

# Latvian Traditional Culture and Music

Valdis Muktupāvels

*Latvia is a northern European country on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea, with a territory of 24,950 sq. miles. It is generally flat and forested, with higher elevations in the northeast and east, where there are numerous lakes. The original inhabitants were Indo-European-speaking Balt tribes and Finno-Ugric Livs, of whom only a small group has survived on the northwestern shore and in some towns. Latvia's present population is more than two and a half million, of whom almost a million live in its capital, Riga.*

*For 300 years after the German Crusaders' conquest in the 13th century, Latvia and Estonia were ruled — under the name of Livonia — by the Livonian Order and the Catholic Church. Livonia was dissolved in 1561, and three parts of what is now Latvia developed separately: Kurzeme as the Duchy of Courland; Vidzeme as a part of the Latvian-Estonian province Liefland, ruled by the Swedes; and Latgale as a part of the Polish-Lithuanian state. After the Russian conquest in the 18th century they became three separate provinces within the Russian empire. Latvia achieved its independence in 1918,*



Street musicians  
in Riga, Latvia.  
Photo by Gunārs Tarvāns



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uniting the three distinctive regions. Latvia was occupied by and incorporated into the USSR in 1940, and regained its independence in 1991.

Christianity reached all social strata only after the Reformation, while some pagan rites and practices survived into the 20th century. Before World War II a majority of Latvians (64 percent) were Lutherans. Twenty-six percent of the country's population — only Latgale and a small enclave in western Kurzeme — were Catholic. Half a century later these two main confessional groups were almost equal in number. People's sense of religious identity has tended to become stronger in the 1990s.

The Latvian language has changed very little over the centuries, and together with Lithuanian it is regarded as a surviving dialect of early Indo-European. There are, in fact, two literary language traditions: Latvian, which has developed on the basis of the central and southern dialects and has been the language of the Protestant Church, and Latgalian, the language of the Catholic Church. In addition, the Finno-Ugric Livs have produced a significant body of published materials in their almost extinct language.

### Dainas and Singing Traditions

Major differences in musical style and repertoire exist between Protestant Vidzeme and Kurzeme on the one hand and Catholic Latgale on the other. On the whole, traditional singing is preserved much better in Latgale, while modern lyrical and other popular styles are common in most of Vidzeme and Kurzeme. Despite the significant differences, however, there is a remarkable uniting entity — *dainas*. *Daina* — the basic form of the Latvian folk song text — is a short, self-contained quatrain of two non-rhyming couplets; when sung, the couplet or each line of text is usually repeated.

*Dainas* are sung as accompaniments

both to the ordinary events of daily life and to special events and communal celebrations. As such, they only rarely tell stories, but rather comment on performed rituals, express feelings, or condense folk wisdom into pithy epigrams.

*Dainas* contain many mythological images, episodes, and motifs. The courtship and wedding of cosmic deities, such as the sun and the moon, are reflected in some rather extensive song cycles.

The first recordings of *dainas* are from the 17th century; more systematic collection began in the second half of the 19th century. The compilation of Latvian folk songs by Krišjānis Barons, *Latvju dainas*, appeared in 1894–1915 and comprised about 300,000 song texts and their variants in six volumes.

### “When They Sing, They Are Howling As Wolves”

This extraordinary description by Sebastian Münster, author of the 16th-century book *Cosmographia* about the singing in Livonia, is, in fact, the first written evidence of a unique drone singing tradition which is still practiced in certain areas, especially in the *suiti* region in Kurzeme. Singers are any group of people, among whom there is at least one recognized soloist, who starts the singing. Usually after half of the four-line stanza is sung, the counter-singer repeats it, while a vocal drone part is performed by *vilcejas*, “those who drawl, pull (a tone).” The drone is sung on the vowel *e* (as in “there”) with a sharp, intense voice.

This vocal drone is closely connected to the so-called recited style, which is one of the two basic singing styles in Latvian folk song. The recited style is characterized by the domination of text over melody, and the respective songs are part of traditional events and celebrations; the recited style occurs in family celebration songs, especially at weddings, in lullabies, in a good portion of calendar celebration songs, and in tunes asso-

ciated with work in the fields. During singing, a quatrain is followed rather freely by other quatrains. The choice of the following *dainas* is up to the soloist; it depends on his/her ability, skillfulness, and knowledge, as well as the context in which the singing takes place. Though each quatrain is short, the singing can go on for hours.

In contrast, the “sung” songs are performed mostly solo, but other singers can join as well. The melody of the sung songs, with its range often exceeding an octave, is as important as the text.

### From the Cradle to the Grave

In Latvia's traditional culture two ritual cycles — seasonal rituals and rituals marking the progression of family members through major stages of life — were intended to assure wealth, fertility, and continuity. Many themes and symbols of these cycles overlapped, in particular the sun. Festivals of the calendar cycle are linked to the major stations of the sun — the summer and winter solstices and the spring and fall equinoxes. (The world is *pasaule*, “under the sun”; after death the human soul goes singing to *aizsaule*, “beyond the sun,” or to *vina saule*, “that sun, the other sun.”)

One of the most developed vocal genres — *ligotnes* — is connected with Janis, the midsummer solstice celebration on June 23. Janis is the central mythological figure of this orgiastic midsummer night feast, the celebration of which combines features of solar, phallic, and fertility rites. The singing of *ligotnes* can start a fortnight before and can continue a week after midsummer, but the culmination is reached on the evening and the subsequent night of the celebration. Melodies of the songs vary from place to place, and several different melodies might be used in one place during the celebration.

In rural areas singing accompanies autumn work in the fields and *vakarsana*, communal spinning and sewing on autumn and winter evenings. It is also



### The Livs

Dainis Stalts

The Livs, an ancient Finno-Ugric people, today live in various concentrations in the country of Latvia. Known as White Indians (*baltie indiāņi*) in reference to American Indians, with whom they believe they share some cultural attributes and historical experiences, they strive to preserve their language and traditions.

Some of these traditions are extraordinarily beautiful, such as the Rite of Spring, which is held at the top of the highest sandy elevation on the seashore. The tradition reflects the belief that in waking returning migrant birds with special songs and rituals on the first day of spring, Livs communicate with the souls of their ancestors, which have been embodied in tiny birds called *tshitshorljīnlists*. With the birds' return also returns hope.

The Livs may have inhabited Latvian territory for more than 5,000 years. The earliest records of the Livs are inscriptions on 7th- and 8th-century Scandinavian rune stones. Artifacts uncovered at grave sites attest to the Livs' skills as craftsmen, makers of tools, weapons, and builders of ships. Letters and chronicles mention the prosperity that existed in Liv-dominated regions around the 12th century. This relative prosperity, however, attracted marauders and pillagers; in the early 13th century the first Teutonic Crusaders subjugated the indigenous people in the name of Christianity, acquiring lands and creating a ruling class which prevailed in the territory of Latvia for over 700 years. During these centuries the majority of the Livs died in wars, of bubonic plague, and of hardship.

After the abolition of serfdom in the 19th century, the rebirth of the Liv nation, who then numbered 3,000, began. The first Liv-language books and the first Liv dictionary were published. But after World War I, only 1,500 Livs remained.

Latvia's declaration of independence in 1918 inspired a second Liv renaissance. Livs organized themselves in communities and established choral societies and associations for Livs and friends of Livs. They produced a newspaper and built a cultural center. Along the Latvian shore in the Kurzeme region, some local schools began to teach the Liv language.

The renaissance was disrupted by the 1940–1941 invasion of Latvia by the Soviet Union. The Liv societies were dissolved, the cultural center closed, and language teaching banned. Deportations to Siberian gulags and flight to the West reduced the Liv population in Latvia by more than half. During their 50 years of occupation, the Soviets made every effort to ban Livs from the dozen or so fishing villages in the northern part of Kurzeme that were their ancestral homes. Fishing boats and equipment were destroyed, schools closed, and the people evacuated to all parts of Latvia. Only at certain Liv folk festivals could the scattered members of the nation meet and celebrate with their music and dance ensembles.



Traditional Liv singers. Photo by Imants Predelis

With the collapse of the Soviet regime, the region along the Baltic seashore was returned to the Livs; they were recognized officially as an ancient founding member of the Latvian people in the new laws of the republic.

The prospect of keeping Liv alive as a spoken language is rather bleak. No more than several dozen people speak it and only one family, mine, is known to speak it at home. Still, the Livs can hold their sacred rites by the seashore, communicate with the souls of their ancestors, and celebrate their traditions with their relatives and friends. Livs, today numbering 500, can freely utter their ancient pledge, "*Minaa un Livli. Min rou un min out*" (I am a Liv. My people is my honor).

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*Dainis Stalts is a folklore specialist for the Latvian Ethnographical Open-Air Museum and was a member of the Latvian Parliament from 1993 to 1995. He has been a key activist within the Liv community for many years.*



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an indispensable part of all ritual and religious events. After a christening in church, singing took place at home during a feast, which in southwestern Kurzeme was followed by *didisana*, ritual swinging and rocking of the baby by all participants in the celebration, accompanied by special songs. Rural weddings started in the bride's house with a farewell party, at which girlfriends of the bride would sing. Since there should be much noise and joy after the marriage ceremony, singing and dancing were essential parts of the celebration. The central musical event at the wedding was *apdziedasanas*, "singing back and forth" — antiphonal, humorous, competitive singing, involving two opposing groups of singers (e.g., boys and girls, relatives of the bride and bridegroom, members of the household and guests); each group sang in turn, teasing or making fun of the other, largely improvising the words. At about midnight, when the bride's crown was taken off and replaced with a woman's headdress, all participants embraced the new couple in a circle and sang songs called *micosanas dziesmas* to mark this particular event.

Of music accompanying stages of the life cycle, that for funerals bears the strongest relation to Christian ceremony; it is mostly psalms and parts of the liturgy that are sung in the house, on the way to the cemetery, and by the grave. The funeral is preceded by *vakesana*, praying and singing by the corpse the night before the funeral, a custom which was still observed throughout the country until the end of the 19th century but now is practiced only in Latgale.

In addition to the music performed in ritual contexts, both men and women sing at the table during feasts, in pubs, and at other social occasions. Courtship and wedding songs are the most common, but certain mythological, soldiers', sailors', humorous, and drinking songs are important as well.

### Singing Bones and Golden Strings

A popular legend tells of the magic power of pipes that are made from a reed growing on a grave. When played, those "singing bones" reveal the reason for the death and return the person to life.

Various bark or clay whistles, wooden flutes and reeds, hornpipes, wooden and birch-bark trumpets were made and played by shepherds, not only for entertainment but to collect the herd in the morning and gather it in the evening. Hornpipes were used to calm the herd or to direct its movement. Horns and trumpets announced forthcoming weddings and signaled important moments of the wedding ritual. Goat-horns, usually with three finger-holes, were played during communal work in the fields or at matchmaking ceremonies.

The making and playing of instruments — except for shepherds' instruments, which boys and girls made — was traditionally a male activity. However, rattle-sticks (*trideksnis*, a wooden stick with hanging bells and jingles) and *eglite* (a fir-tree top decorated with colored feathers and with hanging bells and jingles) were used by women to accompany singing in wedding or winter solstice rituals.

The instrument most characteristic of Latvia and significant in Latvian culture is the *kokles* — a box zither with five to twelve or more strings that is supposed to be the instrument of God (compare it to the *kannel* in Estonia, the *kanklės* in Lithuania, and the *kanтеле* in Finland). The tree for its wood must be cut when someone has died but is not yet buried. To emphasize the special value and importance of the instrument, it is traditionally named golden strings. It has an Apollonian,

heavenly aura and a fine, deeply touching tone quality.

The violin became very popular in the 19th century, first as a solo and then as an ensemble instrument with zither and accordion. The dominance of the accor-

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dion increased in the second half of this century, and it is still the main instrument used for traditional dance music.

### A Singing Nation

More than 200 years ago Latvian music was mostly peasants' music, but various kinds of popular music were developing. Following the abolition of serfdom, Latvian social life blossomed in the mid-19th century. Singing societies emerged all over the country and sought choral works that represented the spirit of the emerging feeling of unity and "Latvianess." Four-part harmonizations of Latvian folk songs served this purpose well, and so more and more composers used folk materials as a source for their arrangements.

Choral singing culminated in a large musical event — the Song Festival. The first Latvian Song Festival, held in 1873, became a political event of the first importance, symbolizing the reawakening and unity of the new nation. Subsequent festivals involved thousands of participants and dramatically concentrated national aspirations. After World War II the Song Festival was reinterpreted in terms of Soviet ideology and was successfully incorporated into the regime-supported musical life.



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### Dainas

The noted folklore group Skandinieki sang the following *daina* in July 1988, as they led the Baltica folklore festival procession past the KGB building in Riga, Latvia. On this occasion the three flags of independent Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were carried in an open procession under Soviet rule for the first time. It is one of the events which sparked the "Singing Revolution."

The song is a traditional magic charm to ward off evil:

*Lai bij vārdi, kam bij vārdi  
Man pašam stipri vārdi;  
Daugaviņu noturēju,  
Mietu dūru vidiņā.*

*Sīta mani, dūra mani,  
Kā ozola blūķenī;  
Neiesīta, neiedūra,  
Kā tērauda gabalā.*

*Visi meži guni dega,  
Visi ceļi atslēgam;  
Ar Dieviņa palīdzību  
Visam gribu cauri tikt.*

I have words,  
I have strong words —  
I can drive a stake into the ground  
And stop the Daugava River.

They beat me, they stabbed me  
Like a wooden stump;  
They didn't hit me, they didn't stab me  
Like a piece of steel.

All the forests are aflame,  
All the roads are locked;  
With God's help  
I want to pass through it all.

BELOW The organizers of the 1993 Song Festival, Riga, Latvia. Photo by Leons Balodis



### Bass Hornpipes and Artificial Braids

In the period between the world wars, professional and popular musical life in the cities and countryside was vibrant. Traditional music had lost its significance in most of the country, although it continued to exist in remote districts, especially in Latgale and western Kurzeme. Thus the need for national music intensified, and in addition to choral activities, a variety of other phenomena developed on the basis of traditional culture. Efforts were made to

"improve" the old, forgotten instruments, especially the *kokles*, and to create folk instrument ensembles.

Though the Soviet occupation in 1940 and World War II interrupted such activities, the "modernization" of instruments continued in the postwar period and resulted in soprano, alto, tenor, and bass modifications of *kokles*, hornpipes, and box-shaped fiddles. Following the Soviet pattern, numerous *kokles* ensembles emerged, along with folk song and dance ensembles, and a state folk music instrument orchestra existed from 1947

until 1961. Uniform, stylized folk costumes, girls' wreaths, and artificial braids became the emblems of all those groups. The folk music orchestra never gained much public support in Latvia, while the *kokles* ensembles, like the folk song and dance ensembles, were quite well accepted. Even in the 1990s those ensembles are to some extent recognized as an expression of "national music" or "national dance."

### When the Singing Revolution Is Over

The folklore movement as a socially significant body of activities, aimed at the preservation and dissemination of the treasures of Latvian folklore, started in the late 1970s, a bit later than in the other Baltic countries. It concentrated on traditional music, dance, customs, crafts, and especially on their archaic or authentic forms. Numerous folklore groups — among which Skandinieki was the first — folklore clubs, and workshops emerged at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Folklorists arranged dance parties, singing, instrument-playing and dancing workshops. As the attention of folklorists was directed not towards music per se but towards music as a part of



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celebration or ritual, certain efforts were undertaken to preserve or renew the rituals themselves.

The cultivation of renewed ethnic music traditions in the 1980s took on the dimension of a national resistance movement, in opposition to Soviet totalitarianism and russification. The most striking expression of this movement was the folklore festival *Baltica '88*. The movement culminated in the "Singing Revolution," a form of non-violent resistance against the occupying regime, consisting of huge, peaceful meetings and much singing of popular and folk songs. Nevertheless, ethnic music did not become a symbol of the restored identity of national music, and in the 1990s its influence has decreased more and more.

Today, while mainstream folklore ensembles show and teach traditional music "as it used to be," a different attitude has emerged among other individuals and groups — a "post-folklore" that leaves space for rather free interpretation of traditional music influenced by rock, minimalism, ethnic music of other parts of the world, or other forms. Among these groups are *Ilgi* and *Rasa*. These various perspectives enrich the process through which Latvian people are revitalizing their musical heritage.

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*Valdis Muktupāvels is a lecturer and ethnomusicologist at the Centre for Ethnic Studies, University of Latvia and Latvian Culture Academy. His research and publications have focused on the field of organology and the traditional culture of Latvia and other Baltic lands. He has contributed to the revival of several Latvian traditional musical instruments, like the kokles, bagpipes, pipes, horns, mouth harp, and burdy-gurdy. He is the artistic director of the Rasa group and has performed as a kokles and bagpipe soloist, as well as with other musicians in the Baltics and around the world*



*A modern kokles orchestra.*

Photo by Imants Prēdelis

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