

# REVIEWS OF JĀZEPS VĪTOLS MUSIC IN THE RIGA GERMAN AND RUSSIAN PRESS

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## Summary

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Opinions on national culture expressed by its very own representatives, as well as observers, will never be identical. Their comparison is engaging and a theme worthy of research, as it can answer the question: in national culture, what is interesting and striking not just locally, but also when looking at the broader context? The analysis of this question can be very extensive. The goal of this paper is to reveal a single aspect of such analysis: to compare diverse opinions on the creative work of Jāzeps Vītols expressed in the Riga German and Russian press during the time of this composer's greatest activity – from the 1880s to the 1930s.

During the first period of Vītols' work – the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the main *national awakening* inspired tendencies in his, as well as other Latvian contemporaries' creative work, is the **expression of national motifs**. With Latvian audiences, as well as music critics, this theme usually generates an enthusiastic response, however, the non-Latvian press sees it in a more contradictory light. The triumphant progress of National Romanticism in Europe is viewed by the majority of Riga's German music critics if not negatively, then at least as something debateable. This is confirmed by, for example, reviews written by Moritz Rudolph (*Rigaer Tageblatt*, July 21, 1889) and Hans Schmidt (*Rigasche Rundschau*, September 4, 1906; November 28, 1911) on folklore-inspired works by Vītols. Hans Schmidt also applies his criticism to other contemporary Latvian composers:

“They all share a common source for their creative work – rooted in motifs of Latvian folk music, yielding to its urge and influence. Though this feature undoubtedly seems attractive and interesting, it still contains a certain threat. It is obvious that excessively cultivating the national only harms the individual development. Modern music history provides many disturbing examples in this respect.”  
(Schmidt 1906)

It is interesting that opposition to an excessive expression of national colour in the works of Latvian composers barely appears in Russian music criticism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, we see many opinions that Latvian colleagues overrate Vītols' accomplishments in the development of national ideas. For example, this is expressed by contributor N. Severski in *Рижский Вестник* (August 14, 1912).

The critic notes composers who, in his opinion, express national colour more confidently than Vītols, such as Andrejs Jurjāns and Alfrēds Kalniņš. In turn, Vsevolod Cheshihin expresses this comparison: “Alfrēds Kalniņš belongs to the Latvian school of melody – it is closely involved with the folk song, serving as the main source of inspiration and guidance in his creative work – rather than the school of melody declamation, which has more of a cosmopolitan trend (this is represented in the work of, for example, J. Vītols).” (*Рижская Мысль*, December 8, 1910)

On the other hand, the reviews by German and Russian critics share the characterisation of Vītols’ **individual style** – a tendency towards an objectified, intellectually controlled music expression, and a notable reservation in the expression of feelings. The other aspect of Vītols’ music that seemed vital to both Latvian and non-Latvian reviewers was his disposition towards refined coloristic nuances. Reviewers Hans Schmidt (*Rigasche Rundschau*, September 4, 1904), G. Romanovski (*Рижский Вестник*, November 25, 1911), S. Almazov (*Народная Мысль*, November 9, 1924) are often enthusiastic about Vītols’ ability to create almost visual associations with unique timbral or harmonic techniques. At times, parallels with impressionism are noted (Vidvud Jurevich, *Сегодня*, December 11, 1924). Vītols himself expressed a deprecatory opinion about this musical style; however, there are some clear parallels with it, considering that he is a former student of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who was influenced by impressionists.

The reviews of Vītols by his contemporary music critics, though subjective, are worth investigating deeper, and could provide interesting material for comparison of the opinion of Vītols’ music today. They confirm that among Vītols’ compositions there is no lack of works that are able to delight non-Latvian listeners, and interest in his music is generated not just by national colour, but also more significantly and even as a primary reason – by his powerful and extraordinary personality.