

# THE (RE)VIEW OF THE SACRED MUSIC OF JĀZEPS VĪTOLS

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## Summary

**Keywords:** Jāzepts Vītols, sacred music, sacred genres, church

Jāzepts Vītols' work in the field of sacred music manifested with great variety and intensity. Reviewing his contribution, a broad field for research appears – both his active practical work, as well the theoretical and even the philosophically theological conclusions he left, and, of course, his extensive oeuvre in various church music genres. Still, even when not considering the broad range and confirmed historical significance of the artistic work, the aforementioned field has still not been analysed in detail.

When considering Vītols' practical contribution in the field of sacred music, we first refer to the *Baznīcas mūzikas vēstures (Church Music History)* lectures at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Latvia, which were given periodically between 1926 and 1936. For the first time, there was serious and thorough work invested in the creation of music that was appropriate for church ceremonies – for example, *Meldiju grāmata Latvijas evaņģēliski luteriskajām draudzēm (Song Book for Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Congregations)*, published in 1924, as well as compositions for certain liturgical sections, vespers, cantatas, etc.

The composer's theoretical observations and conclusions about the history of sacred music and problems are periodically reflected in the press of his time, as well the collection of five notebooks of notes, made while preparing for lectures at the above mentioned Faculty of Theology, which, to this day remain unpublished in the archives of Jāzepts Vītols Latvian Academy of Music. In this context, one must admit that Jāzepts Vītols himself was one of the first to attempt to differentiate the various terminology that was in use during his time for the synonymous description of sacred music in Latvian musicology, attempting to clarify and systemize church music genres, as well as forming his own view on the winding history of church music.

In the context of the composer's creative work in the genre of religious subjects, there are opuses with varied difficulty levels and types of performers. Additionally, more developed or less sacred compositions interweave the entire career of Jāzepts Vītols. Already after completing studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, in 1886 he composes the heartfelt miniature for mixed choir *Lūgšana (Prayer)* with poetry by Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov. In turn, at the end of his creative career, as an exile, he composed religious patriotic miniatures.

The appearance of the religious genre in the creative work of Vītols happened with chronologically fateful succession. Initially, his dearest form of expression was the choir song genre, and he also ended his creative work in the same way. Sacred choir music culmination is marked by the surreal ballad *Dāvids Zaula priekšā* (*David before Saul*) – 1928. From the 1910s, the choir music genre is supplemented by chorale arrangements and original versions. In the 1920s, religious solo songs appear. Then, a vocal-instrumental combination of all three genres appears in the 1930s and 1940s in two liturgies, vesper, as well as nine cantatas, Bible stories and oratorio type works. We should also note Vītols' time in exile, when the composer's searches focused more on liturgical music, and, for the first time in the history of Latvian religious music, an Evangelical Lutheran Church vesper cycle was created.

Reviewing the composer's work, as well as evaluating the analysis of the compositional regularity of the most vivid opuses, a few vital conclusions can be formed. During the composer's life, the curve of the development of his religious works forms as a long *crescendo* wave with a culmination at the end of his creative work, when the greatest sacred music genre diversity and quantity can be observed. Along with interest in the sacred verses of various Latvian poets (including Kārlis Jēkabsons, Fricis Bārda, Kārlis Skalbe, Jānis Kleinbergs, Kārlis Ieviņš, Teodors, Andrejs Pumpurs, Vensku Edvards), the composer also shows his preference for traditional religious texts – fragments from the Old and New Testament and chorales. The assistance of Evangelical Lutheran Church ministers in arranging the verses requires a closer link to the traditions and canons of the confession.

For sacred compositions, particularly important are factors like: an appropriate ensemble, performance time, and the level of difficulty for a church performance, which is dependent on the professional level of the performers. An appropriate selection ensures a natural inclusion of the music in the ceremony, as well as allows for artistically adequate interpretations by the church's own congregation choir. In that way, one can see a broad range of music and genres among Vītols' sacred compositions – beginning with simple chorale arrangements and ending with refined (in a musical language sense) solo songs or expansive vocal-instrumental opuses.