

Polish pioneer

Marking this year's International Women's Day on 8 March, **Eva Doroszkowska** shines a spotlight on Maria Szymanowska, a remarkable pianist, composer and teacher who forged an unprecedented career as a touring virtuoso in the early 1800s

Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831) was one of the first international piano virtuosos of the 19th century. Achieving celebrity status and recognised by many leading artists of her day, she was heralded by Goethe as the 'Charming Almighty of Sound' and by Adam Mickiewicz as the 'Queen of Tones'.

She carved out a glittering career as performer, composer and teacher at a time when women were only expected to play music in domestic settings. Performing over 100 concerts a year, from London to St Petersburg, and touring the war-torn Europe of the Napoleonic era was an achievement in itself, but doing this as a woman – moreover a divorced single mother of three children – was completely unprecedented.

Maria Agata Szymanowska, née Wołowska, was born in Warsaw in 1789, the daughter of a brewery owner. The Wołowski family provided a nurturing environment for the young Maria and entertained many artists from the worlds of drama, literature and music, including Mozart's son Franz Xaver, August Klengel and Józef Elsner (later teacher to Chopin). The Wołowskis encouraged their daughter's talent by taking her to see the latest Italian operas and exposing her to the arts every day. A rich foundation for her musical beginnings, she began piano lessons aged eight but was mostly self-taught as a composer, her improvisations particularly admired.

In 1810 she travelled to Paris for her first tour, accompanied by her siblings who would prove invaluable in supporting her international career: it was impossible for a woman to travel alone. In Paris she met the composers Dussek and Cherubini; the latter was so impressed by her playing that he dedicated a Fantasy to her, writing in her scrap book: 'Fantasy to Ms Wołowska, as a token of gratitude, honour, respect and devotion.'

Throughout her life she kept books with autographs, dedications and letters detailing her meetings with artists such as Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn, Goethe, Clementi,

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'Queen of Tones':
Maria Szymanowska
(1789-1831)

Hummel and John Field – plus letters from those composers she didn't meet, such as Haydn and Beethoven. These letters were a valuable marketing tool.

On her return from Paris, she married the landowner Teofil Józef Szymanowski with whom she had three children. She ceased touring abroad but devoted time to concerts at home and composition, much to the annoyance of her husband who clearly did not support her musical ambition. A letter from a friend and amateur musician reveals: 'Mr Szymanowski was an affluent person... a real husband, man, mari monster, but he could not in any way take charge of his young wife.' His family disapproved of his wife's music-making and believed that a woman's role began and ended at home.

Decades later, Clara Schumann made a conscious decision to put aside her own creative pursuits in the interests of financial and family matters, though perhaps revealing a larger dose of self-doubt. 'A woman must not desire to compose – there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?' A musicologist of the period, Matthew Head, wrote, 'Creative inspiration is linked with masculine genius and inspiration off limits for women.'

Pursuing so single-mindedly a musician's career therefore was brave, given the financial insecurity and prevailing attitudes of the time. For Szymanowska to make such a success of it is testament also to the support and encouragement she received from her family.

Possessing admirable marketing skills, she negotiated a contract with the publishing house Breitkopf & Härtel between 1819 and 1820, at the end of her marriage. Breitkopf published 69 of her compositions:

salon miniatures, highly fashionable and suitable for performance. Schumann wrote in *Music and Musicians: Essays and Criticisms* that her etudes had 'much in them that was new and extraordinary' – they validated her status as a composer in a male-dominated profession. The forerunner of Chopin in the use of *stile brillante*, she was among the first to compose concert etudes that would advance 19th-century piano technique.

Retaining her marital name, Szymanowska toured Russia in 1822 and received the title 'First Pianist to the Tsarist Court'. Securing Romanov patronage encouraged other aristocratic patrons, whose financial support provided invaluable assistance for her costly travels. In the early stages of her career she would forego lighting to reduce concert costs, but at the height of her financial success, during her last tour, she donated half the proceeds to the poor.

She appeared in the most famous venues in Paris, Berlin, Weimar, Milan and London. English critics noted: 'She is one of the most finished pianoforte players we ever heard, her expression perfect and her execution great.' In Germany she drew more listeners than Hummel and a Berlin newspaper praised her 'remarkable rapidity, strength and feeling'. In London, a city known for paying musicians less than in Paris, she commanded the top teaching rate – the same fee that Ignaz Moscheles was charging 10 years later. It was not until the 1840s that a female composer like Louise Farrenc was accepted to teach in the Paris Conservatoire, and even then she had difficulty negotiating equal pay.

Remarkably, Szymanowska often toured with her own instrument and brought an English piano to Warsaw. She was also one of the first pianists to perform from memory. Despite her success, the long, arduous journeys must have taken their toll and her letters home hint at how much she missed her children. In a letter from London, she wrote, 'Although distant and separated from all that I love in the

world, I hope that in spite of the clouded skies of England I will cherish them, if this country contributes to ensuring some existence for my small family.' In another letter from Paris: 'I was a little sad that I couldn't eat cake and see my daughters in their black skirts.'

Offered a permanent teaching position at a music institute in St Petersburg by the Romanovs in 1828, she decided the time had come to settle. Political tensions were mounting at home in Poland, and her letters explain modestly that 'it is by my little talent I must provide for the needs of my family. We must obey fate without murmuring'. Russia was not home, but it offered financial security, even if the country 'freezes the body, the mind and even the heart'.

She threw herself into a rich and artistic life, establishing a salon where literature and music flourished. Her daughter Celina's diary describes the artistic soirées where Pushkin and Glinka were regular guests. Mickiewicz, the exiled Polish poet under close Russian surveillance, also visited and later married Celina. How Szymanowska could, on one hand, teach the Tsar's daughter, and on the other set an insurrectionist's most patriotic poetry to music, navigating political tensions, is extraordinary.

Szymanowska brought the Western European piano tradition to Russia, but sadly the cholera epidemic of 1831 took her life. Still, by the age of 42 she had achieved an unrivalled status as a female professional musician. Largely forgotten in the west, it is only relatively recently that more information about her has been uncovered. A woman revered with enviable royal patronage, she was adored like a star, newspapers announcing her arrivals and departures. 'Such a talented person as she cannot travel incognito,' commented the *Journal de St Petersburg*. She promoted the concept of the modern virtuoso in an age when travelling artists were only just emerging, and was, without doubt, the first independent career woman in classical music history. **IP**

Szymanowska's many eminent admirers included (left to right) Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Adam Mickiewicz, Luigi Cherubini and Robert Schumann



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