

The Phenomenon of Cyclic Form in Onutė Narbutaitė's *Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae*

Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae (2003), a recent cycle of three symphonies by Onutė Narbutaitė, displays most vividly the originality of the composer's worldview and an individual treatment of and the cyclic form. Her work does not strictly adhere to the canons of religious music (albeit making use of some religious texts, such as *Stabat Mater*, *Ave Maria*, *Gloria*, etc.), but this does not undermine the intensity of religious feeling expressed therein. To enter that religious dimension, the composer makes multiple references to myths and rituals, which, connected to certain archetypes, symbols. They facilitate the comprehension of the sacred art. Narbutaitė has indicated some of her resources in the following commentaries:

*"Certainly, there are links with many different things in my piece: I have drawn inspiration from both early and classical music, from mediaeval art and from the reflections on these themes written in different epochs. At the beginning of the score I drew a triangle – the symbol of the Holy Trinity – which also symbolically represents the three parts of the work: a descending line stands for the Annunciation, a horizontal line – for the Nativity and an ascending line – for the Crucifixion."*¹

The work's three movements thus embrace three pivotal moments in the life of Mary related to Christ – the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Crucifixion. The first movement contains the seeds of all consequent music, just like the Angel's Annunciation to Mary had foreordained all future events. Thus the first movement is called "Angelus Domini" ("The Angel of God"); the second is called "Bethleem"; and the third depicts "Mater Dolorosa" ("The Sorrowing Mother"). There is also a short introduction – "Introitus" – set to the fragment from the *Song of Songs*, and a short epilogue called "Oratio" ("Prayer"), in which the text by Hildegard von Bingen is used. The third movement is set throughout to the traditional text of *Stabat Mater*, whereas *Ave Maria* is used in the first movement and the first lines of *Gloria* in the second.

*"The most fascinating thing for me was that these references opened a vast field of associations, in which one can freely play and interact with both listeners and performers and, at the same time, unearth multilayered deposits that are inevitably bound not only to the structures of the work, but also to our existential experience as human beings."*²

The first movement, "Angelus Domini (symphonia prima)", is undulating with broad orchestral waves – moments of tension and resolution – which create a mysterious image of cosmic chaos, of "prematerial infinity" (according to Bohdan Pocij) that brings about a sensation of the divine.³ The musical material, on the other hand, gives a clear sense of direction towards its foreseeable goal, leading to a miracle of the Annunciation and the Angel's hymn ("And the angel then started singing"). The brass chorus "chants like angels" while the choir recites the text of *Ave Maria* (see Figure 1; pages of the score manuscript).

The first movement's overall dramaturgy of timbres and the resourceful use of compositional procedures seem to betray the composer's aim to keep all instruments in dynamic and semantic balance. This effect is achieved in several ways: via cyclic motion from the state of rest to the state of extreme dynamic tension and via the procedures of microdynamic compensation which depend on the rules of voice leading.⁴

The prominent role of contrast in this work was also emphasised by the German critics after the work's première at the Musikfesttage an der Oder in March 2004:

*"From the outset, Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae is reigned by extremely impressive contrastive dramaturgy. Light is contrasted with darkness, noise – with silence. The rippling sonic surfaces give way to gloomy and ominous whirls. Pleading is suddenly suffused with rebelliousness. <...> However, in this particularly intense composition marked with religious mysticism, the limit of excessive sensitivity and ceremoniousness is never transgressed."*⁵

Figure 1. O. Narbutaitė. *Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae*, 1st movement, p. 54.

Handwritten musical score for *Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae*, 1st movement, page 54. The score is divided into three systems.

System 1 (Measures 1-4): Features four parts of Cori (1-4) and three parts of Tn (1-3). Dynamics include *mp*.

System 2 (Measures 5-8): Features Cori, T2 (1-4), and Tn (1-3). Dynamics include *mf* and *f*. Measure numbers 25, 7, and 8 are marked.

System 3 (Measures 9-12): Features Cori, T2 (1), Tn (1-3), and Coro (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass). Dynamics include *f*. Measure numbers 7, 8, and 26 are marked. The lyrics "A-ve A-ve A-ve ma-ri-a" are written under the Coro parts.

In terms of form, "Symphonia prima" is a self-contained symphonic piece, but at the same time it is a basis for the entire cycle of three symphonies. Onutė Narbutaitė has indicated some of the principles underlying her treatment of cyclic form and repetition in the section titled "Arches" of the brochure "Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae":

"Arches, vaults, symmetric proportions, recurring details.

The central, great arch – or a bridge – spanning the first and the third symphonies. <...>

ANGELUS DOMINI pp. 27–42 = pp. 50–65 MATER DOLOROSA

Small arches.

The third symphony MATER DOLOROSA:

pp. 6–7 = pp. 72–73, leading to Stabat Mater and bringing solace shortly thereafter.

Another arch, quite small but sharp enough to be grasped by ear, joins the first and the second symphonies: seven bars of ANGELUS DOMINI between rehearsal marks 31 and 32 = five bars after the rehearsal mark 41 up to 42 in BETHLEEM.

Other repetitions.

Seven lashes of tutti, connected with the seven-note motif in the trombone part, which cross thrice the Stabat Mater and reappear in three bars of 3/4 time on pages 4, 24 and 36 of MATER DOLOROSA. <...>

Chords, prefigured in the very beginning on page 6, appearing in complete form at rehearsal mark 3 and recurring on pages 17, 19–20 and 23, become the harmonic basis for Stabat Mater in the third symphony.

The initial motifs in the flutes entail the subsequent development of melodies in the brass. Recurrences of instruments and timbres that change in colour and expression but remain recognisable."

The energetic intensity of flowing and ebbing waves in the second movement, "Bethleem (symphonia secunda)", becomes reduced and changed in character. Prevailing mood here, especially in the beginning, is that of self-communing, meditation, which is emphatically suggested by the sonoristic textures (see Figure 2). The choir is treated here mostly as a 'sonoristic instrument', even though it specifies once again the sphere of *sacrum* by performing the text of *Gloria* in the climax. The latter (p. 68), which, from the semantic point of view, is the most luminous in the whole cycle of three symphonies (see Figure 3).

The third movement, "Mater Dolorosa (symphonia tertia)", continues the 'sacred narrative' by using texts that help reach the reality of *sacrum* (*Stabat Mater*). On the other hand, this movement can be seen as a recapitulation of the entire symphonic cycle. Rendered in tragic tones, it is very characteristic of the finales and closing movements in many of Narbutaitė's works. Dynamic waves in "Mater Dolorosa (symphonia tertia)" are even fewer and farther between than in the second movement. But there is one eminent and painful rise from p. 49 to the arch on p. 78. Tolling bells and energetic intensity of the musical fabric enhance the foreboding of tragedy. When the strophes of *Stabat Mater* come to an end, an extensive restatement of the material used in the first movement begins (pp. 27–42 = pp. 50–65), thus closing a great central arch and fulfilling painful predictions. The opening and closure of the third movement are more clearly defined than in the other two movements. A moment of transition from the first to the second movement is somewhat obscured by the sonoristic nature of musical textures. The "Symphonia tertia" can thus be regarded and understood as an independent entity – as a "Stabat Mater", consisting of two sections – first choral and then instrumental. The latter feels like a tragic outcome that reveals the meaning of the text even without the text.

Between the tragic foreboding in the first movement and the tragic outcome in the third, the second movement emerges as a realm of light and comfort, as *Adagio*, which corresponds both to the composer's "narrative" reality of *sacrum* ("Nativity") – and to the concept of symphonic cycle. Understanding symphony in a broader metaphorical sense (harmony, agreement, concordance), we would agree with the composer's opinion:

"I used the term 'symphony' for the title quite consciously: I was composing a symphony, not an oratorio. Here, the role of the choir is much less significant than that of the orchestra, albeit very important in some episodes. It is fully brought to the fore only once – in the third movement written to the text of *Stabat Mater*. But from the middle of that movement the initiative is taken over by the orchestra. Besides, the concept of a symphony in the sense of a consonance, harmony, was willingly employed by Hildegard von Bingen, the text by whom I used for the final 'Oratio'".

Figure 2. O. Narbutaitė. *Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae*, 2nd movement, p. 1.

4/4 $\text{♩} = 60$ *misterioso*

Fl. 1
2/3
3

Flc-alto
in G

Ob. 1/2
2/3

Cl. 1/2
in B

Cl. basso
in B

Fg 1/2

Cfg

Cor 1 2
in F 3 4

Tr. in B 1

Tb.

triangl.
1. tam tam

Arpa
Cis d e f g a s h

tutti sul pont. 1. solo ord. tutti (cord.)
2. solo ord. tutti

Vn I

Vn II

Vc

Cb

Figure 3. O. Narbutaitė. *Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae*, 2nd movement, p. 68.

The musical score is handwritten and spans four measures. The time signatures are 7/8, 3/4, and 5/8. The instruments and parts are:

- Picc.**: Piccolo
- Fl 1, 2**: Flute 1 and 2
- c-alto**: C-Alto
- Ob 1, 2**: Oboe 1 and 2
- Cl 1, 2**: Clarinet 1 and 2
- Cor.**: Cor Anglais
- Tz.**: Trombone 1
- Ty 1, 2, 3**: Trombone 2, 3, 4
- Tb**: Trombone
- Timp.**: Timpani
- 1. Crat., 2. C-Ob., 3. Crat., 4. P-Ho**: Trumpets and Horns
- S., A., T., B.**: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass
- Vn I, II**: Violins I and II
- Vc**: Violoncello

Key performance instructions include *senza sord.* (without mutes) for brass instruments, *aperti* (open) for trumpets, and *cresc. poco a poco* (gradually increasing) for the vocal parts. Dynamics range from *p* (piano) to *f* (forte). The vocal parts have lyrics: "Glo-" and "poco a poco".

In concluding the argument about the genre definition of *Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae* another quote from the composer's commentaries seems pertinent:

"Since German musicians have already performed my oratorio *Centones meae urbi* some time ago, I wanted to make something different. Here, I came up with an entirely different solution: large orchestra, great consistency of the work. All thematic material lies encoded in the first movement. One theme, one language... Essentially, it is a work for the symphony orchestra and for the concert stage. And it is a symphonic work, not an oratorio – hence the title.

This does not correspond to a received opinion that voice is superior in the liturgical music or one related to liturgy."

Within the scope of interaction between the *sacrum* (liturgical texts) and the *profanum* (classical symphonic music) the composer seems to transgress the established canons of the Christian liturgy, on the one hand, and classical genre, on the other. Her work may be seen as a continuation of romantic tradition in symphonic genre: her work consists of three individual symphonies combined in one coherent cycle.

Notes

¹ See composer's commentaries in the brochure "*Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae*" specially compiled by Narbutaitė for the work's Lithuanian premiere (14 October 2004) and containing many texts that were used as a source of inspiration but not directly set to music. *Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae* commissioned by the "Brandenburgisches Staatsorchester" and "Musikfesttage an der Oder" Festival, premiered by "Grosser Chor der Singakademie Frankfurt", "Aidija" choir, Brandenburgisches Staatsorchester, conductor Robertas Šervenikas (6 March 2004, Frankfurt).

² From the composer's talk at the National Philharmonic before the premiere.

³ See Bohdan Pocij, "Religinė inspiracija muzikoje" ["Religious Inspiration in Music"], *Krantai* 1990, No. 7–8, p. 32.

⁴ Mikhail Kokzhayev, *Topologia muzykalnogo prostranstva* [Topology of Musical Space], Moskva: Kompozitor, 2004, p. 45.

⁵ Peter Buske, "Das Wesen Maria ergründen" ["To Fathom the Nature of Mary"], *Märkische Oderzeitung*, 8 March 2004.

Santrauka

Ciklo fenomenas Onutės Narbutaitės *Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae*

Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae įtvirtina O. Narbutaitės pasaulėjautos originalumą, savitą ciklo traktuotę. Kompozitorė nesilaiko religinės muzikos kanonų (nors naudoja *Stabat Mater*, *Ave Maria*, *Gloria* ir kt. tekstus), tačiau tai nesumenkina juose reiškiamo religinio jausmo gylio. Kūrinio pagrindą sudaro trys Marijos gyvenimo momentai, susiję su Kristumi: apreiškimas, gimimas ir nukryžiuojimas.

I dalis *Angelus Domini* (*Symphonia prima*) pilna orkestrinių bangų siūbavimo, įtampos ir atoslūgio opozicijų, sudarančių paslaptinę kosminio chaoso „ikimaterialios begalybės“ (B. Pocij) išpūdį, priartinantį Dievo suvokimą. *Symphonia prima*, būdama išbaigtos, simfoniskai plėtojamos formos, drauge yra trijų simfonijų ciklo pagrindas. Cikliškumo, kartojimo principus O. Narbutaitė pati nurodė knygelės-anotacijos dalyje „Arkos“. II dalyje *Bethleem* (*Symphonia secunda*) pakilimo ir atoslūgio bangų energetinis intensyvumas mažesnis, kitokio pobūdžio. Čia, ypač dalies pradžioje, vyrauja išiklausymas į save, meditatyvumas, kurie išreiškiami pabrėžtinai sonoriniu muzikos audiniu. III dalis *Mater Dolorosa* (*Symphonia tertia*) tęsia „siužetinę“ liniją, žodžiais priartindama *sacrum* tikrovę (*Stabat Mater* tekstas). Kita vertus, ši dalis tampa simfoninio ciklo repriza. Ji pasižymi tragiška finalo, baigiamųjų kūrinio dalių koncepcija, apskritai būdinga O. Narbutaitės kūrybai. III dalies ribos savarankiškesnės, nes perėjimą iš I į II dalį niveliuoja sonorinė muzikos audinio kilmė. Taigi *Symphonia tertia* galime traktuoti ir atsietai nuo simfoninio ciklo, kaip *Stabat Mater*. Tarp I dalies tragizmo nuojautos ir III dalies „tragedijos“ II dalis iškyla kaip šviesiausia, tarsi *Adagio*. Tai atitinka tiek „programinę“, autorės kuriamą *sacrum* tikrovę (apreiškimas, gimimas ir nukryžiuojimas), tiek simfoninio ciklo koncepciją.

Kūrinio sąranga vientisa, simfoninė, choro vaidmuo čia mažesnis nei orkestro. Tai trys atskiros simfonijos ir drauge vientisas simfonijų ciklas, išpūdingas muzikos religingumu, šventumu. Daugelyje O. Narbutaitės kūrinų vyrauja metaestetinės vertybės. Didžiausia iš jų – *sacrum* – dėl vidinių ir išorinių veiksnių sintezės sukoncentruota *Tres Dei Matris Symphoniae*.