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## *The Topos of Memory in the Albums of Maria Szymanowska and Helena Szymanowska-Malewska*

The custom of maintaining friendship albums, blank books intended to be filled with keepsakes inscribed by friends and acquaintances, persisted in Europe for some four centuries, though its social contexts and the resulting artifacts underwent many transformations. Mementos left in a friendship album (also known as keepsake album, *album amicorum* or *Stammbuch*) could take on various forms – poems, drawings, paper cuttings, musical compositions – depending on the interests of the recipient and the talents of the inscriber.

In this essay, I examine one aspect of the album tradition: its emphasis on memory. Using the albums of Maria Szymanowska and her daughter, Helena Szymanowska-Malewska, I discuss three ways the topos of memory takes shape in album inscriptions. First, I explore what musical mementos can tell us about ways in which memory intersected with the nineteenth-century cult of relics. Then I contextualize the role musical album inscriptions had in constructing and maintaining the memory of the Polish nation. Finally, I demonstrate how specific compositional features of musical gifts were designed to invoke psychological processes characteristic of a remembered experience.

### MEMENTOS AND RELICS

“Where are the hours that oh! so swiftly vanished?” exclaimed Johann Wolfgang Goethe in the much-celebrated poem known today under the title “Aussöhnung”, but originally composed for Maria Szymanowska’s album.<sup>1</sup> Goethe’s poem, while extolling music’s power to bring back the past, reminds the reader that even as the present, through music, catches a glimpse of the past, it is

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<sup>1</sup> “Wo sind die Stunden, überschnell verflüchtigt?” From Johann Wolfgang Goethe inscription in the album of Maria Szymanowska. *La Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris*, 971. English translation by Isa Donald.

already on its way to *becoming* the past. Such a focus on memory was integral to the practice of album keeping and writing. As collections of mementos and reminiscences, albums took on the function of repositories of memory. Inscriptions that reference the passage of time and the inescapability of the present *becoming* the past abound in Romantic albums.



Fig. 1. Ferdinand Fraenzl, page 2 of “Piango, ma sparsi”, album of Maria Szymanowska. La Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, 973.

There are countless references to passage of time in the albums of Maria Szymanowska and Helena Malewska. Ferdinand Fraenzl’s inscription in Maria’s album, seen in Figure 1, serves as an example of such practice: the three concluding chords mark the passage of time – “Amitié, Separation, Se revoir” – the last chord anticipating a wished-for future reunion. The focus on a moment is also often underscored in the dedication accompanying a musical gift. This practice is demonstrated in Figure 2, an inscription found in Helena’s album (the faded texts on the left margin of the page), which reads “Puisse cette musique vous rappeler les moments passés à la petite Morschoy”. Here the author highlights specific time experienced together with the dedicatee. Renata Suchowiejko proposed that this inscription might reference one of the elegant salons located on St. Petersburg’s

Малая Морская (Malaya Morskaya Street).<sup>2</sup> The choice of Chopin's waltz by the anonymous inscriber further suggests that this particular piece was meant to recall the *music* that accompanied moments spent together with Helena “à la petite Morschoÿ”.

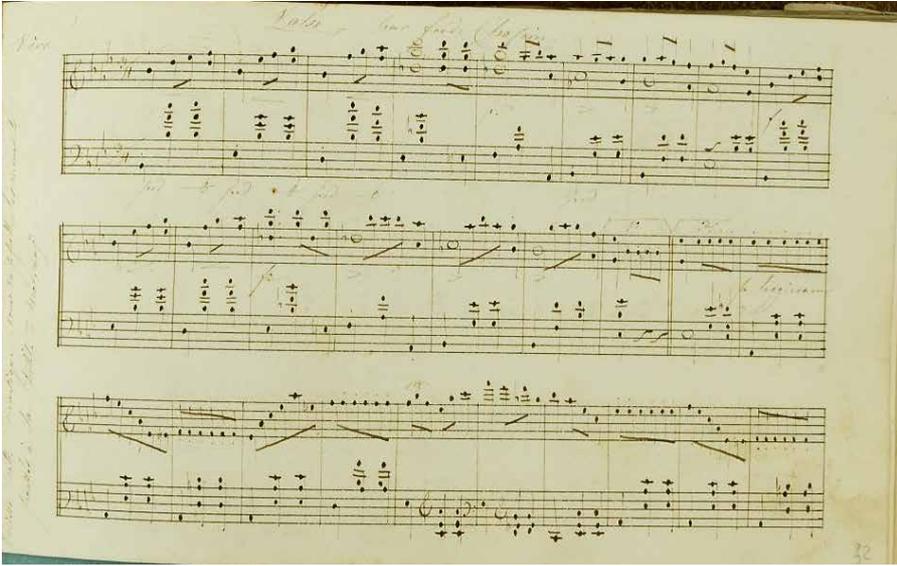


Fig. 2. Anonymous, page 1 of “Valse par Fréd[éric] Chopin [E flat Major, Op. 18], album of Helena Malewska. La Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, 962.

The function of musical gifts as *objects* of memory that preserve a fleeting moment explains the purpose of music inscriptions consisting of a few notes or measures. While their relevance as musical texts is limited, they play an important role as ephemeral moments made concrete. Album inscriptions were expected to convey an air of spontaneity. Indeed, inscriptions were often intentionally artless, improvisatory, fragmentary, or sketch-like. In their inscriptions, musicians who considered themselves performers rather than composers often employed graphic aspects of notation to capture the memory of their idiomatic instrumental techniques. Such is the purpose of Franz Liszt's inscription in

<sup>2</sup> Renata Suchowiejko, „Muzyczne wpisy w sztambuchu Heleny z Szymanowskich Malewskiej. Rękopis MAM 962 ze zbiorów Biblioteki Polskiej w Paryżu”, *Muzyka jest zawsze współczesna: studia dedykowane Profesor Alicji Jarzębskiej*, eds. Małgorzata Woźna-Stankiewicz and Andrzej Sitarz (Kraków: Musica Iagellonica, 2011), 581.

Helena's album, seen in Figure 3. Not intended to carry any notational specificity, the inscription offers an ekphrastic representation of Liszt's facility with arpeggios, and recalls the auditory experience of his rich and expressive sonority. The albums of Maria and her daughter contain several such notated performative utterances, each artist using the inscribed image to signal aspects of his or her sonic persona.

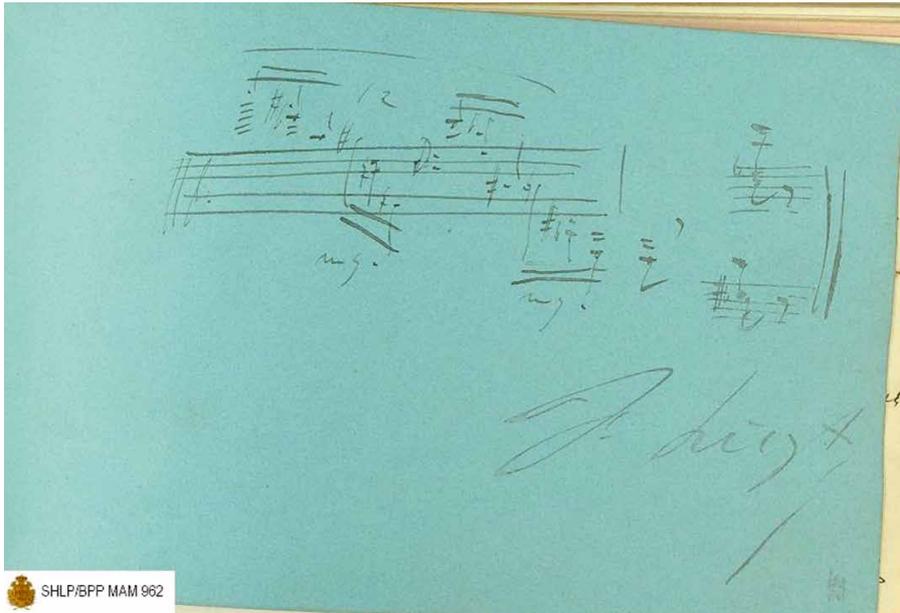


Fig. 3. Franz Liszt, inscription, album of Helena Malewska. La Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, 962.

Album mementos – locks of hair, blood, theater tickets, ballroom and calling cards, dried flowers and leaves – stood in for an absent person or a memorable experience. The act of preserving these objects resonated with a broader culture of collecting secular relics that became so prominent during the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> No other album objects underscore the relic function of album

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Lutz, “The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture”, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39 (2011): 127–142. Along these lines, the removal of Chopin's heart, which according with his wishes was transported from Paris to Warsaw by his sister and buried in the church of the Holy Cross, begs exploration within in the context of heart-burial practices and the Romantic cult of secular relics.

souvenirs as strongly as the ubiquitous dried flowers – the embalmed witnesses of a vanished moment, the simulacra of emotions and ideas from the past. (See Figure 4).



Fig. 4. Calling card and dried flowers, album of Augusta Szadkiewicz. Warsaw, Biblioteka Narodowa Pałac Krasińskich, Akc. 15313.

The relic function of musical manuscripts emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century and was intimately connected with the concept of *Kunstreligion* – a then new aesthetic system that assumed a direct correspondence between musical and spiritual experience.<sup>4</sup> Within this process of sacralization of music, composers, understood to possess prophetic abilities, became the objects of devout veneration. Accordingly, musical manuscripts could acquire fetishistic significance. Like the medieval relics of saints – body parts of and objects that came in contact with holy persons – manuscripts were understood to hold some mystic traces of their author.

Because musical mementos deposited in albums in the previous centuries were already understood to carry object value as traces

<sup>4</sup> The most exhaustive treatment of this subject is found in Elizabeth A. Kramer, "The Idea of *Kunstreligion* in German Musical Aesthetics of the Early Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2005).

of cherished persons' presence, in this new cultural context they easily transitioned to their role as "holy relics". Manuscripts that for their composers had specific practical purpose – as working drafts or notated musical compositions for use in performance – were now collected for their relic value. Like bodies of medieval saints, they were dismembered so that individual pages could be sold or given to special recipients to serve as tangible remnants of the composer's divine presence. Musical albums, thus, could serve as reliquaries, holding fragments of manuscripts that had none of the personalized qualities of gift compositions, but were collected simply for their value of having been written in the hand of a revered composer. Maria Szymanowska's musical album, consisting mostly of dedications written in expressly for her, holds several such additions of relic-object manuscripts: a gift manuscript that Chopin had written for someone else, and fragments of manuscripts by Handel, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and others.

Since relic-manuscripts required "certificates of authenticity", donors or sellers of these treasures typically provided annotations attesting to the genuineness of the object. For instance, Haydn's manuscript in Maria Szymanowska's album, shown in Figure 5, has certification by "son élève Fr. Lessel" (the Polish composer Franciszek Lessel, who was indeed a student of Haydn).<sup>5</sup> These chains of transmission mimic the medieval "invention" narratives used to legitimize the relics of saints by providing a record of their discovery and transfer.

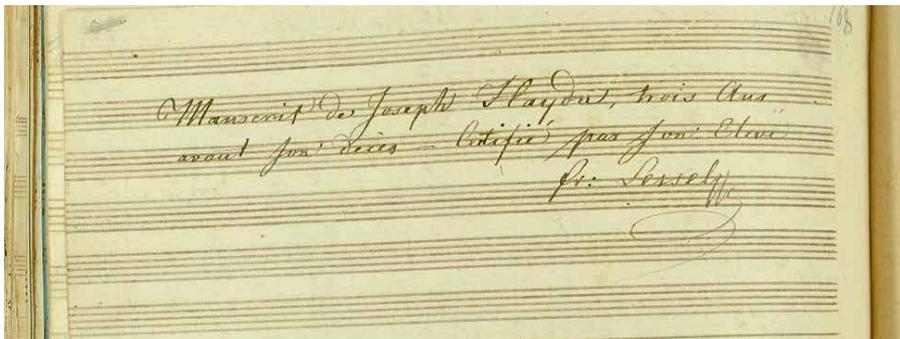


Fig. 5. Franciszek Lessel, certificate for Haydn's manuscript, album of Maria Szymanowska. La Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, 973.

<sup>5</sup> Suchowiejko, *Album musical Marii Szymanowskiej*, 307.

The belief in a manuscript's capacity for preserving metaphysical traces of a dead person dominates Alexandre Dumas' (père) recollection of the circumstances in which he learned of Bellini's death, published in the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*. In the narrative, Dumas, upon hearing that the Italian composer passed away, holds up the recommendation letter that Bellini wrote for him as a proof of the impossibility of his friend's death. As he accepts the veracity of the terrible news, the letter becomes the locus of his memory: through it Dumas recalls Bellini's physique and the sound of his voice. He then remembers the moment Bellini transferred himself onto the page: "I saw him place his hand on this paper. This paper preserved his writing, his name. This paper was alive and he was dead".<sup>6</sup> In Dumas' account, the material object into which the essence of his friend's existence has been transmitted becomes imbued with a relic-like ritualistic power. Bellini's eternal spirit and the page containing his writing become forever linked by a powerful metaphysical thread.

A composer's manuscript also permitted readers to engage with another Romantic notion, according to which a skilled reader was able to derive from a person's handwriting the knowledge of his or her character or momentary state of mind. This concept was first developed in the writings of Johann Kaspar Lavater, but the theory was fully articulated in Edouard Hocquart's highly influential *L'art de juger du caractère des hommes sur leur écriture*.<sup>7</sup> Consistent with Romantic notions of individuality, handwriting analysis revealed "idiosyncrasy, eccentricity, singularity, originality" helping to differentiate "between the meaningless script of the masses and the exceptional handwritings that revealed extraordinary characters".<sup>8</sup> The Romantics considered these readings of the exceptional mind especially valuable because the handwriting was understood as a direct transmission of the unconscious mind.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "[...] je le voyais poser sa main sur ce papier. Ce papier conservait son écriture, son nom. Ce papier était vivant et lui était mort". Alexandre Dumas, "Une mort, un succès, une chute". *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, January 10, 1836, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (Leipzig: Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1775–1778) and [Edouard Hocquart], *L'art de juger du caractère des hommes sur leur écriture* (Paris: Saintin, 1812), expanded from an 1810 edition.

<sup>8</sup> Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1998), 78–79.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

Music aficionados applied these notions to the handwriting of composers. In that sense, musical and non-musical autographs of music celebrities became important as documents of their personalities, capable of capturing the state of their minds at the moment of penning the text. Already in 1820, E.T.A. Hoffmann pointed out that the qualities of the inner man are “glaringly expressed in musical handwriting”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, a keen observer could derive from a musical sketch the information about both the composer’s character and his mental condition at the moment of inspiration. The hurried, untidy hand found in sketches and drafts would have been considered witness to the author’s great originality and profundity, and the speed of writing and near illegibility understood to represent the vitality of his exceptional mind.<sup>11</sup>

The veneration of the relic-manuscript and the belief that handwriting captured the essence of its writer inspired owners of albums to collect valuable documents, but it ultimately contributed to the demise of the album tradition as it was practiced in the first half of the nineteenth century and the destruction of countless albums: many were dismembered in order to remove pages that had particular relic value and the contents considered less valuable were discarded.<sup>12</sup>

#### MEMORY AND THE NATION

“Let her safeguard it like a holy relic”, wrote Antoni Wodziński in 1835, after having learned that Chopin inscribed a piece in the album of his sister Maria.<sup>13</sup> While his advice points to the growing recognition of Chopin’s achievement and his potential for the inclusion in the pantheon of immortal masters, Wodziński – an ardent patriot, who took part in the tragic Polish uprising of 1830–

<sup>10</sup> E.T.A. Hoffmann, “Casual Reflections on the Appearance of this Journal”, *Allgemeine Zeitung für Musik und Musikliteratur*, 9 and 16 October, 1820, quoted after David Charlton, *E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Musical Writings : Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 430.

<sup>11</sup> See descriptions for figures 28–29, in Hocquart, *L’art de juger du caractère*, 47–48.

<sup>12</sup> One might add that it was also a significant cause for the devastation of performing manuscripts by “great” composers.

<sup>13</sup> “Podobno Fryderyk napisał dla Maryni jakiś walc w sztambuchu: niech go zachowa jak relikwię i nikomu przepisać nie pozwala, aby nie spospolciał”. Antoni Wodziński (Paris) to Teresa Wodzińska (Szulzewo), [October, 1835]. *Korespondencja Fryderyka Chopina*, ed. Bronisław Sydow, 2 vols. (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1955), 1: 265.

31 – undoubtedly was aware of the role Chopin’s compositions had in creating the sonic memory of the nation. Partitioned between Russia, Prussia, and Austria, sovereign Poland existed only in the recollections of the past and hopes for the future. During these trying times, albums kept by Polish patriots were vital in the preservation of such memories by functioning as “repositories of a national consciousness under siege”.<sup>14</sup>

Because of the sacralization of Polish political and historical imagination that resulted from the strong influence of political messianism, Polish albums often served as shrines or reliquaries encasing artifacts that had patriotic significance. Figure 6 is an example from a mid-nineteenth-century album of Maria Falkenhagen-Zaleska, whose husband participated in the 1830 Uprising. The small envelope preserved in the album holds a solitary leaf, accompanied by the inscription “A leaf from the grave of the victims who perished on February 27, 1861” and a list of the victims’ last names. These men were the casualties of tsarist forces’ brutal response to a political demonstration that took place in Warsaw; their death is believed to have set the path towards the outbreak of the January Uprising of 1863.<sup>15</sup>

The albums of Maria Szymanowska and her daughters contain numerous musical contributions that have indisputably national character. For instance, Franciszek Lessel wrote into Maria’s album one of the songs he contributed to the 1816 volume containing musical arrangements of Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz’s *Historical Chants* (Śpiewy historyczne), with text of the first stanza written into the score. (Shown in Figure 7). On the surface Niemcewicz’s “Jan Kazimierz” appears to be a historic recollection of the reign of King John Casimir II, who in the seventeenth century led the country in the Russo-Polish War and the war with Sweden, better known as «the Deluge» (Potop). But underneath this thin disguise the poem is, in fact, a call to Polish patriots to protect their homeland. The meaning of the text of the first stanza would have been

<sup>14</sup> Justyna Beinek, “Cultural Texts: Polish and Russian Albums in the Age of Romanticism”, *Rocznik Antropologii Historii* 1 (2011): 176.

<sup>15</sup> “Listek z Grobu ofiar poległych 27 Lutego 1861 w Warszawie”. The custom of taking mementos from gravesites of prominent people was so widespread that vicinity of Napoleon’s tomb was completely stripped of its foliage. Judith Pascoe, *The Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3.

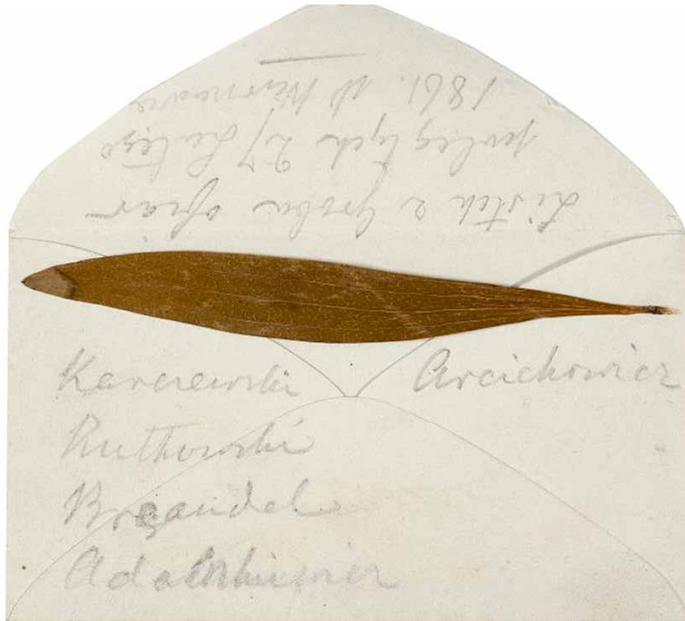


Fig. 6. Envelope with “A leaf from the grave of the victims”, album of Maria Falkenhagen-Zaleska (née Korzeniowska). Warsaw, Biblioteka Narodowa, Pałac Krasińskich, Ms. II 8956.

Fig. 7. Franciszek Lessel, page 1 of “Jan Kazimierz”, album of Maria Szymanowska. La Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, 973.

inescapable to Maria's contemporaries: it speaks of the "plotting of its neighbors" that culminated in an attack on the "unlucky country".<sup>16</sup>

Patriotic album inscriptions became even more important in the aftermath of the November Uprising. With Maria no longer alive, such contributions to her album would now have been secured by her daughters. It is most likely her other daughter, Celina Szymanowska-Mickiewicz that was the recipient of Stanisław Moniuszko's musical setting of perhaps the most famous quotation from her husband's *Forefathers' Eve II*: "Darkness everywhere. Dead silence everywhere. What will happen now?" (*Ciemno wszędzie, głucho wszędzie, co to będzie, co to będzie?*) (See Figure 8).



Fig. 8. Stanisław Moniuszko, "Ciemno wszędzie", album of Maria Szymanowska. La Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, 973.

The pro-Polish sympathies of Helena, who remained in St. Petersburg, would have required very discreet forms of expressions – and her album would have been perfectly suited for that purpose. In the album we find a variety of patriotic-themed album gifts – drawings, poems and songs – offered to Helena by her friends and acquaintances. In this respect, her album is typical of Polish albums of the post-November Uprising period, which

<sup>16</sup> "Pod smutną gwiazdą Kazimierz się rodził/Za niego we krwi ukraińskie niwy/Za niego spisek sąsiadów nachodził/Kraj nieszczęśliwy".

were routinely used as vehicles for the dissemination of patriotic literature and music intended for performance during private gatherings.<sup>17</sup>

Such an example of patriotic music intended for private performances being disseminated through albums is found in the song titled “Recollection” (Wspomnienie), based on a poem by Count Skarbek and set to music by Maria Szymanowska’s youngest sister, Kazimiera Wołowska. (See Example 1). Found in Helena’s album, the song is written on a separate bifolio of paper – possibly to facilitate “fascicle” circulation and copying – and inserted into the album. The poem consists of three eight-line stanzas, each affirming a similar narrative structure: in the first part of each stanza the poet compliments the pleasant atmosphere of a salon only to conclude with admonitions that joyfulness is not appropriate for a bereaved nation. In the first two stanzas – even though there are hints of unhappiness among the jubilation (the reference to “the gathering of sad compatriots”) – the admonitions are confined to last two lines of each stanza and take the form of rhetorical questions: “In the midst of the unfortunate experience, is it right to dream about happiness? But in the midst of the sad experience, is it right to be joyful?” (Wśród nieszczęsnej przygody, o szczęściu marzeń się godzi? Ale... wśród smutnej przygody, czyż nam weselić się godzi?). In the last stanza, conceived as a culmination of and response to these sentiments, the poet clarifies the purpose and significance of the salon gathering described in the song: the song you are hearing is a national chant, whose sound invokes bitter recollections. So, the poet concludes, “It is the right of the disconsolate to cry!” (Strapionym płakać się godzi!).

Wołowska’s music follows the text masterfully: she sets the poem as a polonaise, a dance that already by 1800 would have been understood to connote nostalgia for an imagined national past. Her setting is strophic, but it works for all three stanzas: the concluding rhetorical questions and the poignant answer of the last stanza are set to music that is distinctly different from the

<sup>17</sup> In the collection of Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, there are other manuscripts – MAM 956, 957, and 958 – copied in the hand of Helena Szymanowska-Malewska, which contain patriotic poetry and songs for private performances. There is no musical notation in these notebooks, but many of the poems have directions in the manner of broadside ballad: “Sing to the tune of ...”.

preceding phrases: the register opens upwards towards the highest notes in the piece; the high E is elongated through the use of a dotted quarter-note rhythm not heard before in analogous spots. The subsequent melodic descent is marked by chromaticism that strongly contrasts the predominant diatonicism of preceding phrases. Moreover, while the last two lines of the text are repeated, the dominant harmony is prolonged through a phrase extension. By drawing attention to the concluding words of each stanza, Wołowska underscores the nostalgic meaning of the poem, and helps recall the tragic fate of Poland.

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation on aged paper. It features two systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are written in Polish. The first system includes the lyrics: "A czyż widok swo- ba- dy chmura smutku z oczu spłó- dzi-". The second system includes: "czyż widok niecier- pny go- dy o niez- kę- mar- cie- się- gó- dzi-". Below the piano part, there are two columns of lyrics: "Wiosłoci się- ja- umi- chy / Nie- koch- kras- ko- n- k- le- ca- / Uprze- wie- dzie- się- po- ci- chy / Wro- k- w- i- e- d- z- i- k- o- w- i- e- s- t- e- s- z- e- g- o- w- e- c- a- / Ah! kogo-ż u- d- z- i- a- ł- w- o- b- o- d- y / Chod- na- s- t- w- i- ł- y- nie- w- o- d- z- i- ? / Ale- w- i- e- d- z- i- e- s- t- e- s- z- e- g- o- w- e- c- a- / Czy- nam- w- i- e- d- z- i- e- s- z- e- g- o- w- e- c- a-". A small library label is visible at the bottom left of the page.

**Example 1.** Kazimira [sic] Wołowska, “Wspomnienie” from the album of Helena Malewska. La Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, 962. Based on Renata Suchowiejko’s transcription.

The album was a private setting where candid discourses about the nation could be carried out without fear of censorship. In a collection of essays titled *A Pilgrim’s Evenings* the contemporary Polish poet Stefan Witwicki describes the patriotic role of Polish albums, saying that they were “instigated by an entirely national idea”. He underscores the link between messianic ideology and patriotic album inscriptions by pointing out that the owners of albums, “agog with the sacredness of the rhymes contained within

them” gave them titles such as “Rhymes of Immortality” or “The Temple of Recollections”. Ultimately, Witwicki argues, “native literature, which could not make itself seen to the world in front of the sentries of watchful occupiers, was forced, so to speak, to confine itself to homes behind bolted doors, to somehow endure until better times”. According to Witwicki, few new works were found in bookstores, but countless poems were written into private albums, read aloud during evening gatherings, and “furtively traversed the country”.<sup>18</sup>

### MUSICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF MEMORY

While poetic and visual album inscription used specific cues to invoke the notion of memory – timeless temples to signal the passage of time and ephemeral flowers as reminders of human impermanence – music offered intrinsically musical vocabulary to impart the sense of a remembered past.

The song inscribed into the album of Maria Szymanowska in 1827 by Count Mikhail Wielhorski and reproduced in Example 2 offers one such example. The poetic text, which starts “Il est passé cet heureux temps”, immediately focuses our attention on passage of time and memory. The music of this miniature is organized into a ternary form, but the tonal and thematic return of the opening material is modified. Here the composer calls for pianissimo dynamics. Rather than fully restating the opening idea, he gets stuck in a sequential repetition of the opening motive. Moreover, instead of the active, eighth note accompaniment of the opening, we hear bare chords – no more than the harmonic skeleton. The piano postlude makes one more attempt to remember the opening, but

<sup>18</sup> “[...] literatura ojczyzna nie mogąc przed wartami tych czujnych najezdników na świat się pokazywać, musiała, że tak rzekę, zamknąć się w domach na rygiel, byle lepszego czasu jakkolwiek doczekać. Po księgarniach mało co przybywało, przecież w każdej szlacheckiej prawie familii było prawie co wieczór co czytać, gdy każda miała jedną przynajmniej księgę, w której to dzieci, to rodzice, to krewni, to przyjaciele, wpisywali rozmaite wiersze, ukradkiem kraj przebiegające, często bardzo złe jako wiersze, lecz zawsze bardzo dobre jako twory uczuć patriotycznych i szlacheckich. Te księgi acz sprawione myślą całkiem narodową, nosiły niewiedzieć z kąd nazwisko cudzoziemskie, już to sztambuchów, już to albumów. Czasem młodzi ich właściciele, a jeszcze prędzej młode ich właścicielki, przejęci świętością rymów tam zawartych, (które oddychając miłością ojczyzny, miały dla serc polskich istotnie coś niepospolitego), uniesieni żywością wyobraźni, a po części złym gustem, który z swej natury zwykle gardzi prostotą, kładli na czele owych ksiąg najszumniejsze tytuły, jako Chwała pamiętek, Rymy nieśmiertelności, Świątynia wspomnień itp.”. Stefan Witwicki, *Wieczory pielgrzymy: rozmaitości moralne, literackie i polityczne* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1866), 1: 67.

instead it deteriorates into a chromatically inflected descent. The soft dynamics, misremembered phrase and harmony, and the bare-bones accompaniment all convey the experience of a vague reminiscence of previously heard music.



Example 2. Mikhaïl Wielhorski, “Il est passé cet heureux temps” from album of Maria Szymanowska. La Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise, Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris, 973. Based on Renata Suchowiejko’s transcription.

The techniques used by Wielhorski are well known to scholars of memory. Since 1932, when Frederic Bartlett published his foundational study in the psychology of memory, much ink has been spilled in an effort to describe and understand distortions typical of recalled experience.<sup>19</sup> Scientists often note the blurring, fading, misremembering, and fracturing that characterize memories. Their research suggests that recollections vanish because new experiences interfere with the stored memories and the neuron connections that represent the specific memory weaken over time.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the process of remembering is fundamentally reconstructive: memory is not a literal recall of a stored experience,

<sup>19</sup> Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932). The findings of Bartlett and his followers are described in Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: the Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Schacter, 76–79.

but rather a construction made from stored fragments and impacted by a variety of other forces – the rememberer’s more recent experiences, accumulated knowledge, present circumstances, biases, and emotional factors among them.<sup>21</sup> The fragmented manner in which our brain stores memories and the reconstructive process of articulating memories are best captured in Ulric Neisser’s oft-quoted dictum that “out of a few stored bone chips we remember a dinosaur”, in which he compares the rememberer to a paleontologist who recreates the prehistoric creature from fragments “in accordance with general knowledge on how the complete dinosaur should appear”.<sup>22</sup> While the rememberer’s imagination plays an important role in this reconstruction, it also interferes with the accuracy of the recalled information. This is particularly true of *associative retrieval*, a form of involuntary recall activated spontaneously, as in Proust’s famous passage from *À la recherche du temps perdu* in which a particular memory of his childhood is summoned by the taste of “petite madeleine”.<sup>23</sup> The difficulty in determining the boundaries between imagined and involuntarily remembered experiences often causes memories to be associated with blurry, dream-like states, not unlike the one heard in the conclusion of Wielhorski’s song.

While describing these and other aspects of memory, Daniel Schacter, one of the foremost scientists in the field of memory research, points out that artists portrayed processes of memory long before scientists described and mapped them onto our brains.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, the Romantic fascination with memory led *composers* to develop an inherently *musical* language that could represent the act of reminiscing, long before science understood the mechanisms of remembering. Music as an art expressing itself in time and dependent on the manipulation of time was particularly well suited for communicating the relationship between past and present. Friendship albums – like those kept by Maria Szymanowska and her daughters – helped to foster the use of this musical language

<sup>21</sup> This subject is presented in the chapter “Reflections in a Curved Mirror: Memory Distortions”, in Schacter, 98–133. The term *rememberer* has been coined by Endel Tulving, see Schacter, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ulric Neisser’s quote comes from his 1967 *Cognitive Psychology*, 285; quoted after Schacter, 40. Schacter elaborates on Neisser’s dictum on page 70.

<sup>23</sup> Schacter, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Schacter, 18.

of memory. This is the milieu that nurtured the poignant artistic visions of recalled experiences, which are characteristic of the works of Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, and Schumann.<sup>25</sup> Research into the culture of memories and mementoes opens a window into these composers' cultural context and ultimately helps us to better comprehend the full expressive charge of *their* memory-inspired compositions.

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995). Also, Elaine R. Sisman, "Memory and Invention at the Threshold of Beethoven's Late Style", in *Beethoven and His World*, ed. Scott Burnham and Michael P. Steinberg (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 51–87; Walter Frisch, "You must remember this: Memory and Structure in Schubert's String Quartet in G major, D. 887", *The Musical Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (January 1, 2000): 582–603, and chapters 3 and 4 in Kristina Muxfeldt, *Vanishing Sensibilities: Schubert, Beethoven, and Schumann* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).