

The Art Of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis at the Junction of Two Epochs

Santrauka iš knygos: **Rasa Andriušytė-Žukienė. M.K.Čiurlionis: tarp simbolizmo ir modernizmo. Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2004.**

Even though Lithuania did not appear as a state on early twentieth century maps, and just like Poland, divided Lithuania ‘moved according to three different rhythms emanating from three different capitals,’ as the poet Czesław Miłosz put it¹, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis dedicated his art to Lithuania. This early twentieth century artist succeeded in blending cosmopolitan influences with the local tradition and with his own unique perspective of a composer-turned-artist, thus creating inimitably distinctive works of painting, graphic art and literature. Čiurlionis’ art is memorable through the exceptional variety and grandeur of its images, as well as through the originality and suggestive power of the artistic form of his works. Čiurlionis’ artistic output encompasses only six years of intense activity (1903-1909), nevertheless, it embraces all the essential cultural and artistic ideas of his epoch. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Lithuanian artist Čiurlionis’ work interested such prominent personalities of the period as Igor Stravinsky, Jacques Lipchitz, Wassily Kandinsky, and many others. However, their creative contact with Čiurlionis, both direct and indirect, was short lived and sporadic. Čiurlionis’ art was largely isolated from conditions favourable to wider fame and reputation, since he lived in Lithuania and Poland, which at the turn of the century were the fringes of Tsarist Russia and possessed only weak creative connections with the artists of St Petersburg.

In the last decade, Čiurlionis’ works have been exhibited in several major European cities, where they have frequently caused surprise.² Sometimes it indicated respect for the previously little-known East European genius. However, sometimes it also meant rejection of his art, poised at the intersection of too many artistic trends and ideological and philosophical systems. Although Čiurlionis had little direct contact with Western European art, his artistic output is related to Symbolism and *Art Nouveau*, but even more so to the *fin de siècle* period in general. In the context of nineteenth century European art, Čiurlionis appears as both a distinctive and also a rather typical artist. The world of *fin de siècle*, imbued with the musical fluids of Richard Wagner, was the space out of which Čiurlionis’ idea of the union between art and music could arise. This is more clearly apparent in ideological and iconographic connections than in formal ones. Overall, Čiurlionis’ artistic output belongs more to the whole epoch of Henri Fantin-Latour, Odilon Redon, Vincent van Gogh, Max

¹ Miłosz C., *Lenkų literatūros istorija*, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1997, p. 358.

² The most important international exhibitions of Čiurlionis’ art are the following: *Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit: Die Symbolisten und Richard Wagner*, Berlin and Brussels, 1991; *Territorium artis*, Bonn, 1992; *Europa, Europa: Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, Bonn, 1994; *Okultismus und Avantgarde: von Munch bis Mondrian. 1900-1915*, Frankfurt am Main, 1995; personal retrospective: *Die Welt als grosse Sinfonie. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis*, Köln, 1998; *El Simbolismo Ruso*, Barcelona, Bordeaux, 2000; personal retrospective: *M. K. Čiurlionis. 1875-1911*, Paris, 2000.

Klinger, and James Ensor, rather than to one particular authority or artistic trend. In Čiurlionis' work, which matured in Poland and opened out in Lithuania and Russia, the most diverse European artistic ideas were transformed.

However, perhaps it is not worth our while to try to insert new names into the history of art. The aim of this short study is not only to disclose the unique character of Čiurlionis' art, but also to trace the manifold spiritual bonds and creative ideas which united him with the European artists of his period.

Čiurlionis was born on 22nd of September 1875 in the family of organist Konstantinas Čiurlionis and Adelė Marija Magdalena Radmannaitė-Čiurlionienė in the little town of Varėna in the south of Lithuania, known as Dzūkija, and grew up nearby in Druskininkai.³ As a teenager, in 1889-1893 Čiurlionis lived in Plungė, where he played in the court orchestra of Prince Mikalojus Oginskis (Michał Oginski). The prince supported Čiurlionis' studies of musical composition at the Warsaw Musical Institute (Warszawski Instytut Muzyczny, 1894-1899) and the Leipzig Conservatoire (1901-1902). In Leipzig, Čiurlionis was immersed in musical studies, but he also tried his hand at painting, even though no drawings or paintings survive from that period.⁴ During his Leipzig period, Čiurlionis was a devoted admirer of Wagner, Beethoven, and Bach, and regularly attended concerts in Gewandhaus hall, which had a significant influence on the formation of his musical tastes. In Leipzig he also acquired certain foundations of structurally musical thinking – these foundations were later exploited and developed not so much in musical compositions, but in his artistic output.⁵

Thus, Čiurlionis only acquired a serious interest in art at the age of twenty-seven, when he was already working as a composer. His first surviving works of art are Symbolist compositions for future paintings, executed on postcards which he sent to his brother Povilas in 1903. In 1904-1906 Čiurlionis studied art in the newly-established Warsaw Art School (Warszawska Szkoła Sztuk Pięknych). Early in 1907, Čiurlionis left Warsaw and settled in Vilnius. This move represented a decision to take an active part in the creation of Lithuanian culture. In 1908-1909 he lived intermittently in St Petersburg where he participated in exhibitions. Čiurlionis died in 1911, and is buried in Rasų Cemetery in Vilnius.

The beginnings of Čiurlionis' creative quest

The start of Čiurlionis' creative path coincided with an energetic change in Polish art at the turn of the twentieth century. In Poland, as in the rest of Eastern Europe, the period was a vibrant time of flowering of Symbolism, Impressionism, and *Art Moderne*. Čiurlionis' 'Polish' period, except for a break of nearly a year, lasted for almost ten years. In 1894-1899, while he was still studying music, Čiurlionis was interested in Polish Symbolist art, which was then acquiring its final shape, and attended various art exhibitions. When in 1904 Čiurlionis entered the Warsaw Art School, newly established by artist Kazimierz Stabrowski, he had already spent a year

³ Currently a museum of the artist's memorabilia is open in Čiurlionis' family house.

⁴ In Čiurlionis' letters to friends dated by December, 1901 there are already hints concerning painting and the acquisition of painting materials (National M. K. Čiurlionis Art Museum (henceforth NČAM), ČI 1(21) and ČI 1(28)).

⁵ In a letter to Eugenijusz Morawski, dated 16th January, 1902, Čiurlionis drew schemes of the horizontal and vertical scales, in accordance to which Prof. K. Reinecke advised him to arrange instrumental parts (NČAM, ČI (45)).

and a half studying art in a private class of Professor Jan Kauzik. The professors of the new Art School were appointed from figures already renowned in the artistic world of Poland – Ferdynand Ruszczyc, Konrad Krzyżanowski, Karol Tichy, and the sculptor Xawery Dunikowski. The professors were unusually young – their average age was around thirty, almost the same age as Čiurlionis. This fact, along with nationalist solidarity (both Ruszczyc and Stabrowski were quite open about their Lithuanian origins) may have determined their especially friendly relations with Čiurlionis, and influenced his artistic world-view. Čiurlionis was one of the very best students of Warsaw Art School. In 1904-1905 he was awarded fourteen prizes for his works, mostly for the so-called ‘pure art’, i.e. compositions.⁶

During his studies in Warsaw, Čiurlionis found himself in the middle of a highly intellectual city culture. There were frequent exhibitions of Western European artists (such as Odilon Redon and Edward Munch), as well as Japanese art, and in 1906 Čiurlionis also visited museums in Austria, Bohemia, and Germany. In Stabrowski’s own workshop gatherings of the members of *Młoda Polska* (‘Young Poland’) movement, literati, and artists took place periodically. According to contemporary memoirs, ‘the topics of the discussions were various – literature, music, plastic art, philosophy (especially Indian), Egyptian Sun-worship etc. The artist Čiurlionis and a circle of his closest friends were constant participants of those soirées’.⁷ Whilst in Warsaw, Čiurlionis’ attention was captivated by theories that sought to explain the structure of the world and the essence of nature. He read philosophical works by Kant, Descartes, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, books by John Ruskin and a visionary astronomer Camille Flammarion. Čiurlionis was interested in theories which analysed imaginary visions and perceptions, as well as in discussions of how empathy is generated and how to activate the creative power of the imagination.

Čiurlionis created his first Symbolist compositions while studying at the Warsaw Art School (*Murmur of the Forest* 1904, *Piper* 1904, the picture-cycle *Day* 1904-1905 etc.). He favoured a popular principle of symbolism, namely, animisation, in which natural forms, such as mountain, clouds, the tops of the trees, are painted so as to be reminiscent of human or animal forms (*Day* from picture-cycle *Day*, *Stillness* 1904-1905, *Mountain* 1906). Images such as boats, fantastic gates, music-playing angels, and distant light filtering through forest foliage were favoured both by Čiurlionis and other European Symbolist artists. Nevertheless, even in his early period of creative output (1903-1906), Čiurlionis eschewed concreteness of form and content, and tried to suppress, as it were, the ambiguity of the image which arises due to animisation, making the symbolic plane invisible at first sight. Even in his early work, Čiurlionis stands out among the Symbolist artists through his unbridled imagination, limpid mood of his paintings, and absorption into the world of nature-images. Čiurlionis’ oeuvre is linked with the Polish Symbolism through the use of similar ideas, conceptions, symbols, and motifs. Yet at the same time one ought to emphasise Čiurlionis’ capacity for critical and independent thought, and his ability to conceive new artistic forms. He succeeded much further than his Polish colleagues in transcending the boundaries of everyday earthly existence and escaping into a metaphysical world,⁸ as well as in creating a much more abstract artistic language.

⁶ Siedlecka J., *Mikolaj Konstanty Čiurlionis: Preludium warszawskie*, Warszawa: Agart, 1996, p. 120–121.

⁷ Bžezinskis J., “Atsiminimai apie bičiulį”, *Kultūros barai*, 1965, Nr. 6, p. 20.

⁸ Both the young Čiurlionis and the contemporary Polish artists at the beginning of the twentieth century were influenced by the same sources, namely the Vilnius school of romanticism and its poets who wrote of Lithuania’s past: Adam Mickiewicz, Julijusz Słowacki, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, Cyprian Norwid. The literary critic

Through his paramount emphasis on the plastic language itself, Čiurlionis becomes much more modern than any of his contemporaries in Warsaw or Cracow.

1906-1907: the turning point in creative development

There are marked changes in the plastic character of Čiurlionis' painting around 1906-1907. These are best illustrated by the tripartite picture-cycle *Sparks* (1906). In this period, Čiurlionis began to concentrate on the problematic of painting, on the representation of rapid change and the impressions of light. Čiurlionis no longer employs 'matching' symbolism (in the sense of Symbolist *correspondance*), as can be seen, for example, in the picture-cycle *Funeral* (1903). Instead, there is a transition towards a more plastic and metaphoric image, along with the acquisition of greater technical ease and a more subtle colour-range. There is a marked breaking-point in Čiurlionis' artistic language and thought, and the very rationale behind the painting shifts, resulting in work where the rules of perspective are disregarded, with no attempt to develop the narrative. Every single painting of the *Sparks* cycle is a fragmentary part of the general expressive picture, but it can also exist on its own as a fully independent work of art.

In some of the works dating from 1907-1908 (*My Way*, *Allegro* part of *Sonata No. 1*, as well as *Fugue*, the second part of *Prelude and Fugue*) one finds purely formal elements that do not replicate visible reality. These elements can be treated as a sign of gradually increasing abstraction of the form. Nonetheless, even the forms of Čiurlionis' mature creative period are still characterised by a kind of uncertainty, ambivalence, and indecision. Čiurlionis applies the linear and plane-bound quality of the visual image as a formal decorative means. In many cases one is dealing with the achievement of a certain level of formal ornamentality, rather than abstraction.

The central composition of the triptych *My Way* is striking. This is due not so much to its degree of visual generalisation and its developed principle of linear rhythm, but to its attempt to dismiss and overcome traditional mimetic understanding of painting. The principal means of expression is line. Čiurlionis seeks to obliterate any manifestation of actual reality by employing the plasticity and rhythmic quality of line. The trace of reality, however, remains part of this composition in the motif of flower/star. This triptych is an audacious experiment through which Čiurlionis tests the possibilities of shape and line, as well as of their interaction.

There is no hint of Čiurlionis' preoccupation with the specific problems of artistic form in any of his surviving writings, unlike those of his contemporaries. The only exceptions are his emphasis on the importance of rhythm in music, and his pronouncements on the aspiration to create 'a new language'.⁹ Čiurlionis was not averse to the quest for a new artistic language, which periodically impelled him to progress, almost intuitively, towards abstract art.

Radosław Okulicz-Kozaryn, having comprehensively analysed the internal links between Čiurlionis' art and the poetry of Julijusz Słowacki, asserts that the Lithuanian artist made use of the ideas present in Słowacki's poem *The King Spirit* (*Król-Duch*, 1847) in a manner which was not available to the poet's compatriots, despite their efforts (cf. Okulicz-Kozaryn R. 'Saulėtos meilės kalba', *Naujasis židinys-Aidai*. 1995. Nr. 9, p. 634-649). Many similar subjects relate Čiurlionis' works of the early period to the output of contemporary Polish artists: the motifs of antiquity and the past, the quest of spiritual ties to the past, as well as the motif of the 'presence of the past', or the insight into the actuality and relevance of historical consciousness. This is especially clear in Čiurlionis' works *Eternity* (1906), *The Altar* (1909), *The Fortress* (1909), *The Past* (1907).

⁹ Čiurlionis M. K. *Laiškai Sofijai* [*Letters to Sofija*] / Selected and edited by V. Landsbergis. Vilnius, Vaga, 1973, p. 80.

The rapid and marked development and change in Čiurlionis' style around 1906-1907 may be due to his contact with the art of the Far East. In particular, he appears to have been influenced the Oriental ink-painting on display at exhibitions in Warsaw: Čiurlionis may have been encouraged to try out all the various possibilities of tempera paint, and given the confidence to leave greater and greater surfaces of card and canvass unpainted, barely touched by the brush. This is clearly seen in the triptych *Summer* (1907), *Silence* (1905), *Sonata No. 4* (1908), and *Winter* (1907). In these cycles, Čiurlionis' muted colour-schemes are first apparent. The Japanese art-critic Ichiro Kato associates these in his studies of Čiurlionis with the tonality of the Far-Eastern painting, what he calls the 'despondency of things.'¹⁰ In spite of this, there are clearly no serious ideological connections in Čiurlionis' work with Eastern art, and it is unlikely that the Lithuanian painter professed a view of art analogous to the Eastern conception of painting as a spiritual act. Nonetheless, in Čiurlionis' creative output one may identify some reflections of orientalisising tendency in the broad sense.

One could, perhaps, relate Čiurlionis' paintings on biblical themes to the traditions of the Hebrew Near East (*The Flood* (1904-1905), *Creation of the World* (1905-1906), *Noah's Ark* (1909), *Joseph's Dream* (1907-1908) etc.). However, the Old Testament and, consequently, the Christian world-view, were in no way his sole sources of artistic inspiration, since Čiurlionis, like many artists of the early twentieth century, was attracted by the idea of religious and cultural syncretism. .

The artist's letters, which are preserved in the National M. K. Čiurlionis Museum in Kaunas, contain many references to exotic lands. Some of these can be accounted for by the impressions left by the museums of Europe and St Petersburg. Others represent free-ranging poetic digressions, outbursts of artistic imagination, and reflections that he shares with those close to him. In both cases Čiurlionis mostly refers to the Near East – Assyria, Persia, Egypt, and sometimes also to India.

In general, Čiurlionis' letters contain motifs of varied cultural provenance. Sometimes the fantastically-poetic character of Čiurlionis' texts brings them close to belles lettres. The language and vocabulary of his poetic travel diaries *Laiškai Devdorakėliui [Letters to Devdorakėlis]*¹¹ and some letters to his wife Sofija betray the influence of Oscar Wilde, who was much read and admired by Čiurlionis. For example, in the fairy-tale *The Fisherman and His Soul* Wilde colourfully depicts the ambience of oriental luxury and splendour, where a god's idol was 'seated on a throne of jasper bordered with great orient pearls', and 'on the windows hung thin curtains of muslin embroidered with beetles' wings and with tiny seed-pearls'. Čiurlionis in his *Letters to Devdorakėlis* speaks, for example, of the crowns of the mountains, 'made of opals and pearls, of topaz and malachite, of mountain crystal and diamonds.'¹² Both artists create a fantastic, mystic and visionary world, emphasising its peculiarity and exoticism through pictures that spring from a luxuriant imagination. Wilde refers to an undefined Southern country, Čiurlionis – to mountains and the lands of Africa and Asia. Both artists speak of spiritual matters, of the human soul and its journey.

¹⁰ Kato I. 'Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, the Lithuanian Composer and Painter, and the Correlation Between Pictorial and Musical Compositions', *Journal of Baltic Studies*. 1976. Vol. 7. Nr. 1, p. 40–44.

¹¹ These are the texts of the letters, in 1906 written by Čiurlionis to Halina Wolman in his sketch-books, as well as excerpts from the artist's diaries or even short pieces of poetic prose, written in 1900–1906 m. Cf. Čiurlionis M.K. *Žodžio kūryba [Word-art]* / Edited by V. Landsbergis. Vilnius, Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 1997.

¹² M.K. Čiurlionis. *Žodžio kūryba* / Edited by V. Landsbergis: Vilnius, Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 1997, p. 64.

For Čiurlionis and many of his contemporaries, the idea of pre-historic cultural connections was very important. In particular, India was a popular subject of discussion in Poland at the end of the nineteenth century. It was considered the cradle and origin of European civilisation and its spiritual centre. This view, together with the Polish preoccupation with cultural syncretism, encouraged orientalising tendencies in Poland. The search for traces of Aryan culture began, both in Lithuania and in Slavic Poland, sparked by Juliusz Słowacki's mystical writings. It is somewhat paradoxical that at this time, one of the main sources of information on Buddhism, both in Poland and Lithuania, was the work of the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. He was also the source of the idea of the union between two cultures – the 'materialist' European culture and the 'spiritual' culture of Asia.

The works of many Western European Symbolist artists also contain phantasmagoric orientalising panoramas. Odilon Redon is close to Čiurlionis in subtlety of his imagination; Redon painted, in the words of Philippe Julian, a vision of the Orient radiating with Buddhist abandonment. One can also easily recognise traces of 'abandonment' and fatalism in Čiurlionis' artistic output (*The Flood* (1904-1905)). However, contemplation of the direct relationship with the Deity is more pronounced in his works, even if the Deity sometimes remains invisible (*Rex* (1909), *Journey of the Prince* (1907)). His understanding of 'deity', albeit very generalised and abstract, is nonetheless close to monotheism. In this respect Čiurlionis' orientalism relates to the Christian East. This, however, is a complicated connection, best exemplified by the picture-cycle *Creation of the World*. In a letter to his brother Povilas, written in April 1905, the artist assesses the cycle to be a great success and comments on it in the following manner: 'It is a creation of the world, but not of our world, according to the Bible, but of some other world – fantastic one'.¹³ Thus Čiurlionis steps aside, as it were, from the Christian myth of the creation, of which he is undoubtedly aware. If one takes into account that Čiurlionis possessed a broad range of interests and was fascinated with astronomy and cosmology, this, together with the general interests of artists, men of letters and *fin de siècle* intellectuals, makes it highly likely that Čiurlionis had at his disposal more (and more varied) sources for the account of the development of the world.

Undoubtedly, Čiurlionis was also influenced by other artistic and cultural ideas, as well as by other views on the nature of the world. Nevertheless, neither the popular fascination with the East, nor the enticements of esotericism which appealed to many artists of the time, succeeded in impelling Čiurlionis to deeper and more committed study of any one philosophical trend or religion, let alone its practice. The reflections of orientalism and esotericism which occur Čiurlionis' paintings are due simply to the impact of the atmosphere in which he lived and worked, and by which he was inevitably influenced.

Painting, music, and musicality of images

There are many different aspects and layers to the relationship between painting and music in European art. These range from the use of musical titles and from visual improvisations on a theme of musical composition to the attempts to embody 'the spirit of music' in painting. Odilon Redon, Gustav Klimt, James McNeill Whistler and others were seeking to discover mutual connection between painting and the

¹³ Čiurlionis M. K. *Apie muziką ir dailę* [*On music and painting*] / Prepared by V. Čiurlionytė-Karužienė, edited by A. Žirgulytė. Vilnius, Valst. grožinės literatūros leidykla, 1960, p. 178.

language of music, as well as between their respective means of artistic expression. Similar aspirations also manifested themselves in the artistic output of Robert Delaunay, Wassily Kandinsky, František Kupka, Paul Klee, and Joan Miró. This circle of problems also characterises Čiurlionis' paintings. His seven *Pictorial sonatas* (1907-1909) are, undoubtedly, one of the most interesting example of the synthesis of diverse artistic genres in the history of art.

From his very first attempts at painting, Čiurlionis' connection with the world of music manifested itself in various ways in his new artistic occupation. Indeed, the titles of his earliest paintings reflect an external connection with music and the world of sound (*Funeral Symphony, Murmur of the Forest*). Čiurlionis' score-sheets contain certain peculiar transformations of the musical signs, as well as ornaments and portraits placed on the musical scale. The insertion of a visual image into the fabric of musical score, and vice versa, a picture illustrating the structure of a musical text, were for Čiurlionis entirely natural. It is unlikely that Čiurlionis sought, as it has been frequently asserted, 'to paint music'; rather, with composer's expertise he adopted plastic equivalents of musical means of expression: more abstract space, intensified dimension of temporal expression (action takes place in several sheets of a picture-cycle), the increased significance of rhythm. By applying to painting the principles of the musical composition which have associations with the structure of musical forms (such as sonata or fugue), Čiurlionis created an entirely original cycle of paintings, the so-called pictorial sonata. He united various motifs from reality, different spatial levels and moments in time, as well as contrasting symbolic images into a single compositional system (picture-cycle), based on the dynamic of the rhythm (reflected in the naming of the parts of the cycle after the musical tempi – *Allegro, Andante, Scherzo, Finale*).

Along with conveying an emotional impression, Čiurlionis' pictorial sonatas distinctly realise the possibility of the application of musical principles to painting. This idea was also conceived and employed by painters such as Kupka and Klee. Čiurlionis created a certain system for synthesising the principles of music and painting, based on generic correspondence: the volume of musical sound corresponds to the intensity of colour and outline, musical tempo corresponds to the plastic-linear rhythm, whereas the particular part of the musical composition corresponds to the position of a painting within the cyclical structure. The most general correspondence, as both Čiurlionis and Klee noticed, is the temporal dimension, the fact that both arts, both painting and music, are temporal arts closely related to temporality of perception. Nevertheless, Klee, who in 1902-1905 actively reflected upon the parallelism between music and visual art, failed to embody this theoretical conclusion in his art, whereas Čiurlionis created cycles of paintings in which the structural and compositional connection with music is manifest.

Čiurlionis' pictorial sonata consists of the cycle of two, three or four paintings and has clearly defined theme, developed according to the laws of musical sonata. Sometimes the artist even uses a limited analogy with the composition of musical sonata. The most precise analogy appears in *Sonata No. 1* (1907), sometimes entitled *Sonata of the Sun*. At the bottom of the picture Čiurlionis painted the dominant motif, roughly at the middle of the painting – the development of that motif, and towards the top he represented the modified repetition of the main visual motifs, similar to musical recapitulation (*reprise*). Clearly perceived characteristics of rhythm, deeper functioning of colour and spatial structure, the predominance of the wavy lines in the *Sonatas* create a musical harmony, suggesting a dialogue between sight and hearing.

St Petersburg, 1908-1909

In the autumn of 1908 Čiurlionis arrived in St Petersburg for the first time, attracted by expectations of greater opportunities to exhibit his works, and of greater recognition for his art in general. These expectations, however, failed to come true. His work provoked debate among the Russian artists, but, as previously, no-one bought his pictures. Čiurlionis struggled to make a living, with adverse effects on his health.

At that time, Symbolist art flourished in Russia, and any new artistic conventions had yet to emerge. Russian art critics were justifiably talking of cultural decadence and of a crisis in art on European scale.¹⁴ The group of artists *Mir iskusstva* [The World of Art] with which Čiurlionis established a connection, recommended by Vilnius' sculptor Mark Antokolsky, was long past its prime and had ceased to be a leading or even a significant group in artistic life.¹⁵ Artists of the younger generation started appearing in the exhibitions, and to them the aspirations of *Mir iskusstva* (art as theurgy and as the source of beauty) seemed somewhat incomprehensible. Čiurlionis' letters from St Petersburg give the impression that the artist's relations with the members of *Mir iskusstva* were politely friendly, but that any deeper link or creative contact failed to arise. Čiurlionis may have found it difficult to understand the aristocratism of the artists of *Mir iskusstva* and the 'yearning for the Latin world' which thrived in their minds, and in which they saw the principal means and the driving force of resistance to the contemporary 'artistic crisis'. The descriptions of St Petersburg artistic life in Čiurlionis' letters are mostly critical. By that stage, his impressions and value-criteria were clearly moulded by the experience of the Western culture, drawn in and absorbed in Warsaw, Cracow, and Leipzig. This could have been one of the reasons why Čiurlionis, a newcomer and Lithuanian, found it hard to establish a dialogue with the people who tended to wield a significant personal influence over artistic life in St Petersburg.

The ideas and themes of Čiurlionis' artistic output are much more closely connected with the works of the painters who belonged to another artistic group, known as *Golubaja roza* [The Blue Rose]. There was no direct contact between them, but it is possible today to affirm with certainty their ideological proximity. It was nature and its subtle transitional states that made the greatest impact both on Čiurlionis and on the artists of *Golubaja roza*. They concentrated on similar themes: cyclical rebirth and re-awakening of nature – which they often conveyed through the images of spring and morning, sun and dawn. One may speak of the proximity of the world-views embodied in the early works of Pavel Kuznetsov and in mature pieces by Čiurlionis. One may enquire as to what is the common denominator that brings together the works of these artists. It may be conjectured that it lies in the lively interest, at the beginning of the twentieth century shared by the whole of Europe, in the ideas and works of Heinrich Johann Ibsen and especially Maurice Maeterlinck. They were fascinated by Ibsen's and Maeterlinck's creative expression, which,

¹⁴ Бердяев Н. А. Кризис искусства. Москва: Изд. Г. А. Лемана и С. И. Сахарова, 1918, С. 4–6.

¹⁵ As Lapshina, a scholar who specialises in this group of artists, asserts, the group *Mir iskusstva* underwent a creative crisis already in 1903 (cf. Лапшина Н. П. "Мир искусства": очерки истории и творческой практики. Москва: Искусство, 1977, с. 164). Apart from *Mir iskusstva*, in the first decade of the twentieth century quite a few other groups and associations of the artists were active: *Sojuz russkich chudožnikov* [The Russian Painters' Union], *Alaja roza* [The Red Rose], *Golubaja roza* [The Blue Rose], *Venok* [The Garland], *Bubnovyj valet* [The Jack of Diamonds]. Nevertheless, Čiurlionis, who arrived with a letter of recommendation to one of the members of *Mir iskusstva*, Dobužinskis, failed to establish any closer creative contacts with other Russian artists.

according to Kandinsky, creates images in the fog which threatens to stifle them, images over which an implicit, nebulous threatening force hovers.¹⁶ Maeterlinck's ideas and Wagner's music, well known to Čiurlionis, were the sources of inspiration not only for numerous Russian poets and the artists of *Golubaja roza*.

The peculiar character of Russian Symbolism, which Alexander Bely defined as the 'peaks of knowledge and intuition knotted together,'¹⁷ in art and literature emanated into a host of themes: artistic creation as prophecy, cosmic union, the loneliness and isolation of man, and determinism of fate. These are all important themes of Čiurlionis' works. Both in Čiurlionis and in Russian Symbolism, the interaction between man and universe, the problems of cosmos and eternity are more important than the internal psychological problems of the life of mind, which German, French, and Polish Symbolist artists eagerly addressed. Russian artists mostly limited themselves to the recording of the processes created by the natural elements, because the artist, in their view, is merely a mediator and a chronicler of the mystery of nature.

Although the artist Mstislavas Dobužinskis suggested that Čiurlionis chose one of St Petersburg artists' groups,¹⁸ Čiurlionis instead became more and more inclined towards the Lithuanian community in St Petersburg: he led its choir, participated in its concerts as a pianist, and drew posters for its activities. On the other hand, Čiurlionis' paintings were an object of interest and discussion for only a small circle of the St Petersburg public, and the critical appraisal of his creative output was not uniformly positive.¹⁹ Alexandre Benois, art critic and artist, was perhaps the only consistent enthusiast of Čiurlionis' painting – he was of the opinion that the emergence of Čiurlionis as an artist was the most memorable event in Russian artistic life in recent years. On the other hand, future Russian avant-garde artists, who at the time were still painting in the Symbolist manner (Pavel Filonov, Ivan Kluny, Kazimir Malevich), and whose artistic thematic – contemplation of man's relation to cosmos – made them fairly close to Čiurlionis, considered Čiurlionis to be the 'old type', that is to say, *Mir iskusstva* type Symbolist. The twofold artistic structure and the lack of plastic uniformity of Čiurlionis' paintings may have given rise to these contrasting opinions. These Russian artists were also already interested in the ways of essentially transforming and renewing artistic form, and they discussed the postulates of abstract painting, even though in their art, too, this aim appears as an ideal, and not as an actual achievement.

Some of the themes (though not the execution) of Čiurlionis' paintings and drawings fairly seamlessly fit with the images of a cosmic mystery-play – a frequent theme in the Russian art of the beginning of twentieth century. The reminiscences of Mesopotamian culture and the motif of altar in Čiurlionis' canvass *The Altar* (1909) imply ideas of eternity and of interaction with the otherworldly reality. Its composition is not overloaded with visual motifs – on the contrary, this canvass is laconic and monumental, characterised by the distinct rhythm that pervades both the great volumes and the tiniest graphic element and splashes of colour. Perhaps the impression left by Lev Bakst's picture *Terror antiquus*, which Čiurlionis saw at an

¹⁶ Hofstätter H. H. *Symbolismus und die Kunst der Jahrhundertwende*. München, Dumont, 1972, p. 44.

¹⁷ Белый А. Критика. *Эстетика. Теория символизма*. Т. 2. Москва: Искусство, 1994, С. 131.

¹⁸ Čiurlionis M.K. *Laiškai Sofijai* / Edited by V. Landsbergis. Vilnius, Vaga, 1973, p. 46.

¹⁹ When Nikolai Berdyaev gave a positive appraisal of Čiurlionis' works, others declared that in case of a 'real' painter such works could only be individualist synthetic absurd (Грищенко А. "Кризис искусства" и современная живопись. Москва, 1917. С. 10).

exhibition of the Russian Painters' Union in 1908, was instrumental in propelling him to paint *The Altar*. And yet, viewed against the background of Russian painting, Čiurlionis' canvass is an incomparable example of pure modernist style in respect of its inner content and artistic execution.

Čiurlionis' paintings frequently exploit motifs which are similar in their graphic expression to the book-illustrations of the popular nineteenth century astronomer Camille Flammarion. Čiurlionis read his books, and he also kept some in his house library in Druskininkai. This does not mean that the artist mindlessly followed popular scientific texts, or that he used someone else's ready-made drawings as an inherently valuable artistic source. Nonetheless, the visual similarity of some of the elements indicates that Čiurlionis was interested in popular science and sometimes used the information and visual material that it conveyed. The character of Čiurlionis' works on cosmic themes differs from the Russian artists' works in their intuition and artistic generalisation. In Čiurlionis' works the relation between man and universe is sublime and harmonious, whereas the vision of the Russian artists' is much more concrete, worldly, primitively daunting or mystical.

The main feature that distinguishes Čiurlionis' painting from that of the Russian artists is his application of the principles of musical composition to painting. However, the synthesis of the arts was also an important artistic problem for the Russian painters. Most of the contemporary Russian Symbolists failed to comprehend this innovation of Čiurlionis, and this, perhaps, is the reason why they perceived his painting to be dilettante, the form of sonata unfinished and confused, and its content speculative and ill-defined. This is also why Čiurlionis' neo-romantic landscapes, painted alongside with the pictorial sonatas (*Graveyard Motif*, *Samogitian Crosses*, *Graveyard in Samogitia* (all 1909)), with their sacred motifs, uncomplicated space and traditional perspective (close to the classical perspective) seemed more acceptable to the members of *Mir iskusstva* group.

In Russian painting there are almost no canvasses in which musical foundations would contribute to the creation of visual structure – such is the idea of Čiurlionis' pictorial sonatas, preludes, and fugues. Compared to Russian artists, he was less interested in colour; the Russian idea of 'colour music' was not the goal of his aspirations. That path was chosen by the painter Kandinsky and the composer Alexander Skryabin in their exploration of human psycho-physiological perceptions. Indeed, the artistic output of the latter is variously called 'illuminated music', 'light in music', 'visible music' or 'audible light'. In Čiurlionis' pictorial sonatas, on the other hand, it is not so much the colour, but the compositional structure and graphic-linear principle that is of primary importance.

Overall, one may say that Čiurlionis, just like the Russian artists, sought to achieve musicality of vision, but he did that in an entirely different manner. In his pictorial sonatas, preludes, and fugues Čiurlionis creates narrative through concrete images which, viewed out of context, are close to reality; his whole sonata is like a complete mythological narrative. He applies the structure of musical composition to painting, and develops melody and perfects rhythm through visual means. This method is based on a much more profound rational understanding of the kinship of the different branches of art, their shared foundations and shared compositional principles. Russian artists, as they got nearer to understanding the autonomous expressive characteristics of colour, line, and rhythm, inclined towards expressiveness, developed sense-perceptual relationship with the work of art, and at the same time seemed to follow Kandinsky's idea of 'internal necessity'. Čiurlionis still employed visual narrative, and the visual elements that covered like a veil the

rational and substantive idea of the shared compositional principles of arts fascinated the more conservative painters who knew him (Alexandre Benois, Konstantin Somov, philosopher Viacheslav Ivanov), and disturbed the more modern ones.

Čiurlionis' art in the evolution of modernism

Until now, we have talked about the Symbolism and spiritual yearnings that were especially pronounced on the Eastern fringes of Europe, and were generally characteristic of art at the turn of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it must also be stressed that in the 1900's Symbolism was already past its prime, if not exhausted. In 1905 journal *Le Mercure de France* published the results of a poet and art critic Charles Morice's discussions with approximately fifty young artists. Most of them identified their times as the age of decadence, they felt that they had reached a blind alley and did not know whom to follow – the Impressionists, the realists, or the Symbolists.²⁰ In one of his letters, written in 1906, Čiurlionis also aptly defined the situation of painting in his times: 'Thousands of things that I have seen left upon me only one impression: that painting is striving somewhere, that it wants to break out of the frame in which it remained until now, and yet remains in it.'²¹

As one seeks to describe Čiurlionis' relationship with twentieth century modernism, one ought first to discard the mid-twentieth century art-history attempts to confer upon him the title of the 'first abstract painter'. If we define abstract (non-representational, non-objective) art as the art in which all representation of the objects of visible world is eliminated, then one has to admit that Čiurlionis failed to paint a single wholly abstract canvass. Nevertheless, Čiurlionis is sometimes referred to as one of the forerunners or pioneers of abstract art,²² thus we cannot skirt this question altogether.

Čiurlionis' relationship with modernism is most consistently expressed through the relationship between his paintings and the nascent abstract painting. In the Lithuanian artist's painting one can discern certain elements that characterise certain other modernist trends, however, they are too indistinct and, on their own, insufficient, to make a close connection between Čiurlionis' creative output and futurism or surrealism, for example. Since in his pictures one always finds, albeit present to a different degree, two layers – the abstract and the representative, therefore these artistic works would be most correctly called semi-abstract. In this case Čiurlionis could be considered the originator and the pioneer of the abstract art only insofar as he can be put down as a part of the transitional process that culminated in the emergence of totally abstract painting, that is to say, of the painting which utterly fails to represent any of the objects of the visible world.

In 1907 Čiurlionis painted two of the most abstract of his paintings, *Winter* and *My Way*, and by the autumn of 1909 he had, to all intents and purposes, finished his career as an artist. Therefore, if one wanted to evaluate his painting in this respect, it would be natural to compare it with the creative output of other originators of abstract

²⁰ Mathieu P.-L. *The Symbolist Generation. 1870–1910*. New York: Skira, Rizzoli, 1990. P. 28.

²¹ Original has disappeared. Quoted from the publication of letters by Bronislava Wolman in *Naujoji Romuva*. 1935. Nr. 49. P. 889–891.

²² Cf., for example, Rosenblum R. *Modern painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*. 1994. P. 173; P. 196; Ruhrberg, Schneckenburger, Fricke, Honef. *Art of the 20 th century*. Bd. 1. Köln: Taschen, 1998. P. 101.

paintings, and of its later representatives at the same period. On the other hand, it might be productive and meaningful to weigh Čiurlionis against those of the instigators and representatives of abstract painting who were reasonably close to him in their view of art as a means of searching for, and conveying, spirituality. The attempts of Adolf Hoelzel to create harmonious consonances on the basis of colour contrasts and ratios (which were primarily aesthetically-motivated), or the experiments of the so-called French school, remain quite alien to Čiurlionis.

Čiurlionis' creative output in 1907-1909 may be compared with the paintings by Kupka and Kandinsky in the same years. These three artists, closely connected to Central or Eastern Europe, were united under the same category by the fact that they were permeated with similar spiritual attitude and view of the goal of art. They had also begun their artistic careers with works in Symbolist vein. In other words, they belonged, according to Robert Rosenblum, to the tradition of Northern Romanticism which connects such chronologically remote artists as Caspar David Friedrich and Mark Rothko.²³

There are clear analogies between the work of Čiurlionis and the Czech artist Kupka. Both of them are often called 'philosophising painters', and both were interested in the genesis of human civilisation and the mystery of the origin of the cosmos. In 1907-1909 Kupka, like Čiurlionis, created compositions that contained abstract elements. The landmark of Kupka's transition to abstraction to the same and perhaps even greater degree than Čiurlionis' espousal of abstraction in his triptych *My Way*, is Kupka's painting *The First Step*, depicting a planetary system, more similar to visionary universe of colour somewhere beyond the limits of the visible world.²⁴ The rhythmic of forms becomes to him, as to Čiurlionis, an important means of expression. The space of the picture also becomes flatter and is demarcated in an increasingly minimalist manner, often avoiding colour-nuancing, but using meticulous graphic lines or wide vertical brush-strokes.

In Čiurlionis' works, the motif has become even more ephemeral, generalised, and weightless, and yet it is intimately connected to the forms and meanings of reality. Even in the most daring painting variations, for example, in the picture-cycle *Winter*, the link with the natural motif remains organic and deeply ingrained. On the other hand, for Kandinsky who, obeying flat-surface principle, renounced not only naturalist details, but also perspective, motif increasingly becomes not a theme, but a pretext for painting. One could apply a similar characterisation to Čiurlionis' art only with numerous caveats: for example, the motif of the sun in *Sonata No. 1* is also its theme, but a certain plot is nevertheless narrated by means of the motif and its transformations, by the use of chiaroscuro, variation of colour-scheme and perspective.

Kandinsky was impelled to turn towards altogether abstract painting, that is to say, to refuse in his paintings motifs borrowed from the visible world, by his desire to create an abstract visual language which, like the abstract language of music, would be able to express general ideas and provoke profound emotions. This attitude of Kandinsky was determined by his systematic interest in theosophical texts.²⁵

²³ Rosenblum R. *Modern painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994.

²⁴ Mathieu P.-L. *The Symbolist Generation. 1870–1910*. 1990. P. 167.

²⁵ Tuchmann M., *Verborgene Bedeutungen in der abstrakten Kunst // Das Geistige in der Kunst – Abstrakte Malerei 1890–1985* / Herausgegeben von M. Tuchmann und J. Freeman. Stuttgart: Urachhaus, 1988. S. 35.

Čiurlionis, on the other hand, was not affected in any significant way by the theosophy of the turn of the century, even if certain theosophical and iconographic motifs may be detected in his works. Instead, he remained closer to the traditional outlook of the Northern romantics, especially Caspar David Friedrich, and their neo-romantic followers. The Northern romantics not only aimed to express spiritual reality through depiction of nature, but also searched for the manifestations of spirit in nature itself. Nature as the medium in which and through which the spiritual principle is expressed was, for them, a value in itself. Therefore Čiurlionis, so sensitive to actual nature, could likewise hardly avoid depicting nature and natural objects altogether. In trying to realise the idea of the synthesis of different arts, proposed by the romantics and frequently a matter of prime concern to the Symbolists, Čiurlionis consciously attempted to apply the principles of musical composition in painting, without, however, rejecting the representational strata of the latter. In his pictorial sonatas, fugues, and preludes he tried to create artistic reality according to abstract musical principles, transforming, unifying and isolating the forms of natural reality. Therefore a certain degree of abstraction and abstract character of some of Čiurlionis' works in no way demonstrates that the Lithuanian artist would have crossed the threshold of entirely abstract painting in his subsequent work, had he continued to evolve as an artist. It may be argued that some of Čiurlionis' canvasses from 1907-1909 are not inferior, and in some ways are even superior, to contemporary works by Kupka, Kandinsky and the future Russian avant-garde painters, in their abstract elements and degree of abstraction. One cannot affirm, however, that Čiurlionis' thought proceeded in a manner which would have inevitably and consistently led him to abstract painting.

Although Čiurlionis, like many artists of the beginning of the twentieth century, was interested in the achievements of the rapidly progressing science, he watched surrounding world through the eyes of a lyric poet, not a rationalist. This perhaps explains why the visionary astronomer Flammarion was closer to him than Albert Einstein, whom Arnold Schönberg and Wassily Kandinsky thought to be their 'kindred spirit'. In Čiurlionis' archives one would look in vain for anything similar to Kandinsky's reaction to the splitting of the atom. In a letter to Schönberg, he wrote that, in his mind, this equalled the rupture of the whole world.²⁶

The intersection between art and science was fundamental to art at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, Čiurlionis' poetic mindset determined that at that intersection he chose a different path from Kandinsky or Kupka, who had studied biology at the Sorbonne. Čiurlionis' creative method lies in a judicious transformation, fusion, and synthesis of motifs from nature, as well as in the introduction of the principle of musical composition into a picture cycle. In contrast, Kandinsky's and Kupka's course lies not only through the analysis and, as it were, 'breakdown' of the motif, but also through deconstruction of form and creation of a fundamentally new artistic reality.

In place of conclusions

In spite of all the caveats above, some of Čiurlionis' paintings from 1907-1909 were sufficiently ground-breaking for it to be argued that, at least in respect of his innovations, Čiurlionis was one – though, perhaps, far from the most important – of

²⁶ Hepp C. *Avantgarde: Moderne Kunst, Kulturkritik und Reformbewegungen nach der Jahrhundertwende*. München: Dt. Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992. S. 126.

the pioneers of abstract painting. Čiurlionis crystallised not a colour-based, but rather graphic-spatial method of abstraction, and suggested one of the most interesting possibilities of the application of musical principles in painting. In that respect, he can be regarded as one of the artists who took part in, and contributed to, the process that led towards abstract painting. On the other hand, Čiurlionis made no essential changes in his visual vocabulary and did not earnestly seek to transcribe the metaphorical, symbolic, and allegorical language of his sonatas into a system of signs.

The paintings of Čiurlionis that border on abstraction characteristically possess a twofold artistic structure. First, they are abstract in their compositional-structural dimension, namely, in their resolution of space and the application of musical elements. Secondly, they are also concrete and rooted in empirical reality through their 'vocabulary' – through their details and visual elements. The strata of content remain very important, and refined aestheticism of the form coincides with the symbolism of a theme. Čiurlionis is concerned with the very possibilities of the means of artistic expression in painting and graphic art, yet his concern lags behind the emphasis on formal elements in the paintings by Wassily Kandinsky and by the French modernists of the time.

Čiurlionis' painting was rendered more abstract by the application of the structural and compositional elements of music. Nevertheless, none of the so-called 'musical' paintings could ever be considered a totally abstract work of art. In the mature paintings by Čiurlionis, for example, in his *Sonata No. 4*, or *Prelude and Fugue*, one can easily see in the way the motif is presented that the forms drawn from objective reality have lost their physical weight in the paintings, but have not disappeared altogether. Much artistic attention is devoted to conveying these bodily shapes, since the metaphoric connection between separate motifs and details creates the whole 'narrative plot' of the pictorial sonata. One may treat the musical elements, adopted in most of the pictorial sonatas, as a kind of musical abstraction. However, the content of the paintings 'is not musically abstract, but mythologically concrete.'²⁷

Furthermore, the main elements of Kandinsky's and Kupka's 'musical' compositions – such as colour, rhythm, and form – are 'non-representative', that is to say, detached from the represented object. This differs from Čiurlionis' pictorial sonatas, where these elements still coalesce with the natural objects that they are intended to represent. Although forms may be generalised and abstracted, they still remain recognisable. Thus Čiurlionis' metaphors and associations, as well as his associative images, vary in their level of abstraction. In this manner, Čiurlionis' pictorial sonatas remain faithful to his metaphoric language, and the world that he creates crystallises and is created from small flakes of reality. In order to decipher the meaning of these fragments within the fabric of a painting as a whole, the artist still offers the key of a metaphor. Unlike Kupka or Kandinsky, Čiurlionis did not try to create a language of art consisting purely of signs.

Čiurlionis shares much with Symbolism, and especially with the neo-Romantic tendencies within it. Risking generalisation, one may suggest that what linked Čiurlionis to Symbolism was shared spiritual outlook, emphasis on symbols, and choice of motifs, themes and objects. With the emergence of modernism and abstract art, Čiurlionis was once again linked to them by the compositional structure of his paintings, abstraction of motifs, and paramount emphasis on the elements of artistic expression. In some of his works Čiurlionis transgresses the limits of Symbolism and

²⁷ Eberlein D. Čiurlionis, Skrjabin und der osteuropäische Symbolismus. In.: *Vom Klang der Bilder. Die Musik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* / Hrsg. von K. von Maur. Stuttgart, Prestel, 1994, p. 344.

intuitively draws so close to modernism that he can, with some reservations, be considered one of the originators of abstract painting. Its threshold, however, he does not cross, remaining at its fringes.

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