

ACADEMIA Musicology

# THE MIKALOJUS CODE

The fugue and sonata are artistic forms of music. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis attempted to find out if they could be transformed into paintings.



JUOZAS VALIUSAITIS

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

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**F**or a layman, a musical score looks like a secret code. When, in 1942, British composer Benjamin Britten was boarding a transatlantic liner in the United States to return to his homeland, the customs officers confiscated all his musical manuscripts, fearing that they were hiding encoded messages. From their cautiousness we can presume that they understood enough about music to know that the musical notation does indeed use letters to name individual pitches. This is a form of convenient notation, but it is easy enough to use it to write a simple message on the staff, and thereby to hide a veiled meaning within the score of a composition.

### Musical signatures

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911), a Lithuanian composer educated in Warsaw, was well aware of this, just as many who came before and after him. The musical themes of several of his works were derived from the names of his friends. He hid the name Bolesław Czarkowski in *Variations* on BESACAS: B(ol)ES(ł)A(w) C(z)A(rkow)S(ki). All he had to do was to choose the letters from the name which corresponded to the names of the pitches in the scales of C minor: C D Es (meaning “S”) F G As B, and C major: C D E F G A H. In another piece he used this method to encode the name Stefania Leskiewicz – as SEFAA ESEC.

Čiurlionis utilized his talent for cryptography well beyond these few works devoted to his friends. At about the same time he composed his own musical signature, a melody in which every note corresponds in order to the letters of his full name written in Polish, Mikołaj Konstanty Czurlanis (Polish was his first language). The principle of matching sounds to letters partly corresponds to the principle based on the musical alphabet used in both *Variations*, but it goes beyond that. In his musical signature, Čiurlionis establishes relationships between sounds and letters according to a set of rules he himself invented. It is indeed a musical code.

### From staff to canvas...

This musical signature is the key to deciphering a unique relationship that brought music and painting together in the work of Čiurlionis. After having completed his musical studies, Čiurlionis enrolled in

the Warsaw School of Fine Arts and directed most of his creative efforts into painting. Though he became a painter, he never ceased to be a composer. In composing his paintings he still thought in musical terms. He wanted his paintings to resemble his music. His artistic pursuits resulted in paintings that bore musical titles, the painted versions of sonatas and fugues.

The textbook rules for sonatas and fugues – in other words, everything that anyone who has ever gained a basic musical education would understand as the proper principles for their musical composition – was for Čiurlionis merely a starting point in seeking a solution to the problem of transforming these musical forms into the dimension of painting. The piano pieces, or actually musical sketches that he wrote while working on his musical paintings, testify to this. From the musical point of view it is difficult to recognize them as fully-fledged works. They often end abruptly, being short, laconic, and having no performance markings, as if they were not actually written to be performed. So why were they written at all? Čiurlionis strove to incorporate musical forms that could be transferred to the canvas. Unlike the works composed by his peers, his musical forms were not based on harmonic changes, but on the transformation of the melody that in its basic shape was presented at the beginning of the piece. Čiurlionis later uses these transformations designed within the score to outline his work, corresponding to the melody, on canvas, and this then becomes the formal theme of the painting.

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A clear example of Čiurlionis' creative process can be observed in his first sonata paintings, called the *Sonata of the Sun*, and particularly in the first of the four paintings in this series entitled *Allegro*, which precisely transforms into a painting a music piece cataloged by Vytautas Landsbergis, a musicologist and author of *Visas Čiurlionis: monografija*, as VL 306. The amount of structural analogies between them proves that this was no accident. The second painting in the same series, *Andante*, is also related to a musical sketch (VL 307). Here, the form of the painting can



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Overleaf: Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis with his wife Sofija Kymantaitė.

Illustration on page 40: A painting by M.K. Čiurlionis entitled *The Fugue*, from the diptych *Prelude and Fugue* (1908).



A. BALTĖNAS/M.K. ČIURLIONIS NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART

The structure of the painting corresponds to the structure of fugues in their natural musical environment, with the theme and its corresponding voices present in numerous variations over time.

be compared to only a part of the musical score, not its entirety. The musical sketch ends unexpectedly, which corresponds with the open composition of the painting. It seems that the track could still continue for a long time according to the rule of sound succession from light to heavy. The rhythm of the space in the painting, which also seems to reach beyond its frame, follows the same sequence.

The painting captures only a fragment of the imaginary world rooted in the musical sketch. In subsequent sonatas the relationships between musical sketches and paintings become less pronounced, they do not relate to the entire composition, but are limited to certain formal ideas transferred from the score to the canvas, like in the case of *Allegro* from the *Spring Sonata* and *VL 309*. The melody of the piece, based on a short-long iambic rhythm, is hidden in the central register of the keyboard. The prominent high and low voices heard in the foreground do not allow us to hear it. In the painting, the repeated image of a figure consisting of two trees, one tall and slender, the other short and curvy, is obscured from view by a porous

fog cover. The three-part *Sonata of the Sea*, the fifth sonata painted by Čiurlionis, was conceived in a different way. It precisely mirrors the three-part series of musical landscapes entitled *The Sea*. Čiurlionis sealed the relationship between the musical piece and the painting by incorporating his own initials into both compositions. In the crowning piece of the musical series, three sounds are heard beneath the brook of the pearly passage, which, in his musical signature, Čiurlionis attributed to the first letters of his first and last name. In the corresponding piece of the series of paintings, in turn, these initials are written in the shape of the sea foam amidst of a stormy sea.

### ...and back again

Less than a year after painting his first sonata, Čiurlionis next began to attempt to translate the concept of a fugue into a painting. In the spring of 1908 he composed three short fughettas. He created them in such a way that when the melodic outlines of the individual voices heard at the beginning shifted in relation to each other, they resounded all together in the end, without displacement, simultaneously, and in parallel. In this way he brought together the timing aspect of music with the spatial character of a painting. These musical exercises were a starting point for three fugue paintings which he executed only a few months later that summer. He managed to resolve the problem of transforming a fugue into a painting most convincingly in the *Fugue* with the motif of a fir tree (see the illustration on this page). The structure of this painting corresponds to the structure of fugues in their natural musical environment, the theme and its corresponding voices present in numerous variants over time. In the painting, all the possibilities of this interplay are depicted all at once. But by carefully planning out its design, Čiurlionis directs the attention of the viewer so that he discovers them gradually, one by one.

The fugue inspired Čiurlionis to return from painting to music. The diptych consisting of the *Prelude* (unfinished and very poorly preserved) and the *Fir Tree Fugue* inspired him to compose a several-minute long fugue, *VL 345*, which was preceded by a short prelude. By composing a piece of music based on his own painting, Čiurlionis expressed the desire to underscore a deep and strong bond between the two art forms. This fugue was supposed to be part of the music for an opera about *Jūratė*, a mythical daughter of the king of the sea, set to a Lithuanian libretto being written by Čiurlionis's fiancée at the time, and soon to be wife, Sofija Kymantaitė. Čiurlionis was meant to compose the music, design the scenery and costumes. The lovers' plans were interrupted by his illness and premature death.

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#### Further reading:

Siechowicz P. (2015). *Wyobraźnia muzyczna Mikalojusa Konstantinasa Čiurlionisa*. [The musical imagination of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis]. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk.

Siechowicz P. (2014). *Kanon XIX/XX: Čiurlionis [19th/20th-Century Canon: Čiurlionis]*, *Ruch Muzyczny*, 11/2014.