

# A COMPOSER'S WORK IN 1920S AND 1930S LATVIA: CULTURAL POLICY AND MODERNISM. NARRATIVE OF THE PRESS AND CONTEXTS

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## Summary

The article calls attention to the correlation between the work opportunities and the creative output of Latvian composers in the 1920s to the 1930s, which is examined and evaluated through the prism of the newly founded state's cultural policy, the general cultural milieu, and also modern international influences. The research was done mainly through the lense of the press of the period. As most of the music critics at that time were composers themselves; (Jānis Zālītis (1884–1943), Jēkabs Graubiņš (1886–1961), Jēkabs Poruks (1895–1963), Vidvuds Jurēvičs (1892–1945), Volfgangs Dārziņš (1906–1962), Jānis Cīrulis (1897–1962), Knuts Lesiņš (1909–2000)), a substantially deep insight into the problems the composers of the time faced and their professional aspirations can be found in concert reviews, analytical articles and other publications.

The contemporary musicological discourse is that the aesthetics and stylistics of the Romantic era dominated Latvian music of the 20th century interwar period, and the many and varied modernistic trends of the period left just an episodic and fragmented impact on it. Therefore, it was a surprise to realise that the narrative of the press from the twenties and thirties provided a rather different viewpoint. The emphasis then was clearly put on the correlation with current trends, and the aesthetic ideals and stylistic priorities of the composers very often were looked at and analysed with modernism as a frame of reference.

In this article, not only characterisations of the stylistic features of Latvian music of the time are referred to, but also the understanding of what was considered modern or even radical then. The evolution of such understanding is demonstrated by examples from the oeuvre of Jānis Zālītis, Alfrēds Kalniņš (1879–1951), Ādolfs Ābele (1889–1967), Jānis Mediņš (1890–1966).

Critics of the day linked different aspects of modernism with the music of young composers such as Jānis Kalniņš (1904–2000), Volfgangs Dārziņš (1906–1962), Oļģerts Bištēviņš (1907–1972) et al. The compositions of Jēkabs Graubiņš were defined as "aromantic", Jānis Ivanovs (1906–1983) was characterised as a "moderate modernist", Lūcija Garūta (1902–1977), Lauma Reinholde (1906–1986) and Paula Līcīte (1889–1966) – as greatly influenced by French modern (impressionist) music.

The statement made by Volfgangs Dārziņš in 1938 that "the overall romantic taste does not match the present day" supports the conclusion that the impact of Romanticism on Latvian composers was considered as inappropriate and inferior during the interwar period of the 20th century, and the creative impulses were frequently derived from modern music instead.

Concerning the correlation between creative output and work opportunities – in 1933, Volfgangs Dārziņš, one of the most promising young composers, wrote that it was not possible for a Latvian composer to make ends meet solely through the fruits of their creative labour, and just a few moments when one was not working could be spared for composing.

Three main support mechanisms provided for composer's work by the state were identified during the research process and analysed here to evaluate their contribution to the creative processes – the Culture Fund, Latvian Radio and the National Opera.

The National Opera was one of the altogether two music institutions (alongside the Latvian Conservatory) receiving direct, regular and quite substantial financing from the state. Its exceptional status was confirmed by a special law passed in 1920. Thus, stagings of practically all the newly composed Latvian operas (11), and ballets (4) were almost guaranteed, including subsequent author rights' payments. The composers presented by the National Opera during the interwar period were Alfrēds Kalniņš (2 operas), Jānis Mediņš (4 operas, 1 ballet), Jānis Kalniņš (3 operas, 2 ballets), Jāzeps Mediņš (1 opera), Jānis Vītolis (1 ballet), Mārtiņš Jansons (1 opera). Altogether, compositions by 6 Latvian composers were represented at the National Opera during the interwar period. However, in the 1930s, there were already more than thirty professionally trained active composers in Latvia, and that proportion indicates the somewhat limited assistance to composers' creative work provided by the National Opera. No opera was ever commissioned, and the critics indicated this shortcoming in their reviews.

The Culture Fund, founded in 1920, is considered to be the most important instrument of the state culture policy in the 1920s and 1930s. It should be noted that the range of institutions supported by the Culture Fund on a project basis was extremely large and varied, including not only schools, amateur theatres, but also prison libraries, anti-alcohol and sports societies, et al. In the music sector it supported not only educational establishments (music schools, People's conservatories), but also ensembles and amateur orchestras of regional culture societies and other organisations. Since 1924, the Culture Fund allocated 1500 – 4000 Latvian Lats (Ls) to reward the work of 3 to 5 composers per year. Proportionally, that was a small sum, since the total amount granted for the music sector might have surpassed even 76 000 Ls per year. The prizes awarded for music compositions ranged from 300 Ls to 1500 Ls, and rarely exceeded that amount (unique exception was the 3000 Ls award for Jānis Kalniņš' opera *Hamlet* in 1936). It should be noted that the prize money for painters, actors, writers, scientists was also as small.

It was not only the rather meagre amount available to support the composers that provoked criticism, but also the application procedure itself. Each composer had to submit an application specifying their compositions deserving the support. In a review Jēkabs Graubiņš characterised that as an unethical demand. He also criticised the Culture fund decision makers because they did not even consider the possibility of working pro-actively to promote development of genres still poorly represented in Latvia then. In 1933, ballet, opera, operetta, sacral choral music and instrumental

chamber music were defined as the “the biggest and most unpleasant gaps” by Jēkabs Graubiņš. However, no attempts were made to commission works in these genres.

In addition to the annual prizes for composition, the Culture fund supported the publication of scores. Most of them were published by local publishers, but in 1938 the Culture fund provided for the publication of symphonic scores by Ādolfs Ābele, Jānis Kalniņš, Jānis Mediņš and Jānis Vītolis by *Vienna's Universal Edition*. Two years later, the *Universal Edition* published selections of Latvian solo and choral songs, also with the financial support of the Culture fund.

Several composers received Culture Fund stipends for studies abroad. Conversely, these were never awarded to support composition studies, but only for attending conducting or piano classes.

An essential source of income for composers became Latvian Radio, founded in 1925 (named differently during the times – Radiophone, Riga Radiophone, Latvian Radiophone). Though initially the unsettled author rights payments were a constant subject of public discussion and disagreement, after some quite severe conflicts in 1929 and 1934, the Radio and composers finally came to an agreement regarding the payment amount. These clashes between the Radio and *Skaņražu kopa* – the organisation representing composers – were widely covered in press, most often taking the composers' side, indicating that broadcasting Latvian music on Latvian radio would be an indisputable obligation. In the beginning, several music critics indicated the insufficient proportion of Latvian music on the air when analysing the broadcast policy of Latvian Radio. This notably changed in the second half of the thirties, apparently in accordance with the ideological guidelines of a nation state and culture of the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis (1934–1940). Also, the Radio orchestra, founded in 1926 and gaining full swing by 1931 when composer Jānis Mediņš became its artistic leader, was equally instrumental in securing favourable conditions for contemporary music performances.

In 1934, Latvian Radio announced the first competition for symphonic compositions with the goal “to increase the number of Latvian national scores available for radio broadcasts”. Two more competitions followed in 1935 and 1937.

The winning compositions were Jēkabs Graubiņš' (1886–1961) variations *Vītols' kokle*, Jāzeps Mediņš' (1877–1947) symphonic image *Autumnal Mood* and Lūcija Garūta's (1902–1977) *Meditation* in 1934; Jāzeps Mediņš' *Latvian Land*, Jānis Ivanovs' (1906–1983) suite *Latgallian Landscapes* and Ādolfs Skulte' (1909–2000) symphonic poem *Waves* in 1935; Jāzeps Mediņš' 2nd Symphony *In Springtime*, Pēteris Barisons (1904–1947) suite *Wreath of Flowers* and Eberhard's Lammas' Symphony in 1937.

In spite of the fact that the announced prizes were very modest (300, 200 and 100 Ls in 1934 and 1935; 500, 300 and 200 Ls in 1937), the initiative had a very stimulating effect, and altogether 62 scores were handed in for the competition. The prospect of being performed by a professional symphony orchestra and broadcasted undoubtedly

was the true motivation for such a creative enthusiasm. When in 1939 Jēkabs Vītoliņš reminded the public that no composer could survive solely from their creative work, he had indicated that the Radio “consumed” a lot of Latvian music on a daily basis, and the author rights proved to be quite a substantial material basis for the composers’ work.

In conclusion, it should be noted that although the support provided by the state for creative work of composers could not be defined as satisfactory in the first two decades of the nation state, at least the National Opera, the Culture fund and Latvian Radio were supporting the creation of new music. This was music that tended to be contemporary in many different ways, even if not demonstrating the most radical facets of the modernistic searches of the time. A reconstruction of the contemporary insights and explanations of Latvian music in the 1920s and 1930s was done in this article with the hope that a new perspective for its readings could be found both musically and theoretically.