

M. K. Čiurlionis' Unrecognized Cycle of Preludes. Sacral and Structural Signs

The Lithuanian artist of genius Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis wrote music most often spontaneously, in the state of a spiritual uplift, very intensively but for a short time. His creative élan however would last merely a few days or weeks. In spite of it, he would compose several pieces and sketches, mostly for piano. The composer's activities would quite often synchronize with his painted pictures and their cycles.

If Čiurlionis used to entitle his cycles of pictures, giving them poetic titles say the Star Sonata, See Sonata, etc. he would most often leave his musical pieces written in the period of inspiration without any title and would even not indicate the volume of the movements of the cycle as well as their sequence. It was the reason why the composer's musical cycles have remained unrecognized up to our days Čiurlionis wrote the whole series of untitled spontaneous cycles of music (16!) within his entire life.

One of Čiurlionis' earliest Unrecognized cycles is his Preludes. It is the only this kind of cycles, the pieces of which bear titles. The first prelude F sharp major was also called God's Angel (*Angelus Domini*) among his closest people. The history of this Prelude is described by the composer's sister Jadvyga Čiurlionytė in her memoirs about M. K. Čiurlionis. She relates that in Druskininkai (a small town in southern Lithuania, where the Čiurlionis family lived at that time) there was an old lonely man Lukošius by name (the town's fireman). At silent nights, simple, folk violin melodies were heard from his cabin. Čiurlionis would secretly listen to them. When the fireman died, the composer said that a great, not ordinary man and artist had passed away. It was that day when he wrote Prelude F sharp major. The bells of evening service from a small church in Druskininkai echo in an ostinatic accompaniment of this prelude. According to Čiurlionis, it was a woman Jokūbonienė who would so musically ring the bells.

The bell ostinato of Prelude F sharp major should be considered as a significant sacral symbol of this work, the meaning of which is expressed by the known title of the Prelude God's Angel (Example 1: a, b).

Example 1

MKČ Prelude F# major *Angelus Domini*

a) mm. 10–21

I

b) mm. 46–50

I

The structure of the Prelude discloses two alternative motifs (in the melody m. 1–2 and the bass m. 22–23), reminding of a responsive relationship typical of God’s Angel prayer for the dead.

Čiurlionis seems not to limit himself with Prelude F sharp major as a self-contained work; under a spell of inspiration he goes, as we will see, on writing preludes, starting to form a multimovement cycle.

The final movement of this cycle – Prelude F major. Its melody reminds of a lonely violin accompanied by arpegge chords (“wood’s harp” like in Čiurlionis picture) (Example 2). It is a cry of a lonely soul which should be considered another sacral symbol of this Unrecognized cycle. The sacral symbols seem to be moving throughout the entire cycle from an angelic, divine propagation to a soul’s cry of a lonely man. It is additionally witnessed by the whole structure of the cycle of Preludes.

Example 2

MKČ Prelude F major

The cycle consists of six Preludes. The spacement of their keys reminds of the sonata-form plan.

Movements:	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Keys:	F sharp major	F sharp minor	H major	D flat major	C minor	F major
Cycle:	Exposition (≈ for recapitulation)		Development		Recapitulation (≈ for exposition)	

Here expositional fifth relationships of the keys (C-F) seem to be interchanged with the recapitulation a characteristic feature of which is the unification of the keys (Fis-F).

The lateral Preludes of the cycle (I and VI) stand out for their chromatically varied arch of the keys (F sharp and F) as well as an ostinately recurrent bell motif at the top (I) and bottom (VI).

The themes of the preludes are based on two alternative motifs exhibited in Prelude F sharp major. The first in the melody (angel’s) and the second in the bass. In the recapitulation (from Prelude V) both motifs reach a dramatic metamorphosis. The choral motif becomes the melody of a funeral marsh. Its starts with Prelude V, and Angel’s begins to sound in a low-pitched register as a kind of a lament (section II, m. 10; Example 3). Thus, the motifs in a recapitulation are reflected by way of a mirror symmetry. Besides, the key of Prelude V undergoes polar changes (mode C minor and the key relationship of a tritone with the initial F sharp major Prelude).

The final movement discloses the synthesis of both motifs (angels and chorale) through a common folk melody, calling to mind a blessed memory of the deceased (Lukošius’ violin).

Example 3

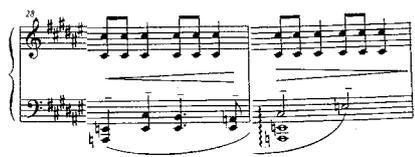
Principle motive
Moderato

I 

Submotive

V 

Submotive

I 

Principle motive

V 

The recapitulation serves for the expression of a dramatic turn of the cycle contrastingly prepared by Prelude D flat minor (IV). The exulting music character of this Prelude calls to mind a children hubbub (“Lukošius, Lukošius, sell your jade and buy trousers”, following J. Čiurlionyte’s reminiscences). The both recapitulation Preludes (V and VI) in respect of the sequence of their contrasting characters remind of a mirror recapitulation. Prelude II, differently from the recapitulation is a live-character minor (sounds as if a lament). The principle of a thematic development in this Prelude shows itself through the extension of the principal (angel’s) motif by way of a descending scale (Example 4). If a scale ascends, it is ended in a principale motif.

Example 4

MKČ Prelude f# minor, m. 1-2

II 

MKČ Prelude H major, m. 1-2

III 

MKČ Prelude D♭ major, m. 1-2

IV 

The development phase starts with Prelude H major (III). Here the principle of a thematic development is different. The angel's motif is developed by a sequential way; later a dialogue of the scale motifs is employed (part II, m. 11). (The Prelude music sounds as a kind of hymn for a native land.)

Let's return to Prelude D flat major (IV). Here we can notice that the principal motif is simultaneously linked with the scale. Whereas in the final (VI) – scale and principle motifs (phrases) are shown by way of alterations.

The primary insights into a spontaneous cycle should be associated with the dates marked by the composer and the place of the works in the manuscript book.

Let's have a look at extract R.1.1.3 from this manuscript book.

- I ← 00281–00281 – Prelude F sharp major (DK 57): May 27/June 10, 1901
00283–00286 – Nocturne C sharp minor (DK 58): May 30, 1901
- II ← 00287 – Prelude F sharp minor (DK 59): June 09, 1901
- III ← 00288–00289 – Prelude H major (DK 60): June 10, 1901
- IV ← 00290 – Prelude D flat major (DK 61, I ed.): June 13, 1901
- V ← 00291–002921–9 – Prelude C minor (DK 63): June 15–20, 1901
002929–12 – [Canon] G minor (DK 119): June 26, 1901
0029213–14 – blank staves
- VI ← 00293 – Prelude F major (DK 62): June 15, 1901

The twice-dated Prelude F sharp major strikes one's eye. Why was it so important for the composer to also mark the second date of the Prelude F sharp major? It is reasonable to suppose that he perceived a possibility of the latter as a continuation of a potential movement of the cycle, moreover, that it became evident after having written Prelude F sharp minor a day before, and on the "correction day" (June 10) also Prelude H major. This June the 10th might have been indeed the composer's subconscious decision day to continue composing preludes until a cyclic form, moreover that the composer might have never thought about it before – in the manuscript book several pages after Prelude F sharp major are occupied by the autograph of Nocturne. Thus, at first the composer seems not to have intended to write a cycle of preludes, but later might have changed his mind. This kind of his decision is confirmed by a further sequence of composing preludes. Three more preludes (H major, D flat major, F major) were written soon after them.

Another distinct discrepancy between dates and pages concerns Preludes F major and C minor. A further analysis of the manuscript book can prove useful for the perception of this collision. The extract from the manuscript shows that Prelude F major (June 15) dated a few days earlier is noted down at least a page further than Prelude C minor. The latter circumstance induced the compilers (VL, DK) of the chronologies of the composer's works to mark a few-day period in the course of which the mentioned Prelude C minor might have been written, i. e. June 15–20, 1901 (VL 189/ DK 63). But the composer marked June 20 as the date of this prelude. This kind of collision between pages and dates makes one to suppose that the idea to notate an earlier written Prelude F major in the further pages of the book was prompted by his intentions to be it final. He could have started to write Prelude C minor approximately at the same time, but finished it a few days later. The logic of the pages enables one to perceive the position of this prelude among other preludes as a section of a cycle. Thus, in spite a later date marked by the composer, Prelude C minor should find its place among other adjacent preludes (D flat major and the final F major).

Bibliography

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Santrauka

Neatpažintas M. K. Čiurlionio preliudų ciklas. Sakraliniai ir struktūriniai ženklai

Paveikslų ciklus M. K. Čiurlionis įvardydavo suteikdamas jiems poetiškus pavadinimus, kaip antai „Žvaigždžių sonata“, „Jūros sonata“ ir pan., o įkvėpimo metu parašytus muzikos kūrinius dažniausiai palikdavo be jokio pavadinimo, nenurodydavo nei ciklo dalių apimties, nei jų sekos. Tai lėmė, kad kompozitoriaus muzikos ciklai išliko neatpažinti iki pat mūsų dienų.

Vienas ankstyviausių neatpažintų Čiurlionio ciklų yra jo 6 preliudai. Pirmasis preliudas (Fis-dur) artimiausioje aplinkoje dar buvo vadinamas „Viešpaties angelu“. Šio preliudo ostinatiniame pritarime ataidi Druskininkų bažnytelės vakarinių pamaldų varpai. Preliudo Fis-dur varpų ostinatą reikėtų laikyti esmingu šio kūrinio sakraliniu simboliu. Preliudo struktūroje lengva pastebėti du alternatyvius motyvus.

Paskutinė šio ciklo dalis – Preliudas F-dur. Jo melodija primena vienišą smuiką, palydimą *arpeggio* akordų (miško arfa!). Tai vienišos sielos šauksmas, kurį dera laikyti kitu šio neatpažinto ciklo sakraliniu simboliu. Per visą ciklą simboliai juda nuo angeliško, dieviško žodžio skelbimo iki vienišo žmogaus sielos šauksmo. Tai liudija ir visa preliudų ciklo struktūra.