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# **Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis and the evolution of the serial compositional technique in Lithuania**

*Darius Kušinskas*

The music of the twentieth century was marked by the search for new methods and techniques of composition. Undoubtedly, Arnold Schoenberg's dodecaphonic system stands out as one of the most significant inventions of the time. But other composers, such as Josef Hauer, were experimenting in the field of micro-elemental construction. In this article, the author surveys the emergence and development of serial technique in one European country – Lithuania. It is most remarkable that, before Schoenberg came up with his invention, Lithuanian artist and composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875-1911) had been experimenting with serial technique between 1904 and 1909. Working on the fringes of the European cultural hub, Čiurlionis was on the brink of the most significant musical discovery of the twentieth century, but his aesthetic considerations pulled him in a different direction.

The three phases of the spread of compositional serial techniques in Lithuania in the twentieth century could be marked as follows:

- 1) Early twentieth century: the first experiments of the serial compositional technique (in the works written between 1904 and 1909 by M. K. Čiurlionis)

- 2) The 1960s: the clear turn from the aesthetic of post-romanticism to “contemporary music” and the mastering of serial technique (E. Balsys, V. Barkauskas, B. Kutavičius, O. Balakauskas)
- 3) The 1990s: the development of new methods of of serialism in the works of young composers (S. Dikčiūtė, A. Jasenka, A. Kučinskas).

The first examples of the usage of serial compositional technique are ascribed to Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, the famous Lithuanian painter and composer, specifically his piano works of 1904-1909. His artistic self-expression did not fit within the frame of a single artistic media. According to Eero Tarasti, “it is possible that Čiurlionis has achieved something that is common between painting and music, which is not possible to express neither in painting nor in music alone.”<sup>1</sup> Having in mind that most artists attempted to achieve synthesis between music and painting, or music and poetry, Čiurlionis, who was able to unite music, painting, poetry and photography for realization of a single artistic idea, stands as a unique creator.

At first, Čiurlionis was interested in uncovering a unifying origin of all the artistic media. “The new” or “universal” language, so often referred to in his letters, later found artistic expression in his development of a unique serial technique incorporating the structural unification of all artistic media in his works. This demonstrates that Čiurlionis

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<sup>1</sup> Eero Tarasti. "Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis and the Interrelationships of Arts". *Semionordica*, vols. 1-2, Odense, Imatra: Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies/International Semiotics Institute at Imatra, 1993: 125-145.

unconsciously integrated into his work the goal of creating a “perfect” artistic language, which became more intense in the collision of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and which was described in detail by Umberto Eco in his book “The Search for the Perfect Language (The Making of Europe)”.<sup>2</sup>

The search for a “new” language, which brought Čiurlionis to the discovery of the serial compositional technique, had began in 1896, while he was working on refining musical notation. Signs that were used by Čiurlionis until 1904 could be divided into three groups:

- 1) Signs to improve the writing of music
- 2) Signs functioning as symbols
- 3) Signs employed as monograms

Signs in the first group are unique and were not previously used by any other composer. The introduction of such signs into traditional notation shows that Čiurlionis felt the narrowness of traditional notation and its inadequacy in comparison to the imagined and textualized music of earlier eras. His development of such signs may be observed in several different cases. For instance, at the beginning of his career, Čiurlionis, notated the double-flat was written by in the following way<sup>3</sup>:

**bb = b̄**

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<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco. *The Search for the Perfect Language (The Making of Europe)*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995.

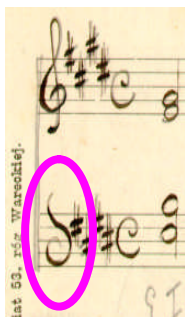
<sup>3</sup> Double-flat of Čiurlionis found in manuscript Čm 37 , p. 19.

Later, in 1904–1905, the sign began to transform into the symbol of the planet Saturn used in encoded correspondence with his brother Povilas, who lived in the United States. This sign no longer meant double-flat but the letter *u* in the encoded correspondence<sup>4</sup>:

**bb = b̄ → ſ = u**

In such a way, an element of musical writing became an element of language writing via the intermediary plane of graphic expression<sup>5</sup>.

The second group of signs, those that function as symbols, expand the meaning of a usual musical sign and reflect the world in a transformative way. One example is the transformed bass clef:



1896



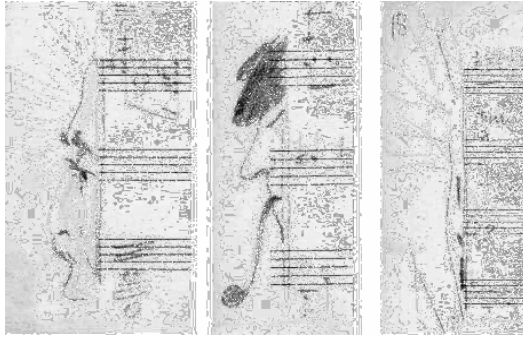
1896



1908

<sup>4</sup> Transformation of double-flat sign into the symbol of Saturn.

<sup>5</sup> Darius Kučinskas. *M. K. Čiurlionio kūriniai fortepijonui: rankraščiai ir redakcijos* [Piano works of M. K. Čiurlionis: manuscripts and editions]. Vilnius: Lietuvos muzikos akademija, 1999: 10.



The third group of signs are employed by the composer as monograms. It is obvious that Čiurlionis was well acquainted with analogous samples of encoded messages in works of composers such as J. S. Bach and Robert Schumann. Čiurlionis was consciously trying to hide proof of his authorship in his art works. Čiurlionis integrated his initials into “Allegro” of his *Sonata No. 4* (Sonata of the Summer) and in the “Finale” of *Sonata No. 5* (Sonata of the Sea). Such samples are found in his musical manuscripts as well. For instance, the following example that demonstrates his efforts to transform the natural sign into the letter *K*, (the first letter of his name, Konstantinas) found in his notebook from 1895<sup>6</sup>:



The letter *K* was also used by Čiurlionis without any modifications as a figured acciaccatura.<sup>7</sup> It remains to be

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<sup>6</sup> Manuscript Čm 38, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Manuscript Čm 17, p. 00677.

determined why he did not use more these discoveries in his compositions.

The most striking example of a monogram symbol appears in his composition of music that is in accordance with a previously created "musical alphabet". This musical alphabet and a musical fragment written in accordance with this alphabet are contained in different books of his manuscripts. His use of a musical alphabet as a compositional structure is why these three fragments seem to be an unprecedented case in the context of music of the nascent twentieth century. Every measure is of a different metre (although not indicated in these fragments), the melody is atonal and what remains of the left hand part is left is totally unpredictable<sup>8</sup>:



However, if one has access to his musical alphabet it is not at all difficult to read Čiurlionis monogram in

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<sup>8</sup> Manuscripts Čm 21, p. 260 and Čm 6, p. 00411.

this fragment: *Mikołaj Konstanty Czurlanis*<sup>9</sup>. Čiurlionis's placement of lines between measures becomes also clear: these lines divide words. However, musical result still did not satisfy the author as there were no more analogous samples observed in Čiurlionis' manuscripts.



M i k o ł a j K o n s t a n t y C z u r l a n i s

In the manuscripts from 1904-1906, there exist two cycles of variations, *Sefaa Esec* and *Besaca*, that are based upon the series of 7 to 9 notes. The principle governing the organisation of the musical material in these works is nearly identical to that employed in Čiurlionis's monogram. These cycles, however, are much more developed and complete from artistic point of view. Prof. V. Landsbergis supposes that the titles were derived from the names of Čiurlionis's colleagues, including only the letters that have no equivalents in notes (i.e. A, B, C, etc.). Thus, SEFAA ESEC is a musical transcription of the name Stefania Leskiewicz (StEFAniA lESkiEWiCz) and BESACAS of Boleslaw Czarkowski (BoLESIAw CzArkowSki)<sup>10</sup>:

<sup>9</sup> Darius Kučinskas. "M. K. Čiurlionio muzikinis alfabetas" [The Musical Alphabet of M. K. Čiurlionis]. *Kultūros barai*, Nr. 3. 1992: 75.

<sup>10</sup> Vytautas Landsbergis. *Vainikas Čiurlioniui* [The Wreath for Čiurlionis]. Vilnius: Vaga, 1980: 176.

eS F F A A F eS F C

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 1

S E F A A E S F C

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

The fact that Čiurlionis used “musical” letters in compositions dating from the early twentieth century is not in itself an exceptional occurrence. Much more important is the way in which the ensuing themes were treated. In the cycles, these stable pitch rows serve as the basis of the texture as well as the form of the composition. Thus, one can with confidence call these stable rows of pitches the “series”. Čiurlionis uses the series as a linear progression (Prelude B Flat, VL 257), or repeats it inverted in the bass voice (Prelude in D minor, VL 260), until he finally arrives at the “magic squares” or palindromes (Variations “Besacas”, Fourth variation, VL 264):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

B E Es A C A Es E

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Es A

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

C A

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 7

Es

B	E	Es	A	C	A	Es
E	B	A	Es	Ges	Es	A
Es	A	Gis	D	F	D	Gis
A	Es	D	Gis	H	Gis	D
C	Ges	F	H	D	H	F
A	Es	D	Gis	H	Gis	D
Es	A	As	D	F	D	Gis

This square is created by repeating the series in a rotating manner beginning each time with the next pitch in the series. The variation ends with the restatement of the series starting with its final pitch.

Beside a desire to create a universal alphabet of arts, as well as the way of composing according to the literal themes, Lithuanian folk music was among the most important contributions to the origins of Čiurlionis' serial technique. Folk music modes of most countries are comprised of not more than 5 to 7 degrees, while rhythmic values usually do not exceed four different length classes – the shortest, short, long and the longest<sup>11</sup>. This is tightly connected to basic human psychology. To transfer information humans naturally use rather limited codifying systems which include no more than 5 to 9 categories, which is referred to as “the magic Miller’s number” (7 plus/minus 2) or operational unit<sup>12</sup>. Čiurlionis’s series

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<sup>11</sup> Rytis Ambrazevičius. *Etninės muzikos notacija ir transkripcija* [Notation and transcription of Ethnic music]. Vilnius: Lietuvos muzikos akademija, 1997: 7.

<sup>12</sup> George Miller. „The magical number seven plus or minus two: Some limits on our capacity for processing information“. *Psychological Review* 63, 1956, p. 81–97.

are also built from 7 and 9 pitches, not exceeding the previously parameters. Thus, the serial techniques employed by Čiurlionis function within the natural axioms of human perception and categorization. These axioms – the natural declaration of a harmonious relationship between the subject (human) and object (nature) – have their most genuine expression in various folk traditions. Therefore, subconsciously sensing the boundaries of human perception, Čiurlionis did not overstep them.

The ostinato principle that is characteristic of Lithuanian folk music is also proper to Čiurlionis' oeuvre. The constant repetition of a rhythmic formula and the employment of a stable melodic compound evidently brought about the invention of compositional serial techniques. On the other side, Čiurlionis made himself master polyphonic composition techniques. His series might be associated with the principle of *cantus firmus*. For instance, the theme of variations *Sefaa Esec* migrates from one part to another, from one voice to another in the manner of *cantus firmus*.

Despite the fact that Čiurlionis did not develop a complete system of serial composition, his works written between 1904-1909 are among the first examples of the use of serial techniques in composition in the history of music. After Čiurlionis' death, serial music was long forgotten in Lithuania, with composers working in different musical styles. For instance, Jeronimas Kačinskas (who now lives in the USA and is the only surviving pupil of Alois Hába) was developing the microtonal system, while Vytautas Bacevičius (who died in New York in 1970) was writing expressionist special music.

The serial compositional technique was used in Lithuania again only in the mid-1960s, during the so-called period of political-détente in the former USSR. The composers Eduardas Balsys, Vytautas Barkauskas, Bronius Kutavičius, and Osvaldas Balakauskas took active part in applying and the “new” technique. Eduardas Balsys was one of the first among this new generation of Lithuanian composers to do so, stating the following:

Seeking the clear expression of my thought I usually drive through the rules. I base upon the principles of free dodecaphony. Why should I keep the broken series? It should derive from the emotional need.<sup>13</sup>

A Romantic aesthetic is evident in this quotation, an aesthetic that both Čiurlionis and Balsys adhered to while composing music using serial techniques. Even in his opera “*Kelionė į Tilžę*” [*A Journey to Tilsit*] (1980) he did not renounce these principles, the opera remains more expressionist rather than dodecaphonic one.

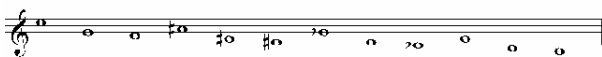
Osvaldas Balakauskas was another Lithuanian composer to begin composing using serial techniques around 1965. He later said: “I began to write according to dodecaphonic method without hearing any music by Schönberg or his pupils or any more

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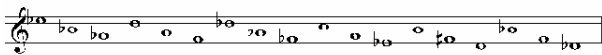
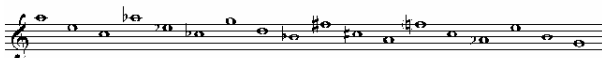
<sup>13</sup> Jūrātė Vyliūtė. “Mano siela! Ar išausi tu svarbiausią mintį?” [“My soul! You are the one to develop the main idea”]. *Muzika* 2 (Vilnius), 1980: 42-50.

modern music”<sup>14</sup>. In the 1960s the only source Balakauskas’s could obtain that contained information on the dodecaphonic compositional technique (and the music composed using it) was the book *The Classics of Dodecaphony* by Polish musicologist Boguslaw Schäffer. However, this fact did not prevent him from creating an original system, which he presented in his study of 1997 *Dodekatonika*. Nearly all works by Balakauskas are based upon the three following symmetrical series:

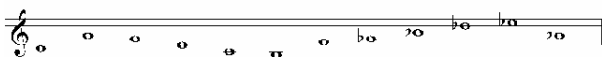
I



II



III



The first series consists of four even groups of notes made of pure fourth and major second intervals that are transposed into minor third. As distinct from the similar isomorphic series of Webern, the structural periodicity of those by Balakauskas is

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<sup>14</sup> Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė. “Už horizonto ir toliau” [“Beyond the horizon and further”. An interview with O. Balakauskas]. *Pergalė* (Vilnius) Nr. 7, 1986: 152.

‘direct’ one, that is, totally precise. The composer himself calls this series ‘a never-ending diatonic row’. The second series is formed from a minor sixth chord that is transposed twelve times by descending semitones. The characteristic feature of the third series is the so-called “syndrome of palindrome” – its spectacular symmetry.

The most important element of Balakauskas’s compositional technique is that he treats the serial method not as just a mere row of tones, but also as an idea and an order of transposition. According to that, how he names the element of the series, the latter could be brought into the following groups:<sup>15</sup>

- 1) Element of the series is one tone
- 2) A three-sound structure
- 3) A complex of sonorities
- 4) Element of the series becomes a stylistically identified musical fragment (a ‘specimen’)
- 5) Element of the series is a chosen mode
- 6) Element of the series becomes the rhythmic formula.<sup>16</sup>

For the element of the series, Balakauskas chooses the bigger and steady compound of sounds or the stable musical section. He also chooses both the theme and the thematic unit. Therefore, the serial

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<sup>15</sup> Gražina Daunoravičienė. “Kompozicinės technikos algoritmai: Antroji simfonija ir *Dada concerto*”. [“The algorithms of compositional technique: the Second symphony and *Dada concerto*”]. *Osvaldas Balakauskas: muzika ir mintys* [Osvaldas Balakauskas: music and ideas] (collected by Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė). Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2000, p.71-122. P. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. P. 80.

element and the thematic unit, the structure of the entire series and that of the theme, and the disposition of the entire work or the series of its movement, in a particular composition by Balakauskas, are entirely identical<sup>17</sup>.

One of the most significant features of Balakauskas's serial compositional technique is his use of diatonic and rhythmic ostinato systems. An obvious connection may once more be made to Lithuanian folk music and the attempts towards serialism by Čiurlionis. It may also be that while using the serial technique, which is cosmopolitan in principle, Lithuanian composers continued to express the individuality of their nation's musical heritage. The influence of the latter might be traced by the means of in-depth relations (in this case, the diatonic and ostinato principle), although, sometimes this musical heritage is featured openly. One example is the oeuvre of Bronius Kutavičius, in particular his oratorio *The last Pagan Mass*.

The last decade of the twentieth century marks a certain renaissance of serial principles in Lithuania. The youngest generation of Lithuanian composers have expressed great interest in the avant-garde music of Western Europe. This situation was partially determined by political changes of the state (such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent free flow of information) and was helped by the fact that the composer Osvaldas Balakauskas,

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<sup>17</sup> Rūta Mielkutė. "Osvaldo Balakausko serijinė technika ir harmonijos sistema". ["The serial technique and harmonic system of Osvaldas Balakauskas"]. *Osvaldas Balakauskas: muzika ir mintys* [Osvaldas Balakauskas: music and ideas] (collected by Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė). Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2000, p. 19-56. P. 42.

one of the most consistent representatives of the serial music in Lithuania, started teaching at the Lithuanian Music Academy. Nevertheless, the re-emergence of serialism to the compositional practise of the youngest composers was affected by the ever-changing avant-garde and post-modern concepts. Having given up the ideal of the continuous advancement of art, typical to modernism, they started to regard history and geography more freely, resulting in post-modern compositions often associated with “cocktails” of different eras and styles.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the so-called strict avant-garde serialism of Snieguolė Dikčiūtė in its sonorous realisation is far from any allusions to the sound of most supposed classical serial compositions. Her “Mystery of Seven Bridges” (7 tiltų misterija) for choir, brass band, two organs and chamber orchestra (1991) was written employing a total serial technique, which was not frequently encountered in Lithuanian music. Another characteristic example of this post-modern serialism is “Ancient Songs” by Antanas Jaska, written for carillon or electronic bells, which may be regarded as a “catalogue” of interactions between determinateness and non-determinateness. In this composition, not only are different sound parameters applied to the serial principle, but also to the degrees of precision and relativity of notation. As a last example, “Popludus” by Antanas Kučinskas may be seen as a hybrid of “mass” and “elite” music

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<sup>18</sup> Antanas Kučinskas. “Serial principle in the creation of the younger generation of Lithuanian composers”. *Composing Principles: Continuity and Innovation in Contemporary Music*. (Abstracts of the Third International Conference). Vilnius: Lietuvos kompozitorių sąjunga, 2002, p. 19-27. P . 21.

(the former represented by thematic material taken from a pop ballad and the latter represented by the composer's use of serial technique). A period theme employed in this composition, taken from pop music, is treated as a series and is transformed by way of rotation.

What inferences may be drawn from this discussion of the history of serialism in Lithuania? First of all, the invention and evolution of serial techniques in Lithuania were disconnected from similar processes that took place in Western Europe. This was partially due to the political situation of Lithuania, which was an independent state for only about three decades in last century. Another significant feature of the use of the serial compositional techniques in Lithuania is a clear national touch. The latter reveals itself through an inner as well as an openly declared relationship with the folk music of the region, especially the diatonic and ostinato principals that are most typical of Lithuanian folk music.

The earliest experiments of Čiurlionis in the field of serial compositional technique took place at the same time as the first in Europe. However, they remained unknown and thus undeveloped or absorbed by other composers. The next works by Lithuanian composers to use serial techniques appeared only in the mid-1960s, during the period of the so-called political *détente* in the former Soviet Union. Composer Osvaldas Balakauskas, who developed an individual compositional technique,

made the greatest impact in the field. Finally, the serialism became the dominant compositional technique in the late twentieth-century Lithuania. An especially significant feature of this post-modern serialism is the combination of different and often opposing compositional techniques. Consequently, such compositions usually remind the listener of hybrids of various epochs and styles.

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the history of research and development of serial compositional techniques in Lithuania. Musical experiments and discoveries of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875-1911) at the beginning of the twentieth century are very similar to the serial compositional technique produced later by composers of the Second Viennese School. However a new compositional technique was accepted by Lithuanian composers only in the 1960s when the only obtainable source of information on the dodecaphonic compositional technique reached Lithuania – the book *The Classics of Dodecaphonic* by Polish musicologist Bogusław Schäffer. The new methods of the development of the serial technique are found in Lithuania during the late twentieth century, where the serial technique became the dominant method of composition. An especially significant feature is the symbiosis of the different and often opposing compositional techniques. As such, compositions usually resemble hybrids of various epochs and styles.

