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A Concise History of Lithuanian Minimalism

Pre-history

With the beginning of the second Soviet occupation in 1944, hopes for the natural renewal of Lithuanian music have been extinguished for many years to come: some modernist composers (like Vytautas Bacevicius, 1905–1970; Jeronimas Kacinskas, b. 1907; Vladas Jakubenas, 1904–1976) emigrated to the West, and those who stayed in Lithuania had to comply with the dictate of the totalitarian state. However colourful it may seem, postwar music corresponded more with the reality of 19th-century romantics and the conservative canons of socialist realism than with the dramatic period of bloodshedding genocide and armed resistance.

Even the so-called period of 'thaw', which began in the aftermath of Stalin's death in 1953, was just a minute step from conventional post-romanticism to somewhat fresher neo-classicism (Eduardas Balsys, 1919–1984; Julius Juzeliūnas, 1916–2001), while the music itself was still in close confinement of Communist ideology. In the late 1950s, however, some unequivocal signs of modernisation began to emerge: Lithuanian music has gradually reverted to tradition of moderate modernism that prevailed during the interwar period.

In the mid-1960s the first virus infiltrated and considerably loosened the entrenched foundations of national music. At that time some recordings and scores of Western avant-garde works began to appear in Lithuania along with available texts on dodecaphony and aleatory. New experiences were imported from the Warsaw Autumn festival – perhaps the only contemporary music event accessible to Lithuanian composers who then lived behind the iron curtain. This is how Lithuanian avant-gardism developed under the strong influence of ideas somewhat belatedly coming from Western postwar music, and inspiring the sprouting of numerous individual styles. Avant-gardism did not take root in Lithuania where its existence spanned less than a decade. It was confronted with many obstacles: the indifference of the public, hostility of the censorship, insufficient technical mastery of performers, and, most important of all, technical and aesthetic limitations of composers who were unable to work out large-scale compositions. This inability may be due to certain historical inertia, because the academic sonata form and conventional handling of basic primary structures were well suited for tonal music, but were all but useless when applied to the avant-garde medium: the jumble of sundry means often gave rise to the ephemeral two-headed hydras.

On the other hand, works by Lithuanian composers have been largely unavailable on the international market of modern music for the most period of Soviet occupation. Exceptions were extremely rare: Lithuania did not seem reliable to Soviet censors, and was turned into a zone of severe isolation.

Perhaps for this reason some Lithuanian avant-gardists have gradually reverted to general standards of Soviet music, in most cases oriented towards the stereotyped aesthetics of Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975) and Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953). There were only a handful of composers who sought the new ways that would satisfy their own, original aspirations.

The need for reduction

Paradoxically, the certain coercion of avant-garde music sometimes reminded the listener of the constraints by the Communist regime on its citizens; the result was an allergic attitude not only to the socrealistic habitat, but also to some similar artefacts of avant-garde art. What was required were new conventions – genetically removed from the ones mentioned above, and expressing a new content, integrating what for that time were radical aesthetic and conceptual aims, which would convey another vision of the world: once again, not directly related to its own timeframe, but embodying a longing, and the possibility for a more ideal, sometimes even timeless, existence.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, a number of younger composers clearly moved in the direction of more or less reducing their musical material. Reasons for this may lie not solely in music, but in general artistic tendency of the period towards a more ascetic expression. This could have been a certain response to Soviet 'baroque': similar instances can be found in the Lithuanian fine arts, cinema, theatre, architecture and literature.

The aim was to revitalize modernism's accessories, and to connect several pertinent ideas: i.e., to oppose the syndrome of Soviet post-romanticism and socialist realism, whilst offering a productive antithesis, one which would, according to the composers, overcome the exhausted idioms of modernism and avant-gardism, with their fetish for dissonance, complexity, rough spontaneity and anarchy, exaggerated dramatics, and frequently a catastrophistic pathos. On demand was a rather more ambitious originality than the avant-garde models adapted from neighbouring Poland.

Primary styles

Minimalism emerged in Lithuania not as a result of the unrestricted freedom of the hippies and their leftist manifestos, as happened in the United States and the Netherlands in the 1960s. It wasn't a manifestation of clubs or garages, and even more recording studios, with musicians, often non-professionals who liked improvising jazz or rock, or were fascinated by Indian or African music, partaking.

At the end of the 1970s, Lithuanian minimalism was being created by academic composers, who had chosen it as a sort of legitimised – albeit not in Lithuania – refined aesthetic and technology, which allowed the incorporation and fusion, within a specific medium, of components of a highly diversified nature – from elementary diatonics to complex, multidimensional structures.

The debuting Lithuanian minimalists were more or less experienced in the avant-garde; thus by turning towards somewhat neglected world of emphatic consonances and simple rhythms they threw the gauntlet not only to their environment, but also to themselves: to the ears, mesmerized by the avant-garde, minimalism seemed (and continues to do so) like an old-fashioned folly.

There were many musical, psychological, and social reasons determining the beginning of what was then referred to as 'non-conflicting' and 'primitivist' music. These were the times of the disco rage, and composers would admit that they heard fresher things in pop music, than they did on the inert academic stage.

The most important, however, was the fact that avant-garde music was excessively cosmopolitan, and had difficulty transmitting relevant artistic messages in an occupied country – not lacking in literature and art, which had mastered the Aesopian language. Perhaps that is why, from its very beginning, minimalism naturally connected with the central idea of the 20th-century Lithuanian music which declared the necessity of linking the modern means of musical language with the specific features of a national music. First came eclectically structured pre-minimalist music, kin to instrumental theatre, teeming with various allusions to vernacular, folk, church, avant-garde, and popular music. The composers were notably influenced by theatre and film, and by montage techniques, employing laconic fragments and (pseudo)-quotations from different styles to weave an entire texture out of short ostinato patterns. In this music, the intuitive has obviously prevailed over the rational.

Feliksas Bajoras composed (b.1934) his *Muzika septyniems* (Music for Seven; 1975) in the manner of an amusing theatre full of folkloric intonations, with each instrument practically playing the theatrical character, even though their 'acting' was limited to solely musical means. Whereas in his cycle for voice and small ensemble *Kalendorines dainos* (Calendar Songs; 1981), Bajoras attempted to combine the ethnic vocal melos with the instrumental material of an entirely different origin: the avant-garde segments, used in many of his earlier works, were replaced here with tiny, 'stuck-in-a-groove' kind of minimalist patterns.

Bronius Kutavicius' (b.1932) *Mazasis spektaklis* (The Little Performance; 1975) for actress, two violins, and two pianos is an allusion, in five extremely ascetic movements, to Arnold Schoenberg's (1874–1951) *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912): used here are canons of twelve-tone melodies, one-note drones, subtle ostinato figures, and a *Sprechgesang* technique. A programmatic piece for organ, violin and bells, *Prutena. Uzpustytas kaimas* (Prutena. A Sand Covered Village; 1977), was conceived as a diptych consisting of the dramatic avant-garde introduction and pseudo-folkloric chorale woven into a slow canon.

Lithuanian minimalism got the best out of an interesting historical parallel: folklore has retained an archaic, one might say, proto-minimalist music – sutartines (polyphonic, 2–4 voice songs, and 2–7 part instrumental pieces, found in northeastern Lithuania up to the mid-20th century) – very similar to minimalist music in their sound and structure. Thus it is not surprising, that having heard the Dutchman Louis Andriessen's (b. 1939) *De Staat* (1976), strongly reminiscent of the music of sutartines, Kutavicius understood what a powerful load of minimalist inspirations sutartines carry; Lithuanian minimalism did not have to hang mid-air, like an empty structuralist game, for it was linked to a deep and ancient tradition of ethnic music. More than one composition thus accreted a dense layer of historical, cultural, religious, and resistential semantics.

Kutavicius' rites

The manifesto work of Lithuanian minimalism – Kutavicius' oratorio *Paskutines pagoniu apeigos* (Last Pagan Rites; 1978) for children's choir, soprano, organ, and four horns – could be considered an example of sacral and ritualistic minimalism. The composition is in essence a total reconstruction of sutartines (or even poly-sutartines), based on plain diatonics, pulsating rhythm, and effective movement by the choir around the audience. A prolonged drone of major ninth-chord, and endless canons of short phrases are typically minimalist, though the dramatic and romantic closing culmination is achieved via collage – with several different styles of music sounding at the same time. "What's important, is to make an impression – to stun the person, to 'knock out' with sound, so that one leaves staggering," – said the composer, who described his original idea with the formula: "monotony–monotony–event".

Kutavicius uses this form of denouement in many of his works: along with live performers in the opera–poem *Strazdas zalias paukstis* (Thrush, the Green Bird; 1981), there is a constant sound of pre-recorded 'invisible' choirs, ensembles and orchestras; and in the finale – fragments of rock music, city noises, and the vernacular speech of a folk artist. In his oratorio *Is jotvingiu akmens* (From the Jatvingian Stone; 1983), Kutavicius mixes Lithuanian intonations and pseudo–African rhythms, and with the use of ancient folk instruments, derives a sound loosely reminiscent of a 'tribal techno'. At the end, wooden horns blow thunderous sutartine, followed by an unaccompanied singing of a folk monody.

During the Soviet period, the 'pagan' rites in Kutavicius' works, perhaps somewhat resembling the ceremonies of New Age communities, served quite effectively to agitate the national consciousness. Incidentally, in terms of style and ideas they had certain analogies to 'mystery plays', produced a bit earlier by the Lithuanian Folklore Theatre under the artistic leadership of Povilas Mataitis, which popularised the sutartines singing and propelled the rapid spread of folkloristic movement.

Similar things can also be found in Estonia, which was closely tied to Lithuania back then: Veljo Tormis (b. 1930) wrote ritualistic choral cycles immortalising the folklore of the vanishing Finno–Ugric people, while Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), with the aid of the Hortus Musicus, mediaeval and renaissance music ensemble, conjured up an original vision of forgotten rites and a time long–past. In every case, the composers were striving for a contemplative and meditative effect, hypnotising the listener and dissolving the notion of real time.

Urbaitis' brand of minimalism

Another type of minimalism, closer to the American, was chosen by Mindaugas Urbaitis (b. 1952), the most prominent ideologue of this trend in Lithuania, who studied and advocated minimalist music in his lectures and public hearings. Some of his compositions openly emulate the style of Philip Glass (b. 1937). On hearing Terry Riley's *In C* (1964), at the Warsaw Autumn festival in 1969, he got interested not in the music itself, but in Witold Lutosławski's negative reaction to the piece, which fortuitously prompted him to turn his attention to this new style.

At first influenced by the avant–garde authors, Urbaitis later composed several purely minimalist works, one of which – *Trio* (1982) for three melodic instruments – aroused a scandal during its premiere: the audience was shocked

by the endless rotation of elementary structures (without any apparent 'events'), which lasted for over an hour. In his other works, which were not so purist and therefore could be ascribed to post-minimalism – *Meiles daina ir issiskyrimas* (Love Song and Parting; 1979) for soprano and digital delay system, and *Bachvariationen I* (1988) for four violins – Urbaitis maintained a subtle balance between chrestomatic minimalism and classical music, at times approaching the drive characteristic of pop music.

Even after his mental shift towards post-modernism, Urbaitis still keeps his minimalist habits. When he is intent on stylising Anton Bruckner's (1824–1896) music, he culls some excerpts from his symphonies and repeats them endlessly, as in *Bruckner–Gemälde* (1997). While in his ballet *Acid City* (2002), written for academic stage, he transforms rhythms and patterns characteristic of contemporary club music in full conformity with the canons of post-minimalism.

Between post-minimalism and neo-romanticism

Drifting between post-minimalism and so-called neo-romanticism were composers Algirdas Martinaitis (b. 1950) and Vidmantas Bartulis (b. 1954). The repetitive structures and diatonic harmonies in their work no longer conformed to the basic minimalist models of form, but to various dramaturgical ideas – often theatrical and romantic, sometimes wandering into other styles, or even their parodies, and at times becoming simply sentimentally meditative.

Both composers have noted that they were influenced by Kutavicius, Pärt, Georgian Giya Kanchelli (b. 1935), and Americans Morton Feldman (1926–1987) and George Crumb (b. 1929). Other conspicuous feature was their experience as theatre composers which urged them to 'purify language' – a rather trendy motto at the time – and use easily recognizable sound symbols, without sidestepping the indeterminacy.

Martinaitis piece *Rojaus pauksčiai* (Birds of Eden; 1981) displays a combination of uncomplicated folk-like rhythms and rock-like timbre of electric cello and synthesizer. His cantata, *Cantus ad futurum* (1982) for two sopranos and baroque ensemble, freely blends the minimalist material of sutartines, pseudo-baroque and rock patterns, while the texts, which lament for endangered birds, in its own way guides the listener to thoughts of a more general ecological, cultural, and existential content.

In his piece *Palydžiu isvykstanti draugà ir mes paskutini kartà žiurime i apsnigtus vasario medžius...* (I'm Seeing My Friend Off and We Are Taking the Last Look at the Snow-covered February Trees...; 1981) for cello and piano, Bartulis takes his time to contemplate a very few sounds which lead to nowhere – until one hears the deconstructed quotation of a song by Franz Schubert (1797–1828). Another of his numerous chamber pieces, *Ateinanti* (She Who Is Coming; 1982) for violin, cello and piano, exploits, in primitivist manner, the sentimentally naive tune which slowly passes from one instrument to the other.

In the aftermath of the first wave

Minimalism caught the attention of composers of entirely different orientations as well, illuminating their creative methods from unexpected angles. The symphonist, and most important ideologue of the merge of national and

modernist trends, Julius Juzeliūnas (1916–2001), wrote the symphony *Lygumų giesmės* (Songs of Plains; 1982) for women's choir and string orchestra, in which the rhythm and harmony of the sutartines resemble *Tehillim* (1982) by Steve Reich (b. 1936).

Osvaldas Balakauskas (b. 1937) created several works similar to postminimalism in their extremely simplified post-serial method of his own invention and emphatic consonances. His *Symphony no. 2* (1979) represents a colourful interplay of neo-classical, minimalist and popular music idioms. *Spengla-Ūla* for 16 strings (1984), with its characteristically unremitting drive and dense harmonic texture, in its own way approaches the motoric style of John Adams and Steve Martland.

Onute Narbutaitė (b. 1956), in her *1981-ųjų birželio muzika* (June Music 1981) for violin and cello, muses on long-sustained drones, simple arpeggios and many times repeated strident structures whereby she evokes the images of striking melancholy, akin to the contemplative works of the 1980s' avant-garde.

Minimalism gradually became very fashionable in Lithuania, attracting the attention of a broader public, and the minimalist composers were considered the most interesting. However, the well-nigh sacred aura enveloping cultural resistance obstructed the natural evolution of ideas: minimalist music became valued as a mythological metaphor for freedom and independence, ideally reflecting the nation's expectations, and embodying the very essence of what is Lithuanian. For nearly a decade Lithuanian composers have not accepted novel ideas, which led to certain erosion of earlier models.

Machinists and super-minimalists

A new generation appeared in the mid-1980s, professing a different concept of minimalism. Chili replaced vanilla: complexity displaced simplicity; grating dissonance and noise – gentle consonance and diatonics; irony and even aggression – friendliness towards the listener. Young composers were inspired not by folk, but by a variety of music – especially the avant-garde. They were accused of 'lacking sense of history', and instead of mythology and pagan utopias, were interested in virtual and anti-utopian worlds.

Muscle-bound and sarcastically mechanical music was soon christened machinism, after the titles of two compositions written in 1985: Rytis Mazulis' (b. 1961) *Čiauskanti masina* (Twittermachine) for four pianos, and Sarunas Nakas' (b. 1962) *Merz-machine* for thirty-three-piece virtual orchestra. Works of a similar orientation were written by Ricardas Kabelis (b. 1957) – *Invariacijos* (Invariations; 1983) for string quartet, Nomedas Valanciute (b. 1961) – *Narcizas* (Narcissus; 1986) for harpsichord and prepared piano, and Gintaras Sodeika (b. 1961) – *Plagaline kadencija dudoms* (Plagal Cadence for Pipes; 1987).

Machinism was the Lithuanian equivalent of American totalism, thus it had much in common with the music of Michael Gordon (b. 1956), David Lang (b. 1957) and Julia Wolf (b. 1958). It carried on the further, ever more complex processes of minimalist metastasis and transformation, which continues in Lithuania to this day. One of the trends to evolve the furthest might be called super-minimalism – taking into account the fundamental principles of repetitive thinking, supplemented with new ideas, and approximating various avant-garde styles.

This trend seems to be most vividly represented in the work of Rytis Mazulis. Under the strong influence of Conlon Nancarrow's (1912–1997) and Giacinto Scelsi's (1905–1988) concepts, he writes radical monistic compositions, using exclusively a canon technique, and frequently falling to the aid of computers: *Grynojo proto klavyras* (Clavier of Pure Reason; 1994) for computer piano, and *ajapajapam* (2002) for twelve voices, string quartet, and electronics.

Though it is often mulled over the Mazulis' predilection for the relics of Renaissance polyphony, in its compressed sound it is sometimes more akin to rock; in its hyper-dissonance and microintervals – to Scelsi's contemplations; and with regard to its form – to gargantuan op art compositions, exhibiting very slowly and consecutively alternating constellations. Mazulis' music bears a fairly palpable mark of laboratory creativity, though it does maintain a balance of academic correctness.

Notable for its structural purism and 'numb' sound is the music of Ricardas Kabelis, which is fairly closely related to Mazulis' conceptions. Kabelis is very attentive to the numerical symbols: he calculates enormous orchestral clusters of extreme intensity by computer, and thereby avoids human interference, including in *Int.elon.s* (1996) and *Mudra* (2000) for full orchestra.

Other varieties

Mazulis and Kabelis are the only 'pure', albeit considerably 'mutated', minimalists in Lithuania today. Nevertheless, many composers, at least occasionally, apply reductionist methods of composing in their music. In most instances their pseudominimalist music is related to minimalism not through the received standards of minimalist composition, but rather through more general features, like lingering atmosphere, repetitions of simple rhythmic structures, and sometimes, predominance of consonance.

In Zigmantas Virksas' (1946–2001) piano sonata *Kaip saules patekejimas* (Like Rising of the Sun; 1982), one may find allusions both to minimalism and to the music of Claude Debussy (1862–1918). Vaclovas Augustinas' (b. 1959) ecstatic *Trepute martela* (The Stomping Bride; 1986) for voices, winds and percussion sounds more like a fusion of ideas stemming from Kutavicius and Reich. Remigijus Merkelys' (b. 1964) composition for three oboes and three violins, *Echosonata* (1988), draws closer to the static models of machinism.

In Snieguole Dikiute's (b. 1966) performance *Septyniu tiltu misterija* (The Mystery of Seven Bridges; 1991) for voices and instruments, one is engulfed in nearly an hour-long flow of slowly transforming consonant sequences, based on magic numbers. Tomas Juzeliunas (b. 1964), in his piano piece *Vylingoji kadencija* (Deceptive Cadence; 1991), contemplates the Feldmanesque succession of silent, albeit sharply dissonant chords. Loreta Narvilaite (b. 1965), in her symphonic piece *Atviras miestas* (Open City; 1996), engages in a vigorous play of charged harmonies and repetitive rhythmic patterns.

Minimal conclusions

Minimalism made a great impact on all Lithuanian music written at the end of the 20th century. In some instances it brought listeners back to concerts of contemporary music (to the highly acclaimed works of Kutavicius, Martinaitis, and Bartulis), in others it created the prerequisites for the emergence and further evolution of new and individual styles.

Interestingly, at the beginning of the 21st century, there are no signs predicting the end of Lithuanian minimalism; on the contrary, many of the composers who came into contact with this style, continue, in one way or another, to make use of the ideas of minimalism – usually transforming and enriching them with new experience. It appears that rational structuralism of repetitive patterns, having come round more than once already, has not yet unveiled all of its possibilities, and is constantly being revitalized.

Published 2004–08–31

Original in Lithuanian

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