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Konstanty Regamey

– An Orientalist, a Composer Who Combined Ancient
Oriental Lyrics with Modern Music,
an Art Critic and an Art Theoretician

Konstanty, or Constantin, Regamey, as his national identity was at least twofold: Polish and Swiss, which is reflected in him being remembered and described by these two names, was a man of many talents. Born in 1907 in Kiev from a Swiss father Konstanty Kazimierz Regamey, who was a well-known pianist, composer, and music teacher, and from a Russian mother of Serbian-Swedish origin, Lydia Slavitch, a pianist, Regamey himself joked that having parents of so complicated origins he was destined to become a Pole¹. Maybe an additional reason for his half-Polish, half-Swiss identity is based also in the generation of his grandparents as his grandfather was Swiss and his grandmother being half-Italian, half-Hungarian grew up as Polish².

Regamey's family on his father's side had its roots in the Vaud region of Switzerland. However, they moved to Vilnius, Lithuania,

¹ E. Jastrzębowska, "Konstanty Regamey rodem z Renesansu w Uniwersytecie Warszawskim", *Przegląd Historyczny* 2005, No. 96, p. 91.

² K. Tamawska-Kaczorowska, "Na rozpoczęcie", [in:] *Oblicza polistylisty. Materiały sympozjum poświęconego twórczości Konstantego Regameya*, Warszawa 1988, p. 15.

in 1840 and then to Kiev, where they became polonized. Konstany's father was a member of Kiev's cultural elite. He could speak and write Polish fluently. At the age of 5, Konstany started to learn playing piano under the guidance of his mother. His next teacher was Reinhold Gliere, the director of Kiev's conservatory. Being a child of 8, he composed his first music. These were several pieces such as mazurkas, a barcarole, and souvenir de jeunesse. In those early years, he already showed his great skill for music³.

After his parents' divorce, 13-year-old Konstany moved with his mother and stepfather to Warsaw. They were there from 1920 till 1944. Konstany received his education in Poland. He attended Polish primary and secondary schools. In the latter, the Jan Zamoyski secondary school, he met Stanisław Schayer, a famous Polish indologist and buddhologist. Schayer taught logic, mathematics, and German language there. Most probably, it was he who induced Konstany to the study of indology. At that time, Konstany already knew several languages such as French, Russian, German, Italian, English, and Polish⁴. He showed his great skill also in languages. During his school years, he also took private lessons of the piano and music theory. His teachers were Józef Turczyński and Felicjan Szopski.

In October 1925, Regamey began his studies at the Humanistic Faculty of the University of Warsaw. His main chosen domains were Oriental studies, but he studied also many other subjects. His most important professors were Stanisław Schayer for indological studies, including Pali and Vedic, Jan Wiktor Porzeziński for Sanskrit, Jan Stawarczyk for Aramaic and Hebrew, Bogdan Richter for Chinese, Ryochu Umeda for Japanese, Adam Krokiewicz for Greek and Latin, Tadeusz Kotarbiński for logic, Władysław Tatarkiewicz for philosophy, Władysław Witwicki for psychology, Tadeusz Zieliński for ancient history and literature and Jan Baudouin de Courtenay for

³ *Encyklopedia muzyczna PWM*, ed. E. Dziębowska, Kraków 2004, p. 331.

⁴ E. Jastrzębowska, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

linguistics. As we can see from this list of teachers within his scope of interests apart from philosophy, logic, history, literature, and psychology were the following languages: Sanskrit, Pali, Aramaic, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, Greek, and Latin. He also took additional courses in Swedish, Czech, Italian, and French. He participated in regular courses covering all the above-mentioned subjects and also in some more. His studies lasted till 1931 and finally he graduated from both Oriental and Classical philologies⁵.

In 1933 Regamey went to Paris to continue his education mainly in the field of indology under the guidance of famous professors such as Louis Renou, Jean Przyluski, Jules Bloch, Sylvain Levy, and Émile Benveniste. He studied at the École des Hautes Études and Collège de France. This period brought one of his first important indological publication “Bibliographie analytique des travaux relatives aux elements anaryens dans la civilization et les langues de l’Inde”, which was included in the serious scholarly journal *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient*.

In 1934 he came back to Poland to write his doctoral dissertation and in 1936 he obtained the degree for the work entitled “Three chapters from the *Samādhirājasūtra*”. His scholarly career was extremely quick as already in 1938 he presented his postdoctoral dissertation (habilitation) and started to work at the University of Warsaw as a private docent. His habilitation thesis was a critical edition, analysis, and translation of the Tibetan version of the Sanskrit text and it was titled *The Bhadramāyākāravāyākaraṇa*.

In that period he was in close contact with Polish cultural elites. He knew personally such outstanding composers and writers as Karol Szymanowski, Witold Lutosławski, Stefan Kisielewski, Roman Palester, Jerzy Waldorff, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Bolesław Miciński, Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, Jerzy Stempowski, Witkacy, and many others. He met them during countless meetings, discussions and concerts. He participated in philosophical debates of these times

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 93-94.

as, along with his university career, Regamey was a music theoretician and an art critic. His first text on music appeared in 1932 and it concerned the IVth symphony of Karol Szymanowski. He published mostly in two periodicals *Zet* and *Prosto z mostu*. In *Zet* he wrote not only on music, but also on Buddhism. There are two series of articles on Buddhist science and philosophy included in 1936 issues. In *Prosto z mostu*, he was a music critic for nearly five years. Apart from the *Zet* and *Prosto z mostu*, he wrote articles in other Polish periodicals such as *Biuletyn muzyki współczesnej*, *Muzyka*, *Verbum*, and *Ateneum*⁶. In 1933, his first book on the aesthetic ideas entitled *Treść i forma w muzyce* was published in Warsaw. Between 1937 and 1939, he was a very active journalist of the periodical *Muzyka współczesna* and in 1938-39 the editor-in-chief of *Muzyka polska*. He was extremely active in this field of writing about music and he continued his writing about music to the end of his life. This is the reason why it is very difficult to give the exact number of his publications in this field.

During World War II he worked as a pianist in coffee bars in Warsaw. He played the piano in several of them e.g. in "Café Club", "Gastronomia", and "Arkadia"⁷. This was the way to earn money also for many other composers and at the same time to keep in touch. During the war, he was also a member of the Polish independent army Armia Krajowa, where his pseudonym as a courier was Czesław Drogowski. Many times he carried secret papers and money which came from Great Britain to support the Poles. Protected by a Swiss passport, he used his apartment as a place where people and valuable texts and scores could be hidden. Among them, the com-

⁶ J. Dankowska, "O muzyce i wokół muzyki. Wypowiedzi Konstantego Regameya z okresu międzywojennego", [in:] *Oblicza polistyliizmu...*, pp. 267 and 289.

⁷ According to memories of Stefan Kisielewski, [in:] *Oblicza polistyliizmu...*, pp. 350-351.

poser Roman Palester kept his scores there and they survived the war in that safe place⁸.

This was also the time of Regamey's debut as a self-taught composer. As those were the times of war, Polish elites gathered for discussions and concerts in private apartments. In 1942, he presented his "Persian songs" during one of such private concerts in Warsaw. He combined his music with seven poems of Omar Khayyam, the famous Persian poet. Regamey and his mother played the pianos and Michał Bułat-Mironowicz sang the poems. The composer himself in one of his articles which he wrote in 1948 said that the exact date of his manuscript of "Persian songs" was uncertain even for him as the first script had been burned in Warsaw during the war. His idea was to add ancient poems of Oriental origin to his modern music. He chose nine poems of Omar Khayyam out of 86 which were published in Polish translation by Maryla Wolska and Michał Pawlikowski, and he added one more unidentified poem. His choice was determined by his music. He used the texts which were condensed but simple, not complicated, and easy to understand. All the songs concern the generality of human existential questions and the music was received as being full of passion⁹. After the war, the same poems by Khayyam were presented by Regamey in an orchestral version in Kraków in 1947. The French version of the poems entitled "Les Chansons persanes pour baryton et orchestra de chambre" translated by Camille Dudan was presented to the public in Lausanne in 1967 and in 1977. They were sung there by Etienne Bettens with l'Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne. Regamey's debut as a composer provoked discussions in the circles of composers.

However, the days of war were filled not only of private concerts, but first of all they were fraught with everyday danger. Even the Swiss nationality and passport did not defend Regamey from being arrested by Germans. In 1944, after the defeat of the Warsaw

⁸ Cf. *Encyklopedia muzyczna PWM*, pp. 331-332.

⁹ More information in: M. Tomaszewski, "Na temat *Pieśni perskich* Konstantego Regameya", [in:] *Oblicza polistylistyki...*, pp. 79-111.

Uprising, he and his wife and mother were caught by Germans and sent to Stutthof concentration camp near Gdańsk. Then they were transferred to Hamburg. They spent several months there and finally were released in November 1944 and allowed to leave for Switzerland. Regamey knew this country only from his two former visits there, but he decided to go to Lausanne, where he spent the rest of his life.

Shortly after the war, the Warsaw University sent him an offer to become a professor of Oriental studies there, but aware of his participation in Armia Krajowa, he did not decide to come back to Poland.

In Lausanne, he immediately made contact with Ernest Ansermet, the conductor of the Orchestre de Suisse Romande, and with Aloys Mooser, a music critic. However, his career was in linguistics. From April 1945, he started to teach Russian and Oriental languages at the University of Lausanne and in 1946 he acquired the position of professor of general linguistics and comparative grammar at the university of Fribourg. In Fribourg he taught languages such as Greek, Japanese, Hittite, Italian dialects, ancient Persian, and Irish (often the choice depended on students' interests).

His was appointed professor in Lausanne in 1949. The chair he obtained there was titled "Langues et civilisations slaves et orientales". In his teaching there, he covered certainly such languages as Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, Pali, Latin, Greek, Polish, Russian, French, English, German, and Spanish.

According to many, Regamey had the command of about forty languages. He himself used to say that he could easily write and speak about 10 languages, he could read 12 without using the dictionary too often and about 20 other which he knew but was not fluent at¹⁰.

His interests in the field of indology were extremely versatile. He covered not only languages but also Buddhist philosophy, histo-

¹⁰ This information is given in N. Loutan-Charbon, "Constantin Regamey, Compositeur", [in:] *Revue Musicale de Suisse Romande et les Editions de la Thiele*, Yverdon 1978, p. 133.

ry, and history of science, a comparison of methods used in Indian and Western philosophies, the dialogue between Indian and Western cultures, and the ideas of his master in this field, Stanisław Schayer. He continued his work at both universities until 1977, when he retired, but still continued a lot of different activities¹¹. It is worth mentioning that Regamey was also for many years the President of Société Suisse d'études asiatiques.

While in Switzerland, Regamey was also very active in the field of music. Among his compositions were those coming out of his interests in Oriental cultures.

In 1955, he composed a piece entitled "Cinq études pour voix de femme et piano", in which he included untranslated words coming from Indian dialects and treated this "phonetic part", as he called it, as an additional instrument which was to evoke certain feelings. It was one of his many experiments. The piece was performed for the first time in 1955 in Donaueschingen and published in the *Ruch Muzyczny* in 1958. Regamey himself mentioned that he chose the wording of some lyrics to suggest some erotic flavour and he insisted on performance in the original language¹².

In August 1970, for the 50th anniversary of Orchestre de Suisse Romande, he composed a cantata titled "Alpha...", where he used the famous cosmological hymn from Rigveda X, 129. It was planned as the beginning of a greater whole but was not followed by other pieces. Regamey himself translated the hymn into Polish and French and he tried to express and illustrate its content by music¹³.

¹¹ The list of bibliography of his scientific works is included in *Asiatische Studien* 2001, No. 55, pp. 370-379. Also there in the article "La carrier universitaire de Constantin Regamey" written by J. May one can find the detailed information concerning his university career in Switzerland.

¹² M. K. Byrski, "«Ragamaja» czyli «uczyniony z namiętności»", [in:] *Oblicza polistylizmu...*, p. 77.

¹³ A. Tuchowski, "Związki słowno-muzyczne w kantacie *Alpha...* na tenor solo i wielką orkiestrę Konstantego Regameya", [in:] *Oblicza polistylizmu...*, pp. 257-266.

The hymn itself concerns the philosophical questions connected with the beginning of the Universe. Certain images of non-being and chaos are given there. The skepticism as to the knowledge about these processes is clearly expressed in RV.X.129. Even God is presented as probably not knowing the answer. The cantata was first performed in Lausanne on October 5th, 1970.

In 1976, he composed a concerto inspired again by Oriental motifs titled "Lila", which he dedicated to Paul Sacher. It was performed for the first time in March 1977 in Basil. The Basler Kammerorchester was conducted by Paul Sacher, accompanying the violinists P. Novak and S. Basler. Later, one of the players of this concerto was the famous Polish violinist Kaja Danczowska. The composer gave the name "Lila" to make it enigmatic and to open it to various possible interpretations. In Sanskrit, one of the possible meanings is "play". Many pieces of Regamey's music have this feature of playing with listeners, they have hidden meanings which can only be deciphered by some listeners.

While being a composer, he also wrote about music, and in 1948 in the *Kwartalnik muzyczny* magazine he published a text entitled „Próba analizy ewolucji w sztuce” (“An attempt to analyse the evolution in art”). It was meant to become the introductory part of a greater whole about the history of contemporary music, *Dzieje muzyki współczesnej*. The book would not be finished but in this introductory part he expressed some of his opinions on the theory of music. Among them were parallels between the acts of speech and the acts of composing and the analogies between the natural languages and musical forms¹⁴. These were most probably the reasons of his experiments with combining music with different languages.

For many years, he published his articles on music in the *Feuilles Musicales*. In 1958, together with Zygmunt Mycielski they prepared a special issue devoted to Polish music entitled "La vie

¹⁴ More information in S. Cichowicz, "Regamey: odwrotna strona zwierciadła", [in:] *Oblicza polistylisty...*, pp. 45-71.

musicale en Pologne”. He was also the author of many texts included in the *Revue Musicale de Suisse Romande*, *Revue Musicale Suisse* and in several German, Italian, and French periodicals¹⁵.

As has been mentioned, he was also very active in musical circles in Switzerland. In 1954-62, he was a co-editor of the *Feuilles Musicales*, and in 1963-68 president of Association des Musiciens Suisses. He was also the president of the Swiss section of Societe Internationale de Musique Contemporaine and of Conseil Suisse de la Musique.

He worked with three main Swiss orchestras, namely Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, and Basler Kammerorchester.

After World War II, he made many scholarly trips and several tours as a concert pianist all around the world. Among them were voyages to Poland, Russia, different countries of Asia, and several to India. His first trip to India was in 1949/1950 and during his stay he traveled around the subcontinent with a series of lectures. While in India, he personally met Dalai Lama and in 1956 Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1959, at the University of Hawaii, he met Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, a famous specialist on Zen Buddhism. He was a delegate for the XXIIth Congress of Orientalists in Istanbul and also participated in the Congress of Orientalists in New Delhi in 1964. In 1959, 1964, and 1976 he took part in conferences on “Meeting of the Philosophy of East and West” in Honolulu. For years he was the member of Société Linguistique in Paris. He was also the initiator of the UNESCO program for closer exchange between East and West. His opinions on the universality and at the same time diversity of music of the world is expressed in many of his works, e.g., in an article entitled “Musique occidentale et musique orientale: le langage musical est-il devenu universel?”¹⁶.

¹⁵ J. Stankiewicz, “Konstanty Regamey w Szwajcarii”, [in:] *Oblicza polistylisty...* , p. 200.

¹⁶ Included in *Revue Musicale de Suisse Romande* 1967, vol. 4.

His links with Poland lasted until the end of his life. He visited Poland several times after the war, e.g., in 1957 he was in Kraków, where he had a meeting with the professors and students of the Academy of Music. In 1968, he was a guest of the *Warszawska Jesień* Polish Festival of Contemporary Music. He also delivered a series of lectures at the Warsaw University at that time. How important Poland was for him can be seen from the fact that he celebrated his 70th birthday in Baranów in 1977, during the Second Musical Meeting there .

However, in his lifetime, his music was performed at the *Warszawska Jesień* festival only four times and his pieces were performed not more than several times in different places in Poland. There is a small number of radio recordings but it is not easy to find them. In the opinion of Krzysztof Meyer, the former president of the Association of Polish Composers, his music is not known enough in Poland¹⁷. This opinion still holds true after twenty years which have passed since then.

He died in Lausanne in 1982 after some years of serious illness. His works were given to the *Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire* at Lausanne.

So who was this man of many names and skills?

Konstanty Regamey, Constantin Regamey, or maybe Anonymus Helveticus, Kot Regamey, Kosticzka Riegamietnikow, or Czesław Drogowski, as this may be the list of names associated with this person of many faces.

As is visible from this short biography limited only to chosen areas of his activities, Konstanty Regamey's interests were at least in the domains of the West and the Orient, linguistics and music, compositions and theory of music. He was a man who achieved, as was once said by his friend Paul Sacher, "a synthesis of the powers of mind and the genius of art creation and intuition". He was certainly

¹⁷ K. Meyer, "Wypowiedź inauguracyjna", [in:] *Oblicza polistylisty...*, p. 11.

an exceptional man, an intellectual and an artist who is hopefully not to be forgotten.

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