

Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis, Composer

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The visual arts have long been a source of inspiration for composers. *Pictures from an Exhibition* by Mussorgsky is probably the most famous example, although the connection between music and painting in this work is perhaps not as close as the title would suggest. Mussorgsky did not write his work in response to finished paintings, but based it on sketches and designs by his deceased friend Viktor Hartmann. Less well known is the inspiration that Brahms drew from paintings by the Romantic painter Anselm Feuerbach. He even composed a moving elegy for his kindred spirit in the choral song *Nānie*, which contains the famous phrase 'Even the beautiful must die.' Liszt based one of his most magnificent piano pieces on his impression of Raphael's *Sposalizio* (Marriage of the Virgin) in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan. Debussy borrowed ideas for *La Mer* from prints by the Japanese artist Hokusai and Turner's paintings. Rachmaninov's most beautiful orchestral work, *The Isle of the Dead*, was inspired by Arnold Böcklin's series of identically titled paintings. Yet the relationship between music and painting probably finds its greatest expression in the orchestral work *The Frescoes of Piero della Francesca* by Bohuslav Martinů. Post-war avant-garde composers also borrowed freely from painting: Morton Feldman found his kindred spirits in Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. But composers who are also artists are something of a rarity. Like Ciurlionis, Arnold Schoenberg also dedicated himself to painting. While Schoenberg's towering musical stature overshadowed his work as an artist, Ciurlionis managed to make a name for himself in both disciplines. One aspect of his talent was not subordinate to the other. It was precisely this – the union of the two art forms in one person – that brought him to the attention of other international artists. The unity of the arts was an ideal shared by many *fin de siècle* artists and thinkers: the American-British painter Whistler, for example, often gave his paintings musical titles. Symbolist artists in Russia pushed their plea for the cohesion of the arts, which they described as the higher harmony of the muses, to the extreme. The Russian writers Andrei Bely, Vyacheslav Ivanov and Alexander Blok proclaimed music to be the ideal to which all other art forms should aspire. Bely argued that the closer an art form came to the ultimate revelation, the more musical it would be. The visual arts needed to free themselves from the restrictions of space and materials and focus instead on the display of the rhythmic movement that constitutes the very essence of music. Ivanov added that the power of music lay not only in the way it sounded but also, crucially, in the spiritual resonance it evoked in the listeners. Whereas realists had endeavoured to understand the world by looking, the Symbolists believed that reality would only offer up its secrets to those who could listen on the deepest level.

Against this background, it is not surprising that Ciurlionis came to the attention of the Russian Symbolists in 1908. When he visited St Petersburg in the autumn of that year, Russian Symbolism had already reached its zenith and the artists of the *Mir Iskusstva* (The World of Art) group welcomed him as a kindred spirit. Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, in particular, made a concerted effort to provide a stage for his Lithuanian compatriot. Ciurlionis' compositions were included in the legendary 'Evenings of Contemporary Music', during which he shared the stage with Nikolai Medtner and Alexander Scriabin. At the same time, his paintings hung in a salon of the Union of Russian Artists. Shortcomings in his painterly technique were remarked upon, but these were dwarfed by the visionary power of his images. Unfortunately, Ciurlionis' success in Russian

circles marked the end of his short, but intense, artistic career. Not long afterwards, he sank into a depression and remained in its grip until his death in 1911.

Ciurlionis fascinated the Russian Symbolists because he was one of the few artists to actually personify the higher harmony of the muses. The question arises, therefore, as to what he actually was: a composer who also painted, or a painter who also composed? In the current interpretation of his personality, the dominant view is that he was, primarily, a composer. As a painter, he never achieved the same level of technical brilliance as did his great Russian contemporaries, such as Benois, Bakst, Vrubel or Goncharova. Some art historians, however, deny that he lacked technique and appreciate Ciurlionis for his originality. Certainly, music was the first discipline upon which he focused. His second passion only developed when he felt inhibited by the conservative musical atmosphere of the Conservatoire in Leipzig, where he studied under Carl Reinecke, among others, in 1901-02. Music alone was not enough to sate his restless imagination, but it was only when he found a new motivation – in his urge to contribute to the musical development of his native Lithuania – that he dedicated himself, once more, to composition.

Ciurlionis is recorded in musical history as being the greatest national composer of Lithuania. His posthumous reputation in his homeland is absolute and gained a new impetus after Lithuania's independence in 1990. Yet Ciurlionis' work for his national culture, however, only constitutes a short phase in his biography and most of his output was aimed at an international audience.

Ciurlionis showed his musical talent early on. His father was an organist in the southern Lithuanian spa town of Druskininkai. In 1889, he was admitted to Michal Oginski's music school in Plungė, and it was Oginski who financed his studies at the Conservatoire in Warsaw. In 1894, Ciurlionis began to study piano and was taught composition by Zygmunt Noskowski. Warsaw, where the memory of Chopin was revered, had an excellent conservatoire. For Ciurlionis, the city also provided a window onto the outside world. It was in Warsaw that, besides music, he discovered the international art scene and cemented a lifelong friendship with the young Polish composer Eugeniusz Morawski. For his graduation piece, Ciurlionis composed the cantata *De profundis* in 1899.

In 1900, he composed his first major work, the symphonic poem *Miške (In the Forest)*. It won first prize in a competition organized by Count Zamoyski but, because the contest was only open to Polish composers and Ciurlionis had insisted on being announced as Lithuanian in the programme book, *Miške* was not performed at the concert that had been arranged.

Ciurlionis continued his studies at the Leipzig Conservatoire where, in 1901, he studied composition under the famous composer and pedagogue Carl Reinecke. His relationship with Reinecke was, however, a difficult one, partly because he couldn't relate to the conservatism of his teacher.

Ciurlionis returned to Warsaw in 1902 and earned his living by giving private music lessons. He also discovered dance as an art form through the work of Isadora Duncan. This gave a fresh impetus to his creativity and, throughout 1902 and 1903, he dedicated himself to his new passion: painting. In 1904, he enrolled at the new School of Fine Arts in Warsaw. In the characteristic atmosphere of the *fin de siècle*, he studied Nietzsche and Indian philosophy, and even hypnosis.

The outbreak of the 1905 Revolution in Russia triggered a new sense of political zeal in Ciurlionis. Circumstances compelled the Russian state to relax the strict restrictions that

had previously been placed on minorities and Ciurlionis decided to place his talent at the service of the emancipation of the Lithuanian nation. In 1907 he settled in Vilnius. He devoted himself to the spread of the Lithuanian language to the detriment of Polish, which was preferred by the aristocracy and the middle classes. Sofija Kymantaitė helped him to master the correct Lithuanian pronunciation and, in 1909, she became his wife. Ciurlionis also involved himself in the choir of the *Vilniaus Kanklės* Association (*Zither of Vilnius*), the first organization dedicated to the dissemination of Lithuanian music. Plans to establish a Centre for Lithuanian Culture in Vilnius during his lifetime did not bear fruit.

Parallel to his championing of the Lithuanian language, Ciurlionis also focused on the musical folklore of his country. He collected folk songs and wrote numerous arrangements for choir and piano, incorporating the hallmarks of Lithuanian songs – their simplicity and a tendency towards monotony – into his musical signature. With his wife Sofija, he developed a plan for a Lithuanian opera, *Juratė*, based on a Lithuanian legend about a goddess who lived under the Baltic Sea. In 1906-07, Ciurlionis composed his second great symphonic work *Jura* (*The Sea*).

In the autumn of 1908, Ciurlionis travelled to St Petersburg, where he was welcomed with open arms by the Russian Symbolists. Although they appreciated him as the personification of the ideal unity of the arts, the Russians were more interested in his paintings than in his music. What could have been a breakthrough to an international career was, for Ciurlionis, the end of his development as an artist. In the autumn of 1909 he sank into a depression and a complete state of apathy. He spent his last years in a sanatorium in Warsaw, where he died on 10 April 1911.

Ciurlionis' musical oeuvre comprises 270 compositions and includes 170 short pieces for the piano. Given his training in Warsaw, and the legacy of Chopin, it is hardly surprising that short piano pieces feature so prominently. That the origins of his music can be traced back to Chopin, is something that Ciurlionis shares with Alexander Scriabin and Karol Szymanowski. From 1904 onwards, his piano music became more experimental. By leaning towards polyphonic lines instead of traditional harmonies, Ciurlionis arrived at his own form of atonality, in which melodies and rhythmic repetitions lead the harmony away from tonal patterns.

The Late-Romantic style is easily discernable in the background of Ciurlionis' music. Nevertheless, his best compositions are incomparable. The visionary quality of his music is best reflected in his two symphonic works, *Miške* and *Jura*. Ciurlionis wrote both pieces for a large, Late-Romantic orchestra with an extensive wind section. In *Jura* he added the organ and an extensive percussion section (including cowbells).

Despite the high claims that the Symbolist artists made for music, their ideas only inspired a handful of composers towards a radical revolution in musical language. The Late-Romantic style was generally considered flexible enough to be able to express Symbolist aesthetics in musical terms. Rachmaninov is a clear example. He dedicated two of his greatest works to Symbolist themes, the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead* (named after the paintings of the same name by Arnold Böcklin) and the choral symphony *The Bells* (based on a text by Edgar Allan Poe and translated into Russian by the Symbolist poet Konstantin Balmont). Only Debussy and Scriabin responded to the rallying cry by profoundly altering their musical language. Yet they did not succeed in creating a total revolution and even their most progressive works are understood in terms of their continuity with the past. A true revolution in music would not take place until the modernist experiments of Schoenberg and Stravinsky's generation.

It is hardly surprising that the Late-Romantic style seemed sufficient, at least initially, to capture the ideals of Symbolism. The writers and philosophers responsible for the development of the ideals were, in general, rather conservative in their musical tastes. They did not preach a revolution in music, but cited the music they knew as the artistic measure of the ideal harmony of the arts.

This background is essential in terms of understanding Ciurlionis' place in musical history. If his work sounds familiar, then it is because it is written in a Late-Romantic style that rarely defies traditional conventions. His orchestral style does not have the sensuality of Scriabin, the sensory richness of Strauss, or the elegance of Debussy. It also sounds more monochromatic, despite the frequent short solos for wind instruments. The evocative use of the solo trumpet is reminiscent of Scriabin but, in Ciurlionis' works, every instrumental solo immediately blends back into the elaborate and highly atmospheric total sound. On the other hand, his work is unique and difficult to mistake for the work of any other composer – an originality that comes to the fore in his two symphonic works.

The unmistakably visionary quality of Ciurlionis' symphonic music does not only lie in a few passages of experimental harmony. Those passages certainly exist, but they are very short and are usually explained by the linear voicing that he prefers for intense moments. If the music seeks out the limits of tonality, then it is due to the voice leading. At the end of *Miške*, Ciurlionis clearly confirms the C-major tonality in a sustained tonic pedal. Nor can the root of the music's visionary character be found in its tonal structure. In both *Jura* and *Miške*, he uses motifs as signals – clearly suggested by solo wind instruments. These are not, however, given the chance to grow into fully fledged melodies. The motifs have a panoramic character and are embedded in an original sound world, as it were, without reaching a melodic conclusion. This method creates a constant feeling of expectancy and perspective. The musical time is projected as both linear and as constantly stalling. As a listener, you lose the thread. The themes might be apparent on paper but, at a spontaneous listening, are almost impossible to retain: they are not defined sharply enough. The consequence is that the listener doesn't hear this music as a continuous development of melodic ideas. Critics might argue that this is Ciurlionis' weakness, that he was unable to write haunting melodies. Yet the tenacity with which Ciurlionis followed this approach, leads to an inevitable conclusion: that it constituted an essential feature of his aesthetic. After all, what Ciurlionis succeeds best in doing is presenting the listener with music in which time is not a continuous process. His music comes as close to a spatial effect as music can possibly be. Ciurlionis achieved this not by holding his music at a constant standstill – as likeminded composers such as Arvo Pärt would later do – but through a continuous give and take between tense movement and the stasis of an atmospheric sonority.

The originality of his working method becomes clearer if we compare it with other examples from the same period. The aforementioned *Isle of the Dead* by Rachmaninov contains an asymmetrical rhythmic pattern in written in 5/8 time. This pattern depicts the strokes of the oars belonging to Charon, the ferryman of the Underworld, who transports the souls of the dead to the mysterious island of death in Böcklin's painting. The rhythm creates a continuous movement that propels the music to a crescendo. The music thus expresses the will to live, and ends in the inevitable climax of the *Dies Irae*. Of all the works by Sibelius, it is the symphonic poem *Tapiola* that bears the most resemblance to the symphonic works of Ciurlionis. *Tapiola* deals also with the pantheistic worship of nature as a place of inspiration and revelation and, in the sense that it takes the mystique of the forest as a starting point, is similar to *Miške*. Even so, the

compositions are very different. Sibelius' music is created out of a targeted, motivic-thematic process. Upon listening to Ciurlionis, the musical process seems unpredictable: there is no one overarching, focused evolution towards a climax.

Ciurlionis succeeded in bringing the musical timing of his work as close as possible to the spatial impression of painting. That he achieved this in a style so full of life is his greatest strength. Tension is built up and simultaneously unravelled again. Drama accumulates and surges forth. Ideas are both presented as individual colours and incorporated within the overall colour of the entire orchestra. Only rarely is the music descriptive. In *Jura*, it is impossible not to hear the sound of the waves and the howl of the wind. The overall impression, however, connects more to the mystical idea of the fundamental tone that animates nature or, to quote Alexander Blok: 'the musical wave that wells up from the music of the world.'

We cannot listen to the orchestral works of Ciurlionis without feeling a sense of loss. His productive period was all too brief and his musical potential was curtailed too soon. *Miške* and *Jura* have a rightful place in the canon, alongside contemporaneous masterpieces by Debussy, Rachmaninov, Strauss and Sibelius. Or, at the very least, they are much more than the masterpieces of Lithuanian national music they are venerated for in Ciurlionis' homeland. From his surviving work, it is difficult to tell whether or not he would have chosen the path of modernism. Despite the experimental nature of certain piano pieces, it seems unlikely that he would have relinquished the Late-Romantic idiom. Perhaps, like Sibelius, he would have pulled back and bid farewell to the musical world of modernism? What can be said with certainty is that Ciurlionis possessed a unique talent and that his music was born of his active involvement in the intellectual developments of his time. He was a curious observer of the cultural currents of the *fin de siècle*. His commitment to the foundation of the national culture of Lithuania shows just how hard he could work for his ideals – and Ciurlionis was an idealist in all he undertook. Although he never had the time to realize his full potential, his legacy lives on in the unmistakable signature of his music.