

Lithuanian Music Prior To 1918

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SITUATED at a strategic point in Europe, Lithuania has been oppressed by her neighbors for centuries. Attempts were made by her aggressive neighbors to denationalize and to disregard the native cultures of Lithuania. The very difficulties which impeded the material development of Lithuania left her with a mass of archaic customs and traditions. The living monument of these archaic customs and traditions, and, the spirit and soul of the Lithuanian people is found in her folksongs. However, the outside world knows practically nothing about these folksongs or the achievements of the Lithuanian composers.

Throughout the centuries of Lithuanian oppression by her neighbors, the Lithuanian folksong, fortunately, was able to thrive and develop together with the language, traditions and customs of the people. At the same time the economic, social and political life of Lithuania was such that the development of musicians capable of creating music of artistic worth did not come about until almost the end of the nineteenth century. Although the cultural life of Lithuania had its restrictions, there are indications that a musical life existed prior to the present century.

In 1513, St. John's school in Vilnius, Lithuania, prepared students for participation in church choirs. Almost all of the schools that were directed by religious orders taught hymns and chorales to their students. In Kaunas, soon after 1642, the Jesuit order was teaching instrumental music to be used during their church services.

Before the eighteenth century, Vilnius was the center of music culture. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the convents and estates of the well-to-do became centers of music. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the accomplishments of government and privately sponsored music schools overshadowed the music in the convents and estates. Although the schools during this period did not become world-renowned, they did become well known in Lithuania proper.

About 1885, Mary Tyzenhauzen-Przedzieckis established a school for organists in Rokiskis, Lithuania. The instructors were foreigners and were well educated. This school prepared at least forty Lithuanian students for organist positions throughout Lithuania. J. Gruodis and J. Tallat-Kelpsa, twentieth century Lithuanian composers, were products of this school.

Other music schools that contributed towards the beginning of Lithuanian music culture were:

the Mykolas Oginskis school in Kaunas; the Imperial Music school in Vilnius; and, the J. Naujalis school in Kaunas. Many of the twentieth century Lithuanian composers received their early music training at these schools and later completed their music education at conservatories in Warsaw, St. Petersburg and Riga. There were other music schools in Lithuania before the twentieth century but their influence and contribution towards the musical culture of Lithuania was negligible.

Early Church Music

Rsv. A. Strazdelis (1763-1833) introduced the first original Lithuanian melody into Lithuanian hymn singing and also created many original texts to which he composed melodies. Many of his hymns were translated into the Polish language

and are still in use in Polish churches. Wherever Strazdelis traveled or lived, in Lithuania, he would teach his melodies and hymns to the people. It is interesting to note that the people learned these hymns without the use of any printed materials.

Bishop M. Valančius (1801—1875) compiled a Lithuanian hymnal so that the people would have something to sing from written in their own native tongue. The Polish influence in Lithuanian church music was pronounced. The hymns used in the Polish churches were gradually introduced into the Lithuanian churches by a Polonized Lithuanian clergy. The hymns were generally sung in Polish and even sermons were delivered in the Polish language. Through the efforts of Bishop Valančius and Rev. Strazdelis many of the parishes in Lithuania proper began singing hymns in the Lithuanian language.

First Lithuanian Composers

In 1883, the newspaper "Aušra" (The Dawn) made its initial appearance. The aims of his newspaper were both cultural and idealistic, and it strove to instill a feeling of nationalism amongst the Lithuanian people which would oppose both Russification and Polonization. Russification had afflicted the entire nation and Polonization had affected the Lithuanian gentry, and the Polonized Lithuanian clergymen were still influencing the common people to a certain extent. This newspaper contained the words and melodies of folksongs and original creations designed to help inspire the people with a feeling of nationalism. It was during these years of the nineteenth century that the first pioneer Lithuanian composers appeared.

Among the very first Lithuanian composers was Juozas Kalvaitis (1842—1895). He graduated from the Warsaw Conservatory in 1874 and became the director of the Oginskis Music school in Rietava. Many of his students later graduated from the Warsaw Conservatory. One of the works of Kalvaitis, a Mass for choir and organ, was published in 1886. This composition was the first Lithuanian choral composition to be published and some of the melodies used in this composition are still utilized in Lithuanian churches to this day.

Dr. Vincas Kudirka (1858—1899) was a strong Lithuanian patriot, a doctor of medicine, violinist and composer. His published compositions are among the first Lithuanian compositions to be published and consist of waltzes, polkas, mazurkas and two volumes of harmonized Lithuanian folksongs. The greatest musical contribution of Kudirka was his patriotic hymn "Lietuva tevyne mūsų" (Lithuania, Our Homeland) composed in 1898. The hymn first appeared in the newspaper "Varpas" (The Bell) and was later adopted as the Lithuanian National Anthem.

In 1902 a volume of songs called "Dainos" was published by Ereminas. In 1904, Vydūnas (Vilius Storasta), the philosopher of Tilsit in Prussia, published a volume of songs called "Lietuvos Aidas" (Echoes of Lithuania). In a Lithuanian newspaper published in 1902 two versions of a patriotic hymn "Kur bega Šešupe" (Where the River Šešupe Flows) were printed. Both versions were composed by Česlovas Sasnauskas (1867—1916) who is considered to be one of the pioneer Lithuanian composers. It is interesting to note that the newspapers were printed in East Prussia and were smuggled across the frontier as were banned Lithuanian books. They were made accessible to Lithuanians both in Lithuania proper and in various sectors of Prussia.

Before the rights of the Lithuanian press were restored on May 7, 1904, Lithuanian music was still in its infancy. Collections and arrangements of folksongs were made and original vocal and instrumental compositions were being created. The techniques were primitive and were limited to short compositions. The educated Lithuanian musicians saw the shortcomings in their musical literature and strove to correct this deficiency as much as local conditions and their own abilities would allow.

The ending of the nineteenth century not only saw the rise of a feeling of nationalism amongst the Lithuanians but also the first Lithuanian composers. Česlovas Sasnauskas (1869—1916), Mikas Petrauskas (1873—1937), and Juozas Naujalis (1869 — 1934) form a trio of Lithuanians who are considered to be the first pioneer composers with a Lithuanian nationalistic element. M. K. Čiurlionis (1875—1911) a contemporary of the trio, composed music that was more universal in its appeal and although it contained Lithuanian elements, it was so far advanced that it was not understood by his fellow country men. Through their music, Sasnauskas, Petrauskas and Naujalis helped to strengthen and instill Lithuanian nationalism in three different sectors of the world. Naujalis worked amongst Lithuanians in Lithuania proper, Sasnauskas amongst the Lithuanians in Russia, and Petrauskas in the United States. Their compositions formed the foundation upon which later Lithuanian composers based their compositions.

Of the three pioneer composers, Juozas Naujalis is considered to be the most important. Naujalis was known as an outstanding organist, composer, pedagogue, choral director, pianist and musicologist. But, he will be especially remembered for his musical compositions. Naujalis graduated from the Warsaw Music Institute in 1889 and later attended the Ratisbone Music School. He was the organist of the Kaunas Cathedral and established the St. Gregory Society to help unify all Lithuanian Catholic Church organists. Naujalis also established summer courses for training organists and prior to World War I had trained a large number of Lithuanian organists. Some of these organists are still active in the United States. In 1919 he instituted a new music school which later became the Kaunas State Conservatory. He remained the director of the Conservatory until his resignation in 1926.

Naujalis contributed much towards the literature of Lithuanian religious music. Numerous polyphonic Masses and many beautiful compositions which reflect his deep religious ideas were left by him. Several of his compositions became known

in other countries and he won prizes in international competitions. His secular compositions range from patriotic and folksong harmonizations to symphonic works and are closely allied with the Lithuanian freedom movement prior to and during World War I. Using the texts of the poet Maironis he became the founder of a new era of Lithuanian song. Among the more important instrumental works are the symphonic poem "Ruduo" (Autumn), the string quartets, and, a symphonic suite "Antai Zebrių ruginė" (There is a Zebra in the Rye Field). The secular compositions reveal traces of a Polish influence, but, his melancholy and lyricism are essentially Lithuanian elements.

Česlovas Sasnauskas (1869—1916), composer, organist and musicologist, studied music in Warsaw and later graduated from the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He pursued his musical studies in Prague, Wurtemberg, Italy and in Sweden. The greater portion of his life was spent in St. Petersburg, away from his homeland. He was the choir director and organist at the church of St. Catherine and also an instructor of music at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy. Until the published works of Sasnauskas appeared in 1909 and in 1910 longer and larger Lithuanian musical compositions were non-existent. The appearance of works by Sasnauskas was a novelty to Lithuanians of the period since earlier musicians had clung primarily to folksong arrangements. Sasnauskas, however, used folksong motifs in his compositions. This utilization of primitive Lithuanian folksongs in larger music forms helped raise the standard of early Lithuanian music literature.

The works of Sasnauskas consist primarily of vocal compositions. One of his largest and greatest works was the "Requiem" composed for solo voices, choir and organ. This requiem was first presented at a memorial service for Čiurlionis in St. Petersburg. The requiem is very lyric and contains a taint of Lithuanian national elements. The first publication of the "Requiem" appeared in St. Petersburg in 1915.

The cantata "Broliai" (Oh Brothers) is the greatest secular composition by Sasnauskas. The cantata first appeared in 1909 along with other published works of Sasnauskas in "Lietuviškoji Muzika" (Lithuanian Music) and was at that time the finest item of Lithuanian music literature available. "Lietuviškoji Muzika" was a series of twelve publications published by Sasnauskas at his own expense and contains his own compositions. These compositions were the first fruitful seeds sown in Lithuanian music from which all later Lithuanian musical compositions grew. His choral works became and are still popular, especially "Kur bėga ešupė" (Where the River Sesupe Flows).

Mikas Petrauskas (1873—1937) a prolific composer and the "father" of Lithuanian opera, graduated from the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1906. In 1907 he went to the United States where he spent the greater portion of his life. Petrauskas was the first Lithuanian musician trained for the profession to arrive in the United States and was well received by the Lithuanian professional people. However, the average Lithuanian did not appreciate him and hampered his efforts to instill a love of better music in them. Petrauskas gave numerous concerts in various American cities and was one of the first Lithuanians in America to improve the standards of Lithuanian programs and concerts. He organized a music school in Chicago in 1910 that was the first Lithuanian music school in the United States.

Several of his compositions were published in St. Petersburg in 1909. Beginning with the year 1912, numerous works were published in the United States. From the time that Dr. V. Kudirka had published the harmonizations of Lithuanian folksongs in the nineteenth century no one had utilized the Lithuanian folksongs in arrangements for solo with piano accompaniment. Petrauskas was the first Lithuanian to accomplish this. A series of such solos was published beginning with the year 1912. His compositions include works for solo voice, chorus, piano, operetta and opera. His opera "Eglė, Žalčio Karalienė" (Queen of the Vipers) is considered to be a true Lithuanian national opera.

The harmonies utilized by Petrauskas were simple without any traces of modernism. Petrauskas wanted all music lovers to be able to perform his works. His music talent was inferior to that of Naujalis and Sasnauskas and although he was a prolific composer most of his compositions have found appreciation only amongst Lithuanians in America. Petrauskas is remembered by Lithuanians as: the "father" of Lithuanian opera; as the first author of a Lithuanian opera; as an organizer of numerous Lithuanian choral groups; as the first to write about Lithuanian music in the Lithuanian language, and as the organizer of the first Lithuanian music school in the United States.

M. K. Čiurlionis

Although M. K. Čiurlionis (1875—1911) died when Sasnauskas, Naujalis and Petrauskas were active in the field of composition, he left works that were unique and decades ahead of his time. His compositions were of a wider scope than those of his Lithuanian contemporaries and were more European in appeal.

Čiurlionis was a graduate of the Warsaw Conservatory and went to Leipzig for advanced music study. In Leipzig many of his compositions were performed at the Conservatory concerts.

Čiurlionis brought Lithuanian music out of its isolation and was the first composer to attach Lithuanian music to European music culture. The essential traits and elements of his race are found in his works which reveal a blending of Oriental and Occidental elements. This phenomenon is later revealed in the works of later Lithuanian composers.

When Čiurlionis was alive, Lithuanian music was still in its infancy, and Lithuanian compositions were making their first appearance. Čiurlionis regarded these works with respect and seriously reviewed these contributions to Lithuanian music literature. He was the first Lithuanian musician to criticize and review music in Lithuanian.

Čiurlionis was also the first Lithuanian to compose for the piano utilizing Lithuanian folk motifs. His fourteen organ preludes are interesting compositions written in a true liturgical style. The fourteen vocal songs are unique in that each is harmonized to produce an individual tonal color. These songs are gems that contain tender melancholy alternating with phrases of restlessness. The song "šėriau žirgeli" (I Fed the Horse) is especially well-known to Lithuanians. The greatest compositions of Čiurlionis were his symphonic poems. His symphonic works are imbued with an epic and mystic breath and are remarkable for their richness of thematic material and magnificent orchestration. The compositions of Čiurlionis reveal a mastery of the technique of orchestration and a great talent. His early works reveal the influence of Chopin and Scriabin whereas his Leipzig compositions show the influence of the contemporary German musical trends.

Prior to 1904, Čiurlionis devoted his time to music, but, beginning in 1904 and until his death, he spent most of his time painting with little time devoted to the composition of music. Although Čiurlionis breathed a new spirit into Lithuanian music, he is better known as a painter rather than as a composer. He tried to portray musical forms in his paintings and gave them musical titles. He created a new mystic trend in art and belongs to a class of painters of which only a few existed. Art critics have called his paintings ingenious and without equal. Čiurlionis is claimed to be one of the greatest Lithuanian painters and one of the outstanding Lithuanian composers.

Lithuanian music prior to World War I had not established itself with its own traditions. The composers had utilized folk melodies using primitive techniques in works that betrayed Polish and Russian influences. With few exceptions, the musical accomplishments were a means towards promoting a feeling of Lithuanian nationalism. The Lithuanian musical life was still provincial and limited with the music of M. K. Čiurlionis excepted for it was universal in its appeal.