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A Collage-Like Work of Music. Aspects of Variation Technique in Maria Szymanowska's Nocturne in B-flat Major

Abstract

The article aims to examine the ways in which selected variation techniques are used in Maria Szymanowska's *Nocturne in B-flat Major*. The author discusses both conventional thematic modifications and collage-like transformations of brief motifs. By comparing the composition to selected works of John Field and placing it within appropriate historical contexts, the author seeks to illustrate how such an approach to variation not only enriches the conventional form of the nocturne as a genre, but also highlights the possibility of programmatic intent being present.

Keywords

Maria Szymanowska, nocturne, John Field, variation technique, programme music

The *Nocturne in B-Flat Major* is, along with the *Nocturne in A-Flat Major* 'Le Murmure', one of the two surviving 'songs of the night' by Maria Szymanowska. The former is sometimes described as something 'in between a prelude and an étude',¹ first of all because of its simple structure, in which a uniform figuration in the accompaniment serves as an illustrative background for the melody in the top register. In this context, One might venture the thesis that the *B-Flat Major Nocturne* is unique within that composer's output, and not only in terms of classification. The piece, published in Saint Petersburg in 1852, more than twenty years after its author's death, stands out from among her earlier works also because of its dramatic construction, which some consider similar to the 'spirit of Chopin's nocturnes or even ballades'.²

Especially frequent are direct comparisons between Szymanowska's *Nocturne in B-flat major* and Chopin's *Nocturne in A-flat major* Op. 32 No. 2. Their dates of publication seem to effectively eliminate the chance that the artists might have mutually inspired each other. The striking similarity between these two compositions probably results from a similar way of thinking and developing the genre models. According to Irena Poniatowska, of special interest in Szymanowska's nocturne are such elements as the broad cantilena and extensive codas.³ What seems to confirm her claim is that these similarities most distinctly reflect both Chopin's and Szymanowska's characteristic tendency to use the variation technique.

Its use in the *Nocturne in B-flat major* depends primarily on a subtle combination of means typical of the virtuosic brilliant style with textural and temporal modifications. From such simple variation devices as ornamenting the melodic line to development-type techniques, Szymanowska makes creative use of the sound material within the framework of the nocturne genre. This endows the music with a high degree of individuality and emotional (possibly even semantic) depth.

¹ Quoted after: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska* (1959), 167.

² Quoted after: G.S. Golos, 'Some Slavic Predecessors of Chopin', *The Musical Quarterly*, 46/4 (1960), 445.

³ I. Poniatowska, 'Styl brilliant i idee preromantyczne w twórczości Marii Szymanowskiej', in I. Poniatowska, *Historia i interpretacja muzyki. Z badań nad muzyką od XVII do XIX wieku* (1995), 105.

The Origins of the Composition

For the *Nocturne in B-Flat Major*, the exact date of composition is unknown. In his monograph dedicated to Szymanowska, Igor Belza hypothesises that it was written towards the end of her life (cut short by a cholera epidemic that broke out in Petersburg in the summer of 1831). It was because of the outbreak of the November Uprising (1830–31), he suggests, that the composition waited for nearly two decades for its publication. As a consequence of the uprising, ‘the situation of Poles in Petersburg rapidly deteriorated. They were viewed with suspicion, and anti-Polish sentiment grew strong in many circles.’⁴ What is more, Belza claims that the *Nocturne* itself ‘was to some extent [...] an emotional response to the events related to the uprising.’⁵ Relations between Poles and Russians in Petersburg, including the artistic circles, did become significantly cooler in the autumn of 1830, though the city remained an attractive place for Poles looking for work or education outside the territory affected by the empire’s repressive measures.⁶ It is possible that the composer found it reasonable to postpone the publication of her *Nocturne*.

The manuscript used as the basis for its first edition at one point became the property of renowned pianist-composer Łucja Rucińska, who was later also Juliusz Zarębski’s teacher. It was she who in 1852 included this piece in her *Album muzyczne na fortepian, wydanie Lucyi Rucińskiej* [A Musical Album for the Piano, Edited by Łucja Rucińska], comprising works by such Polish composers as Szymanowska, Dobrzyński, Moniuszko, and Rucińska herself.⁷ From that moment on, the *Nocturne in B-Flat Major* sporadically appeared in print, frequently in anthologies dedicated to women composers, more often abroad than in Poland, where in fact it only became a bit more widely known as late as in the mid-1950s.⁸

⁴ Quoted after: T. Syga, S. Szenic, *Maria Szymanowska i jej czasy* (1960), 38.

⁵ Quoted after: I.F. Belza, *Мария Шумановская* (1956), Polish edition: *Maria Szymanowska*, tr. J. Ilnicka (1985), 175.

⁶ Cf. e.g. T.M. Smirnova, ‘Życie społeczne i kulturalne Polaków w Petersburgu (XIX–XX wiek)’ and A. Kowalczykowa, ‘Petersburg. Burzliwe losy i koneksje polskich pisarzy w stolicy carów’, in D. Konstantynów, ed., *Petersburg i Polska*, <http://www.polskipetersburg.pl/zbiór-esejów>, accessed 17 Oct. 2020.

⁷ Quoted after: Belza, *Maria Szymanowska*, 172.

⁸ The piece became known thanks to a reproduction printed in Belza’s monograph (Moscow, 1956), though the Polish translation of this book only appeared in 1987. Cf. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska*, 168.

Transforming the Model

Maria Iwanejko perfectly sums up the significance of the *Nocturne in B-Flat Major* for the history of the genre's development by emphasizing that '[it] represents the first attempts at composing in this genre in Poland, parallel to the beginnings of Chopin's nocturne writing.'⁹ Both Szymanowska and Chopin used as their starting point the models worked out by the Irish composer John Field, universally considered the 'father' of this genre.¹⁰ For many years, Szymanowska was even viewed as Field's pupil. However, scholars (including Teofil Syga and Stanisław Szenic in their book *Maria Szymanowska i jej czasy* [*Maria Szymanowska and Her Times*]) refute this thesis. The latter authors quote the composer's statements printed in nineteenth-century press, in which she claimed that not only had she never studied with Field but she 'had no good music teachers at all'.¹¹

Nevertheless, Szymanowska knew Field personally, frequently played his works¹² and sometimes even performed with him on the same stage.¹³ No wonder, therefore, that her *Nocturne in B-flat major* demonstrates some features highly characteristic of the Irish composer's output. Among those qualities, Szymanowska elevated the use of variation techniques to the rank of a fundamental principle for shaping the sound material in her composition. Before analysing her technique in detail, it may be worthwhile to look at the opening section of *Nocturne in B-flat major* (example 1), which, especially in comparison with the first bars of Field's *Nocturne in E-flat major* No. 1 (example 2), constitutes a kind of a miniature artistic manifesto dedicated by Szymanowska, among other things, to the idea of the variation form.

Similarities between the above-presented fragments are easy to observe. Both nocturnes are in 12/8 time. Their themes start with an interval leap, and later mostly follow the constituent notes of successive chords. Differences are equally evident, though. These divergencies result partly from the rapid changes taking place in sound language in the first half of the nineteenth century, and partly from Szymanowska's

⁹ Quoted after: Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska*, 179.

¹⁰ R. Langley, 'Field John', in *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09603>, accessed 15 June 2020.

¹¹ Quoted after: Syga, Szenic, *Maria Szymanowska...*, 38.

¹² Syga, Szenic, *Maria Szymanowska...*, 262–263, 273, 288, 303, 346.

¹³ Syga, Szenic, *Maria Szymanowska...*, 117.

highly individual approach to shaping the sound material. For instance, she exhibits greater freedom in using notes foreign to the given harmonic structure, especially suspensions, irregularly superimposed on the harmony outlined in the accompaniment. The undulating melodic line in the theme likewise resembles that from Field's *E-flat major Nocturne*. However, in Szymanowska's piece the intervals between successive notes can be as large as a sixth, whereas as far as m. 6 Field does not exceed a fourth within any single phrase. An even more significant reference to Field's piece can be found in the melodic scheme of the left-hand figurations in the first measure of the *B-flat major Nocturne*, as if literally transposed from the key of Field's piece to that of her own. This quotation, however, is only momentary, and already one measure later we can observe Szymanowska's tendency to introduce faster harmonic changes, which distinctly reflect her intention to diversify the static homophonic texture.



Ex. 1. M. Szymanowska, *Nocturne in B-flat major*, mm. 1–3. Source: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska* (1959), 168.



Ex. 2. J. Field, *Nocturne in E-flat major No. 1*, mm. 1–3. Source: J. Field, *18 Nocturnes*, L. Kohler, C.F. Peters, eds, Leipzig [n.d.], 3.

All this suggests that variation, which is the central idea of *Nocturne in B-flat major*, was conceived from the outset as something more than

merely 'modified repetition of a musical thought'.¹⁴ Szymanowska's approach seems to anticipate the idea of collage, since it largely depends on variational transformations and juxtapositions of existing elements, which, thanks only to this kind of creative stance, can develop in musical-aesthetic terms and gain additional extra-musical meanings.

Variations on a Theme

A texture based on a monotonous, usually triple-time accompaniment and a cantilena unfolding above it in a higher register is frequently considered a nearly idiomatic quality of the nocturne genre. The merit for this concept should probably go to Field, who was the first to apply it in lyrical piano pieces on such a broad scale. Of the 18 nocturnes and other similar works he composed, the first two, in *E-flat major* and *C minor*, are texturally most conventional and entirely based on a homophonic relation between a static melody in the right hand and an accompanying motion of the left. However, as David Rowland observes, 'the emergence of a particular texture can only go so far in providing the main element for a successful composition'.¹⁵ That traditional homophony can weary the ear after some time was also observed by Field himself. He therefore gradually diversified his nocturnes with regard to texture. This is evident in such works as the *Nocturne in B-flat major* No. 5, in which the cantilena passages are contrasted with segments representing a completely different texture (example 3).

Szymanowska likewise seems to have applied this type of segmental form-building principle as the point of departure for her *Nocturne in B-flat major*. Nevertheless, her piece is much more complicated and elaborate in comparison with Field's eponymous composition. While Field chooses a simple stanza-and-refrain structure (ABA₁B₁), Szymanowska constructs a kind of unhurried rondo, in which the initial melodic theme recurs as many as three times (AA₁BA₂CA₃ + coda).

¹⁴ Such an understanding of the word 'variation' was universal among music theorists in the first half of the nineteenth century. Cf. Z. Chechlińska, *Wariacje i technika wariacyjna w twórczości Chopina* (1995), 18.

¹⁵ Quoted after: D. Rowland, 'Piano sonority and melody c. 1800-1835', in K. Stępień-Kutera, ed., *The Lyric and the Vocal Element in Instrumental Music of the Nineteenth Century* (2017), 59.

In both nocturnes the cantilena passages (marked A) alternate with sections characterised by a more massive chordal texture.

Ex. 3. J. Field, *Nocturne in B-flat major* No. 5, mm. 16–19. Textural contrasts between sections. Source: J. Field, *18 Nocturnes*, L. Kohler, C.F. Peters, eds, Leipzig [n.d.], 18.

Both Field and Szymanowska apply variation techniques first and foremost in the refrain sections. The most obvious of these techniques is embellishing the repeated melody of the theme with ornaments and progressions of small rhythmic values, which creates the impression of ‘an irregular flow of sounds within the rhythmic framework maintained in the accompaniment’¹⁶ characteristic of the brilliant style. This technique, applied by virtually all nocturne composers, draws on the performance practice of the Italian *bel canto*, where singers felt in a way ‘obliged’ to enrich the repeated sections (for instance in *da capo* arias and in stanzaic forms) with ornaments in which they could demonstrate their vocal skills.¹⁷ Field came in contact with Italian opera during his stay in Russia early in the nineteenth century, which justifies the hypothesis that *bel canto* may have inspired this composer, and, through him, others who followed in his footsteps.¹⁸

¹⁶ Quoted after: Poniatowska, ‘Styl brilliant...’, 98.

¹⁷ M. Elliot, *Singing in Style. A Guide to Vocal Performance Practice* (2006), 156–159.

¹⁸ Field’s first three nocturnes were published in 1812 in Petersburg. Cf. J.E. Brown, ‘Nocturne (i)’, in *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630>.

Interestingly, Szymanowska has it her own way even in this area. She applies conventional ornamentation only in the first repetition of the theme (mm. 9–16), and, as Maria Iwanejko observes, she is ‘more restrained in the use of the variational-ornamental-virtuosic manner than Field was, since in his music the virtuoso element frequently gets the better of the expressive aspect for a while’.¹⁹ Szymanowska ornaments her theme very subtly and in agreement with the musical phrase. In m. 9 she bridges the notes B-flat and G (forming the head of the theme; the latter note is transposed an octave lower) with an elaborate passage, but just one measure later she fills in the same melody with just two transition notes, E-flat and C-sharp, which transform m. 10 in such a way that it becomes rhythmically similar to the second half of the original theme (example 4).

Ex. 4. M. Szymanowska, *Nocturne in B-flat major*, mm. 7–12. The similarity between the A₁ section (m. 10) and the consequent of section A (m. 7). Source: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska* (1959), 168.

Notable among the more complex ornaments incorporated into the theme’s melodic line in the A₁ section is also the characteristic motif consisting of a ‘looped’ turn (*gruppetto*) and an interval leap in m. 13. This ornament recurs several times later in the *Nocturne*, first as a transitional element towards the end of A₁ (m. 15), and later in

article.20012, accessed 15 June 2020.

¹⁹ Quoted after: Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska*, 176.

section B (mm. 19–22), where it attains the status of a kind of leitmotif (example 5), and finally in section C (mm. 39–41 and 43–44), where it becomes embedded in the figurative texture of the right-hand part, whereas in m. 42 it serves as a fine ‘lacy’ background for the C9 chord components emphasised in the soprano (example 6).

Musical score for Example 5, showing measures 19-22 of Szymanowska's Nocturne in B-flat major. The score is in 12/8 time and B-flat major. It features a piano introduction with a 'gruppetto' motif in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include piano (p) and fortissimo (sf).

Ex. 5. M. Szymanowska, *Nocturne in B-flat major*, mm. 19–22. The *gruppetto* leitmotif. Source: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska* (1959), 169.

Musical score for Example 6, showing measures 41-44 of Szymanowska's Nocturne in B-flat major. The score is in 12/8 time and B-flat major. It shows various applications of the 'gruppetto' motif, including a 'lacy' background in measure 42. Dynamics include piano (p) and fortissimo (sf).

Ex. 6. M. Szymanowska, *Nocturne in B-flat major*, mm. 41–44. Various applications of the *gruppetto* motif. Source: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska* (1959), 170.

These examples show Szymanowska going a step further than Field in transforming the melodic line of the theme. The variation techniques

she applies in one section can serve as material for further variations in the next one. Similarly as in the case of the above-mentioned two notes added to the theme's melody in m. 10, such collage-like juxtapositions of previously introduced figures make the music develop in an extremely organic and internally coherent manner, despite distinct contrasts between the individual sections.

The contrasts themselves are mainly textural and similarly contribute to the variational transformations of the musical thought presented in Szymanowska's *Nocturne*. It is the texture that constitutes the dominant medium for the variations occurring in the third and fourth theme presentations. In mm. 27–29 of the A₂ section, the theme's melody remains unchanged, but the arpeggiated left-hand chords disappear in favour of vertical harmonies in the beat of three, which are a kind of reference to section B. In mm. 31–33, the cantilena of the right hand is transposed an octave higher, possibly in order to allow for the virtuosic semiquaver passages, whose ambitus may even exceed three octaves. Following section C, akin to the first 'stanzaic' segment (though featuring more elaborate figurations in the right hand), the composer returns to the 'skeleton' of the theme's melody. In the antecedent of A₃, however, she enhances this core theme with octaves so that it can stand out against the accompaniment based on arch-shaped figurations, while in the consequent she returns to a more static, chordal texture.

Variations in the Closing Sections

Despite the transformations which the theme undergoes in the *B-flat major Nocturne*, its overall structure remains unchanged. It is based on two four-bar phrases, each of which (except for the consequent in section A₂) ends with a characteristic descending motif. In most cases, this motif makes use of notes from the B-flat major natural scale, save for m. 30, where the composer goes beyond the scale, which is chromaticised and transposed to the sixth (three-line) octave. Of interest is also the non-melodic variation technique at the end of A₃, which consists in abandoning regular rhythmic pulse in favour of one that makes it possible to smoothly connect the last refrain segment with the *Nocturne's* coda (example 7).



Ex. 7. M. Szymanowska, *Nocturne in B-flat major*, mm. 53–54. Smooth transition from the last theme presentation to the coda. Source: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska* (1959), 171.

The impression of the lack of a clear boundary between the A_3 section and the coda is enhanced by the left-hand part, which is the same for both of these passages and consists of vertical harmonies repeated at a regular pulse – a concept very similar to the transition between B and A_2 . This allows the coda essentially to function not as a separate element of the work's form, but as the 'last sound of the last word' in this instrumental song; a sound extended in time, and possibly even beyond it. At the same time, the coda is a form of summary, since it employs a number of solutions previously used in the course of the composition, such as accompaniment, scale and passage ornaments, motifs repeated in various registers, as well as figurations building up 'from inside' – a highly characteristic element of this Szymanowska's style (example 8).²⁰



Ex. 8. M. Szymanowska, *Nocturne in B-flat major*, mm. 59–60. The build-up of figurations. Source: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska* (1959), 171.

Here again, the variation technique depends on the idea of a collage, though this time it is more than a mere direct 'quotation' of

²⁰ Poniatowska, 'Styl brilliant...', 99.

components used in the previous segments. It can easily be observed that the said figurations are nothing else but the result of a temporal shift in one of the 'parts' in motifs such as that in mm. 25–26 (example 9). Before being transplanted into the coda, the motif is not only transposed and melodically modified, but also 'cut up' and creatively reassembled into a less condensed, fragmentary whole.

25

per - den - - do - - si

p

Ex. 9. M. Szymanowska, *Nocturne in B-flat major*, mm. 25–27. A motif made up of vertical harmonies, resembling the figurations in the coda. Source: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska (1959)*, 169.

A temporal distortion of a different kind constitutes the basis for the right-hand part in mm. 54–56 (example 10). Its melodic contour distinctly refers to the material of mm. 39–40 (example 11). The successive semiquaver progressions lead up to motifs in which the suspension note value is prolonged, which gives an impression of decreased tension, a slowing down and a kind of 'shutting down'.

55

f *p* *sf*

Ex. 10. M. Szymanowska, *Nocturne in B-flat major*, mm. 55–56. Semiquaver progressions separated by crotchet-and-quaver groups. Source: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska (1959)*, 171.

Concerning Szymanowska's concept of time, it is worth noting that overlapping (mm. 53–54), the echo effect (m. 61), and introduction of

additional melodic material in the form of ornamental progressions of small values belong to techniques frequently applied in order to introduce variety into regular periodic structures.²¹ In the coda of Szymanowska's *Nocturne in B-flat major*, they affect the perception of time to some extent, but at the same time they coexist with the overall sense of regularity that dominates in this piece. The whole remains consistently clear, but also highly colourful, as befits a collage form.



Ex. 10. M. Szymanowska, *Nocturne in B-flat major*, mm. 39–40. Semiquaver progressions separated by pairs of quavers. Source: M. Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska* (1959), 170.

Summary

Regardless of whether the variation techniques applied by Szymanowska in the successive repetitions of the theme concern melody or texture, the composer uses them in agreement with a 'consensus' worked out by nineteenth-century theorists. Variation is defined in this context as such a theme repetition in which only some selected elements are transformed; what differentiates it from development is the lack of structural modification.²² The shorter motifs, however, are treated differently by the composer; she cuts them out of the phrases in which they constituted the element of variation and rearranges them into completely new structures.

All this not only enriches the sound structure of the work and broadens Field's original perspective, but also endows the *Nocturne*

²¹ Cf. J. Chomiński, K. Wilkowska-Chomińska, *Teoria formy. Małe formy instrumentalne* (1983), 215–217.

²² Chechlińska, *Wariacje i technika...*, 17.

in *B-flat major* with a nearly programmatic character. In her essay on oneiric soundscapes in Romantic music, printed in the anthology *Chopin and His World*, Halina Goldberg observes that early nineteenth-century composers commonly and consciously applied such techniques as fragmentary recall of previously used motifs, producing the effect of a ‘fading’ and ‘blurring’ of sound, in order to musically illustrate the manner in which human memories are deformed, for instance, in the distorting mirror of dreams.²³ While stressing that ‘dreaming and remembering overlap and share similar musical vocabularies’,²⁴ the author points out the role of nostalgia for the lost homeland in émigré composers’ oneiric soundscapes. If we accept Belza’s claim that the *Nocturne in B-flat major* was written in Petersburg in the last years of Szymanowska’s life as her emotional response to the political situation in Poland at that time,²⁵ comparing that musical composition to a dream (in which past events recur, mix, interact, and take completely new forms thanks to a vivid use of variation techniques) becomes even more legitimate.

All these processes are assisted by the use of a musical equivalent of the collage technique, which essentially aims to represent things indeterminate, deformed, and fragmentary by nature. Risky as it might be to compare Szymanowska’s *Nocturne* to Kurt Schwitters’ collages (created approximately a century later), a hypothetical analogy may be drawn between the ways in which both artists reflected the emotions towards the surrounding reality in their works, making use of ‘found objects’ appropriate to their respective artistic disciplines.²⁶ Schwitters’s graphic material frequently consisted of everyday objects, transformed and arranged in abstract combinations which, however, evoked well-defined associations. To Szymanowska, sounds, though themselves devoid of programmatic content, could potentially attain such extramusical meanings when juxtaposed by means of collage-like variations.

²³ H. Goldberg, ‘Oneiric Soundscapes and the Role of Dreams in Romantic Culture’, in J.D. Bellman, H. Goldberg, *Chopin and His World* (2017), 20.

²⁴ Goldberg, ‘Oneiric Soundscapes...’, 20.

²⁵ Belza, *Мария Шумановская*, Polish ed. *Maria Szymanowska*, 175.

²⁶ In one of his works, *Merz 19*, Schwitters applies the fragmentation and abstract juxtaposition of material to present a cityscape affected by the ravages of war. Cf. D. Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters. Tradition and Innovation* (1993), 9.

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