

# EMERGING OF MODERNISM IN LATVIAN MUSIC AND JĀZEPS VĪTOLS

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## Summary

The 20<sup>th</sup> century features striking and irreversible changes in European history and culture. Pragmatism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, feminism and other phenomena are only some of the alterations in human perception. This process, which may also be called differently, is characterized by pluralism, abstractiveness from the historical context, the reality of life and nostalgia for the lost values.

One of the most widely known terms for it proves to be *modernism*. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century the rejuvenescence of art incorporated such trends as impressionism, expressionism, symbolism, fauvism, cubism, futurism, constructivism, dadaism, neoprimitivism and many others. Modernism as a notion reveals the diversity of the fragmentary awareness of the 20<sup>th</sup> century society, disclosing individual subjective feelings and strivings for the meaning of life in the metaphysical world. Every epoch has its own trend of modernism: new things turn old when something more novel comes to the foreground. Stable values don't become out-dated but turn into classics. Most of researchers of 20<sup>th</sup> century music interpret modernism as a refusal from the traditions of romanticism, as a transformation of tonality and emerging of new composition techniques in line with the changes of time in human perception.

Alienation among people caused by urban lifestyle, disappointment in technology and progress, confusion and loss of positive ideals manifest themselves most directly in the intensity of expressionism. The paradigm of the new age characterizes the refusal from tonality most vividly. Neoclassicism, neofolklorism, neoprimitivism, interest in exotic things, urbanism, vitality and philosophy of the game seem to be only several of the multiform trends of modernism in the world of music. Sometimes it is either a ruthless disclosure of the most urgent problems or withdrawal from reality. Composers of New Viennese School, Igor Stravinsky, *Les Six*, Béla Bartók and Sergei Prokofiev are the most distinguished representatives of this trend. Besides, such new tendencies always coexist together with more moderate ones, even within the creation of one particular composer.

Being linked with the formation of classical standards, the seeking for fundamental truth, the formation of the national self-assurance and being forced to listen to the actualities of global creative thinking, the situation of professional art and culture in Latvia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is particularly complicated. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is the only century, incorporating Latvian professional music from starting from its origin up to the very end. This new culture of Latvian music originated in the age of romanticism, growing out of folklore, with an objectively epic mood of its own. At the turn of the century a group of composers emerged, writing music with a

focus of interpreting human psychology, which was certainly influenced by symbolism in contemporary poetry and other forms of art.

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the history of Latvia witnesses rather painful and tragic events, giving rise to disappointment and disillusionment. Such phenomena are usually linked with the process of decadence in art. In Germany it was after the revolution in 1848, in France – after the Commune of Paris, in Russia and Latvia, integrated into it – after the defeat of the revolution in 1905. Intelligentsia at such moments turns away from the reality of life, from the insipid taste of the crowd, giving rise to scepticism, irony, grotesque and seeking for values within the artist's inner self. Such an approach characterizes decadence as one of the initial manifestations of modernism. The ideals of love and beauty are substituted by low and primitive instincts and glorification of the pleasures of life.

The stylistics of romanticism in Latvian music in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is substantially influenced by the elements of impressionism, expressionism and neoclassicism. One of the first to experience the newly-formed historical situation, the loneliness caused by the estrangement from the urban mode of life and loss of enthusiasm rooted in the patriarchal national entity is Emīls Dārziņš (1875–1910). The serene and dolorous mood of Dārziņš compositions, his lyrical sensitive zeal and intonations of urban folklore give way to fresh winds in Latvian music, having some common features with decadence in literature and *Art nouveau* in architecture. However, the simple language of his music is far from the expression of West European modernism. There is an apprehension of modernism, but the adequate realization of it still remains the task of his music students, later – Latvian composers Ādolfs Ābele and Jānis Zālītis.

The present article places more emphasis on the attitude of Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948), the patriarch of Latvian music towards modernism. The topicality of the theme is determined by the great significance of this outstanding personality in the formation of Latvian school of composition. Traditionally, Jāzeps Vītols is considered to be a rather conservative composer and in many respects such an assessment can be approved of. However, things are not as unambiguous as they seem from the first sight because both his opinion and music are indicative of the composer's interest in the new trends, exceeding the boundaries of romanticism.

The reserved attitude of composer, teacher and conductor Jāzeps Vītols towards the new tendencies of music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century stems from realistic traditions of the Russian group of composers, called *The Mighty Handful* (*The Five*) and followers of their ideas like Aleksander Glazunov and Anatoly Lyadov.

Jāzeps Vītols holds the opinion that the Third symphony by Aleksander Skrjabin with its ecstatic enthusiasm is already too close to French decadence. After listening to the *Poem of Ecstasy* the reviewer admits the following: in order to enjoy this kind of shouting one obviously needs futuristic ears. Those who have them may be lucky. But *Prometheus* comes to the following conclusion: the physical device called ear cannot change

within one day, even in our century such readjustment needs years to be implemented [17: 140].

Vītols aesthetic views are featured by the declining of Arnold Schönberg from such notions as *nice* and *ugly*, when art becomes devoid of joy, provided by the hope to reveal within this logic a new and much more elevated beauty [17: 103].

As to the music of Claude Debussy, Jāzeps Vītols believes that it lacks a directly stated primary meaning: [...] *it is impossible to look into kaleidoscope for long, because you are getting tired. What you see there is only optical illusion, without any meaning, blood or soul* [17: 149].

However, after the *culture shock* experienced in St. Petersburg at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the classical style of Jāzeps Vītols music becomes more refined, especially in his vocal lyrics – the most subjective, nuanced and varied genre of his creation. In some of his creations the element of harmony becomes increasingly less marked and exquisite. The song *The Dream of an Orchid* (*Orhidejas sapnis* Op. 50 #4, 1918) for a solo voice, inspired by the lyrics by Fricis Bārda is rich in expressionistic and fantastic images, where a romantically sapless, tranquil and glowing vision literally explodes, transforming into quite a different kind of music – tense and strenuous, being congenial to *Salome* and *Electra* by Richard Strauss. Particularly tense and psychologically complicated proves to be opus 61, written in 1923. The recited monologue *Nightmare* (*Murgi*) based on the lyrics by Andrejs Kurcijs demands music which is so much permeated with discordant notes that in some places it is wavering on atonality.

Contrary to the above brightly impressionistic richness in colouring should be mentioned. It can be sensed in several pieces by Jāzeps Vītols – in the filigree and cool daintiness of orchestra suite *Jewels* (*Dārgakmeņi*, 1924) which is akin to the French music for ballet performances; in the subtle colouring of the introductory piano part for the solo song *Misty days* (*Miglainas dienas* Op. 53 #2) based on the lyrics by Edvards Vulfs (1919) as well as in the song *Melodies* (*Melodijas*) based on the lyrics by Jānis Sudrabkalns and composed in 1933, where a whole-tone scale gives rise to an ascending uniformity of pedal-merging sounds. Everything that has been said here leads to the conclusion that new trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century still have gradually found reflection also in the music of Jāzeps Vītols, although he himself might not even have perceived it.

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