

## THE MUSIC OF OSVALDAS BALAKAUSKAS: A GENERAL APPRECIATION

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During my October 1992 visit to Lithuania to attend the *GAIDA* Festival, I had the pleasure of having several dinners with Osvaldas Balakauskas, the distinguished composer. I would like to share some impressions of Balakauskas's music that result from these visits. In general, I will avoid discussions of complex technical matters and emphasize instead the more general aspects of his music.

The following brief biography may help put Balakauskas's music in perspective and explain some aspects of his style. Born in 1937 in Lithuania, Balakauskas first studied at Klaipeda (1953-56) and then in Vilnius (1956-57). Between 1957-61, he attended the Pedagogical Institute of Vilnius; this was followed by a mandatory term of service in the Soviet army between 1961-64. Perhaps the most important and formative part of his early career was his studies at the Kiev Conservatory with B. N. Ljatoschinski and M. M. Skorik between 1964-69. It was here that he was introduced to the radical trends of Soviet music of the time and became aware of the newest musical techniques. A deeply committed man, Balakauskas has maintained an active role in Lithuanian politics and has been named ambassador to France — an indication of the high esteem in which he is held.

During one of our conversations, I posed several questions. The following is not a verbatim report, but a general rendering of his ideas.

The first question I asked was with regard to serialism. For Balakauskas, a series may be generated by other elements than single pitches. For example, a series may be a chordal succession or even a V-I progression, but without the usual tonal implications. Some series are triadic and generate the 12 pitches by symmetric transpositions of the 1/2 step. The individual components of a series have an important musical personality of their own. Typically, a series is heard in a work rather slowly, allowing the listener to follow its course with relative ease. This contrasts with the practices of other serial composers who present their series initially either vertically, in segments, or even in transposition. Balakauskas often spoke of the 'color' or tension of a serial element. He noted that each composer has his favorite harmonic 'color' — that of Machaut, for example, differing from that of Beethoven or Debussy. It is therefore evident that certain works of Balakauskas may be based on tonal elements, but without the usual tonal connotations. Although Balakauskas has a theoretic bent and works from a fully evolved system, the series is only an initial element of the work, which takes on secondary importance in the compositional process. Like Beethoven, Balakauskas sketches and works with preconceived elements only as aids to a satisfactory musical experience.

I also asked whether the systems of Messiaen and Hindemith have influenced his conceptions. One very striking element in common between Hindemith and Balakauskas is their emphasis on the perfect fifth as the source for all other intervals; but their methods of derivation are different as are their musical styles. The hierarchy of pitches, the creation of series, and even the historic evolution of harmony is viewed by Balakauskas as rooted in the circle of fifths. The fifth, because of its acoustical purity, becomes the origin of series and harmonic combinations. This may surprise listeners of Balakauskas's music, for his usual style is quite dense and has little surface connection to the quartal style of the neoclassicists, such as Hindemith. At heart, Balakauskas is a kind of Pythagorean whose world order must be derived from the simplest of elements.

Balakauskas, like Messiaen, views rhythm as an integral element of the compositional design but also as a domain capable of theoretic organization. Like Messiaen, Balakauskas employs rhythms which are based on arithmetic progressions or are non-retrogradable (which is to say that their backwards form is the same as the forwards form). Although rhythms may be created in an abstract way, their function is always musical and connected with the pitch

progressions as resulting from the series. Thus even in works whose rhythms are complex, the principal concern is with the general direction rather than rhythmic detail.

Duration is also an area of interest. Balakauskas often predetermines the length of the work, much in the way an artist determines the size of his canvas. Also like the visual artist, Balakauskas plans the light and dark areas of his work. Balakauskas is economical and prefers works which are intense rather than extensive.

In answer to the question regarding changes his system had undergone in the last few years, he answered that the modification of his system has been slow, but that he has been interested in the creation of a number of modes, but not in the conventional sense. Balakauskas employs the circle of fifths to create 8-tone to 12-tone modes which function within his compositions. These, in turn, are seen as the source of individual contrapuntal or harmonic combinations. It is also apparent that Balakauskas has been influenced by minimalism and the general trend in the west to overt expressivity.

In addition, the Polish contemporary school has exercised a strong influence on Balakauskas—he knows Penderecki personally. The Polish musicologist, Krzysztof Droba, has long been a champion of Lithuanian contemporary music and has been instrumental in maintaining connections between Polish and Lithuanian composers. Like the Poles, Balakauskas has been influenced by Debussy, and this has tempered the cerebral aspects of his music.

Balakauskas's music, however, is marked by a special intensity. For example, the *Ostrobothnian Symphony* for 20 strings (1989) features dense textures, cluster formations resulting from the interplay of sustained pitches, and complex rhythmic polyphony. The *Symphony No. 2* (1979) — certainly one of the major Lithuanian works of this century — has, despite its intricacy, clear ostinato patterns and some turns of phrase reminiscent of jazz. The "Rain for Krakow" is, in the words of its author, "based on a three or four microtonal system." But, like in many of Balakauskas's works, the restriction of pitch or design becomes a matrix for expressivity.

In summary, each work of Osvaldas Balakauskas solves problems of compositional restriction, timbre, and structure in an individual way. It is because of the originality of the compositional problems and their solutions that Balakauskas's music is so worthy of attention.