

Interaction of Sonoristic and Non-Sonoristic Material: Various Aspects of Musical Form and Aesthetics

Annotation

The article discusses music that contains both sonoristic and non-sonoristic materials. Their relationships frequently reflect the interaction of different styles (eras) as a significant feature of the culture of 20th/21st centuries. The manifestations of the interactions are diverse and unique; however, it is possible to define some of the most common models. In the article, they will be summarized and illustrated using examples from contemporary Latvian music, and a world context will also be provided.

The article will deal with the following models:

- 1) sonoristic material as a symbol of mystical world and eternity that often appears at the beginning and the end of a composition, while the remaining material is mostly non-sonoristic (with examples from music by Eriks Ešenvalds and Santa Ratniece);
- 2) sonoristics as a tragic culmination (catastrophe, collapse) of the development of non-sonoristic material (with examples from the works of Pēteris Vasks);
- 3) sonoristic material as a transformation (sometimes a parody) of non-sonoristic (neo-classical, neo-romantic) thematism – the main aesthetic idea is a contemporary modification of the classic values of the past (with examples from music by Arvo Pärt and Pēteris Plakidis).

Additionally, further models may be mentioned. The article is meant to encourage an evaluation of the forms of dialogue between the sonoristic and non-sonoristic material and the aesthetics they represent.

Keywords: sonoristic and non-sonoristic musical material, three models of interaction, main aesthetic ideas, sonorism in marginal phases and in culmination, alternating or simultaneous use of non-sonoristic and sonoristic material.

1. Introduction

For some time the researchers of sonorism mainly studied the *inner* essence of this compositional technique – sonorism and related phenomena are theoretically described both by composers (the classification of clusters by Henry Cowell (1930); the description of the net structure by György Ligeti (1960); the typology of the sound types of new music by Helmut Lachenmann (1970), etc.), as well as musicologists, for example, by Maria Anna Harley (1998), Alexander Maklygin (Маклыгин 2005), Zbigniew Granat (2009), et al. However, there has been comparatively little research focusing on the *external* environment of the sonoristics, e.g., its interaction with other, non-sonoristic musical material if it is used in the composition.

The forms of such interaction will be the main topic of this research. Attention will be paid to compositions, which include only episodic use of sonoristics – e.g. this technique is used in dialogue or confrontation with a relatively traditional melodic thematism. Such compositions were created by composers of different eras – many of them appeared at the time when the concept of sonorism had not yet been defined, respectively until the end of the 1950s/early 1960s, starting with the music of the so-called “cluster man” Henry Cowell (Chase 1992/1955: 578) or Béla Bartók. The clusters in their compositions will usually interact with a traditional melodic thematism. It is noteworthy that one of the first radical sonorists – Krzysztof Penderecki – in some of his works, for example, in the *St. Luke Passion* (1966), did not use sonoristics through the entire work, but used them merely as a particular means of expression in separate moments of development.

Latvian composers, starting with the first sonorists in the second half of the 1960s – Pēteris Vasks and Pauls Dambis – and then until the beginning of the 1990s, almost always used this technique in the interaction with a non-sonoristic, melodic thematism. This might be explained by the great influence of the neoromantic style¹ and the corresponding cult of melody in the Latvian music of this period. Only starting from the beginning of the 1990s did the sonorism appear in the works of many Latvian composers, particularly representatives of the young and middle generation, as the main and often the only kind of texture. Of course, there are also exceptions, for example, the works by Eriks Ešenvalds, in which sonoristic effects are used only occasionally.

Consequently, the forms of interaction of sonoristic and non-sonoristic thematism have existed for several decades and, although each of these forms is individual, we can at least in part systemize them into some groups which reflect various aesthetic correlations. The **aim** of the article is to analyze the most common models of such interaction. Several examples from the works of both foreign and Latvian composers will be provided.

¹ Read more about the neoromantic tendency in the Latvian music of this time in the Summary of the doctoral work by Jānis Kudiņš (Kudiņš 2008).

2. The first model: sonoristic material as a symbol of mystical word and eternity that often appears at the beginning and at the end of the composition

We can already find the historical roots of this model in several examples of romantic music; however, it is even more visible in the works by impressionists. They frequently reflect a slow moving and finely nuanced process of approaching and distancing with barely perceptible shades of transition between sound and silence. This creates an impression that music comes from a mysterious twilight or fog and returns to it; we could mention the apt observation by musicologist Jann Pasler: “These composers’ [impressionists – *B. J.*] attempts to explore the fleeting moment and the mystery of life led them to seek musical equivalents for ... fog, clouds and the night” (Pasler 2001: 91). That is why the beginning and the end of the compositions often contain those “musical equivalents” – chords, which can be regarded as precursors to sonorism because their coloring is more significant for the musical context as their harmonic function. In contrast, the central section of the composition, figuratively speaking, reflects a gradual retreat of twilight (fog), and a traditional or melodic thematism comes here to the foreground. The prelude *The Sunken Cathedral* by Claude Debussy is one of the best known examples of this conception. It begins with distinctive parallelisms of fourths and fifths which emphasize the mood of emptiness and remoteness coloring (mm. 1–15). The melody on this background arises only later, and in the central section of the work (mm. 28–41) it sounds really broad and sonorous, like a hymn. Then the music gradually returns back to silence, and the coloristic chords of fourths and fifths dominate at the end of the prelude again (the last 6 measures).

Another example of such development is the composition *Night Music* from the cycle *Out of Doors* by Béla Bartók. In this case, we can perceive the muffled seconds which are merged with a pedalization as forerunners of sonorism. They dominate in the beginning of the composition (mm. 1–16). In the central section of the work, these intervals become a background for two melodic themes in the mood of Hungarian folk music: at first we hear a theme with a song-like character and then a dance. At the end of the piece both melodies are slowly fading, we only hear some brief echoes, and the main method of expression in the last five measures is again the coloristic of the muffled seconds.

An example where a similar model is found in contemporary Latvian music, which does not just simply use the forerunners of sonorism (coloristic), but also true sonoristic thematism is *A Drop in the Ocean* (2006), the choir composition by **Ēriks Ešenvalds** (born 1977). This work was dedicated to the memory of Mother Theresa. The choice of the title was inspired by the words that she said about her life’s work: “My work is nothing but a drop in the ocean, but if I did not put that drop, the ocean would be one drop the less.”²

The composition begins with the use of some sonoristic elements in the voices of the choir – whistling and quasi-loud breathing, which symbolizes the rustling of the infinite ocean (Fig. 1). Gradually a melody arises as well, and its role, over time, becomes greater; in the central section of the work (from measure 55) each choral part contains an expressive melodic line, and elements of sonorism disappear completely. The end of the composition is characteristic for Ešenvalds: a brief melodic ostinato is repeated many times until it gradually fades and merges with the silence. And at the same time, the sonoristic features return in the voices of the choir – whistling and breathing as an imitation of the rustling of the ocean (Fig. 2).

Mātes Terēzas piemiņai / In Memory of Mother Teresa
A DROP IN THE OCEAN
PILIENS OKEĀNĀ

Ēriks Ešenvalds
(*1977)
ca. 30'

*1 - Whistle each staff/avoid of synchronism!
*2 - To create mystical atmosphere, T and B should imitate quasi loud breathing.

*3 - S II div. in 2-3 as independent and non-synchron singers following the S I as echo.
*4 - Before the last

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Fig. 1. Ēriks Ešenvalds, *A Drop in the Ocean*: beginning

² See mm. 90–118 of the composition by Ešenvalds.

In the marginal sections of the form, in contrast to the polymelodic middle section, various effects of a voiceless sound dominate; they bring to the music a mystic nuance. Along with various nuances of vibrant lines, there is also the element of onomatopoeia as a glissando that imitates wolves howling. The composer herself has said about this work: “Tuva is located on the northeastern side of Ubsu-Nur, and their inhabitants inspire me with their peculiar ability to imitate the voices of animals (deer or wolves), and communicate with them.”⁶

It can be summarized that in this case as well, sonoristic in the first and last section of the composition could be perceived as a symbol of the mystical world, of eternity, but at the same time as a representation of pristine and wild nature, without any urbanistic transformation. Therefore, the musical language emphasizes an archaic syncretism, frequently together with elements of traditional music and onomatopoeia. Thus the model inherited from impressionism is still evolving in the 21st century different interpretations, at times only having small traces of the origins of this conception.

3. The second model: the use of sonoristics to highlight the dramatic culmination

While the origin of the previous model was connected with impressionism, this next model may be considered as expressionistic – of course, only in the broadest sense of the word. The sonoristic technique is used in this case for creating effects that are not unreal and mystic, but extremal and dramatic. The main methods are a rich usage of clusters in a high dynamic gradation and a transformation of instrumental timbres; they appear in an uncomfortable tessiture and so reflect an extreme escalation of tension.

Such an interpretation of the sonoristic possibilities can be found in the work that is considered a manifest of this technique – *A Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960) by Penderecki, with its twelve tone clusters and remarks requiring the highest possible pitches for the string instruments so that the sound is similar to the cry of pain.

The influence of such a dramatic interpretation of sonorism is seen in the music of **Pēteris Vasks** (born 1946). Along with Pauls Dambis (born 1936), he is one of the founders of sonorism in Latvian music. In the second half of the 1960s, Vasks studied at the Vilnius Conservatory and, as a member of a group of students, attended the Warsaw Autumn Festival. Here he became familiar with the sonoristic music of Polish composers that influenced his own works in the 1970s and 1980s. However, unlike the *Threnody* by Penderecki, Vasks had never used sonoristics throughout an entire composition. He prefers an interaction of sonoristics and non-sonoristic musical thematism according to a certain model. Namely, sonorism together with aleatorics appear frequently as a tragic culmination (catastrophe or collapse) in the development of the non-sonoristic material⁷; the musical form is mainly through-composed and contains a dramaturgical crescendo.

One of the examples is the *Drama* from the *Cycle* by Vasks (1976). There are two kinds of non-sonoristic material. The first contains nervous and fitful, impetuous motifs. We can recognize them by sharp syncopes, rising and chromatic minor seconds and harsh dissonances as major sevenths a.o. This kind of thematism may be associated with an expression of a protest or desperate anointing (see Fig. 3, mm. 1, 5, 9–11). The second kind of material is based on tritone unisons and a slower pulsation.

Fig. 3. Pēteris Vasks. *Drama* from the *Cycle*: ending

⁶ Diena.lv. (19.10.2009.). Latvijas Radio kora izpildījumā skanēs “Mijkrešļa dziedājumi [Latvian Radio Choir will perform *Twilight chants*]. <http://www.diena.lv/izklaide/latvijas-radio-kora-izpildijuma-skane-mijkresla-dziedajumi-695026> (accessed 10/12/2014)

⁷ There is also a distant similarity with another work by Penderecki – his *St. Luke Passion* (1966) – that contains both sonoristic and melodic thematism. Sonoristic is used in dramatic moments. Musicologist Alexander Ivashkin observes that “a certain intonative sphere remains in the voices of the orchestra (the choir is interpreted as merely sonoristic – as the crowd shouts)” (Ивашкин 1983: 73).

It may be perceived as an expression of fatality (see Fig. 3, mm. 2–4, 6–8). It is noteworthy that this second kind of thematism appears in the *Drama* each time in a richer texture, as a more and more thickening danger (see score numbers 7 and 9). In one sense, it symbolizes the question that Vasks rhetorically asked in one of his interviews 1989 and that has strongly influenced his music: “Is a man or mankind able to overcome the urge of destroying that – I do not know even how to name it – what is sitting inside a man and occasionally flares with black flames?” (Jakubone 1990: 157).

The sonorism is manifested at first by a cluster (dynamic gradation *fff*) already at the beginning of the work, and during the *Drama* such a cluster is repeated twice (after score No 8) – as a laconic, brusque answer to the theme of protest. However, the main and the most durable manifestation of sonorism is the ending of the *Drama*: when the alternating development of both non-sonoristic materials has reached an apogee of a tension, it is followed by the culmination as a catastrophe: clusters, among them a forearm cluster in a very loud dynamic symbolizing a collapse and the futility of all the previous battles and protests (see Fig. 3, score No 10).

Vasks himself has mentioned that some of his compositions have a hidden programme that is influenced by the *Quartet for the End of Time* (1941) by Olivier Messiaen, and music reflects the dramaticism of the era – “a situation when mankind has come near to crisis, to catastrophe” (Jakubone 1990: 157).

A partially similar conception is found in the *Burlesca II* from the piano trio *Episodi e canto perpetuo* (1985) that Vasks had dedicated to the above mentioned Messiaen. In this composition we find the same model of interaction between two kinds of mostly non-sonoristic material until the apogee and a sonoristic culmination with the cluster (score No 46) which is perceived as a tragic collapse.

4. Third model – sonoristics as an element of collage

This model frequently reflects the dialogue (or confrontation) not only of different textures, but also of different styles (or eras) as a significant feature of 20th–21st century culture. In this case, the sonoristic material encourages a transformation (sometimes a parody or a caricature) of the non-sonoristic (neo-classical, neo-romantic) material, the main aesthetic idea is a contemporary modification of the classic values of the past. There is also a certain resemblance with the conception of the famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde (1891): the same face in different time periods gains surprisingly different traits, and the present is perceived as a parody (caricature) of the past.

Among the best known examples of such a conception in music is the Sarabande from the *Collage on BACH* for strings, oboe, harpsichord and piano by Arvo Pärt (1964). This composition is based on the Sarabande from the Sixth English Suite by Johann Sebastian Bach and consists of two kinds of sections; firstly, the material from the Sarabande by Bach in the instrumentation by Pärt that is sustained in the Baroque style; secondly, the imitation of the same material, as a kind of *Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors*, namely, the classical harmonies by Bach are replaced with clusters, and the sounding is strange, unreal. The alternating of the non-sonoristic/sonoristic material is constructed according the scheme a-b-a1-b1-a2. Pärt has also left the last word to Bach and thus he indirectly reveals his view on the permanent and the changeable in the confrontation of past and present.

One of the contemporary Latvian composers who have done the most cultivation of different forms of stylistic interaction is **Pēteris Plakidis** (born 1947). By the transformation of the stylistic of the past, he episodically also uses elements of sonorism; one example is his piano trio *Romantic Music* (1980) (Fig. 4). This work demonstrates another approach to the interaction of the past and present that we have seen in the Sarabande by

The image shows a musical score excerpt for a piano trio. It consists of three systems of staves. The top system has a violin part (treble clef), a cello part (bass clef), and a piano part (grand staff). The middle system continues the violin and cello parts. The bottom system continues the piano part. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, slurs, and dynamic markings like 'poco f'. There are also some unusual markings, possibly indicating clusters or specific performance techniques.

Fig. 4. Pēteris Plakidis, *Romantic Music*: an excerpt

Pärt. In the work by Plakidis, a neoromantic theme in a classical tonality (G-Major, both string instruments) appears simultaneously with sonoristic flecks in the piano score – brief motifs or intervals of seconds – that are harmonically incompatible with the melody and sound in a high register and in muffled dynamics.

On the one hand, we can perceive these motifs as a manifestation of humor that is a characteristic feature in the nature and music of this composer. On the other hand, they also reflect a philosophical dimension – an estrangement of the stylistic of the past from the contemporary age, the unreality of former values. The interpretation of the conception could also be, as well as in the Sarabande by Pärt, ambiguous and could evoke different associations.

5. Conclusions

- The content, expressed during the use of sonoristics in the interaction with non-sonoristic material, can be variable. However, there are two main spheres of content that dominate: the first is connected with mystic and unreal images, the second – with an extremely dramatic tension.
- Both of the above mentioned spheres reflect a succession to the traditions of the past – on the one hand, to impressionism with its harmonical and tembral coloristics, on other hand, to expressionism with its congestion of dissonances and feeling of insolubility.
- The conceptions of interaction between sonoristic and non-sonoristic material are often influenced by programmatic ideas or a hidden programme; it is evidenced practically by all the analysed compositions.
- This article cannot be considered as a comprehensive study of the interaction between sonoristic and non-sonoristic material. However, it could serve as a methodological encouragement for future researches of this topic. Such studies could enrich the concept of sonorism in different aesthetic contexts that reflect not only the specifics of the music, but also contemporary art trends in general.

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Sonoristinės ir nesonoristinės medžiagos sąveika: įvairūs muzikinės formos ir estetikos aspektai

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariama sonoristinės ir nesonoristinės kilmės medžiaga muzikos kūriniuose. Šių skirtingų medžiagos tipų santykis dažnai atspindi skirtingų muzikos stilių (laikotarpių) sąveiką, ypač būdingą XX–XXI amžių muzikinei kultūrai. Nors tokios sąveikos apraiškos esti įvairios ir unikalios, vis dėlto galima išskirti kai kuriuos labiausiai paplitusius modelius. Straipsnyje aptariami būdingieji šių modelių bruožai, iliustruojami pavyzdžiais iš šiuolaikinės Latvijos ir kitų šalių muzikinės kūrybos.

Straipsnyje plačiau nagrinėjami šie modeliai:

1) sonoristinė medžiaga kaip mistinio pasaulio ir amžinybės simbolis, dažniausiai pasigirstanti kompozicijų pradžioje arba pabaigoje; tuo tarpu kita kūrinyje naudojama medžiaga yra nesonoristinės kilmės (pavyzdžiai iš Ēriko Ešenvaldo ir Santos Ratniecės kūrinių);

2) sonoristika, pasitelkiama kaip nesonoristinės medžiagos plėtotės tragiška kulminacija (katastrofa, kolapsas) (pavyzdžiai iš Pēterio Vasko kūrinių);

3) sonoristinė medžiaga kaip nesonoristinio (neoklasikinio, neoromantinio) tematizmo transformacija, įkūnijanti šiuolaikinę klasikinių praeities vertybių modifikavimo estetinę idėją (pavyzdžiai iš Arvo Pārto ir Pēterio Plakidžio kūrinių).

Be šių trijų pagrindinių modelių, straipsnyje minimi ir kiti. Straipsnio tikslas – paskatinti svarstymus apie dialogą tarp sonoristinės ir nesonoristinės medžiagos formas bei estetikas, kurias jos reprezentuoja.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: sonoristinės ir nesonoristinės muzikos medžiaga, trys sąveikos modeliai, pagrindinės estetinės idėjos, sonorizmas užuomazgų ir kulminacijų fazėse, alternatyvus ar vienalaikis nesonoristinės ir sonoristinės medžiagos naudojimas.