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Music pedagogy for developing national identity and preserving musicality in Latvia

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Introduction

For many centuries one of the most characteristic features of the Latvian people has been their musicality, which has engendered a rich heritage based on the skills of singing. In May 2001 the European Music Association Conference 'Globalisation and Identity' was held in Riga. Latvian choirs of schoolchildren performed, and music pedagogues from other European countries commented on the achievements of Latvian music teachers in the formation and preservation of national identity.

Observations of pre-school children at the Aesthetic School/Children and Youth Centre (Ridze) show that a child's musicality develops most successfully when music lessons are designed to suit the particular age group and nature of the child. At age three to four the child learns by imitation; therefore the development of speech, singing skills and movements is promoted by fostering singing skills at regular music lessons, both individually and in groups.

Since 1992 music at comprehensive schools has been a mandatory subject only for Forms 1 to 9: today's young parents, at secondary schools during these years, may not have attended optional music classes. This might indicate that Latvian folksongs and musical upbringing are now seen as of less significant value. Other observations suggest that Latvians may lack a critical attitude and be too ready to borrow other peoples' songs, dances, holidays, gestures and body movements.

This paper reports the development of national identity and musicality in contemporary music pedagogy, based on the analysis of pedagogical and psychological literature and pedagogical observations, the content of Latvian folksongs and methods of music teaching.

A pedagogic concept of musical upbringing

Latvian music pedagogy acknowledges the emotional influence of folksong and of the integrity of music and lyrics. In the 1920s music experts such as J. Bebris, J. Rozitis, and J. Graubins wrote that the influence of folksongs on peoples' lives would be likely to decline, and urged that Latvian folksongs be taught in comprehensive schools. Latvian identity, they argued, is expressed through folksong, and music education would be particularly important for girls, who would nurture Latvian identity for future generations.

Influenced by Rozitis's pedagogical theories, there were positive attitudes in the 1920s and 1930s towards music as the main way to promote Latvian identity. This was deliberately minimised in the Soviet era, but has since been regained. Rozitis argued that a knowledge of the past was a way to better understand the present and shape the future. Adopting pedagogic ideas and progressive techniques of upbringing and teaching from other countries would be to turn away from the uniqueness of Latvian pedagogical thought (Liduma, 2001a).

The mythic and symbolic life of a nation nurtures its collective memory and shapes the identity and unity of the people. Latvians' rich cultural heritage includes a well-preserved folklore (Kursite, 1996, p. 425-6), and the older generation traditionally contributed to the young child's identity by dandling and nursing them, playing games, singing songs and telling stories. Latvian family folksongs give the child a musical emotional input that contributes to successful personal development. Important values of national identity are learned from the songs.

While in many modern cultures the bringing up of young children is given to professional teachers and child care workers, in Latvia bringing up children involves *all* the community. People bringing up young children use tested and acknowledged practices, passed on from generation to generation: these include adjusting practice to the child's individual nature, helping children become accustomed to work and to meeting difficulties, and encouraging persistence and thoroughness in reaching one's goals. Spiritual needs are met through noticing beautiful things, working with joy, and singing folksongs about the change of seasons or one's feelings. Songs are sung every day, under all circumstances.

The pre-school age is the most sensitive period in the formation of a child's emotions, and music is the earliest of the arts to which they respond. The transition from liking to understanding music is challenging. The pre-school years are also when a sense of self-awareness and identity are forming, and identity and musicality can be developed by children simultaneously in music lessons. Musicality is an emotional identification, and the Latvian identity expresses itself through this emotional attitude to folksong and music-making.

Identity is an awareness or consciousness of one's faculties and capabilities, one's self-reliance, conscientious behaviour and independent decision-making (PTSV, 2000, p.62). National identity is a uniformity or similarity of such features and qualities within the national group, so that the individual's personal characteristics refer him/her to the group (PTSV, 2000, p.62).

The thematic variety of folksongs

There are many genres of folksongs that tell of the Latvian people's virtues, wisdom, concepts of the beautiful, labour, and attitudes to the family and to society.

- 'labour folksongs' relate the beauty of labour and the joy of accomplishing a task, traditionally sung while at work.
- lullabies sung by the mother, as guardian of the hearth, child-raiser, a role model of industriousness and diligence, and the creator of beauty in the home. Lullabies and songs about mothers are linked, and often contain advice on behaviour.
- children's songs often concern the surroundings: nature, birds, animals and events.
- family-related songs tell of relationships between brothers and sisters: assistance, love, respect, care of each other, and the concept of the beautiful (Liduma, Vitolins).
- the horse is a common theme in some songs, reflecting the time the horse was the main support for a man at work.
- songs about singing: Latvians are not particularly demonstrative, and love is expressed in song through poetic images of special tenderness, warmth and care.

Latvian folksongs contain many symbols in poetic form. Some people nowadays say they dislike folksongs, because they do not have sufficient knowledge of their national history and origin to make the content comprehensible. This shows that many have not been

brought up in the Latvian spirit, and that the conscientious understanding of Latvian identity, values and uniqueness is not being passed on to the next generation.

Views of Latvian identity

Latvians have protected their culture for centuries from the influence of foreign nations. The original singing and musicality of the Latvian people has aroused great interest and attention from foreigners, particularly songs that welcome the seasons, such as Midsummer songs. Visitors from Europe have been writing about Latvian peculiarities since the 16th century:

- Sebastian Minster (1550) characterised Latvians singing as "They howl plaintively like wolves..." (Vitolins, p. 68).
- The Baltic chronicler Baltazar Rusov (1584) described peasants' bagpipe music and singing: "Throughout the whole land I saw nothing but bonfires..." (Vitolins, p.68-69).

Friedrich Menni, professor of history at Terbatas University, first set down the lyrics and the melody of the Latvian folksong "Manne balte mamelyt" in 1623 (Vitolins, p.69). The priest Georg Manzel (1654) scornfully referred to Latvian folksongs as "nonsense songs" (Vitolins, p.72). On the other hand, Johan Gotfrid Herder (a leading German Enlightenment figure) was impressed by the Midsummer songs. After spending some years working in Latvia (1764-1769), he turned to studying of folksong lyrics (Vitolins, 76-79), arguing that inspiration and power in arts and literature could be found in the lyrics of folksongs.

Gothard Friedrich Stender (1783) acknowledged Latvian originality in singing and dancing. "We, Germans, would never be so exhilarated by most beautiful music as Latvians by their folksongs". Historic songs are old, with traces of paganism; there are similarities between Latvian and German folksongs, and Latvian folksongs are as coarse as ancient German bards' songs (Vitolins, p.74). The German traveller and geographer Kohl (1841) wrote that the Latvian people is the only people in Europe that deserved to be called the Nation of Poets and the land that deserved the name of the Land of Poetry.

Krisjanis Barons, a Latvian Renaissance writer, collected and published *Latvian Folksongs* in eight volumes (1894-1915). Vidzemes teachers' initiative led many national schools to start folklorist work from 1870 onwards, preserving Latvian folksong melodies and divided them into genres. The six books of *Latvian Folksong Materials* published by the composer and folklorist Andrejs Jurjans included 3000 folksong melodies, catalogued by genre. The composer Emils Melngailis published three collections of *Latvian Music Folklore Materials* (1951-1953), collected from the Latvian regions. The musicologist Jekabs Vitolin collected season-welcoming songs, *Children's Songs Cycle, Lullabies, Children Songs and Funeral Songs* (1971). With other folksong melodies collected during the post-war period, these serve as a fundamental source for Latvian musical upbringing.

The rapid development of sound technologies in the 20th century has weakened Latvian folk singing traditions. The re-evaluation of values in the post-war period also had a negative effect on national identity and musicality, particularly for the younger generation. Without everyday practice in childhood, musical development is difficult.

Conclusion

Latvian national identity should not be taken for granted; it is the task of music pedagogy to promote the formation of Latvian identity in new generations, and to promote values such as industriousness, honesty, cheerfulness, endurance, and tolerance in the family, at school and in society. If adults acknowledge the value of Latvian identity, children will understand and be aware of the importance of folk traditions, and pass these values on to their own children. Musical upbringing, formed over the centuries through the participation of the whole nation, has been fundamental; and can serve as an essential and significant means of forming, maintaining and promoting Latvian identity. An appropriate musical environment - at home, in the mass media, through music lessons and events at pre-school and school - is indispensable for the fostering of children's identity.

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