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Baltic Portraits

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**Baltic Portraits: Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis,
Lithuanian Composer and Painter**

by Vance D. Wolverton

Earlier installments in this series of articles explored the music of four Estonian composers (Cyrillus Kreek, *Choral Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1999; Rudolph Tobias, *Choral Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 7, 2000; Urmas Sisask, *Choral Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 8, 2002; Erkki-Sven Tüür, *Choral Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2002) and the patriarch of the Latvian art music tradition, Jāzeps Vītols, *Choral Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2003. The present article moves the focus to Lithuania, featuring the life and works of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis. Like Tobias in Estonia and Vītols in Latvia, Čiurlionis was the founding father of the art music tradition in his native country. Unlike the others, he also founded a national tradition in the visual arts. The prominent Lithuanian musicologist Adeodatas Tauragis (1936-2004) has stated the following about Čiurlionis:

M.K. Čiurlionis's name was like a bright star in the constellation. With his arrival professional Lithuanian national art, just taking its first halting steps, at long last had an artist and composer of rare talent. The significance of Čiurlionis's work for Lithuanian culture was enormous. Rising like a bright star in the firmament, Čiurlionis too quickly burnt out. However, his work, [and] all his activities, remain an inspiring example of selfless creative effort for generations of Lithuanian artists to come. The work of Čiurlionis is an inseparable part of the cultural heritage of our nation—a very valuable contribution to the treasury of world art.¹

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis was born on September 22, 1875, in Varėna, in southern Lithuania, at that time the Kaunas province of the Russian Empire. His father, Konstantinas Čiurlionis, was a church organist. His mother, Adelė Radmanaitė, met his father when she visited the Catholic church where Konstantinas played and was struck by both the sound of the organ and the appearance of the organist.²

Mikalojus was the first of eleven children born to Konstantinas and Adelė; nine of whom survived into adulthood. In 1878, the family moved to Druskininkai, a resort town in the Gardinas province. Life was difficult for the family. Konstantinas earned ten rubles per month as parish organist and Adelė sewed and gave private lessons to supplement her husband's meager income. In Druskininkai, young Mikalojus Konstantinas attended the local primary school where Russian was the language of instruction. "Learning to read a sheet of music, playing the piano, listening to his parents' songs or his father's organ and choir provided the young Čiurlionis with his first glimpses into the world of art."³

From 1889 to 1893 Mikalojus lived in Plungė, on the estate of Duke Mykolas Oginskis, taking music lessons in the estate's orchestral school. Mikalojus played the flute and, from the age of seventeen, he began to earn a regular salary as a member

of the estate's orchestra. Duke Oginskis took a liking to the young flutist and offered to provide him with an allowance to enable him to get a proper education. In this way, at the age of eighteen, Čiurlionis was able to make his way to Warsaw where he enrolled in the Institute of Music. At the institute, Mikalojus initially studied piano, switching to composition after three and a half years. While yet a student, he composed piano fugues, choral works (psalm settings), piano variations, sonatas and other works for piano, and the cantata *De Profundis* for mixed choir and orchestra (1899). He graduated in June of 1899 in the class of Zygmunt Noskowski (1846-1909).

While in Warsaw, Čiurlionis tried his hand at writing—one of his early poems dating from 1899. He also developed an amateur interest in painting and drawing, which he had begun to pursue while living in Plungė. Above all else, he devoted himself to reading, becoming especially enamored of the popular science works on various terrestrial and celestial phenomena by the French astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842-1925). After his graduation from the Institute of Music, Mikalojus continued to reside in Warsaw until the spring of 1901, supporting himself by teaching private lessons.

In 1901-02 Čiurlionis studied counterpoint, composition and instrumentation in Leipzig with Salomon Jadassohn (1831-1902) and Carl Reinecke (1824-1910). In Leipzig he composed major musical compositions that far surpassed his student work, but his future was still unclear to him.⁴ He was offered a position at the Warsaw Institute of Music, but turned it down. Instead, he began attending classes at the Warsaw School of Drawing. In the spring of 1904, while composing his musical masterpiece, the symphonic poem titled *The Sea*, he enrolled in the newly opened Warsaw School of Art. Although he strove to become a professional artist, political developments provided a more concrete direction to his ambitions.

The revolution in Russia and military failure in the war with Japan forced the tsarist government to make liberal concessions to inhabitants of the outlying regions of the empire. In 1905, the Warsaw Lithuanian community was awarded the right to establish a mutual aid society. The Society soon organized a choir and Čiurlionis agreed, offering to become its director without salary. Čiurlionis also became active in the Lithuanian National Revival Movement. The Movement needed musicians and artists, the choirs needed songs, and the books needed illustrators. Čiurlionis received commissions to harmonize folk songs or compose new songs for a Lithuanian school song book, to design a cover for the primer and similar tasks. In these ways, Čiurlionis joined those patriots who had set out to foster a Lithuanian national culture and he soon became a leading figure in that movement.⁵

In the autumn of 1907, Čiurlionis settled in Vilnius where he was able to make a modest living as the conductor of the choir "Vilniaus Kanklės". In addition, he taught private lessons to the choir members, nurtured plans for a future music school and dreamed of organizing large annual concerts of Lithuanian music. He also continued to present piano recitals and conduct the choir, arranging folk songs and composing original works for it. In all of these activities, he was helped by Sofija Kymantaitė, a young author he had met in Vilnius in the summer of 1907.

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With her help, he was able to gain a better mastery of the Lithuanian language and soon found himself falling in love. Throughout 1908, Čiurlionis continued to compose and conduct new choral works set to Sofija's lyrics and, in the spring, he was able to mount the first performance of his cantata *De profundis*. In October 1908, Čiurlionis traveled to St. Petersburg where he was invited to exhibit several of his paintings. He tried to find a permanent position there, but was unsuccessful. He

returned to Lithuania where he and Sofija were married on January 14, 1909. After the wedding, he and Sofija returned to St. Petersburg where, in addition to showing his paintings, his piano preludes and landscapes from *The Sea* were performed in a concert sponsored by the Society of Contemporary Music. In March 1909, the Čiurlionises returned to Lithuania where they collaborated on a collection of essays titled *In Lithuania* including a lengthy chapter by Mikalojus on the

characteristics of Lithuanian folk song and Lithuanian composers.

In late November of 1909, Mikalojus returned to St. Petersburg with the goal of securing a permanent position. Sofija, who was pregnant, remained in Lithuania until such time as her husband could provide adequately for her and the baby. As early as the autumn of 1908, Čiurlionis had suffered from episodes of depression. Shortly after his return to St. Petersburg, weighted down by the lack of prospects and loneliness, he began to suffer bouts of insomnia and his strength began to fail. Sofija traveled to St. Petersburg where she found Mikalojus in poor health and spirits. Following the advice of a psychiatrist, she brought her husband home to Druskininkai. In 1910, he had to be placed in a sanatorium outside Warsaw. While no documents of his medical history have survived, his diagnosis, in modern medical terms, would no doubt be schizophrenia.⁶ Following the collapse that resulted in his hospitalization, he was

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Figure 1. M. K. Čiurlionis, *Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei*, "Agnus Dei," mm. 1-17.

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never able to resume his creative work. In the spring of 1911, he caught a cold that developed into pneumonia. He died on April 10, 1911, and was laid to rest in the Rasos Cemetery in Vilnius on April 13. The remainder of this article will focus on Čiurlionis' choral *oeuvre*.

Čiurlionis' choral compositions can be divided into three groups: original compositions on religious texts (1898–1902), harmonizations of folk songs (1905–08), and original compositions on the words of Sofija Kymantaitė-Čiurlionienė (1908–09).

Three Mass movements, written in 1898 while Čiurlionis was a student at the Warsaw Institute of Music, were published for the first time in 1993. Darius Kučinskis, who edited these works for publication, points out that each of these

pieces (*Kyrie, Gloria, Agnus Dei*) exist in two manuscript versions—with text and without text, suggesting that the composer intended them for performance not only with choir, but also for organ alone.⁷ V. Landsbergis has noted that these "youthful pieces are not lacking in expression and vividness" and that "more than one of them merits performance."⁸ Figure 1 is an excerpt of Čiurlionis' three-voice *Agnus Dei* from 1898. Both

harmonically and formally it is quite sophisticated, even if it were not the work of a student.

Čiurlionis composed two additional Mass movements, *Kyrie II* and *Sanctus*, in Leipzig in 1902. Romaldas Misiukevičius notes that these movements were published in several collections and "are among the most mature and most often performed compositions of Čiurlionis."⁹ Avenir Mikhailov (1914–1983), famed

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Andante con moto *f*

S *f* Sanc - tus, sanc - tus, De-us Sa - ba -

A *f* Sanc - tus, sanc - tus, De-us Sa - ba -

T *f* Sanc - tus, sanc - tus, sanc - tus Do - mi - nus, Do - mi - nus De - us Sa - ba -

B *f* Sanc - tus, sanc - tus, sanc - tus Do - mi - nus, Do - mi - nus De - us Sa - ba -

7

oth. _____ Sanc - tus, sanc - tus, sanc - tus Do - mi - nus.

oth. De - us Sa - ba - oth. Sanc - tus, sanc - tus, sanc - tus Do - mi - nus,

oth. De - us Sa - ba - oth. Sanc - tus, sanc - tus Do - mi - nus,

oth. _____ Sanc - tus Do - mi - nus,

Figure 2. M. K. Čiurlionis, *Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei*, "Sanctus," mm. 1-12.

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conductor of the Leningrad State Glinka Academic Choir, frequently programmed Čiurlionis' *Sanctus* and referred to the piece as one of the most vivid examples of this genre in the literature of music.¹⁰ Čiurlionis' *Sanctus* is not a typical setting of the text. He employs dotted rhythms, *divisi*, and sudden significant changes in dynamics to impart a sense of high drama to the angels' declamation (Figure 2).

The cantata *De profundis* (1899), cantata for mixed choir and orchestra or piano, is the composer's diploma work from the Warsaw Institute of Music. It is his only concerted choral work, all others being unaccompanied. *De profundis* was



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premiered by the composer in Vilnius in 1908 with piano accompaniment, the orchestral parts apparently having been added at a later date. The text of *De profundis* is based upon the first eight lines of Jan Kochanowski's metrical translation into Lithuanian of Psalm 130. V. Landsbergis has described the piece as follows:

The music is vivid, elated, and dramatic, particularly in its opening and closing sections. In its variety of texture and form, as well as the important role assigned to the orchestra and the bold modulations, the work is unmistakably Neo-Romantic, while its culminations are reminiscent of Wagner, whom Čiurlionis admired. In the middle section, where God is addressed not with humility but with rationalist elaboration, Čiurlionis results [sic] to a Handelian fugato in a major key. With the dawning realization of just whom is being addressed, however, an impressive psychological contrast is provided

by the question in male voices, 'Who, then, oh Lord, will be righteous before You?', sounding in the empty space over the remaining tremolo of the 'depths.' The reprise, slightly modified, expanded, and dramatized, ends on a grim note, full of resignation, offering no answer and no consolation.¹¹

De profundis has been recorded by the Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra and Kaunas State Choir, conducted by Juozas Domarkas. Figure 3 is an excerpt from the opening of *De profundis*.

The second group of Čiurlionis' choral works consists of harmonizations of folk songs (1905-08). In this group, there are 26 pieces for treble voices, 25 pieces for mixed choir, and 12 pieces for men's choir. These pieces were composed during the time Čiurlionis was the leader of the choir of the Lithuanian Society of Mutual Aid in Warsaw and, later, the choir of the "Vilnius Kanklės" Society. These choirs lacked for Lithuanian repertoire, especially folk songs adapted for

choir. Čiurlionis took very seriously the task of providing an artistically satisfying and appropriately challenging body of folk song adaptations. Regarding this task he wrote the following to his peers: "Let's not forget the big responsibility that we have to bear. We are the first Lithuanian composers, and the coming generations will use our works as examples. We are a kind of link between folk songs and future Lithuanian music...."¹²

The pieces for treble voices were intended for use in the new Lithuanian schools that were being established after many years of czarist prohibition. These were published in the small volume *Vieversėlis* [The Skylark] in 1908. Although they are uncomplicated settings intended for inexperienced singers, they could also be sung by adults. The harmonizations for mixed and men's voices are significantly more sophisticated, characterized by more elaborate textures (canons, counterpoint) and daring chromatic harmonies that were signal in Lithuanian music of the period. These stylistic tendencies are derived from the

Figure 3. M. K. Čiurlionis, *De profundis*, mm. 1-10.

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Figure 4. M. K. Čiurlionis, *Bėkit Bareliai*, mm. 1-15.
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sutartinė, a genre of polyphonic folk song unique to Lithuania. The principal characteristic of the sutartinė is its construction on simultaneous major seconds that are not resolved. Čiurlionis' mastery of contrapuntal technique is clearly illustrated in *Bėkit, Bareliai* [To the End of the Field] for four-part men's voices unaccompanied (Figure 4). A translation of the text follows:

Move quickly, mow,
 Move quickly, mow,
 O the end of the field.
 Move quickly, mow.

Translation by Joseph A. Graves.
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Figure 5 presents *Siuntė Mane Močiūtė* [My Mother Sent Me Away], a charming and harmonically sophisticated miniature for four-part mixed voices unaccompanied. A translation of the text follows:

Mama sent me to the sea to fetch
 some water
 with a linden bucket of white on a
 copper-hooked pole to carry it.
 As I was scooping up the water, a
 black rowboat drew near.

In that black boat sat a young man.
 "Come here, young maiden," he said.
 "Come sit in the boat with me."

Translation by Joseph A. Graves.
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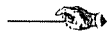
Both *Bėkit, Bareliai* and *Siuntė Mane Močiūtė* illustrate Čiurlionis' understanding of the archaic modal character of Lithuanian folk songs and his ability to emphasize that character through harmonic means and textural means.

In like manner, each of Čiurlionis' folk song harmonizations is compositionally unique. The most recent (1995) and complete edition of Čiurlionis' folk song settings is *Liaudies dainos chorams* [Folk Songs for Choirs] published by the firm of Jonas Petronis, Kaunas. All 25 of the harmonizations for mixed choir have been recorded by the chamber choir *JAUNA MUZIKA*, under the direction of Vaclovas Augustinas.¹³

The third group of Čiurlionis' choral output, dating from 1908–09 and mark-

Figure 5. M. K. Čiurlionis, *Siuntė Mane Močiūtė*, mm. 1-9.
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- Gostautas (Vilnius: Vaga, 1994), 30.
3. Vytautas Landsbergis: *M.K. Čiurlionis—Time and Content* (Vilnius: Lituanius, 1992), 25. Landsbergis, an accomplished concert pianist and respected musicologist, served as the first president of Lithuania following the re-establishment of independence in 1991. He has also recorded the piano works of M.K. Čiurlionis on EMI Records #66791 (2001).
 4. Vytautas Landsbergis: *M.K. Čiurlionis—Time and Content* (Vilnius: Lituanius, 1992), 31.
 5. Vytautas Landsbergis: *M.K. Čiurlionis—Time and Content* (Vilnius: Lituanius, 1992), 32.
 6. Vytautas Landsbergis: *M.K. Čiurlionis—Time and Content* (Vilnius: Lituanius, 1992), 45.
 7. Darius Kučinskas: *Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei* [introductory remarks] (Kaunas: Petronis Editions, 1998), 2.
 8. Vytautas Landsbergis: *M.K. Čiurlionis—Time and Content* (Vilnius: Lituanius, 1992), 65.
 9. Romaldas Misiukevičius: "Preface" to *Religious Choir Music* (Kaunas: Petronis Editions, 2000), 6.
 10. Romaldas Misiukevičius: "Preface" to *Religious Choir Music* (Kaunas: Petronis Editions, 2000), 6.
 11. Vytautas Landsbergis: *M.K. Čiurlionis—Time and Content* (Vilnius: Lituanius, 1992), 66.
 12. M.K. Čiurlionis (translated by Romaldas Misiukevičius): *Apie muziką ir dailę*, 315.
 13. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis: *Symphonic Poems, Fugues, String Quartet, Piano Works, Folk Songs for Choirs* [three CD set], (Vilnius: Semplice, 2000).
 14. Vytautas Landsbergis: *Čiurlionio Muzika* [The Music of Čiurlionis], monograph (Vilnius: Vaga, 1985), 320.



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