! There may be three or four measures where the orchestra predominates."²⁴

The Form

In Szymanowski's view, "each and every work creates the conditions of its formal coherence."²⁵ The formal organization of the First Concerto is all but simple. Adrian Thomas has written: "This concerto daringly weaves a seductive web of associated themes in a single movement that defies conventional analysis."²⁶

In his view, it is an "interlocking rondo-based structure," which is about as close to a "conventional analysis" as one could get! Alistair Wightman has published accurate and detailed analyses of both concertos, without making any attempt at classifying them in scholastic patterns.²⁷

According to Wightman, the form of this Concerto is articulated around five climaxes by the tutti. I must say that I hear six climaxes, the one that Wightman bypasses being the momentous tutti just before the cadenza. In any case, there is no single apex and those six climaxes are to a certain extent structurally equivalent. The segments delineated around these climaxes cannot be equated to a conflation of sections in a prototypical concerto. I have demonstrated elsewhere that the sections of the Third Symphony correspond to a reorganization of elements drawn from regular formal patterns, namely sonata form and scherzo.²⁸ Nothing of

24 Letter to Zofia Kochańska, 5th November 1922. See Karol Szymanowski, *Korespondencja*, tom 2: 1920–1926, ed. Teresa Chylińska (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1994), 450.

25 Quoted in *The Szymanowski Companion*, eds. Paul Cadrin, Stephen Downes, 95.

26 Adrian Thomas, Program notes to *Szymanowski / Karłowicz Violin Concertos*, Tasmin Little, Edward Gardner, BBC Symphony Orchestra. Chandos CHSA 5185 (2017), 9.

27 Wightman, *Karol Szymanowski*, 181–188, 380–382.

28 Paul Cadrin, "Between Dawn and Dusk: The Song of the Night and the Symphony at the Turn of the Century," in *The Songs of Karol Szymanowski and His Contemporaries*,

the kind can be observed here. One senses that, with the exception of the introduction and the cadenza, segments could be shifted around like interchangeable building blocks.

This is a powerful epiphany of a concept of time radically different from that which is at work in most of the repertoire. Since its advent, concert music has been more and more structured into set patterns displaying a perceptible goal-directed organization of time. The order in which the material of each movement is played must be perceptible, and the movements themselves do not suffer being shifted around. In the later half of the twentieth century, works have been written with an open structure, allowing for the performer to choose the order in which the sections or segments are to be heard, putting an end to this kind of goal-directed formal organisation. Obviously, Szymanowski could not consider an approach of this kind. Yet, the formal strategy that he adopts comes as close as possible to evoking a similar vision of time suspended. He achieves this goal by juxtaposing sections that are equivalent from a formal point of view, and therefore do not fit in an overarching structure with a single orientation. This is in keeping with the mediatory function that Nature is called to fulfill according to the Symbolist painters.

The mental scenery conveyed to nature a mediatory function between man and transcendental reality, allowing to exceed the limits of human knowledge, to annihilate the notion of time, and therefore to facilitate an understanding of eternity.²⁹

Although it follows the cadenza, the last section is not a conventional final tutti. It does rise to a climax at measure 637, but this is followed with a rapid decrescendo and allargando leaving room for an unexpected final entry of the soloist, pianissimo, the tempo gradually slowing down. This enigmatic quiet ending is an almost unique feature in the concerto literature—I say “almost” because its exact contemporary, Prokofiev’s First

eds. Zofia Helman, Teresa Chylińska, Alistair Wightman (Los Angeles: Polish Music Center, 2002), 112–121.

29 Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Symbolizm i symbolika w poezji Młodej Polski* (1975), quoted in Danuta Knysz-Tomaszewska, “Le symbolisme dans la littérature de la Jeune Pologne,” in *Le Symbolisme polonais*, 51.

Violin Concerto also has a similarly quiet ending, but this is an entirely different situation. This is clearly not the kind of heroic culmination which a concerto composer is expected to write, but an entirely appropriate fade out. We have been plunged into a mysterious night in which time was suspended. We are delicately brought back to ordinary life, to plain time.

Conclusion

Szymanowski's First Violin Concerto has been examined in the light of the concept of epiphany as formulated by Charles Taylor. This work appears to be an epiphany of a person immersed in a teeming and welcoming Nature, as depicted by the orchestration and by the constant dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra. The soloist is not in a position of conflict with Nature, which he doesn't have to dominate. This is far from the heroic vision of the soloist prevalent in most Romantic concertos. This epiphany happens at night, a period when auditory perception is heightened, but also a period where the borders between dreaming and the creative imagination are blurred. Its erotic underpinnings are immersed in Dionysian vitality. The relentless march of time is suspended, as is revealed in the formal organization of the work. Melancholy and nostalgia occasionally surface, but they do not prevail. This enchanted vision evaporates with daybreak, hence the enigmatic ending.

I hope to have shown how the concept of epiphany can help move beyond the tabulation of the structures of music to a better understanding of its expressive content. The self-contained epiphanic dimensions of the Concerto are of the highest moral and spiritual significance. They belong to an aesthetic in which allegories are shunned in favour of symbols.

Further studies would be needed to examine the motivic content and the tonal-harmonic vocabulary of the Concerto. Comparisons both with the Second Concerto and with their exact contemporaries, the two Violin Concertos of Prokofiev, could also be illuminating.

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ABSTRACT

Szymanowski's First Violin Concerto in the Light of Charles Taylor's Concept of Epiphany

According to the philosopher Charles Taylor, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the advent of Romanticism, the work of art is defined by its epiphanic character. It is a manifestation of something of the highest moral or spiritual significance. This manifestation is not merely subjective, in which case it would be inaccessible to scholarly inquiry, but it has an objective character. The concept of epiphany is applied to the First Violin Concerto by Karol Szymanowski. Its connections with the poem *Noc majowa* by Miciński, its orchestration and formal design are singled out as carrying out epiphanic significance.

KEYWORDS Karol Szymanowski, violin music, concerto, Charles Taylor, epiphany, Tadeusz Miciński, orchestration, form, Symbolists

STRESZCZENIE

I Koncert skrzypcowy Szymanowskiego w świetle koncepcji epifanii Charlesa Taylora

Według filozofa Charlesa Taylora, od początku XIX w. i nastania romantyzmu dzieło sztuki definiuje się w odniesieniu do jego charakteru epifanicznego. Jest ono przejawem czegoś o najwyższym znaczeniu moralnym czy też duchowym. Przejaw ten jest nie tylko subiektywny — w takim przypadku bowiem byłby niedostępny badaniu naukowemu — ale ma charakter obiektywny. Koncepcja epifanii została zastosowana do *I Koncertu skrzypcowego* Karola Szymanowskiego. W artykule wskazano, że jego związki z wierszem *Noc majowa* Micińskiego, jego orkiestracja oraz plan formalny mają znaczenie epifaniczne.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE Karol Szymanowski, muzyka skrzypcowa, koncert, Charles Taylor, epifania, Tadeusz Miciński, orkiestracja, forma, symboliści