

# HIGHLIGHTS OF CONTEMPORARY LATVIAN PIANO MUSIC

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## **1. Introduction**

While keyboard music in Latvia has been composed and performed from the fifteenth century (Šarkovska-Liepiņa 1997: 22), academic piano music dates back only to the second part of the nineteenth century. Piano pieces by Latvian composers closely followed the aesthetics of romanticism and the conventional types of musical texture of the time (e.g., piano works by Jāzeps Vītols, Alfrēds Kalniņš, and Jānis Mediņš) until the first half of the twentieth century. Canadian-Latvian composer Tāļivaldis Ķeniņš (1919–2008) also emphasized the significance of the tradition of romanticism: “It is simply not possible to discuss Latvian music and not discuss romanticism” (Zemzare 1994: 221).

Even when not considering the fact that Soviet ideology facilitated a trend to keep a link to the traditions of romanticism and did not accept modern ideas, calling these *formalism*, in the 1970s and 80s Pēteris Vasks, Pēteris Plakidis, Pauls Dambis, Imants Zemzaris, and some other composers, working in a clear romantic aesthetic, created a great number of powerful and original ideas with regards to the usage of elements of compositional techniques such as sonorism and aleatorics already accepted in Europe at the beginning of the century.

Even in twenty-first-century music, a figurative layout based on harmony in works with romantic imagery (at times we can see even impressionistic or sonoristic traits), relating to instrumental specifics is relevant. In that way, romantic pianism approaches (figured doubled voice or layer, polyphonised figuration, polyfigure textures, *al fresco*,<sup>1</sup> vibrato, tremolo, and genre figuration) organically fit with the characteristic genres of the era of romanticism – variations and miniatures, and that is why this texture is often encountered in the piano works by Latvian composers, who worked within the traditions of romanticism, from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century until today.

## **2. Romantic tendency**

The romantic tradition, which is indivisibly involved with colorfully illusory pianism, is still relevant today, for example, the vibrating figurations which become a

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<sup>1</sup> *Al fresco* (Italian) – this description is derived from the Renaissance painting technique based on painting on a wet surface or plaster. Jakov Milshtein wrote about this technical approach of romantic piano music in his monograph about Liszt (Мильштейн 1956: 11-29).

background for the texture of spatially broad multiple layers and expressive melody in *Song of the Goddess* (2001) by Dace Aperans (1953). This work was originally written for two pianos, but Diana Zandberga arranged it for piano solo. This music is inspired by a haiku by the Japanese poet Ueshima Onitsura (1661–1738): “At last, when her song is still, the goddess becomes a small, green bird.”

With regards to the relevance of the romantic tradition, it is also essential that we can feel the influence of folklore and a developed choir culture in Latvian piano music, which comparatively often manifests itself as a usage of singing linearity and choral textures. Take, for example, the commissioned work for the Jāzeps Vītols VI International Piano Competition in 2012 by Ēriks Ešenvalds (1977), *Frozen Horizon* (2013), written in the same period the composer was working on the multimedia symphony *Nordic Light*.

### **3. Repetitive technique**

Approximately in the middle of the twentieth century, a motoric figurative texture appeared in Latvian piano music; it was related to linear (linearity, motorics, general forms of movement, sometimes enriched with elements of neo-classicism [embellishments, etc.] or with the polymetric and polyrhythmic structures in piano works by Volfgangs Dārziņš and Mārgers Zariņš) and percussive pianism (a figurative texture is made up from chords and clusters, while the repetitive or *martellato* texture was sometimes associated with the percussive nature of the piano in works by Pauls Dambis and Jānis Porietis).

In the context of texture, which is characteristic of repetitive technique and minimalism, two trends can be observed in Latvian piano music: compositions with new simplicity new romanticism stylistics predominantly combine with an intonatively expressive and colorful texture, while the piano compositions of minimalism combine with a toccatic texture often without the use of the sustaining pedal.

One outstanding example is *The Second Piano Sonata* (1985) by Juris Karlsons (1948), dedicated to the remarkable Latvian pianist Ilze Graubiņa (1941–2001) and has been performed and recorded by many Latvian musicians. The traditional cycle of sonata form is reversed—the fast and dramatic movement is between two slow parts. The composer said that that the First Movement (*Moderato*) is a funeral march, the Second (*Allegro*) the catastrophe, and the Third (*Lento*)—an epilogue like *Moonlight Sonata* by Beethoven.

### **4. Impressionistic figuration**

The key types of impressionistic figuration which are encountered individually as well as in interaction with each other are diversely represented in Latvian piano music. Among them are figurations of a vibrating background, rhythmically clear ostinato figurations, figurations in doubling, and illustrative figurations that imitate concrete sources of sound, including the peculiarities of playing different instruments.

They are widely represented not only in the piano texture of Latvian composers in the twentieth century but also in compositions in the twenty-first century, for example, vibrating figurations which become a static background for texture of spatially broad multiple different layers in *Impressions of Salvador Dali* (2011) by Selga Mence (1953) or *Dos Sueños* (2011) Dace Aperans, which is a testament to the universal applicability of this technique of texture and its significance to the present day.

One striking example, *Volatile Watercolor* (2017) by Jānis Zandbergs (1973), is the commissioned work of the Jāzeps Vītols VII International Piano Competition in 2017. Like in watercolor painting, which is characterized by the avoidance of clear lines, *Volatile Watercolor* draws a picture of color fusion with a splitting of the sounds in different registers, in addition to upward and downward figurations, which like the flow of water, cover or separate both melodious and harmoniously colored layers. This improvisational musical material offers to the artist a wide range of possibilities of interpretation and requires the search for a rich color palette.

The impressionistic harmonies and modal melodies of piano work *Bells of The Wind* (2016) by Pauls Dambis (1936) are based on the special tune. Like in the Johann Sebastian Bach theme BACH, Pauls Dambis uses special mode *d flat; c flat, b flat, a* as a peculiar stylistic sign or mark in of his many compositions. This is a folk tune called *Long refrain of Nīca (Nīcas garais sauciens)* from the southwest part of Latvian Kurzeme, where the composer comes from. The dramaturgy of the *Bells of The Wind* covers imagery from dark mystery to the transparent, clear sound of wind bells, which gradually reaches an ecstatic climax.

## 5. Conclusion

These are some the most common trends of Latvian piano music in the beginning of the twenty-first century:

- From the origins of Latvian piano music in the second half of the nineteenth century, elements of an illusionary, coloristic, figurative texture and **romantic tendency** prevail as we have heard in works by Aperans and Ešņvalds.

- Any discussions of Latvian music are impossible without mentioning folklore and advanced choral culture, which influenced, to a certain extent, the relatively common use of harmonic linearity and **texture of chorale** in the piano pieces of Latvian composers, for example, in works by Juris Karlsons, Ēriks Ešenvalds, Jānis Zandbergs, and Pēteris Vasks.

- In addition to already existing genres in Latvian piano music, it is possible to distinguish the works with **features of Latvian folklore** and outline the melodies enriched with folk music intonations and texture with characteristic elements of folk dances as in music by Pauls Dambis and in *Latvian Dance* (2012) by Pēteris Vasks (1946), where the original Latvian folk dance melody (*Garais dancis*) and common rhythms are used.

When analyzing piano textures used by Latvian composers in the twenty-first century, it is obvious that modern composers, in their musical language, use different current compositional technique elements and, as a result, it is difficult to identify the types of textures that are used the most often. Of course, we must agree that novel techniques in many ways interact with the compositional principles of romanticism. But the stylistic variety of the composers of new Latvian music is a good characterization of their most important impulses.

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