

Rhythm as a Means to Express Sacredness in the Piano Works of Alvidas Remesa

While analysing various music works on a religious topic, rhythm can be noticed to be one of the basic means to express sacredness. This element of music is being used by the sacred music composers for the formation of specific musical time associated with the perception of sacredness. This attitude is also reflected in composers' and musicologist's statements. For example, according to the composer Ernst Křenek, "The main element, which determines sacredness, is the organisation of music in time".¹ In Bohdan Pocij's opinion, "we feel sacredness in music through the way it fills time by itself".² Also, Olivier Messiaen called music "the geometry of time" and compared the structure of sacred music to a circle.³

Theologians state that there are two kinds of time. According to the religion historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade, it is "the historical present" and "the holy time". As Eliade observes, a religious man contrary to a nonreligious man, "lives in two kinds of time, of which the holy time is more important". According to the author, it is "a constantly repeating ... sort of eternal, mythical present time into which a man periodically merges during the rituals".⁴ The "holy time" relates to the sacred space, while "the historical present" to the profane one.

Analogically in music the composers creating the image of sacredness use the antithesis of musical flow with the aim to separate the *sacrum* and *profanum* origins. Setting the sounds in time in a specific manner, they seek to form a "sacred time" which can be experienced when listening to music. The perception of this unusual flow of time "takes" the listener's thoughts and senses to the "sacred space" where he experiences something absolutely opposite to the usual everyday flow of time. The division between the sacred and profane is thus being emphasized. From the standpoint of rhythmical organisation, in music it is expressed through "irregular rhythm" or, in other words "timelessness" and "regular rhythm".

Such a tendency is often noticed in Olivier Messiaen's music. According to the musicologist and researcher of Messiaen's works Sliglinda Bruhn, Messiaen defines himself "first and foremost as a rhythmicist".⁵ No doubt, the rhythmical expression of music was one of the most important things to him in his creative process. Rhythm in Messiaen's music is often being used to emphasize the difference between the concepts of "time" and "eternity". According to Messiaen, "time by no means is a portion of an eternity that encloses and exceeds it. Time and eternity are two absolutely different ways of measuring duration. Time is the measure of all that is created, eternity – is God Himself".⁶ Based on this quotation we can say that "time" refers to the profane sphere while eternity to the sacred. The spiritual state of the listener when he experiences "eternity" the composer called "the breakthrough towards the beyond".⁷

In Catherin Pickstock's estimation, in Messiaen's music "the repetition of non identical motives" is associated with the eternity and conveys the vision of God, whereas the identical repetition is characteristic of the temporary world of people".⁸ The variability of motives is also used to create an image of the greatest God's creation – nature in which, according to the composer, contrarily to man's everyday life nothing repeats identically. In his music Messiaen achieved this variability by reconstructing primitive rhythms, prolonging, or shortening the motives by notes of small value. For the creation of the image of *sacrum* sphere Messiaen also used "rhythmical palindromes", which he associated with the symbolism of eternity.

The contrast between time and eternity, conveyed by rhythmical organisation, is one of the elements of dramaturgy in the piano cycle "Twenty Gazes on the Infant Jesus" (1944). The appropriate example of this contrast is the 13th part of the cycle "Christmas". It is written in rondo form with the regularly accented rhythm in the refrain. As the composer's subheading comment shows, the refrain imitates the chime of

¹ E. Křenek, "Vom Geiste der geistlichen music", in: "Musica sacra in the context of contemporary studies". Kalavinskaitė D., *Lithuanian Musicology*, Vol. X, 2009, p. 95.

² B. Pocij, "Religious inspiration in music", *Krantai*, 1990, Nr. 7–8, p. 33.

³ C. Pickstock, "God and meaning in Music: Messiaen, Deleuze, and the Musico-Theological Critique of Modernism and Post-modernism", *Sacred Music*, Winter 2007, Vol. 134, No. 4, p. 44, 50.

⁴ M. Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane*, 1957, p. 49.

⁵ S. Bruhn. *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 2007, p. 56.

⁶ Ibid., p. 66.

⁷ S. Mass. *The Reinvention of Religious music*, 2009, p. 37–61, 126–158.

⁸ C. Pickstock, "God and meaning in Music: Messiaen, Deleuze, and the Musico-Theological Critique of Modernism and Post-modernism", *Sacred Music*, Winter 2007, Vol. 134, No. 4, p. 59.

Christmas bells. According to Siglinda Bruhn's observation, the refrain conveys an "untroubled expression of joyful festivity".⁹ As a contrast to the refrain, which creates the image of the *profanum* sphere, another episode is presented. This episode is different in some musical parameters – tempo, textural arrangement, as well as rhythm, based on "rhythmical palindromes". All these together create a "timeless" mystical mood that contrasts with the refrain. Thus the organisation of the rhythm in different ways reveals the antithesis of *sacrum* and *profanum* spheres (Ex. 1).

Example 1. The contrast of the “profane” (P) and the “sacred” (S) rhythm in O. Messiaen’s piano cycle “Twenty Gazes on the Infant Jesus”, 13th part “Cristmas”, bars 21–29

When analysing the piano music of the Lithuanian composer Alvidas Remesa, we find the direct analogies to the Messiaen’s music and a familiar approach to rhythm as a means to express sacredness in music. The composer himself does not deny the direct influence of Messiaen’s music on the creation of his piano cycles, especially to “Stigmata” (1987). Remesa recalls that before he created “Stigmata” he had to hear, for the first time, the cycle “Twenty Gazes on the Infant Jesus” performed live. “This experience of hearing made an indescribable impression on me”, said the composer. “Until then I was sure it was impossible to express sacredness with the help of contemporary means. Messiaen changed my viewpoint completely. I just could not believe that one can convey such a spiritual message by using the piano”.¹⁰ Therefore, inspired by Messiaen’s music, Remesa created his first religious opus “Stigmata” in 1989. This creative work was included on the list of the International M. K. Čiurlionis Piano and Organ Competition. Since then “Stigmata” has been one of the most often performed Lithuanian piano music works distinguished from others by its suggestively revealed artistic idea and specific emotional-spiritual impact on the listeners. Nine years later Remesa created another piano cycle called “Sacramentals”. Both of them, “Stigmata” and “Sacramentals” (1998) are united by the religious idea, as well as structural similarities (both cycles consist of five miniatures). The dramaturgy of the cycles is based on the principle of contrast, which is being created not only by tempo, dynamics and texture, but also by a different rhythm.

As the composer stated himself, “when creating he thinks in images”. This process is being also revealed in both piano cycles. Remesa has not given a detailed programme plot of the cycle “Stigmata”. Therefore we cannot define concrete images associated with its semantics. However the title of the cycle “Stigmata” acts as an assumption for certain interpretations of the images. According to the composer, the five miniatures are the five wounds of Christ. “Just as Messiaen gazes at the Infant Jesus from different angles in ‘Stigmata’ I too wanted to look at the stigmata from an entirely different aspect”, the composer said during the interview. It was written in the annotation published with the score of the work that the contrasting parts of the cycle are

⁹ S. Bruhn. *Messiaen’s Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 2007, p. 208.

¹⁰ Quoted from an interview with composer Alvidas Remesa (October 2012).

“united by the liturgical idea, reveal the picture of the suffering noble personality”. Referring to it we can come to the conclusion that the semantics of the work is associated with Christ’s Crucifixion. The cycle structure based on contrasts can be interpreted as the composer’s aspiration to reveal the antithesis between the worldly (or bodily) impermanence (the image of *profanum* sphere) and divine eternity (the image of *sacrum* sphere).

When analysing “Stygmatas” two kinds of images stand out: 1) those of a mystical colour, associated with the sacredness; 2) the realistic ones, conveying worldly impermanence. The images of the first group are created with the help of irregular rhythm or “timelessness”, whereas the images of the second group are created using the regularly accented rhythmical formations or “regular rhythm” (Ex. 2).

	<i>Sacrum</i>	<i>Profanum</i>
The types of images	The images of mystical colour associated with the sacredness	The realistic images conveying worldly impermanence
Their rhythmical expression	Irregular rhythm (“timelessness”)	Regularly accented rhythmical formations (“regular rhythm”)

Example 2. The scheme of contrasting images in Remesa’s piano cycle “Stygmatas”

The whole cycle begins precisely by such a contrasting display of musical images (Ex. 3). When analysing the rhythmical organisation, we notice clearly the regularly repeating accents in the beginning of the first movement. Then, the following episode forms a contrast: with the abandoning the regular rhythmical pulsation, the limits of time are being deleted.

The musical score for Example 3 is presented in four systems. The first three systems are for the piano part, and the fourth system is for the bass part. The tempo is marked 'Andantino' and the time signature is 8/8. The piano part consists of two contrasting episodes: a 'profane' (P) episode with a regular, accented rhythm, and a 'sacred' (S) episode with irregular, 'timeless' rhythms. The sacred part includes markings like 'una corda' and 'Ped.'.

Example 3. The contrasting episodes of the “profane” (P) and the “sacred” (S) rhythm in the first movement of Remesa’s piano cycle “Stygmatas”

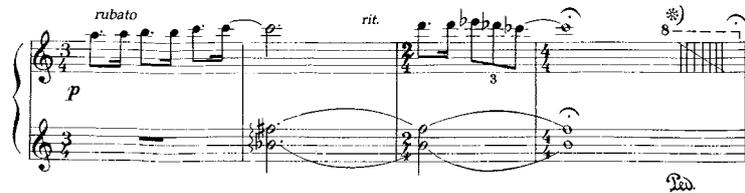
Similarly the contrastic episodes are placed together in the second piece of the cycle (Ex. 4). In it after the especially distinct rhythmical episode begins an indefinite in time movement episode of a meditative kind.

Example 4. The contrasting episodes with the “profane” (P) and the “sacred”(S) rhythm in the second movement of Remesa’s piano cycle “Stigmatas”, bars 1–10

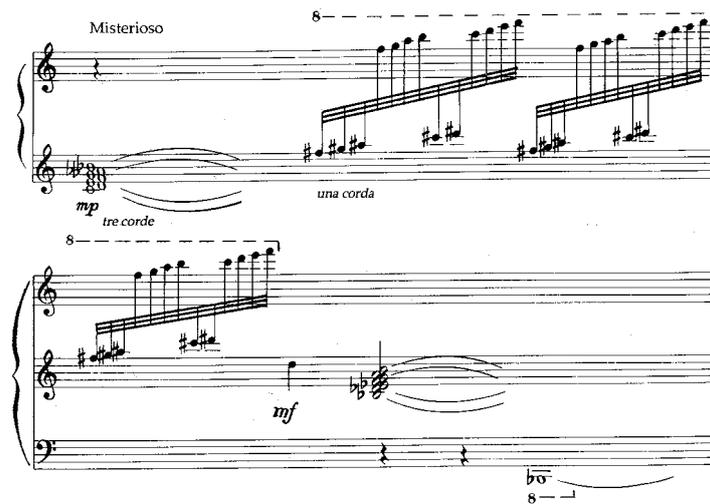
In the cycle “Stigmata” the juxtaposition of sacred and worldly spheres takes place not only inside of the parts, but also when opposing one to the other. The third part of the cycle is especially contrasting to the sacred flow of musical time. The entire piece is based on an unbroken and rhythmically regular movement. The importance of the rhythm is also stressed by the composer’s note in the first bar *ben ritmico* (i.e. “well rhythmically”). As compared to the other parts of the cycle its rhythmical structure is marked by clarity, in some places even by primitiveness. Referring to the assumptions given before, this part may be interpreted as an image of the exclusively worldly *profanum* sphere (Ex. 5).

Example 5. The “pronane” rhythm in the third movement of Remesa’s piano cycle “Stygmatas”, bars 1–13

The last four bars of the third part is sort of a bridge between the worldly and sacred spheres (Ex. 6). The composer's note *rubato* stops the strict metrical pulsation, the regular rhythmic movement is substituted by "the flow of sacred time", which gets established in the fourth and fifth parts of the cycle (Ex. 7, 8, 9).



Example 6. Remesa's piano cycle " third movement, bars 33–36



Example 7. The "sacred" rhythm in the fourth movement of Remesa's piano cycle "Stygmatas"

From the semantic point of view the fifth movement of the cycle can be interpreted as a spiritual transformation. The apparent disappearance of the tension in the end of the work, heard during the whole piece naturally brings an association with Christ's Resurrection. The composer said that this movement is like "the wound of the heart", but explained that one should not interpret this association in a narrow way: "I perceive the heart here in the spiritual level, as a form of acceptance, based on spiritual resignation, not as the organ of human body. The fifth piece is sort of spiritual meditation, when one feels an even beat of the heart in a peaceful state", said the composer. The disappearance of tension first of all is expressed with the help of harmony: during the entire movement sounds a clear second inversion of A major triad. The sacred mood of the piece is also created with the help of rhythm. Metrical order, observed at the first glance, is just an illusion. The composer gives a clear metrical note – 4/4. However, the rhythmical *ostinato* of triplets creates a feeling that really music pulsates in 6/8 (six eighths) metre. It is difficult to feel the metrical accents for one more reason because the melody starts every time in another part of a beat. As for the metrical accents, the octaves of the left hand also are introduced irregularly (Ex. 8).



The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The piano part features a prominent triplet rhythm in the right hand, while the left hand has a sustained chord. The second system continues this texture, with the vocal line moving and the piano accompaniment maintaining the triplet pattern. A fermata is placed over the final notes of the piano accompaniment in the second system.

Example 8. The “sacred” rhythm in the fifth movement of Remesa’s piano cycle “Stygmatas”, bars 3–8

The indefiniteness of time is especially felt at the end of the piece. The melody is coming to an end and the notes of the first and the third texture layers one by one are being played in the weak parts of the beat thus creating the impression of something unconsummated (Ex. 9).

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system features a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The piano part has a triplet rhythm in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. Dynamics markings include 'dim.' (diminuendo) and 'rit.' (ritardando). The second system continues the texture, with the piano accompaniment showing a final triplet in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. A fermata is placed over the final notes of the piano accompaniment in the second system.

Example 9. The “sacred” rhythm in the fifth movement of Remesa’s piano cycle “Stygmatas”, bars 29–34

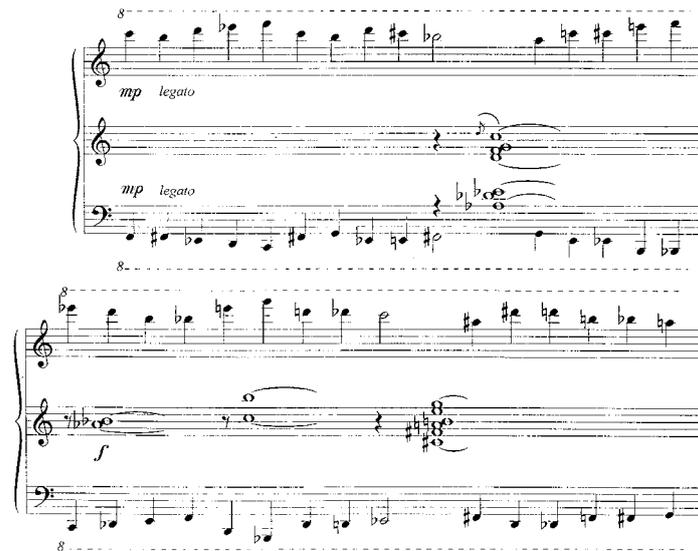
The following scheme (Ex. 10) reveals the alternation of profane and sacred time flow and the evident establishment of the latter at the end of the work. As we can see, in the first two parts the *sacrum* and *profanum* spheres are juxtaposed but neither of them takes a dominant position. The third – central – part of the cycle creates only the image of *profanum* sphere. The flow of the sacred time, after coming back and finally establishing itself in the fourth part of the cycle from the semantic point of view, marks the ascent to a higher spiritual level. Semantically this can be also interpreted as Christ’s Resurrection. On the grounds of this scheme we can come to the conclusion, that the rhythmical organisation in this cycle is one of the basic means, helping to reveal the semantics of the work.

Profanum–Sacrum											
Part I		Part II				Part III		Part IV		Part V	
P	S	P	S	I	P	S	P	I	S	S	
0'–20"	20'–1'55"	1'55"	2'10"		2'35"	2'50"	3'30'–4'30"		4'45'–6'30"	6'30'–9'20"	

Example 10. Remesa’s piano cycle “Stygmatas”. The “profane” and “sacred” time flow alternation scheme¹¹

The antithesis of the “sacred” rhythm to the “profane” one is not so distinct in another Remesa’s cycle called “Sacramentals” (1998) as it was in “Stigmata”. From the point of view of dramaturgy this cycle is not integral. Its parts are not much interrelated with one another. According to the composer, they are separate pictures of “something sanctified”. Musical images in the cycle are also not very contrasting. From the point of view of rhythmical organisation, “timelessness” is distinctly dominant in this work.

As for musical composition, the most striking example of sacredness interpreted as “timelessness” is the second piece of the cycle (Ex. 11). Indefinite arrangement of the sounds in time is being noticed in several layers of the texture: in the melody heard in marginal registers and the line of middle texture layer chords. Though the melodic movement is based on the even pulsation of crotchets, the metre is not indicated, there are no bar lines. The melody is notably joined to the phrases, but the number of crotchets in every one of them is different (the first phrase – 11, the second – 15, the third – 12, the fourth – 13 crotchets). The appearance of the chords is also absolutely unpredictable and defying any symmetrical order. They appear either in the end of the phrase and do not destroy the even rhythmical pulsation or in their middle where they occur as syncope after the rests of eights. The absence of metre, the movement of independent melodies in different time, the juxtaposition of marginal registers – all these things create the mood of mystical experience.



Example 11. The “sacred” rhythm in the second movement of Remesa’s piano cycle “Sacramentals”

Conclusions

1. The rhythmical analysis of the piano cycles “Stigmata” and “Sacramentals” confirmed the assumption that rhythm is a suitable means for the creating and separating images of *sacrum* and *profanum*.

2. While analysing the cycle “Stigmata” it was noticed that the alternation of these images caused all the dramaturgy of the cycle. By this way the rhythm was established as a basic means helping to reveal the religious semantics of the work.

3. The detected analogies while analysing the creative works on the religious topic, belonging to composers from different countries (as Messiaen and Remesa) confirmed that the subjection of the rhythm to the expression of sacredness is not a random phenomenon, but an objectively existing tendency of composing.

¹¹ In the scheme the letter *P* marks the episodes semantically related to the *profanum* sphere, the letter *S* to *sacrum*. The letter *I* marks kind of intermediate episodes in which an irregular rhythm changes to a regular one or the opposite.

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Santrauka

Ritmas kaip sakralumo raiškos priemonė A. Remesos kūrinuose fortepijonui

Remiantis XX a. kompozitorių – Ernsto Křeneko, Olivier Messiaeno, Arvo Pārto ir kt. – mintimis apie sakralumo išraišką muzikoje, galima teigti, kad lemiamas šio proceso veiksnys yra specifinis laiko tėkmės organizavimas. Kaip religijos istorikas ir filosofas Mircea Eliade rašė apie religingo žmogaus gyvenime egzistuojantį dviejų rūšių laiką – „istorinę dabartį“ ir „šventąjį laiką“, taip kompozitoriai analogišką požiūrį perteikia atitinkamai planuodami muziką laike.

Analizuojant vieno ryškiausių XX a. sakralinės muzikos kūrėjų O. Messiaeno kūrinius pastebėta, kad specifinės „šventojo laiko“ tėkmės procese svarbiausias elementas yra ritmas. Šis muzikos elementas dažnai tampa priemone atskleisti priešpriešą tarp *sacrum* ir *profanum* sferų. Tyrinėdama Messiaeno kūrybą, teologė Catherine Pickstock atkreipė dėmesį, kad „neidentiškų motyvų kartojimas“ („neritmiškumas“) šio kompozitoriaus muzikoje „susijęs su amžinybe ir perteikia Dievo vaizdinį“, o laikinajam, žmogiškajam pasauliui būdingas „identiškas kartojimas“. Tendencijos pasitelkti ritmą kaip priemonę sakralumo raiškai akivaizdžios ir kitų XX–XXI a. sakralinės muzikos kompozitorių kūryboje. Skirtingų autorių kompozicijas vienija siekis per ritmą niveliuoti laiko ribas, sakralumą interpretuojant ir perteikiant kaip „belaikiškumą“.

Straipsnyje siekiama pateikti ritmo, kaip vienos efektyviausių sakralumo raiškos priemonių, teorines prielaidas bei jas pagrįsti nagrinėjant lietuvių kompozitoriaus Alvido Remesos kūrinius fortepijonui „Stigmos“ (1989) ir „Sakramentalijos“ (1998). Nustatyta, kad, analogiškai O. Messiaeno kūrybai (kuri inspiravo šių kūrinių atsiradimą), A. Remesos kompozicijose atskirties tarp dieviškosios ir žemiškosios sferų išryškinimui pasitelkiamas „sakralinis“ ir „profaninis“ ritmas.