

## Alfred Erich Senn, John C. Bowlt, and Danutė Staškevičius. **Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis: Music of the Spheres.**

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I visited the Čiurlionis exhibition galleries in Kaunas in the summer of 1978. This was an important event because I had been acquainted with the artist's work from my childhood. Upon my first viewing of the paintings, however, I remember being struck by the small size of the majority of the works. In my mind, they had been large canvases. In reality, they were no larger than the folio sheets of the reproductions with which I was familiar. *Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis: Music of the Spheres* is an attempt to reconcile the myth and the reality of the life and work of M.K. Čiurlionis.

This book is composed of four parts, a short introduction and three essays. In the introduction, the authors state the purpose of the volume: "To introduce Čiurlionis to the English speaking public." The authors further write:

It has been our aim to offer a balanced, reasonably comprehensive picture of the man, placing him in his own time, pointing out his talents, but at the same time putting him against the background from which he drew and to which he was reacting (p. 3).

Alfred Senn addresses the first goal in his essay, "Čiurlionis's Search for Spiritual Continents." This is the most general of the three essays. Senn's biographical presentation outlines Čiurlionis's education and his search for artistic expression through painting and music. In this entry, the reader is confronted by the reality of the artistic temperament. As Senn presents him, Čiurlionis appears as an arrogant young man — he does not wish to provide explanations of his paintings when they are requested and then complains of being misunderstood. Senn further dispels the myth of Čiurlionis as a great Lithuanian nationalist. The author reiterates the late blossoming of the Lithuanian language and culture in the Čiurlionis household. While his pride at being labeled a Lithuanian in artistic circles grew and his participation in Lithuanian cultural activities increased over time, Čiurlionis continued to display little sympathy for nationalist passions. Senn reminds the reader that, in addition to these personality traits, Čiurlionis overcame significant odds by achieving a high level of education and by gaining extensive academic patronage, and that Čiurlionis was a man who cared deeply about his friends and his family.

The second essay, "M.K. Čiurlionis: His Visual Art," by John Bowlt is an objective examination of the artist in his milieu. Bowlt's essay is divided into a series of topics, each discussing an aspect of Čiurlionis's work, such as his attempt to synthesize painting and music, or his relationship to contemporary artistic movements. In analyzing Čiurlionis's work, Bowlt points out that the Symbolist mode in which Čiurlionis created was already stylistically outdated by the time Čiurlionis discovered it and that, in general, he was a "sponge" absorbing aspects of other painters' work. In addition, "as a colorist, as an artist concerned with the facture of paint, even as a technician, Čiurlionis leaves much to be desired (p. 41)." Nevertheless, Bowlt recognizes in Čiurlionis an artistic representative of the *fin de siècle* and of Baltic and East European Modernism. In this type of criticism, presenting both positive and negative aspects of an artist's talents, the conclusions drawn by Bowlt become more than empty and unfounded praise. Bowlt implies that Čiurlionis may have achieved artistic greatness through large-scale commissions such as murals and frescoes. In examining *Rex*, Čiurlionis's last major painting, Bowlt states, "Čiurlionis . . . died prematurely, without attaining the artistic apogee that his last works promised (p. 66)."

Danutė Staškevičius's "Čiurlionis's Music in its Time" is also a piece which places Čiurlionis in relation to his contemporaries and forerunners. While discussing turn-of-the-century trends in composition, Staškevičius admits that it is difficult to place Čiurlionis in the context of European music history. Čiurlionis was an eclectic who incorporated various European trends and Lithuanian folk song elements into his compositions. This essay is divided into separate segments which discuss the various types of works produced by Čiurlionis (piano, orchestral, and choral). For the musician, Staškevičius includes excerpts of musical notation, demonstrating Čiurlionis's technique and comparing his pieces to those

of Chopin. For the scholar, the author includes the state of research for dating the various works. Staškevičius's conclusions leave the reader to ponder the questions left unanswered by Čiurlionis's early death (1875-1911): Would his music have matured to the level of a true professional or would he have continued to direct his energies at painting, relegating his music to the sphere of personal enjoyment?

The task which the authors of the book set for themselves brought a number of problems. By wishing to examine Čiurlionis in a realistic rather than an adulatory light, two of the authors wrote essays on his art and music that were by necessity complex. While Senn's essay will be useful to the general public, Bowlit's and Staškevičius's essays require previous knowledge of art history and musical composition to be understood fully. There are also a few comments for the editors of the book. One would like to see some illustrations to accompany John Bowlit's essay. Because of the inaccessibility and rarity of reproductions of Čiurlionis's paintings, especially in non-Lithuanian publications, the majority of art historians, not to mention the public for whom this book is intended, are unfamiliar with the works discussed. While realizing the cost of reproductions, I believe that a small increase in the price of the volume would be justified by the inclusion of three or four plates to aid the reader. The editors must also shoulder the blame for the few typographical errors and the inconsistent writing of the artist's name.

In general, the authors should be commended for their insightful presentations. This book will be useful to Lithuanians and non-Lithuanians alike. The non-Lithuanians will have the opportunity to read a series of compact essays introducing them to, or broadening their knowledge of, Čiurlionis. Lithuanians who have previous knowledge will also find this book of use. It is my hope that they will share the experience I had on that day in Kaunas — to be confronted by and to recognize the difference between the myth and the reality that has enveloped our knowledge of the creative spirit of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis.

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