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On Modernism in Estonian Music (1900–1940)

Modernizmas Estijos muzikoje 1900–1940 m.

Abstract

Estonian music of the early 20th century, similar to that of the other Baltic countries, is characterized by the fact that the period of the formation of the professional musical culture chronologically coincided with the emergence of the so called “New Music”.

Chronologically, the manifestations of modernism between 1900 and 1940 can be divided into three stages:

1. Pre-modernism, the preliminary stage (ca. 1900–1910);
2. Early modernism (ca. 1910–1919);
3. Mature modernism (ca. 1920–1940).

In the “modernistic” works of the first stage, the idiom of the New Music was not yet predominating, but sometimes its influence was very remarkable. The leading composer was Rudolf Tobias (1873–1918).

In ca. 1910 the first compositions in Estonian music based on the idiom of the New Music were created. The most prominent composer representing this trend was Mart Saar (1882–1963).

Whereas Mart Saar turned to a more folkloristic idiom during the 1920s, the leading figure of modernism in Estonian music then became Heino Eller (1887–1970). In the 1930s, a group of young composers (Eller’s students Eduard Oja and Eduard Tubin) emerged, again connected with modernism in some way or another.

Keywords: “New Music”, expressionism, Rudolf Tobias, Mart Saar, Heino Eller.

Anotacija

XX a. pradžios Estijos muzikai būdinga tai, kad čia, panašiai kaip ir kitose Pabaltijo valstybėse, profesionalioji muzikinė kultūra formavosi lygiagrečiai su kylančia vadinamosios naujosios muzikos banga.

Modernizmo apraiškas 1900–1940 m. galima suskirstyti į tris etapus:

- 1) premodernizmą, pereinamąjį laikotarpį (~1900–1910);
- 2) ankstyvąjį modernizmą (~1910–1919);
- 3) brandųjį modernizmą (~1920–1940).

Pirmojo etapo „modernistiniuose“ kūriniuose naujosios muzikos stilistika dar nėra dominuojanti, nors jos įtaka jau gana akivaizdi. Ryškiausias šio etapo estų kompozitorius – Rudolfas Tobiasas (1873–1918).

Apie 1910-uosius Estijoje sukuriamos pirmosios kompozicijos, nuosekliai grindžiamos naujosios muzikos kalba. Iškiliasis šios stilistinės srovės atstovas – Martas Saaras (1882–1963).

XX a. trečiame dešimtmetyje Saarusi pasukus į labiau folkloristinį stilių, svarbiausia Estijos muzikinio modernizmo figūra tapo Heino Elleris (1882–1963). XX a. ketvirtame dešimtmetyje iškilo būrys jaunų kompozitorių (tarp jų Ellerio mokiniai Eduardas Oja ir Eduardas Tubinas), kurie vienaip ar kitaip taip pat buvo susiję su modernizmu.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: naujoji muzika, ekspresionizmas, Rudolfas Tobiasas, Martas Saaras, Heino Elleris.

Estonian music of the early 20th century, similar to that of the other Baltic countries, is characterized by the fact that the period of the formation of the professional musical culture chronologically coincided with one of the greatest revolutions in the history of European music – the emergence of the so called “New Music”. As a result, several layers of musical culture existed side by side; the stages, which were passed gradually in older musical cultures, were passed here simultaneously. The stylistic contrast between different layers was very remarkable. The most radical trend was represented by young composers who studied in the St. Petersburg Conservatory during these years, which was decisive for European music history. Through their works, the “New Music” reached Estonia more or less at the time of its origin (1908–1910).

In this article, an attempt will be made to show the modernistic tendencies of Estonian music, exemplified by

a number of especially characteristic works written during the first four decades of the 20th century.

Chronologically, the manifestations of modernism between 1900 and 1940 can be divided into three stages:

- Pre-modernism, a preliminary stage (ca. 1900–1910);
- Early modernism (ca. 1910–1919);
- Mature modernism (ca. 1920–1940).

I. Pre-modernism

In the “modernistic” works of this period, the means of expression of the “New Music” were not yet predominating, but sometimes their influence was very remarkable. Here the leading figure was the first professional Estonian composer **Rudolf Tobias** (1873–1918) whose oratorio *Des Jona Sendung* written in 1909 – the largest one in

its genre and perhaps the largest work in Estonian music at all – was for the first time (and very unsuccessfully) performed in Leipzig in the same year 1909, conducted by the composer himself. However, the German musicologist Hermann Kretzschmar said about it, that since Bach and up to our days, nobody had composed such a mighty work of sacred music (Kursk 1995: 181). His music possesses both impressionistic and expressionistic features. The former can be found, for example, in his vocal ballad *Sest Ilmaneitsist ilusast* (The Beautiful Maiden Ilmaneitsi, 1911). The latter, which are especially characteristic, are manifest in his *Walpurgis-Burlesque* for piano (1910–1911?) and in a number of piano miniatures (Prelude in C-sharp minor, 1905–1910; *Melancholie* and *Nachtstück*, 1910; see Humal 1990: 643–644), as well as in his only violin piece *Durch die Nacht*, written ca. 1914.

According to Tobias's first biographer, Riho Päts, this piece is "an impressive, mysterious, intense musical picture, painted in rough colours, with an original violin melody and an accompaniment, interesting both in terms of harmony and timbre". (Päts 1968: 131) The most striking harmonic feature of this piece, written in the weakly centralized D minor, is the recurring sustained major second D–E (sometimes also C–D; see bars 1–5, Example 1). Eventually, after a number of deceptive solutions to a half diminished seventh chord or to the second-inversion tonic triad, it resolves, at the moment of culmination, to the root-position tonic triad which had never sounded up to that moment. At the end of the piece, however, the major second returns, being then abruptly abandoned, without a "proper" solution.

Example 1. Tobias, *Durch die Nacht*, bars 1–5

II. Early Modernism

In ca. 1910 the first compositions in Estonian music based on the means of expression of the "New Music" were created. The stylistically predominating trend was expressionism. Its main characteristic feature is "a strenuous spiritual attitude" and an aspiration for "an emphasised intensity of the artist's self-expression" (Lamp 1978: 43). As we know, the notion of expressionism in music has usually been connected with the works of Arnold Schoenberg and his students. However, it was not primarily the music of Schoenberg and his school but rather that of the "late" Scriabin (also having some points of contact with expressionism) that served as a direct pattern for Estonian composers.

The most prominent composer representing this trend was **Mart Saar** (1882–1963), whose solo song *Must lind* (Black Bird) and piano piece *Skizze*, both of them published in 1911, have been labelled as the first atonal compositions in Estonian music.

One of Saar's most interesting early piano pieces is the waltz *Quasi allegretto* for piano (1911) – a typical work of the era of *Musica futuristica*. (A manifesto bearing this title was published by Balila Pratella in the same year in Italy.) Its elementary ternary form, consisting of two 16-bar sections (see the first section, Example 2) and a somewhat expanded recapitulation, makes a grotesque contrast with extravagance of its harmonic idiom – a weakly centralized chromatic tonality, where the beginning C-major triad is followed by chords belonging to F-sharp major and

Example 2. Saar, waltz *Quasi allegretto*, bars 1–16

G-sharp minor, with a tonally ambiguous whole-tone ending. This piece has some features in common with the young Prokofiev, who, however, had completed only a few early works (Opp. 1–3) by 1911. Therefore, although it is known that Saar and the nine years younger Prokofiev not only knew each other well, but also used to play piano four hands, it is likely that their modernist experiments took place independently from each other.

Saar's most famous early piano piece *Skizze* (1910) is written in a ternary form a_1ba_2 (12 + 24 + 11 bars). Its melody is based on the whole-tone motive *e flat-f-g-b double flat* along with its various modifications (inversion, extension, augmentation, diminution etc.). The outer sections of the piece begin in the chromatic D-flat major with the raised fourth degree (see Example 3a). However,

Example 3a. Saar, *Skizze*, bars 1–6

Example 3b. Saar, *Skizze*, bars 12–17

since the fourth bar, the music will be increasingly influenced by the whole-tone scale (in both of its two versions), which also entirely predominates the midsection (see Example 3b). These harmonic features impart an ambiguity to the harmony, enhancing the mystical mood of this music resulting also from the low register and the unusual metre 7/8. According to the Estonian musicologist Karl Leichter, “the piece somewhat tends towards the sphere of Scriabin’s philosophical problems” (Leichter 1964: 38). Nevertheless, it cannot be easily compared with any of Scriabin’s works – Scriabin’s mysticism is more refined and its expression is more stylized. The complicated texture of Saar’s piece is perceived as a masque, and although its music possesses a number of expressionistic features, it is not purely expressionistic: rather than “an emphasized intensity of self-expression”, it features a play of some mystic, obscure forces (see Score 2).

Saar’s two piano preludes written in 1911 were labelled by the composer as “tonally instable”. A characteristic feature of the first of them (*Poetico, con delizio*, Example 4) is an oscillation between two remote tonalities – C major and E-flat minor. The prelude concludes with an unusual plagal cadence (flattened VI–I) in C major. On the other hand, the first phrase of its initial period concludes on the dominant of E-flat minor (bar 4) and the second – on its tonic (bar 8). Yet there is no modulation in this piece – both tonalities exist in parallel from the outset (with the key of C major predominating in the odd bars and that of E-flat

Example 4. Saar, Prelude *Poetico, con delizio*

minor in the even ones). It is this continuous oscillation between two remote keys that makes this music “tonally instable”, creating an impressionistic colouring, enhanced by the predominating ninth and seventh chords (see Score 3).

Most directly connected with expressionism is the second “tonally instable” prelude (*Precipitosamente*, Example 5). It is written in the form of a usual parallel period consisting of two phrases, with the extended second phrase. Both texture and the grouping structure of phrases (4+1+1+2) are traditional. The harmony, on the other hand, is almost atonal; chords are connected by means of atonal chromatic linear motion, with some weak features of tonality only in cadences. At the same time, the upper-voice melody contains some distinctly tonal phrases making up a nearly a surrealistic contrast with the chromatic and dissonant atonal harmonies. It seems that the composer even enjoys their sharpness (the same impression was also produced in *Skizze*). He himself confessed afterwards:

I also have committed the sin and used very many dissonances, but soon it was over [...]. Speaking frankly, at the concerts in St. Petersburg, I liked most of all to listen when the orchestra was tuning up, because then one could hear most dissonances (Mägi 1973: 82).

Each of these four piano pieces written in 1911 differs from others in its character and the use of compositional technique. However, due to the novelty and boldness of the

Example 5. Saar, Prelude *Precipitosamente*

harmony, all of them can be qualified as the first genuine examples of 20th century “New Music” written by an Estonian composer.

Mart Saar’s solo songs from the same period are perhaps less radical but nevertheless absolutely untraditional in terms of musical language. The Estonian composer and musicologist Leo Normet characterizes his early piano pieces, as well as the solo songs *Must lind* (Black bird) and *Haiguse aegu* (During Illness) as follows:

His underlying theme could be called “the home and the world” à la Tagore. Since his childhood Saar was painfully sensitive to home and nature. Saar’s alertness to the world makes itself felt first and foremost in these solo songs and piano pieces in which he seems to claim spiritual kinship with Grieg, Debussy and Scriabin. The chromatically rich song “Black Bird” (1909) reveals organic links between the home and the world. Karl Eduard Sööt’s text is national in character but has also a slight touch of symbolism in it. The same nightmarish mood can also be felt in the song “During Illness” to a text by Villem Grünthal-Ridala (Saar 1982: [9]).¹

Saar’s aforementioned solo song *Must lind* (1909) begins with an almost atonal introduction (bars 1–3; see Example 6a), having a unique expressive quality. It is followed by the melody, written in the melodic minor with a flattened second degree (bars 4–7). As a result, an entire whole-tone scale arises between the supertonic and leading tone. Its impact is enhanced by the predominantly whole-tone chords in the accompaniment, especially those at the end

Example 6a. Saar, *Must lind*, bars, 1–7

(Adagio)

keer- leb mus - ta - tii - va - li - ne

Example 6b. Saar, *Must lind*, bars 32–33

of the two-bar phrases in the beginning. These chords, like a bottomless “black hole”, irresistibly pull the music towards the chaos of atonality.

In the concluding section of the songs, the incessant whirling of the black bird is symbolised by the chromatically descending melody, accompanied by an elliptical progression of dominant seventh chords (bars 32–33; see Example 6b).

In Saar’s next solo song, *Haiguse aegu* (1911), a weakly centralized tonality is combined with untraditional but structurally stable chords, creating an impressionist colouring. Its central harmonic complex consists of an incomplete seventh chord in the middle register, which, combined with the bass, often results in various ninth chords (see Example 7).

Example 7. Saar, *Haiguse aegu*, bars 1–7

Lento

Koi - dab ja tou - ser-gue tä - hed kus-tu-vad ä - - ra.

Kuu kui koh-ku-rud moon-dab lah-va-tules eä - ra.

Ped. *

(Luttuosamente)

Ei viimne ü - le - ko hus, mis ta-bas mõnda meest; ei

Example 8a. Saar, *Ei viimsed*, bars 8–12

(Luttuosamente)

Kuid nende hual leh-vib ja e-lab lootus veel-mu

ai-nu-ke-ne saat- ja siin hä - ma - ru - se - teel, siin

Example 8b. Saar, *Ei viimsed*, bars 31–38

The third solo song *Ei viimsed* (Not the Last), written in the same year 1911, is characterized by a linear harmony, with a continuous variation of a recurring melodic, rhythmic and textural material, producing an ever-changing flow of unusual scale and chord structures (see bars 8–12, Example 8a), especially at the beginning of the last section (see bars 31–38, Example 8b). In the musical language of this song one can notice the anticipation by Mart Saar of certain aspects of the neo classicist style of Stravinsky and Hindemith.

III. Mature Modernism

During the 1920s, the leading figure of modernism in Estonian music was **Heino Eller** (1887–1970), whereas Mart Saar turned in these years to a more folkloristic idiom. In the 1930s Eller also followed his example. At the same time, a group of young composers emerged, again connected with modernism in some way or other, first of all, Eller’s students Eduard Oja (1905–1950) and Eduard Tubin

(1905–1982). (Their music will be discussed in separate articles in this issue.)

Although Eller's artistic nature was closest to impressionism, the modernistic tendencies manifest in his early works are connected, first of all, with expressionism, whose influence is perceived in a number of his works written in the 1920s: in piano preludes, in the symphonic poem *Väärastused* (Phantoms, 1924), in the First String Quartet (1925) etc.

One of Eller's most impressionistic early works is the capricious and lightly grotesque piano piece *Danse du Faune* (1917; see bars 1–4, Example 9).

Eller's twenty-nine piano preludes, written during the years 1913 to 1934, are the most experimental part of his vast piano production. Book 2 of his preludes (1920) opens with a short prelude in A minor, where an entire psychological drama unfolds during fourteen bars. Its leitmotif is insolubility, this main idea being embodied, first of all, in the initial and concluding sonority – a sharply dissonant incomplete ninth chord B–D–A–C (Example 10). “Through this tiny prelude consisting of some twenty bars, suddenly there blows a mighty, suffocating gust of wind. Only one blow, but so powerful that, after the lugubrious conclusion of the prelude, it continues to sound and live in us” – the Estonian composer Eduard Tubin so characterized this prelude (Tubin, 1967: 20).

In the early 1930s, Eller wrote some of his most radical works, including the Second String Quartet (1930) and the Elegy for strings and harp (1931), whose musical language entirely belongs to the 20th century idiom. The nearly atonal prelude in C-sharp minor (1932), belonging to the incomplete Book 3 of his piano preludes, sounds as a late farewell to expressionism. The outer sections of this piece, written in a free ternary form, are based on the four-tone motive C–A–G-sharp–E (see bars 1–5, Example 11). During the prelude, it will be repeated eleven times in various transpositions and modifications, sometimes simultaneously in different voices, resulting in polytonal combinations. But it is first of all the sharply dissonant chords and linear chromaticism that impart a gloomy, melancholic character to this prelude.

Eller's undated short piano piece *Lento* in C minor (Example 12, probably also written in the 1930s) looks like an experiment in bitonality: an almost diatonic melody in B minor is accompanied by the chord progressions, clearly belonging to C minor. These two remote tonal areas are combined in the dissonant concluding chord C–G–E-flat–F-sharp–B.

One of Eller's artistically most perfect works is the Second String Quartet in F minor. After its first performance in 1933, the German journalist Gerhard Krause wrote in the musical magazine *Signale für die musikalische Welt*: “It



Example 9. Eller, *Danse du Faune*, bars 1–4



Example 10. Eller, *Prelude in A minor*



Example 11. Eller, *Prelude in C-sharp minor*, bars 1–5

Lento

Example 12. Eller, *Lento* in C minor

is the first example of the modern (*fortschrittliche*) music I have ever heard in Estonia” (Krause 1933).

In the Second Quartet, the composer’s original style is combined with the contemporary musical idiom and a masterful technique (Humal 1984: 73–90). Its content reflects very different aspects of the composer’s individuality: pure and discreet lyricism is combined here with romantic aspiration for something unusual, fantastic and grotesque, which manifests itself in an insistently dissonant harmony and an “angular” melodic design. The composer frequently uses polytonality, parallel chord progressions and chromatic linearism, combined with the *ostinato* technique.

The harmony of the Second Quartet is characterized by an absolute prevalence of complex dissonant chords. The diversity of chordal structures, creating a distinct fluctuation of harmonic tension, results in a functional differentiation of dissonant chords, the diatonic chords having a stable function and the chromatic ones – an instable one.

Such an individualized harmonic idiom testifies to the composer’s attempt to create a consistent harmonic system, individual both in its functionality and chord structures (see Example 13).

Although in years 1900 to 1940, due to the general situation of musical culture, modernism did not find a response and did not acquire a leading position in Estonia, this does not lessen the historical significance of the music of

Allegro appassionato

Example 13. Eller, String Quartet No. 2, first movement, bars 1–10

the aforementioned “modernists”, as well as the artistic value of their works. By now, the development of Estonian music has reached the stage when even the most daring experiments of the early modernism have become generally acceptable.

References

- 1 Karl-Eduard Sööt’s text mentioned by Normet is translated by Ants Oras as follows:
When you listen quietly and tensely,
you will shiver as though something stirred,
a faint rustle overhead a murmur
like the furtive movement of a bird.
In the twilight as the night is falling
when you sit and muse of long lost things
vaguely in the gloaming like a shadow
seems a bird to spread its night-black wings.
In my youth I often saw it hover
playing on the village green I heard
in my childhood fancies the mysterious murmur
of the sombre bird.
Now how lost I am and how unhappy!
Haunting all my dreams it brings
all the burden of my life upon me
in the murmuring menace of its wings...

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Santrauka

XX a. pradžios Estijos muzikai būdinga tai, kad čia, panašiai kaip ir kitose Pabaltijo valstybėse, profesionalioji muzikinė kultūra formavosi lygiagrečiai su kylančia vadinamosios naujosios muzikos banga – viena didžiausių revoliucijų visoje Europos muzikos istorijoje. Todėl raidos etapai, kuriuos senesnės muzikinės kultūros išgyveno pamažu, čia supuolė į keletą dešimtmečių. Per Sankt Peterburgo konservatorijoje studijavusių jaunų kompozitorių kūrybą naujoji muzika pasiekė Estiją labai panašiu metu, kai ji radosi ir Vakarų Europoje (1908–1910).

Modernizmo apraiškas 1900–1940 m. galima suskirstyti į tris etapus:

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Pirmojo etapo „modernistiniuose“ kūriniuose naujosios muzikos stilistika dar nėra vyraujanti, nors jos poveikis jau gana akivaizdus. Ryškiausias šio etapo estų kompozitorius

– Rudolfas Tobiasas (1873–1918), kurio muzikoje galima aptikti impresionizmo ir ekspresionizmo bruožų. Pastarieji, išryškėję „Valpurgijos nakties burleskoje“ (*Walpurgis-Burlesque*) fortepijonui (1910–1911?) ir fortepijoninėse miniatiūrose, ypač būdingi jo kūrybai.

Apie 1910-uosius Estijoje sukuriama pirmosios kompozicijos, nuosekliai grindžiamos naujosios muzikos kalba. Tuo metu vyraujanti stilistinė srovė buvo ekspresionizmas. Tačiau sektinu pavyzdžiu estų kompozitoriai rinkosi ne Arnoldą Schoenbergą ir jo mokyklos atstovų muziką, o Aleksandro Skriabino kūrybą (taip pat turėjusią sąlyčio taškų su ekspresionizmu). Iškiliasias šios srovės atstovas buvo Martas Saaras (1882–1963), jo daina „Juodas paukštis“ (*Must lind*) balsui solo (1909) ir pjesė fortepijonui „Skizze“ (1910) laikomos pirmosiomis atonaliomis kompozicijomis Estijos muzikos istorijoje. Pirmoji kompozicija prasideda labai išraiškinga, beveik atonalia įžanga. Antroji, kad ir turinti ekspresionistinių bruožų, nėra visiškai ekspresionistinė: vietoj pabrėžtinai intensyvios saviraiškos šioje pjesėje dėmesys telkiamas į mistinių, tamsių jėgų žaismę.

Kai Saaras XX a. trečiame dešimtmetyje pasuko į labiau folkloristinį stilių, svarbiausia Estijos muzikinio modernizmo figūra tapo Heino Elleris (1882–1963). XX a. ketvirtame dešimtmetyje jis irgi sekė Saaro pėdomis. Tuo pat metu iškilo ir būrys jaunų kompozitorių (tarp jų Ellerio mokiniai Eduardas Oja ir Eduardas Tubinas), kurie vienaip ar kitaip buvo susiję su modernizmu. Nors Ellerio meninei prigimčiai buvo artimesnis impresionizmas, modernistinės tendencijos ankstyvojoje jo kūryboje pirmiausia siejamos su ekspresionizmu (preliudai fortepijonui, simfoninė poema „Vaiduokliai“ (*Vürastused*), 1924; Styginių kvartetą Nr. 1, 1925). XX a. ketvirtame dešimtmetyje kompozitorius sukūrė bene radikaliausius savo kūrinius – Styginių kvartetą Nr. 2 (1930) ir Elegiją styginiams ir arfai (1931), kurių muzikos kalba neatskiriama nuo XX a. muzikos stilistikos.

Nors modernizmas ne iš karto rado atgarsį ir neišsyk užėmė vyraujančią padėtį Estijos muzikinėje kultūroje, šis faktas nė kiek nesumenkina minėtų estų „modernistų“ kūrybos reikšmės ir meninės vertės.