

## INSPIRED MUSIC

### 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Čiurlionis Ensemble

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IN 1950, after one of the Čiurlionis Ensemble Lithuanian folklore concerts In New York's Carnegie Hall, a critic for the New York Herald Tribune wrote:

The Čiurlionis Ensemble is a rich-voiced, ringing choral group, and under Mr. Mikulskis direction their work had great bounce and style. Robust sentiment is their specialty, but the voices, in the nostalgic numbers, also sang sweetly, cleanly and in tune. Their work has color, too, and their musical animation is of a kind that rehearsal alone cannot inspire. The Čiurlionis Ensemble sings folk music only, but sings it well...

Never, possibly, has a critic found more suitable and fitting words to describe the art of the Čiurlionis Ensemble as has this New York Herald Tribune writer. If it is possible to express and demonstrate through music the feelings, spirit, and ideals of a most unhappy and tortured nation — one which is desperately fighting for its rights — the Čiurlionis Ensemble does it.

Like a symbol of Lithuania's unfortunate destiny, the Ensemble did more to bring Lithuanian hardships and sufferings before the eyes of civilized mankind than did all the newspapers or radio of the world. It demonstrated the axiom that the nation with a love of music and beauty cannot be conquered — no one can kill a spirit — for it lives on forever.

THE HISTORY of the Čiurlionis Ensemble is closely linked with the tragedy of Lithuania. The Ensemble was organized in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, at the same time that the Communist troops overran Lithuania and the flourishing life of a freedom-loving independent nation turned into the nightmare of cruel and barbaric slavery caused by the communistic invaders of the Soviet Union.

Between 1940 and 1944, throughout the Nazi and Communist occupations, the Ensemble, despite the attendant dangers involved, urged the people of Lithuania to fight for their freedom.

At the close of World War II, the Ensemble found its way to the West. In Western Germany the Ensemble effected a complete reorganization, and under the patronage of General de Tassigny commander of the French Occupation Forces, gave more than 300 concerts in Western Europe appearing in the concert halls of Vienna, Berlin, Stuttgart, Munich, Bayreuth, Frankfurt, Hamburg and many other cities where they were enthusiastically received by American, French, Swiss, and German music critics. Many of these concerts were performed before members of the U.S. armed forces and will be remembered by them as one of the finest spectacles of the continent.

In the fall of 1949, through the generosity of many friends, the Ensemble was able to settle in Cleveland. Since its arrival in the United States., the Čiurlionis Ensemble has appeared in most of the well-known cultural centers of Northern America giving more than 100 concerts. Capacity audiences filled New York's Carnegie Hall, Chicago's Civic Opera House and Orchestra Hall, Philadelphia's Academy of Music, Toronto's Massey Hall, Detroit's Music Hall and many others — wherever the Ensemble rendered its unusual, interesting and skillful performance.

On May 15, 1955, in the famous Severance Hall of Cleveland, the Čiurlionis Ensemble gave its 15th anniversary concert.

The ČIURLIONIS Ensemble, named after the 1 great Lithuanian composer and painter M K. Čiurlionis (1875—1911), is a choral group of 75 voices. Its repertoire consists of Lithuanian folk songs, folk dances, and folk music played on ancient Lithuanian musical instruments dating back to the ages before Christianity.

The organization, leadership, and direction of the Ensemble's musical achievements are the results of the continuous work of Ensemble's conductor. Mr. Alfonsas Mikulskis, who has devoted all his efforts to collecting, arranging, interpreting, and presenting Lithuanian folklore, not only to his own people but to the world. Through his efforts hundreds of songs, ballads, and selections of dance music were formed into a cohesive whole, giving a clear picture of the aspirations, character, and unconquerable spirits of the Lithuanian people.

Altogether, more than half a million people have witnessed the Ensemble's performances, not counting several appearances on the NBC television network throughout the whole country. In Rochester, N. Y., a reporter for a local newspaper wanted to know what keeps the Ensemble together since its members never profit from the concerts and often have to contribute their own money in order to cover costs and enable the Ensemble to travel on expensive long distance tours.

IT TOOK a very, very long time to make thi.« reporter believe that nothing but the love of freedom, the love of beautiful Lithuania, the moral obligation to help fight communism and to help enslaved nations regain their independence has kept this group together 15 years.

After a concert in Hartford, Conn., U.S. Congressman Sadlak, who witnessed our performance, delivered the following speech in the U.S. Congress (Congressional Record, Vol. 99, No. 26 Feb. 16. 1953, p. 1124):

...There then was presented a varied program of Lithuanian folk songs and danccs by various ensembles of this large chorus dressed In multicolored, festive native costumes. The songs varied from sweet to happy and sad, and though the singers tried to show happiness on their faces, their songs reflected sad feelings In their hearts for those with whom their thoughts were on this day, for the Ciurlionis ensemble consists of recently displaced persons who have somehow escaped to freedom from their native Lithuania and have found refuge in our midst.

Their voices individually and in chorus sang out a plea for justice and freedom to their native Lithuania which today is being physically obliterated but their spirit and determination to once again have the freedom won in 1918 and which has been forcibly taken from them by the Soviets is strong...

In Bellevue, Ohio, (every 4th of July) a gigantic commeration of the American Independence Day is held. Some 20 thousand people from all over Ohio gather here every year to celebrate the greatest of all American national holidays. This year, the sponsor of this event, the American Legion, invited the Čiurlionis Ensemble to perform on this occasion. When the Ensemble expressed its doubts as to whether Lithuanian songs sung in Lithuanian would fit well into a concert dedicated to commemorate the American Independence Day, it received following answer:

.. .We had the pleasure of hearing your program during the National Art and Music Teachers Assn Convention in Cleveland. We greatly enjoyed your art and such specific atmosphere which was created by your music. It was something unusual, and we were deeply moved by your approach to combine your musical renderings with Lithuania's tragedy.

America is a freedom loving country. America's music is the music of every group, every nationality, because everyone is equal in this great country of the United States. We think that your group is most fitted to help us celebrate our Independence Day.

In celebrating the 4th of July, the Ensemble firmly hopes that someday, like those pilgrims in Wagner's "Lohengrin" it will sing tearfully "I see again thee, my beloved country", because freedom is indivisible, for all and forever.