

08. Marche

(ca. 1819)

Maria Szymanowska

(1789-1831)

arr. William Melton

Szymanowska, Maria

(born Warsaw, December 14, 1789; died St. Petersburg, July 25, 1831)

Born in Warsaw to middle-class Jewish parents that had been baptized as Catholics, Maria Aghate née Wolowska was one of ten children. Her prodigious musical talent singled her out for attention, and she studied piano and composition with a slew of local teachers (Antoni Lisowski, Tomasz Gremm, Józef Elsner, Franciszek Lessel, and Karol Kurpiński) before travels to Moscow and Paris introduced her to two master pedagogues, John Field and Luigi Cherubini. 1810 saw debuts in Warsaw and Paris and marriage to the affluent Józef Szymanowski. The marriage produced three children, but was ended in 1820 due to Szymanowski's opposition to his wife's performing. She then took her children and proceeded to concertize across Europe with a vengeance, filling concert halls, playing royal command performances in both London and Berlin, and earning high fees and critical praise for her lyrical style (the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* enthused in 1823, "She possesses a superbly assured touch on her instrument, which is bound to delicacy and great expression"). Appointed court pianist to the Czarina Maria Feodorovna of Russia in 1822, she gave up playing in public six years later and lived her last years in St. Petersburg (where she taught and supported Polish and liberal causes). In July of 1831 Szymanowska contracted cholera, and died at the age of 42. Many great musicians of her time were impressed with Szymanowska's person and her talent, including Beethoven, Rossini, Meyerbeer, Paganini, Liszt, and Clara and Robert Schumann. Piano pieces were dedicated to her by Field, Cherubini, and Johann Nepomuk Hummel, and she was the inspiration for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem *Aussöhnung*.

Maria Szymanowska also composed over a hundred works, mainly piano pieces and songs, many of which were published. "She sometimes harks back to style galant," wrote Katarzyna Swaryczewska, "but elsewhere, like the polonaises and mazurkas, she evokes Polish folk music." Those, together with her waltzes and nocturnes, were a precursor of the work of her two decades younger countryman Frédéric Chopin. "Szymanowska's compositions for piano..." concluded Alina Nowak-Romanowicz, "herald Romanticism in style, and demonstrate new technical and colouristic possibilities for the instrument." The Marche No. 2 from the *Six Marches pour le Pianoforte*, was published about 1819 by Breitkopf & Härtel of Leipzig, and dedicated "to his Imperial Highness the Grand Duke Constantine Pavlovich Romanov" of Russia. The opening martial swagger of the work underscores the Grand Duke's second distinction: he was also Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army.

Text by William Melton