

THE TESTIMONY OF THE LITTLE-KNOWN LATE LETTERS OF JĀZEPS VĪTOLS TO IRENE NARVAIT

Armands Šuriņš

Summary

Keywords: Jāzeps Vītols, letters, World War II, Latvian music life, Latvian Conservatory, Baltic Germans, Latvian culture in exile

The previously unpublished letters from Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948) to Irene Narvait (also Irēne Narvaite, 1914–2009, after 1939 – in Germany), a graduate of his composition theory class at the Latvian Conservatory that he himself established, is a valuable primary source that provides a compact testimony about the final years of the Latvian music composer, providing a view of his aesthetic beliefs, world view and his creative credo. It enriches the understanding of the European cultural panorama, influenced by the dramatic course of history in the first half of the 20th century.

Starting in 1940, over the course of seven years, these 46 letters in excellent German, reveal Vītols' rhythm of life in Latvia – winter work in Riga, summer relaxation in Gaujiena. The last third of the letters were written while he was a refugee, frequently moving between cities in Poland and Germany.

In his letters, Vītols describes current events in Latvian music life, the Conservatory and the careers of the graduates, the successes and fates of students and colleagues, farsighted evaluations of budding composers, with the most praise reserved for Ādolfs Skulte (1909–2000), his Latvian Conservatory assistant, and later, a professor for many years. The letters also reflect Vītols' musical and literary creativity – work on the sacred cantata *Jēzus Nācaretē* (*Jesus in Nazareth*) – including the translation of the literary text into German, the choir song *Trimdā* (*In Exile*) with the poetry of his brother who lived in Germany, and the topical *Atmiņas...* (*Memories...*), that became a chrestomathic source of information.

In the context of 1940s history, there are two important guidelines which permeate throughout the letters: Latvian patriotism and humanism. There are attempts to protect the students from forced mobilization in the German army, insuring that foreign powers are not able to use the Song Festival and other Latvian folk traditions for totalitarian propaganda, and to rise above the prejudices of separating society into *us* and *them*. In every letter there is a deep sensitivity and interest about Narvait's experiences in Germany, varying from anxious caring to encouragement with a well-aimed joke. Clear worries about the fate of the Latvian Conservatory are expressed in at least half of the letters since World War II, and, at the same time, Vītols is consistently ascetic regarding issues that affect him personally.

In spite of his health problems, Vītols also is involved in societal activities while in exile, giving them a greater meaning for both Latvians as well as the local residents (Mascagni's opera *Cavalleria rusticana* as performed by Latvian musicians in Oldenburg). Even though his freedom of movement is restricted, Vītols accurately registers changes in the processes that involve Latvian artists, seeking to establish contacts with the friendly Belyayev publishing company in Leipzig, planning the exiled Latvians' Song Festival, and continuing teaching. He was happy to be again useful for his fellow Latvians, as well as for Lithuanian and Estonian political emigrants, forming a Baltic music school in Detmold. These activities help him to look positively towards the future.

The wise and sunlit letters reflect Vītols' personality with a revealing, objective view of the East and West, formed by his cultural experience. The great balance in his personality is confirmed by a broad range of interests: foreign musical life, the concept of *contemporary music*, impressions of literature and educational wisdom. A likeable, sympathetic humour gives the composer a personal charm in these letters.

A great debt is owed to two people for making these letters available: Irene Narvait, who preserved them, even in extremely difficult conditions, then published them and gave the originals to the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, and the professor of the aforementioned academy, *Dr. habil. art.* Vita Lindenberga (1942–2006), who performed the exhaustive and precise translations of the letters into Latvian, as well as scientific analysis.