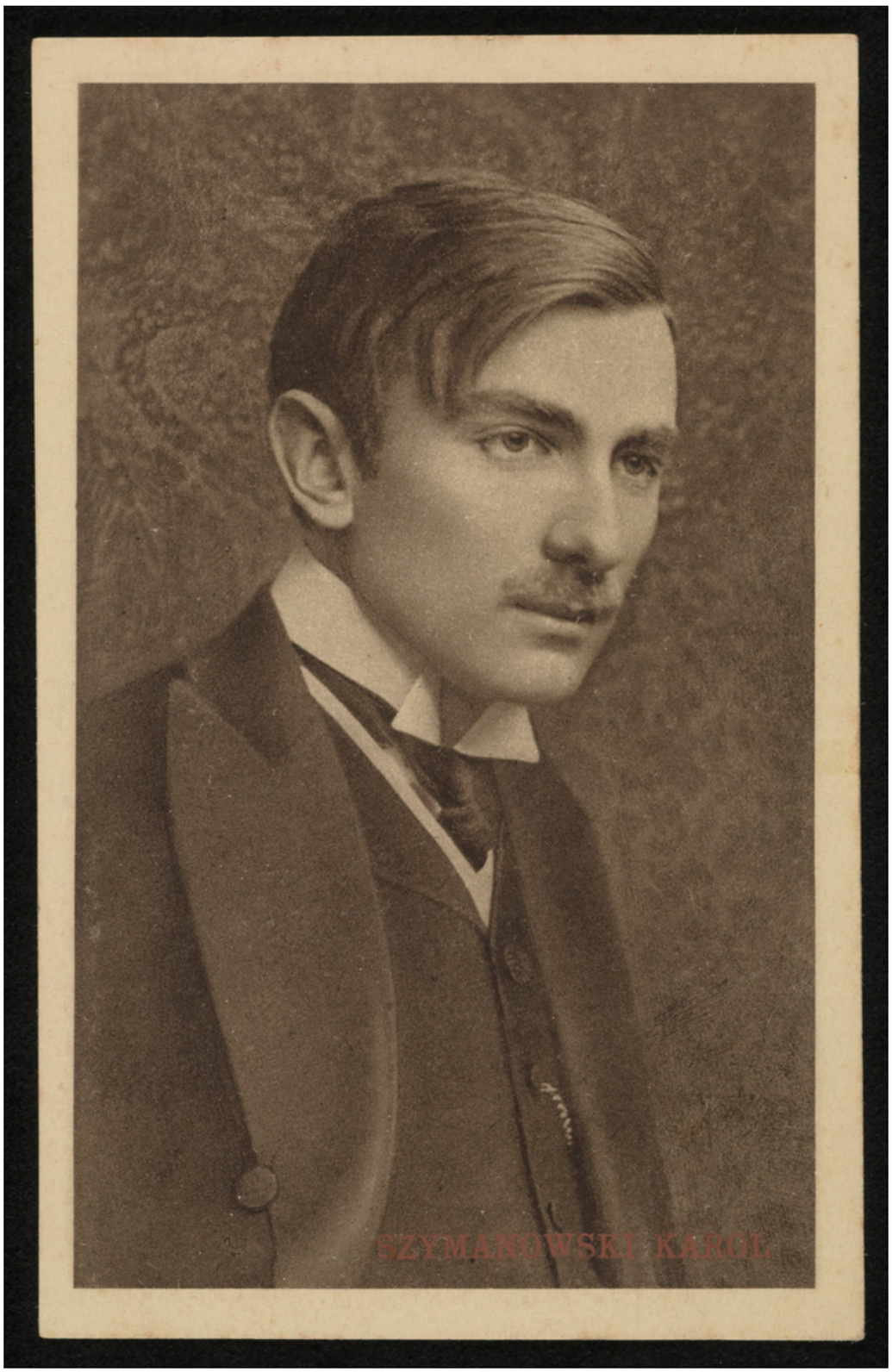
ONDINE



SZYMANOWSKI

COMPLETE PIANO WORKS, VOL. 1

PETER JABLONSKI



Karol Szymanowski, 1910s

KAROL SZYMANOWSKI (1882–1937)

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PETER JABLONSKI, piano

> I believe that in spite of all the terrible things which are happening in the world today, there exists some mysterious means of mutual understanding amongst men, some straightforward, purely human solidarity which is supra-national, and this exists precisely in the sphere of the most elevated intellectual, aesthetic and – above all – ethical matters… I myself, for want of a better word, have called this "Europeanism".
>
> Karol Szymanowski, from an interview given to *Wiadomosti Literackie* in September 1912.

Who was the author of the words above, uttered more than a century ago and yet still so relevant today? A name we associate with Polish music and culture, and, of course, with some of the most complex works written for piano, metaphorically hiding behind one of his *Masques*. Poland's most significant composer after Chopin, Szymanowski was also a man who possessed a great talent for writing, leaving behind a monumental correspondence, works of fiction, writings on music, culture, and education. He witnessed the breakdown of the old order in which he safely grew up, having to leave everything he knew behind when his family estate was destroyed by the Bolsheviks in 1917. A contemporary of Stravinsky and Bartók, he knew many leading musicians and writers of his day, and counted among his close friends violinists Paweł Kochański and Bronisław Huberman, conductor and composer Grzegorz Fitelberg, and pianist Arthur Rubinstein. He became, through his life and work, one of the most important names in the history of Polish music to whom it is difficult to give full justice in short album liner notes.

Karol Maciej Korwin-Szymanowski was born on 3 October 1882 into a family of wealthy land-owning gentry at the Tymoszówka estate, which was situated in the Chekhrin District Authority of the former Kiev Province (now Kyiv, Ukraine). His father Stanisław Bonawentura Marian Szymanowski belonged to a distinguished family which could trace his ancestry to the beginning of the sixteenth century, and his mother, Baroness Dominika Teodora Anna von Taube, descended from the Barons von Taube, members of the German Teutonic Order associated with the province of Courland (now Latvia) in Polish Lithuania. The Taubes were endowed with the privileges of the Polish nobility in 1572. Although more research is needed, there are tantalizing glimpses of also possible Swedish ancestry on Szymanowski mother's side. Szymanowskis were connected by marriage to the families of Blumenfelds and the Neuhauses, the latter would become particularly important to Karol's musical education and development. Writings about Szymanowski's ancestry make for fascinating reading, particularly those by Alistair Wightman and Teresa Chylińska.

Third of five children, all artistically gifted, Karol grew up in a family that valued and supported music and culture. His father Stanisław himself was raised in a musical home where he heard Tausig and Liszt play; he studied piano and cello, and was also interested in astronomy, meteorology, mathematics, and natural sciences. It was Stanisław who first gave piano lessons to his seven-year-old son, soon after sending him to the music school of his uncle Gustav Neuhaus in Elizavetgrad. Known today as Kropyvnytskyi, it was a town with a population of around 75 000 before the First World War, where the Szymanowskis had property and extensive family connections. Karol became close to Gustav's son Henryk, who would later become a professor of piano at the Moscow Conservatoire, where he taught Richter, Gilels, and Radu Lupu, among others. Gustav introduced Szymanowski to the works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, and Chopin, and also to German literature and philosophy, and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in particular.

The families of Neuhauses and Szymanowskis hosted musical evenings every Saturday, alternating between their respective houses in Elizavetgrad, where performances and discussions lasted until midnight and where the masterpieces of piano literature were played. Although he grew up far away from major musical centres, Szymanowski later reflected that thanks to his upbringing in a highly musical environment, he was exposed to what he called 'the *best* music' from his younger years.

In 1901, Szymanowski travelled to Warsaw to begin studies with Zygmunt Noskowski (1846–1909), the leading Polish composer of his generation and professor at the Musical Institute, who accepted Szymanowski as his private pupil in counterpoint and composition. Noskowski was a student of Moniuszko, and also director of the Warsaw Musical Society (1881–1902), conductor of the Warsaw Philharmonia (1904–1907), and director of the Warsaw Opera (1904–1907). Of his most significant works, the symphonic poem *The Steppe*, was praised by none other than Debussy after its Parisian performance in 1903. It is under Noskowski's guidance that Szymanowski continued his development as a composer, with a teacher who was careful to give advice whilst allowing his student to retain his own creative freedom and individuality.

While devoting himself to study, Szymanowski was acutely aware that he was living in turbulent times, politically, socially and economically, with depression, food shortages, strikes, and Russo-Japanese war leading to a wave of civil unrests brutally put down by the government. The territory of Poland was occupied by three powers – Russia, Prussia, and Austria, and the nature of this three-way partition meant that the development of one national tradition in

music was impossible, also creating tensions between the creative factions. Szymanowski, with his belief in a broader European view and his love of culture that embraced the best of European heritage, could not be a zealous advocate of purely national tradition. He would search for something greater, something that would make Poland and its talent a part of a wider cultural and creative universe, and devoted himself to acquiring a musical voice which would bring comparison to the leading European composers of his day.

Together with Fitelberg and other young colleagues, Szymanowski founded in 1905 'The Publishing Group of Young Polish Composers', financially supported by Prince Władysław Lubomirski, who was one of the founding sponsors of the Warsaw Philharmonia. The aim of the group was to promote the works of the member composers in major European musical centres, as well as to develop their reputations in Poland. Concerts were given in Berlin and Warsaw, with the very first concert taking place in Zakopane, the area which would become a creative refuge to Szymanowski in his later years. Through the work of the group, Szymanowski was able to find a publisher, signing a ten-year contract with Universal Editions in 1912.

With the First World War ravaging Europe, and thus curtailing Szymanowski's travel, he entered his most creative period, completing many of his works for piano, chamber works, Third Symphony, Second Violin Concerto, and beginning his opera *King Roger* (completed in 1924).

In 1917, with his family estate destroyed by the Bolsheviks, Szymanowski began his nomadic existence, settling eventually in Warsaw in 1919, but never again owning a home. He lived with friends and family, and even his final refuge in the Tatra mountains, villa 'Atma', was a rented home.

After gaining recognition at home and abroad, in 1924 Szymanowski was offered the directorship of the Conservatory of Warsaw with the express aim of establishing a music academy that would raise the level of music education in Poland. He saw it as an opportunity to re-invigorate Polish music education and to bring up a new generation of Polish composers. But he already suffered from tuberculosis, and his tenure would be affected by several periods of illness, and absence from his post while receiving treatment in sanatoriums in Switzerland and France. His appointment was not universally accepted, and was heavily criticised for being given to a composer who never received any formal musical education, and Szymanowski on several occasions felt compelled to defend himself and his educational views in press articles and publications. During the 1930s Szymanowski gained further international recognition,

receiving numerous prizes and honorary titles. Exhausted by constant infighting and his illness, he resigned in 1932, and died in Lausanne on 3 October 1937.

Karol Szymanowski's output of 62 opuses and a number of unpublished works is highly varied in genre and form and includes songs, symphonies, chamber works, works for solo piano, operetta, opera, ballet, incidental music, and choral works (including his monumental *Stabat Mater*).

The piano works by Karol Szymanowski, composed over a period of more than 30 years, show his early fascination with Chopin and Scriabin, the spirit of Romanticism, Impressionism, and of course a national style, with references to Polish folklore. Szymanowski's works are often divided into three periods: early, mature, sometimes called 'Impressionist', and late, or 'Polish', influenced by his interest in folk music from the Tatra mountains.

Out of Szymanowski's six works written in theme and variations genre, two are for piano solo, and both belong to his early period: **Variations in B minor, Op. 3** (1901–1903) and **Variations in B-flat minor, Op. 10** (1900–1904).

Szymanowski's teacher at the Warsaw Conservatoire Zygmund Noskowski, published in 1907 a treatise on counterpoint and composition in which he emphasised the importance of writing variations for young composers, providing a helpful guide on how to approach the task. Several of his suggestions can be seen in Szymanowski's own variations, such as use of a simple theme that can be broken into two-bar cells (both Op. 3 and Op. 10), applying basic contrapuntal techniques, and writing variations without a theme, based instead on a harmonic, rather than melodic, structure, such as Op. 3 Nos. 2 & 4 and Op. 10 No. 7, and use of dance forms, especially Polish.

Szymanowski used his own theme in Op. 3, and in Op. 10, which is dedicated to Noskowski, he used elements from a Polish folk melody. Szymanowski added an introduction before the theme – something that Noskowski himself employed in his own works – thus paying homage to his teacher.

Noskowski also recommended writing simple two-part *cantus firmus* variations, with the theme alternating between the voices, and gradually increasing the complexity to three and four parts. Szymanowski, however, avoided simple two-and three-part variations altogether,

and used cantus firmus only in three variations in each set (Op. 3 Nos. 1, 3 & 12, and Op. 10 Nos. 2, 4 & 8). But he certainly did not exclude complex harmonies and rhythmic complexity.

Dance forms are also strongly present in both sets: mazurka, scherzo, and waltz (Op. 3), and a funeral march in each set. Op. 10 ends with a variation that is followed by a fugue, in which the subject is distilled from the variation theme.

Arthur Rubinstein performed Szymanowski's works throughout his own career, and included Variations Op. 10 in his recital on 27 February 1912 in Vienna's Beethoven Hall.

> If Italy did not exist, then I also could not exist. I am not a painter or a sculptor, but when I walk through the museums, then churches and finally the streets, when I look on those elevated noble works (…) then I feel it is worth while living and working. (Wightman, p. 84)

Szymanowski always loved travelling and between 1911 and 1914 made several trips to Italy, Sicily, North Africa, developing a fascination with ancient Arab and early Christian cultures, which resulted in a number of works in various genres, including the two piano triptychs ***Métopes* Op. 29** (1915) and ***Masques* Op. 34** (1915–1916) which drew direct inspirations from these trips. Considered to be some of not only his best works for piano, but also of the 20th century piano literature, they belong to his second, or 'Impressionist' period.

Métopes is Szymanowski's first major work for piano created during the First World War, when he was more or less confined to Tymoszówka and Kiev. Inspired by memories of bas-reliefs (or metopes) of Selinus which Szymanowski saw at an archaeological museum in Palermo during one of his trips, they were also created at a time when he was devouring literature about ancient Greece and the Mediterranean.

The triptych is based on some of the female characters encountered by Odysseus on his journey home, and just as metopes are frozen-in-time archaeological snapshots, so each of the pieces are character portraits without a focus on narrative.

L'île de Sirènes is an island where half-birds, half-women sirens guard the bones of sailors who fell prey to their deadly songs. In the introduction marked *Lento, molto rubato e improvvisando*, Szymanowski depicts the waters of the warm Mediterranean sea with rolling

arpeggiated figurations, staccato exclamations referring to the play of the waves or perhaps to the echoes of bird-calls, trills, and changing rhythms, all creating a beguiling soundscape. Rich harmonies are built on prevalent ninths intervals combined with tritones and whole-tone structures, and absence of clear tonality.

Calypso is a nymph, daughter of the Titan Atlas, who held Odysseus captive on an island for seven years trying, in vain, to make him her immortal husband. She is associated in Greek mythology with deep sea and its dangers, and it is the sea again that Szymanowski paints so lusciously with a colourful palette of rhythmic and harmonic devices.

Nausicaa, a daughter of Alcinos, King of the Phaecians, is dancing gracefully when we first encounter her in a sparkling, light-footed *Allegretto grazioso* introduction. This is how Odysseus, too, met her after a shipwreck that yet again delayed his return home. The lilting dance becomes more lively, culminating into a tumultuous frensy prepared by a protracted but continuous *accelerando* that would surely sweep everything from its path. But it ends on *Subito adagio*, which unexpectedly brings back melodic material heard in *Calypso*, combining it with Nausicaa's dancing theme and thus uniting the cycle not only narratively but also thematically, albeit briefly.

Sviatoslav Richter, who played many of Szymanowski's piano works, wrote in his notebook in 1983: 'I've been listening to "my" Szymanowski again. There are so many of his works that I play that you'll easily understand the seductive appeal that he has for me. It's real! (…) I dream of learning two more pieces from *Métopes*, but at the same time I'm afraid of them: *L'île de Sirènes* (unbelievably difficult) and *Calypso*. But when shall I be able to do so?'

Szymanowski enjoyed composing his ***Masques***, completing *Tantris le bouffon*, and *Sérénade de Don Juan* in 1915, and adding the *Shéhérazade* the following year. Although each piece is a self-contained work, there are a number of connections that bind the whole cycle together, such as the use of second, fourth, and fifth intervals, semitonal figures, and the rhythmic figures from the opening of *Tantris* appearing in the *Sérénade*. Szymanowski did not attempt to give his music an eastern colour, and did not use Arab and Persian melodies or scales. He grounded his works on the most basic qualities of orient music: coloratura melody, sequential chromatic patterns, percussiveness, and its characteristic expressive elements of ecstasy and passion.

Shéhérazade opens the cycle, in its intricate musical storytelling evoking the eponymous character from the *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights*. Beginning with a slow introduction

marked *Lento assai. Languido*, it intones a single note in the bass evoking the ringing of a low bell, the narrative twists and turns, tempi often change, and the sumptuous, rich harmonic language brings to mind the many stories skillfully told by Shéhérazade. It is dedicated to Sasha Dubiansky, a pupil of Felix Blumenfeld who performed *Masques* in 1916 in Petrograd.

Harry Neuhaus is the dedicatee of *Tantris le bouffon,* which was inspired by the dramatic parody of the original Celtic myth of Tristan and Isolde by Ernst Hardt. In Hardt's story, Tristan is coming home after a long absence, not recognised by anyone, not even his wife, with only the dog knowing who the wanderer really is. Szymanowski depicts the dog's bark by succession of sharp, pungent chords, and casts the story in three musical sections of differing characters: capricious and eccentric, energetic and almost violent, and finally, poignant, with the total collapse of sound and drama in the end. If one listens carefully, one will hear a veiled Wagnerian musical connection in a very short section with musical material from the first act of *Tristan und Isolde*, based on the same notes of Wagner's *Der 'Tantris' mit sorgender List sich nannte.*

The last of the *Masques*, *Sérénade de Don Juan*, is dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein, and is a deeply troubled, powerful psychological portrait of the famous lover. It opens with an improvisatory cadenza taking a whole page, which leads to the gentle guitar-like *arpeggiato* chords accompanying an energetic and beguiling bass line, as Don Juan tries to seduce his next victim with his song. Indications to the performer *dolce amoroso*, *con passione*, *palpitando*, *con forza e passione* abound, with frequent tempo and meter changes, frenzied rhythms, and harmonic richness used to paint Don Juan's portrait.

The *Masques* quickly became one of Szymanowski's most popular works for piano, with their richly varied storytelling musical extravagance. All three works are technically and musically challenging, but Szymanowski, perhaps to reassure his publisher, somewhat disingenuously remarked 'Please don't believe pianists should they say anything about the huge *quasi* difficulties of my new piano cycle. In fact everything is easy to perform and *absolutely* idiomatic for the piano.' (Wightman, p. 170). Easy or not in Szymanowski's own view, they do remain, together with *Metopés* and both sets of variations, some of the most challenging works in a pianist's repertoire, while offering a captivating musical journey for their listeners.

The music of Karol Szymanowski was appreciated by many of the greatest piano virtuosos such as Sviatoslav Richter, Béla Bartók, Alfred Cortot, Arthur Rubinstein, and Walter Gieseking, to mention but a few.

Anastasia Belina

Described by the *Gramophone* as 'a pianist in full flower of his mature, imaginative artistry', **Peter Jablonski** is an award-winning Swedish pianist. In 2026 he received the prestigious Polish Fryderyk award for his recording of André Tchaikowsky's piano concertos, and in 2025 he was awarded with a Swedish Grammy for his critically acclaimed recording of Ronald Stevenson's piano works, released on Ondine. He is among the leading pianists of his generation, and during the last thirty years on international stages has performed with over 150 orchestras, given over 2000 concerts, and has been on more than 30 tours of Japan.

Discovered by Abbado and Ashkenazy and signed by Decca in his seventeenth year, he went on to perform, tour, collaborate, and record with many of the world's leading orchestras and conductors, which include NHK Tokyo, Orchestre National de France, L'Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, DSO Berlin, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Tonhalle Zurich, Philadelphia, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, La Scala Philharmonic, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, Warsaw National Philharmonic Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra of Polish Radio (NOSPR), Daniele Gatti, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Andris Nelsons, Daniel Harding, Kurt Sanderling, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Riccardo Chailly, Myung-Whun Chung, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, and Marie Jacquot.

He has appeared in concert and recitals in famous venues around the world, which include the Royal Festival Hall and the Barbican in London, Philharmonie Berlin, Suntory Hall Tokyo, Hollywood Bowl Los Angeles, Salle Pleyel Paris, Musikverein Vienna, Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, among many others.

He has performed and recorded the complete piano concertos by Beethoven, P. Tchaikovsky, André Tchaikowsky, Rachmaninoff, Bacewicz, Bartók, Melcher Melchers, the complete mazurkas by Chopin and Scriabin, and all piano sonatas by Prokofiev. During his three-decade-long career he developed a diverse repertoire that in addition to major works by Classical and Romantic composers also includes works by Barber, Gershwin, Szymanowski, Lutosławski, Copland, Stenhammar, with most recent additions of such composers as Ronald Stevenson and Grażyna Bacewicz.

He has worked with composers Witold Lutosławski and Arvo Pärt, and had a number of works composed for, and dedicated to him, including Wojciech Kilar's Piano Concerto, for which he won the Orpheus Award for the world premiere performance at the Warsaw Autumn

Festival. He remains a supporter of today's composers and regularly gives world premieres of new works.

Jablonski's extensive discography includes recordings he has made for Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Philips, and Ondine labels. He has received numerous awards for his recordings, which include the Swedish Grammy for his recording of piano music by Ronald Stevenson, the Edison Award for best concerto recording of Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto, Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, and Lutoslawski's Paganini Rhapsody with Ashkenazy and RPO for Decca. He was presented with the Gramophone Classical Music Award for his Deutsche Grammophon recording of works by Cécile Chaminade with Anne Sofie von Otter and Bengt Forsberg.

In December 2022, Peter Jablonski was awarded the prestigious French Academy Charles Cros Award, Contemporary Music, for his recording of Grażyna Bacewicz's piano music.

Peter Jablonski is the recipient of the Litteris et Artibus medal for his services to culture, granted to him by the King of Sweden, Carl XVI Gustaf. He is also the winner of the prestigious prize Årets Svensk i Världen (International Swedish Personality of the Year), receiving it before ABBA and Astrid Lindgren. In 2022 he was elected into the Royal Swedish Academy of Music.

www.peterjablonski.com

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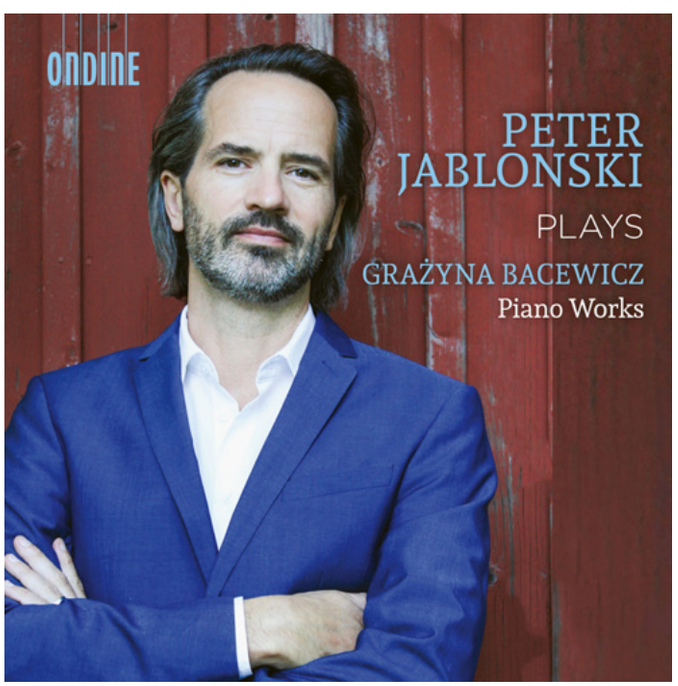
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