

Signs of Identity in Lithuanian Music of the Beginning of the 21st Century

JUDITA ŽUKIENĖ

Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre

ABSTRACT: In Lithuania as well as in the other countries of the Baltic region, the question of national music identity remains notably important. However, when one starts to analyse the problem of identity of current Lithuanian music, its interdisciplinary character becomes evident. Apparently, the word 'identity' itself will become one of the signs of identity of the 21st century, as this topic lately is especially relevant in research of different branches of sciences (notably in the humanities and social sciences) in the context of phenomena of globalization. In an attempt to define a field of search for identity related only to music, different angles – cultural, social, ethical, local, spiritual, etc. – are revealed. How they manifest in Lithuanian music of the latter decade? Does Lithuanian music identity exist? Does it fluctuate? These questions will be attempted to be answered in this article, by analysing the situation of Lithuanian music at the beginning of the 21st century, including specific pieces of works of composers.

KEYWORDS: *Lithuanian music, identity of Lithuanian music*

110

THE SEARCH for identity always supposes a certain paradox. Searching for identity of a certain object and seeking to define specific, individual features, we deduce a certain code of identity and separate features we are able to name as signs of identity. On the other side, determining the entirety of features, suitable for accurate characterization of the chosen object and developing it, we quasi decipher, decentralize the whole code and resolve it into components which allow to identify this object with other objects and to discover ledges which unite them. Thus we do not lose links with context and entirety and escape problems of isolation.

In the process of identification, we start the research with the question 'what is it?', and plunge into long and sometimes unpredictable searches, the success and quality of which is determined by contexts. In an attempt to define a field of search for identity related only to music, different angles – cultural, social, ethical, local, spiritual, etc. – are revealed.

CONTEXTS AND SIGNS OF LITHUANIAN MUSIC IDENTITY

If we choose Lithuanian professional music of the beginning of the 21st century as an object for such review, we are able to identify it in

different aspects, searching for signs of its identification, for intercultural and interdisciplinary correlations, thus deriving its identity code. Having a global look, after many parameters Lithuanian music itself is to be identified as part of European music, on a larger scale – as part of Western music, and on the largest scale – as part of world music, and interactions happen in both directions.

World music ↔ Western music ↔ European music ↔ Lithuanian music

Researching interactions of Lithuanian music and European music, which allow the former to be considered as part of the latter, one can determine many points of the touch, which can be treated as signs of identity. As cultural aspects that unite these objects, historical experience, influential and vital conception of tradition, general tendencies of music style, choice of technologies, general usage of musical genres, musical instruments and other components are to be treated. Naming the social aspect, we bear in mind models and strategies of functioning of music in society. The religious aspect: a large part of Europe is united by the Christian tradition, and Lithuania actively practises its Catholic branch. Local aspect: Lithuania is part of Europe.

111

Naturally, it would be possible to find more aspects which unite Lithuanian and European music in general. In these latter decades more and more of it uncloze as Lithuanian composers more actively anchor in the European music environment.

LITHUANIAN IDENTITY OF MUSIC

However, a question arises here: does Lithuanian music identity still exist? What can we call Lithuanian music? These questions were relevant not only today. Very savage discussion on these topics was raised in the Lithuanian press in 1938. At that time, when Lithuania celebrated its 20th anniversary of Independence, the supreme Lithuanian composers Juozas Gruodis, Vladas Jakubėnas, Vytautas Bacevičius, Jeronimas Kačinskas and others participated in this dispute.

This year, as Lithuania commemorates the 20th anniversary of restoration of its Independence (1990), these questions are also relevant. Composers of different generations perceive nationalism of music in different ways and operate with various signs of national identity, still they do not deny the fact that the very identity exists.

Raising the question what Lithuanian music identity is, we find different strategies of sign combinations in the works of various authors. Still in the first half of the 20th century, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (in 1910; cf. Čiurlionis 1960: 295–316) and Gruodis (in 1932; cf. Ambrazas 1965: 216–223) suggested a strategy of creation of Lithuanian music, based on the same values. Usage of Lithuanian folk song (as the basic tradition) and striving of creation of modern music intertwine in it. Similar tendencies are found in the music of the composers of later generations. Analysing Lithuanian music of the 20th century with aspect of national identity, musicologist Vita Gruodytė named four attributes:

1. Imprint of folk music tradition in professional music;
2. Complicated but continuous search of modernity;
3. Moderation which switch to conservatism on occasion;
4. Oppositional thinking which is entirely determined by the historical experience (cf. Gruodytė 2008: 10–11).

After studying Lithuanian music features continually named by Lithuanian composers and musicologists of different generations, such compendium can be formed: mental spirit of the old layers of Lithuanian folklore (cf. Daunoravičienė 2009: 253), monotony (especially that of rhythm; cf. Čiurlionis 1960: 302–303), minor tune, lyricism, tragedy (cf. Narbutienė 2005: 272–273), spirituality, metaphysics of musical ideas.

IDENTITY OF LITHUANIAN MUSIC OF THE BEGINNING OF THE 21st CENTURY

After the reinstatement of Independence and opening of the walls, Lithuanian composers visibly turned towards Western music. At the beginning of the 21st century Lithuanian music is already characterized as aesthetically and technically “pluralistic, currently lacking one or few striking composers who would represent its national sound” (Goštautienė 2006: 164). Such critical evaluation was delivered for presentation of Baltic music in *MaerzMusik* festival in Berlin (2003); in this presentation, the so far stereotyped ‘Baltic’ sound, the cliché of which, according to Rūta Goštautienė, “is woven of characteristics of spirituality, meditation, spontaneity and minimalism” (Goštautienė 2006: 164), was missed.

Pluralism, processes prompted by globalization, are currently named as attributes of creation of the contemporary young Lithuanian composers’ generation. Writing about the composers of the young generation, Vita Gruodytė proposes:

This music is surprisingly easy, with no apparent deliberation, nostalgia or any fear of losing the national identity. They seem to have little concern for musical nationality – the issue that was central to most discussions in the 20th century Lithuanian music. These composers are more pragmatic and they belong to the global world, where art is not bound to a specific place, where being here and there, has become an inevitability, not an idiosyncrasy. The concept of collage is just as prevalent in contemporary Lithuanian music as it is in other Western music of the 21st century. This music no longer pursues stylistic purity and feels no former tension between academicism and its oppositions (Gruodytė 2008: 12).

Writing this, the musicologist meant the composers who were born between 1972–1982 (Raminta Šerkšnytė, Vytautas V. Jurgutis, Marius Baranauskas, Martynas Bialobžeskis, Žibuoklė Martinaitytė, Giedrius Svilainis, Justė Janulytė and others).

Similar tendencies can be noticed in the creation of the youngest generation. These are the composers who have just finished or are finishing their studies (Albertas Navickas, Mykolas Natalevičius, Rūta Vitkauskaitė, born around 1985). As Asta Pakarklytė wrote, their music

[...] synchronically coincides with the vivid tendency of the 21st century global music scene, described in a variety of names, like polystylism, eclecticism, pluralism, postmodernism or post-history, when the composer's oeuvre (or individual pieces) represent an intersection of different genres, styles, media, materials, composing techniques and conceptual contents (it becomes important to choose and merge the elements, the interaction of which would produce a new artistic artefact) (Pakarklytė 2009/2010).

Hence, in the creation of young composers various signs of identity of Western professional music intertwine, allowing to identify the very Lithuanian musical creation with Western musical culture.

NATIONAL IDENTITY OF LITHUANIAN MUSIC OF THE BEGINNING OF THE 21st CENTURY

It would be wrong and too categorical to state that the question of national identity at the beginning of the 21st century became irrelevant. Nationality in Lithuanian music continues to unfold with different signs of identity and in the creation of various Lithuanian composers. However, the attitude towards Lithuanian music identity visibly changes. As Lithuanian philosophers and culturologists notice, processes of rethinking of national identity happen in our culture in a broad sense.

Analysing national identity of contemporary Lithuanian professional music, we choose parameters which are mentioned in the works of the

researchers of different countries as the most optimal for defining national music identity and which should be treated as signs of national identity: language, location, history, culture, folklore, mentality, etc.

Distinguished Lithuanian poet and literaturologist Tomas Venclova, when asked what constitutes the essence of Lithuanian identity, had proposed that “first of all it is the language and certain historical memories” (quoted after Navickaitė 2009). The Lithuanian language still functions as text in Lithuanian vocal music and as titles in instrumental music. Even formal invoking of language all by itself imparts a sign of a certain nationality.

Lithuanian choral music can be considered a certain sign of Lithuanian identity. As Eero Tarasti has noticed, after the “singing revolutions in the Baltic countries, namely choral music had gained significance of music identity of the Baltic countries” (Tarasti 2002: 167).

Particular location, the directly mentioned name of Lithuania or other place-names lately occur in Lithuanian music less often. For the current generation of composers, affected by globalization, concretization of location is less important; names of locations seldom appear in the titles of compositions or in the texts (Algirdas Martinaitis, *The Abduction of Europe from Lithuania / Europos pagrobimas iš Lietuvos*, 2001; Vidmantas Bartulis, *Our Lithuania / Mūsų Lietuva*, 2003; Giedrius Kuprevičius, *Three Still-Lives with Lithuania / Trys natiurmortai su Lietuva*, 2003).

History, culture and folklore – these are the three fields which can be generalized as cultural signs of a certain nation which mark tradition. Here we can observe traditions which are very different. For example, works of Lithuanian literature, which became the basis for musical compositions, can be treated as cultural signs. We find such choice in the creation of classics of Lithuanian music, as well as in works of the youngest composers. Thus the poem *The Year (Metai)* by the 18th-century Lithuanian writer Kristijonas Donelaitis became the basis for four compositions by Bronius Kutavičius (b. 1932), which are entitled according to the names of the parts of the poem: *Merry-Making of the Spring (Pavasario linksmybės*, 2005), *Summer Works (Vasaros darbai*, 2006), *Goods of the Autumn (Rudenio gėrybės*, 2007), *Brooding of Winter (Žiemos rūpesčiai*, 2008). And the novel *I Hit It (Kliudžiau)* by Jonas Biliūnas, the writer of the end of the 19th – the beginning of the 20th century, became an inspiration for the same-name opera by Rūta Vitkauskaitė (b. 1984).

Events related to Lithuanian history also appear in contemporary Lithuanian music, however, they are mostly associated with certain anniversaries and important dates. Such examples are the opera by Kutavičius *Ignis et fides* (2003), related to the 750th anniversary of the coronation of Lithuanian king Mindaugas, and the opera by Martinaitis *The Scyscraper of the World (Pasaulio dangoraižis*, 2009), dedicated to the

150th birth anniversary of Vincas Kudirka – one of the most prominent characters of the Lithuanian national revival of the end of the 19th century, and to the 120th anniversary of the magazine *Varpas (The Bell)* which was edited by him.

Elements of Lithuanian folklore, especially of musical folklore, are invoked as attributes which apparently represent our national culture. They are chosen as the most traditional sign of national identity and are used openly, visibly declaring the cultural dependence of the composition. This is particularly popular in the choral music (for example, works of Vaclovas Augustinas, Giedrius Svilainis). Also the effect of the unexpected is achieved when elements of folklore are collated with stylistically distant phenomena (composition *Sutartinės party* by Linas Rimša). Exploitation of timbres of Lithuanian folk instruments (especially of folk cither, *kanklės* and reed-pipe, *birbynė*) can also be considered as analogical signs of national identity. However, in the 21st-century Lithuanian music they are often related not only to the sound of Lithuanian music, but literally to Lithuanian sound (*Crumbling of My Fluttering Wings / Mano plazdančių sparnų trupėjimas*, by Indrė Stakvilė).

The composition *Our Lithuania* by Vidmantas Bartulis, in which many national identity signs are assembled, can be considered as an imperative example of displaying 'Lithuanianess'. Classifying these signs we find all signs of national identity discussed above: Language – Lithuanian; Location – Lithuania; History – dedicated to the 750th anniversary of coronation of Lithuanian king Mindaugas; Folklore – Lithuanian folk texts, melodies, folk music singer among other performers, folk instruments. Without a doubt this is the occasional composition, its premiere happened during the World Lithuanian Song Festival just four days before the definite coronation anniversary in the very symbolical place, in the Cathedral Square in Vilnius. In the context of this paper, this composition is to be rated as an example of declarative national identity.

Language, location, related to a certain nation, national history, cultural objects (first of all art objects) and folk creation are definite attributes of nationalism; understandable as possible signs of national identity they, without doubt, exist in contemporary Lithuanian music. Thus national identity of Lithuanian music exists, but it changes gradually, gaining new signs and meanings. In the 21st-century Lithuanian music and in musicology, the mental level of nationalism is more and more being emphasized and is identified as a certain part of our national identity. This idea, which was advocated by the interwar avant-garde representatives Bacevičius and Kačinskas, is particularly relevant in the world outlook of the current young generation of Lithuanian composers. According to Daunoravičienė, Rytis Mažulis (the Head of the Composition department at the Lithuanian academy of music and theatre) and his students "believe, that certain genetic Lithuanianess exists, and it manifests itself in the level of artistic thinking, and that music which is not directly based on

folklore or national tradition, can be perceived as essentially Lithuanian” (Daunoravičienė 2009: 253). It is to be associated to the above mentioned features of composing of Lithuanian music, such as minor scale or metaphysics of musical thought. Such signs can be found in the creation of many Lithuanian composers (Onutė Narbutaitė, Raminta Šerkšnytė, Justė Janulytė, Marius Baranauskas, Ramūnas Motiekaitis and others).

This level is the most difficult to grasp or to define; it is rather anticipated than identified objectively. It is extremely intertwined with other signs of identity from outside. When tendencies of pluralism and eclecticism prevail, developing phenomena of globalization or strivings for cosmopolitanism transform into a very diverse image of creation of Lithuanian composers. Alongside the signs of Lithuanian identity, co-cultural ones, bonding our music with European, Western and other music traditions, function as well. Besides the Lithuanian language, the English language in our vocal music or composition titles is used more often. During the last two decades after the historical-political situation changed, the composers create more church music; also, various creative technological tendencies, which effect Lithuanian authors, become signs of different identities in Lithuanian music.

CONCLUSIONS

Lithuanian music of the 21st century is an inseparable part of Baltic, European, Western music, and this interaction functions in two directions.

Influenced by tendencies of world music of the beginning of the 21st century, Lithuanian music is distinguished for its openness, pluralism of styles and ideas; signs of different cultures, nations and styles can be found in it, and they are also part of the identity of contemporary Lithuanian music.

However, national Lithuanian music identity also exists. Gaining new quality and perceived as ‘certain genetic Lithuanianness’, it displays itself in different musical, cultural and aesthetical parameters.

A joyful fact is that the question of Lithuanianness is still relevant for students of composition, who positively study Lithuanian musical folklore (especially glees). When they leave for studies in European high music schools after the Erasmus exchange programme, young composers actively organise presentations of contemporary Lithuanian music to their foreign colleagues. We receive requests for lectures introducing Lithuanian music from foreign universities. Hence Lithuanian signs of musical identity are still relevant.

References

Ambrazas, A. J. (ed., 1965). *Juozas Gruodis. Straipsniai, laiškai, užrašai, amžininkų atsiminimai* [Juozas Gruodis. Articles, Letters, Notes, Contemporary Memoirs]. Vilnius: Vaga.

Čiurlionis, M. K. (1960). *Apie muziką ir daile. Laiškai, užrašai ir straipsniai* [About Music and Painting. Letters, Notes and Articles]. Vilnius: Valstybinė grožinės literatūros leidykla.

Narbutienė, O. (ed., 2005). *Vytautas Bacevičius. Gyvenimo partitūra, I tomas* [Vytautas Bacevičius. The Score of Life, Vol. 1]. Vilnius: Petro ofsetas.

Daunoravičienė, G. (2009). J. Gruodžio kompozitorių mokykla ir jos šakos [The composers school of J. Gruodis and its branches]. In: A. J. Ambrazas (ed.). *Juozas Gruodis epochų sankirtose. Straipsniai. Atsiminimai. Dokumentai* [Juozas Gruodis at the Intersection of the Periods. Articles. Reminiscences. Documents]. Vilnius: Lietuvos muzikos ir teatro akademija, pp. 226–253.

Goštautienė, R. (2006). Keletas variacijų kanono tema: aštuntojo dešimtmečio lietuvių muzikos pagrindinė srovė ir jos recepcija [A few canonic variations: Lithuanian musical mainstream of the 70s and its reception]. *Lietuvos muzikologija*, Vol. 7, pp. 153–169.

Gruodytė, V. (2008). Between national identity and musical modernity. Lithuanian music during one century. *World New Music Magazine*, No. 18, pp. 4–13.

Navickaitė, R. (2009). Tautos identitetas yra gyvas daiktas [The national identity is a living thing]. *Atgimimas*, 07.10. <http://www.atgimimas.lt/Diskusija/2009-metai-liepos/Tautos-identitetas-yra-gyvas-daiktas>

Pakarklytė, A. (2009/2010). *New [Re]Generation of Lithuanian Contemporary Music. Lithuanian Music Link No. 17, October 2009 / March 2010* <http://www.mic.lt/en/classical/info/935>

Tarasti, E. (2002). *Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.