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The Image of Love in Musical Culture – Introductory Notes, Aspects, Realization

1.

This perennially current problem, always ambiguous, unpredictable and elusive, has its evocative reflection in music – the music of every period, environment and technique, music making use of words and that which does without them. Just as in poetry and literature, many works of music have been inspired by love, and works of musical sculpture reflect the state of contemporary social behaviours.

A few key aspects of this 'chanson d'amour' can be distinguished:

- the social, sociological and cultural aspects relating to both romantic feelings and eroticism,
- the musical aspects, from the point of view of music history and literature,
- the analytical aspects, concentrating on particular examples,
- the poetics of the musical art in this respect.

These aspects will mark out the path I intend to take here, tracing the outline of the 'embodiment in music' of the amorous experiences of composers who, by loving, have gifted the world the fruits of their emotions.

2.

The changes of opinions towards all things amorous have become one of the more important indicators of the development of civilization, moral norms and personal culture in general, as Norbert Elias (1969) describes it, talking about the emergence, from simpler forms, of the higher and more sophisticated forms of poetry, 'in connection with the differentiation of society and the shaping of more affluent and more discriminating social circles'. This influenced the creation of the trouba-

dours' lyric verse in southern France, the multiplicity of spheres in which was manifested the courtly activity of women, frequently better educated than the warring men, and the blossoming of elitist relationships between the sexes among the higher social strata. These feudal social conventions in relation to a lady occupying a higher position in the social hierarchy were the seed of women's emancipation, already growing from the 'second Renaissance of the thirteenth century' and consolidated during the eighteenth century, and later brought about the crystallisation of the rules of courtesy and social refinement.

The very word 'woman' started to acquire dignity from the seventeenth century onwards, and history notes many names of famous women of merit, starting with the beautiful woman-pharaoh Hatshepsut, through the intelligent Aspasia and Sappho, Galia Placidia, the Byzantine empresses Theodora and Irene, such figures as Cleopatra, Heloise, Iseult, Maria Walewska, George Sand, Ewelina Halska and Camille Claudel, famous for their love stories, well-known mothers, like Eleanor of Aquitaine, the Polish Wanda and Anne Boleyn, such thinkers as Germaine de Staël, Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir, monarchs, such as Catherine de' Medici, Isabella of Castile, Elizabeth I and the currently reigning Elizabeth II, Mary Stuart, Catherine II, Marie Antoinette, Christina of Sweden, Queen Victoria, Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir and Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, and writers, like Marie de Sévigné, Bettina von Arnim, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Selma Lagerlof and Gabrielle Colette, to working women, e.g. Florence Nightingale and Marie Curie.

Throughout all that time there have been two mutually exclusive attitudes towards women in public life: antifeminism and appreciation (laudation included). And with regard to the freedom of wives, Poles have particularly distinguished themselves compared to the rest of Europe.

Western cultural attitudes in respect to gender and erotic customs reach all the way back to the ancient Near East, to Mesopotamian and Sumerian influences, and the bipolar traditions developed in Christian Europe have survived until today: the amicable, approving attitude derived from the Old Testament and continued in the New Testament, and the antifeminist current, influenced by Gnosticism and Greek philosophy, dating back to the writings of St Peter and confirmed by St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, which already dominated in early Christianity.

Attitudes towards the role of women began to change in the eleventh century, in the sphere of courtly love and behaviours characterized by gallantry; still, however, the fair sex was treated in an ambivalent way. The more modern, Renaissance models turned out to be short-lived when

faced with the ideas of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the conflict between theory and practice led to the flourishing of both the Libertine and the Puritan movements; social differentiation in respect to manners and mores was a separate problem. The metamorphoses of the nineteenth century (double moral standards, middle-class pretence, the repressive model of upbringing, a return to Puritanism) formed the basis for the development of psychoanalysis.

In folk art, there was also a place for reflection on the social roles of women in epic song, lyric verse and – highly characteristic of folklore – obscene song; the original Old Polish burlesque erotic poetry is particularly interesting. Voiced here are national values, associations and myths, folk artistic conventions, transformed at the beginning of the twentieth century into the language of symbols.

From his analysis of folk material and scholarly descriptions, Kazimierz Ślęczka (1999, 48) draws two mutually exclusive conclusions about the existence of two models of rural love: the model deriving from nineteenth-century folkloristics, where Godfearing sentiment was subordinated to the good of the group, the limitations of Christian morality and higher feelings; and the canon of liberated and sensual love, determined by the laws of biology, characteristic of the eighteenth century and the present day.

'It is vain to flee, vain to look for shelter from love,
For how is one who flies not to catch up with one who walks?'¹

3.

The depiction in music of feelings of love is highly characteristic, be it in the form of dedicated compositions written as the result of romantic enchantment, works inspired by a more or less open commitment or music connected by title to a well-known love story (Tristan and Isolde, Orpheus, Samson and Delilah, Pelleas and Melisanda, etc.). Here, we will be most interested in the second category. Many compositions have been born of hidden personal feelings, not even reflected in their title, which are only described in the composer's biography, letters and diaries. In a surge of new feeling for Emma Bardac, Claude Debussy composed his *Suite bergamasque* and *L'Isle joyeuse* for piano and the song cycle *Fêtes galantes*, and Gabriel Fauré his song cycle *La bonne chanson* – for the very same woman. Marie d'Agoult, Franz Liszt's para-

¹ *Wiersze miłosne. Kochanowski, Morsztyn, Książnin. Wybór i wstęp M. Józefacka* (Lublin, 1986), 21.

mour, was the inspiration for his *Années de pèlerinage*, whilst Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein contributed greatly to the creation of the *Faust Symphony* and *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*, and the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, written during Liszt's liaison with Carolyne, are the prototype of impressionistic thinking.

On learning of the engagement of Julia Schumann, the daughter of Robert and Clara, Johannes Brahms wrote his 18 *Liebesliederwaltzer* for four hands and vocal quartet, Op. 52, to words by Georg Friedrich Daurer, and the famous Rhapsody, Op. 53 for alto, male choir and orchestra, and to her mother, Clara, he devoted his *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121. Bernard de Ventadour transformed into music his feelings for the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine; Carlo Gesualdo de Venosa's beautiful madrigals, original in their modernity, were inspired by love, just as Joseph Haydn's Organ Concerto in C major, for Theresa Keller, Ludwig van Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata, for Giuletta Guicciardi, Franz Schubert's Fantasy in F minor for four hands, for Princess Caroline Esterhazy, Robert Schumann's *Carnaval*, Op. 9, for Ernestine von Fricken, and his 'Spring' Symphony, for his wife Clara Wieck, along with his masterpieces of song – the cycles *Dichterliebe* and *Frauenliebe und -Leben*, and the pre-marital cycle *Myrthen*, Op. 25.

Henryk Wieniawski's *Legend*, written for Isabella Hampton, his wife-to-be, played its part in the history of music, and the figure of Pauline de Ahna Strauss appears frequently in the works of her famous husband (*Ein Heldleben*, *Sinfonia domestica*, *Intermezzo*, songs), who composed the song *Malven* for the superb singer Maria Jeritza a year before his death.

One of the most important musical compositions of the twentieth century, Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite*, was conceived amid the composer's amorous sighs for Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, and Leoš Janáček's *Káťa Kabanová* and String Quartet No. 2 (*Intimate Letters*) were written for Kamila Stossel.

Stella Campbell inspired the creation of Fauré's music for *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Matilda Wesendonck was Richard Wagner's muse during the writing of *Tristan und Isolde*, while his second wife Cosima was gifted, after the birth of their son, Siegfried, with the symphonic *Siegfried Idyll*. Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony, with the famous Adagietto, came into the world thanks to his equally famous wife, Alma.

The famous female figures connected to Chopin's biography cannot be omitted: Maria Wodzińska, to whom he dedicated the Waltz in A flat major (Op. 69 No. 1) and Waltz in D flat major (Op. 64 No. 1) and Delfina Potocka, the dedicatee of the F minor Concerto. The omission in the dedi-

cations of the companion of his Parisian life, George Sand, is symptomatic.

Notably, this issue returns in the age of postmodernism: the first part ('Love is more thicker') and fourth part ('In time's noble mercy of proportion') of Eugeniusz Knapik's cycle *Up into the Silence*, to words by E. E. Cummings, are dedicated to the composer's wife, Barbara, and the whole cycle, 'on the borderline between late, pathetic Romanticism and ecstatic expressionism' is, according to its creator, 'a great book of love'.

4.

It is interesting to take a look at selected musical compositions created to amorous inspiration, written for some beloved. It will be particularly important here to analyze the technical issues, the elements of the art of sound which are characteristic of these moods, regardless of the historical period.

Thus, if the medium of courtly and courteous love was the French and German lyric verse of the troubadours, trouvères, minnesingers and meistersingers, created between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries, including the famous *Le jeu de Robin et de Marion* by Adam de la Halle, Guillaume de Machaut's ballads, the whole range of Renaissance madrigals as far as the late Baroque air de cour, instrumental compositions in the galant style, with their particular baroque rhetoric, to the rich Romantic literature, with its salon embodiment, crowned by Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, inspired by his feelings for his wife-to-be, Harriet Smithson, and that 'pure' expression of musical eroticism *Tristan und Isolde*, then we may assert the existence of specific musical genres connected to the expression of love in music, just as it is possible to infer the influence of the content and symbolism of certain textures, procedures and gestures of compositional métier.

Technical components can be analyzed on the example of compositions from various periods connected by the emotion emanating from them and by the circumstances surrounding their conception.

4.1. Liszt's 'Les cloches de Genève' in F sharp major (No. 3 in Book 1, 'Impressions et poésies', of his *Album d'un voyageur*, and later, in 1836, arranged as No. 9 of Book 1, 'Première année: Suisse', of *Années de pèlerinage*), was composed in Geneva for the birth of the composer's and d'Agoult's first daughter, Blandine, and is dedicated to her. Its textural, formal (intense potential for development) and harmonic form shows features typical of mature Romanticism; it is built in a sonata form, based on two themes, with the first theme evoking the eponymous bells (struck ten times

to symbolize the hour of the child's birth) and the second theme stylistically suggestive of a gondoliera. It is a prototypical study of both musical Impressionism and Romantic symbolism (water, the gondoliera; air, the bells).

4.2. Schumann's 'Spring' Symphony, No. 1 in B major (1841) is a joyous work, written during the happiest period of his life, following his marriage to his beloved Clara. The movements were originally to be entitled 'The coming of spring', 'Evening', 'Happy games' and 'The height of spring'; the poetic content is expressed in the composer's letters: he talks about the main fanfare theme of the 'awakening' depicted at the beginning (Andante un poco maestoso), illustrating the blossoming of the world; the music enhances this atmosphere with a figurative passage motif with the character of 'bird calls'. The other, dance-lyrical, theme is also anchored in the beginning.

The intentions and circumstances of the symphony's composition are reflected in certain elements of the music, evoking the desired associations in respect to meaning and plot:

- the appropriate textural characters, referred to above, evoking a feeling of lightness,
- the relatively uncomplicated harmonic content, with a moderate level of changeability,
- the primacy of textural changeability against rather rarefied harmonies,
- the emphasis on the influence of a rich palette of orchestral textures, in fast as well as slow tempos,
- the optimistic major-key sound of the finale of the Scherzo and the last movement,
- the contrasts between the dominant figurative sections and the cantilena sections,
- the clear form, based on a small number of themes, emphasizing rather their variability and development,
- the constructive function of the introduction (to movements I and IV) as a reservoir of thematic material for the rest of the composition,
- the wide range of musical moods: idyllic, pastoral, nocturnal, dance, hunting, march,
- the illustrative elements ('bird calls', the motif of horn and flute, the rural dance or the storm in the Scherzo, dance features).

4.3. A happy Debussy wrote (in the summer of 1904) his *L'Isle joyeuse* for his second wife, with the intention of depicting an Arcadian island, an island of mermaids, where eternal spring reigns. In formal

terms, it is a rondo with two themes, containing elements that are characteristic of Debussy's technique – whole tone scale progressions, methods of chordal parallelism, an emphasis on colouristic and tonal procedures, with a particular virtuosity in the former, and an articulative richness. Debussy displays in this composition a strong tonal anchoring (A major).

The artistic and emotional mood is clearly optimistic, lively, radiant; love in this miniature is full of light, of happiness, blossoming against the background of sunlit, shimmering nature – not romantically tragic and marked by suffering.

4.4. Francis Poulenc's *Les Mammelles de Tiresias* is marked by characteristically Poulencian humour, sarcasm and even grotesque; it is a surrealist drama with text by Guillaume Apollinaire in two acts with a prologue (1903; Poulenc's work, 1944). This buffa-style work, a suite of 'gags', is more of a poetic fantasy with a certain dose of libertinism than a story with a plot. The elements of grotesque and pseudo-archaism (sections of plainchant, sixteenth-century French chanson), the interweaving of lyrical moods with mockery, the plainchant texture with the rondo in a spring-like mood, vocal sections, choral and dance sections (waltz, galopade, polka, pavane and gavotte stylisations) all testify to the intentionality of the stylistic and artistic incoherence.

Poulenc's biographer, Henri Hell (1978, 198), writes about this piece: 'c'est un véritable tumulte musical' (op. cit, p. 198), with no moments of calm. The composer's spontaneity is also manifested by the lively melodiousness, lyrical scenes without an ounce of sentimentalism, and brilliant instrumentation. A similarity to his own *Le bal masqué*, characterized by irony and grotesque, suggests itself, or to Maurice Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole* or Emmanuel Chabrier's *Le Roi malgré lui*.

4.5. Beautiful in their subtle, lyrical atmosphere are the songs of Tadeusz Baird, among which the cycle Four Love Sonnets (words by William Shakespeare) for baritone, strings and harpsichord (1969), dedicated to Jerzy Artysz, stands out. These songs have the character of an autobiographical monodrama on the vicissitudes of love. The music accompanies the protagonist and the soloist, explicates the moods, while also concealing them, and does not emphasize the chromatic element (only to a modest degree in the instrumental layer) against the simplicity of the solo part. The archaising procedures accentuate the style and the composer's artistic intentions (fauxbourdon, modalisms, the polyphonisation of texture, the instruments treated as if they were voices, the use of diminished and parallel fifths, delays, parallelisms, pedal notes, Picardy

thirds, a small compass, a frequent recitative texture, repetitiveness as a principle of the shaping of musical narrative, a reticent mode of expression, simple formal scheme).

It is impossible to omit in our text another composition of Baird's – the *Goethe-Briefe* cantatas, for baritone, mixed choir and orchestra, to a selection from Goethe's correspondence with the famous Charlotte von Stein, composed in 1970. This is a work about love, a lyrical scene about the feelings of two people, a work full of confessions; it is an apology of sentiment. The 'mini-events' of this monodrama, with their dominant expressive, colouristic function, rooted in a rudimentary, yet fundamentally treated tonality, point to its Wagnerian influences – an inference corroborated by the role of the introduction, the Vorspiel, which is the key to the whole work, its quintessence, in respect to its expression, narrative and content. The composer himself used the expression 'dramatic-lyric form', in its Joycean sense – one 'in which the artist presents an image in direct relationship to himself, where 'music can embellish, fill, enrich the word – then there is a chance that there will emerge a composition which will interpret the word in a deeper way than could the theatre, or an actor having at his disposal none of the possibilities which sound gives' (Baird, Grzenkowicz 1982).

The composer's strong autobiographical, reflexive and romantic allusions in his works (including the erotica) are suggestive in their atmosphere, artistic expression and the range of technical means employed, in their emotional, coloristic and narrative shimmering; they are a reflection of the search for the perfect relationship between text and music, music and feeling, music and love.

5.

It will be interesting at this point to identify the components of the poetics of the musical art with regard to the depiction of love and eroticism, based on the works referred to above and other familiar compositions which already display certain invariable characteristics in the sphere of compositional technique:

- melic lyricism (Schumann, Poulenc, Baird);
- simplicity of harmonic schemes, without chromatic intensity (Schumann), but with a rapid tempo of harmonic changes and modulations treated tonally, colouristically (Liszt), and in the twentieth century leaning towards chordal diatonics (Debussy, Poulenc) and a tonality-based sonorism (Baird);
- texture endowed with great semantic richness, a form-creating and stylistic function (Liszt, Debussy, Poulenc);

- uncomplicated form, derived from the generic canons;
- dance elements (Schumann, Debussy, Poulenc), with a preference for the waltz (Schumann, First Symphony, movement II, Debussy, Poulenc);
- stylisation procedures (Debussy, Poulenc, archaisations – Baird);
- illustrative procedures (Schumann, Liszt, Poulenc);
- a rather bright mood, sometimes with a spring-like quality (Schumann, Debussy), bordering on the jocular, humorous, grotesque (Poulenc);
- the intensification of a lyrical mood marked by extraversion (Liszt, Baird);
- the use of certain textural-harmonic characters in the role of old rhetorical figures (Liszt, Poulenc, Baird).

So the composers writing the works referred to here were happy in their fulfilled love, and the cited biographical examples (e.g. Berg, Berlioz, Haydn, Janáček, Knapik, Mahler, Wagner; with the exclusion of Beethoven) testify that these moods are not isolated. Not accidentally are these works accompanied by an allusion to spring, and its realization proceeds in a quicker tempo agogically, texturally and harmonically.

Love is frequently – as can be concluded from its musical depiction – a phenomenon which inspires a composer positively, optimistically, loftily; the musical speech follows the content and the composer's intent, speaking suggestively and symbolically. The music constitutes here a gift for the beloved woman, a recollection of beautiful moments, a desire to stop time – an eternal problem for happy lovers...

Translated by Jolanta Szulakowska-Kulawik

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