

# LATVIAN CHORAL MUSIC: TRADITIONS, PERSONALITIES, THE LATEST TRENDS

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## Summary

Choir singing has always played an important role in Latvian music history, starting with the dawn of national music culture in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, right up till nowadays, though the tradition of choir singing can be dated back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Lutheranism was introduced to Latvia. The genre of choral music forms the basis of Latvian cultural identity insofar as music is concerned. This is mainly due to the rich choral music repertoire which is both extensive and of a high quality, constituting a significant proportion of concert life in Latvia.

This is the year of Latvian Song Festival. Therefore it was particularly interesting to actualize the problems of choral music within a more extended context, trying:

- to reveal the most essential aspects of developing the genre of choral music in Latvia, focusing on the major trends which came to the foreground in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but reached climax after the year of 2000;
- to outline new perspectives and ways of creative seekings, analyzing the most striking works of choral music, written by several composers of the younger generation.

The professional as well as numerous amateur choirs of Latvia are noted for their outstanding quality of performance, interpretation and refined professionalism. Furthermore, it should be added that the educational system also places great emphasis on singing, thus involving schoolchildren in music already at an early age. The long-standing tradition of amateur choir singing culminates in a significant musical, cultural and social phenomenon – the song festival, which nowadays, is organized as a national choir festival. On the one hand, song festivals continue the tradition of *a cappella* singing and the development of the classical repertoire, yet, on the other hand, they continue to foster composing new works. This results in a continually enriched choral repertoire with increased technical and stylistic demands for singers.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century the choral repertoire was enriched further with a substantial number of vocal-symphonic works, choral symphonies, cantatas and other large-scale compositions. At the same time new arrangements of folk-songs came into being, retaining their importance even today. The same refers to an extensive use of folk-music elements in small-scale works written, primarily, for amateur choirs. Furthermore, music written for amateur choirs reflects the evolution of music technology, notation and a diverse approach to sound, ranging from classical harmony to the use of unlimited musical and sonorous devices, as well as electronics, thus marking

a metamorphosis through several generations of composers and their various styles of writing.

In attempting to define the identity of Latvian music, we have no other choice but to return to a distinctive feature of traditional ethnic music, namely, to the predominance of vocal in folk-songs over instrumental folk-music. Vocal thinking is prevalent and there is a close link, on the one hand, between the music and the text, but, on the other hand, between the above and the non-musical elements. Folk-songs contain codes of ethics and aesthetics, they reflect various mythological ideas and all aspects of people's lives and their attitudes towards life. The frame of Latvian folk-songs defines a world model through the synthesis of both music and text, complementing the former with non-musical elements which anyway form an integral part of the sound. Historical processes, such as consolidation of the Latvian nation, its national self-awareness and the concept of a sovereign state, coupled with freedom and self-determination at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century should also be taken into account.

It is interesting that professional music contains little that may be called superfluous. Music is meaningful and the search for superhuman message, comprising artistic and musical means of expression, is important for both choral and instrumental music. The value of sound has often been secondary and this feature has greatly influenced the development of professional music.

Nowadays, the tradition of choir singing retains its importance both at an amateur level and through the maintenance of an extensive choir movement. There is a marked trend of creating more intricate and almost elitist scores, aimed at a refined professional audience – and this can be traced back to the origin of the genre itself. Historically, it started with Jāzeps Vītols, Alfrēds Kalniņš, Jānis Zālītis, Ādolfs Ābele and several other composers, whose music pieces are now within the capacity of many amateur choirs as well. This line continues through the refined works by Ādolfs Skulte, the *New Wave of Folklore* by Pauls Dambis, Pēteris Plakidis, Pēteris Vasks, Maija Einfelde, Imants Zemzaris and many others. The tradition finds its way through the stylistic versatility of the latest generation of composers, among them Andris Dzenītis, Mārtiņš Viļums, Ēriks Ešenvalds, Gundega Šmite and others.

There are two trends in the process of creating new Latvian choral music – one aimed at professional choirs and the other – at amateur ones. The former comprises new works to be performed at a highly professional level. These works are intricate and almost limitless insofar as the compositional potential is concerned. The latter trend is aimed at amateur choirs and has to face the level of choir potential and styles. In most cases these works have elements of folklore or distinct melodies that are related to easily adaptable rhythmic models and similar musical elements. While the range of possibilities, provided by such musical language can sometimes place restrictions on the relevant composers, it is still wide-ranging and rewarding. Furthermore, if we take into account the scope of the choir movement and the continuous

popularity of choir singing in Latvia, music compositions for amateur choirs actually provide far greater, yet simpler opportunities for musical communication.

The vast scope of contemporary Latvian choral music is greatly influenced by the commissioning of new music and those who pay for it. The Latvian Radio Choir and the State Academic Choir *Latvija* prove to be the most active supporters of new Latvian choral music.

The International Sacred Music Festival and the New Music Festival *Arēna* are two important events in the concert calendar for which new works by young Latvian composers are commissioned each year. These are predominantly large-scale compositions, setting high professional standards. At the same time, new choral works are commissioned by amateur choir movement administrators and performers and by those organizers of song festivals, who are interested in developing choral music repertoire for amateur choirs.

It is worth mentioning that the share of sacred choral music in the creative contribution of several Latvian composers is rather extended and multiform. It can be explained by very old and long-established traditions of this musical genre in Latvia, the development of which was considerably hindered under the Soviet regime. However, the new trend like a dammed up and turbulent river still found its way, breaking through the dam with an uncontrollable force, particularly intensely in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus providing for quite a new choral music situation.

Sacred music proves to be predominant and essential in the choral compositions, written by Rihards Dubra, Georgs Pelēcis, Pēteris Vasks, Pēteris Butāns, Pauls Dambis, Arturs Maskats, Juris Karlsons and many other composers. The trend development has been favoured by several factors, such as the existence of deep and long-rooted church music traditions in Latvia, a particularly favourable cultural background within the period in question, the universal potentials of textual communication also on the multinational scale and especially processes which facilitate the commissioning of sacred music. The brightest example proves to be the International Sacred Music Festival. Its organizers are commissioning new oratorical compositions from Latvian composers almost every year, thus rather frequently discovering new talents.<sup>1</sup>

Sacred music concerts within the framework of Latvian Song Festivals are also becoming essential elements in the calendar of sacred music events.

The most intricate new choral compositions are those commissioned by professional choirs. Regular commissions by the Latvian Radio Choir and its conductors Sigvards Kļava and Kaspars Putniņš, as well as the State Academic Choir *Latvija* and its conductor Māris Sirmis foster the creation of new works by young composers. It is significant that choral works by Mārtiņš Viļums and Ēriks Ešenvalds, commissioned and recorded by the Radio Choir were selected as the most outstanding at the 2005 and 2006 UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers. The award-winning composers also include Santa Ratniece, and the list of recommended pieces

<sup>1</sup>The origin of the above tradition dates back to 1998 when the State Choir *Latvija* for the first time organized music festival with a purpose of improving and refining the cultural situation in Riga alongside with reviving the spiritual level of the community. The Sacred Music Festival focuses primarily on performing vocal / instrumental music and singing a *cappella*. The repertoire of almost every Sacred Music Festival comprises choral music by Latvian composers and new music works are being commissioned. The First Festival (1998): performing of contemporary Latvian music – *Ave Maria* by Maija Einfelde, *Dona nobis pacem* by Pēteris Vasks, *Song of the Sacrament* by Andris Dzenītis, *St. Francis of Assisi Prayer of Peace* by Arturs Maskats and *Recitative, solo and duet*, as well as *Farewell* by Romualds Kalsons. The Second Festival (1999): the first performing of messa *Libera me, Domine* by Pēteris Butāns, Music for string orchestra by Jānis Kalniņš, *Lacrimosa* by Arturs Maskats and Memorial Mass *Return of Souls* by Leons Amoliņš. The Third Festival (2000) witnessed the first performing of *The Riga Book of Psalms* by Pauls Dambis. The Fourth Festival (2001): the first performing of the oratorio *God is Love* by Georgs Pelēcis, messa *Signum Magnum* by Rihards Dubra and *Morning Liturgy* by Maija Einfelde. The Sixth Festival (2003): the first performing of Choir Symphony by Pēteris Butāns. The Seventh Festival (2004): the audience of Latvia for the first time can listen to the author's concert performance by Imants Ramiņš, a Latvian composer of Canadian origin. The first performing of Latvian music here is oratorio *Song of Songs* by Indra Riše. The Eighth Festival (2005): the first performing of *Passion and Resurrection* by Ēriks Ešenvalds and *Eine kleine Passion* by Imants Zemzaris. The Ninth Festival (2006): music piece for the choir and orchestra *Fides. Spes. Caritas.* by Andris Dzenītis and *Agape* (dedicated to countertenor Sergejs Jēgers) by Daina Klibiķe.

of music also includes a fragment from the choral piece *Lux Aeterna* by Pēteris Butāns.

As to compositions that have won international recognition, I would like to mention *At the Edge of the Earth* (1996) by Maija Einfelde (1939), based on the tragedy *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus which was awarded the first prize at the composers' competition in 1997, organized by the Barlow Foundation, USA. Maija Einfelde's musical style is characterized by her own words: *Life is not so beautiful, so as to be able to write beautiful music* [9: 32]. Her favourite genres are chamber music and choral music, where historical, mythological, superhuman and biographical themes are brought alive through a harsh musical language.

The inspiration for Maija Einfelde's *Choral Symphony* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 2004) comes from the poem *Bāra bērni (Orphans)* by Vilis Plūdonis. This composition stands apart from her other works. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the work complements the existing four-part cycle, based on liturgical texts, with two parts based on Vilis Plūdonis poetry. The Latin texts are intertwined with the poetics and vitality of Plūdonis' poem.

The music material confirms that neo-romantic aesthetics is held in high esteem in Latvia and outside its borders, although this aesthetics is more characteristic of the middle and older generation of composers. Under Soviet regime such issues as the survival of the nation, culture and language were particularly topical, and the creative intelligentsia reinforced this by developing a creative refuge.

Under the censure of Soviet ideology, the cultural policy imposed strict aesthetic restrictions on the art in Latvia and a reflection of the objective truth was accepted together with the renovation and continuation of traditions. Any innovative idea was considered only within the context of this methodology. This was the only, yet restrictive, path that composers could follow in order to bring their creative ideas to life. The works of such composers as Pēteris Vasks, Romualds Kalsons and Juris Karlsons contain a number of techniques, used in modern music, e.g. aleatory, dodecaphony and sonoric – but these techniques are applied in the context of traditional forms and dramatic content. At the time the modernistic compositions by Juris Ābols alongside with his search for concept in music were almost the only examples of non-mainstream works. Whereas, Pēteris Vasks, Pēteris Plakidis, Maija Einfelde, Imants Zemzaris, Juris Karlsons, Arturs Maskats and many other composers have created a variety of powerful and original works, within the framework of a romantic aesthetics.

During the last 10 to 15 years Latvia young composers have created a number of works, inspired by the Western post-war avantgarde. At present, those composers whose music is based on the aesthetics of modernism were mainly born in the 1970s. This is a generation that grew up in an independent country and had the opportunity of studying abroad, which, in turn fostered new stylistic trends in Latvian music. Opposition against a particular ideology or foreign government holds no relevance for this generation.

The young composers are primarily interested in the sound and musical substance itself. It may seem that the connection with traditional Latvian music has disappeared, as these composers integrate various styles and aesthetics in their music. The emphasis not being placed on national identity, it paradoxically unfolds through the form and its particular details. Emotional musical expression also unites this younger generation. In fact, there is neither generation gap, nor any radical controversy, although the young composers often write and talk about some sort of conflict. Innovative techniques, used by the young composers, interact with the classically romantic principles of composing.

New opportunities have fostered the individuality of Latvia young composers. Different musical tastes and creative impulses are borrowed from a great variety of composers. So, Andris Dzenītis is influenced by the works of Michael Gordon and Per Nørgård, whereas Ēriks Ešenvalds is influenced by Gérard Grisey and Michael Finnissy, but Mārtiņš Viļums has been inspired by Giacinto Scelsi and Kaija Saariaho. Andris Dzenītis (1978) studied composition under Pēteris Vasks, Pēteris Plakidis and Osvaldas Balakauskas. The most important task in *Four madrigals by e. e. cummings* (written in 2000) was to reveal his musical message through very small and concentrated forms, which are not too typical of his music. The poetry of the American poet and painter Edward Estlin Cummings attracted the young composer with its ideally defined musicality and proportions of form.

Mārtiņš Viļums (1974) left his imprint on choral music through his explorations of micro-sonority. The composer's world comprises dreams and visions, which manifest themselves in the Rostrum award-winning work *Le temps scintille* (2003). The text is based on the poetry of Paul Valerie and Rainer Maria Rilke. Images like *a dream, flickering time, a burnt-out soul, dazzling secrets, the sun, an airy shimmer* and *eternal farewells* are depicted in this work. Comparing Mārtiņš Viļums to Andris Dzenītis with his crystal-clear structures, we can see that both composers continue to follow the principles of Giacinto Scelsi.

Ēriks Ešenvalds (1977) has taken a different path. He sees himself as continuing in the footsteps of the older generation of composers, and feels strong allegiance to the styles of Pēteris Vasks, Pēteris Plakidis, Romualds Kalsons and Selga Mence. At the same time he continues studying and developing, by learning new techniques. Ešenvalds believes that a live conversation with the listener is of utmost importance and in order to achieve this, the composer must be aware of the listener's musical comprehension.

Ešenvald's work *Légende de la femme emmurée* (2005), commissioned by the Latvian Radio Choir, was selected as the most outstanding in the young composers' category of the 2006 International Rostrum for Composers. The Albanian folk tune, which is rolled out through the theme of the legend is the basis of an outstanding work in terms of drama and choral texture.

Santa Ratniece (1977) is one of those composers whose works were selected as the most outstanding at the 2004 International Rostrum for Composers. Santa Ratniece studied composition under Līga Liepiņa, Imants Zemzaris, Romualds Kalsons and Helena Tulve from Estonia. Her choral work *Saline* (2006), based on the poetry of the Armenian poet, Ovanes Shiraz, was premiered by the Latvian Radio Choir at the *Klangspuren* festival in September 2006. The drama of the work is purposeful and it addresses the audience both powerfully and emotionally. In this work, Santa Ratniece, has made use of the entire vocal register, powerful dynamic contrasts and gradations in addition to a range of textures and a palette of sounds, including breathing and whistling.

A diversity of styles – this is a characteristic feature of contemporary Latvian choral music.

Outstanding quality of interpretation – this is a standard by which Latvia's best choirs are known not only in Latvia, but also outside its borders.

Wide ranging opportunities and prospects for development, based on powerful traditions and innovations – this is how we can assess the professional potential of choral music composers and performers.

These three trends – stylistic diversity, the quality of interpretation and the potential for developing traditions in the direction of innovation – are important features, which allow us to single out contemporary Latvian choral culture as a striking and convincing phenomenon also on the global scale.

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