

Tomasz Bocheński*

Witkacy's Amusia

During the First World War Witkacy ceased hearing music even though he could hear sounds very well¹. It intrigues me whether he ceased hearing the music of the spheres or became deaf to the cosmic symphony, the scherzo of creation? He thought that humanity could not be imagined without hearing the musical drama of being. Did he no longer hear music but heard the music of the spheres; or he did not hear music and could only speak of the cosmic composition? It was not enough to speak about that, too little in fact for someone who recently savoured the world of sounds, who heard by means of his whole body and who could only remember his lost feelings as one remembers one's past sensitivity, past loftiness, love or oneself even. In the description of Witkacy's illness alongside amusia² the loss of the feeling of strangeness can be written with a quotation mark. An exclamation mark can be put after the word "incurable". However, this diagnosis can be questioned as musical miracles do happen. It was also Witkacy who was touched by such a miracle so that he did not even know how to write about it. When he was seven years old he began hearing music, thanks to the interference of some higher powers; when he was about twenty-nine, maybe thirty, because of the work of some devil, he ceased hearing music.

When Witkacy heard music he could talk about it not only as a dilettante but as someone of a medium level of initiation, knowing notes, the basis of composition as well as having a well-trained hearing. Unlike Gombrowicz, who would neither achieve that basic level of knowledge nor suffer from amusia. That could had been the reason why Gombrowicz would talk of music with absolute self-confidence, create circles of snobbish listeners, explain music until he came across a specialist. And to this specialist he will start playing over-cabaret, will pretend

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¹ It was thanks to Lech Sokół who inspired me to write about Witkacy's amusia.

² I use the medical term even though my knowledge of medicine is very limited – please forgive me. See also: O. Sacks, *Muzykofilia. Opowieść o muzyce i mózgu*, transl. J. Łoziński, Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2009.

to tell stories from the very beginning³. They had not much in common apparently and yet I can see a sign of coincidence, perhaps not as Swedenborg saw heaven and hell, however similarly. Witkacy lost music and desired to regain it at any cost, maybe even at the cost of a pact with the devil himself.

Gombrowicz did not dare to love music when he was young so once an adult he called for the devil to write about music. They were both tempted by the most difficult possible composition of work of art imitating musical form. Witkacy wrote *Beelzebub Sonata* following the demonic sonata of some modern artist, perhaps Schönberg, perhaps some invented artist. Gombrowicz composed *Cosmos* following the rhythm of Beethoven's last string quartets. Does it call for the greater convergence to illustrate the drama of the loss, to show how the cosmos is falling into pieces when we lose our ability to hear its symphony? Witkacy wrote to Hans Cornelius:

This similarity also reveals itself between you and me, I was – as you were devoid of musical skills, even hated music until I took up art. Anointed with the holy balms during my serious illness – a very comical thing indeed – I became mentally and physically a completely different child. I began liking music and thanks to exercise I improved my hearing (that I had been previously devoid of) that I was able to take down notes as somebody dictated. When the war came my passion for music (I comprehended my musicality formally then) expired. I am writing about this because these cases are, psychologically speaking, intriguing⁴.

It can be observed that Witkacy did not even mention miracles and he was as much surprised and awed as Lombroso would have been cutting brains open. In the past events he saw a psychological case, God forbidding God Himself. “A very comical thing indeed” – as he wrote about his recovery and internal transformation, as if he wanted to find another explanation for his gift of music than the mere anointment with holy balms. God brought him back to the world and music and he thought that it was only body and coincidence (a psychological one). Nothing stranger or more paradoxical could happen to this distruster and rationalist (of course with strangeness always waiting in the background). Let us imagine how this creator of mondalogy utters: “It is terrible that anointed balms turned me into ‘a musician’. And how fortunate it was that I lost this gift and became an artist. No, it is really terrible!”

When we stop being ironic we can see that Witkacy – probably – was an artist of music and a philosopher of strangeness. He found refuge in speaking when

³ See: P. Millati, *Gombrowicz wobec sztuki. (Wybrane zagadnienia)*, Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, Gdańsk 2002, pp. 93–142.

⁴ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Listy do Hansa Corneliusa*, transl. S. Morawski, “Dialog” 1978, issue 5, p. 90.

he ceased to feel because it was not speaking that rendered him immune to feeling both music and strangeness. In adult life he would have suffered a loss which most of us had suffered in our early childhood! One theory states that when we start speaking we lose absolute hearing, stop hearing the music of words, hum, steps, rain, everything that is playing and we begin to hear sounds and understand words⁵. We lose absolute hearing, as one would say, we lose the hearing of the absolute. But this theory also does not explain Witkacy's history because he was born with an aversion to music and died indifferent to it. Anointed balms got him out of musicians' hell but stopped working in the end. Now we can understand better why Witkacy was so outraged at, as he called it, radio-turning ("radiokręciicielstwo") and at the clan of the howling dog. Similarly to Irzykowski and Słonimski he protested against listening to a loud radio. Howling speakers made it impossible for Irzykowski and Słonimski to work. "As I like you in the time of spring" – broke into their devised word constructions. Witkacy's case was different. Romances from a thousand speakers talked to him about romantic meetings and tender words, while he was obsessively following other bodies. Smash hits listened to by millions while he was listened to by hardly anyone. Songs moved crowds whereas his plays moved only individuals. He saw that the majority delights in nothing, no melody at all. Therefore, he made the term: "the clan of the howling dog" because a dog – as Witkacy explained – howls at any type of music. The clan of the howling dog tells also a story of the beginning of noise, a necessary element of dispelled spirituality. There is no way one can concentrate, have second thoughts or be attentive when surrounded by this musical aura. The clan makes a new man – a man having multiple experiences, a simultaneous man, a man of infiltration, a man torn into pieces by entertainment. Witkacy demanded concentration and seriousness. He did not want to be a radio station which a radio-turner skims. This dislike could be easily understood. Others are hidden in the crevices of rational justifications. Music lost its innocence in the interwar period as well as its art. It can be used to obtain any result; for instance, to give rhythm to marching masses or facilitate carrying out stupefying work at the assembly line or reviving life in a prison cell. Innocent hits can fly the catastrophist into a rage, even arouse tears. Excited by the coming end, talking himself into believing in the coming catastrophe, he cannot stand the comforting and liberating power of music. When he was saved from death he began to hear music; when he understood that everything was going to an end he ceased hearing music – it was not difficult to notice that demonic symmetry.

Let us go back to the miraculous recovery. Witkacy was taught music by his mother. Maria of Pietrkiewicz Witkiewiczowa graduated from the Warsaw Conservatory where she was taught by Władysław Żeleński. After finishing her studies, she taught music for many years. She wrote the Music Primer, from which

⁵ See also. O. Sacks, *op. cit.*

she taught Stanisław Ignacy. There is a photo of the seven-year-old Staś sitting straight at the piano and looking at the notes with his hands on the keyboard demonstrating his childish devotion to music. That photo was taken after 1902. It is hard to imagine Maria Witkiewiczowa wanting to encourage her son, already showing signs of amusia, to learn music. The seven-year-old Staś “not only does not find music repulsive but plays willingly”, as Witkiewicz the Father wrote in a letter, “composing various childish, funny yet harmonious pieces and plays and completes them using only hearing.” In other letters:

“His music is funny – these compositions in which there is character and of whose performing he is unusually caring and correcting all the changes with pedantry.”

“Regarding ‘the system of teaching’ [...] it comprises lack of one/any. Stasiak is learning ‘properly’ and systematically only music; He is learning music properly and has begun writing his own compositions by now. Since he contracted smallpox there has been a change in him regarding music.”⁶

Smallpox freed him from amusia. He stopped disturbing his mother maliciously during music lessons and started composing. He wrote compositions and played them for parents and guests. Gradually, however, music was pushed into the background of his life.

In the end he proved that it was his father’s and not his mother’s artistic theories that were true. He still listened to music but did not compose. After 1908 he dedicated himself to his only passion: the study of nature by means of painting. It was the romance with Solska that made him decide ultimately that he was an artist, i.e. a person that could create works of art more intense than the most saturated life experiences; shortly speaking: that using art he could evoke a feeling more important than the erotic theatre of Solska was arousing in him. He was aware that only by painting and literature he could become an artist. He felt music intensively – “622 falls of Bungo” – but he could not make non-amateur compositions. We do not know what accident made him lose his interest in music: his fiancée’s suicide, a wound at the battlefield, being exposed to the Bolshevik Revolution? In the interwar period, Witkacy was less interested in music, even Karol Szymanowski’s compositions faded for him, although he happened to attend Szymanowski’s concerts (Witkacy met Szymanowski in 1904; as a token of their friendship Szymanowski dedicated *I Soanta c-moll*, op. 8 to Witkacy). He was checking to see if music aroused anything in him. In 1927, after Szymanowski’s concert, Witkacy admitted in a letter to his wife: “music faded completely

⁶ Quotations from Witkacy’s father’s letters from: A. Micińska, *Życie Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza w latach 1885–1918*, “Pamiętnik Teatralny” 1985, issue 1–4, pp. 18–20.

to me”⁷. Previously, after the loss of music, he wrote an operetta “Panna Tutli Putli” and “Beelzebub Sonata”. He also showed off his musical mystifications. He played discordant compositions, fooled around. “I was at the dancing,” he wrote in a letter, “and performed a solo dance with some terrible bitch and some piano pieces. These were replacement actions”⁸. During his visit to the house of Roman Jasiński he walked on all fours to the piano to smite the hosts with his compositions: “Minuet composed on the Pacific Ocean” and a little waltz “Grief for life gone forever” and “the gush”⁹ that was a free-jazz or “jass” improvisation. He knew very well what tomfoolery meant even though he was no musical dilettante. Maybe his plays were a kind of resentimental vengeance caused by his lost skills? When he abandoned The Clear Form in painting he found pleasure in demonstrating the artisan-like correctness of portrait painting and pleasure in kitsch and self-plagiarism. It seems that he found the greatest pleasure in the deconstruction of music. It was only the writing of programme kitsch, scribbler little poems that gave him comparable pleasure. He sang absurd songs praising his lost sight from the early morning. We do not know whether he sang out of tune when singing those morning canzones. We only know that he showed off with his absurd sense of humour and that the melody enabled him to arrange distant words, bring together foreign languages, harmonize non-musical discourses – if they existed, of course. He also parodied highlanders’ songs in defiance of his father who admired highlanders’ language, and also Szymanowski who was writing down Podhale folk groups songs. He ceaselessly travestied popular songs and hits, parodied cabaret hits with their incessant “och” and “ach”. It is difficult not to notice the homeopathy of kitsch in those pieces, therapy applied by many 20th century artists. Witkacy wanted to defend himself against tack in that “kitsch” therapy and not to cure himself of amusia. Reducing music to basic, infantile and banal forms made him happy. It is difficult not to notice that he derived a demonic pleasure from the humiliation of art comparable only with the pleasure of the masses who preferred hits of Włast from Szymanowski’s songs. He sang when shaving as any old pyknik. His privy songs did not differ from hits broadcasted by the radio, maybe apart from the main topic:

Do trumny i do wychodka	[to a coffin and a privy
O jakże tęsknie ja	oh how much I miss you both
Czy może być tak słodka	oh can it be so sweet

⁷ S.I. Witkiewicz, *Dzieła zebrane*, vol. XIX: *Listy do żony (1923–1927)*, prepared for publication by A. Micińska, edited and annotated by J. Degler, PIW, Warsaw 2005, p. 193.

⁸ J. Degler, *Witkacego portret wielokrotny. Szkice i materiały do biografii 1918–1939*, PIW, Warsaw 2009, p. 108.

⁹ R. Jasiński, *Witkacy*, in: *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Człowiek i twórca. Księga pamiątkowa*, T. Kotarbiński, J.E. Płomieński (eds.), PIW, Warsaw 1957, p. 310.

Rzecz co mi ach spokój da	a thing that'll give me peace
Czy mnie to ach nie spotka	or won't it maybe happen to me?
Bym poszedł do wychodka	so that I went to a privy
Lub nawet ach do trumny	or even to a coffin
(gdybym był zbyt dumny)	(or if I was too proud)
I trochę posiedział sobie	and sat there for a little while
Spokojnie niczym w grobie	as quiet as in a grave
Lub nawet w grobie samym	or even only in a grave itself
Solidnie murowanym	a solid stone one though
Gdy ach już nie w wychodku	when, oh, not in a privy anymore
Znajdę spokój – o mój – cudny kotku.	I'll find my peace – oh – my beloved kitten!] ¹⁰

He plunged into musical kitsch without any hope for high art, into the sound trumpety, primeval noise, a sea of easy and casual assonances, deriving pleasure from eliminating himself. In his novels he wrote about ultramodern, excruciating compositions by Smorski and Tengier while being himself unable to feel music, being logocentric and visionary as well as amusical.

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¹⁰ Rhyme from Książnica Pomorska in Szczecin, collection shown in an exhibition *Marginalia Filozoficzne* in 2004.

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(Summary)

Witkacy suffered from amusia as a child and as an adult person. He was seriously interested in music only for a little over twenty years (1890–1914?). He wrote his main works as an amusic. The relation between amusia and metaphysical feelings may suggest that Witkacy wrote dramas and created painting compositions in order to evoke the lost strangeness of being. Amusia could have also been the reason for Witkacy's ambiguity – he was defending and degrading high art at the same time.

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