

Next on

Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

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Encore presentations of the entire *Discoveries* series every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. on WRTI-HD2

Saturday, October 13th, 2012, 5:00-6:00 p.m. (2nd Saturday this month!)

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937). [Violin Concerto No. 1](#) (1916). Nicola Benedetti, violin, London Symphony Orchestra, Daniel Harding. Deutsche Grammophon 6154, Tr 1-3, 26:59

Szymanowski. [Symphony No. 3, "The Song of the Night"](#) (1916). Steve Davislum, tenor, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Pierre Boulez. Deutsche Grammophon 4778771, Disc 1, Tr 3-5, 25:28



Squeezed between a Russian revolution that destroyed his home, and a world war that destroyed the rest, Karol Szymanowski finally found escape in the art that had so long eluded him.

By 1914, the Polish composer, born in the Ukraine, had come to an impasse. His preparation and his training were failing him. Folk music had energized many other cultures in his generation, but he saw it as old-fashioned and an artifice. Chopin, whom he loved, was the greatest of all Polish composers, but seemed both ubiquitous and beside the point. Expression in the new century demanded different methods and different sounds. But how to choose from among them?

The extravagant German Romanticism of Mahler and Richard Strauss trumpeted irrevocable cadences of cosmic certitude. In France, Debussy and Ravel were knitting wisps of hinted harmonic incense into glowing twilights of ineffable sadness.

Young Polish poets spoke of transcending life, penetrating the universe, and of an art evolving into the highest of all religions. The Russian Scriabin was singing of this new aspiration in his symphonies.

Everywhere Szymanowski looked, things were new. He traveled to Sicily and North Africa, studying Arabic, Greek, and Eastern mythology. As exoticism started to shift boundaries for him, he noticed something strange: even tradition could be enticing. When the Great War erupted in 1914, he was forced to cease wandering and return home. There, through long hours of work, a new language began to emerge. By 1916, he had composed two works—huge works—that would define his career, the First Violin Concerto and the Third Symphony.

It was almost as if he wasn't choosing a new musical expression, but that these influences were choosing him. The sure tonal direction of the Romantics was there, but rising and dissipating faster. Parisian Impressionism spun out high melismatic solos that sounded Moorish at times. Harmonies were at turns bold and muted, with altered scales suggesting Russian mysticism, Debussy, or the East. It was all fashioned with brilliant orchestration as strong as Strauss and as piquant as Ravel. The Persian poetry of Rumi was turned into a symphony about planets, constellations, sleeping, and gods:

"Such quiet, others sleep... I and God alone together in this night... Truth with gleaming wing is shining in this night!"

In that one year, Karol Szymanowski awoke his art. This concerto and symphony are astonishing works of freshness and expression. They sound like everything around at the time, yet like nothing else.

It is difficult to describe music at all, but Szymanowski's music seems especially so, being so varied and striking. Perhaps Simon Rattle said it best. On his first encounter with this composer (with his later *Stabat Mater*), Sir Simon relates that it was love at first sight. "I cannot talk objectively about Szymanowski, for you cannot expect objectivity or reason from someone in love. And reason is out of place where his music is concerned."

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), former Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).