THE WORDS OF THE BELL: SOVIET LATVIAN CHORAL CENSORSHIP IN THE 1970s AND THE CURIOUS CASE OF PĒTERIS PLAKIDIS (1947–2017)

Edgars Raginskis

Abstract

In the 1960s–1970s, the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic experienced various forms of censorship. In the case of the Latvian composer Pēteris Plakidis (1947–2017), his choral song *Zvana vārdi* (The Words of the Bell) was banned due to his choice of text by the famous Latvian female poet Vizma Belševica (1931–2005), who had been persecuted by the Soviet regime since the early 1960s and was banned from publishing her works from the summer of 1971 to May 1975. This incident remained unreported and undocumented to a wider audience until 2018, after the deaths of both artists. This paper analyses the case study of Plakidis and Belševica within the framework of artistic censorship by association amplified by the experience of the Latvian nation within the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union. The author contextualises this case as a representation of a widespread type of censorship experienced in Latvia due to the importance of choral music within its national tradition.

Keywords: Song Festivals, choral music, social memory

Anotācija

20. gs. 60.–70. gados Latvijas Padomju Sociālistiskajā Republikā cenzūra izpaudās dažādos veidos. Tā, piemēram, komponista Pētera Plakida (1947–2017) kordziesmas *Zvana vārdi* atskaņojums tika aizliegts teksta dēļ – vārdu autore ir ievērojamā latviešu dzejniece Vizma Belševica (1931–2005), kuru padomju režīms vajāja kopš 60. gadu sākuma; no 1971. gada vasaras līdz 1975. gada maijam viņas dzeju nedrīkstēja publicēt. Savukārt par Plakida dziesmas aizliegumu plašākai sabiedrībai nebija zināms, un tas fiksēts dokumentālā liecībā tikai 2018. gadā, jau pēc abu mākslinieku nāves. Rakstā Plakida un Belševicas gadījums pētīts mākslas cenzūras aspektā un saiknē ar latviešu tautas pieredzi padomju totalitārajā režīmā. Autors reprezentē to kā piemēru Padomju Latvijā plaši izplatītam cenzūras veidam, kas vērsts pret kormūziku – nacionālajās tradīcijās stingri sakņotu žanru.

Atslēgvārdi: Dziesmu svētki, kormūzika, sociālā atmiņa

Introduction

Since the very conception of the idea of a Latvian nation-state, and even before this pivotal moment, Latvians have cherished their tradition of amateur choral singing, which has been interlinked with their rich heritage of folk songs. Generations of singers and conductors have honed the skill of collaborative musicianship, and composers have continuously contributed their talent with dedication to strengthening the sense of national self-awareness while producing multitudinous choral compositions of exceeding technical difficulty and aesthetic exquisiteness yet also closely associated with the poetic and musical material of folk songs. Established in 1873 and held with varying and inconsistent frequency, since 1993 a choral song festival has been held in Latvia every five years, with the participation of female, male and mixed choirs complemented by woodwind and symphony orchestra concerts, among other activities. Choral singing has proved to be one of the cornerstones of Latvian music culture and thrived throughout the first period of the independent Republic of Latvia (1918–1940). Even after the annexation and subsequent occupation of Latvia by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the practice of choral singing did not dwindle or perish but continued to flourish and expand, albeit in an appearance altered by the new political system. Along with a renewed interest in Latvian folklore, amateur choral singing played an integral part in the national awakening movement known as the *Trešā Atmoda* (Third Awakening), which greatly contributed to the reestablishing of the independence of Latvia.[1] After the collapse of the USSR, the Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian Song and Dance Festivals were included on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (State Agency [...] 2008). The vast choral repertoire and its importance for Latvian society have been recognised by foreign scholars and vocal music experts. Vance Wolverton notes:

> "One of the main premises for such grand-scale choral singing is to celebrate a national repertoire. Latvia is doubly blessed with both a repertoire of folksong literature, much of which has been arranged for choral singing, and an abundance of original compositions for choir." (Wolverton 1998: 39)

Fully aware of the vibrancy and social impact of the Latvian amateur choral tradition, the censorship apparatus of the Soviet Union, and by extension that of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (hereafter, Latvian SSR), attempted to coerce the established custom of choral singing to serve its ideological purposes. The demand to write in the officially approved style of socialist realism and use the texts of poets endorsing the dominant regime was imposed on Latvian composers, as was a selection of repertoire made compulsory for conductors and their choirs. Any outburst of individual artistic liberty that fell outside the ideological boundaries was viewed with suspicion, thoroughly

[1] The Third Awakening, also known as the Singing Revolution, was a period between 1986 and 1991 in the three Baltic states – Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia – that led to a complete restoration of independence in all three countries. For further reference, see Clare Thompson, *The Singing Revolution: A Political Journey Through the Baltic States* (Thomson 1992), and Guntis Šmidchens, *The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution* (Šmidchens 2014).

examined, and on numerous occasions censored. Music historian Arnolds Klotiņš describes the intricate and complex process of censoring composers:

> "The central censorship office dealing with any kind of accumulated or current information was Latvia's Chief Literary Board, whose duties, of course, also extended to song texts, titles of musical works and names of poets whose lyrics were used in vocal compositions. Before actually reaching the board, however, the text or music had passed through many institutions that carried out direct or indirect censorship, such as the Composers' Union, officials at publishing houses and concert-organising agencies, various committees and finally editors, reviewers and critics as well as the composer or performer him/herself, who was expected to practise self-censorship. The ultimate aim of the ideological regime was to generate poets and composers who censored themselves." (Klotiņš 2018: 614)

Soviet censorship was a ubiquitous and simultaneously deliberately obscure force that Latvian composers had to contend with throughout the Soviet occupation of Latvia (1945–1990), and, as this paper will show, even prominent figures in the music environment of the Latvian SSR were subjected to the scrutiny and non-relenting control of the censorship apparatus.

Censorship and the Soviet Latvian music environment

Liberal thought has extensively explored the topic of censorship since the Age of Enlightenment and has contributed to both forming the understanding of the matter by the general public and facilitating scholarly debate. Jean L. Cohen writes that "in liberal thought, censorship is external in that it represents authorities' intervention in the sphere of consensual actions of individuals, namely, civil society" (Cohen 1994: 48). However, in the context of censorship within totalitarian regimes, the strict delineation of the externality of the censor is insufficient to understand the procedural intricacies and full extent of the censorship activities. Marxist scholars such as Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci have developed a mutually supplementary system of (1) repressive and (2) ideological state apparatuses, where repressive mechanisms such as censorship are subordinated to constructive activities such as propaganda (see, for example, Gramsci 2000: 306). These constructive mechanisms presuppose the indoctrination of the population into the dominant Marxist ideology and the practising of voluntary self-censorship by artists as well as the general public without any coercive outward influence.

According to Matthew Bunn, the most productive way to sufficiently understand the substantial differences between the liberal and repressive state approaches to censoring practices is through the lens of New Censorship Theory – a theoretical framework that "sees censorship as

a diffuse, ubiquitous phenomenon in which a host of actors (including impersonal, structural conditions) function as effective censors" (Bunn 2015: 27).

The diversity and multiplicity of censorship processes have provided the scholarship with the challenge of understanding the limitations of censorship, as this phenomenon encompasses both the result of content censorship and censorial actions. Forms of censorship include legal, quasi-legal and informal social censorship, and the common types of censorship are preliminary censorship, which is concerned with vetting and altering material before it is published and publicly disseminated, and post-censorship, which involves limiting the proliferation of already published material, withdrawing censored material from the public sphere and invoking punitive measures towards the author of the material in question (Ingram 2000: I).

Just as several forms of censorship exist, various definitions of the term *censorship* circulate in the research and academic discourse. For example, George Anastaplo calls censorship "the changing or the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is deemed subversive of the common good" (Anastaplo 2019). Latvian literary scholar Raimonds Briedis defines censorship as a mechanism of societal control that evaluates and arbiters the information accessible to society by limiting or excluding certain or potentially possible units of information from the consciousness of the society (Briedis 2010: 7). For this paper, the author has devised the following working definition of censorship: a direct or mediated effort by the authorities to limit, control or otherwise influence the result of creative efforts by individual artists or artistic groups.

The common perceptions of censorship and freedom of speech are mutually exclusive in their extremes; in reality, however, the absolutism of free speech has never been allowed by the individuals or organisations in power, and various practical limitations have been implemented in all societies. The Soviet Union was no exception, and, from the establishment of Bolshevik rule in 1917 onward, it always strived towards absolute control over modes of expression, dissemination of information and means of communication (Jansen 1991: 110). Although Article 125 of the Constitution of the USSR of 1936, which had legal power at the time of the investigated censorship incident, guaranteed freedom of speech (Garant.ru 2003–2020), in practice composers of the Soviet period experienced numerous forms of censorship. These included legal, quasi-legal and informal social censorship (Ingram 2000: 5). With certain types of music media, such as vocal works that include lyrics, composers could easily face censorship for their choice of poet or poetic text, even if they did not write the texts themselves. In the case of Latvian composer Pēteris Plakidis, the choral song *Zvana vārdi* (The Words of the Bell) was banned predominantly due

to the choice of text by the dishonoured Latvian poet Vizma Belševica, who had come under condemnation by the Soviet Latvian government in the early 1960s and was effectively banned from publishing her works from the summer of 1971 to May 1975 (Briedis 2007: 65).

The scholarly literature on the topic of Soviet Latvian music censorship is scarce. The first monograph to be mentioned, *Mūzika pēckara staļinismā* (Music in Latvia during the Stalinist Post-War Decade), is authored by Latvian musicologist Arnolds Klotiņš and gives a valuable contribution to scholarship by providing the political-historical context of the decade from 1944 until 1953, uncovering and cross-referencing factual evidence about events within the field of art music in Soviet Latvia, and opening a discussion about the reasons for and consequences of music censorship.

In addition to Klotiņš' book, another noteworthy literary source that indirectly discusses the subject of music censorship is authored by Sergei Kruk. His book *"Par mūziku skaistu un melodisku!" Padomju kultūras politika, 1932–1964* ("Here's to Music, Beautiful and Melodious!" Soviet Cultural Policy, 1932–1964; Kruk 2008) focuses on processes in Soviet music that were reflected in the Latvian musical community of the same historical period and to a certain extent continue to resonate in Latvian music even today, as composers often try to deal with the traumas of the past in an artistically creative and innovative manner. The monograph evaluates the modes in which Latvian musicians worked within the framework of the Soviet system. Because only a couple of non-scientific journal articles cover this subject, there is a substantial research gap in documenting the conditions under which choral music of the Latvian SSR was censored. Due to the potential political and social repercussions, this topic was not widely publicised and discussed during the Soviet period and continues to be a delicate and often avoided subject even today, because many of the affected composers are still alive and active and prefer not to share detailed information about themselves and their colleagues.

This paper considers the case of Plakidis and Belševica within the framework of artistic censorship experienced in a small nation that was part of a larger repressive state. The author will discuss a censored choral work by Plakidis as an example of a common form of quasi-legal censorship experienced in the Latvian SSR due to the importance of choral music within its national tradition. From a phenomenological standpoint, it examines the scope of potential socioeconomic and musical consequences that composers of text-based choral music encountered regarding the performance prospects of specific works and their addition to the popular repertoire as well as the professional development of the composers' careers. The following discussion will provide a concise outline of the biographies of the composer and poet and the conditions under which they were censored. The author will

also describe the censored choral song examined in this case study. Finally, the author will recount the circumstances through which the choral work was censored yet, due to the nuances of totalitarian censorship, the composer was nonetheless able to flourish. This paper will thus help shed light on certain elements of artistic censorship that are often overlooked.

The curious and ill-fated collaboration between Pēteris Plakidis and Vizma Belševica

Pēteris Plakidis (1947–2017) is rightfully regarded as one of the most outstanding Latvian composers of the 20th century. Having exhibited an extraordinary musical ability in his childhood and teenage years, by the age of twenty Plakidis was already an accomplished pianist and chamber musician. His first major composition, *Music for Piano, Strings, and Timpani* (1969), received praise at the All-Union composition competition, and, while awarding the aspiring composer with a diploma, the chairman of the competition Dmitry Shostakovich commended his achievement with the words: "Keep it up, young man, and everything will be all right."[2] Indeed, by the age of twenty-five, everything was all right for Plakidis – he held a tenured position as a composition lecturer at the Latvian State Conservatoire (currently, the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music), he was a voting member of the respected Composers' Union of the Latvian SSR, and he was a member of the Communist Party. The latter was, if not obligatory, a highly recommended prerequisite for uninterrupted rising in the professional ranks and should not necessarily be viewed as proof of a pro-Soviet worldview on the part of Plakidis. Quite the contrary, he was remembered by his colleagues and friends, and also by the author of this paper, as a generally apolitical person who dedicated his time and attention entirely to music. Plakidis had an untarnished biography, which, according to the Soviet nomenclature, meant that none of his relatives had been representatives of the bourgeois class during the period of the independent Republic of Latvia. On no occasion had Plakidis displayed any views that could be labelled as anti-communist. This begs the questions: if Plakidis was not the source of the issue, what was it, then? What caused the banning of his song?

Vizma Belševica (1931–2005) was a Latvian poet, writer and translator. Much like Plakidis in music, she is regarded as one of the key figures in Latvian literature of the second half of the 20th century and was widely beloved by critics and audiences alike. An author of numerous poetry collections, short stories and other works, she was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, however, only after the restoration of Latvian independence (1992 and 2000) (Kuduma n.d.).

[2] This memory was revealed and reiterated by the composer over the course of numerous private conversations with the author of this paper from 2008 to 2015.

Belševica was born into a working-class family and manifested an early interest and aptitude for literature. Unlike Plakidis, she was initially a passionate member of the Soviet Latvian Communist Youth Organisation, but she quickly became disillusioned with communist ideas after seeing the apparent inconsistency between the ideological slogans and the reality of everyday life. This disenchantment, in combination with Belševica's refusal of the standards of socialist realism[3] in poetry (for example, indiscriminate praise of the supposedly thriving Soviet life), led to several encounters with the Soviet Latvian repressive institutions, multiple unwarranted searches of her apartment by KGB agents and, ultimately, the aforementioned ban on the publication of her literary works from the summer of 1971 to May 1975 (Briedis 2007: 65).

[3] Socialist realism was the predominant form of officially approved art in the Soviet Union between 1932 and 1988. For further inquiry, see the monograph by Caradog Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory* (1973).

Zvana vārdi is a song for mixed choir composed in 1976 by Pēteris Plakidis with lyrics by Vizma Belševica. In a private and undocumented conversation in 2020 with the author of this paper, the composer's daughter, Agate Plakide, revealed that Plakidis had been a distant acquaintance of Belševica but did not have direct access to her newly written poems. However, his mother, Džuljeta Plakidis, was an avid poetry connoisseur and could have acquired the poem through some unnamed friend, later sharing the text with her son, who had previously expressed interest in Belševica's poetry and had already written a couple of songs with her lyrics, for example, *Tavas saknes tavā zemē* (Your Roots in Your Land, 1970). Another, equally likely, possibility is that Plakidis might have bought the recently released collection of Belševica's poems titled *Madarās* (In the Bedstraw, 1976), which was the first collection after the lifting of the ban on the publication of her works, chosen the poem and promptly composed the work.

The song is written in the key of G minor in a polyphonic texture and exhibits features of the ternary form. The style of the song follows the idiom of Post-Romanticism and could be described as somewhat simplistic, keeping in mind that Plakidis was writing this song specifically to match the needs and abilities of an amateur choir. Music-wise, then, *Zvana vārdi* is far from the composer's boldest experiments and does not contain anything that would be likely to have been picked up by the Soviet censorship apparatus.

The poem *Zvana vārdi* (written on November 11, 1972, published in 1976 in the poetry collection *Madarās*) consists of five verses. It is a dedication to Kurzeme, one of Latvia's historical regions.[4] The poem is, in its essence, a list of various towns and villages situated in Kurzeme, arranged in a rhythmically varying and playful manner and for the purpose of wordplay, paired with verbs that rhyme with the names of these geographical places.[5] The poem is fluently written and well-structured, and one can easily see how Plakidis might have found inspiration to create a song with such lyrics. The poem contains

[4] Referred to in the international context until the 20th century as Courland or Courland Province.

[5] For the original version of the poem and its English translation, see Appendix I.

no open criticism of the Soviet regime nor hints at any noticeable and debatable metaphors. On the other hand, the text with its abundance of Latvian geographical locations could have captured the attention of the censors, prompting them to flag the poem as undesirable for further proliferation in society.

Before discussing the case of *Zvana vārdi* in detail, it must be mentioned that, until recently, the existence of this incident remained unknown to anyone but the censors, the few select members of the Board Praesidium of the Composers' Union and, arguably, Plakidis himself. Coincidentally, during a private conversation with one of the involved parties the author of this paper acquired information that led to further investigation of this incident. The informant/interviewee gave his written consent to go on record and shared further details of the case, facilitating the gradual piecing together of a somewhat complete narrative. Also, private and undocumented conversations with Maija Krīgena, the spouse of the recently deceased Plakidis, reveal that on no occasion did he discuss this matter with her. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss every aspect of censorship and the psychological trepidations an artist must have endured after encountering an aggressive external intrusion into his creative process. However, the failure of Plakidis to communicate this information with his wife may be explained in two ways. Either he was unaware of the censorship incident, or his secretive behaviour could be symptomatic of a common trait among Soviet artists of the period, namely, staying silent and not disclosing any information that might potentially endanger their families and loved ones as well as put themselves in a professionally disadvantageous situation.

In the preface to his work *PSRS atklātajos iespieddarbos, radio un televīzijas raidījumos publicēšanai aizliegto datu saraksts: slepeni, Maskava, 1970* (Document Collection of USSR Data Forbidden to Be Published and Broadcast in Public Mass Media: Classified, Moscow, 1970), the Latvian historian Heinrihs Strods writes that it was a common practice and requirement of Soviet censors to systematically dispose of documental evidence of censorship acts by destroying censored manuscripts and pictures, any written case files, diaries, censorship registration journals and other materials (Strods 2008: 11). An analysis of the archival materials related to the second half of the 1970s and the Composers' Union of the Latvian SSR has so far failed to produce any tangible evidence situating the involved parties in the context of the censorship case of *Zvana vārdi*; thus, the historical account provided by the author's informant, Dr. Jānis Torgāns, is of crucial significance.

Torgāns (b. 1942) is a respected Latvian musicologist who specialises in the work of Plakidis. In the 1970s, he worked as a music propaganda editor in the Latvian branch of the Music Foundation of the USSR and

held an administrative position in the Composers' Union of the Latvian SSR. His duties included compiling concert programmes, clearing musicians for concerts and corresponding with other organisations and Soviet republics, especially the leadership in Moscow. He also attended all the important gatherings and meetings, particularly the weekly assemblies of the Board Praesidium, where he documented all the thoughts the executives voiced. According to Torgāns, the meaning of those documents was marginal, as the common practice was to arrange all the necessary details over the phone or in direct communication with the superiors, who always conveyed their directives in verbal form (PAER,[6] Torgāns 2018).

[6] The Private Archive of Edgars Raginskis, hereafter PAER.

The following are Torgāns' memories of the *Zvana vārdi* case:

> "In the wake of the XVII Latvian Song Festival (1977) the bureaucratic machinery (the organisational committee) was about to vet the festival programme, pre-selected by a panel of the leading choral conductors in the country. Being a mere formality, the opinion of the Composers' Union was also required to "look good on paper". During that specific meeting of the Composers' Union Praesidium, the board was going through the list of the compositions, and, once they reached the name of Pēteris Plakidis (who was being represented by *Zvana vārdi* with lyrics by Belševica), the referent of the Culture Division of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party, Vija Bluka, a PhD candidate in philosophy (who at that time was ever-present in all the discussions of any serious matters), uttered a couple of words under her breath but strictly: "Not going to happen."" (PAER, Torgāns 2018; translation by the author)

All three leading members of the Composers' Union (chairman Ģederts Ramans, his deputy and the [Communist] Party Secretary Pauls Dambis, and board secretary Oļģerts Grāvītis) expressed their confusion and objected categorically. The question "WHY?" was voiced rather loudly. No reply. Again, "WHY?" How is it possible? A talented composer, a member of the Communist Party! Again silence, no reply. Gradually all in attendance understood that this was not the personal decision of the referent, and, if the directive of the party was to deny the poet Belševica any public exposure, nothing could be done. This was only one of many techniques of censorship in the Composers' Union. The idea of all this being that to preserve the bourgeois tradition of the Song Festival, sacrifices needed to be made. And those were not the only sacrifices (PAER, Torgāns 2018).

The situation described above was a typical occurrence during the Soviet period, when the fate of artistic work was adjudicated behind closed doors, verdicts were delivered by a hierarchically subordinate nomenclature operative not directly involved in the decision-making, and censorship incidents did not generate any paper trail, as there is not even the slightest hint of the Plakidis-Belševica incident in the protocols of the meetings of the Board of the Composers' Union of the Latvian SSR. In the incident revealed above, censorship was manifested in its

quasi-legal form, in which an action is taken by those in some official capacity who nevertheless have no express legal backing for what they do in the case in question (Ingram 2000: 6). This form of censorship involves needless and formal discussions not supposed to yield any tangible results, omnipresent and all-powerful bureaucracy, and *pre-factum* decisions without any opportunity to contest them, hence the phrase uttered by the referent of the censorship body: "Not going to happen." The account of this censorship case demonstrates that the person delivering the verdict of the censorship had no authority to alter the decision, which had already been made beforehand.

Analysis of the verbal account of the *Zvana vārdi* case reveals that, although Soviet censorship had nothing against the character or music of Plakidis, making an argument in defence of the inclusion of his song in the programme of the XVII Latvian Song Festival was futile. Neither his musical talent and position as a lecturer at the Latvian State Conservatoire nor his membership in the Composers' Union, or even his affiliation with the Communist Party, could play any part in reversing the decision to ban the work of Belševica from any public performance. The behaviour of the referent of the Culture Division confirms that the censors had no interest in discussing the content or the professional or artistic qualities of either the poem or the song. Plakidis got his song banned from the Song Festival purely by making the unintentional yet critical mistake of setting it to the lyrics of *persona non grata* Vizma Belševica.

In order to better understand the context of this censorship case, it must be reminded that in 1973 the Latvian SSR celebrated the centennial of the Latvian Song Festival tradition, a lot of effort had been put into the planning and production of that festival, the majority of the repertoire consisted of music created by Latvian composers, and there was a noticeable sense of national pride regarding the preparation and celebration of one hundred years since the beginning of the tradition. The XVI Latvian Song Festival (1973) provided an opportunity for amateur choirs to further improve their singing abilities through more regular and serious rehearsals and boosted the morale and the sense of Latvian nationhood of the singers and audiences with its emphasis on Latvian music repertoire (Grauzdiņa 2008: 142).

This shift in attitude on the part of certain citizens of the Latvian ethnicity towards the dangerous notion of perceiving the Latvian Song Festival as a festivity encouraging a sense of Latvian national identity profoundly worried the authorities, and several decisive steps were taken to remind the general public of the true symbolic meaning of the Latvian Song Festival as a tradition strengthening the friendship and brotherhood of Soviet peoples and demonstrating the flourishing of Socialist culture. In this tone, the 1977 Song Festival was planned

and produced as a showcase of Soviet Latvian amateur art and the gala event of the First Festival of Workers' Amateur Art of the USSR. The key feature of the repertoire policy for the XVII, XVIII and XIX Latvian Song Festivals was the "dilution" of the programmes with works by composers from other Soviet Socialist Republics. This policy was intended to redirect the singers from extensively immersing themselves into Latvian sensibilities, and it was accomplished by surrounding the Latvian songs with foreign compositions about the friendship of nations (Grauzdiņa 2008: 175).

The first and most obvious "victim" of the *Zvana vārdi* censorship case was the song itself. It was denied a performance at the XVII Latvian Song Festival and, subsequently, did not receive notable exposure to concert audiences or choir singers, ultimately fading into relative obscurity. The author of this paper searched for an audio recording of *Zvana vārdi* and consulted former colleagues at Latvian Radio 3 *Klasika*, the only classical music radio station in the country and an organisation that focuses, among other things, on the preserving of national cultural heritage, including any recordings made by Latvian Radio under the Soviet regime. A meticulous search revealed only one recording of the song in the Latvian Radio archives – a performance by the *Beverīna* mixed choir and conductor Juris Kokars that was recorded in 1981. Unfortunately, no follow-up interview with the conductor was possible, as he died in an automobile accident in 1990. Furthermore, it was a surprise and revelation for the staff at the *Klasika* radio station that Plakidis had written such a song in the first place. For context, the oeuvre of Plakidis is widely represented in Latvian Radio's digital archives, and most of his compositions have at least several recordings.

As powerful as the Soviet censorship apparatus was, it was not omnipotent or devoid of human error. The previous discussion illuminated the intense attention by Soviet censors towards the repertoire of the Latvian Song Festival; however, opportunities to include songs by Soviet Latvian composers that had been banned from the festival occasionally arose in different circumstances, for example, when programming music for smaller-scale concerts. These events were too numerous to be thoroughly controlled by censorship, and choral conductors utilised these openings. Further investigation of the printed mass media in the Latvian SSR of the 1980s revealed that *Zvana vārdi* was not entirely erased from the concert repertoire by extension of its unpublicised banning in 1977. An article titled *Zvana dziesma* (The Song of the Bell) published in the popular newspaper *Rīgas Balss* (The Voice of Riga; December 8, 1983) reviewed a collaborative concert by two artistic groups – the mixed choir *Mūza* and the mixed choir *Līvzeme*. Published under the alias J. Jumis, the article mentions the song *Zvana vārdi* as having been featured in the concert and discusses the poetic qualities of Belševica's text while somewhat inelegantly connecting the

poem and music it is set to with the ideas of socialism and creating a better future for Soviet citizens.[7]

[7] For the full text of the review, see Appendix II.

It is highly unlikely that Belševica was aware of the *Zvana vārdi* case or could somehow have gained access to any information regarding it. As stated above, the censorship incident went undocumented, and all involved parties were engaged in a specific type of unspoken non-disclosure agreement. If the composer did not share this information with his spouse, also a musician, then it is at least improbable, if not impossible, that he might have reached out to the poet, whom he knew only superficially. Because Belševica was already labelled a *persona non grata* in Latvian SSR Communist Party circles, it is questionable whether she was subjected to any additional repercussions. Raimonds Briedis writes that Belševica had been ostracised by the Central Committee of the Latvian SSR Communist Party since the 1960s, and the General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press under the USSR Council of Ministers (Glavlit) had been instrumental in censoring and othering the poet on all levels, starting from the editorial boards of newspapers and journals, and ending with instances of punitive censorship. Simultaneously, representatives of the Central Committee complained that on numerous occasions editors did not fully comply with the order to avoid even mentioning Belševica's name (Briedis 2010: 65). Despite the efforts of Soviet Latvian censorship, by 1977 she had already become a household name among Latvian readers, was well received in the literary community, and her poems were even being used by composers of popular music as source material for highly-acclaimed songs.

Consequently, one can assume that the censors were: (1) using every opportunity to hurt the poet they felt was probably already slipping out of their control and (2) bureaucratically and rigidly following an outdated list of authors to be censored. This hypothesis is reinforced by the shift in the power dynamics between Glavlit and the Central Committee of the Latvian SSR Communist Party discussed above as well as by the varying attention to detail within the monitored artistic works of the period. Thus, Glavlit could have analysed the poem *Zvana vārdi* for censorable features, discovered none and vetted the poem for publication in the *Madarās* collection, but the Central Committee could have instructed its staff to block any attempt to popularise the works of Belševica during the ban on her publications and still not have changed its policy as of 1977.

Plakidis came out of this situation seemingly unscathed – no threats were made to revoke his tenure at the Latvian State Conservatoire nor did he lose his position in the Composers' Union nor was he subjected to any disciplinary action. Quite the contrary, the next year after the censorship incident provided Plakidis with career advancement,

when he was voted by the members of the Composers' Union into the Executive Board of the organisation on March 7, 1978 (LNA/LVA, 423-6-39: 12–15[8]). Overall, Plakidis' professional reputation seems to not have suffered from this incident. He continued to write choral music with lyrics by Belševica, and eventually one of these songs, *Tavas saknes tavā zemē* (Your Roots in Your Land, 1970), was performed at the XXI Latvian Song Festival in 1993 by the united choir, conducted by Imants Kokars. It is worth noting that this song would never have been approved during the Soviet period due to the distinctly national sentiment of its text.

[8] LNA/LVA, 423-6-39: 12–15 = Latvijas Nacionālais arhīvs / Latvijas Valsts arhīvs (The National Archives of Latvia / Latvian State Archive), fund No. 423 (*Latvijas Komponistu savienība* / Latvian Composers' Union), Collection No. 6, Case No. 39, pp. 12–15.

On the other hand, Plakidis' professional debut at such a professionally prestigious and important event as the Song Festival was delayed by three years, until the XVIII Latvian Song Festival of 1980, when his choral song *Ar dziesmu dzīvībā* (With Song in Life, 1979, lyrics by Jānis Peters) was performed by the united choir, conducted by Ausma Derkēvica (Grauzdiņa 2008: 322). There is no demonstrable way of confirming with Plakidis whether he was aware of the censorship incident, as he died in 2017, and Torgāns was unable to corroborate Plakidis' knowledge of such an event. Furthermore, when asked about the incident, Plakidis' widow conveyed her surprise and unfamiliarity with it, leading the author to deduce that Plakidis never discussed this issue with his spouse, a professional musician herself. This is one of the elements of the censorship case that is still undetermined and will probably remain so forever, as it would seem highly unlikely that a composer, after having written a composition that has been approved by his colleagues and aggregated the interest of professional choral conductors, would not inquire about the sudden exclusion of this composition from the repertoire of the Song Festival. On the other hand, the *modus operandi* of Soviet censorship excluded the author from direct contact with the censor; any communication was to be performed between the censorship operative and the editor (Briedis 2010: 10). The latter, in this case, could be conditionally considered the Board Praesidium of the Composers' Union. It can only be speculated what effect this case of censorship had on Plakidis, but his musical heritage leads one to believe that this setback did not discourage him from composing stylistically bold and poetically patriotic choral music in the 1980s.

Any cross-referencing with the verbal account of the censorship incident as given by Torgāns failed to produce any noteworthy results. Two of the members of the Board of the Composers' Union had already died, Ģederts Ramans in 1999 and Oļģerts Grāvītis in 2015, and the third participant, Pauls Dambis, gave self-conflicting statements when interviewed about the incident, first claiming to not remember any such occasion, only to later rephrase his denial into a somewhat vague acknowledgement that "something of such sort might have indeed

happened" but he could remember no details (PAER, Dambis 2019). The author sought out the staff member of the Cultural Division of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Latvian SSR, Vija Bluka, who agreed to share her memories about the relevant period and had no objections to the author making these memories public. Although the interview with Bluka helped to shed light on the established procedures within the organisation she represented, she did not recall the meeting with the Board of the Composers' Union described by Torgāns. At the same time, Bluka remembered having great sympathy for the artists working within the framework of the creative unions and trying to alleviate the ideological pressure exerted upon them by the propaganda operatives (PAER, Bluka 2020). These claims, which lack documentary evidence or substantiation in interviews with Latvian composers who were active during the Latvian SSR period, should be acknowledged as an item of social memory and investigated in future research.

Conclusions and further discussion

The case described and analysed in this research paper challenges the common assumption about Soviet totalitarian censorship of the 1970s being a blunt and merciless instrument of force similar to that suffered by the likes of Shostakovich and Khachaturian beginning in the 1930s, after the infamous publication *Sumbur vmesto muzyki* (*Сумбур вместо музыки* / Muddle Instead of Music) in the Soviet Russian newspaper *Pravda* (*Правда*, January 28, 1936), and continuing after Andrei Zhdanov's declaration in the 1940s of a ruthless battle against "formalism" (Gojowy 1993: 289), when in fact the repressive apparatus had evolved over the decades into a far more elaborate and nuanced system of influencing and limiting the creative output of artists, often prompting them to practise systematic self-censorship. Subordinated to their superiors in Moscow and Leningrad, the Latvian censors had multiple tools at their disposal, and an author could never be certain if his or her work would withstand the censorship, especially in cases of quasi-legal censorship by association. It could never be precisely determined whether one's artistic collaborator had already been pardoned and removed from the list of forbidden authors or condemned and left on it. Also, the potential severity of consequences in one's professional, artistic or private life remained unclear. This uncertainty would destabilise artists' psyches, force them to doubt the validity of their artistic choices and make them vulnerable to potential future manipulation by the censors as well as increase the likelihood of voluntary self-censorship by avoiding certain topics, potential artistic collaborators and music genres that had proved to be the subject of interest in previous encounters with Soviet Latvian censorship.

An additional challenge for researchers is the fact that, in a repressive state such as the USSR, the censorship apparatus made regular and systematic attempts to conceal and dispose of any factual evidence of censorship by destroying all materials related to censorship cases (Strods 2008: 11). An exhaustive analysis of the dedicated Fund No. 423 of the Latvian State Archive, which encompasses the body of documents originating from the Composers' Union of the Latvian SSR during the second half of the 1970s, did not reveal any indications of the censorship incident discussed in this paper. Therefore, it is crucial for researchers to conduct in-depth interviews with surviving composers with the purpose of collecting the greatest amount of social memories possible and documenting the experiences of the composers. It is important to continue the work of establishing the true extent of the impact that the cultural policies of the repressive regime had on the thought process and manifestations of creativity of individual artists. This is perhaps the last opportunity to strive for transitional justice through intergenerational communication, giving voice to senior composers, most of whom have already reached the age of eighty and, in some cases, ninety years.

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