The Study of the Latvian Concept Music of the Early 21ˢᵗ Century. Terminological Issue

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ABSTRACT: Concept is a new term applied to the Latvian music of the early 21ˢᵗ century. The idea of concept is borrowed from visual arts. It refers to the conceptual art that emerged in the late 1960s in the USA and in Europe. It focuses on verbal ideas and treats an artwork as a medium for transmission of these ideas. The conceptual art suggests a new form of art perception: these artworks should be regarded not only as visual ones, but mostly as ideas that can be expressed linguistically.

Likewise, some of the new Latvian composers, Andris Dzenītis, Mārtiņš Viļums, Santa Bušs, etc., suggest that verbally explicated ideas are crucial in some of their instrumental works. It is recommended to the listener to learn about its content in linguistic terms. Although the idea is expressed musically, it might not be perceived adequately if the listener ignores the concept stated by the author in words. The main link of conceptual art with the concept music would be a meaning that demands a verbal explanation.

The term *concept* can be transmitted from the theory of art to music without changing its main theoretical aspects. Borrowing of the term would mean that there is a shift of media from visual to acoustic without essential changes of the term itself as it is formed in a wide range of art theory sources. The large supply of texts dedicated to the conceptual art and its developed definitions would serve as a firm basis for this research.

KEYWORDS: *programmatism, conceptual art, semiotics of music, Latvian new music*

THE subject of the research came into my mind when I realized that almost all the Latvian music nowadays has an authors' comment published in the concert booklet. This written text explains the idea of the piece. Obviously this documentation of the idea is necessary because without it the listener could be lost – he would not be able to fully understand the sense of the piece.

This kind of music that has a linguistically expressed idea and needs a written comment will be denoted 'concept music'. And it has also some other features that will be stated below.

Concept is a working term at the moment: it is sometimes found in the young composers' utterances and sporadically also in some press materials, but it is not fully adapted in the language of musicology yet.

The term of concept is borrowed from the visual arts. It refers to the conceptual art that emerged in the late 1960s in the USA and in Europe. Conceptualism focused on verbal ideas and treated an artwork as a

medium to transmit these verbal ideas (cf. Lippard 1973, Morgan 1996, etc.). However, almost all the ideas of artworks can be expressed linguistically. The concept in its turn **needs** to be explained in words, because there is a semantic code that has to be unlocked or told about in some other semiotic system (cf. Monelle 2000: 14–17). In other words, this idea is not semantically transparent.

According to this definition, one could call a piece of concept music a musical work that has a verbally stated idea that is coded. Besides, in music the concept means also an original idea, because, for instance, a sonata or symphony, are also conceptions. In contrast, the concept is a unique idea.

I have been asked very frequently why the term of programmatism cannot be used. The argument is that the programmatic works also have a "preface written in intelligible language" as stated by Franz Liszt (Scruton 2001: 396; Krauklis 1999: 11). So the programmatic music also has a written comment, and it is not semantically transparent, but encoded: the listener needs to read, for instance, the program of the *Symphonie fantastique* to understand the music.

One of the reasons why I am not using the term of 'programmatism' is because the young composers refuse to use it. Secondly, I would like to show a difference, moreover, to make a strict demarcation line between terms of program and concept. I would hold upon the strict interpretation of the term 'programmatic music', knowing at the same time that there are several definitions of it and a large theoretically 'dark zone' that leads us far away from the strict interpretation (cf. Orrey 1975; Krauklis 1999).

I would insist that a programmatic piece is a piece that has a program, and use the term 'program' to signify a plot told in a linear way. In other words, it would be the piece that illustrates a succession of events, so to say a story in progress. This progression is found in the written comment, and in music, too.

The program works in time, but the concept represents a compact idea, a 'body' of thought that is not represented in music in progress. Sure, in words the concept will be told in a linear way, too, because there is no other way to tell, but it will be embodied in the musical material as a shorter or longer formula that affects the musical material as a whole. In music the concept could be called holistic.

In conclusion of the theoretical section of this report let me note once again the work definition of the concept music. It is a music that has a verbally stated and encoded idea that is holistically represented in music, and that is original or unique.

There is a small difficulty in this definition because of the code: there are also pieces that have a concept, but do not actually oblige the listener to decode the message. Some concepts can be ignored by a listener without disturbing his understanding of the piece.

I suppose that one of the features of these pieces can still be the code, even if the listener does not have to break it.

Let us pass now to the examples of the Latvian concept music. The piece *Simurg* for ensemble (2005) by a Latvian composer Mārtiņš Viļums (b. 1974) shows the holistic aspect of the concept, and its harmonic code. The composer invites the listener to contemplate on the nature of an ancient Persian deity named Simurg. The nature of this deity is described as a union of all the souls of believers, of people who are searching for their God.

The concept is holistic (it affects the musical material as a whole): namely, the composer has structured the harmony of this piece after formula "all is one"[1], referring to Simurgs' nature. The harmony of each section of this piece has a single chord. Each chord, based on spectral or other harmonic principles, represents the union of many souls.

One can see that in this concept there is no story or succession of events, but a compact idea that can be shortly formulated as "all souls are one God", found in the harmonic structure. Although the idea is adapted from a legend about birds travelling to a sacred hill to search for their God Simurg, the composer has used only one aspect of this story.

The next example is *Stanza I 31.12.99* for string quartet and piano (1999). The piece is written by Latvian composer Andris Dzenītis (b. 1978). It is a representation of the great passions and tragic events of the 20th century, observed "from a cosmic height".[2] The piece is called *Stanza* or 'space', because the 20th century represents here a space of human passions, in contrast with a divine character that lies beyond this space.

According to the composers' idea, the title of the piece contains the last date of the century[3] as a sign that it has ended. So it is a closed space of events, and therefore can be regarded distantly. The idea is represented in two layers in the score: human passions are represented by a string quartet, but the divine and distant part is played by piano. Again, one can see that this concept is not a linear story, but a compact idea of two dimensions. This idea affects the musical material as a whole. The concept is vertical or spatial, not chronological.

The title of the piece, in its turn, gives no concrete explication of the above stated idea. Although the musical material reveals the two dimensions quite clearly, the authors' idea might not be transparent to the listener.

Another example is the piece *Ad(vanta)GE oN ClaY* for chamber orchestra (2009) by a young Latvian composer Santa Bušs (b. 1981). It refers to the logic of a tennis play. The music represents a specific moment of the play: after achieving 40 points, the session of the play ends and the result is counted as drawn. Then a new session starts during which a player has an 'advantage' to win the game. In short, the piece represents a rather unstressful 'play'

[1] Citations are documented during interviews with Mārtiņš Viļums on 10 July 2009, 6 November 2009 and 5 March 2010 in Riga and in the electronic letter to the author on 11 May 2010.

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[2] Citation is documented during interviews with Andris Dzenītis on 8 February and 13 November 2010 in Riga and in the electronic letter to the author on 24 December 2010.

[3] Mathematically, 31 December is not the last date of the 20th century.

until 'achieving 40 points', and a more dynamic fight that follows it. The form and dramaturgy of the piece is built referring to this idea.[4]

[4] Citation is documented during an interview with Santa Bušs on 5 February 2010 in Riga and in the electronic letters to the author on 18 October and 2 November 2010.

But the signs of the music do not reflect a realistic tennis play. There is no logic of a tennis match that would be developed as a linear narrative. The piece signifies the two modes of a play and sounds like two different spaces of musical events. So there are thematic elements and an action, but no story.

Another example is the piece *The Sense of the Past* (2001) by Mārtiņš Viļums. The semantic code of this composition in one sentence is an obscure space of memories where images emerge and fade away. This idea is represented in the score by a technique of composition.

This piece has a holistic concept, too. Although there are memories coming in and passing out of the space, the music does not represent any succession of events, just the general character of the composers' world of memories.

Finalizing my report, let me suggest once again to signify or to categorize the pieces analyzed above as 'concept music', regarding their specific features: they have a verbally stated, coded and compact or holistic idea instead of a linear story that draws a demarcation line between concept music and programmatic pieces. And this idea is also original or unique, so it cannot be compared, for instance, with traditional conceptions of sonata or symphony.

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