

Nationalist Tendencies in the *De Profundis* Cantata of M. K. Čiurlionis

1. Introduction

“A composer may naturally imbibe certain styles and approaches, but careful thought is necessary to integrate them into a larger whole, and much conscious study of musical technique is an inevitable part of the process.” So writes Michael Beckerman in the opening pages of his seminal work regarding nationalism, *New Worlds of Dvořák* (2003: 10). This concept – that a composer might acquire naturally, subconsciously even, some musical traits of his or her own native music – leads directly into the concept of national music: that music can display specific characteristics that betray, or rather identify, its origin. Beckerman’s continuation however, that “much conscious study of musical technique is an inevitable part of the process” (2003: 10), leads naturally to the topic of this conference: namely how the rational and the intuitive, the conscious and the unconscious, the native experience and the conservatory education combine within a composition to form the whole.

This paper examines the harmony and contrast of *intuitio* and *ratio* within the *De Profundis* cantata of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis. Why the *De Profundis*? It has long been established that the composer’s two tone poems, *Miške* and *Jūra* are at least somewhat nationalist in nature; however, *De Profundis* predates both of these by at least two years.¹ Further, the cantata was written as Čiurlionis completed his studies at the Warsaw Conservatory – and can thus be viewed as his first mature work; though he wrote music prior to the *De Profundis*, they are considered student compositions. Finally, the cantata contains both vocal and instrumental music, allowing not only the ability to compare Čiurlionis’s text setting with melodies and harmonies commonly found in Lithuanian folk song (and his other vocal works, including *his* folk settings, Mass Ordinary, and Psalms), but also the opportunity to compare his orchestral writing with his nationalist tone poems, *Miške* and *Jūra*.

2. Čiurlionis’s Musical Background Prior to the *De Profundis*

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis was raised in a musical household; his father was a church organist in Druskininkai, and his sister writes that when the relatives would visit, the family would often congregate together and sing Lithuanian folk songs, with the boy Čiurlionis often singing the highest voice in those songs (Čiurlionytė 1973: 35). Lithuanian musicologist Vytautas Landsbergis supports this when he writes “[b]oth [of Čiurlionis’s] parents knew many Lithuanian songs and loved to sing them [around the home]” (1992: 24).

Funded by the Polish prince Michal Oginski, Čiurlionis studied composition, piano, and counterpoint at the Warsaw Conservatory. It seems that Čiurlionis’s interest in folk music persisted when he attended conservatory; indeed multiple letters to his brothers and other friends, dating from those years, reveal that he composed works either based upon or employing Lithuanian folk melodies. Unfortunately, many of these works are now lost, and were used as student and practice compositions for Čiurlionis. Those works that do survive are primarily small student works, including piano works in the style of Chopin, a Mass Ordinary (for counterpoint exercises) and other short pieces. For Čiurlionis’s graduation in 1899, he completed the *De Profundis* cantata for choir and orchestra.

3. Elements of *Intuitio* in the *De Profundis* Cantata

Elements of Lithuanian folk song can be found in nearly every facet of Čiurlionis’s *De Profundis* cantata; to streamline this analysis this paper will proceed individually through each category. It will begin by examining Čiurlionis’s use of rhythm, both within the choral setting and the orchestration. From rhythm, the analysis will advance to melodic construction. Finally, a brief examination of harmony will be presented as well as arguments for why certain characteristics can be considered Lithuanian.

¹ For additional scholarship regarding nationalism in *Miške* and *Jūra*, see Vytautas Landsbergis, *M.K. Čiurlionis: Time and Content* (1992).

3.1. Rhythm

Rhythm is very important within Lithuanian folk music, particularly a long-short-long dotted rhythm, especially when presented as an ostinato (see Ex. 1). In the *De Profundis*, Čiurlionis wastes no time in displaying this feature; indeed the first choral sections present the long-short dotted rhythmic pair in the initial statements of the soprano, alto, and tenor (mm. 7–8). As if to emphasize this point, Čiurlionis further presents these three voices homorhythmically, so that the listener cannot help but identify this hallmark of Lithuanian folk music.

The image shows a musical score for a choir, labeled 'Example 1. Čiurlionis, De Profundis, mm. 7–8, choir'. It consists of four staves: Soprano (Sop.), Alto, Tenor (Ten.), and Bass. The music is in 3/4 time and features a long-short-long dotted rhythmic pattern. The lyrics are 'Se - mia-mas ne - lai - mių'. The Soprano part has a long note followed by a short note and a dotted quarter note. The Alto and Tenor parts have a long note followed by a short note and a dotted quarter note. The Bass part has a long note followed by a short note and a dotted quarter note. The lyrics are 'Se - mia-mas ne - lai - mių'.

Example 1. Čiurlionis, *De Profundis*, mm. 7–8, choir

This rhythm is found throughout the piece; Čiurlionis uses it no fewer than six additional times, and by employing this rhythm, he clearly hearkens back to the folk songs he would have heard in his youth. Further, both Čiurlionis (1910: 66) and modern musicologists, such as Danutė Staškevičius (1994: 453–458), identify this rhythm as being a hallmark of Lithuanian folk song, and one can find this rhythm in works from the entirety of Čiurlionis’s compositional career. In early works, such as his settings of Psalm 29 (1898) and 66 (1899), Čiurlionis treats this rhythm in a similar manner to the *De Profundis*, presenting it within initial motives that he then treats imitatively throughout the piece. In his middle period works, such as his Op. 8, No. 1 for piano from 1901, Čiurlionis utilizes the rhythm as groundwork for the left hand, driving the piece forward. Finally, in later period works, including his final compositions, such as Op. 33 for piano, completed in 1909, Čiurlionis uses this rhythm throughout all voices and tessituras, ensuring that the listener will clearly hear and identify it as an aspect of Lithuanian folk music.

Beyond the writings of Čiurlionis and Staškevičius, however, how can one be sure that this rhythm can or should be interpreted through a nationalist lens? The simple solution is to examine Lithuanian folk song, and a cursory glance through a folk song collection allows one to see that this rhythmic motif (or a similar one) can be found in much of Lithuanian folk music, including *Subatos vakarėly*, *Kai mes augom*, *Ne tėviškėlėj*, *Kareivūžėlis*, and *Beaštanti aušrelė*, to name a few. In total, this long-short rhythm appears in approximately one-third of Čiurlionis’s folk song arrangements.

In addition to the long-short dotted pair, another characteristic rhythm of Lithuanian folk song is monotony often presented as a consecutive collection of eighth notes that move homorhythmically and homophonically within each voice. Čiurlionis himself identifies this within his writing, *Apie muziką*; he writes, “[even the] unaccustomed ear of a foreigner will immediately sense a certain monotony [of] our rhythm” (1910: 66). Within his folk song settings, one can find this musical trait in *Prapuoliau močiute*, *Ganau avelės*, *Anksti rytą kėliau*, and others. Both Čiurlionis and musicologist Daiva Račiūnaitė-Vyčinienė (2006) consider this an important characteristic of Lithuanian folk music, and its presence within the *De Profundis* cantata is neither disguised nor hidden.

Although Čiurlionis first presents strings of eighth notes in the vocal part in mm. 30–33 and 40–46, the voices do not move homorhythmically until mm. 47–48 in the alto, tenor, and bass voices. The technique appears again in the alto, tenor, and bass in mm. 66–68, and in mm. 68–72, the soprano finally joins the other three voices (see Ex. 2). Čiurlionis’s Psalm settings confirm this to be a musical trait that he knew intrinsically; in both the homophonic and fugal sections of his Psalm 130, Čiurlionis presents these strings of eighth notes with a syllabic text setting (mm. 9–12) similar to that employed here.

Nationalist concepts within the orchestral rhythm of the piece closely mimic those that are identified within the choral sections. For example, the opening bassoon motive, displayed in Example 3 demonstrates the long-short rhythm so commonly found in Lithuanian folk song. It must be noted, however, that the long-short motive is not simply found in individual orchestral parts, but also employed by the entire orchestra, for example, in mm. 29–30 (see Ex. 4). The rhythm employed as such is truly unavoidable – it is even marked *fortissimo!!!* – and constitutes part of Čiurlionis’s “imbibed” Lithuanian folk song style. This long-short rhythm is also found within the second theme of his tone poem *Miške*.

Sop.
Alto

Ten.
Bass

Prieš Ta-vo sos - tą bus tei - sin - gas, tai kas bus prieš Ta-ve tei-
sin - gas, tei - sin-gas bus prieš sos - tą?

Prieš Ta-vo sos - tą bus tei - sin - gas, tai kas bus prieš Ta-ve tei-
sin - gas, tei - sin - gas bus prieš sos - tą?

Example 2. Čiurlionis, *De Profundis*, mm. 66–72, choir

Example 3. Čiurlionis, *De Profundis*, mm. 1–2, bassoon

Example 4. Čiurlionis, *De Profundis*, mm. 29–30, orchestral reduction

De Profundis Main Theme

Miške Second Theme

Example 5. Comparison of rhythmic thematic material:
Čiurlionis, *De Profundis* main theme and *Miške*, second theme

3.2. Melody

Within Čiurlionis's writings, a great deal of time is spent discussing melody. As mentioned prior, he exhorts young composers to use a limited melodic range, writing that a truly Lithuanian song should contain, "[a] simple melody that does not expand across the entire octave, often making [do] with four of five notes" (1910: 68). Throughout the majority of Čiurlionis's folk-inspired compositions, this limited melodic range is evident, and the *De Profundis* is no exception.

Se - mia-mia-mas ne - lai - mių tva - no

Example 6. Čiurlionis, *De Profundis*, mm. 6–9, soprano

Example 6 displays the melody of the first vocal phrase of the work (mm. 6–9). Note that throughout the imitative phrase the melody moves only a perfect fourth; further, each sub-phrase is even more limited in scope, moving only a major or minor third. Čiurlionis often employs this musical characteristic in imitation, and it is found throughout the *De Profundis*, from the initial vocal entry in m. 6 through the final vocal close in m. 11.

This limited melodic range mirrors that which one finds within Čiurlionis's folk song settings. Throughout his arrangements, including *Kai mes augom*, and *Linelis*, Čiurlionis employs the melodic range of a fifth or less. This limited melodic range can also be found in transcriptions of these folk songs, including those by Stasys Šimkus (1965), and thus one can be assured that Čiurlionis's use of these folk songs and their musical elements is authentic. Further, one finds this musical element within other folk songs that Čiurlionis did not harmonize, further cementing it as a Lithuanian characteristic.

Čiurlionis employs his melodies differently throughout his folk-based piano works. Due to thicker left-hand textures, including block chords and arpeggiations, Čiurlionis presents the melody in octaves. This is evident with the Op. 11, No. 2 and Op. 13, No. 2, and demonstrates the importance of the melody in Čiurlionis's eyes.

3.3. Harmony

Within a polyphonic work, harmony is perhaps the most important complete musical characteristic: now, the rhythmic variety and the melodic construction are examined together as a single whole. Regarding harmony, Čiurlionis's *De Profundis* demonstrates a hallmark of Lithuanian folk song: an abundance of major seconds.

Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė, in her article, "Folk songs in the Work of Lithuanian Composers (2006)" focuses on the first of the aspects, the treatment of a major second. Gaidamavičiūtė writes that this interval is commonly found within the Lithuanian folk genre the *sutartinė* and that it often leads to a bitonal nature within this pieces (2006: 1–2).

While the *De Profundis* by no means contains bitonality, the presence of these parallel seconds can be viewed as an unconscious decision made by Čiurlionis that reflects his musical heritage, namely, Lithuanian folk music. He presents the interval (and its octave equivalence) most often when he employs the full choir in a chorale setting; Example 7 identifies one moment where this occurs. Further, Čiurlionis utilizes this musical element throughout the entirety of the work, including a return of an earlier, second-prominent section. The texture at this point, similar to earlier in the work, is homophonic and the voices move generally in static or parallel motion, presenting this interval as a noticeable feature that clearly recalls Lithuanian folk song.

Example 7. Čiurlionis, *De Profundis*, mm. 24–27, choir

This prominence of the second in the *De Profundis* is not anomalous. Within his folk song settings one can discern his use of the interval to identify the sound as Lithuanian. Indeed, within other Lithuanian folk song collections, such as that of Stasys Šimkus (1965), this interval is also employed within select songs as a hallmark of Lithuanian music. Further, within Čiurlionis's other Psalm settings, dating from later in his career, he employs this interval with some frequency.

The orchestral harmony throughout the piece is slightly more difficult to label; throughout the *De Profundis*, Čiurlionis seems to prefer standard late-Romantic progressions to folk song harmony. This should not be surprising, however, as the Lithuanian folk music that Čiurlionis would have heard is primarily vocal in nature, and his idolization of Richard Strauss's tone poems during his conservatory days betray his preference for a lush, late-Romantic orchestration.

4. *Ratio* in the *De Profundis*

Čiurlionis's use of lush, late-Romantic orchestration within the *De Profundis* is just one example of the 'ratio' – the carefully crafted aspect of composition – that exists within this work. A cursory glance at the score reveals that Čiurlionis wrote the *De Profundis* for a standard late-Romantic orchestra, complete with a full complement of woodwinds and brass.

Čiurlionis's harmony within the work is primarily triadic, and modulations are accomplished through altered and enharmonic reiterations of chords, leading to mediant-related keys (e.g. B-flat minor to d minor); additionally, each chord within the phrase has a distinct cadential purpose and goal. This would not have been out of fashion for other late-Romantic composers, including the early works of Gustav Mahler or Richard Strauss, or the late-period of Franz Liszt, among others. Indeed, throughout the work, Čiurlionis's employment of the orchestra is primarily Romantic in nature.

Within the vocal sections, one sees a distinct contrast between Čiurlionis's folk-inspired chorale-like sections and the fugal parts with which they alternate. Whereas the chorale sections display distinct musical elements of Lithuanian folk song – the *intuitio* of this work – the fugal sections clearly demonstrate Čiurlionis's ability to work within the learned style he acquired within his conservatory studies – the *ratio*. The contrapuntal technique utilized by Čiurlionis here is reminiscent of his Mass setting, which was completed as a set of counterpoint exercises during his time at the Warsaw Conservatory.

Čiurlionis's use of counterpoint is not exclusive to the fugal sections of the *De Profundis*; for example, in mm. 37 and 39 one finds that Čiurlionis treats his limited range melody (part of this 'intuitio' of this work) contrapuntally, thus marrying the imbibed style of the Lithuanian folk songs of his youth with the learned style of the conservatory.



Example 8. Čiurlionis, *De Profundis*, mm. 37, 39

Regarding nationalist tendencies within the work, Čiurlionis makes the important conscious decision to set the text in Lithuanian. For Lithuanians, and for many other ethnic groups at this time, the issue of language, and the unrestricted or official acceptance of their native tongues was a major victory – the lack of it, a form of repression. For this reason, literary movements and the publication of national histories, poems, news, and other writings in the vernacular were vital to the establishment of any nationalist movement.²

Čiurlionis's decision to set his *De Profundis* text in Lithuanian thus expresses a conscious desire – part of the *ratio* – to present a major work in his homeland's native tongue. For its composition, he used translations by the Polish poet Jan Kochanowsky; although the translations were in Polish – the language with which Čiurlionis was most familiar at the time – his decision to ultimately present the final work in Lithuanian clearly gives evidence of his nationalist tendencies. Further, this method of composition – working with a Polish translation of the Psalms and then translating the text Lithuanian for the final draft – was common to Čiurlionis at this time; his other Psalm settings followed a similar construction process.³

5. Conclusion

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis is the quintessential Lithuanian composer, and for good reason. Though this paper touches on only one of his many compositions, it demonstrates that from his earliest "mature" compositions – that is, works composed beyond an assignment – Čiurlionis *naturally* expresses aspects of the Lithuanian folk music he would have heard as a child. For Čiurlionis this "Lithuanianness" – *intuitio* – combined itself inseparably with his conservatory training – *ratio* – to create a truly Lithuanian style of composition – a style that many scholars have identified within his later works. For Čiurlionis then, and for Lithuania, national style is truly born out of the marriage of soul and mind – *intuitio et ratio*.

² It must be noted that the Lithuanian language was prohibited at this time due to a Russian mandate issued after an uprising in Poland in 1863-4. More recently, Russian soldiers and citizens massacred Lithuanian Catholics in the Kražiai Massacre of 1893. During this time secret Lithuanian schools (*daraktorinės*) were formed in villages, the first Lithuanian newspapers (*Aušra* and *Varpas*) were published, and the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania was established. Following demands for greater liberty by the SDP and other political action, the Russian government formally revoked the ban on the Lithuanian alphabet and publications in 1904.

³ This construction process is evident within Čiurlionis's own scores, sketches, and letters that detail his compositional processes from this time period, housed at the M.K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art in Kaunas, Lithuania; the author has consulted these documents as a part of his research.

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Nacionalinės tendencijos M. K. Čiurlionio kantatoje *De profundis*

Santrauka

Lietuviškas nacionalizmas užėmė svarbią vietą brandžioje Mikalojaus Konstantino Čiurlionio kūryboje. XX a. pradžioje Lietuva išsilaisvino iš carinės Rusijos valdžios, ir tai suteikė galimybę kurti savo nacionalinę identitetą. Šiame procese menai, ypač muzika, atliko kertinį vaidmenį.

Straipsnyje tyrinėjama viena pirmųjų Čiurlionio brandaus laikotarpio kompozicijų *De profundis* chorui ir orkestrui (1899). Stilistinės analizės metu buvo kruopščiai išnagrinėti įvairūs muzikiniai harmonijos, ritmo bei melodijos aspektai, studijoje identifikuojami tiek lietuvių liaudies dainų (jas Čiurlionis jaunystėje girdėjo Druskininkuose) pėdsakai (*intuitio*), tiek sodrių vėlyvojo romantizmo stilių elementai ir technika (pastarąją kompozitorius studijavo Varšuvos konservatorijoje) (*ratio*).

Per savo trumpą gyvenimą Čiurlionis sekinamai dirbo, siekdamas įtvirtinti ir kuo plačiau skleisti lietuvių muziką. Jo organizuojamos parodos, koncertai, kūrinių konkursai turėjo skatinti lietuvių muzikus kurti atsiremiant į lietuvių liaudies tradiciją. Dviejuose straipsniuose jis nuodugniai charakterizavo lietuvių liaudies muziką ir nurodė, kaip kompozitorius galėtų ją pritaikyti profesionaliojoje kūryboje. Šie straipsniai ir kiti pirminiai šaltiniai siūlo instrumentą, kuriuo galima tirti kūrinio lietuviškumą pagal tuos pačius kriterijus, kuriuos taikė ir Čiurlionis.

Siekdamas identifikuoti lietuvių liaudies muzikai artimus muzikos bruožus, straipsnio autorius tyrinėjo didžiąją dalį tautinės Čiurlionio kūrybos, taip pat jo liaudies dainų išdailas (pradedant 1905 m.). Autorius analizavo minėtus straipsnius apie lietuviškumą muzikoje, kitus Čiurlionio literatūrinių tekstų rinkinius, atspindinčius to meto kompozitorių / kompozicijų ir nacionalinių muzikos stilių realijas, taip pat dienoraščių fragmentus, eilėraščius ir kitus šaltinius, laikomus M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejaus archyvuose Kaune. Ši kruopščiai dokumentuota studija buvo lyginama ir pildoma kitų lietuvių tyrėjų (Vytauto Landsbergio, Rūtos Gaidamavičutės, Daivos Račiūnaitės-Vyciniene, Danutės Saškevičius ir kt.) darbų įžvalgomis.

Šio tyrimo metu buvo atlikta kantatos *De profundis* analizė. Be identifikuotų lietuviškumo ypatybių kantatoje, straipsnyje aptariami bendri bruožai, būdingi ir kitoms Čiurlionio kompozicijoms – ankstyvosios konservatorijos laikotarpio psalmių ir mišių harmonizuotoms, dviem didžiosioms nacionalinėms simfoninėms poemoms „Miške“ ir „Jūra“ ir netgi fortepijoninėms kompozicijoms, parašytoms prieš pat mirtį 1911 metais.

Analizė atskleidė, kad tam tikri lietuvių liaudies muzikos elementai Čiurlionio kompozicijose egzistavo dar iki jam įvardijant juos savo publikacijose; šie muzikos bruožai skiriasi nuo konservatorijoje taikytų principų, todėl greičiausiai jie kilo iš jaunystėje girdėtų liaudies dainų – t. y. jo intuicijos. Vis dėlto, turint omeny faktą, kad Čiurlionis studijavo prestižinėje konservatorijoje, šie folkloro elementai nepasirodo grynu, nenušlifotu pavidalu, bet yra meistriškai pritaikyti ir modifikuoti. Taigi Čiurlionio kantata *De profundis* (pirmasis jo brandus kūrinys) ir pats Čiurlionis, kaip lietuvių nacionalinis kompozitorius *par excellence*, žymi fenomenalią sąjungą tarp *ratio* ir *intuitio*, kuri formuoja Čiurlionio pažadintą lietuvių nacionalinį stilių.