

Linear Composing Strategies in Arrangements of Lithuanian Traditional Songs by Mikalojus K. Čiurlionis

Annotation

The arrangements of traditional Lithuanian songs for choirs and piano solo by M. K. Čiurlionis (1875–1911) constitute socially and didactically important part of the composer's legacy. Meeting the needs of the national movement at the beginning of the 20th century they played an important role showing the composer's strong will to take an active part in the political revival of Lithuania, contributing to the development of professional arts and musical culture. Apart of the historically important social functions the arrangements of traditional songs are an interesting research object representing the innovative composing strategies of the composer. Over sixty traditional songs arranged for mixed and men's choirs and forty compositions for piano solo are known. Both could be treated as presenting a synthesis of traditional tunes with different composing ideas and developing principles. The topic of Čiurlionis' relations to traditional music is well researched (see Čiurlionytė 1959: 79–86; Landsbergis 1986: 45–48; Landsbergis 2004: 416–417; Astrauskas 2005: 43–49). The composer's compositional ideas, which are the main focus of the research were partly approached by Vytautas Landsbergis (Landsbergis 1986: 156–157), Rimantas Janeliauskas (Janeliauskas 2008: 50–55), Gražina Daunoravičienė (Daunoravičienė 2012: 26), Rokas Zubovas (Zubovas 2011: 15–17).

The aim of the research is to turn attention to various techniques and strategies of tunes arrangement and to present a draft typology of the linear composing ideas. The methodological approach is based on the musical analysis of the composer's works.

Keywords: linearity, linear composing strategies, techniques, Lithuanian traditional music arrangements, M. K. Čiurlionis music, 20 century musical innovations.

Historical background

Having interest in traditional songs from his first attempts of composing M. K. Čiurlionis formed a long lasting romantic engagement and tradition of folk tunes arrangement which started in the beginning of the 19th century. Soon after the first Lithuanian folk songs with tunes collections by Liudvikas Rėza, Simonas Stanevičius, Georg Ferdinand Heinrich Nesselmann, later by Christian Bartsch were printed, the first attempts to harmonize and adapt them to stage appeared. F. V. Rauschning, Andreas Peter Berggreen, Oskar Kolberg, Luis Nast were the first authors. Unfortunately, their harmonisations did not gain popularity and support from the cultured part of society. Some of them (e.g. O. Kolberg, L. Nast) were heavily criticised by their contemporaries for distorting the organic nature of the tunes (see Chomiński 1978: 199).

The growing Lithuanian choral movement and lack of an available repertoire gave a new impact to this interest at the end of 19th century. At this time Vincas Kudirka was one of the first to foster arrangements of Lithuanian traditional songs. He could not find a Lithuanian composer in his neighbourhood so he approached famous Polish musicians Władysław Rzepko, Aleksander Poliński, Stanisław Niedzelski, Piotr Maszyński, Michał Biernacki for help. They completed a set of folk song harmonisations published in a book "Kanklės" (the first volume came out in 1895, the second in 1899), but none of them became popular, mainly because foreign musicians could not feel the soul of Lithuanian songs, they used means inadequate to song tunes that distorted them. Feeling the lack of Lithuanian character in music M. K. Čiurlionis later reharmonized a few songs from Kudirka's collection. Paradoxically, singers mostly loved the songs simply harmonized with parallel thirds and basic chords by Kudirka himself such as "Kur upelis teka" (Where the stream flows), "Sėjau rūtą" (I planted rue), "Ant kalno gluosnys" (Willow on the hill), "Šėriau žirgelį" (I fed my horse) and others. Kudirka put accompaniment as simple as possible avoiding chromaticisms and any significant movement in accompanying voices. At the beginning of the 20th century the same song repertoire and performing problems were also faced by Leonas Ereminas, Vilius Storosta-Vydūnas, Mikas Petrauskas and others. Player piano rolls by Kudirka and Mikas Petrauskas represent examples of the harmonized songs of that period.

Traditional songs harmonized by Čiurlionis from 1904 until 1908 when he lead Lithuanian choirs in Warsaw and Vilnius are significant in the context of his creative work of the period. In 1908 his songbook "Vyturėlis" was published and gained popularity among singers. Čiurlionis approached each folk song time individually trying to convey its specific mood and emotion. The only principle he strictly adhered to was to keep the tune unchanged from the beginning to the end of the composition exposing a dozen of different ways of various harmonic and polyphonic techniques as accompaniment. The development of tune using harmonic or vertical means and compositional techniques was a common practice of that time, meanwhile linear or polyphonic means had never been used before. Even in the harmonic sphere, the composer did not limit himself to the

main functional chords, and widely used chromatics, dissonances, modulations. The well-known arrangement of the traditional song “Šėriau žirgelį” is based on modulation from E_s major to c minor.

Šėriau žirgelį

VL 292 (1906?)

Sostenuto e poco lugubre *più risoluto e mosso*

Example 1. M. K. Čiurlionis. Arrangement of the traditional song “Šėriau žirgelį”

On the one hand, Čiurlionis harmonisations are close to chamber music, they are not easy to perform and all that puts limitations to their popularity. On the other hand, they play an important role in the development of the artistic emotions and professional artistry of the performers. In harmonisations of such songs as “Oh grove, grove”, “When dawn breaks” and others the composer found organic synthesis of the melody and the leading voices, and by using accompaniment revealed the emotional content and structure of the tune. These compositions still constitute the golden part of the repertoire of many choirs.

The most interesting part of the songs are those where linear composing strategies prevail. I will to present examples with contrapuntal mixture of the linear material of different structures (e.g. diatonic and chromatic, diatonic with artificial modes, polytonal, serial etc.) leading to vanguard modernistic sounding.

Polyphonic means

Arrangements of traditional tunes by Čiurlionis stand over contemporary ones by their polyphonic texture, which could be found in nearly each composition. By using polyphonic means Čiurlionis achieves many-faced coloristic sounding and concentrates a few different ideas in one timely restricted form. His polyphonic means are extremely large: the tune is treated either as a theme for fugue or fugetta, it can be echoed by imitation or inversion, supplemented by vertical and horizontal counterpoints, bourdon, ostinato, combined with diatonic and chromatic lines. Provided examples illustrates diachronic development of composer’s ideas. Ex. 2 represents the composer’s first attempt of to “domesticate” folk songs. According to Vytautas Landsbergis, Juozas Žilevičius in his memoirs wrote that Čiurlionis played this joyful song to his patron Mykolas Oginskis in 1894 (Landsbergis 2004: 420).

Ant kalno gluosnys

VL 289 (?-1906)

Con moto

Example 2. Basso ostinato “Ant kalno gluosnys”, VL 289 (1906? 1894?)

Following two examples (3a and 3b) illustrate the techniques of vertical counterpoint used in arrangement of the traditional song “Ei, mergele, kur buvai?” (Oh, my girl, where have you been?).

Ei, mergele, kur buvai?

I

VI. 283 (1906?)

Lento ma non troppo

II

Lento simile

Example 3 (a, b). Vertical counterpoint “Ei, mergele, kur buvai?”, VL 283 (1906) I, II variations

Rhythmical means

In his early period Čiurlionis often used various rhythmic means giving priority to patterns shared from traditional Polish dances – polonaise, mazurka, motor rhythmic, in the later period – ostinato and izorhythmic. Some of the Lithuanian songs in this period were treated as Polish. In one of the first documented arrangements, for example, the song “Sėjau rūtą” we could trace izorhythmic bass, based on the polonaise rhythm scheme. Later on the composer returned to this song and its sounding became sophisticated and tritonal in 1909. When Čiurlionis got acquainted closer with Lithuanian traditional tunes, he was amazed at their rhythmic monotony, admired as one of the most precious features, giving to music a profound and noble sounding. A similar statement we find in his writings “On music” from 1909. Example 4 illustrates basso ostinato, which was the composer favourite principle of linear development.

Močiute, noriu miego

VI. 281 (1906)

Allegretto

Example 4. Basso ostinato “Močiute, noriu miego” (Grandmother, I want to sleep), VL 281 (1906)

Linear modal and tonal means

Vertical sounding strategies in Čiurlionis works is a separate topic of our interest. Meanwhile polyphonic, confronting melodic lines of a different modal structure can be treated as a new innovative principle. Side by side with very common diatonic lines we face chromatic lines, a mixture of diatonic and artificial modal (octatonic) lines, sometimes ambivalent tonality or bitonality and polytonality. The latter are radical not only in Lithuania but also in international contexts. And what is important is that the composer choose compositional techniques that were derived organically from the inner structure of the melody. This innovative strategy was later developed by Julius Juzeliūnas in his work *On the question of the chord structure* (1972).

Example 5 illustrates the composer's attempt to enlarge possibilities of diatonics, including chromatic structures as separate lines. As an outcome of mixture, the sounding reaches extremely modern result.

Example 5. Chromatics in middle voices + diatonics in upper and bass lines "Išėjo mergaitė" (The girl went out), VL 278 (1906)

In Example 6 we can see another innovation – a narrow range lament tune "Motule mano" (My dear mother) is confronted with an artificial octatonic mode, which was also constructed like a lament from the same intervals of tone and semitone. The result of the mixture is unbelievable, the feeling of tonality disappears. The artificial modes at Čiurlionis' times were of interest to Aleksandr Skriabin, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Igor Stravinsky. Thus, looking for new ways to musical expression, Čiurlionis can be counted among the outstanding pioneers.

Example 6. Octatonics "Motule mano" (My dear mother) theme – Three preludes, VL 300 (1906)

Example 7 is also innovative, especially its middle part, where at the same time three tonalities sound – G major, e minor and c minor. This is an argument to prove that Čiurlionis was the first on the way, which was chosen lately by Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók, and in serial using all 12 tones, he is close to Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern and Alan Berg.

Example 7. Tritonality (G-e-c) "Sėjau rūtą", VL 334 (1909)

Texture and structural means

Texture and structural means in arrangements of traditional tunes varies according to their address: for children's choirs it is close to folkloric analogues, however in dramatic works for piano they are thick and sophisticated. Čiurlionis kept the structure of the song unchanged but for development often uses a variation form, putting the variants of the same song to cycles of two to five parts. The development of traditional tunes is not typical of him but in the later period, he loved to develop short motives in a very dramatic sophisticated texture (Ex. 8).

IV. *Motule mano* IV. *Oh, My Dear Mother*
(Prelude) VL 340 (1909)

Agitato e con espressione

Example 8. Motivic development of the tune “Motule mano”, VL 340 (1909)

Conclusions

- Traditional tunes were admired by Čiurlionis as an equivalent of nature in culture, as a treasure of natural feelings, a mirror of the national character, a means of national consolidation, and valuable material for professional works.

- Traditional songs harmonized by Čiurlionis merged into tradition lasting since the beginning of the 19th century. In his arrangements, the composer reached new horizons.

- Harmonisations for choir were created mainly for repertoire needs in Druskininkai in 1905 and 1906 but he kept a strong interest in traditional tunes all his creative life.

- Folk tunes arranged for piano were the composer's laboratory in search for new compositional techniques.

- Čiurlionis approached each tune individually and provided more than 20 different ways of arrangement and linear development of the melodies using polyphonic, modal, tonal, harmonic and textural means and combining them. Some of the strategies applying linear mixtures of diatonic and chromatic lines, artificial modes, bitonality and polytonal structures are modern and innovative.

- In the harmonisations of songs “When dawn breaks”, “Oh grove, grove” and others the composer found organic synthesis of various compositional means and revealed the mood and structure of the tune.

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M. K. Čiurlionio lietuvių liaudies dainų išdailų linearinės komponavimo strategijos

Santrauka

Liaudies dainų išdailos chorams *a cappella* ar fortepijonui solo sudaro visuomeniškai ir didaktiškai svarbų M. K. Čiurlionio (1875–1911) kūrybinio palikimo sandą. Inspiruotos nacionalinio atgimimo reikmių, jos rodo ryžtingą kompozitoriaus apsisprendimą aktyviai dirbti politinio Lietuvos atgimimo labui, kurti ir plėtoti nacionalinę muziką ir dailę. Šie kūriniai, be visuomeninės jų svarbos, yra ir vertingas tyrimo objektas, atskleidžiantis netradicines, neretai inovatyvias kompozitoriaus kūrybines strategijas. Kiekvienoje iš šešiasdešimties kompozitoriaus liaudies dainų aranžuotųjų vaikų, vyrų ar mišriems chorams bei keturiasdešimtyje išdailų fortepijonui matome tradicinių melodijų ir skirtingų komponavimo idėjų bei plėtojimo principų sintezę. Įdomiausias šių kompozicijų – tos, kuriose vyrauja linearinės muzikinės minties plėtotės strategijos. Išlaikydama nekintamą liaudies dainos melodiją, kompozitorius kuria palydimuosius balsus pasitelkdamas dešimtis skirtingų polifoninių raiškos priemonių. Straipsnyje aptariamos M. K. Čiurlionio taikomos kontrapunkto priemonės, lineariškai sugretinančios skirtingos sandaros muzikines struktūras, – tai diatonika ir chromatika, diatonika ir dirbtinės dermės, politonalumas, garsų serijos ir kt.; jos kardinaliai keičia garsinę raišką, atveria kelią muzikos kalbos inovacijoms ir pozicionuoja M. K. Čiurlionį greta pačių ryškiausių XX a. pradžios muzikos novatorių.