

**Folk influences as an aid to performance:
Szymanowski's *Mazurkas*, Op. 62**

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Abstract

This paper examines Karol Szymanowski's *Mazurkas*, Op. 62 in the context of Polish folk traditions. Whilst Chopin draws on the folk music from the Mazovia region in his *Mazurkas*, Szymanowski exploits a very distinctive folk music from the Tatra Mountains of the Podhale region. Through this exploration of cultural influence, from the perspective of a practising musician, I propose that this particular folk influence could serve as a possible interpretative strategy for the *Mazurkas*, Op. 62.

Keywords: Szymanowski, folk music, performance, Chopin

Introduction

Just as the music of Bartók draws on Hungarian folk influences and Grieg's on Norwegian, Szymanowski's late works draw on Polish folk traditions. This influence is particularly explored in his two sets of *Mazurkas*, Op. 50 and Op. 62. In this paper I propose to contextualise Opus 62 within Polish folk music and explore what implications this may have for performance.

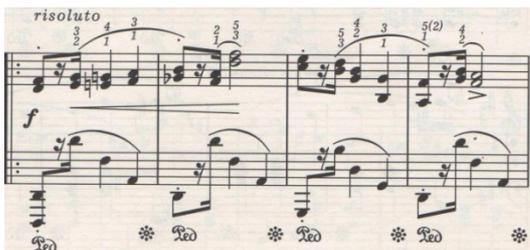
In referring to the genre of mazurka in the title of this opus, Szymanowski invokes the memory of Chopin—suggesting certain interpretative approaches to performers. The music to which Chopin applies the name 'mazurka' uses elements of three folk dances from the Mazovia region forming the 'mazur group': the kujawiak, mazur and oberek. This complicates the ways in which the memory of Chopin might influence a reading of Szymanowski's pieces: should we attempt to capture the distinctive properties of these original dance-types?

Although all three dances of mazurka are in triple time, their tempos, distinguishing features and characters are explicitly varied. The kujawiak is a slow dance with a flowing style and mostly weak accents. Its character is lyrical, calm and melancholic.



Musical example 1: Chopin, *Mazurka*, Op. 62 No 2, bars: 1-4

The mazur generally has a faster, yet still moderate tempo. Its dynamic and buoyant character is emphasised by strong and irregular accents.



Musical example 2: Chopin, *Mazurka*, Op. 30 No 3, bars: 9-12

The oberek is the fastest of the dances, characterised by a whirling flow which is occasionally interrupted by sudden stops of movement. The accents are strong but regular, supporting the joyful, lively and temperamental mood of the dance.



Musical example 3: Chopin, *Mazurka*, Op. 33 No 3, bars: 1-4

While Szymanowski draws on all these styles and the memory of Chopin, Tadeusz A. Zieliński comments that “Szymanowski proves that the piano mazurka was not a 'historic' concept forever tied with Chopin and his age (and subject to mere imitations), but rather a living and dynamic thing that develops just as well as other musical forms” (1997: 247). Szymanowski’s *Mazurkas* are in fact not only modern versions of the Chopinesque genre, but also a manifestation of another Polish folk tradition: that of Mountain Music. This culture, from the Southern region of Poland, is explicitly different from the folk music of Mazovia. Considered as more masculine and austere, it is

distinguished by duple time, sharp syncopations, staccato articulation, aggressive chords and unique modal scales.

Besides his interest in this particular folk music, Szymanowski also drew on it for certain ideological reasons. While re-working the notion of Polish-ness in his music, the composer revisited Chopin's *Mazurkas*—works considered to embody the essence of Polish character. However, as noted by Jim Samson, Szymanowski believed that the mazurka “had more or less stagnated and that the only means of reviving it was by a kind of stylistic cross-breeding of different folk regions” (1980: 169). To that end, Szymanowski intertwined the genre of mazurka with Mountain Music to achieve an innovative approach to Polish national music. According to Wightman, the *Mazurkas*, Op. 50 provide “an excellent demonstration of [the mountain] barbarism to invigorate by cross-breeding a moribund tradition which had been in steady decline since Chopin's contribution to the genre” (1999: 289).

However, the subject of this paper, the *Mazurkas*, Op. 62, is considered by musicologists to have little connection with folk traditions. In analysis of these works, researchers tend to focus on non-mazurka features of this music, such as its particular serenity, sophistication and intellectualism, claiming that there are only occasional appearances of characteristic mazurka features (Chylinska 2007, Zielinski 1997, Wightman 1999). These pieces are certainly complex and elusive: their elaborate texture, distinctive sound world, and aphoristic style (common of the twentieth century miniature) may seemingly depict little evidence of folk influences. Through intense practice, reflection, lessons and concerts of this opus, however, I have discovered that folk traditions are in fact implicit in these pieces, and may constitute a creative interpretative strategy for performers. In this study I examine how the exploration of folk influences may enrich performers' understanding of these *Mazurkas* and, thus, inform their interpretation. Of particular importance will be Mountain Music, as I argue that this tradition has a crucial meaning in Szymanowski's late works. My intention, however, is not to provide a 'correct' interpretation, but to explore this important dimension of possible expressive qualities. To that end, I shall first identify the characteristics of Mountain Music which are relevant to the *Mazurkas*, Op. 62, and then examine how these qualities can be conveyed in performance.

Richness of Mountain Music

Although Polish Mountain Music is commonly perceived as harsh, primitive and masculine, it has a very complex nature, including lyricism and delicacy (Domańska 2002: 41). According to Christopher Palmer, Szymanowski is:

drawn to a more rugged [mountain] music, a more massive, less finished art – folk-art – [...] not only through sympathy with the more obvious qualities of ruggedness and masculinity, but also because he divines the sweetness, the vulnerability, which lies at the heart of the strength. Once, we realise this, our eyes open to new dimensions (1983: 82).

The austere lyricism permeating Mountain Music is commonly emphasised in performances through the use of flexible tempo. Certain practices assume a very particular style of rubato. For example, the melodies sung by musicians between dances would be performed, according to Domańska, such that the beginning and the end of the phrase would be faster than a slower middle section (2002: 39). This particular style of rubato is different from the commonly accepted manner in classical music, in which the opposite tempo relationship occurs (i.e. slower – faster – slower).

Other important features of Mountain Music are three- or five-bar phrasing and duple metre—dissimilar from the music of Mazovia and its regular four-bar phrasing and triple metre. Szymanowski, in drawing on both traditions in his *Mazurkas*, distinguishes himself from Chopin, achieving a unique combination of opposing features.

In addition to its lyricism, Mountain Music is also characterised by particular narrative patterns. This is derived from the practice of story-telling typical of the mountain culture. In traditional singing, such narrative quality would be suggested by a flexible tempo, musical suspensions typical of a natural speech, and accentuation closely related to the mountain dialect. In this language, certain syllables are strongly accentuated (especially the first in a word or a phrase) and the vocal timbre characteristically descends at the end of a sentence. In addition, another feature connected with the mountain narrative is the practice of 'nodding'. This refers to the listeners' habit of agreeing with the speaker's words. Like the choir in the Greek tragedy, they confirm the truthfulness of the speech or comment upon it.

The improvisatory character of Mountain Music is derived from the practice of repeating the same melody in a slightly altered or embellished way. According to Piotr Dahling, it was typical of folk violinists to decorate, alter and diversify motives, but always within the scope of recognition (2007: 143). Joanna Domańska, on the other hand, claims that such practice is more closely related to improvisations of the famous mountain musician, Sabała. According to Ferdynand Hoesick, Sabała was “an inexhaustible source of paraphrases [...] and rarely repeated a melody twice in the same way” in his story-telling (1922: 181).

The final feature of Mountain Music I wish to highlight is the resulting sound quality of long, held bass notes. Traditionally, they would be played by the *dudy podhalanskie*, an old mountain instrument similar to a bagpipe. Such long drone notes, lasting several bars, enrich the texture and create a very characteristic timbre. This sound, along with the other features of Mountain Music, has been drawn upon within the music of Szymanowski.

Analysing the *Mazurkas, Op. 62* in performance

In light of the characteristic features of Mountain Music, I shall now examine *Mazurkas, Op. 62* in search for the implicit traces of such folk influences and demonstrate how various performers approach particular passages indicating which interpretations most convey the mountain style. As previously mentioned, the influence of Mountain Music constitutes only one possible expressive dimension of these pieces. Therefore, for contrast, I shall attempt to determine what other influences can be recognised in different performances. For this analysis, I will examine various recordings of the works by both Polish and non-Polish pianists, including Jerzy Godziszewski, Anna Kijanowska, Marc-Andre Hamelin, Martin Roscoe, Martin Jones and Roland Pontinen.

The main subjects in both *Mazurkas* are lyrical, suggesting Mountain Music through several features. The first dance, for example, uses the modal scale typical of Mountain Music, with a raised fourth and a lowered seventh scale degree.



Musical example 4: Szymanowski, *Mazurka*, Op. 62 No 1, bars 1-4

Although all of the pianists play the same notes, in certain recordings the mountain colouring is easier to perceive than in others. For example, Kijanowska plays this passage quite slowly, giving time to hear the complex harmonic nuances. Furthermore, by playing this theme at a fairly even tempo, she achieves the quality of austere lyricism and simplicity typical of certain mountain melodies.



Recording excerpt 1: Kijanowska (track 21, 1-10s.)

In contrast, Hamelin plays this passage much quicker, explicitly rushing the third beats of the second and the fourth bars. In doing so, he succeeds in achieving a dance-like character—suggesting the influence of the genre—but consequently underplaying the possible mountain colouring.



Recording excerpt 2: Hamelin (track 26, 1-7s.)

This passage also reveals a duple metrical grouping, another unique trace of Mountain Music. While the melody of the right hand emphasises a triple metre, resulting in a 3+3 pattern, the chords of the left hand juxtapose a 2+2+2 pattern.



Musical example 5: Szymanowski, *Mazurka*, Op. 62 No 1, bars 1-4

This tension between the triple metre of the mazurka and duple metre of the mountain music is very characteristic of Szymanowski. Therefore, it may seem ambiguous what the composer actually requires in bars 1-4. This ambiguity results in a variety of interpretative choices. For example, Hamelin,

Godziszewski and Jones suggest the mountain music by adjusting the sustaining pedal to the motivic pattern of 2+2+2, whilst Kijanowska, Roscoe and Pontinen emphasise the mazurka character by neatly releasing the sustaining pedal on the first beat of the second bar (3+3).



Recording excerpt 3: Godziszewski (track 23, 1-8s.)



Recording excerpt 4: Roscoe (track 27, 1-7s.)

In the second *Mazurka*, the main theme depicts an irregular three-bar phrasing typical of Mountain Music.



Musical example 6: Szymanowski, *Mazurka*, Op. 62 No 2, bars 1-5

This passage inspires several different approaches in performance. In particular, Kijanowska and Hamelin vary explicitly in their interpretations. While Kijanowska maintains an even tempo, Hamelin allows much more rhythmical freedom.



Recording excerpt 5: Kijanowska (track 22, 1-12s.)



Recording excerpt 6: Hamelin (track 27, 1-12s.)

Hamelin's performance more strongly suggests mountain lyricism and narration because, through the use of rubato, he achieves the flexibility typical of this folk music. This rubato, however, is the classical manner of phrasing: slower-faster-slower. This is characteristic of all of the recordings under consideration, in that none reflects the phrasing of traditional Mountain Music. Of the pianists analysed, Pontinen comes closest in his interpretation to such performance practice. However, it is difficult to say whether this is a conscious decision as his interpretation of similar passages varies, not always revealing the same phrasing pattern. Although authenticity to folk influences does not guarantee an

expressive and convincing interpretation, it is nevertheless interesting to examine whether any of the pianists use this particular rubato in their performances.

The first *Mazurka* displays some of the characteristic narrative features of Mountain Music in bars 9-10.



Musical example 7: Szymanowski, *Mazurka*, Op. 62 No 1, bars 9-10

The notes in this passage are marked by the composer with the agogic stresses (-), a detail which has been described as an interpretative clue implying the speech-like quality typical of the mountain dialect (Domańska 2002: 38). To convey such narrative effect, Domańska proposes the *parlando* articulation, resulting in a flexible delivery of individual notes. In my own performances, I attempt to convey these 'dialect' qualities by shaping the dynamics slightly against the composer's indications in the score. Although he wishes the performer to *crescendo* towards the last note, I prefer to start louder and make a *diminuendo* towards the end of the phrase, thus implying the descending line of the mountain spoken language. A similar approach can be found in Godziszewski's performance:



Recording excerpt 7: Godziszewski (track 23, 15-20s.)

Other performers' interpretations of this passage vary significantly. While Kijanowska both *accelerandos* and *crescendos*, Roscoe and Jones make this passage distinctive by playing it louder than preceding phrase. Arguably, both Hamelin and Pontinen misread the indications in the score, slightly altering the quavers into dotted rhythms:



Recording excerpt 8: Hamelin (track 27, 15-20s.)

Though they achieve a dance-like character, it is difficult to feel the speech-like quality of this passage. However, one should not necessarily dismiss their readings as 'wrong', as they decided to emphasise another expressive quality implicit in this music.

In the second *Mazurka*, we can recognise the expressive figure previously described as 'nodding':



Musical example 8: Szymanowski, *Mazurka*, Op. 62 No 2, bars 8-12

The performance analysis reveals the same approach towards dynamics in this passage. All of the pianists under consideration tend to give the 'nodding' gesture a secondary importance in relation to the main theme, but the achieved expressive effects are different. For example, Godziszewski plays the grace note quickly, subsequently accentuating the main note. Kijanowska, on the other hand, plays the grace note as a quaver, slightly accentuating it. Whilst Godziszewski achieves a more coloristic effect here, Kijanowska's approach more distinctly conveys the particular 'nodding' gesture.



Recording excerpt 9: Godziszewski (track 24, 11-19s.)



Recording excerpt 10: Kijanowska (track 22, 17-27s.)

The improvisatory character of repeated melodies, characteristic of Mountain Music, is found particularly in bars 53-56 in the first *Mazurka*:



Musical example 9: Szymanowski, *Mazurka*, Op. 62 No 1, bars 53-56

The intended effect of this repetition is ambiguous. According to established folk practice, the two phrases should be played in a similar way. However, Szymanowski's indications in the score instruct that they should explicitly contrast: the first phrase is marked *forte* while the second one is marked both *piano* and *più tranquillo*. Recordings of this passage vary in the amount of contrast portrayed. Pontinen strongly emphasises the similarity of these phrases—ignoring the composer's indication—playing both at the same tempo and dynamic:



Recording excerpt 11: Pontinen (track 12, 1.31-1.40s.)

Godziszewski, on the other hand, emphasises the similarity by maintaining the same tempo while simultaneously changing the dynamics. Kijanowska's interpretation does not reveal many similarities, as she changes both the tempo and the dynamics. This obscures any influence of Mountain Music in her performance at the expense of gaining interesting coloristic contrast.



Recording excerpt 12: Kijanowska (track 21, 1.39-1.49s.)

The final quality of Mountain Music to be discussed is the typical timbre created by a bass drone, best revealed at bars 26-31 in the second *Mazurka*:



Musical example 10: Szymanowski, *Mazurka*, Op. 62 No 2, bars 26-31

The fifths in the left hand of the piano part are marked with slurs, suggesting a drone effect. In performance, they can be either emphasised by dynamics and use of the sustain pedal (as Godziszewski and Roscoe do) or slightly underplayed through the use of short and clear-cut pedalling (as in Kijanowska's performance). Although Kijanowska achieves harmonic clarity through this approach, she nevertheless loses the textural nuance provided by the drone, draining the music of this cultural significance.



Recording excerpt 13: Godziszewski (38-48s.)



Recording excerpt 14: Kijanowska (48-60s.)

A culturally-informed approach to Szymanowski's Mazurkas

Mountain Music has emerged as a creative strategy by which performers can craft their interpretations of Szymanowski's *Mazurkas*, Op. 62. However, this is one of many possible meanings implicit in this music. The richness of these pieces lies both in the combination of different folk traditions with a modern style as well as in Szymanowski's distinctive sonority—that which Piotr Dahling defines as the 'invisible orchestra' (2007: 143). Such multidimensional music invites the performer to explore different expressive qualities and meanings, of which the influence of Mountain Music may be brought to light.

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Author's biography

Joanna Szalewska-Pineau is a pianist and musicologist focusing on performance studies. After completing her Master's Degree at the Music Academy in Cracow, she received an Advanced Postgraduate Diploma at Birmingham Conservatoire. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate at the Conservatoire, where her research examines possible interpretative strategies for the piano works of Karol Szymanowski.