

LATVIAN TENORS IN GERMANY IN THE 1920s AND 1930s AND THE “TENOR CRISIS” IN THE LATVIAN NATIONAL OPERA

Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča

Summary

For various reasons, some of the best Latvian tenors of the 1920s and 1930s – Mariss Vētra (Maris Wehtra), Jānis Vītiņš (Ian Wittin) and Artūrs Priednieks-Kavara (Arthur Cavara) – built their professional careers in German and European opera houses, successfully integrating into the international opera industry of the time. The testimonies of their careers can be found in archives, correspondence and autobiographical prose and letters by Mariss Vētra, one of the most fruitful and gifted documentary writers of that period. His letters from Germany have been extensively published in the Latvian interwar press. All these sources serve to reconstruct the creative paths of three Latvian tenors outside their homeland, simultaneously proving the fact that the widely discussed “tenor crisis” in the Latvian National opera actually was a myth based on management and communication failures at the top administrative level of the only opera house in the newly founded state.

Today, a few Latvian opera singers are among the group of worldwide famous stars. Actually, almost ten years ago, there were also a few tenors from Latvia who made their fame in Europe, more precisely Germany, as one of the cultural centres. Paradoxically, they were not fame-and-fortune seekers, their international wanderings started from being underestimated in their homeland or longing for voice studies with Italian teachers to improve the professional skills, which was a trend of the 1920s. All three of the tenors in question had studied voice with Italian teachers, such as Fernando de Lucia, Francesco Cannoni or Giuseppe Anselmi. Cavara had started his voice studies in Berlin with Louis Bachner, the famous founder of “dynamic singing”. These proper studies made Latvians competitive for leading tenor roles in opera houses in Dessau, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Zagreb and others.

The article is based on an overview of the roles sung by the three tenors and offers a comparison of the two tenor voice classification systems – Italian and German, provided by the author, concluding that all of the singers in question had large, unique and competitive voices and a wide list of operatic roles, including in classic golden age performances and contemporary operas of the time.

Among other ideas, this article uncovers the circumstances of the management of the Latvian National opera in the mid-1920s with a challenging cultural policy and constant discussion between the opera and the Ministry of Culture and Education. Despite the fact that opera was led by famous and talented musicians of the time, their management skills and understanding of opera business machinery was not sufficient to implement

a long-term human and artistic resource policy. This is where the “tenor crisis” came in, being mentioned several hundred times in the press, meanwhile, the leading Latvian tenors in Berlin longed to sing in Latvian National Opera instead of to call themselves soloists of any German theatre they were engaged in. The sense of national belonging is particularly important for Mariss Vētra and Jānis Vītiņš, who participated in the Independence Battles of 1919, defending their homeland against external aggressions.

The situation “improves” in the mid-1930s, when Mariss Vētra, Jānis Vītiņš and Artūrs Priednieks-Kavara started to visit the Latvian National Opera as guest soloists more often. They also gave concerts and made records in shellac or vinyl discs, both in opera and popular/folk repertoire. However, the context of the “return” is related to the Nazi power gradually pushing all foreigners out of the job market. The destinies of Latvian tenors were as follows: at the outbreak of WW2, Mariss Vētra and Artūrs Priednieks-Kavara emigrated to Sweden and Germany, followed by Canada and the USA. Jānis Vītiņš, as a former military servant of the Latvian Army and an instructor of the National Guard, was arrested by the Soviets in 1940 and sentenced to death as a “traitor of the nation” and a “German spy”. He was executed in 1941. His last will was to sing the aria from Umberto Giordano’s *Andrea Chenier*, where the poet is similarly unfairly executed. Because of these events, all three tenors were forgotten during the Soviet times and their stories re-emerged in the music history of Latvia only in the 1990s through the memoirs published by overseas Latvian communities.

107

The article uncovers an interesting perspective combining the facts uncovered by Mariss Vētra in his letters and articles and the press reviews by different music critics of the time. The conducted research proves to bring in new data and discoveries about Latvian singers abroad during the interwar period and requires further studies to properly cover the field, aiming to collect an exhaustive compendium about Latvian opera singers in the nearest future.