



5. attēls. Beatrise Vīgneres skolas audzēknes ekspresionistiskā kustību vingrinājumā. Foto: Lūcija Kreicberga, 190935

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BEATRISĒ VĪGNĒRĒS SKOLAS AKTĪVĪBĀS (1923–1944) INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF LATVIAN DANCE

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Summary

There are still many unexplored pages in Latvian dance history. This is part of a wider study of modern dance activities in Latvia of the first half of the 20th century. Its goal is to find evidence that the modern dance has existed in Latvia since the beginning of the 20th century. Many rhythm-plastic and plastic dance schools and studios, which flourished in the 20's–30's of the 20th century indicate to the presence of modern dance in Latvian culture. Beatrise Vīgneres's dance school, which existed from 1923 until 1944, and to which the study is devoted to, is one of the most active of the new plastic dance representatives in Latvia.

In the 20's many solo dance performers were seeking their way in the art of dance, such as Elza Siliņa (later a well-known Latvian dance critic and historian), Aija Bertrāne-Dunkane, Mīla Čirule (Mila Cirul) and other Latvian dancers. Latvian audience in the 20's had the opportunity to witness many of Europe's recognized artists works. At that time Riga was visited by Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman, Sam Hior,

Astrid Malmborg, Alexander Sacharoff, Clotilde von Derp-Sacharoff, students of Isadora Duncan, Sent M'Ahesa, Elmerisa Parts, Ella Ilbak and other recognised masters of dance.

In the early 20's the term 'modern dance' was not yet established, so plastic and rhythm-plastic dance schools could be considered as a representation of modern dance and the beginning of Latvian modern dance. Interestingly that in the 1924 Latvian dance critic Elza Siliņa in her article *Modernās dejas stils (Style of Modern Dance)* used the term 'modern dance', and talked about the stylistic diversity of the new dance (Siliņa 1924).

Beatrise Vīgnere (1903–1990) in her creative work and teaching activities has gone a long way of development – from the rhythmic gymnastic to the free dance. She also has searched for a new, expressive dance, which is already close to the German expressionistic dance. She comes from a remarkable family of Latvian musicians. Her father Ernest Vīgners is the first Latvian musician who travels to Moscow to study at the Moscow Conservatory. Also the rest of her family – mother Luīze Vīgnere, brother Leonīds Vīgners, and sister Meta Vīgnere – were musicians.

Beatrise Vīgnere was born in Moscow. She attended private ballet school of the Bolshoi Theatre ballet artist Mikhail Mordkin. In 1918 she obtained diploma from the music institute led by her father, and continued her studies at Moscow State Institute of Physical Education and the Moscow Institute of Rhythmic Education, where courses were based on Émile Jacques-Dalcroze method, supplemented by a comprehensive movement arts classes – from classical dance to Isadora Duncan free dance principles.

Beatrise Vīgnere moved to Riga in summer of 1922, and immediately started working at the Phonology Institute, leading rhythm-plastic lessons. Soon she was invited to work as choreographer at the Latvian National Theatre. The first success of pedagogical activity encouraged her to establish her own school. In 1923 with the approval of The Ministry of Education Beatrise Vīgnere's Physical and Aesthetic Education School was established.

The first public concert of Beatrise Vīgnere's students was named the Melo-rhythm-plastic evening. It took place on February 6th 1923 at the National Theatre. The evening was opened by its founder's speech, explaining that her teaching was based on Ernest Vīgners, Émile Jacques-Dalcroze and Isadora Duncan's methods. At that time the school had already about 50 students of different age. The mission of school was to nurture their students' musical sense of rhythm, as well as beautify the body movements, to make them music-abiding, enabling the latter to mimic or to illustrate certain musical phrases or musical ideas.

An integral part of the initial concerts is a demonstration of rhythmic and auditory development exercises, especially for groups of young ones, plastic performances, which included also improvisational aspects, causing her productions to eventually gain more precise form and way of expression, towards the art of dance.

In 1924 Beatrise Vignere took classes from Rudolf von Laban. The critic Roberts Kroders wrote:

„B. Vignere’s school is based on recognized methods. [...] But she is still looking for new ways. And during the search she found the great dance enthusiast R. Laban dance school. She learned to unleash student’s emotional impulses and to give up bodily automatism training. B. Vignere’s students have a sense of freedom, rhythm and sensitivity in their nature“ (Kroders 1924).

Over time Vignere has improved knowledge and skills by learning from Gret Palucca, Mary Wigman, Max Terpis, Dorothee Günther and Jutta Klamt, bringing the latest dance trends and insights to her pedagogical practice and creativity.

Gradually Beatrise Vignere’s longer and more detailed productions were staged in schools plastic dance evenings, which is a qualitative leap in the school’s activity. During 1928 those were *Indian Legend*, music by Edvard Grieg, and *Carnaval*, music by Robert Schumann. The ballet *Pulcinella* by Igor Stravinsky was displayed in 1931.

From Beatrise Vignere’s school timetables of the 1927/1928 academic year we can see that rhythm and auditory development, plastic dance, body work, methodology, improvisation and dance technique were being taught at that time. From the methodology we can see that it was intended for the future dance and rhythmic teachers. Rhythm and ear training have always been in Beatrise Vignere’s school program, especially for groups of small children. With time the school’s curriculum will be complemented by classical dance training, folk dances, including Spanish dancing and acrobatics. A special place was given to Latvian folk dance training: for groups of small children – teaching Latvian folk dances and traditional games; for future dance teachers – acquiring the folk choreography knowledge from experienced Latvian folklore specialists. Stylized folk dances have always been in the school’s concert repertoire, and critics acknowledge it as a specially successful part of Beatrise Vignere choreographic scope. In 30’s dancers are admitted to school’s *Choreographicum*, which means a comprehensive training in different dance techniques, including artistic dance (*Kunsttanz*), and participation in school dance ensemble which is traveling and performing all over Latvia. It was undoubtedly the most artistically powerful group of students, and productions were specifically being designed for this group in search of more modern forms and ways of artistic expression.

In Vīgnere's choreographic work alongside with conventional choreographic art manifestations, such productions as *Musical Moment* (music by Franz Schubert), *Dream* (music by Frederic Chopin), *Minuet* (music by Ludwig van Beethoven) and stylized folk dances, also dramatic themes appear – *Bolero* (music by Moritz Moszkowski), *Salome Dance* (a popular story in modern dance, music by Richard Strauss), *The Ballad of Jester* (music of Franz Liszt's *Rigoletto-Konzertparaphrase*). *Prelude*, music by Sergei Rachmaninov, is a powerful piece where game of light is used as a means of expression, for describing man's helplessness and hopelessness in fighting death. There are three scenes in the expanded form of the choreographic staging *Soul Crossing* (1929, music by Leonīds Vīgners): *Temptation*, *Regret*, *Enlightenment*. The latter work is a major statement; the content more concerns the German expressionistic dance's common human and eternal theme in general, if compare to Isadora Duncan's stylized spiritual experiences depiction.

In 1930, Beatrise Vīgnere is recognized as having made an undeniable progress in her creative work, her choreography being characterised as versatile and contemporary with strong impact on subjectivity (Dārziņš 1930).

During school activities Beatrise Vīgnere has raised a significant number of talented dancers; already in the 1928 dance critics are beginning to recognize high-quality artistic and expressive dance performances. In 1939, a number of students staged self-composed dances at the Latvian National Opera, some scenic routines and artistic readiness is shown by Marta Alberinga and Austra Priede, but a particular interest is focused upon Lidija Kocere who has received additional training from Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder school in England. Dramatically powerful and expressive choreography, which is particularly characteristic to the school, has significantly influenced and reformed Lidija Kocere understanding of dance. Higher artistic culture and intelligence in dance is characterising some of her performances, as in the dance *Druggie* and the *Enchantress Dance* (Siliņa 1939).

International success comes as well – in 1934 the Beatrise Vīgnere's dance school is participating in the International Dance Competition in Vienna and among 17 dance groups 6/7 place is won, shared with Gert Ramert dance group from Switzerland. In summer of 1937 Vīgnere's school students are making brilliant success at the World Student Games in Paris, the students Lidija Ozoliņa, Lilija Vītola, Taisija Tuča and Malvīne Lence gained gold medals in the group competition, but in the individual dance and gymnastics competition all three first places were won.

Beatrise Vīgnere's dance school continued its work till 1944, when the last school concert in the Riga Opera House was held (the 20th anniversary of the school was celebrated in 1942). Vīgnere's restless creative spirit is still alive: „[...] head of the school proves

once again that she is not tired of the quest for new ways and for strengthening recognized achievements“ (Bērziņš 1942).

Beatrise Vīgnere has published articles on the importance of rhythm and plastic in the development of children (Vīgnere 1926), on her artistic impressions from trips to Paris, comments on the International Choreographers competition of 1932 (Vīgnere 1932a), articles on the Monte Carlo Russian ballet performances (Vīgnere 1932c), the International Warsaw solo dance contest (Vīgnere 1933), and other cultural events. Press coverage allows tracking Vīgnere's professional activities – she has been frequently travelling abroad for improvement of skills and she has always been interested in all the news and developments in choreography. Often Beatrise Vīgnere has been involved in controversy and discussions with dance critics and colleagues in press columns, in defending her views, or to protest against the biased severe judgments and ratings.

In 1944, Beatrise Vīgnere emigrates from Latvia and lives in Germany for the rest of her life, continuing educational and creative activities at the Berlin Free University Theatre Sciences Institute.

Beatrise Vīgnere has promoted development based on experience of European modern dance, accumulating all that is new and applying it to the resources and needs of her school. We can definitely conclude that her incessantly active creative work, through experimentation and seeking ever new means and forms of expression of the art of dance has furthered the understanding of modern dance in the Latvian cultural environment. The school of Beatrise Vīgnere has been one of the most popular and well attended dance schools in the Latvia of the 1920s and 1930s, which is why the pedagogical work of the artist is commendable. The main principles of her method have been clearly defined – first the development of a sense of rhythm and musicality with the help of physical exercise, gradual development of the body flexibility and strength, switching to ever more complicated body work, developing the dance techniques, but – always retaining the creative spirit, which manifests itself in the improvisations of rhythmical exercises of small children and independently created choreographies of older students. One needs to stress the versatility of the school which could also be referred to as somewhat eclectic. Alongside the dances created in the aesthetics of modern dance there were also stylised Latvian dances, dances of other nations and so called *exotic dances*, so the students of Vīgnere acquired a wide and varied set of knowledge and skills, which they could later use in their creative or pedagogical work.

Beatrise Vīgnere is one of the most noteworthy personalities in the art of Latvian dance of the 1920s and 1930s, thus her name occupies an important place in the history of the art of Latvian dance.