

ANTONI SZALOWSKI

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Antoni Szalowski was born in Warsaw on the 27 April 1907. Originally, he studied the violin then proceeded to the piano, conducting and composition. His studies at the Warsaw Conservatory were with Pavel Lewski and, in 1930, he obtained a grant to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

“It is the duty of Polish musicologists to know more or less as much about us as they do about the composers who live in Poland”, Roman Palester wrote in his letter to the organisers of a symposium devoted to the works of Polish émigré composers, organised in Warsaw in 1988 by the Musicologists’ Section of the Polish Composers’ Union. The conference, an event unique in that period, was supposed to include papers dedicated to Antoni Szałowski (1907-1973); however, in spite of earlier announcements, they were omitted from the programme. Palester described this as “something of a scandal” (1989: 28). Referring to the title of the symposium, Music wrongly present, he remarked that it was inaccurate in relation to the list of artists who were to be the subject of the conference, since some of them, such as Michał Spisak, used to visit Poland and maintained continuous contact with their native community, while their works were published and performed in Poland. Others, a minority, were repressed, since the “wrong presence” implied a ban on the performance and publication of their works, as well as on writing about their authors. Alongside Andrzej Panufnik, Tadeusz Kassern and himself, Roman Palester also included Antoni Szałowski in this second group. He wrote: Szałowski is the only composer whose punishment befell him by way of ricochet. His views were more or less the same as mine or Panufnik’s, but he did not make them public all that often. The administrative ban hit him simply because during the 1950s the three of us were regarded as the official group of émigré composers, Szałowski often emphasised the fact that the situation in which he found himself after the Second World War was different from that of Palester and Panufnik. He did not “escape” from Poland, he just remained in Paris, where he had arrived before the war, on a scholarship from the Fund of National Culture, having completed with distinction (1930) his studies with Kazimierz Sikorski at the Music Conservatory in Warsaw. In a conversation with Tadeusz Kaczyński, Szałowski admitted that one of his main reasons for going to Paris was the situation of the music community prior to the Second World War in Europe, and particularly in Poland. He remarked: “one made music almost in secret, hardly anybody was interested, and some regarded it with contempt, considering composition as a totally useless activity”.

According to the composer’s wife, Szałowski was not too keen on “émigré circles”. At some point he came to maintain closer contacts with French composers including Henri Dutilleux and Henry Barraud than with the Polish ones.

In February 1966 he joined the musicians’ section of the Confédération Générale de Travailleurs. For many years he would not apply for French citizenship, although this decision had a damaging effect on his work as a composer and his material situation. He only changed his mind in 1970, on the advice of his wife Teresa, who was concerned about the family’s future. He received French citizenship on 23rd October 1970.

Living in Paris, at that time the most important musical centre in the world, enabled Szałowski to come into contact with outstanding artists and musical authorities such as Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Ravel, Roussel, and to participate in the changes taking place in music. The need to be close to the Parisian centre was frequently stressed by Karol Szymanowski, who claimed that a true and penetrating understanding of the music being created there was one of the necessary conditions for the future development of Polish music.

During the years 1931-1936 Szałowski studied with Nadia Boulanger, the famous “Princesse de la Musique”, who supervised the development of many composers of diverse nationalities and ethnic

origins. Boulanger, a proponent of pure art, who at that time was faithful to the ideals of Neoclassicism, shared the views of the young “Parisian” Stravinsky about the need to nurture an artistic attitude which would combine musical composition with the classical theory of beauty

Szałowski, who, during his early attempts at composition made while he was still in Warsaw, was fascinated by the music of Szymanowski and the sound qualities of the works of Debussy and Ravel, now, as a pupil of Boulanger, turned towards neoclassicism for the fulfilment of his creative ideals. He underwent something of a metamorphosis, from the stylistically incohesive Sonata for piano to String Quartet No. 2 (1934), which clearly belongs to the neoclassicist trend. This composition, together with other works, was presented in 1935 at the École Normale de Musique during the composer’s concert, entirely devoted to the music of Szałowski. Judging String Quartet No. 2, alongside Suite for violin and piano (1931) was said, to be the most interesting works performed at the concert. Szałowski’s successive chamber works continued the stylistic interpretation of the pre-war school of Nadia Boulanger which he adopted, and which manifested itself in motoric rhythm, simplification of melody and harmony, textural transparency, glittering instrumentation, structural clarity and dimensional symmetry. In fact his three string quartets were highly successful.

The carefully restrained comments about Boulanger’s pupil gave way to enthusiastic praise in 1937, after the Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Grzegorz Fitelberg performed Szałowski’s Overture, his last composition written in Boulanger’s class, at the Théâtre de Champs Élysées during the Festival of Polish Music. This work, which was awarded the Gold Medal at the World Exhibition in Paris, was judged to be the most important event of the 1936–37 season, alongside Bartók’s Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste, by Florent Schmitt, an outstanding music critic and at that time a highly regarded composer.

The success of Szałowski’s brilliant Overture, achieved through the power of his talent, meant at the same time a collective victory for the new Polish music in its attempts to establish itself on the world arena. It also meant that the interest in the young musician in his homeland grew very quickly. In 1938, during the composer’s visit to Poland, a number of concerts took place during which Szałowski’s works were received with great enthusiasm.

Michał Kondracki wrote, Another important feature of Szałowski’s music deserves particular emphasis. That is, it is purely Polish. This young composer, who has not indulged in even a shadow of a quotation of a folk melody in any of his compositions, is Polish through and through in the character of his inventiveness, in his perfectly crafted arabesques and in his unexpected stylistic and melodic.

The Association of Young Polish Musicians, established in Paris in 1926 on the initiative of Piotr Perkowski and Feliks Łabuński, also played a not insignificant part in nurturing talented young Polish musicians, promoting Polish music and creating an atmosphere, which was favourable to it. Szałowski held various posts in it – that of treasurer, vice-president and president from 1938. With the outbreak of the Second World War, he took with him the most important part of the Association’s archive and, together with his mother Felicja, Michał Spisak, Henryk Szeryng and Seweryn Różycki, moved to the south of France. He did not compose much, suffering from health problems and considerable financial difficulties, but he was comforted by news from Nadia Boulanger, whose letters from the USA told him about such events as the performance of his String Quartet No. 3 (1936) at the International Festival of Contemporary Music in New York (1941), or the presentations of his Symphony (1938/39) and Sinfonietta (1940), the scores of which she took with her when she travelled overseas.

During the Second World War, Szałowski lived in hiding and was in great financial difficulties and was hunted by the Nazis.

Szałowski returned to Paris towards the end of 1945. Although it was still at time of serious material hardships, the post-war years were the most fruitful period in the development and the reception of

his music. A significant role in popularising his music was played by his musician friends such as Grzegorz Fitelberg, Nadia Boulanger, Paweł Klecki, Andrzej Panufnik, Waław Niemczyk, Feliks Łabuński, Grażyna Bacewicz. His works were presented during concerts commemorating important events, such as the first anniversary of the victory at Monte Cassino in 1945 or the opening of La Scala, restored after the war, in Milan in 1946. Works by Antoni Szałowski were also presented at International Festivals of Contemporary Music. His *Sonatina* for oboe and piano (1945–46) was performed in Amsterdam in 1948, and the first performance of the concert version of ballet *Zaczarowana oherża* [The Enchanted Inn] (1947) took place in Frankfurt am Main in 1951.

During the early post war years, Szałowski's works occasionally appeared in concert programmes in Poland, but after 1949, when Polish culture was paralysed by the process of left wing politics, a profound silence descended on the artistic output of émigré composers. His *Symphony*, performed on 24th January 1950 by the Radio Orchestra of Katowice conducted by Grzegorz Fitelberg, was, according to the composer, his last work to be performed in his homeland before his music came under the ban of censorship. It was a major disappointment to the artist to be removed from the Polish Composers' Union in the early 1950s. He blamed this on Jan Maklakiewicz and Tadeusz Szeligowski who, according to him, were afraid of competition should Szałowski return to Poland.

By the mid-1950s Szałowski had composed a large number of orchestral, chamber and solo works. Most of them were commissioned by the French Radio, with which he had begun to collaborate immediately after the end of the war. As well as being heard in radio concerts, his works were performed on prestigious occasions at various venues, such as the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, where the international orchestra Jeunesses Musicales conducted by Franz André gave the first performance of his *Suite* for orchestra in the presence of Queen Elizabeth of Belgium on 9th July 1953. Szałowski's music was also heard during the Congress of Polish Émigré Culture on 10th September 1956, when Waław Niemczyk and the Orchestre Radio-Symphonique de Paris, conducted by Andrzej Panufnik, presented Szałowski's *Violin Concerto* (1948–1954), dedicated to the composer's father.

The composition provides an example of a virtuoso concerto with a conventional, three-movement structure. It is distinguished by the transparency of its construction plan, compact narration and clearly drawn main thematic thoughts. The element which links all the parts is the principle of constant differentiation of sound by changes in motion and instrumentation. Rhythm plays an important part in shaping the form of the concerto. The constitutive role of rhythm is particularly apparent in the development phase of the sonata allegro and in the final rondo. Its effect is especially clear in passages with motoric rhythm, where multiple repetitions of the formulae impart a dynamic value to the motion

In 1955 Antoni Szałowski, together with Roman Palester and Andrzej Panufnik, received the music award of the Polish Guard Company, attached to the American Army in Europe, for his artistic achievement. These were the first music prizes to be awarded by the command of the Guard Company; in previous years such prizes had been given to writers, scientists, plastic artists, printing artists and creators of beautiful Polish books. The jury, under the leadership of Witold Małcużyński, included Ludwik Bronarski, Konstanty Régamey, Tymon Terlecki and Paweł Hostowiec (the pseudonym of Jerzy Stempowski). During the award ceremony, which took place on 7th October 1955 at the General Władysław Sikorski Historical Institute in London, Dr Tymon Terlecki, while explaining the jury's decision, referred to Antoni Szałowski in these terms

Szałowski, who did not take part in the awards ceremony, sent to the Polish Guard Company a letter, which included this passage:

You have reached out a helping hand to a musician who, over a quarter of a century, has written 50 chamber and symphonic compositions, half of which have been published by great music publishers

in France, England and the USA and are being performed throughout the world, yet who cannot support himself out of the royalties and has not even got the right to complain, since it is obvious that every country takes care of its own artists first of all. In a word, I can only thank you as a human being, since as an artist I have nothing to say about my music. I hope that it is good music, and I make an effort to make it so to the extent of my abilities when I write it, but what it is like beyond that should be judged by others – the listeners and the critics, and I bow to their judgment

The ceremony, broadcast by Radio “Free Europe” and widely reported in the émigré press, was not mentioned in Poland. The period of oblivion, which lasted a number of years, meant that even later publications, appearing after the “October thaw” of 1956, did not attach much importance to the works of émigré artists

Szałowski’s music was heard again during the “Warsaw Autumn” in 1959. At the third festival (15th September 1959) the Warsaw Reed Trio performed his Trio for wind instruments which, like the Overture, had been composed in 1936. Positive opinions about Szałowski’s works came from critics who had been brought up on the same, neoclassical aesthetics. Opposition to them came from young musicians, passionate about avant-garde trends, for whom neoclassical compositions, which in Poland carried associations with the period of socialist realism, were no longer viable

The one-act ballet *The Enchanted Inn* (1943-1945), where the main characters are the Tapstress, a young and lusty peasant woman, the flirtatious and elegant Prince and the god of wine, Bacchus, is remarkable for its light, concise, witty narrative, woven around the cult of wine and joy of life. Moving the action deep into the historical past (sixteenth century) and using a mythical character enabled Szałowski to maintain the emotional distance postulated for neoclassical music. Maintaining such a distance is also aided by the aura exuded by the work, one of gaiety and flirtatiousness, of jocularly, grotesque, and a situation where the conflict is slight. In *The Enchanted Inn*, Szałowski recalls the classical models, where dances and pantomime scenes are linked by the threads of one plot. The treatment of the musical matter: lightness and purity of the phrases, lively rhythms, sophisticated harmony, attractive orchestral colours, grace and elegance, all allow one to discern features of the French style in the music of the ballet. The sound layer corresponds perfectly to the subject of the work, itself close to the French tradition, and fulfils an unobtrusively descriptive, at times clearly illustrative function in relation to the plot of the ballet.

In spite of his resistance to new trends in music, Szałowski's perfect mastery of the compositional *métier* ensured the continued presence of Szałowski’s works on the stages of the world. At a time of general fascination with the compositions of Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono or Karlheinz Stockhausen he could not expect the same degree of popularity as previously, but he still received commissions. At the beginning of the 1960s, among his major works performed in Poland were: *Aria and Toccata for chamber orchestra* (1962) and *Concerto for reed trio and orchestra* (1962), which combined the features of solo concerto and concerto grosso. Thus, at last, relatively new works by Szałowski were being performed.

The composer himself never courted recognition or fame. Persevering and confident in the pursuit of his art, he was also a very private person, keeping his distance from the artistic milieu, indifferent to artistic fashions and novelties. By remaining faithful to his ideals, he was forced to work in very difficult material circumstances, isolated from the native community and not fully integrated with the artistic world of Paris. In 1958 he wrote in one of his letters to his friend, Seweryn Różycki:

These days I do not meet with my former friends at all, there are things that separate me from them; we do not have any common platform of understanding and each of us is in a sense alone.

It was at that difficult moment in his life that Antoni Szałowski met his future wife, Teresa Bończa-Uzdowska, a young woman from Warsaw, daughter of General Bończa-Uzdowski. She had

graduated from the Department of History and Archeology of Warsaw University as a student of Professor Aleksander Gieysztor; and she came to Paris on a scholarship. This was the beginning of a new stage in the composer's life and creative activity. At last he had his own family, where he found support and which gave a deeper meaning to his earthly existence. He cared for his son Piotr with great devotion, drawing motivation for creative work from his family life. In 1960 Antoni Szałowski received the first prize of French RTV for the radio ballet *La Femme têtue* composed in 1958. It was the first time when the Paris broadcaster awarded a prize to an artist who was not a French citizen.

At the same time, Szałowski completed a commission for compositions inspired by medieval literature and paintings including *Cantata* for female voices and orchestra to poems from the *Carmina Burana* collection, and symphonic picture *Résurrection de Lazare* based on Giotto's fresco, in which he tried, in a sense, "to go beyond the formal and aesthetic norms of Neoclassicism," highlighting the expressive possibilities of harmony and orchestration. Evidence of the composer's desire to break out of the classical patterns is also provided by Szałowski's late works, such as *Music for Strings* (1969–1970), a composition integrated in terms of material, which provides an example of reinterpretation of the traditional model of the sonata form, without the previously expected symmetry of sections and clear segmentation of the form.

While during the 1970s works of émigré composers such as Palester or Panufnik remained absent from Polish musical life, Szałowski's works appeared sporadically in concert programmes (mainly his prewar chamber compositions and Overture). The Polish première of Szałowski's last composition, *Six Sketches* for chamber orchestra (1971–1972), took place during the sixteenth Music Spring in Poznań (4th April 1976). On that occasion the orchestra of Wrocław Philharmonic was conducted by Marek Pijarowski. Zygmunt Mycielski and Władysław Malinowski, who reviewed that concert, both agreed that the music of Szałowski, one of the greatest composers of his generation, went far beyond neoclassical formulae and deserved greater attention.

Szałowski's belief in the need to build the present on the foundations of the legacy of the past found its expression by adopting the models of form and genre particularly characteristic of the epochs of Classicism and Baroque, and in referring to the traditional principles of organising sound material. Turning to tradition thus allowed him to come close to major-minor tonality and modality, the use of contrapuntal and concerting techniques, and the organisation of the sound material in the forms of sonata, reprise or series.

His wife had a fall on a slippery floor and in trying to lift her Szałowski had a heart attack. He died in Paris on 21 March 1973.

Apart from the Overture and the engaging Sonatina for clarinet and piano, his music is ignored.

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