Lai atskan dziesmas[1]: Latvian Music and Cultural Identity in Twenty-First Century New Zealand

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[1] *Let the Songs Resound!*

ABSTRACT: The city of Christchurch, New Zealand, is home to the most distant settlement of the post-World War Two Latvian diaspora. For more than sixty years, this tiny community has maintained a strong sense of cultural identity through music and dance, despite the difficulties presented by geographic distance and isolation. In 2008, I initiated an ethnographic recording project with musicians from the Christchurch Latvian community, which resulted in the production of a double-CD, *Lai atskan dziesmas*. This paper provides a discussion of the practical and theoretical considerations of the ethnographic component of this recording project, and examines the process of identity construction embodied in the recording process. This construction of identity can be examined on many levels, as it involved issues such as the juxtaposition of archival and new recordings, the process of repertoire selection, the differing challenges of live and studio recording, and the process of re-arrangement of songs for the purposes of studio recording. Furthermore, the recording process mobilised issues of identity with respect to the roles of Latvian and non-Latvian musicians involved, and even the ways in which songs on the CD reflect the shared identity of the Christchurch community.

KEYWORDS: *Latvian diaspora, New Zealand, music and identity, music ethnography*

THE Latvian community in New Zealand was established by post-World War Two migrants who became displaced in Europe during the war, and who were unable or unwilling to be repatriated to Soviet-controlled Latvia. Many of these refugees were housed in 'displaced persons' (or 'DP') camps in central Europe in the post-war period, where they developed networks with other displaced Latvians and an understanding of the resettlement possibilities that were available to them. While a number of Allied countries offered resettlement, migrant choices were also influenced by their experiences in dealing with representatives from potential host nations. Latvians who came into contact with New Zealand officials often felt positive about these encounters and were sympathetic towards resettlement in New Zealand.

New Zealand was party to the intake of DPs to fill post-war labour shortages. However, the ethnicity and cultural practices of prospective migrants were matters of concern for New Zealand policy makers. In this pre-multicultural era, New Zealand officials desired migrants who would adapt quickly to New Zealand customs and who could blend in with the

predominantly white Anglo-Saxon New Zealand population. Documents such as the 1951 book by parliamentary advisor Revel Anson Lochore encouraged the selection of Northern European and Baltic migrants for resettlement. In this text, Lochore describes the 'East Balts' (in which he includes Latvians) as well-educated middle-class descendents of German and Russian landed gentry, who are ideal for resettlement (cf. Lochore 1951: 69–70). On the one hand, Lochore's description of Latvians demonstrates an extremely narrow understanding of the ethnic makeup and proto-nationalist sentiment within the DP population. However, it may also be the case that this description is left deliberately vague in order to ingratiate these migrants to the New Zealand readership of the day.

In 1949, around 200 Latvian DPs were granted permits to migrate to New Zealand. While initially housed around Wellington, many were subsequently offered jobs in the South Island. In 1950, the Christchurch City Council resolved to accommodate 5% (or around 180) of the 3000 new migrants that had entered the country that year from Europe. The Latvians who arrived in Christchurch recommended it to others as the climate and terrain reminded them of home. Through rapid internal migration, Christchurch became the main centre of this migrant population. Being predominantly Lutheran, they found quick acceptance at the Lutheran church of St. John in Christchurch, which had a historically small congregation largely comprising the descendents of Germans who had migrated in the 19th century. Subsequently, Latvians built and consecrated their own church and cultural centre.

MUSIC IN THE CHRISTCHURCH COMMUNITY

Religious worship played an important role in the consolidation of the New Zealand Latvian community because a charismatic Latvian Lutheran pastor, Romāns R. Reinfelds, was amongst the initial intake of Latvian DPs to New Zealand. Many of the Latvians who migrated to New Zealand did so in conjunction with Reinfelds, who had been practicing as a pastor in the post-war DP camps and was therefore known to the wider community. Reinfelds established a Latvian choir to sing for church services in Christchurch, and this choir became a mainstay of the community for four decades (see Bendrups 2008).

Alongside the church services, Latvians in Christchurch maintained (and still maintain) formal gatherings for midsummer and Independence Day celebrations, as well as informal gatherings for birthday parties and other events of significance to the community. These festivities regularly featured performances by a nucleus of amateur musicians who became the backbone of community celebrations. This group was never a formalised

folk ensemble, and did not exist for the purposes of preserving or developing a particular folk music repertoire. Rather, they drew on their collective memories, and on resources obtained through Latvian diaspora networks (especially student societies) to build a repertoire of songs with which to entertain the community. It coalesced around Rūdis Krauze and Paulis Puriņš, two talented amateur performers who had been active as musicians in Latvia before the war, and whose guitar and vocal skills strongly complemented each other. In 1983, after many years of hearing their parents performing together, the children of Rūdis and Paulis cajoled them into recording some of their songs. Karl Krauze recalls:

> *I had a friend who had his own recording studio, and he offered to record Dad.* […] *we took them round one afternoon, sat them down in the studio with a bottle of whiskey and told them to get on with it. It was difficult at first, but after a few drinks they just started to play without worrying about where they were* (Krauze 2008).

This impromptu session was rough-mixed down to cassette tape, and copies circulated freely within the Christchurch community and overseas. Both Rūdis and Paulis passed away soon after, but their voices would live on in community celebrations on tape. Their musical collaborators, especially Viesturs and Miervaldis Altments, and Visvaldis Bērziņš, would continue to play at parties into the 1990s. However, by the late 2000s, Miervaldis was often the only musician left playing, and the tape recordings of Rūdis and Paulis had worn out or disappeared from public circulation.

My engagement with the Christchurch Latvian community began in 2006, but it was not until 2008 that I began to understand the role played by Rūdis and Paulis and folksong in general in the social life of the community. I soon found out about the recording, but could not find a copy. I contacted the studio where it was made, and the engineer remembered the session fondly, but the tape he used had be re-used and then discarded long ago, so no master was available. Eventually, Karl managed to locate one cassette, and handed it to me with great trepidation, as it was of deep sentimental importance to him, and possibly the only copy remaining. I undertook to return it to him along with a digital copy on CD. However, the recording quality of the cassette turned out to be reasonably high, which encouraged me to consider other ways of re-disseminating the material, and my thoughts turned to an issue that I had been dealing with in other unrelated research projects: the nexus between field recording and commercial production (see Bendrups 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). It occurred to me at this point that the task of remastering the 1983 recording could become part of a larger, more interactive recording process involving contemporary musicians, with a view to producing a CD to commemorate the community's sixtieth anniversary in 2009.

After lengthy discussion with Miervaldis, I arranged for him to travel to Dunedin, to collaborate in a recording session with myself and some of my colleagues in the Department of Music at the University of Otago, where we have a sophisticated recording studio. Miervaldis would have the task of deciding what songs to record, and we would have the challenge of creating an accompaniment to these songs in situ. The recording was funded by a research grant from the University of Otago, obtained on the basis that the whole process constituted a novel and innovative test of research practice, based around recording studio ethnography.

STUDIO RECORDING AS THEORY AND PRACTICE

Recording studio ethnography is an emerging research area in the field of ethnomusicology, though the idea of the studio as 'field' has been around for some time (see Fitzgerald 1996). Studio ethnography processes range from participant-observation anthropological description (Meintjes 2003) to practical, commercial production (Neuenfeldt 2007). As yet, no single methodology exists as a best-practice framework for approaching the studio as a site of inquiry. As with other types of ethnomusicological study, the objective of studio ethnography is to conduct phenomenological research into music (as cultural practice) through the collection and interpretation of ethnographic data, but in the context of the studio, this data is drawn from the recording process itself. Studios provide a fertile ground for ethnomusicology because the recording process is an inherently intimate and interpersonal one, where successful performance relies on the trust built between performers, producers and sound engineers – similar relationships to those that underpin participant-observation research (Barz, Cooley 1997; Rice 1994). However, beyond this, studio ethnography also offers the potential to produce recorded works, which can then be used for a variety of purposes.

A model for studio ethnography is provided by former head of Macquarie University's Centre for Contemporary Music Studies (CCMS), Philip Hayward. In his time at the CCMS, Hayward produced a series of recordings by his research collaborators from Norfolk and Pitcairn islands on a label set up by the department for this purpose, Coral Music (see Bendrups 2007d). Hayward's approach to studio ethnography is grounded in his conceptual framework of Culturally Engaged Research Facilitation or CERF (Hayward 2005: 58–59). This model positions the production of sound recordings as a model for research reciprocity where research participants receive a tangible, meaningful and professionally produced cultural product in return for the knowledge that they impart to the researcher. The research relationship therefore centres on collaboration

rather than on the subjugation of culture bearers to the academic gaze. This reciprocal approach differs from the existing practice of ethnomusicologists releasing commercial versions of field recordings in that the output is a goal of the research from the very beginning, not something produced after the fact. It is also different from most documentary recording in that the recording process is not driven by the vision of a director/producer, but agreed upon through mutual arrangement, or decided entirely by the performers themselves.

LAI ATSKAN DZIESMAS: THE RECORDING PROCESS

In the case of *Lai atskan dziesmas*, the preparation evolved along practical and pragmatic lines. Over about six months, Miervaldis prepared around 20 songs that he regarded as being significant to the Christchurch community, some of which he had not played for decades. These divided into three categories that Miervaldis self-identified as guiding characteristics of Latvian migrant music identity in Christchurch: nostalgic songs about a lost homeland, entertainment songs for drinking and dancing, and celebratory songs about the beautiful things in life (and love). Meanwhile I recruited colleagues as performers for the recording.

In community gatherings, Miervaldis played guitar and banjo, but was also partial to the mandolin, which had been Rūdis' instrument of choice. A fellow academic at Otago, John Egenes, happens to be an accomplished American folk musician with aptitude for both banjo and mandolin, and he was quickly recruited for the project. Another colleague, Robert Burns, is a bassist with a long pedigree as a session player and studio artist in England. Miervaldis was familiar with a number of the famous bands Rob had played with, and was very pleased to bring him on board, despite the fact that the Christchurch musicians had never played with bass before. Miervaldis was also keen for me to participate in some way, which was perhaps the most unconventional aspect of the recording as I am principally a jazz trombonist – an instrument rarely if ever encountered in Latvian folk music performance. Miervaldis also knew that I possessed a kokle, and convinced me to play it for a few of the tracks. Kokles are ubiquitous instruments in the Latvian diaspora as symbols of cultural revival (cf. Niles 1978). I have no skill or training whatsoever in kokle performance, but Miervaldis was certain that the characteristic sound of the instrument alone would enrich the recording and endear it to the Christchurch audience.

The recording took place over five consecutive days in February 2009. One by one, Miervaldis would play through a song from his list to be recorded as a "rough cut", and the other musicians would then work out the chord sequence and add accompanying tracks individually or as a

group. Once we were satisfied with the track, we would move on to the next. In this way, we recorded twenty-four tracks, thirteen of which were selected for production. These were packaged alongside a remastered version of Rūdis and Paulis' tape, and presented as a double-CD to capture and differentiate between the old and the new.

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY

Lai atskan dziesmas stands as a representation of the Latvian cultural presence in New Zealand, and chronicles the contribution that Latvian musicians make to a broad and diverse national identity. However, other aspects of identity, whether musical or cultural, are problematised in the recording. Firstly, the remaster of Rūdis and Paulis is a *de facto* archival recording, representative of their musical existence. However, the original recording session was entirely an ad hoc affair, which the performers probably did not intend to preserve, and certainly did not conceptualise as a definitive representation of their music. By remastering and preserving this recording, for better or worse, the recording project is complicit in the invention of a historicised identity for these performers.

Secondly, the 2009 recording positions Miervaldis at the very forefront of the music, creating a new performance identity for him in the process. Usually, his performances are noisily accompanied by raucous singing from revellers, not through-produced with the crisp clarity of the recording studio. Therefore, for better or worse, the recording process changed the nature of his vocalisation and affected his way of thinking about performance. On one occasion, a sad, nostalgic song that he would usually sing without further thought required several takes to record because the sparse sound of his disembodied voice accentuated the nostalgic weight of the song text, which he found emotionally distracting.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the 2009 recording included contributions from a rock bassist, a bluegrass banjoist and a jazz trombonist, all bending their individual performance styles towards a repertoire of Latvian folk songs emanating from as far back as the 1920s. The result of this can be heard in tracks like the folk dance accompaniments *Tūdaliņ, tagadiņ* and *Sudmaliņas*, where John Egenes' bluegrass finger picking style carries through the entire tune, and in the folk song *Zaļumballe*, where the town band referred to in the song text is recreated in the bridge by overdubbing trombone and flugel lines to replace what is usually a sung vocalisation of brass band 'oompah' sound.

Finally, for my own part, the recording brought up questions of identity with regard to my own musical profile and ethnicity. I am a second generation descendent of post-war Latvian migrants, yet I have grown up

as an outsider to the Latvian migrant community and, unlike my cousins, do not speak Latvian or possess a deep cultural knowledge of Latvian music. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this recording, I found myself enacting the part of a cultural insider through performances on kokle – an instrument of ethnically-embedded symbolic resonance.

CONCLUSION

The production of *Lai atskan dziesmas* had multiple, overlapping objectives. It began as a way of preserving a historical recording of clear community significance, but soon extended to include contemporary renditions of other important community songs that were not represented in this recording. In order to secure research funding for this process, the project was given a theoretical perspective: to test the idea of using a recording studio as a site for ethnographic research. Most importantly, however, the production and packaging of the recordings provided the Christchurch Latvian community with an artefact to commemorate their sixtieth anniversary, which can also be sold for community fundraising purposes. So far, the recording has been well received in Christchurch despite the eclectic sound combinations and non-traditional arrangements presented in the 2009 CD.

One unanticipated outcome of this recording is that it also serves to represent the New Zealand community at a formal level amongst other larger branches of the post-war Latvian diaspora. While this international community will have no trouble understanding the heritage value of the remastered 1983 recording, I believe that the 2009 recording has the potential to raise questions about the role of tradition, and the impetus to preserve tradition, in diasporic performance practices. Certainly, the combination of electric bass, trombone, bluegrass banjo and guitar with kokle, mandolin and vocals is a unique attempt at expanding the Latvian folk music aesthetic, and is itself predicated on a particular set of circumstances, and the availability and involvement of a particular set of musicians. The underlying impetus for this recording, however, was also an act of preservation: not just of specific songs, but of the way in which this combination of songs and their meanings reflects the sentiments and sixty-year history of the Christchurch Latvian community.

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