

Several More Strokes to the Portrait of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis' Creativity

Abstract. The object of this article is the exceptional creativity of the great Lithuanian artist—Čiurlionis. During his short life and early death at the age of 35, he created more than 400 musical and 350 visual works of art of exceptional quality and originality. While it is not possible to cover all the aspects of his creativity or the multifaceted nature of such a creative personality, we will try to examine how was Čiurlionis generating original ideas in his musical compositions, mainly decorated and harmonized Lithuanian folk tunes, and how was he able to facilitate interpenetrations of musical ideas into his works of visual art. Hereby, the concept of cyclicity becomes a key to our discoveries.

Keywords: creativity, original artistic works, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, synthesis of arts, cyclicity, harmonized folk songs.

Foreword

Among research papers written on the phenomenon of creativity, only a few are related to the creative process of music. The history of music is created by original and creative personalities. Musical creativity, like any other creative field, is an invisible, closed inner world that takes place in the depths of consciousness. Composers (with very few exceptions) are not keen to talk about their work and this position supports its mystification. Some knowledge about the process of music creation is provided by the sketchbooks used by composers (particularly notable are the sketchbooks of Beethoven, Stravinsky, etc.), and the comparison of the manuscripts of the works is very helpful (we know that, for example, there are almost no corrections in the manuscripts of Bach, while in the manuscripts of Chopin, on the contrary, they are very abundant), sometimes a window into this mysterious world is opened in composers' memoirs, discussions (in this respect, Stravinsky's "Dialogues with the Kraft" are unique). A large part of Čiurlionis' manuscripts has survived but some of them were lost during the years of wars and turmoil, while some of his works were restored from memory by his sister Jadvyga. She told me that Čiurlionis did not transcribe those musical episodes that were clear to him, sometimes he did not even mark keys or tonality signs, because he heard the music with his inner ear. Later, this caused problems for editors, as several versions (editions) of his same works appeared. Jadvyga Čiurlionytė published a valuable book of memoirs about her brother Mikalojus Konstantinas, in which we find many episodes capturing the artist's creative moments. A valuable source of insight into the creative processes is the large body of correspondence of the artist, his letters to his close relatives—parents, brothers, sisters, his fiancée Sofija, friends and colleagues where he explained his plans and evaluated results. Also, the unique possibility to conduct this research is possible due to the nature of his creative fields and their interrelations. Different spheres of the artist's activity—his musical, visual and literary works—are in complementary relation as they reflect the artist's personality via different means of expression.

On the matter of terminology

The concept of creativity started to gain traction after World War II. Joy Paul Guilford, who linked creativity with divergent (innovative) thinking, is considered the pioneer of research in this area, and the three dimensions of thinking proposed by him are widespread and are still used today¹. Creativity is not only expressed during thinking, it can be applied to abilities, personality traits, and creative products. The concept is very broad, it includes dozens of components, there is still no universally accepted definition, but it is a relevant topic, because the importance of creativity in solving the problems presented by the world is generally agreed upon. There are special tests for the study of creativity, which were compiled by Paul E. Torrance (1996), but they can be applied to living persons. But, how then should we study the creativity of authors who have not been living among us for a long time? Most likely, this can be done based on their work, correspondence of composers and the memoirs of their contemporaries. The medium of creativity is a rapid technological progress that opens up new possibilities. Throughout all of his short life, Čiurlionis showed a deep interest in technological innovations and tried various forms of expression, including photography, daguerreotypes, various techniques of painting, making etchings, graphic art, etc., and he was aware that future generations of

¹ Read more: Guilford (1967).

Lithuanian artists would look for a starting point in his works, which suggests that something is consciously encoded in them, or has been inserted to enable discovery.

According to Scott G. Isaksen and Donald J. Treffinger², creativity is finding new, important, appropriate connections which are expressed as the ability to foresee many possibilities, to invent and try out different ways of decision, to propose new and unusual solutions and to create and select alternative ideas. This definition could be proven many times by the expressions of the creative artistic nature of Čiurlionis. James C. Kaufman & Robert J. Sternberg (2010) summarize creative thinking by distinguishing its three characteristics—originality, quality and adaptability, and the ability to solve problems: “Just what is creativity? The first step to understanding creativity is to define it. Most definitions of creative ideas comprise three components. First, creative ideas must represent something different, new, or innovative. Second, creative ideas are of high quality. Third, creative ideas must also be appropriate to the task at hand or some redefinition of that task. Thus, a creative response is novel, good, and relevant” (Kaufman & Sternberg 2010: 4). Sometimes a dispute may arise about the completeness of works and the evaluation of unfinished works and their sketches as creativity. However, this theoretical assumption is not reliable, because it is the analysis of sketches and different versions of the same work that allows us to better understand the creative process itself, its different stages and the final result. Any artist will admit that very rarely a finished work is born in an ideal form, often its creation is accompanied by a long incubation period, and then the work is ironed out, perfected, until it reaches its final form. And usually this is not the end, a rare artist is completely satisfied with the result achieved. Modern art critics also see considerable advantages of applying the principle of *non-finito* in creation. Antanas Andrijauskas observes that “This Lithuanian artist was extremely demanding of himself, sought perfection in various areas of creative activity and was not satisfied with what he had achieved. It was more important for him to raise a new idea, to understand its meaning than to implement it in practice. This explains the incompleteness of many works of art music” (Andrijauskas 2019: 23).

Features of the epoch

Čiurlionis was open to the ideas prevailing in society and the art world, which he was able to notice, feel and experience. He lived in a period of transition, when one era ends and another begins, when the usual paradigms change. Usually, during such a period of time, what has been achieved in the past century is summarized and new paths are sought, and an attempt is made to predict what awaits in the near or distant future. This is a mythological interpretation of a time of transition to which Čiurlionis was open. The junction between the 19th–20th centuries—the watershed—was a time when the romantic paradigm of musical expression, together with the musical modal major-minor system based on functional harmony, were exhausted, as was the most sensitive part of society; artists were frantically searching for new forms and possibilities of expression.

Innovative features of Čiurlionis’ work

It was characteristic for Čiurlionis to notice and marvel at small and large “miracles”, to look at life through the eyes of a child. His special ability was to master musical stylistics (Chopin’s style) very quickly, grasp the limits of its expression and tirelessly search for new possibilities of expression (within a short time he had transitioned from romantic music to the latest manifestations of modernism). We see how he was able to modify his musical language from a major-minor harmonic system to an extended tonality, bitonal or polytonal texture, using polyphonic voice development tools and series of sounds, applying their modifications (rotations)³. The same ability can be observed in his paintings, where we notice a great innovative and aesthetic leap from the first stylistic works of symbolism to his original pictorial sonatas. The dynamics of this search for new forms of expression is also clearly visible in the technical evolution of his folk song compositions.

Creative use of folk music

The creative use of various compositional techniques to accompany folk music tunes are analyzed in a detailed way by the author of this paper in the article “Lithuanian Traditional Song Harmonized by Čiurlionis: New Thoughts” (2013). Living in the very musically rich ethnographic region of Dzūkija, Čiurlionis showed

² Read more: Grakauskaitė-Karkockienė (2003: 12).

³ See five microhistories discovered by Gražina Daunoravičienė, tests of new resolution paradigms (Daunoravičienė 2019: 168–187).

a deep interest in Lithuanian traditional songs throughout his creative life, treating traditional tunes as a foundation for Lithuanian professional music. The compositions of folk songs for piano became a laboratory for searching and testing new compositional tools, where the resulting solutions were soon manifested in original compositions. Čiurlionis presents more than 20 different ways of harmonizing folk melodies, using mainly modal, tonal, harmonic, polyphonic and textural means and their combinations, some compositional solutions, especially with the help of artificial modes, bitonal and polytonal modal and tonal structures—all extremely bold and original. He repeatedly returns to older harmonized examples and tries new tools and methods.

Vivo

Ex. 1. Motule mano / Oh, My Dear Mother (VL 300, 1906)—octatonal mode

Agitato e con espressione

Ex. 2. Motule mano / Oh, My Dear Mother (VL 340, 1909)—motivic development

Con moto, gaio

Ex. 3. Sėjau rūtą / Sowed the Rue (VL 179, 1900)—simple contrapuntal accompaniment

Meno mosso e misterioso

Ex. 4. Sėjau rūtą / Sowed the Rue (VL 334, 1909)—politonicity—triple modality G Major–E Minor–C Minor

His creative method could be partly uncovered if we consult the memoirs of his family members. One of the most important breakthroughs in creativity was the ability to create instantaneously, improvise, and convey experienced impressions and feelings. Together with special sensitivity to the surrounding environment, observation of nature and associative thinking, this characteristic of Čiurlionis is undoubtedly a key component of his creativity in music, paintings and literary works. It was witnessed by his sisters Jadvyga and Valerija. Valerija recalled:

“When he would get up early in the morning with the sun, he would go out to the meadows, to nature, he would watch the sunrise, and then when he would return, he would sit at the piano for a long time and play. It seemed as if it was not music, but a retelling of what he saw, what he felt, what he observed in nature” (Čiurlionytė-Karužienė 2006: 229).

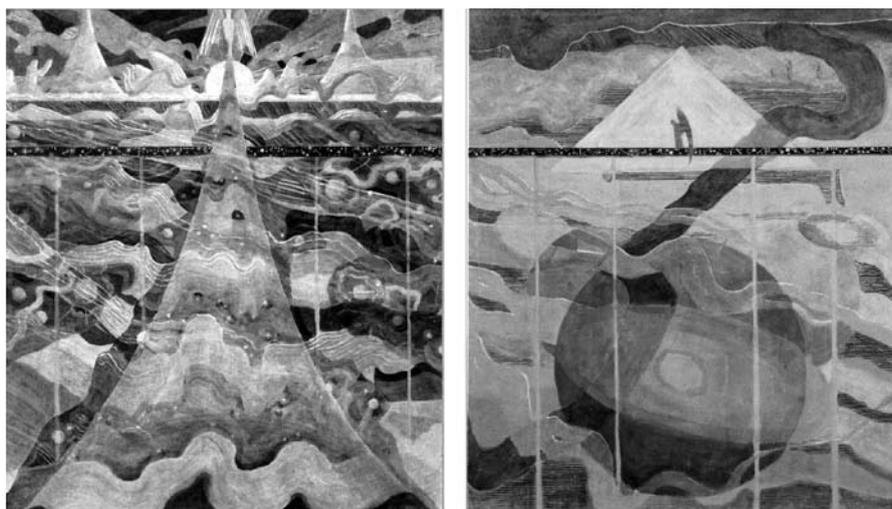
Valerija also noticed that the same impressions could be conveyed directly or alternately in musical and visual form almost simultaneously. The youngest sister Jadvyga confirmed her impressions from one journey to the outskirts of Druskininkai:

“Suddenly, we heard a song through the open window. Somewhere far away, on a mountain, the reapers sang their harvesting song. My brother jumped but he did not have a feast on his mind. His brothers (Stasys, Petras and Jonas)—each dressed only in a single shirt and straw hat—met him in the yard. All four climbed the hill, and saw rows of bent women with sickles in their hands, cutting, rushing. The women of one row stood up, straightened their backs and sang *Bėkit, bareliai...* Before reaching the cutters, my brother pulled out a sheet of music from his pocket and started writing. He had improvised at the piano for a long time, and from the fullness of the sounds the same mournful song of the wide fields kept emerging” (Čiurlionytė 1970: 113).

All these impressions accumulated into a four-variation cycle for piano and the choral composition, both named *Bėkit, bareliai*—according to what the heard song was called—as well as into pictorial vignettes. The same compositions also provide us with a very interesting example of creativity through visualization of a musical work. The apotheosis of *Bėkit, bareliai* is the ability to visualize the musical image that was being created.

Universality of the artist

However, even among creative artists, Čiurlionis’ creativity stands out. At that time in Lithuania, his point of view was truly unique. Meanwhile, Čiurlionis’ creativity could be counted as very strong and well expressed in multiple fields, namely: music, painting, photography and literature. Andrijauskas expands the space of manifestation of creativity by adding different spheres of artistic creation. During various periods of his life, Čiurlionis wrote letters to his family members where his creative intentions were often mentioned or analyzed. For example, about his work with Reinecke, when Čiurlionis was seeking to implement Lithuanian intonations—the most common motifs or intonations of Lithuanian folk songs—into a piece of classical music. Čiurlionis is characterized by his wide horizon. He was interested in many fields of science and art: psychology, mythology, cosmology, philosophy of art, history, literature and poetry, he was open to new ideas, new means of expression and technologies, he was able to use different sources of ideas (for example, musical sources are not only works of Western classical music, but also folk music, Lithuanian and Polish religious hymns, Polish revolutionary songs, etc.), he was interested in esoteric ideas, was dreaming of visiting distant lands. He had a very developed imagination that provided a wide space for fantasy. He was very good at improvisation, but his fantasy was well-controlled (to put it in Guilford’s terminology, it is a synthesis of divergent and convergent thinking). Look for example, at the two-part *Sonata of Stars*, where we see an unreal outburst of fantasy that is framed in repetitive shapes and vertical lines.



Ex. 5. Allegro and Andante from the *Sonata of Stars* (1908)

Cyclicity of works

The cycle expands the framework of the depicted work; allowing one to look at it from different points of view (see the tool of various angles in Milda Kulikauskienė's album⁴) gives it greater "weight", a development perspective, and the fourth dimension—time. There are dozens of examples of cycles in Čiurlionis' music and paintings, and what stands out is a different number of cycle parts. This also shows Čiurlionis' creative attitude to the cycles themselves, treating them in different musical ways; sometimes as a set of parts as in a suite, sometimes as a dual cycle such as prelude and fugue, sometimes as variations or sonata. We should remember here Janeliauskas' observation about the cyclic nature of some preludes (see Janeliauskas 2010). Cyclicity interests Čiurlionis in all periods of his work, but it is interpreted differently. In the early period, it is like a romantic literary narrative, when the same story is developed in separate parts of the cycle, shown from different angles or in an evolutionary sequence (see the 7-picture cycle *Funeral* or the 12-picture cycle *The Creation of the World*). In the mature stage of creation, the so-called "sonatic" period in his paintings, the cyclicity seems to rise to a completely different level. It is constructed according to the musical principle of sonata and is guided according to musical logic, where the idea matures and is exhibited at the beginning, then it grows, develops, reaches its climax and then gradually descends, gestures and disappears.

Elements of interaction and synthesis of the arts, expression of synaesthesia

Musical rhythm (also isorhythms), elements of polyphony (also bourdon), motif transformations in painting noticed by Vytautas Tumėnas (2019: 313–329), different forms of cyclicity, these ideas coming from the musical forms of prelude, fugue, sonata, suite, variations significantly influenced Čiurlionis' paintings and literature works. Cyclicity is part of the creative process (recall J. Čiurlionytė's testimony where Čiurlionis created not one, but several works in one sitting). Čiurlionis' influence on the emerging currents of modernism is a proven fact (see Andrijauskas 2019). Čiurlionis realized the same idea of transferring musical forms to poetry and literature in his literary work called *Psalms*, and also advised his wife Sofija Čiurlionienė-Kymantaitė to use it in her literary works.

What is very specific to this artist is **convergence and interpenetration of ideas from one artistic field to another**: musical polyphony and structural elements are creatively planted into painting and literature. At the beginning of the 20th century, composers were seeking a new musical language and Čiurlionis proposed dozens of ideas on how to deal with that issue. His **experiments** with bi- and polytonality, thematic sets and their rotation, confrontation of alternative diatonic, chromatic and octatonic elements, and many others show a huge creative potency that went far beyond that of his contemporaries.

Čiurlionis was returning to the same songs when he discovered a new method or principle of their interpretation, i.e., finding and testing new possibilities, then evaluating the results obtained and either using them further or rejecting them. Creative geniuses do not overemphasize the "guano" of their discoveries, are not satisfied with what has been achieved, they embark on further searches...

Conclusions

Even at first glance, the issue of Čiurlionis' creativity issue shows the huge potential of this topic as he was truly an outstanding artist with multifaceted abilities. At the beginning of the 20th century, when artists all over Europe and the world were looking for a new paradigm (according to Thomas Samuel Kuhn, 2003) of artistic language, he generated dozens of alternative ideas and principles in various fields of artistic expression. Paradoxically, only part of his legacy could be revealed to the public due to political circumstances (Lithuania was a province of the Russian Empire). We can only imagine what honor and recognition this artist would have received had he been living in a cultural center such as Paris, Vienna or Berlin. In any regard, the recognition of Čiurlionis is growing from year to year.

⁴ Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis: *Piešiniai, kompozicijų eskizai, grafika*. Katalogas. Sudarė M. Mildažytė-Kulikauskienė. Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos institutas, 2007.

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Dar keli potėpiai Mikalojaus Konstantino Čiurlionio kūrybos portretui

Santrauka

Šio straipsnio objektas – išskirtinis didžiojo Lietuvos menininko Mikalojaus Konstantino Čiurlionio kūrybiškumo reiškiny. Per savo trumpą, 35 metus trukusį gyvenimą jis sukūrė daugiau kaip 300 išskirtinės kokybės bei originalumo muzikinių ir 350 tapybinių meno kūrinių. Nėra įmanoma aprėpti visų tokios autentiškos asmenybės kūrybiškumo aspektų ir pusių. Pagrindinis dėmesys straipsnyje skiriamas originalioms idėjoms generuoti atliekant Čiurlionio muzikines kompozicijas (daugiausia lietuvių liaudies melodijų harmonizuotes ir išdailas), taip pat muzikinių idėjų įsiskverbimo į vizualiąją sferą procesui, darbų cikliškumui.