

JĀZEPS VĪTOLS AND THE TRADITION OF LATVIAN SONG FESTIVALS

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Summary

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Between the last decades of the 19th century and until the end of World War II, Jāzeps Vītols was the most active, influential and brilliant figure in Latvia's culture of music. Over the course of several decades, his work personified the first golden age of Latvian music, and the quintessence of Latvian musical culture was the Song Festival.

The growth of Latvian choirs during the latter half of the 19th century was very rapid and dynamic. Choral singing brought along efforts which did not relate to music, ever more clearly making out the nation's desire for consolidation and self-determination. This created a social and cultural phenomenon – the Song Festival. The first All-Latvian Song Festival took place in Riga, in 1973, it centered on a *a cappella* choir singing, the national repertoire, and the participation of a broad range of professional musicians and amateur singers.

Vītols played a particular role in the emergence of the Latvian Song Festivals, as one of the fathers of the national school of composition, and as an outstanding public activist and individual. In *Memories From My Life* Vītols wrote that the Third Song Festival (1888) led him „into the boiling centre of the Latvian national movement”. This was an important crossroads for Vītols' work. At the time of this festival Vītols was 24, and he was already a composer and instructor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He contributed three movements of a symphony to the symphonic concert at the festival, and that was one of the very first symphonic scores to be composed by a Latvian.

While living in St. Petersburg, Vītols was actively involved in Latvian musical life back home. He was a member of the Music Commission of the Riga Latvian Association, which was responsible for organising the festivals. The commission established the repertoire, commissioned new works, and co-ordinated the learning of the songs. The unusually uplifting mood of the Song Festival and increasing power of a new music culture excited Vītols so much that he became the conductor of a Latvian choir in St. Petersburg. It won plaudits at choral competitions at the 4th Song Festival in Jelgava in 1895 and the 5th Song Festival in Rīga in 1910.

The songs which Vītols contributed to the Song Festival in advance of World War I took on nearly symbolic meaning. The ballads *The Bard of Beverīna* (*Beverīnas dziedonis*, 1891) and *Castle of Light* (*Gaismas pils*, 1899)

were both based on lyrics by the National Awakening poet Auseklis. *Daughter of the King* (*Karaļmeita*, 1903) was inspired by a poem by the distinguished poet Rainis. Technical maturity, architectonic clarity and a certain level of complexity could be found in these surprisingly original, epic and dramatic songs. The choral ballad took over the central role in Vītols' choral music.

One might think that the social function of consolidating the nation of the Song Festival might have exhausted itself once the Republic of Latvia was established in 1918, but the fact is that the festivals continued to become stronger and more extensive (there were four festivals 1916, 1931, 1933 and 1938) until the Soviet occupation in 1940. Vītols was at the forefront of this process. He had diplomatic abilities, authority, and the skill of finding compromises, and this led singers and conductors through a major economic crisis and the authoritarian regime, that was established in Latvia in 1934. Together with other members of the Latvian Composers' Association (Emīlis Melngailis, Alfrēds Kalniņš, Jēkabs Graubiņš, Jānis Zālītis, Jānis Mediņš and others) Vītols ensured that the level of music at the Song Festival was sufficiently high. The repertoire included new compositions which were often innovative, extensive and technically difficult. Each new Song Festival brought new stars to the stage, and all of them were students of Vītols at the Latvian Conservatoire (Pēteris Barisons, Volfgangs Dārziņš, Jānis Ivanovs, Jānis Norvilis, Helmers Pavasars, Ādolfs Skulte, Bruno Skulte, and others).

Once Latvia was absorbed into the Soviet Union, the Communist regime was impressed by the mass traditions and the national elements which brought the festivals close to the Socialist model of the people's art – *Socialist in nature, national in form*. It was, however, important for the regime to modify the traditions in accordance with the new ideology. Paradoxically enough, Vītols was quickly included in the ideological scheme as a „desirable” composer, with the regime making the excuse that he became a refugee because he was very old and could not resist attempts to bring him to Germany. The regime even closed its eyes to the posts which he held in the „nationalist bourgeois regime”, and glorified Vītols' long years in St. Petersburg, arguing that he was following along with „progressive Russian art”. What occupiers could not avoid, however, was a situation in which festivals, quite unofficially and in subtexts, reanimated the original essence of them – it was a festival of the whole nation, and once official tributes were made to the regime, the classic Latvian repertoire was staged. There were 11 festivals during the Soviet occupation, and this allowed generations of outstanding conductors to emerge.

The classic repertoire, particularly the songs of Vītols, retained an outstanding role during the Soviet occupation. Of particular significance has been the Vītols' song *Castle of light*. In 2003, the Song Festival was listed on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage.