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*Frank Martin's Interpretation  
of the Tristan and Isolde Myth:  
Following the Trail of a Certain Novel*

Some people may frown at a juxtaposition of the Tristan and Isolde myth, one of the greatest sources of artistic inspiration in European culture, and its numerous musical representations with a novel by Charles Morgan, a minor writer known today almost exclusively to English literature scholars. If, however, we assume that the practice of musicology, apart from the analysis of music in terms of purely sonic structures, embraces also critical reflection, then we can put forward a perspective which will – to quote Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert – ‘open up a dialogue with the maker of the work, with his unique inner world, his love, passion and dilemmas, and also the path of perfection characteristic of him and given to him’.<sup>1</sup>

I set out to scrutinise Frank Martin's work in view of certain cultural and psychological issues, as well as the social aspect of myth. Taken out of its complex context, the music score is forced to be an autonomous organism, and thus the multidimensional sense of art in the modern world becomes forgotten. Bearing an artistic and cultural message, a work of art is a carrier of meanings beyond the author's intent – meanings to be reached and understood. Moreover, this process of reaching out toward meaning does not exhaust itself in a single act of cognition, supposed to establish a certain truth once and for all. I would like to adopt here Hans-Georg Gadamer's premise of the ‘inexhaustibility’ of the meaning of art as well as the ever renewed process of its understanding.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Herbert, ‘Willem Duyster (1599–1635) albo Dyskretny urok soldateski’ [Willem Duyster, or the Discreet charm of the soldiery], *Zeszyty Literackie* 68 (1999), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘Estetyka i hermeneutyka’ [Aesthetics and hermeneutics], in *Rozum, słowo, dzieje* [Reason, word and history], trans. Małgorzata Łukasiewicz (Warsaw, 1979).

Martin's oratorio *Le Vin herbé* was composed in 1938–1941. Initially, Martin wrote only the first part (later entitled 'Le Philtre'), commissioned by Robert Blum, choirmaster of the Zürich Madrigalchor. After its success, the composer decided to expand it with two further parts, 'La Forêt du Morois' and 'La Mort', finishing off with a short Prologue and Epilogue. 'Le Philtre' thus became the drama's exposition. Each of the three sections consists of five to seven 'tableaux', built independently in respect to form. The very term 'tableau' can be seen as suggesting that Martin's work be located on the borderline between stage music (chamber opera<sup>3</sup>) and a contemporary reincarnation of the madrigal. Although some episodes have been given a dramatic quality reminiscent of opera (e.g. I.6<sup>4</sup>), Martin tends rather toward an epic construction. He wanted to create the atmosphere of a medieval epic poem, 'filled with the quivering of a legendary tone'<sup>5</sup> and with a timeless dimension.

The limiting of the cast to twelve vocalists and eight instruments (as stipulated in the commission) contributed in effect to the creation of one of the most original oratorios in the literature of this genre. The narration is assigned to the chorus, from which the solo parts of the individual dramatis personae (Tristan, Isolde, King Mark, Brangien and others) are taken. But since these roles are interchangeable (there is even a solo narrative part), the distinction between the soloists and the chorus is dissolved. This is one of the fundamental dissimilarities of *Le Vin herbé* from a traditional opera or oratorio: the lack of leading and secondary parts, with each singer given a mobile set of roles. In group episodes Martin uses three kinds of expressive means: monody, isorhythmic chant and polyphony (this last means is actually used only twice, when contributing to climax). The solo parts are more expressive and dramatic; their melodic line is more fluctuating and rhythmically varied than that of the purely narrative, descriptive passages. However, despite a seeming modesty of artistic devices, bereft of any showiness, swagger or operatic acrobatics (lack of traditional recitatives and arias), the composer achieved a great intensity of expression.

<sup>3</sup> The first stage presentation of *Le Vin herbé*, directed by Oscar Franz Schuh, was given in August (15, 20, 24, 28) 1948 in Salzburg. The soloists and Wiener Staatsoper choir were conducted by Ferenc Fricsay, set design by Caspar Nehar (cf. Friedrich Wildgans, 'Frank Martins "Le Vin herbé" zur szenischen Aufführung bei den Salzburger Festspielen', *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 3 (1948), 192-196). *Le Vin herbé* has been staged 27 times in all, mostly in Germany. On the composer's scepticism towards the idea of staging the oratorio, see Kerstin Schüssler, *Frank Martins Musiktheater. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Oper im 20. Jahrhundert* (Kassel, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Roman numerals refer to the part, Arabic numerals to the tableau.

<sup>5</sup> Willi Schuh, *Schweizer Musik der Gegenwart* (Zurich, 1948), 133.

Seven string instruments (two violins, two violas, two cellos, one double bass) and a piano make up a 'chamber ensemble' which unobtrusively accompanies the voices and helps to create the moods of successive tableaux. Of the few purely instrumental passages, particularly notable are the solo introductions to certain sections (e.g. I.3, I.5, II.3, III.5, III.6) and also the mimetic passages (illustration of the movement of waves in I.2 and I.6) and symbolic passages (e.g. solo violin in a dodecaphonic series attributed to love as a signifying structure<sup>6</sup>). In deciding on such homogenous, modest instrumental forces, Martin deliberately relinquished the possibility of using the means of so-called 'painting with sound', which is so characteristic of works of the literary-musical genre and programme music. The absence of the symphonic element, different interpretational approach (epic), lack of grandiosity, controlled emotionalism – all closer to the Gallic than the Germanic spirit – make Martin's work an antithesis of Wagnerian drama. In the same way as Martin's spiritual attitude was far-removed from Richard Wagner, *Le Vin herbé* and *Tristan und Isolde* are different not only formally, but also psychologically. The opposition comes mainly from the underlying literary material and a dissimilar reading and interpretation of the myth: the grand myth of love, which has produced the most perfect epiphanies in Western lyric output.

The great impact of the Tristan and Isolde myth – of the fatal love, purified by pain and sanctified by death – has been repeatedly evidenced from the first oral Celtic sources up to the masterpieces of the twentieth century. It is a triumphant apotheosis of love 'together with the whole immensity of its lust, lies, sublimity and debasement, worship and dishonour, happy intoxication and tragic misery'.<sup>7</sup> Wagner's work opened a new chapter in the myth's interpretation, being itself a model realisation of such an interpretation, since it appeals to the listener through the impulse of Dionysian music. 'Vermöge der Musik geniessen sich die Leidenschaften selbst' [By the power of music, the passions take pleasure in themselves], as we read in Nietzsche.<sup>8</sup> As the least material of all the media of ideas, music alone is able to express directly the mystery and spontaneity of Eros. This Nietzschean belief is backed by Søren Kier-

<sup>6</sup> An extensive discussion of compositional issues relating to this work, including the dodecaphonic technique and the question of leitmotif, can be found in Chapter 2 ('*Le Vin herbé – opus magnum*') of my book *Język muzyczny Franka Martina* [The musical language of Frank Martin] (Łódź, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Tadeusz Zeleński-Boy, Introduction, in Joseph Bédier, *Dzieje Tristana i Izoldy* [The romance of Tristan and Isolde] (Poznań, 1949), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Jenseits von Gut und Böse', in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1980), 92.

kegaard. In his famous essay on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, he points to music as the only medium capable of presenting the 'sensuous in its elemental originality'. We read there:

In der Skulptur läßt sie sich nicht darstellen denn sie ist an und für sich etwas Innerliches. Ebensovwenig läßt sich malen, denn sie läßt sich nicht in einen bestimmten Umriß fassen, da sie in all ihrem lyrischen Schwung eine Kraft, ein Sturm, eine Leidenschaft ist, und das nicht in einem einzelnen Moment, sondern in einer Succession von Momenten.<sup>9</sup>

[It cannot be represented in sculpture, because it is something internal, in and for itself; it cannot be painted, for it cannot be fixed within definite contours. In its lyricism, it is a force, a wind, impatience, passion, etc., yet in such a way that it exists not in one instant but in a succession of instants].

There is a point here. It is in music (apart, of course, from literature) that the Tristan myth has evoked the grandest responses. One can speak of more or less significant links to it in Richard Strauss, Arnold Schönberg, Olivier Messiaen, Mieczysław Karłowicz, Karol Szymanowski, Tadeusz Baird and many others, up to Claude Debussy (his *Pelléas et Mélisande* as *Tristan à rebours*). On the other hand, the history of art has not noted any major paintings or sculptures beyond mere illustrations incorporated in successive editions of the story of Tristan and Isolde.

The popularity of the Tristan myth was further reinforced by its reconstruction in *Le Roman de Tristan et Iseult* by Joseph Bédier, published in 1900. Bédier (1864–1938), a specialist in French medieval literature, reconstructed the whole of the Tristan and Isolde legend on the basis of all known versions. He found that forty out of sixty episodes appear in two or more versions.<sup>10</sup> This led him to the conviction that in all probability there must have had existed a pre-poem about Tristan, of which the twelfth- and thirteenth-century versions are variants, and this prompted him to give his scholarly hypothesis an artistic form. Bédier's *Le Roman de Tristan et Iseult* is marked by both simplicity and sophistication: the author's erudition does not overwhelm and the archaic stylisation is harmoniously intertwined in the texture of the work. Bédier shows how the episodes and situations are derived from the adopted conception of the conflict and from the clearly portrayed characters of the main protagonists. However, as Zygmunt Czerny has pointed out, 'the sober Latin mind of the learned scholar did not fully convey the melancholic, dream-like atmosphere, the lunar glimmer of the Celtic legend,

<sup>9</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Entweder – Oder* (Dresden, 1909), 61. English quotation from *Either/Or*, Part I, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Eric S. Murell, *Girart de Roussillou and the 'Tristan' Poems* (Chesterfield, 1926).

the sinister strength of the conflict or the pantheistic mood and mysterious charm of primitive nature'.<sup>11</sup> The Polish medievalist is drawn more to the approaches of German romantics, who – just like Wagner – relied on Gottfried von Strassburg's thirteenth-century version and emphasised the fatalism, pessimism and sensuality of Tristanian love. We can see here a polarity between the irrational Germanic element and the Latin element in European culture, associated with elegance, detachment and reflectiveness. This opposition plays an important role in the modern reception of the Tristan and Isolde myth, and not only thanks to Bédier. Many years before Martin, Claude Debussy was considering a project for a lyric drama based on the myth in the Bédier version. The composer wanted to 'restituer à Tristan son caractère légendaire, si déformé par Wagner et par cette métaphysique douteuse' [restore to Tristan his legendary character, so deformed by Wagner and by dubious metaphysics].<sup>12</sup>

The range of solutions in literature is even greater. According to Denis de Rougemont, the author of such books as *Love in the Western World* and *The Myths of Love*, the theme of the passion borne of the distance or conflict between illegitimate love and the pressure of social duty occurs in most true romances, that is, those Western novels which 'independently of their literary value, popularity, readership and importance for humankind contain the dominant medieval archetype of Tristan'.<sup>13</sup> Indispensable to this archetype is first of all the existence of a distance between the main characters, or an obstacle – not necessarily in the shape of a third person – which renders their union impossible. The obstacle is usually of a moral or social order, e.g. the binding law, a sense of loyalty, marital fidelity, intolerance or taboo. King Mark may therefore be an embodiment of common morality, accepted social norms or even a particular political system. Consequently, among twentieth-century novels – examples referring to the mythical scheme – de Rougemont analyses works as disparate as *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil or *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak. Let's mention here also *Tristan 46* by Maria Kuncewiczowa, a novel about the life of a Polish emigrant after the Second World War, where the role of a love potion is assigned to César Franck's Symphony in D minor.

According to de Rougemont, understanding the legend of Tristan in terms of a 'touching story of a nearly innocent love, only by chance not

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<sup>11</sup> Zygmunt Czerny, Introduction, in Joseph Bédier, *Dzieje Tristana i Izoldy* [The romance of Tristan and Isolde] trans. Tadeusz Żeleński-Boy (Kraków, 1991), 23.

<sup>12</sup> From Debussy's letter to Victor Segalen, 26 July 1907; Claude Debussy, *Lettres*, ed. François Lesure (Paris, 1980), 161.

<sup>13</sup> Denis de Rougemont, *Mity o miłości* [Fr. orig. *Les Mythes de l'Amour*, Paris, 1972], trans. Maria Zurowska (Warszawa 2002), 37.

falling within the bonds of marriage'<sup>14</sup> is an anachronism and oversimplification. After all, it is in the name of love – that cosmic power, independent of volition and self-destructive – that crimes are committed here: crimes of betrayal, adultery, the recurrent breach of vassal duties, the violation of the oath and holy sacrament of marriage, perjury, and even the use of black magic. This love is based on two opposing elements – the primal passion of the flesh and a childishly pure rapture of the soul – and two dimensions: the erotic and the mystical. It is the highest treasure of life and valued over life itself, but at the same time it is paid for with inner turmoil, renunciation and readiness for death. It is characterised in equal measure by bliss and by pain, ecstasy and remorse, joy and melancholy. Discussing the Tristan myth as a fatal rapture of passion inflamed with a challenge to morality, de Rougemont ultimately wonders whether we may not be witnessing today the end of the romance as a genre. In an age when nothing is forbidden anymore, when the last taboos of lifestyle and morality have been abolished, when everything is allowed and 'subjected solely to the rules of hygiene and sociology',<sup>15</sup> is there any room for a literature based on the mystery of love under the banner of Tristan?

Martin made use of ten of the nineteen chapters in Bédier<sup>16</sup>: 'Tristan's childhood' (Prologue), 'The Philtre' (Part I), 'Brangien turned over to slaves', 'The tall pine', 'The leap from the chapel', 'The forest of Morois', 'Ogrin the hermit' (Part II), 'Isolde of the White Hands', 'The madness of Tristan', 'The death of Tristan' (Part III). Only chapter 4 ('The Philtre') and the last ('The death') were quoted more or less in full. There are also the episodes of Tristan's leap from a castle window and his stay with Isolde in the forest of Morois, King Mark finding them both asleep in a forest hut (separated by an unsheathed sword), which evoked in both the lovers remorse, perplexity and the decision to part, and also Isolde of the White Hands and Kaherdin (absent in the Wagner). Martin's composition of the text suggests a shift in focus from sensual experiences to suffering. From the moment Brangien utters the dramatic words: 'Iseut, amie, et vous, Tristan, c'est votre mort que vous avez bue!' [Isolde, my friend, and you, Tristan, it is your death that you have drunk], it becomes evident that love and death are inseparable. However, death in Bédier/Martin is treated with an acceptance of inevitability rather than with fatalistic undertones. It is the peace of death, not the ghastliness of death, that emanates from the last pages of the work. A purely autobiographical expla-

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> English quotations from Joseph Bédier are taken from *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, trans. Hilaire Belloc (London, 1913).

nation of this attitude would not do justice here, although the sudden death of the composer's wife, Irène, in May 1939, just between the completion of Part I and the commencement of work on parts II and III of *Le Vin herbé*, and only eight years after their marriage, must have had some impact. Nonetheless, Martin's 'befriending of death' comes from a much deeper source: the unity of life, faith and the composer's artistic attitude.

In a speech delivered at the second performance of *Le Vin herbé* (Part I) in Zurich (23 January 1941), Martin mentioned his fascination with the novel *Sparkenbroke* by the English writer Charles Lambridge Morgan (1894–1958).<sup>17</sup> Reading it in 1938 was a source of some inspiration in the course of his work on the oratorio, partly due to the Tristan myth analogies. Morgan is generally considered a 'minor' author. Praised in France for their aestheticism, sophistication of style and romantic-mystical mood, his books are regarded by British critics as 'middle class literature'. A lofty style of describing banal marital infidelities, pseudo-philosophical reflections and 'literary tailorship' are among the objections raised. However, critics do stress his ability, rare among the authors of the time, to assimilate complicated philosophical ideas in an accessible way to readers.<sup>18</sup> Morgan was most successful in the 1930s and 1940s. Among the characters of his novels and dramas we often meet aristocrats (either by lineage or of spirit), artists (like the painter in *Portrait in a Mirror*, the poet in *Sparkenbroke* or the writer in *The River Line*) or scientists, all entrapped in difficult moral dilemmas, seeking an ideal love, consumed by creative unrest. They usually lack the courage to face up to life and confine themselves in a state of 'mental, moral and spiritual elegant invalidism',<sup>19</sup> which brings them to death. The drama hinges on an insoluble conflict between sensuous life and passions, on the one hand, and spiritual life and dreams of an ideal world on the other.

The novel about the life and love of Lord Sparkenbroke was published in 1936 and was quite a success. Today – despite the unquestionable anachronisms of narration (slow, with numerous philosophical and theological digressions) and a lofty, exaggerated style – it catches the reader's attention with its aura of solemnity and mysteriousness, as well as its psychological verity and deep emotionality. The story of the lord's life is told with an absolute seriousness, without any detachment on the author's

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<sup>17</sup> See 'Réflexions générales à propos du Vin herbé', in *Un compositeur médite sur son art*, ed. M. Martin (Neuchâtel, 1977), 33–7, and 'Le Vin herbé (1938 et 1940-41)', in *À propos de... Commentaries de Frank Martin sur ses oeuvres*, ed. M. Martin (Neuchâtel, 1984), 28–33.

<sup>18</sup> Alfred C. Ward, *Twentieth-Century English Literature 1901-1960* (Frome, 1964).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

part or any trace of triviality. In descriptions of the scenery of the English manor and garden, as well as Italy (Lucca), with its characteristic atmosphere, one can sense Romantic influences, particularly from novels of the ilk of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. The subject of death as a basic problem of the metaphysics of being points to a link with modernism. However, the general conception of the formal structure, the development of themes, and also the symbolism of certain props and gestures rely on a free interpretation of the Tristan and Isolde story. This reference runs on two levels. Lord Piers Sparkenbroke, a distinguished poet, is working on a new version of the myth, while at the same time experiencing an extraordinary love of a Tristanian nature. Since early childhood his life has been touched with drama. First there was the drama of his mother, who left her husband, taking young Piers with her. After she died (cf. Tristan's orphanhood), the father took Piers back, but then all traces of his mother were cleared from the manor. The scene of a half-brother shutting Piers in a tomb prefigures his premature death. His best friend, George (Mary's future husband), who found him, would say many years later: '[Mary] is also part of your necessity [...] like your art and [...] your tomb' (p. 245).<sup>20</sup>

Married out of convenience to Etty and detached from his own son, Piers devotes all his time and thought to work. But at the age of forty he meets Mary – a beautiful, innocent girl with a deep affection for poetry: an embodiment of the perfect woman. Initially, Mary does not know who he is. Fascinated with their conversations about art and poetry, she indulges in meetings with the mysterious stranger. In their conversations, the name of Sparkenbroke crops up, and it turns out that Mary knows and values his poems. Still unaware of his identity, she asks him to explain the words of the Lord-poet about death being a complement to life. Besides poetry and love, death is life's main companion, as Sparkenbroke's credo runs. Ecstasy in love can only be compared to ecstasy in poetry and in death (p. 98).

The description of the first meeting between Mary and Lord Sparkenbroke contains the usual Tristanian motives: apart from a hidden identity there is also a forest (the scene of all the major events) and the theme of quenching thirst. In Derry's Wood, Mary offers Piers water from a stream in her clasped hands:

his lips' movement which, by rapturous transmission, seemed to lay the touch of feathered wings upon her breasts; and suddenly her hands were parted [...]. She shook the last drops on to the willow root, feeling that she was throwing away

<sup>20</sup> All quotations from *Sparkenbroke* come from the Albatros edition, Leipzig-Paris-Bologna 1938.



her life [...] When he was drinking from her hands, all that she knew of herself, her character, her strength of mind [...] had flowed out from her (pp. 130–1).

When Tristan and Isolde drank the potion, Brangien 'entra et les vis qui se regardaient en silence, comme égarés et comme ravis' [entered and saw them gazing at each other in silence, as though distracted and rapt], as Bédier writes (chapter 4). For Piers, his meeting Mary has released in him a strength and vitality; her presence has gradually awoken in him a dormant richness of imagination.

Yet the love between Piers and Mary cannot be fulfilled without a breach of oath. Therefore, Piers leaves England and secludes himself on his Italian estate, burying himself completely in his work on *Tristan*. Mary marries George, Piers's closest childhood friend, who takes care of her after her father dies. Over the course of subsequent meetings, it becomes increasingly apparent that the conflict between love (Piers: 'She is in all the breath of my thought', p. 297) and loyalty and fidelity (Mary: 'Simply, to keep my word', together with the Decalogue and the two commandments of love, represent the principles according to which she leads her life) is insoluble. This leads Mary to consider suicide, and eventually to relinquish love. She prays: 'Teach me to love him without sin. Though we do not meet, let us not fear to remember. If we meet, be with us then' (p. 416).

Meanwhile, Piers dies of a heart attack, but he still manages to write in a farewell letter: 'I love you not in the body only, or in the mind only, but in the core of my imagination. In you [...] I may die to my former self. I love you for this mystery, and for the simplicity of your own life within it [...]. With you, the one believable innocence among all the false innocencies of life, I come as near to absolute communication with another human being as I shall in this world' (p. 466). As in the case of Tristan and Isolde, love has become for the protagonists a sign of the negation of the whole of their previous life and of the transformation of their personalities. According to Piers, for whom Tristan is the opposite of Don Juan (a well-established concept, cf. de Rougemont), the act of love is not 'a delight of the senses but an ecstasy in which separate being is consumed.' The only alternative to this ecstasy is death, whereas poetry and art are its equivalents (p. 314). The Tristanian love is therefore for Morgan an absolute, transcendent love, which displays certain traits of a mystical experience, accompanied by its sense of total unity with the loved being and an impression of stepping beyond time and space.

But it seems Martin was inspired not only by Morgan's interpretation of the myth. Even more important appears to be the level of the novel where the author shares, through the words of the main hero, his own thoughts with regard to art, the artist's vocation, the essence of creativity, and finally the ethos of art. As late as in June 1942, that is, a year

after the completion of *Le Vin herbé* and several months after the first performance of the oratorio, in his personal notes<sup>21</sup> Martin returns to *Sparkenbroke* when considering the duties of art. “The divine essence of man, which art and death liberate, isn’t necessarily “good”; it has two aspects, godlike and devilish; their contest is the drama of the spirit. Art gets the curtain up’ – and that, according to Piers/Morgan, is all (p. 62). This spiritual drama must find its representation in the human drama, Martin adds. This material form may be supplied by a tragedy of love such as *Sparkenbroke*, such as *Le Vin herbé*. And art must not turn away from this battle, which is fought both among people and inside man. ‘L’art doit fair lever le rideau’ [art has to raise the curtain], as Martin, the author of ‘Responsabilité du compositeur’, puts it unequivocally.<sup>22</sup> In this key essay for his ethical-esthetical system, Martin stresses the author’s responsibility for the form and meaning of his work, for the selection of the basic element or elements which will shape the general tone of the work. However, he is not proposing the evoking of idealistic visions in art or the naive construction of worlds detached from reality; instead he advocates approaching reality simply and directly. Neither is the idea to imitate life; art should point to the values to which life should aspire.

So what is art and creativity to the artist? ‘His art holds out to him something – some promise and expectation – that makes him, by our standards, mad with eagerness. The promise of love and expectation of death.’ Not only this, though: ‘art [is] the most profound of all the intimations of immortality.’ Piers goes on to explain it further: ‘Beneath the impact of a work of art [...] we undergo a kind of conversion. Our stiffness breaks, we flow again; we are aware, as at no other time, of a continuity in ourselves [...]. A work of art [...] yields a recognition, which seems almost a remembrance, of what was before birth and what shall be after death.’ (*Sparkenbroke*, p. 64).

The theme of the ethos of art was elaborated also in essays and articles by both Martin and Morgan. When we compare their titles, e.g. Morgan’s ‘The Artist in the Community’ and ‘The Independence of Writers’, and Martin’s 1971 text ‘Le rôle d’art dans la société d’aujourd’hui’, the similarity seems striking; however, the two authors emphasise different points. Martin takes up mainly a discussion with avant-garde art, while Morgan’s approach tends to be more sociological; *nota bene*, the lecture on ‘The Independence of Writers’ he gave in 1948, at the *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*. Whether the two men met there is not certain. (Martin left Geneva in 1946 and moved to the Netherlands, but he naturally stayed in touch with his city of

<sup>21</sup> They were published after the composer’s death as ‘Réflexions intimes’ in the collection of texts *Un compositeur*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 227.

origin). It is interesting to note their parallel views on the genesis of the process of composing. Martin, at home with the free forms of a rhapsodically flowing narration, compares a musical piece to a living organism which 'croît, sans que la volonté de l'auteur puisse intervenir autrement que celle de l'arboriculteur qui "conduit" son pommier et lui donne la forme désirée'<sup>23</sup> [grows without the author's will being able to intervene in a different manner to that of a gardener who 'guides' an apple tree and imparts to it the desired form]. This sounds like a far echo of Sparkenbroke, who considers art to be a kind of representing of nature, a selecting of a natural phenomenon and its subjecting to the power of creative influence. The creator, like a gardener, continually produces new forms of this phenomenon, interbreeding it with others and transforming until eventually life itself becomes a work of art, a poetic vision, the contour of a drawing, the vibration of a sound (cf. *Sparkenbroke*, p. 135).

In his essay "The Word "Serenity", Morgan discusses a concept which played a very important role in the art of former times and was completely forgotten in the twentieth century. From the ancient Greeks to Jean Renoir, via *The Tempest*,<sup>24</sup> 'the serenest of plays'<sup>25</sup> ever created, through Giotto di Bondone, Vincenzo Bellini and Mozart, artists searched for the particular shade of luminosity which would render their work immortal. For Morgan this means such a penetration with light as brings both peace and purity. This is not to be confused with dull complacency or the transparency of colourlessness. Light is the opposite of darkness or murkiness, whereas peace comes from an acceptance of fate, reaching the state of being spiritually in peace with the world. 'Serenity marks an essential distinction between good and evil, and that its presence or its absence is one of the means by which good and evil may be defined',<sup>26</sup> says Morgan. The idea of serenity is also one of the key concepts in Martin's aesthetics. Art should be a fountain of peace and calm, although this does not rule out the possibility of expressing longing and pain. However, all unrest which accompanies the act of creation should be eventually overcome. Without necessarily bringing solace, through its beauty art should bring liberation to man. The liberation of Isolde is symbolised by a pure C major chord in the scene of her death (III.6) in *Le Vin herbé*. Martin's work as a whole, meanwhile, is one of the most convincing examples of serenity in twentieth-century music.

*Translated by Dorota Rossowska*

<sup>23</sup> Martin, 'L'expérience créatrice', in *Un compositeur*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> *The Tempest*, after Shakespeare, is Martin's most important opera.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Morgan, "The Word "Serenity", in *The Writer and His World* (London, 1960), 51.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

