

Inga Jankauskienė

Sounding Picturesque City

The object of the research is the oratorio *Centones meae urbi* (Skiautinys mano miestui, 1997) by Onutė Narbutaitė. This research aims at looking at the composition from the perspectives of musical colourfulness, the so called landscape, the specific depicted place and space in music. The article describes the treatment of the picture of Vilnius in music. The mixed, comparative method is used for the analysis.

The oratorio *Centones meae urbi* by Narbutaitė is a prominent composition not only in the Lithuanian context, but also worldwide; therefore, in 1997, it was granted national award. The uniqueness of this composition pre-conditions the variety of its "ways of reading".¹ The oratorio *Centones meae urbi* is rich in the variety of the used means: in other words, here, it is the novelty and exceptional character of the chosen treatment of the oratorio that is important since the aim is to reveal the specificity of the chosen object.

Previous researches of the oratorio *Centones meae urbi*

It is worthwhile mentioning the researches carried out by musicologists Audronė Žiūraitytė², Linas Paulauskis³, Jūratė Landsbergytė⁴, and the author of this research⁵ in the field.

The article by Žiūraitytė, published in *Menotyra*, features a detailed and comprehensive musicological analysis of the composition; the author draws attention to the so-called broad field of poly-stylistic associations: *in the oratorio by O. Narbutaitė, the poly-stylistic – one of the most popular means of expression in postmodernism that is organic with the genre of "centones" – is more prominent than in other compositions by the composer*⁶.

Bearing the discussed composition in mind, Žiūraitytė views the composer's music as representative of the neo-romantic direction and maintains that the composer has excellently mastered features of various styles (e.g., Renaissance, Baroque, contemporary music) and musical characteristics of certain genre and investigates the multicultural ties exhibited here and the signs determining the composition's intertextuality. In addition, this publication investigates in detail the peculiarities of dramaturgic development of the oratorio.

Also, Žiūraitytė writes in the same article about close relation between the poetic text, which is simultaneously produced in several languages used here and the music through paraphrasing of Biblical words "and the Word became flesh": "Word becomes music, music becomes word, and together they create a special atmosphere of Vilnius stretched in time line where the past and the present turn into a single space".⁷

Linas Paulauskis, viewing Narbutaitė as a neo-romantic composer, in his discussion of the composition *Centones meae urbi*, draws attention to its structural characteristics – the inner balance, the constructive features of the composition, the rationality of composing, and its multi-layered texture⁸.

1. New treatment

The colourful oratorio *Centones meae urbi* by Narbutaitė encouraged viewing it as an example of colourfulness, which is supported by best verses about Vilnius, in music.

The brass fanfares and verses about Vilnius sung by soprano and the male choir can be regarded as the exceptional features of *Opening* and *The Poet's Return* parts.

Narbutaitė's words about the creation of patchwork became the stimulus for and a means of developing another analysis of the oratorio *Centones meae urbi*. According to the composer,

CENTO MEANS 'A PATCH'; CENTONES IS A NEW TEXT composed out of borrowed verses and phrases [...] Centones meae urbi is a patchwork for my city, mended out of patches torn from the old walls of Vilnius, which, joined together, have produced a map marked by usual symbolic figures: the baroque with Sarbievius, Romanticism with Mickiewicz, the Northern Jerusalem... .

¹ Narbutaitė, Onutė. *Centones meae urbi*. Partitūra, rankraštis. 1997.

² Žiūraitytė, Audronė. Kultūrinė atmintis ir jos muzikinė reprezentacija Onutės Narbutaitės oratorijoje *Centones meae urbi*. *Menotyra*, 2002, Nr. 1 (26), p. 25–34; Žiūraitė, Audronė. Onutė Narbutaitė. *Centones meae urbi*. *Bernardinai.lt/straipsnis/2005-09-20-onute-narbutaitė-centones-meae-urbi/12573*

³ Paulauskis, Linas. Portretas. Onutės Narbutaitės garsais rašomas dienoraštis. 1997–2008. *Lietuvos muzikos link* Nr. 13. Muzikos informacijos ir leidybos centras.

⁴ Landsbergytė, Jūratė. Dvasios architektūra iš užmarštės Vilniaus skiaučių. *Kultūros barai*, 1998, Nr. 3, p. 34.

⁵ O. Narbutaitės *Centones meae urbi* minimas mano straipsnyje-recenzijoje: Jankauskienė, Inga. Vainikas Vilniui. *Menotyra*, 2009, T. 16, Nr. 1–2, p. 73–75.

⁶ Žiūraitytė, 2002, p. 26.

⁷ Žiūraitė, 2005.

⁸ Paulauskis, *Lietuvos muzikos link* Nr. 13.

This composition can be analyzed from the vertical (paradigmatic) and horizontal (syntagmatic) perspectives. In the first case, the whole of the composition becomes apparent: its framework (*Opening* and *Closing*, *The Poet's Return* and *The Poet's Farewell*) and the patchwork in the middle part that is composed of bigger and smaller segments. In this case, it is important to point out the so-called “stapling” elements that act as connectors and that are embodied in several characteristic motifs.

The framework in the oratorio is used for a certain purpose. It frames the time, place, and its inhabitants that are depicted in the composition. A similar structure, with the so-called “theatre inside theatre” frame, is characteristic of the oratorio *The Last Pagan Rites* (*Paskutinės pagonių apeigos*) (1978) by Bronius Kutavičius. This composition frames the abstractly treated ancient pagan time and the envisioned pagan rites in process. Behind the oratorio *Centones meae urbi* by Narbutaitė, a concrete time, place, i.e. Vilnius, its people, its stories and narratives are revived in an artistic form. This separation contains specific theatrical features: the character named the Poet, who narrates the city stories, is presented. Later on, we find out from the poetic text of the composition that the character is Czesław Miłosz who expressively depicted his beloved city.

The city itself is depicted by the composer in separate stories that are sewn together in a colourful patchwork where one finds the famous cemeteries of Rasos and the Bernardines, city view in winter, royal celebrations that once took place here, and mundane stories of the city's inhabitants.

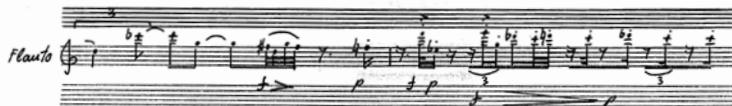
The connecting elements of the patchwork are its separate segments that link repetitive formations, some of which are mentioned below:

a)

- a rhythmic fugue that consistently becomes thicker and that is performed by tamburello;
- these are often used in the beginnings and endings of the segments of the composition;
- for example, tamburello and tamburo parts from the beginning of Epitaph I (p. 9);
- sometimes, in various points of the composition, the same motif is repeated (just like other motifs mentioned here). It is either shortened or lengthened;
- besides, *The Autumn* part of the composition is framed by the rhythmic tamburello motif – it is heard in Epitaphs I and IV.

b)

- the formations performed in solo, duo or trio by flute, oboe, or clarinet in the middle part episodes are also worth mentioning;
- for example, flute solo in the end of Epitaph I (p. 20);



- oboe solo in the end of Epitaph III (p. 38–39);



- clarinet solo in epitaph IV (p. 239–143);



- flute, oboe, and clarinet – their trio in part IV of the oratorio (from p. 181, e.g., p. 182, 195).



- c) the use of the rhythm of sekstoles is also exceptional (starting with part III).

The central part of the oratorio is presented syntagmatically, i.e. the history is relayed through the narration occurring on the horizontal. Figuratively speaking, we travel in Vilnius as if moving in time machine from one period to another. The syntagmatics here is systematized following the seasons of the year, starting with autumn and ending with summer.⁹

The autumnal city (alongside verses written in the 16th cent. and the four epitaphs) take us to the famous Bernardines and Rasos cemeteries; in *The Winter* part, which is prevailed by contemporary instrumental music, one can enjoy musical sounds and the way they express the beauty of the landscape; the picturesque *The Spring* part is distinguished for its theatrical features: it is related with royal and church processions, rituals and celebrations (16–17th cent.); Summer, as it seems, bears links with the beginning of the composition, it reminds once again of the daily living of Jews in Vilnius (until their tragedy in the 20th cent.), their belief and words from the Old Testament.¹⁰

2. Semiotically about space and place

Narbutaitė's oratorio *Centones meae urbi* is multi-layered, and it raises multi-faceted discussions. In discussions of musical expression of city landscape and signs of musical language, we can refer to the so-called landscape semiotics of the Finnish semiotician Eero Tarasti, i.e. the science that studies the landscape as a kind of sign language¹¹. Landscape is defined by the researcher as the interaction between the environment and its observer that

[...] can be interpreted as a communication relationship in which surrounding nature serves as the sender of a message, the landscape as an experience (the message itself), and the observer as the receiver of the message or sign language of the landscape. Thus, landscape semiotics concerns communication between nature and man. The landscape "talks" to man.¹²

In the oratorio *Centones meae urbi* by Narbutaitė, a musical, aesthetically attractive picture of Vilnius is presented alongside the verses by poet Czesław Miłosz. Within the framework of *theatre inside theatre* used and created by the composer, following a short instrumental introduction, the listener is as if guided and taken to the hills of Vilnius where he meets the city and its history, which is told as if from afar by the soprano and male choir performing Miłosz's verses (these are the parts called the *Opening* and *The Poet's Return*) and then, in the end, *The Poet's Farewell* in Miłosz's verses and the *Closing* episode, where one hears verses by the poet Vaidotas Daunys rhythmically whispered by the orchestra musicians:

When I am asked: Do you believe that this city hosts the mystery of life? – I answer: I am its participant; and alongside the city bells are chiming.

In the beginning of the composition, the Poet imaginatively tells the story of Vilnius, its alley of the Literary Men, the book shop on the corner, the chiming bells of the Churches of St. John, the Bernardines, St. Casimir, Cathedral, the Missionaries, St. George, the Dominicans, St. Michael, St. Jacob: here we evidence its represented content¹³.

In Tarasti's terms, the landscape is introduced in the beginning and is treated through the prism of nature and culture:

*Landscape is that part of nature/culture the border area, which a culture projects its own structures and attitudes. The concept of landscape is thus based upon the dialectic between nature and culture. It is the humanisation of nature and, above all, transformation of nature into culture. Such humanization (or domestication) occurs frequently in the history of landscape painting.*¹⁴

By means of culture, the mentioned place, where events happen, is characterized. Landscape is regarded here as inner and outer expressions of culture. In the first case, we deal with "the level of representation; that is, the landscape in its physical form", this is what the researcher calls culture's Otherness (the outside location), and, in the second case, "the level of represented content, that is, of an aesthetic image or emotional state which can be called the content of the landscape, i.e., Sameness (inside location)."¹⁵

⁹ See *Semantically about space and place*.

¹⁰ See CD program: *Onutė Narbutaitė. Centones meae urbi*.

¹¹ Tarasti, Eero. 2000. Semiotics of Landscape, *Existential Semiotics*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 154–163.

¹² Tarasti, 2000, p. 154–155.

¹³ Tarasti, 2000, p. 137.

¹⁴ Tarasti, 2000, p. 156.

¹⁵ Tarasti, 2000, p. 157.

The *Opening* and *Closing* parts of the oratorio *Centones meae urbi* by Narbutaitė can be interpreted as the Poet's stories that project his own sentiments in surrounding urban nature, and they evidence the interplay between culture and nature.

In *The Poet's Farewell* part, the soprano sings about the streets of Vilnius, mentions the Hill of Three Crosses glistening in the snow and the Hill of Bekes (the singing is accompanied by the men's choir and a group of strings), while the *Closing* part is ended by a symbolically sounding chime group.

In the oratorio, the diegetic (*diegēsis*, Plato's term.) narration, i.e. indirect speaking, is inventively combined with the mimetic (*mimēsis*, Plato's term.) narration, i.e. direct speaking.

The continued Poet's story about the city, its inhabitants, and the events embrace the entire year, starting with autumn and ending with summer.

The Autumn part consists of four epitaphs that embrace visits to the cemeteries.

The first part of the composition is characterized by the treatment of the vocal parts with the instrumentation divisions. The variety of the choir part stems from the traditional singing (the verses of the above mentioned authors are used) that is combined with the silent reading of the words written on the tombstones by whispering of another choir group (e.g., p. 35). In addition, it is worthwhile mentioning the frequently varying figural notation (e.g., p. 40) as well as artistic positioning of the choirs on the stage following the provided scheme in the score (see the above mentioned p. 35).

The epitaphs are separated from each other by short instrumental insertions that are frequently performed by a solo instrument (as a rule, it is the flute or the oboe).

For example, the first epitaph is framed within the tamburo episode in the beginning (p. 9) and the flute in the end (p. 19–20). The latter (as the score denotes, this is *Poco piu mosso – Chiara*) is specified by the variety of rhythm and dynamics. In the end of a little bit longer second epitaph (this is a short *Andante* episode), the flute and strings quartet are playing. Instead of these it is possible to perform the piano citation of Stanislovas Moniuška, who lived and worked in Vilnius (5 measures, p. 28). In the third episode, the composer has used (p. 38) the contemplative clarinet solo.

The first part of the oratorio – *The Autumn* – ends in the so-called P.S. with the quatrain of Miłosz. It is performed by a solo soprano together with tamburello and tamburi in the rhythmically free aleatoric episode (p. 49). The farewell is composed of the poet's words: *And now neither we, nor Marilé are here*.

The tombstone words are read freely, aleatorically by the choir (the landscape of the place and its presentation), and, following Tarasti, are to be regarded as *landscape and its description qua message*, whereas *its description is equivalent to code*.¹⁶

The cemeteries, where the people who made Vilnius famous in the past, are seen through the words of the poets as a closed and local space – “place may symbolize the space surrounding it”¹⁷.

Another part of the composition – *The Winter* (Example 1) (Lento sostenuto), on the contrary, is characterized rather laconically and abstractly (here, instrumental music prevails, and its choir is treated as an instrument – at first it sings mor-morando, and then it performs the poetic verses by Ališanka from the cycle *The Mist of Hollyhock* that smells of *white smoke* and *eternal winter* in



Example 1. O. Narbutaitė. *Centones meae urbi (The Winter)*

¹⁶ Tarasti, 2000, p. 163.

¹⁷ Tarasti, 2000, p. 165.

instrumental manner (the choir stresses separate syllables and sounds). The music here is rather dramatic since its *largo* tempo is maintained, the melodies are chromatized, and the constantly dissonant intervals of the seconds are based on sets of two or four sounds.

In the second part (*Allegro leggiero*), the composer uses a broad palette of agogics of musical instruments: staccato, legato, marcato; the rhythmic variety (triplets, quintuplets, sextuplets, and dotted rhythm); the contrasts of sound lengths and pitches.

And now we can turn to and listen to the lively *Spring* part of the oratorio, which is made of three segments: 1. Greeting of the King (text by Petras Šaulys), 2. The Spring in Lukiškės (anonymous text), 3. Procession (text by Motiejus Kazimieras Sarbievijus). These segments are related by Narbutaitė with the lush green colours of trees, bright sunlight, and Vilnius city dwellers in the background who joyfully greet the visiting king (a choir sings); in another, the Spring in Lukiškės, episode, they glorify King Vladislovas Vaza (soprano, bass, choir) and join the solemn procession to the Holy Virgin Mother of Trakai (performed by choir). For each of the episodes, the composer has found corresponding means of musical expression (it should be noted that they are innovative, courageous and rather unusual).

The *Greeting of the King* part, which begins with fanfare introduction, is distinguished for non-traditional treatment of music of this kind of genre: its musical texture (just like the vocal part) are divided into separate sounds produced by varying agogics. The very musical texture reminds one of a pointillist fabric. Here, like in other parts of the oratorio, the sekstole motifs performed by percussion mark separate formations. Acoustically and visually, the scene of the greeted king in this episode is developed by the composer by means of creative use of echo-repetition principle (the reference to echo is also found in the verses by Petras Šaulys (Petrus Strzelec) used in the composition).

The *Spring in Lukiškės* (*Lento*) is characterized by the variety of the melic treatment (p. 197 soprano singing *Merry Blossoms*). In this episode, the blossoming plants bring joy. The vitality of the spring is depicted here through the lush green blossoming plants adorned in the verses of an unknown poet:

The blossoms are merry, for the Kings have arrived; – the blossoms have seen the Sun and brought forth their beauty much in advance¹⁸.

The soprano and bass parts, which contrast with the accurately written and intoned orchestra and choir music, are characterized by precision with abundant forschlags and rhythm aleatorics. The soprano and the bass are combined on the base of the echo principle – the bass reiterates some of the motives performed by the soprano.

The *Spring* ends in the *Procession* (*Allegretto legierissimo*), during which the men and women choirs pass by the audience, both singing a poetical text by Sarbievijus in sequences¹⁹. The slowly moving procession of the praying people and the accompanying singing is presented here as a music in the style of the Gregorian choral.

The *Summer* part of the oratorio is unified, though the poetic text is composed of several sources in various languages: excerpts from Vilnius newspaper publications (1906–1911), verses by Mošé Kulbak (1926), which are sung by the soprano and bass, verses by Czesław Miłosz (1974), and the Laments of Jeremiah from the Old Testament. This material is presented in a uniform musical texture.

The fourth part of the oratorio (*The Spring*) is distinguished for its developed section of the orchestra divisi *Allegro*, which is heard before the more usual choir singing in oratorios. Alongside prominent episodes of the flute, oboe, clarinet solo, duets and trios, which are intertwined in the orchestra texture, more often than in other parts of the oratorio and beginnings of episodes, one hears the fanfare motives performed by them and the percussion instruments.

The *verbal text* in the composition is treated in various ways. For instance, fragments from newspapers are chanted in a smooth rhythm, in the same pitch of the text pronounced in syllables (one syllable equals to one eighth note) and this creates background for the singing soprano and bass. In general, the oratorio by Narbutaitė achieves its colours not only by non-traditionally used choir voices and orchestra instruments, but also by the present variety of languages (Lithuanian, Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian). The sounds of substantially different languages add to the expression of the oratorio, and the fact of them being used here and their combinations should be regarded as one of the most innovative means of contemporary musical art “discovered” by Narbutaitė. Besides, this means is dictated by the logic of the composition to reveal Vilnius, the multilingual city.

¹⁸ See CD *Centones meae urbi* annotation.

¹⁹ This is aforementioned similarity with B. Kutavicius' oratory *Paskutinės pagonių apeigos*.

Writer and researcher Tomas Venclova has counted in Vilnius “seven so-called historical, or traditional, nations that inhabit the Lithuanian capital since oldest times”²⁰. The researcher uses the term “the city text” to describe the city picture: “The landscape here is northern, almost Scandinavian; its woods and lakes have always made it look almost savage but the city architecture here is southern, or, in other words, mostly Baroque and Classicist. [...] Vilnius is part of Central Europe and alongside that it is very Italian-like. Architecture can be regarded as a substratum of “the city text” and thus its part.”²¹

It is worthwhile mentioning the impressive episode of scattering stones before The Lament of Jeremiah as expression of concrete music – starting with single separate stones and ending with their massive “avalanche” (here, special containers, boxes, or drums are used). Clarinets and the trombone accompany them in an aleatoric manner.

Conclusions

1. The composition achieves its colours through its poetic text and the variety of used text pieces and means of musical expression.
2. One of the most effective means of expression in the oratorio is multilingualism, when at the same time several different languages are used.
3. By the use of the aforementioned means, the landscape of the oratorio is created and concrete places, i.e. Vilnius, as well as spatial levels are depicted.

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Santrauka

Skambantis vaizdingasis miestas

Skambumo ir spalvingumo kūriniui suteikia bendra jo traktuotė ir visas išraiškos priemonių kompleksas, pradedant pavadinimu ir baigiant paskutiniu taktu. Visa tai lemia kūrinyje įkūnytas kompozitoriaus meistriškumas.

Apie Onutės Narbutaitės oratorijos *Centones meae urbi* (1997) pobūdį byloja jau pats jos pavadinimas, kuriame įkūnya skiautinį primenant kūrinio struktūra ir teatrui būdingi kompozicijos bruožai. Apibendrintai galima sakyti, jog tai – sinkretinis muzikos ir verbalinio teksto kūriny. Atskirų jo dalių muzikos priemonės koreliuoja su poetiniu tekstu.

Pirmoji ir paskutinė oratorijos dalys – *Atskländai ir Užskländai (Opening and Closing)* – yra tarsi uždanga, žyminti spektaklį, kuriame jo veikėjai supažindina su spalvinga miesto istorija. Jungiančiuoju oratorijos elementu pasirinktas pasivaikščiojimo laike ir erdvėje motyvas. Čia matome kartu su metų laikais besikeičiantį miestą, sutinkame jo žmones, su jais lankomės įsimintinose vietose.

Spalvingiem kūrinio vaizdams sukurti kompozitorė yra pritaikius skirtingų literatūros žanrų (pvz., *epitaph*, *promenade*, *solutation*, *epode*, *lamentation*) eiles lietuvių, lenkų, lotynų ir žydų kalbomis, čia naudoja šiuolaikinės kompozicinės technikos stilistiką. Tarp pastaruju – garso, žodžio ir vaizdo sintezė. Patraukia kūrinio žanro ir formos traktuotė. Oratoriją atliekantys sopranas, bosas, chorus ir orkestras traktuojami gana išmoningai – jie yra tiesioginiai ir netiesioginiai pasakotojai, įkūnijantys veikėjus ir muzikos kūrinio atlikėjus, esamomis priemonėmis piešiančius muzikinį vaizdą.

²⁰ Venclova, Tomas. Vilniaus kultūrinio kraštovaizdžio kaita (Zum Wandel der Kulturlandschaft in Vilnius). *Nidos sąsiuvinis (Niddener Hefte)*, 2008, Nr. 4, p. 94–102 (103–110).

²¹ Venclova, 2008, p. 98.