KAROL SZYMANOWSKI was the greatest composer to have emerged from Poland since Chopin, who in any case was arguably more French than Polish. Szymanowski's music was passionate and completely individual, despite its flavour of Strauss, Rimsky-Korsakov, and occasionally Debussy. But the change of musical fashions and its overly national identity—based as in the cases of other Eastern European masters like Bartok, Janacek, Enescu, and Prokofiev on local ethnic elements—have led to almost total neglect outside his native Poland since his death in poverty of tuberculosis in 1937 aged 54.

Only now is Szymanowski's second and best opera, King Roger, which he completed in 1924, getting a London production. The New Opera Company give one performance tonight at Sadler's Wells Theatre, and another on Saturday.

Artur Rubinstein knew Szymanowski for most of his adult life, and was an early enthusiast for, and executant of, his music. The pianist, who was born in Lodz in what was then the Russian part of Poland, is an amazingly spry 88 and on a recent visit to London for video recording sessions he talked with wonderful clarity and astuteness about their friendship and about Szymanowski's life and music.

"I first met him very, very early in my life—in 1904 when I was 17. It was a quite extraordinary episode. I had been studying music in Berlin, but was invited by a very wealthy Polish family to join them in Zakspane where they had a good villa." Zakopane is a ski resort in the Tatra mountains. Rubinstein was friendly with the son of the family who was a few years older and also a pianist and composer. "I was there—a poor boy without money—and I had finished my studies. Well I've never finished them, but I thought I was through with Berlin in any case. I had a faint idea that I would go to Paris, because a Polish gentleman, Count Skaczinski, had invited me to spend a couple of weeks in his house and wanted to introduce me to managers and musicians in Paris. That was my plan for the summer.

"There was a piano in the drawing-room downstairs, and I used to practise and learn repertoire during the nights, from 10 or 11 o'clock till two or three in the morning. One of those nights I saw through the window a man standing there covered with a hood, and I was a little bit frightened. Most summer villas are very open so you can go in to their grounds very easily. This villa was very isolated, near the mountains. This man just stood there: he wouldn't move and you see nothing happened." Next morning Rubinstein complained to the family about the intruder, and arranged with the son to make a signal that night if the stranger returned so they could together frighten him away.

That night there he was again and Rubinstein, feeling a bit more courageous, asked him what he wanted. "I am a music-lover, and I am listening to your playing. I adore music and I know you were a pianist. Everybody knows that." Rubinstein explains that he had already acquired a little reputation and, quite naturally, invited the man to come back the next day.

"He was very charming, intelligent, well-educated. Next day he told me that he was himself a violinist, but amateur, and that he had been to school in a Russian town and that this composer who was a genius, I gave a little smile. You know, a fellow in school. He's probably composed a nice little waltz, a mazurka or something.

"Yes,' the man went on, 'I have manuscripts of his that I want to show you.' He has written a violin sonata, some preludes, and some marvellous songs—a great deal. He told him to bring them, thinking that I could look them over and send him home with them saying 'It's all right.'

Artur Rubinstein : picture by Don Morley

'I read the music and found that it was unbelievable. It was great music, absolutely marvellous.'

Tonight Karol Szymanowski's best opera King Roger, receives its first performance in London more than half a century after completion. Tom Sutcliffe interviews the great Artur Rubinstein about the neglected Polish composer's life and work.

. One or two days later the manuscripts were brought over, and "I was forced to look them over," Rubinstein says, "and my friend the musician stood by. I was a good sight-reader, and I read that music and found that it was unbelievable. It was great music, absolutely marvellous music. Not only did it make sense, but there was a new way about it, something quite out of the usual, and very mature too. I said how old is he? It seemed about 23. And where does he live? 'He comes from the Ukraine.' The Poles always had great estates in the Ukraine, which is now Russian but used to be Polish. The language there even is between Polish and Russian.

"Well, I found out that this composer—who was Szymanowski of course—had lost his father, and to console him the family sent him to Bayreuth to watch the Wagner performances for the first time. I found out his address in Bayreuth. I never write letters, you know, but I had an urge. I wrote the most incredible letter of admiration I ever wrote in my whole life to that young man. I wrote, 'I am thrilled by your composition. I dream to meet you, to hear more about you from you. . . I am fascinated. I will play your works.' I didn't expect any reply from a man who was in deep mourning. I thought he will just keep that letter and that's all. But imagine to my aionishment I received a telegram: 'Arriving such and such a day Zakopane.'

"Well, he arrived. A young man who looked rather like a diplomat, dressed up in city clothes with a high, stiff collar, nice tie, bowler hat, stick in his hand — young gentleman from an embassy. And rather cool. I thought he would be very warm. Not at all. He shook hands with my friend who came to the station and we invited him to lunch, and there he was absolutely non-committal. He spoke about Wagner, also without exaggerated enthusiasm. I thought it strange for such a passionate composer, as I had discovered in his music, to be so diplomatic, so cool, so off-hand. But after luncheon he said, to me 'Would you care to come to a cafe? There is a friend of mine, a Polish poet, who expects me there.' He didn't invite my friend, with whom I was staying. There was a certain antagonism there, in their approach to music and perhaps personally.

"At the cafe, Szymanowski suddenly opened up. There he was in his element, and there came all the musicality. He said to me that he was so impressed by my letter because he was at my concert in Warsaw, and I also had impressed him very much so that he was proud of me and as his interpreter. It was a very great thing for him to find out that I was already without his help showing such an incredible follower. So we saw each other there every day.

"We left together too, imagine, I for Paris, and he for home, for the Ukraine. We took the whole night, getting Cracow on that small mountain train and there was a very touching scene because I was very sad to get into my new life and to leave that family. I was in love with a person. Szymanowski and I had a compartment to ourselves, and I remember that I started crying a little bit. I was starting a big adventure in the black. He was extremely kind. I never forgot it. I don't know why, he covered me with newspapers to make me feel warmer—it was rather cool in the compartment—covered my feet and so on. And when we parted, in Cracow, it was as the best of friends which we remained until his death."

Rubinstein became Szymanowski's interpreter, and he many times dedicated to him. He knew all the music, of course, and talks with enthusiasm about the beauties of the King Roger score. Szymanowski chose the subject because of his love of Italy, and particularly Sicily. But Rubinstein, who has seen the opera twice, says it is more oratorio-like than an opera, rather static, with most of the work left to the music. From that point of view it does not have the ingredients of successful operas like Carmen or Faust.

"It was never popular," he said. "Szymanowski's music will never quite be popular because it is very complicated and difficult. It appeals to a certain very distinguished, developed, refined musical taste." But of course Szymanowski was picked up in Poland as the hero composer of the time, and now he is highly admired there, highly acknowledged. When he died he had a magnificant funeral. That was during Hitler's time, in Lausanne, and when the funeral train came into Berlin on the way home it was stopped by Hitler there with military honours."

Did Szymanowski ever play ? Was he a performer ? "Yes he played the piano not too well. He didn't have a virtuoso kick. He played like a musician who could play everything, but it was not good piano-playing. But to make money, poor man, he was forced sometimes to take up that concerto that he wrote for me. I told him that his only possible way of making money was to be engaged as piano soloist for his own concerto. All society would engage him right away.

"I advised the same thing to Stravinsky, who followed it up. Stravinsky was a nasty piano player. He banged the keys. He hit them. He didn't know he found that it was a percussion instrument and not to be treated as a singing instrument. He proposed to me that all the music written for the piano was not for the piano, he said, could not sing out the melodies. Perhaps for me a piece which I never played called Petrushka's Rag Music, which is a percussion piece. I played the manuscripts of it. I said to him, 'No, I am not a drummer. I will never play that.'