5. LATVIAN CONCEPT MUSIC
IN THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: *The article is devoted to the problem of defining a current contemporary Latvian music in front of programmatic music. The current is named in this research " music concept " because it has its core an idea or concept that controls the hardware. To place this type of music in history and teach in a histoirique context, it is important to distinguish the principles of romantic and modern music. Music concept that appeared to Latvia in the first decade of the 21st century , like the programmatic music in some aspects : they both have an extra-musical content (located outside of music , you could say) and a semantic code leaves "translate" extra-musical ideas into sound. Nevertheless, the music is different concept of programmatic music primarily by its specific code. Semantic concept is worked into the deep structure of the work : calculated in mathematical figures of rhythm, for example. This is why we can not hear or read in the musical score. The idea is hidden, it does not open by only associations. Beyond code, music concept is organized by a principle called space-time . It is a metaphorical term for a musicology in which however is limited by the means of expression moving structure - by a certain figure of rhythm or harmonic formula . The term music concept is borrowed from the current avant-garde music represented by John Cage, La Monte Young and colleagues. It appears in Europe and the United States in the 60 - 20th century art, and also had an extra-musical idea , and coded a very simple and limited equipment .*
Key words: *avant-garde music, programmatic music, music semiotics, code, timespace*

This study of concept music, the relatively new paradigm of contemporary music, is focused on the analytical aspects that can be used in pedagogy. In order to explain concept music in a process of academic teaching, and its place in music history, specific terms of code and timespace that characterise concept music have to be taken into account.

The composers now producing work in the Latvian concept music genre were **born in the 70's and 80's** of the 20th century: Armands Strazds (1970), Mārtiņš Viļums (1974), Ruta Paidere (1977), Santa Ratniece (1977), Andris Dzenītis (1978), Jānis Petraškevičs (1978), Kristaps Pētersons (1982), Santa Bušs (1981) among others. **Concept music can be defined as** a compositional paradigm in the field of extramusical semantics which appeared in Latvia approximately during the last two decades. Works that belong to this paradigm demonstrate:

- an extramusical and coded idea incorporated in the deepest layers of musical texture[18],
- a semantic opacity, and a key offering an opportunity to "break" its code,
- the oeuvre has a holistic[19] idea (outlined as a compact structure, not as a linear story),
- and a kind of timespatial[20] musical development.

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[18] The deepest layers of the structure are, for instance, the complex aspects of form, texture, calculated rythm patterns, etc. They are called „deepest" because they cannot be heard at once and identified without analysis.

[19] Holistic – from the Gr. *hólos*: complete, whole, single (Barnhart 2000: 486).

In some aspects contemporary Latvian concept music resembles the tradition of the **concept music** that flourished **in USA and Western Europe during 60's and 70's** of the 20th century (Cope 1971: 102; Cope 1977: 273-274; 303-304; Cope 1984: 309-314; Flynt 1961; Watkins 1995: 570). **John Cage** pioneered the genre with the well-known *4'33"* written as early as 1952. The concept music created by Cage also had a **holistically structured idea**, as well as a **semantic opacity**. For instance, *4'33"* was made as an intellectual riddle whose title does not explain its idea and therefore can be called semantically opaque. As well, its idea is structured holistically because it represents, one might say, a "grain" of thought (instead of a linear story that would be typical to a programmatic piece). It invites us to listen to the acoustic space that surrounds us – that is music (Kostelanetz 2003: 70; Cage 1973: 175, 191).

On a larger scale, Latvian concept music is related to the **avant-garde** music that appeared in Western Europe in the 1950's and lasted up to the 80's. This also is the case in the USA, and Cage can be included in that genre. It flourished brightly in **contemporary Russian and Lithuanian music** up until the 1990's and ran into the first decade of the 21st century in Latvia. Latvian concept music resembles Western European avant-garde in terms of the extramusical idea worked into the deepest layers of the material, as well as the increasing complexity of code. However, it does differ in a way from Western European avant-garde music (Sofia Gubaidulina, Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti among others) because the leading role of composition technique is not typical of Latvian music.

Stockhausen, Ligeti and their colleagues have worked out the conceptual principles much more scrupulously than they appeared in the **"classical" concept music** of Cage and his followers Tom Johnson, La Monte Young and others. Cage and composers who shared his views built **an outline of conceptual thinking** that has influenced European music up to now. They tried to invent some provocative, **new principles of content and development of the music**. However, compared to the "serious" avant-garde work of Stockhausen, their works were just draft models of a contemporary concept. The holistic structure of idea that was typical of Cageian concept music, turned into so-called musical timespace in Western Europe's avant-garde music. The titles are even more difficult to grasp than the Cageians, e. g., *Rebonds* (1988) by Xenakis, *Gruppen* (1957), *Kreuzspiel* (1951) by Stockhausen, *Partiels* (1975) by Grisey, *Quarternion* (1996) by Gubaidulina.

Latvian concept music is related also to **Russian cryptophony**. It appeared slightly earlier in comparison to Latvian concept music (already in the 1980's) and continued to exist until the first decade of the 21st century. Russian composers, just like the Latvians, used verbal systems "translated" into music, and some very distant sign systems from music like chess and mathematics. Both are polyglotic and creative towards inventing new codes. Both avoid the

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[20] Timespace is a metaphoric signification of the development of musical material that tells about its internal changes during the process of expansion while still preserving its outline, its main shape (Christensen 1996: 66-67).

use of signs openly, in the meantime passing the keys to the listener willingly (Grigoryeva 2007: 29; Snitkova 1999: 98).

There is much research indicating that "secret writing" has been a current trend in Eastern and Western European music since the 1960's. The Lithuanian musicologist Rima Povilionienė, for instance, has comprehensively examined the cryptographic manifestations in interdisciplinary context: she has analyzed music of the second half of 20th century in reliance to mathematics, architecture and other realms. Analysis of **Lithuanian composers**' Šarūnas Nakas (b. 1962) and Vytautas Jurgutis (b. 1976) and others' work signifies that this tendency is current also in the neighbour country of Latvia (*Ziqquratu*, 1998 by Nakas and *Fractals*, 1999 by Jurgutis) (Povilionienė 2006: 285-289; Povilionienė 2008: 77; Žukienė 2010: 171, 174).

The parallelism and kinship of those musical streams lead to a conclusion that **the new Latvian paradigm is one of the current trends of contemporary music in a wider area**, and the above mentioned composition principles are actively used in the music of the nearest past. I will briefly reiterate the meaning of the two main terms that are used in this article.

Code is an enciphered sign that lies in the deep structure of the material and therefore is mostly unrecognizable without analysis. It is often related to another semiotic system (mathematics, architecture principles, linguistics, etc.). Code can be mentioned in the title of the musical work; however, the title is semantically obscure because it gives no indications for decoding (indications can be found in the annotation or analysis). This trait of concept music has been called a "hidden coil"[21] and an "inaudible phenomenon" (Kjuregjan 2007: 605; Snitkova 1999: 107).

The term of **timespace** is used when speaking about the layout of material and its development. The timespatial material can be recognized by an inner motion, an action that represents the "time" aspect, and a clearly perceivable "space" of the sound (Kjuregjan 2007: 606-607; Giacco 2001: 39-40, 44). It is manifested as a processual expansion of a sound spectrum, microchromatic potential, tembric or harmonic possibilities of a certain material that is otherwise unchanging. This type of development is close to the minimialistic style especially when it is manifested as a monotone space that gives an impression of a flow but is qualitatively static. Timespace is built on the model of the basic idea of concept: a laconic formula, image or scheme without a narrative structure.

A precise **example of timespace** is *The Sense of the Past* (2001) for a string orchestra by the Latvian composer Mārtiņš Viļums. Its main idea is an image of memory created by Viļums. For him, memory is like an architectonic space. *The Sense of the Past* manifests a dimension of depth and perspective of memory. Meanwhile, memory is changing. Therefore each phase of the work is made like an internally moving space that is developed by gradually expanding a certain complex of elements, for instance, transforming microchromatically the

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[21] Hidden coil, Rus. *скрытая пружина* (Karaev 2007: 236)

sound, variating articulation, dynamics and rhythm formulas while still keeping the same pitches or other means of expression (see musical example No. 1: a single harmonic structure is variated with accents, dynamical signs and microtonal "sliding"). This kind of material layout is typical of music by Viļums.

Musical example No. 1. Mārtiņš Viļums. *The Sense of the Past* (excerpt)

Muqarnas (1999) for piano, by the Latvian composer Santa Ratniece, is an **example of a coded material**. Its structure is dictated by a complex sign that is concealed in deep layers of texture. The main idea of the work is an image of muqarna, the Islamic architectural element that is used as an ornament on arches, domes and other places in sacral buildings. Muqarna has a three-dimensional construction: alongside the two symmetric sides of the ornament there is a partition in the middle that is located deeper than the other two. Musically the two opposite sides of muqarna are represented by figures in opposite directions (see musical example No. 2). The third dimension of muqarna is represented by a repetition motive (a^1, a^2 in the first bar, etc., marked with *ped.*). This semiotic complex functions as a musical code that cannot be registered without analysis. Muqarna is "translated" into a specific musical image that cannot be "read" openly, but only if its' meaning is revealed by an author.
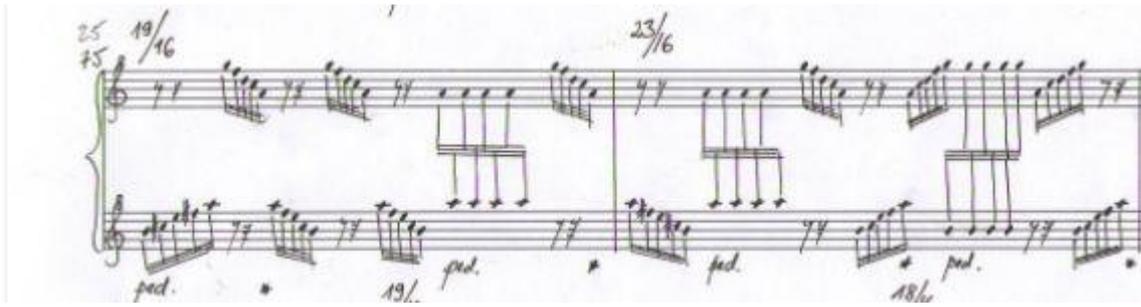
Returning to the historical context of concept music, there is another term that has to be examined, and that is **programmatic music**. It is similar in some aspects to concept music. Program, as well as concept, has **an extramusical content and a code**, but they differ in the qualities as follows.

Structure of the idea. The idea of concept music is that it has no linear form of story. Concept is a semantic topic, but not a narrative. It can be metaphorically compared to a carcass or a skeleton in contrast with program. There is only a main contour of idea incorporated in concept, or its outline.

Code. The idea of a concept is representative and coded, like programmatic music, but the conceptual signs are mostly encoded discretely and the title is not understandable at first sight, while for programmatic music this would be very unusual. Concept music usually demands a scrupulous analysis to be understandable. Concept music, unlike the program music of romantic era, possesses a „concealed meaning"[22]. But a listener can obtain the keys of the code supposing that he will not be able to decode the message on his own. The author of program music relies instead on a listener's capacity to understand the story by his associations.

Material layout of the idea. Concept music is holistic: the idea affects the material as a totality instead of being laid out in a linear way. The development of the material is timespatial. It usually moves inside of a musical "contour" determined by a certain mode of expression. Program music in its turn has a horizontal development, and it moves following the linear idea (Scruton 2005: 396; Krauklis 1999: 9-10; Liszt 1959: 285). The change of the programmatic tradition into the concept music is an important topic in teaching music history. Despite their common features, it is yet insufficient to conclude that the programmatism could be a historical ancestor of the concept music, because there is no evidence of a direct offspring, therefore it is important to differentiate those traditions. The differences of structure of idea and its material embodiment are crucial in order to distinguish those terms and to show the significant change of musical paradigms.

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[22] Rus. *скрытий смысл* (Grigoryeva 2007: 28, 31)

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