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French influences in the works by Bacevičius

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Abstract. During his stay in Paris, Lithuanian composer Vytautas Bacevičius was probably imbued, by a certain scientific (positivist?) atmosphere, which was important in all the arts at this time in the French Capital. This could have provided the "inspiration" for some of his future works, such as *Electric poem* (1932), *Cosmic symphony* (1960) or *Graphic* (1964). Paris would also have been the place to study certain aspects of French musical "impressionism". One can find harmonic procedures characteristic of Debussy or Ravel, for instance, in certain piano works of the French period (such as the *Poem* op. 10), procedures which don't appear before in his works. Several aspects of French neoclassicism also appear in his compositions. A certain taste for *ostinato* and polytonality may have come from Stravinsky (who was still living and creating his works in Paris at this time), but also Milhaud and Honegger, whose very pragmatic, "scientific", but also neoclassical *Pacific 231* was famous in Paris for several years already. It is also possible that Varèse, who had just returned from the United States (and was about to stay in Paris for several years before flying back to America) served as some kind of model for Bacevičius, in connection with the scientific inspiration of the future works, of course, but also the positive evaluation of the New World (America), which Varèse was probably symbolising in Paris at this time period.

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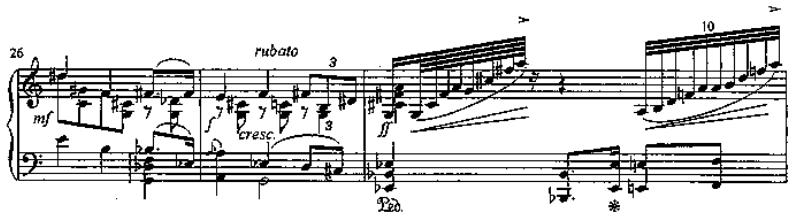
There are few documents about the Parisian period of Bacevičius, between 1928 and 1932. We can attempt to trace possible French influences of these three years by studying the evolution of the musical language.

First of all, let's start by examining a piano score of the beginning of the French period, the famous *Poema Nr. 4* op. 10. It's the work of a young composer, and we will see that, as a work of youth, it shows a great ambition of being a « total work », of reaching every goal of modern art, of making the synthesis of many modern or previous musical tendencies. And the first influence that we can locate is not

French, but German. Like many young composers of the 20th century, Bacevičius obviously admires Wagner. We can find the chromatic shadow of a famous Wagnerian leitmotiv in the melodic line of the start of the *Poema Nr 4*: the leitmotiv that starts the opera *Tristan and Isolde*. In Wagner's leitmotiv, the strings begin with a jump of minor sixth and then gradually go down three steps on a chromatic scale. In the case of Bacevičius's *Poema* , the piano begins with a jump of fifth (thus, an interval close to the Wagnerian first sixth minor) and then, also climbs down a chromatic scale (three degrees again)[1].

Besides this Wagner-like melodic line, the young Bacevičius also uses the famous « Tristan chord », F, B, D#, G#, transposed one tone higher (as in its second occurrence in the work of Wagner itself), G, D *b*, F, B *b*. Already in the beginning of the *Poema*, the harmony seems to turn around this chord. Now, let's examine three bars in particular, further in the score (bars 26-28).



***Poema* Nr. 4, bars 26-28.**

We can recognize the temptation of chromaticism (as often in this work and in Bacevičius's works in general) in the upper part of the right hand (bars 26-27), especially between the second note (G#) and the eighth note (F#). Chromaticism probably betrays Wagner's influence again. We can also find, this time precisely, an explicit quotation of the « Tristan » very specific chord (at the third beat of the first bar, left hand). In a way, Bacevičius seems as fascinated by Wagner as the young Viennese school can be (Schönberg, Berg and Webern). He quotes explicitly the « Tristan chord » like Alban Berg did it himself in the last movement (*Largo desolato*) of his *Lyrical set* (op. 15), composed three years before, in 1926. Bacevičius perhaps already knows this Viennese School, or perhaps follows a parallel way. Indeed, beyond this fascination for Wagner, like Schönberg, he also uses a kind of « anti-tonality ». For example at the very beginning of the bar 26, the E (at the left hand) and the D# are probably not constructing an empty major seventh, but

[1] Even if one finds Bacevičius's melodic line quite different from a Wagnerian leitmotiv, the similitude will shine through during the *audition* (of the beginning of the *Poema*).

perhaps more some kind of « anti-octave », avoiding octave to avoid tonal consonance, like we can find many examples in Schönberg's or Berg's music since the beginning of the century. Finally we can presume that the first inclination of Bacevičius, in his personal history, is Germanic, and lies towards Wagner and perhaps also his followers, who have made the Viennese modernity. We can find that kind of Germanic influence even stronger in the *Poema Contemplation* op. 5.

However, what is characteristic of this *Poema Nr. 4* is that we can also recognize a new possible influence, something that mixes itself with the Germanic tendency. Let us study precisely the chord of the bar 28 of *Poème* Nr. 4. It enharmonically sounds like a chord of dominant (E *b*, G, B *b*, C#), with « added notes » however, as we say in the French harmonic system. Here, these added notes (the two highest notes as a matter of fact), are precisely the « blue note », F# (because E *b*-F# is enharmonically a minor third added upon the major third of the chord of dominant) and the « added tritone », A (E *b*-A is a tritone, i.e. an augmented fourth, "*diabolus in musica*"). These exact « added notes » (blue note and tone), precisely added to a dominant chord, before sounding « jazzy like », or like the second style of Scriabin, are first of all typical of the French style, what one calls « musical impressionism », developed by Debussy and Ravel. Debussy is already dead at this time but Ravel is still alive and composes, in 1928, his most famous work, *Bolero*, where he still uses that kind of harmonic system. Bacevičius has probably heard this immediately famous *Bolero* or has been studying the new French harmony a year before his arrival in Paris.

If the beginning of the *Poema* is German like, the end is definitely French like, with one of those Ravelian big notes added chord, C, E, G, B *b*, D, A *b* : a chord of dominant (C, E, G, B *b*, D), with an added minor sixth (A *b*).

Paris, the « City of lights », might also be, for the young composer, the theatre of a new bright and powerful orchestral music, especially in a time where orchestra becomes, in Paris, the symbol of savage energy, of implacable mechanicism, using great brass and percussion parts, notably in recent works of French neo-classicism, far from the ascetic Viennese taste for chamber music. It must not be forgotten that Stravinsky is still living in Paris at this time. If he as well already turned himself to chamber music, and to a more quiet style, his Parisian followers have very well understood his first message of youth and energy, the message of his *Rite of the Spring*, whose first performance took place precisely in Paris fifteen years before (1913). The new Parisian orchestral works, which people can hear

during those « Années folles », try notably to reach the strongest sound ever heard, using a hypnotic rhythm, as in the famous *Pacific 231* by Arthur Honegger, which had been composed five years earlier, and which all the cultivated Parisians certainly still remembered very well. 1928, the year of Bacevičius's arrival in Paris, is the year of composition of another powerful, strongly rhythmical and famous "symphonic movement" of Honegger, *Rugby*. Like *Pacific 231*, Honegger's *Rugby* immediately became famous and Bacevičius might have heard about it, and perhaps heard the work itself in a concert. However, 1928 is most of all the composition year of *Bolero*, as we mentioned before, the loudest orchestral work ever written by Ravel, a work which is a good symbol of these years, glorifying simple musical parameters like rhythm, percussions, brass, and choosing an efficient shortness of the duration (like Honegger's *Rugby* and *Pacific 231*), around 15 minutes only, Bolero which Bacevičius must have known about. The climax is attempted at the end of the work, with maximal power of the brass, particularly of the percussions with a noisy regular snare (generating a rhythmical fascination evoking military music) and notably with the triptych: bass drum on the first beat, cymbal on the second, orchestral tom-tom on the third. Above all, the whole work is a great *ostinato*. Indeed, since the *Rite of spring* of Stravinsky, the composers know well that, *ostinato* is a good way of simply *repeating* and thus *multiplying* the new power of the orchestra.

Two years after the *Poema n°4*, Bacevičius writes his first Piano Concerto. Before that, he had written his *Symphonic poem* (also in Paris), then his first opera, as if the concept of orchestra that would come to be defining for him had been born in Paris. Thus, it seems as if he had wished this orchestra to be as powerful as possible. We can also notice subtle new traces of *ostinato* in it. It is a fact that it is not a Stravinskian or a Ravelian powerful *ostinato* that comes in play here, but rather an ironic one, similar to what can be found, for example, in a work of Francis Poulenc written one year before (in 1928), and which Bacevičius had perhaps heard, the *Country concert* which uses amusing *ostinato* in different moments, evoking a childish idiotic but particularly jovial process. In his own Concerto, Bacevičius uses a similar ironic *ostinato*, which is new and even surprising, in comparison with the serious and abstract *Poema* op. 10.

If we consider bars 250-251 of the Piano concerto Nr. 1, we notice the strange and amusing use of castanets, in the same curious rhythm as the violins (quaver, two semiquavers), a rhythm which probably caricatures some

kind of derisory cavalcade[2]. This rhythm underlines the *ostinato* theme of the violins, in which we also notice the ironic scraping noises generated by the G# (violins 2) and the A played together. Thus, this rubbing noise is not employed here as a Viennese anti-tonal process but more as a form of French ironic "false music". We can find again this kind of rubbing noises *ostinato* in the part of the bassoons, bars 252-253 (B scraping against C and F# rubbing sharply against G), processes which Poulenc in particular employed at this time, a caricature of the more amusing side of Prokofiev's[3] style, his first model.

Then, the end of this concerto seems to seek the greatest power of rhythm and intensity, as if Bacevičius were trying to emulate a Honegger-like or Ravel-like – a "Parisian" – orchestra. Let us make a digression. Great orchestral chords might be too heavy to follow subtle rules, in this concerto. Those chords sometimes seem to be tempted by a new and simple harmonic process, *parallelism*. Thus, those – at least partial – parallelisms are probably originally French, because they are, first of all, fundamental processes of the Ravelian and Debussyst harmony. They have probably been studied by Bacevičius during his French period.

It needs to be pointed out at this stage that *Mechanicism* is the new philosophy of art at this time. Thus, harmonic *parallelism* perhaps becomes the way of harmony to become mechanical, systematic, breaking the old rules of counterpoint in a very simple and blind "industrial" way. Rhythmic *ostinato* has perhaps also become a mirror of the repetitive sounds of factories. The musicians adopt a new *anti-sentimentalism*. Even Ravel, composing *Bolero*, wanted to write – he said himself, a "non music", which justified the blind *ostinato* in it. If we go back to Honegger's *Pacific 231*, we notice that it's not only an orchestral demonstration. The title is an ode to industry and science, it quotes the name of a famous American train and the work describes the repetitive sound of it. The work testifies the new *scientific*, technical, industrial inspiration in arts. People still dream about recent theories of Einstein. Science has not yet been discredited by the Second World War and the atomic bomb. It is still unreservedly considered to be the future of humanity. The writer Paul Valéry uses a new dry and objective style in his poems and will write in 1935 that industry must take a part

[2] We can find this process again at bars 286-287. The flutes take the motif of the violins, once again underlined by the castanets.

[3] Let us remind ourselves that Prokofiev was one of the first influences of Poulenc. Besides, Prokofiev was living in Paris during the 20's and found great success there. Bacevičius couldn't ignore this and probably studied Prokofiev's style himself.

in the production of art[4]. Almost twenty years before this, Busoni predicted the same phenomenon to the young Varèse[5]. Later, Varèse seems satisfied to be able to claim: "music is the science-art[6]". Varèse, in 1928, has just returned to Paris from the United States (before soon flying back to America again) and begins the composition of *Ionisation*, a piece whose title is explicitly related to the scientific view of the world and notably physics. The French film director Jean Painlevé creates the concept of « scientific film » and produces in 1928 his film *L'oursin* (*The sea urchin*), precisely in homage to Edgar Varèse. Bacevičius might have known about the works of Varèse. Indeed, when he returns to Lithuania in 1932, he composes his famous *Electric poem*. The title shows an obvious scientific influence, of course, and recalls the title of a future work by Varèse (*Electronic poem*).

Like Honegger's *Pacific 231*, the *Electric poem* of Bacevičius is a great orchestral ode to « science and technology ». Being at one with Paul Valéry on this point, Bacevičius wrote that, composing this work, he wanted to "reject sentimentality". Like in the Piano Concerto Nr. 1, we can also find traces of partial "parallelism" in it, serving powerful brasses.

If we consider bars 92-94 of *Electric poem*, for orchestra, we notice that the harmonic writing of the brass is not exactly parallel. However, Bacevičius chooses a particularly efficient homorhythmic process, with quite a fast tempo for the brass (around 100 bpm at this moment of the work). Finally, the audition will give an impression of powerful parallelism because of the trumpets. Indeed, the three trumpets move in a parallel way and especially, trumpets 1 and 3 draw parallel fifths: Bacevičius give us an impression of parallelism because of this old harmonic rule he breaks (parallel fifths are forbidden since the end of middle ages) and this in a quite noisy way if we consider that the trumpets take the higher (and then the most powerful) part of the brass.

In a future work, we could also search for traces of *polytonality* in the *Electric poem* (more than *atonality*). Those eventual traces of polytonality would also betray an influence of the Parisian musical world. Darius Milhaud, the French composer, uses polytonality very commonly, and also Stravinsky of course. Polytonality is notably a way of superposing, in different tonalities, several *traditional themes*, like Stravinsky did, for example, in his work *Wedding*. Thus, as in the First Piano Concerto, Bacevičius

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[4] Paul Valéry, *Notion générale de l'art*, § XIV, in *Œuvres*, tome I, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 1411. (Collection de la Pléiade).
[5] Odile Vivier, *Varèse*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, p. 20.
[6] Fernand Ouellette, *Varèse*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 1989, p. 37.

also uses traditional Lithuanian themes, according to the famous critic Vladas Yakoubenas, who recognized them during the first performance in Kaunas. This "national" folkloric position, so common at this time, is probably the legacy of his colleagues of the Ecole de Paris, or perhaps simply derives from being far away from his country during three years, and still feeling himself Lithuanian, as opposed to feeling in « exile », and thus capable of writing real national music. Bacevičius, like many composers before him, has perhaps used Debussy's harmonic style (whose influence has been useful for many « national composers ») to associate it with national themes, like Falla or Bartók did before him (both having lived in Paris during their youth).

In conclusion, we could compare Bacevičius, in the beginning of his life, with Bartók. Many points of comparison seem to be result from the first common point: the same trip to Paris when both composers where young. Like Bartók, Bacevičius was first fascinated by Germanic music, like Bartók he has probably been influenced by French harmony, notably parallelism (which one can find in a very simple way, for example, in Bartók's opera *Blue beard*), like Bartók he has tried to mix many different musical modern procedures, like Bartók he has used traditional themes, and like Bartók, he has finally flown to America, or perhaps he did it more like Varèse (not invited but aimlessly), to reach a New World filled with technical and scientific dreams, a perfect place to write his future works like *Graphic* or the *Cosmic Symphony*.