

# NEW SEARCHES IN CONTEMPORARY CONCERT MUSIC: PERSPECTIVE OF RIGA GERMAN MUSIC CRITICISM (1850–1875)

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The article deals with music reviews presented in the German periodicals of Riga, discussing new searches in contemporary concert music during the third quarter of the 19th century. In Riga's history, this quarter is remarkable as a time of transition – the last period when the dominance of Baltic Germans in various areas of social and cultural life in the city was so strongly expressed. The main concert venues, like previously, were the City Theatre (*Stadttheater*), the houses of various German societies (Big and Small Guild, House of the Blackheads, etc.), and the Riga Cathedral. The concerts also regularly attracted the attention of the music critics in Riga. Their articles in the biggest newspapers (*Rigasche Zeitung*, and from 1867 *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*) as well as in a few other periodicals are the most comprehensive testimonies on the tendencies of concert life that encourage a search for answers to the following questions:

- 1) What were the main aesthetic values of contemporary music for Rigans at this time?
- 2) Which processes were perceived as ambiguous or even negative?

When discussing this thematic, much attention is paid to the concept of the “music of the future” (*die Zukunftsmusik*). It was a keyword that entered the lexicon of Riga music critics in the 1850s; similarly, like in Germany itself (see, for example, Kallionpää, Gasselseder 2020: 113), “music of the future” gained various connotations, both positive and negative. A common context for its use were comparisons with music from the past, for example, with the oeuvre by Schubert (A[lt], *Rigasche Zeitung* 07.10.1853), or Mozart (Alt, *Rigasche Zeitung* 30.06.1856; Hr., *Rigasche Zeitung* 16.(28.)03.1863). Usually, the past was mentioned as an ideal, meanwhile, the gradations of assessments of the *Zukunftsmusik* were found to be quite different: from a cautious and rather negative attitude to neutral. It can be observed that over the period under review, the critics' views towards the *Zukunftsmusik* changed, and the initial misunderstanding was gradually replaced by a far more tolerant attitude. This turn was also expressed in the judgements of the local critics on composers that usually are associated with the *Zukunftsmusik* and the New German school (*neudeutsche Schule*): it could be confirmed with the reviews of Riga's first performances of works such as the tone poem *Preludes* by Franz Liszt (P[ilzer], *Rigasche Zeitung* 26.10.(07.11.)1871; R[udolph], *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* 28.10.(09.11.)1871), *Faust Overture* by Richard Wagner (Pilzer, *Rigasche Zeitung* 23.10.(04.11.)1873; Rudolph, *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*, 26.10.(10.11.)1873) and others.

It is well-known that the leaders of the New German school perceived Schuman and Brahms as their conservative opponents (see Walker 2001, etc.). Nevertheless, the music critics in Riga did not highlight this dimension. The works by Schumann, especially those for chamber ensembles, were frequently performed in Riga already during the 1850s. The most influential reviewer of this time, Carl Alt from *Rigasche Zeitung*, describes him mainly as an interesting yet controversial composer (A[lt], *Rigasche Zeitung* 22.11.1852; A[lt], *Rigasche Zeitung* 28.02.1853), and in one case, he even links Schumann to the “indefinite and dark music of the future” as opposed to Mozart's “clear greatness” (Alt 1856a). In the 1860–1870s, Schuman's work received significantly more favorable reviews. Regarding Brahms, an event with a

special resonance was the first performance of his *German Requiem (Ein deutsches Requiem)* in Riga (1872). The critics from the main newspapers, Friedrich Pilzer (*Rigasche Zeitung*) and Moritz Rudolph (*Zeitung für Stadt und Land*), discuss this work in extensive articles, particularly noting the unusual interpretation of the religious motifs (P[ilzer], *Rigasche Zeitung* 22.04.(04.05.)1872; R[udolph], *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* 16.(28.)04.1872). Such a reception coincides with the assessment of the Requiem by Brahms in Germany itself (see, for example, Beller-McKenna 1998: 10).

In the late 1860s, the term “modern music” (“modern composition”, etc.) also appeared in the lexicon of Riga’s music critics. It was attributed both to the New German School and to several works by Schumann, Brahms and other contemporary composers associated by reviewers with manifestations of novelty.

Reviewers have also focused their attention on the novelty in some works by the local composers:

1) Wilhelm Bergner junior (1837–1907) has received both laudatory reviews for following Mendelssohn’s new direction in the composition of his fugue (-tz, *Rigasche Zeitung* 02.04.1858), and also accusations about a chaotic way of expression in his tone poem (W. A. G., *Rigasche Zeitung* 17.(29.)01.1859) – presumably, he was one of the very first local composers who used this genre recently created by Liszt. Later, it was Bergner who conducted the above-mentioned Riga performances of the tone poem *Preludes* by Liszt and *German Requiem* by Brahms.

2) The works by Nicolai von Wilm (1834–1911), the composer of Riga origin, were frequently performed in his native city. On the one hand, his sacral music was criticised for its exacerbated emotional expression as being too secular ([Anonym], *Rigasche Zeitung* 17.(29.)04.1865); on the other hand, his “modern” approach to the religious motifs in the composition *Ave verum corpus* was noted (P[ilzer], *Rigasche Zeitung* 01.(13.)03.1873).

3) Already at the end of the period under review, The First All-Latvian Song Festival (1873) came to be the first time when German music critics got acquainted with the new Latvian choral music. Despite some tension in the German-Latvian relationship at this period, they were able to evaluate the particular Latvian color of the folk song arrangements by Jānis (1814–1881) and Dāvids Cimze (1822–1872) presented at the festival; these arrangements received even more flattering reviews than original songs created in traditions of German choral music ([Anonym], *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* 01.(13.)07.1873: 6).

The conducted research allows us to conclude that the insights of Riga music critics related to the novelty of contemporary music were highly influenced by the dominant views in the whole German cultural space. At the same time, compared to Germany, there were few polemics and heated discussions between supporters of various musical directions in the periodicals of Riga, and the division of critics into parties or factions was not felt, although the musicologist William Weber mentions it as an important tendency for the cultural space of Western Europe in the second half of the 19th century (Weber 2008: 237–238). Maybe this could be explained by the particular situation of the German community in Riga at this time: it felt threatened because the number and influence of Rigans of other nationalities (Latvians and Russians) was growing rapidly; and this process was facilitated by the reforms of Tsar Alexander II, which aimed to weaken German positions in the Baltic provinces. The tendency towards cohesion in musical views correlated with the desire of the Baltic German community to protect its national identity in Riga, which was gradually becoming more and more multicultural.

The work of Riga German critics discussed in this article – both their aesthetic views and their ways of presenting ideas – probably also influenced the pioneers of Riga Latvian-language music criticism. Deeper studies of this line of succession would be a topic worth further research.