

# Part 1: A Brief History

## **Understanding the Past:**

Latvija<sup>1</sup> is a small country in the Baltic region of Northern Europe. Settled in-between Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia is roughly 25,000 square miles in size and is home to approximately two million people. With a generally temperate climate, Latvians find joy in their seasons. Warm summer days are filled with many hours of sunlight, and are starkly contrasted by the cold winter months that see very little sun. I have had the privilege of experiencing this beautiful country over the course of three consecutive summers. During this time, with my own eyes, I have witnessed the stunning simplicity that makes this country truly unique. I can attest to the magnificent clouds rolling off the Baltic and the bustling central market in Riga. Most importantly, I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to live alongside people who have taught me firsthand about their lives and what makes Latvia their home.

Latvians constitute a prominent division of the ancient group of people known as the Balts.<sup>2</sup> These individuals have been labeled by historians as people of the Indo-European linguistic family who resided on the southeastern shores of the Baltic Sea. The earliest documented connection between the Balts and another civilization of the ancient world can

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<sup>1</sup> Latvija is the native spelling of the country, which I found essential to include at least once in this paper. However, from this point forward, I will be using the English spelling: Latvia

<sup>2</sup> Misiunas, Romuald J., and James H. Bater. "Latvia." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 6 Dec. 2018, [www.britannica.com/place/Latvia/History](http://www.britannica.com/place/Latvia/History).

be dated back to 3000 BC. Interestingly, during this time period, the Balts established trade routes to Rome and Byzantium to trade amber for other important metals.<sup>3</sup> By 900 AD, there were four separate Baltic tribes that inhabited Latvia: the Curonians, Latgalians, Selonians, and the Semigallians. These scattered tribes are what made up the earliest known people groups of modern day Latvia, and as a result, had a significant impact on the formation of Latvian as its own language.

Although the early tribes that inhabited Latvia had a small amount of contact with the outside world, these individuals became more fully integrated into the European sociopolitical system in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It was during this time that the first missionaries sailed up the Daugava River under strict orders by Pope Innocent III.<sup>4</sup> However, with absolutely no context for Christianity, many Balts rejected the missionary teachings. Unfortunately, not long after, German crusaders were sent and invaded the land. This invasion marked the first official occupation that the Baltic region would struggle through. It is a difficult thing to look back in history and to understand that this three hundred year time period of oppression was just the beginning for the people who would eventually identify themselves as Latvian.

Upon the arrival of the Germans on Baltic soil at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a new name was given to the land: Livland, which was ultimately called Livonia in Latin. The Livonia confederation established by the Germans was not a pleasant reality for the people living along the coast. The feudalistic government was constantly in contradiction with itself

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<sup>3</sup> Amber is extremely plentiful along the shores of the Baltic Sea. It is something that today still holds a distinct sense of pride for many Latvians.

<sup>4</sup> The Daugava is the main river that runs through Riga, the capital of Latvia.

and as a result caused many unnecessary wars over the course of multiple centuries.

Although the Germans mostly left a negative impression during their years of oppression, they did have a lasting impact especially since they are the ones credited for the foundation of Riga, Latvia's present day capital.

After the Livonian war (1558-1583), the Latvian territory was partitioned in various ways, but ultimately fell under Lithuanian and Polish control. This division of the land mostly remained the same until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, and Russia all struggled for authority over the Baltic region. After the Polish-Swedish war, Northern Livonia came under Swedish control, and is interestingly remembered as a peaceful time. Serfdom on the Balts was eased, and schools were established to help educate those who had never had the opportunity to receive any type of education. During this time, several important cultural changes also took place. Under Swedish rule, Lutheranism was adopted as the main religion and the four Baltic tribes previously mentioned: the Curonians, Latgalians, Selonians, and the Semigallians found it a priority to unite themselves in one language which would later become present day Latvian.

In 1710, Riga was over taken by Peter I and as a result the Swedish lost control of the land. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all of Latvia's land mass was subjected to Russian rule. In the period following the Napoleonic Wars (1792-1799), the Russian tsar Alexander I found it necessary to grant personal freedom to the "peasants" of the territory. However, this implication of freedom did not allow Latvians the right to buy back all the land that was taken from them. As a result, there was great political unrest up until the emancipation of the serfs, which was brought about by the Russian Empire founded in 1861. It was during

this time period that Latvians finally had the opportunity to regain some of their land, but this process was only possible through the supervision of the state and landlords.

It was during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a national revival struck Latvia's territory. As a result Universities were finally established, along with other national institutions. For the first time in centuries, the idea of an independent Latvia was being discussed openly. In the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution in 1917, Latvia finally declared its independence on November 18, 1918.

As we move forward in our discussion of Latvian culture, and ultimately the significance of Latvian music, it is important to remember the eight hundred years of occupation and oppression that was faced from the 12<sup>th</sup> century up until 1918. It is an astonishing accomplishment that even in the midst of occupation under countless oppressors, a small group of Baltic people were able to maintain their own unique culture and language. Resilience is the ground on which Latvians stand on, and is what still runs through their veins today.

Having very little material wealth and social status for hundreds of years, allowed Latvians the opportunity to nurture and develop their own culture. Many customs and traditions that were formed centuries ago are still celebrated today. Latvians take great joy in the simple nature of their land and of their life. A lack of wealth made it possible for people to hold fast to their traditions instead of arguing about money.

Music is the most prominent element of Latvian culture. People I now consider dear friends have looked me deep in the eyes and with a smile, have assured me it has been that

way for as long as they can remember. I have witnessed the joy that Latvians have for their music. Songs of the past serve as a token of remembrance and songs of the future give people hope. Even in the face of war and violence, Latvians have always held true to their roots. Latvia has been, and always will be: The Singing Country.

## Part 2: A Closer Look at Culture.

### **Introduction to Folkloristics:**

Understanding Latvian folklore is the first big step in acquiring a deeper understanding of Latvian culture. Although Latvian folkloristics have not been widely recognized by the majority of scholars, Latvians still deserve our attention.<sup>5</sup> The reality of this rich cultural heritage is powerfully evident throughout the country. Traditional folk elements are represented in countless ways: the celebration of summer solstice holidays, an extraordinary fascination with flowers, mythological stories, iconic patterns printed on fabric, and of course thousands of folksongs and dances.

It is important to note that the majority of folklore customs derived in Latvia originated from pagan practices. As a whole, Latvians have felt united with the natural wonders their country has provided them. As a flat area covered in forests, open meadows, and an entire coastline by the sea, early Latvians found comfort and shelter in their land. As a result, many mythological practices before Christianization in the 13<sup>th</sup> century focused on praising celestial and natural deities such as the sky, sun, and river gods. Specific symbols were designed for each deity and even today are sold on necklaces or various other garments to be worn in order to provide protection, strength and beauty.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bunkse, Edmunds V. "Latvian Folkloristics." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 92, no. 364, 1979, p. 196.

<sup>6</sup> "Folklore and Customs." *Folklore and Customs. Latvia Travel*, [www.latvia.travel/en/article/folklore-and-customs](http://www.latvia.travel/en/article/folklore-and-customs).

- For examples, see Fig. 1 in the appendix

Although its basis might have been built on the foundations of paganism, Latvian folkloristics is something that has grown exponentially and has become deeply ingrained in the culture.

### **Dainas:**

The *dainas* are the main source of catalogued folklore within Latvia's history. These short poems that are usually set to song, and carry an incredible amount of information regarding early Latvian life. The term *daina* actually refers to a particular genre of folksong. Generally speaking, a *diana* has a strict format that includes a short quatrain that is usually divided into two parts. The first of these parts poses a thesis to which the second part provides an antithesis. The *dainas* are non-rhyming poems, but greatly excel in their aesthetic effect and ability of providing thematic content that complements the Latvian language.

#### **Typical Daina<sup>7</sup>**

Viena meita Rīga dzied,	One young girl sings in Riga,
Otra dzied Valmierā;	The other in Valmiera;
Abas dzied vienu dziesmu,	Both sing the same song,
Vai tās vienas mates meitas?	Do they have the same mother?

Although these poems are usually cryptic and unsentimental, they were a part of everyday life, especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Dainas* have been written for every occasion, and the text generally deals with the rustic life Latvians have always faced. On summer

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<sup>7</sup> "Latvian Poetry." *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, by Alex Preminger et al., Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 793–794.

nights, one person generally led the singing and a chorus containing two or more voices typically followed. Occasionally the lead singer would sing multiple *dainas* in a row, which would lead to what Latvians call *virķenes*. This type of singing can be described as various songs that beautifully combine together like beads on a string. Latvian composer Volfgangs Dārziņš, believes that some of these melodies containing only three to four tones, originated as early as A.D. 900. However, for most *dainas*, it is difficult to set a specific date of origin since the act of singing was mostly an oral tradition.

Although the *dainas* had been around for hundreds of years, they did not attract attention until the nineteenth century. The primary reason for this was because Latvians had been confined to serfdom for a large part of their existence. As a group of people with a small population, cultural contributions were not catalogued or deemed significant. According to Edmund Bunkse's article on Latvian Folkloristics:

*“Over the centuries only occasionally would a daina or two surface from its oral obscurity into the light of the printed page, either as a magical incantation, recorded in court minutes of post-Reformation witchcraft trails, or as an item of curiosity, written down by one or two Germans sympathetic to the Latvians.”*<sup>8</sup>

It was Johann Gottfried Herder, a German philosopher and writer, who brought the *dainas* to the forefront. In 1778, Herder incorporated twelve *dianas* in his *Volkslieder* (a book that attempted to collect folk music from nations across Europe), which was later re-titled as *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (Voices of the Peoples in Song). Herder stated that, “*The art of*

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<sup>8</sup> Bunkse, p. 201



*poetry and music of the Latvians is remarkable and reflects nature, which has been and still is their master teacher.”*<sup>9</sup> This publication made an impact, because it was one of the first times that Latvians felt that their own work was worthy to be categorized as cultural expression and had the right to be collected as important folklore. This simple act inspired many Latvians, and as a result led to massive national awakening a hundred years later in the 1860’s.

This was brought on by Latvians who had a strong desire to find their cultural identity and to preserve it at all cost. As a result, collecting the *dainas* was one of the first major priorities during the awakening. The collection was guided by Krišjānis Barons, who dedicated thirty seven years to locating, editing, and publishing these works. An act mainly out of love, and using personal funds, “Father Barons” as he was referred to, saw eight complete volumes of *dainas* through to publication. Because of his dedicated work, Barons is viewed as the first cultural hero of Latvian culture. Barons found value in a purely Latvian creation, and this value sparked a sense of appreciation and inspiration for the country as a whole. Verbal forms of expression have not been the only ways Latvians have built upon their cultural heritage. Rather, other unique characteristics include a significant contribution of Latvian instruments, as well as a fascination with dancing.

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<sup>9</sup> Bunkse, p. 200

## Indigenous Instruments<sup>10</sup>

Latvia is home to various unique indigenous instruments that add a greater sense of tradition and culture within the country. By far the most popular of these instruments is the *kokle*, which can be spotted on the streets of Riga, or in just about any folk ensemble. The *kokle* is a plucked string instrument that is quite similar to the zither, and is categorized as a chordophone. The instrument itself is carved out of a single piece of wood that and is covered with by a thin soundboard that usually has carved decorations. This chordophone has been around for centuries and the earliest one discovered in Latvia dates back to the thirteenth century. An interesting quality of *kokle* is the fact that the strings do not rest on the bridge like most chordophones. The strings on this instrument are totally secured by tuning pegs, and as a result a softer and richer sound is produced. The number of strings on a *kokle* varies, but is generally between six to nine. However, a few instruments have been found that have more than ten strings. Different types of *kokles* are played in different parts of the country. In the Kurzeme district (Western Latvia where I have spent most of my time), the instruments are usually slightly smaller and are generally played on a person's lap. The plucking of strings is completed with an individual's right index finger, and the left hand is used for muting unwanted strings. The most common tuning of *kokles* is that of a diatonic scale, and occasionally lower strings will be used as drones.

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<sup>10</sup> The information in this section comes from the following source:

Jātniece, Amanda. "A Primer on Latvian Folk Instruments." *Latvians Online*, 17 July 2001, [latviansonline.com/a-primer-on-latvian-folk-instruments](http://latviansonline.com/a-primer-on-latvian-folk-instruments)

- For more information, see Fig. 2 in the appendix

Percussion instruments are commonly used in folk music around the world. Latvians mostly utilize large calfskin drums, but also use rattles called *trideksnis*. These instruments are simply made out of a wooden stick with small pieces of metal attached to the opposite end that allow the instrument to produce a distinct rattling sound. In order to correctly play the *trideksnis*, a player will shake the rattle while hitting it against his or her palm to create a strong percussive timbre. Larger rattle sticks called *velna bungas* are also used and typically reach about 4 to 5 feet in length. These instruments are struck against the floor in order to amplify their sound. *Eglīte*, also known as bell trees are pieces of spruce trees that have their branches tied to the center stem. In order for these instruments to produce sound, Latvians have traditionally attached bells and various other trinkets.

Simple wind instruments are also commonly heard in Latvian folk music. Historically speaking, some of the oldest wind instruments in Latvia were simple whistles that had one or two sound holes. These instruments have been made out of many types of natural materials including horn, bone, shells, animal teeth, bark, and even clay. More sophisticated flutes called *stabules* have a few additional holes and are mostly made out of wood.

Along with music, and the use of indigenous instruments, dancing is another outlet that Latvians use to express themselves. Although music is the primary focus of this paper, I want to make readers aware that folk dancing historically has gone side by side with traditional music. For more information, please see Fig. 3 in the appendix.

**Kokle <sup>11</sup> (For Children)**



**Kokle Ensemble <sup>12</sup>**



**Stabules <sup>13</sup>**



**Trideksnis<sup>15</sup>**

**Velna Bungas <sup>14</sup>**



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<sup>11</sup> *Kokle Bērniem*. [www.baltharmonia.lv/izstradajumi/params/category/19785/item/121853/](http://www.baltharmonia.lv/izstradajumi/params/category/19785/item/121853/).

<sup>12</sup> *Dzītari-about Kokle*. [www.dzitari.lv/par-kokli.php?lng=3](http://www.dzitari.lv/par-kokli.php?lng=3).

<sup>13</sup> *Koka Un Māla Stabules*. [www.tautasmuzikasinstrumenti.lv/muzikas-instrumenti/koka-un-mala-stabules](http://www.tautasmuzikasinstrumenti.lv/muzikas-instrumenti/koka-un-mala-stabules).

<sup>14</sup> *Velna Bungas*. [www.baltharmonia.lv/izstradajumi/params/category/19786/item/82338/](http://www.baltharmonia.lv/izstradajumi/params/category/19786/item/82338/).

<sup>15</sup> *Trideksnis* . [www.tautasmuzikasinstrumenti.lv/muzikas-instrumenti/trideksnis](http://www.tautasmuzikasinstrumenti.lv/muzikas-instrumenti/trideksnis).

## Rise of the Choral Tradition<sup>16</sup>

The rise of choral traditions in Latvia can be originally tied to Germanic influence. Beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, choral singing was introduced in the form of hymns by Lutheran ministers. At the time, all Latvian workers were required to attend church and as a result were exposed to this early form of congregational singing. However, it has been noted that the hymn texts provided by the Germans suffered from poor translation. Therefore to the Latvians, these homophonic tunes did not leave a significant impression. Even though many people were not directly inspired by the German hymns, the action of everyone singing at the same time was a new concept that sparked an interest.

Up to that point in history, Latvian music was still usually a call and response form that dealt with some type of *daina* as a text setting. Latvians tolerated congregational singing, even though they had very little desire to fully participate alongside of the Germans. A curiosity for choral music began to form at the roots of the culture. Many German ministers were oppressive figures in society at the time, and therefore Latvians wanted to have very little to do with these individuals. Even though for hundreds of years, Latvians have been considered quiet people, some sources suggest that they quietly made fun of the ministers for their lame attempts of speaking Latvian. However, when analyzing the events of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, many scholars hold a debate on the musical influence the Germans had on traditional Latvian folk music.

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<sup>16</sup> Carpenter, Inta Gale. "Festival as Reconciliation: Latvian Exile Homecoming in 1990." *The Journal of American Folklore*, 1996.

*“While some scholars of Latvian music contend that Germans (and their Latvian emulators) used choral music to stamp out indigenous tradition, others claim that Latvians actually rescued native tradition by borrowing form and substance from the Germans. In other words, Latvians indigenized choral singing as an extension of their folk music.”<sup>17</sup>*

In 1839, a German-educated Latvian named Jānis Cimze, founded one of the first influential teacher institutes. This school, which was based off of the motto, “Serve Your People,” sent its graduates into rural parts of Latvia to establish parish schools. One of the main focuses of each of these schools was daily choral singing, and as a result, in 1864 and 1870, the first regional choral song days were instituted.

At its core, the acceptance of choral singing in Latvia began to form a unique sense of unity among people. As a country that had been continually oppressed for most, this unity which was first felt towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is something that cannot be ignored.

Truly considered the father of Latvian choral music, Jānis Cimze published the first choral song book in 1872. Although simple in nature, this initial publication had a powerful impact because it was the first time that Latvians could join each other on a stage and sing together in a massive combination of voices. By this time in history, Latvians had fully accepted choral singing as an extension of the *dainas*, and therefore felt the freedom to incorporate and expand upon this new art form within the creativity of their own culture.

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<sup>17</sup> Carpenter, pp. 98-99.

In 1873, the first Latvian Song and Dance Festival took place in Riga, Latvia. At this event 1,003 singers were present from forty-seven choirs, and a thirty person orchestra also participated. Even from its humble beginnings, a strong sense of Nationalism and emotional power was present in the air. Valentīns Bērzkalns, a song festival historian suggests that:

*“The emotional power of the song festival derives from re-experiencing feelings of unity engendered by group singing at summer solstice festivities called Jāni and with special songs called ligo dziesmas.”*<sup>18</sup>

In regards to my personal experience in Latvia, I can attest to the fact that the customs surrounding Jāni are still at the forefront of the culture. For the past three summers, I have had the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of summer solstice events ranging from listening to Latvian pop artists on the crowded streets of Riga to traditional countryside celebrations. Jāni is considered a public holiday where people generally travel to rural areas to dress in traditional clothes, as well as to eat, drink, and sing. After the celebration, groups of people relocate to hillsides to commence their singing and dancing of the Jāni songs.<sup>19</sup> These songs are sung until the sun rises and are associated with many things such as fertility and good fortune.

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<sup>18</sup> Carpenter, p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> It is important to take note that this holiday (like many Latvian holidays) is directly tied to the pagan practices referred to earlier.

Inta Gale Carpenter also notes in her article that:

*“The daina style, especially the droning, can carry some distance if a large enough group sings. Thus, long before print capitalism distributed forms of imagined unity, sound connected Latvians to imagined others who were also singing the same songs.”*<sup>20</sup>

From 1873, and onward, song festivals took place in Riga every four to five years towards the end of June to coincide with Jāni. These early festivals incorporated Jāni songs as well as traditional customs such as decorating the conductor’s podium with oak boughs. As is still customary today, men in the choir wore head crowns made of oak leaves and women wore crowns woven from fresh flowers. Latvian musicologist Arnolds Klotiņš describes the early festivals as an interesting duality that ties together both modern music and folk music. This unique combination is something that Latvians are conscious of and truly nurture in the process. A speaker once proclaimed:

*“We are a continuation – we ourselves and also our song festivals, which are a direct continuation of the ancient daina singing.”*<sup>21</sup>

The following piece of music “God Bless Latvia,” is Latvia’s national anthem. The lyrics and music were written by Kārlis Baumanis, who was one of the most influential participators in the 1860’s national awakening. The piece was composed in 1873, and was

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<sup>20</sup> Carpenter, p. 99.

<sup>21</sup> This quotation is from a speaker from the 1986 Latvian exile festival in Toronto

- Carpenter, p. 102.



premiered at the first national Latvian Song and Dance Festival. To listen to the piece, please play track No. 1 on the provided CD.





## Part 3: A Small Taste of Freedom & Hard Years of Occupation

### **Twenty Years of Joy:**

As discussed earlier in this paper, Latvia has faced countless years of occupation under various oppressors. This harsh reality is one that we must face as we take the time to look back in Latvia's history. In order to gain a proper understanding of Latvian music under Soviet occupation, I would like to take the time to briefly unwrap the historical backdrop that set the scene to what we will be discussing in the pages to come.

The Russian Revolution took place in 1917 as a way to dismantle the Tsarist autocracy which had confined Russia for many decades. Over the course of a few years, the autocracy was soon replaced by a new form of government: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). It was in this aftermath of the Russian Revolution that Latvia was able to declare its independence on November 18, 1918. The newly found Soviets were not supportive of this declaration and caused various conflicts that led to the War of Independence. Despite its name, this "war" only turned out to be a series of military conflicts that were supposedly resolved with a peace treaty between Latvia and the USSR on August 20, 1920.

The brief period of independence that took place for the twenty-one years following 1918, is something that even today is still celebrated by Latvians today.<sup>22</sup> This time of peace

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<sup>22</sup> This year, 2018, marks the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Latvia's independence, and was celebrated widely across the country. Even though Soviet occupation was to follow twenty years later, Latvians still consider November 18, 1918 as their first independence day since it was on this day that they began to rebuild what had been lost after hundreds of years of occupation.

in-between the two World Wars gave Latvia the opportunity to breathe and to rebuild what had been broken in the midst of the chaos and violence of World War I.

*“The establishment of the national state in 1918 introduced a new period in Latvian folkloristics: the study of folklore grew from a pursuit of scattered intellectuals into an institutionalized discipline: in 1924 *Latviešu folkloras krātuve* (Archives of Latvian Folklore) was founded.”*<sup>23</sup>

It is clear that during this twenty-year span, Latvia was not only able to rebuild physical structures that had been destroyed by war, but also cultural structures that had helped define the country’s identity for hundreds of years. The concept of “folk” was very much re-defined in this era, especially with the foundation of the *Latviešu folkloras krātuve*. The individuals working for the archive between the years of 1920-1940, took it upon themselves to collect hundreds of thousands of folk artifacts that in their opinion had the right to be properly cataloged and preserved. In this process, by the mid-1930’s, the archive’s folk song collection already exceeded 435,000 entries.

Also noteworthy is that during this twenty-year time span, multiple folksong collections were published in pursuit of continuing the legacy of Krišjānis Barons.

During the years of 1920-1940, the Latvian choral tradition was back on the rise. Now, not burdened by war or occupation, the singing country, finally had the opportunity to pursue what they were most passionate about: music.

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<sup>23</sup> “Herder's Legacy: Latvia and Folksong.” *Singing the Nations: Herder's Legacy*: by Dace Bula and Sigrid Rieuwerts, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2008.

Two important genres were developed during this time, folk song arrangements and sacred music.<sup>24</sup> The devastation of World War I had almost entirely destroyed Latvia's musical tradition, but it is important to understand that these hard times just created a greater desire for self-assertion among the people. The continuation of past musical tradition and development of new musical genres is truly a remarkable statement of perseverance.

*“The development of Latvian choral music in the period between the two World Wars faced a difficult struggle, but was one of steady growth and progress towards excellence.”*<sup>25</sup>

The two main choral figures from 1920-1940's that deserve attention are Jāzeps Vītols and Emīls Melngailis. These two men greatly contributed to Latvian music as prolific composers and music educators. Both were centered at the Riga Conservatory, but ultimately contributed in different ways. Vītols' mission was to demand the same standards in choral music as those that were being held to instrumental music at the time. Melngailis left a different impact by enriching Latvian choral music by further adding characteristics of folk music. This process helped add a greater sense of musical freedom in melodic styles.

The following piece of music, “The Sun's Revelry” is one of Jāzeps Vītols most popular works. It was written in 1923, and serves as a representation of Vītols mission to compose high quality vocal music. The second piece, “Midsummer Eve,” is by Emīls

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<sup>24</sup> More examples of these works can be found in the following source:

- Klotins, Arnolds. *Anthology of Latvian Choral Music: 1918-1940*. Vol. 2, Riga SIA SOL, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

Melngailis. This work has more folk elements such as faster rhythms and sustained notes that replicate early folk music.<sup>26</sup> To listen to these pieces, please play track No. 2 and 3.

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<sup>26</sup> The sheet music for both of these piece comes from the following source:

- Klotins, Arnolds. *Anthology of Latvian Choral Music: 1918-1940*. Vol. 2, Riga SIA SOL, 1998. pp. 43-46, and pp. 85-88



























Those wonderful years of freedom and creative expression also led to four national Song and Dance Festivals held in Riga between the years of 1926-1938. A total of three hundred regional song festivals also took place.

The following table shows data from the national Song and Dance Festivals That occurred between the years of 1873-1990.<sup>27</sup>

<b>Festival</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Singers</b>
I	1873	Riga	1,003
II	1880	Riga	1,653
III	1888	Riga	2,618
IV	1895	Jelgava	3,000
V	1910	Riga	2,300
VI	1926	Riga	6,526
VII	1931	Riga	11,853
VIII	1933	Riga	10,600
IX	1938	Riga	14,450
X	1948	Riga	14,542
XI	1950	Riga	13,866
XII	1955	Riga	10,767
XIII	1960	Riga	11,248
XIV	1965	Riga	12,331
XV	1970	Riga	12,700
XVI	1973	Riga	14,800
XVII	1977	Riga	14,446
XVIII	1980	Riga	17,425
XIX	1985	Riga	16,850
XX	1990	Riga	19,000

Blue: Czarist Latvia

Green: Independent Latvia

Red: Soviet Latvia

As we look back in history, it becomes clear that this time of peace was only the calm before the storm. However, many Latvians still cherish these days and recall what the past

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<sup>27</sup> Carpenter, p. 101.

generations remember about their experiences at the song festivals that took place in Independent Latvia. It is crucial to understand that:

*“The song festival evolved side by side with shifts in Latvian identity consciousness, to accommodate, facilitate, and contest repeated re-imaginings of self.”*<sup>28</sup>

There was a true sense of power that was felt as individual Latvians came together to sing alongside thousands of people. Latvians, especially during this time period, cherished how the song festivals were resilient in their ability to turn, as Carpenter states: *“a generalized mood into a practical force.”*<sup>29</sup> This force was the mortar that helped rebuild Latvia, time and time again.

### **Soviet Occupation:**

However, the autumn of 1939 is often marked by historians as the season in which the fate of the Baltic countries took a turn for the worse. During those cold autumn days, among the falling leaves, Soviet warships sailed their way into the harbor of Tallinn, Estonia. During this time, the Soviets violated their airspace agreement by illegally flying planes over the Baltic countries to gather information. Even in the midst of nervous tension, Latvia (out of fear of becoming re-occupied by the Germans) signed a treaty with the Soviet Union that outlined the following agreement.

*Article 1: Provided for military cooperation between the parties in case of an attack by a third party*

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<sup>28</sup> Carpenter, p. 102.

<sup>29</sup> Carpenter, p. 104

*Article 2: Obligated the Soviet government to assist the Latvian government in providing armaments*

*Article 3: Permitted the Soviet government to establish military and naval bases on Latvian territory<sup>30</sup>*

*Article 4: Obligated the Soviet and Latvian government not to engage in military alliances against the other party*

*Article 5: Stipulated that the political and economic systems shall not be affected by the treaty*

*Article 6: Dealt with ratification and that the treaty shall remain in force for ten years, with an option to renew for an additional ten years*

Even with the limitations clearly outlined above, Latvians felt a small sense of security by entering into an agreement with the Soviet Union. However, attitudes clearly shifted when Finland refused to sign a similar treaty with Soviet Union in 1939, and as a result, was attacked by the Soviets on November 30th. This unnecessary rage and violence led to the USSR being removed from the League of Nations on December 14<sup>th</sup>. In the midst of fear and political confusion, Finland eventually entered into an agreement with the Soviet Union and signed the treaty a few months later in 1939.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> During the summer of 2018, I lived ten minutes away from the largest military base that was built by the Soviets.

- For pictures, see Fig. 4 in the appendix

<sup>31</sup> This fact was included to show the sheer dominance the Soviets had acquired in such little time.

The summer of 1940 marked the Soviet Union's first occupation of the Baltic States. Vayacheslav Moltov<sup>32</sup> had accused Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia for making conspiracy threats, and in a matter of three days, the Soviet Union took the three countries. The first of the invasions took place in Estonia on June 14, 1940, and on the following day, Soviet troops invaded from the south and overtook Lithuania. On June 16, Latvia, caught directly in the middle of the violence was invaded and was given a two-point ultimatum to be answered in less than six hours:

1. Latvia must establish a pro-soviet type of government
2. Soviet troops have freedom of passage through all of Latvia

As a small country comprised of less than two million people, Latvia was in no position to fight back. Therefore, the people braced themselves for the occupation ahead. The first Soviet occupation in 1940 brought about a paralyzing sense of fear as cattle cars that were headed to Siberia began to fill with men, women, and children. These "June deportations" as they are referred to, directly targeted political opponents of the Soviet government. As a result, 15,600 Latvians were deported to Siberia in a matter of two days (June 13 & 14), and around 35,000 people total over the course of the Soviet Union's first occupation period of Latvia. To put that into perspective, nearly 1.8% of Latvia's population was sent to starve in labor camps.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Vayacheslav Moltov (1890-1986) was a Soviet politician and diplomat who was considered a protégé of Joseph Stalin.

<sup>33</sup> This percentage may not seem like a lot of given Latvia's small country size, but imagine if 1.8% of America's population was sent to a labor camps. That would be approximately 5,216,000 people. Latvia suffered from these deportations, it is important to remember that.

German troops arrived in Riga on June 22, 1941, and interestingly, Latvia's first impression was that Germany had arrived to save them from the Soviets. Confusion quickly spread across the country as Latvians aired the German national anthem on local radio. The nation seemed to be celebrating. However, it did not take long for Latvia to realize that their German brethren were not there to help liberate, but merely to take over as oppressors. By July 10, 1941, Germany had taken over the entire country, and the harsh years of occupation continued.

Increased political tension and conflict between Soviet and German powers eventually led to a Soviet attack on Riga on September 14, 1944. Within four days, the Soviets regained their occupation which would ultimately last for fifty years. Dark days had come to stay, and Latvians prepared for the worst.

As Soviet troops marched their way into Latvian territory, a sense of hopelessness fell over the country. No longer did Latvians have the freedom to praise their cultural identity through their music. A new era had come, an era that was built upon fear. Music scholars that had worked so hard during the twenty-year period of independence now had a decision to make: flee Soviet Latvia in hopes of continuing their research elsewhere, or stay and conform their research to Soviet ideology. As many as 200,000 people fled to the West to escape Soviet occupation. This sense of desperation even caused some people to flee across the Baltic in small fishing boats. A total of 100,000 Latvian refugees settled in Displaced Person camps in Germany, as well as 40,000 immigrating to North America.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Carpenter, p. 93.

A rather significant cultural phenomenon is how Latvian refugees during this time were the ones able to maintain and develop their cultural identity. Some well-educated academics, intellectuals, politicians, and artists saw these refugee camps as an opportunity to continue their cultural freedom. Ina Gale Carpenter in her article, states the following:

*“Latvians view this period in the refugee camps as a time of intense cultural activism, a crucial training ground that laid the foundation for a subsequently viable exile society.”*<sup>35</sup>

Just because they were forced to leave their homeland, Latvians had no intention of giving up their passion for music. In a multi-volume *Anthology of Latvian Choral Music*, Arnolds Klotiņš states that nearly 40% of the songs in volume III<sup>36</sup> were composed by refugees outside of Latvia. A valid point made in the introduction to this anthology is that creativity in choral writing only thrives where choral singing is a way of life. In refugee camps, Latvians had very little restrictions, and therefore had the opportunity to form choirs that continued to thrive even against the difficult circumstances. The *Zuika Male Choir*, was founded and led by conductor Roberts Zuika, and is a perfect example of the perseverance that was shown by many refugees during this time. This specific choir gave hundreds of concerts in post-war Germany, and after 1947 even continued their tradition for more than twenty years in Great Britain.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 93.

<sup>36</sup> This volume is focused on Latvian choral music written from 1940-1965

- Klotins, Arnolds. *Anthology of Latvian Choral Music: 1940-1965*. Vol. 3, Riga SIA SOL, 1998.



However, even as the difficult times of the 1940's continued, a total of twelve Latvian choral festivals took place in various venues in Germany. With an average of 500 participants that occasionally reached 1,000, many of these celebrations of music and culture had positive impacts not only on Latvians, but also on German families who had been innocent bystanders of the war.

At the end of the 1940's there was little hope for Latvia's independence, so as a result many Latvians picked up their undefeated sense of nationalism, and relocated to other countries. As a result, the choral tradition of Latvia interestingly diverged into several branches that developed and flourished in communities across Great Britain, USA, Australia, and Canada. An important contribution from the Latvian immigrants who fled to North America for safety, was that:

*“They constructed and nurtured a borderless global Latvia-outside-of-Latvia to promote their ideological strategies for restoring Latvian independence and preserving Latvian culture.”*<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 17

The following chart contains information on the refugee song festivals that took place in North America from the years of 1953-1991:<sup>38</sup>

Festival	Date	Place	Singers	Audience
I	1953	Chicago	650	5,000
	1953	Toronto	289	3,200
II	1957	Toronto	680	5,000
	1958	New York City	900	10,000
III	1961	Toronto	992	8,000
	1963	Cleveland	1,000	10,000
IV	1965	Toronto	900	7,000
	1968	Cleveland	1,100	8,600
V	1970	Toronto	1,300	--
	1973	Cleveland	1,250	10,000
VI	1976	Toronto	850	--
	1978	Boston	700	8,500
VII	1981	Toronto	--	--
	1983	Milwaukee	1,000	7,000
VIII	1986	Toronto	--	--
	1988	Indianapolis	789	5,000
IX	1991	Toronto	--	--

The middle of the 1940's marked a new era for music making in Latvia. Now, under heavy surveillance by the Soviet Union, all art forms could only develop by defying the oppressive conditions. The establishment of the Soviet regime had a catastrophic impact on musical life in Latvia by instating countless laws that made music-making extremely difficult. These laws included censoring all song texts and programs that were to be performed in public. The sense of nationalism that previously paved the musical tradition was destroyed as choirs were forced to sing political propaganda praising the Soviet Union.

Performers were not the only musicians who felt a sense of shame as they walked across stages to sing in concerts built upon lies. Composers too felt a profound sense of

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<sup>38</sup> Carpenter, p. 102

betrayal to their country as they were forced to compose new works that hailed the Soviet Union. In the multi-volume *Anthology of Latvian Choral Music*, Arnolds Klotiņš states that among musicians, about a third chose to flee Soviet Latvia, and among composers, almost half.<sup>39</sup>

The intense pressure of the Soviet regime did not remain unchanged during the whole period of occupation. The difficult times of the 1940's gave way to a small time of rest often referred to as the "thaw period." This period of time took place during the mid 1950's, but unfortunately did not last long. A minor change in perspective from the Soviet point of view is what made these years slightly less destructive. Now, the focus was on the development of the new, instead of on the demolishing of the old. With this new mind set, Soviet authorities encouraged the establishment of amateur arts, especially the formation of choirs.

Although they regained a bit of hope, Latvians were not fooled by the hidden intentions. They clearly understood that this time of "creativity" was the regime's desire to manipulate widely differing social classes, in an effort to achieve changes in culture in line with their ideological demands.<sup>40</sup> However, history clearly shows how choirs formed at almost every collective farm, institution, and town. Active community members across the country used this authorized opportunity as a way to assemble people in large numbers to

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<sup>39</sup> Klotins, Vol. 3, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 14

once again experience a sense of nationalism even in the midst of the propaganda they were forced to sing.

However, it is important to note that choral expression during this time period was now something that was uniquely valued. Having little understanding of Latvian culture, the Soviets did not understand that allowing people to sing was actually what re-fueled the nation. Emotional expression was not only seen in music, but was also notably present in poetry, drama, and other arts. Many artists, especially composers who chose to stay, found this period as an opportunity to breathe more freely.

The following piece, “A Prayer by Latvians in Exile,” was written by Jāzeps Vītols as an offering to those who under dire circumstances chose to leave their homeland.<sup>41</sup> Vītols composed this work in for mixed choir in the autumn of 1945. The lyrics and musical content of this piece expresses the wandering mood that was felt not only by those who left Latvia, but also those who chose to stay. To listen to this piece, please play track No. 4.

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<sup>41</sup> The sheet music for this piece comes from the following source:

- Klotins, Vol. 3, pp. 31-33.







### **Song Festivals Under Occupation:**

Even in the midst of heavy oppression, Latvians still had a strong desire to gather for a national Song and Dance Festival in 1948. This particular gathering was the first post-war festival that took place under Soviet occupation. Although Latvians were generally in a position of fear, the festival “proclaimed loyalty in its historic numbering.”<sup>42</sup> However, for the first time in the history of the song festivals, Latvians were forced to proclaim the national identity of the Soviet Union rather than to sing the song of their own hearts. At this particular time, the Soviet government had the intention of borrowing the song festival form only as a way to project communism.

*“To exiles and natives alike, familiar structures filled with historically alien meanings: children carrying Soviet flags and portraits of Lenin, banners proclaiming “Long Live the Latvian Worker!” On stage, Latvians temporarily and publicly became someone else for the time being as Soviet order was presented through the power of once-again subordinated voices.”<sup>43</sup>*

Although there was an underlying sense of hostility, Latvians gathered to celebrate and ultimately 14,542 participants sang at the 1948 festival.

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<sup>42</sup> Smidchens Guntis. *The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture In The Baltic Singing Revolution*. University of Washington Press, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Carpenter, p. 104.



A female teacher present, recalls the following:

*“You know, somehow it was very painful...when we had to sing together with people who carried rifles on their shoulders...since it was precisely these people who brought us those fifty years without freedom.”<sup>44</sup>*

Inta Gale Carpenter describes the situation very well in the following quote:

*“Ironically, Soviet song festivals kept nationalism alive by creating a time and place where Latvians could be Latvian together – in the beauty and isolation of the festival park, in the spaces between the obligatory songs, in the nuances of meaning and behavior that accrued around the Latvian songs. In order not to lose the possibility of coming together in mass numbers, Latvians paid their ideological dues by singing unwelcome words. When nationalists and historians had to remain silent, conductors emerged as a key national tribunal and the choir as an idealized model of the people.”<sup>45</sup>*

There is a beautiful sense of irony in how these hard years of oppression sparked a new sense of determination for many Latvians. No longer would they let their voices be drowned out, but when possible they would declare their identity through song. At this point in history, a consensus seemed to fall upon the country. No matter what lyrics were forced to come out of their mouths, people would base their hope on what could be found beneath the lyrics...they would let the heart of the music fuel their passion.

In the twenty-five year period following the mid-1950's, the choral movement and song festivals gradually grew from a practice based on tradition to an autonomous social

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>45</sup> Carpenter, p. 105.

force.<sup>46</sup> It was during this time that the Soviet Union still had little understanding of how powerful music could be in uniting the people of Latvia.

### **The International Stage:**

In the 1960's Latvian choirs were gradually able to resume making regular concert tours abroad. These tours were of course still under strict political control but had a greater impact on people by raising the self-esteem and encouraging other countries that had been devastated by the Soviets. Although these concert tours may seem like a small detail in the grand scheme of history, it is important to realize that out of a country of only two million people, small touring choirs were in their own way able to create small chinks in the armor of the iron curtain. The success that was achieved by these choirs, in turn, inspired other Latvian choirs to participate in international competitions.<sup>47</sup> The first to succeed in this arena was a female choir called *Dzintars* when in 1968 they were awarded first prize at the Bela Bartók International Choral Festival in Hungary.

After the initial years of touring and competing internationally, Latvians had gradually discovered their position on the international scene and as a result, found it necessary to set higher standards for their own choral writing. Of course, the *dainas* would always be the foundation of traditional Latvian music, but during this time, many choral musicians and composers wanted to sing new music that expressed the struggles of their own times. It was during the year of 1966 that most people acknowledged the necessity for change.

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<sup>46</sup> Klotins, Vol 3, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> This was again allowed because the government thought that as long as Latvians were singing Soviet lyrics only the Soviet Union would be praised.

That very year, a presentation and evaluation of the most recently composed choral music was held in Riga.<sup>48</sup> Over the span of five days, 22 choirs presented 167 choral works, 52 of them being premiers. After the event, the judges came to the conclusion that (with few exceptions) Latvian choral music had become standardized as lyrical, contemplative works that heavily overused homophonic writing.

This assessment of the choral literature created a pressing need for Latvians to go further in their music. In the *Anthology of Latvian Choral Music Vol. III*, Arnolds Klotiņš states the following:

*“Earlier in the late 1950’s, choral writing had won the right to lyrical self-expression, previously rebuked by the regime as unnecessary individualism, but now there was a pressing need to go further. In the avant-garde Latvian poetry written from the 1960’s onwards, the very concept of man and his individuality had changed – man was no longer perceived as an insignificant cog locked in the wheel of class warfare and production plans, but as an individual evaluating his historical and national ties, his place in the endless cycle of nature, and his responsibility to other generations.”*<sup>49</sup>

A number of young Latvian composers with innovative approaches paved the desired road towards change. However, Latvian choirs on both sides of the iron curtain felt the need to push forward for progress. As a result, new choral music was being written all over the world. The Latvian composers who had fled during the invasion of the Soviet Union were playing an important role in this movement.

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<sup>48</sup> Klotins, Vol. 3, p. 15

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 15

During the twenty years that past from the mid-1960's to the mid-1980's, Latvians faced similar political struggles as they did during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Music making was still tolerated, and choirs were allowed to maintain their status as long as Soviet propaganda was being projected. However, a new restlessness for independence buzzed through the hearts of many during the 1980s. Latvian leaders could tell that the Soviet Union's political tension with various other countries was beginning to cause cracks in its foundation. If independence was going to be fought for, now would be the time. It was truly remarkable how this passion for freedom ultimately had to remain unsaid, but nevertheless fueled the beginnings of a revolution.

### **The Singing Revolution:**

The Singing Revolution took place in all three Baltic States from 1987 to 1991.<sup>50</sup> This term was ultimately coined by an Estonian activist and artist named Heinz Valk, who in 1988 published an article about a spontaneous mass singing demonstration that took place in Tallinn, Estonia. In that same year, Latvians referred to the beginning of 1986 as the "Third Awakening," which truly sparked an unshakeable desire for a national revival. For the first time in fifty years, Latvians were beginning to raise their voices and speak out against injustice. Protesting the building of a hydroelectric power plant on the Daugava River, placing hundreds of thousands of flowers below the Freedom Monument to commemorate

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<sup>50</sup> The Singing Revolution was a form of non-violent protest that occurred all three Baltic States. However, for this paper, I will mostly only be addressing the events that took place in Latvia. This is largely due to the fact that even though the Baltic States are very close in proximity, they are quite different culturally.

the victims of the 1941 deportation, and the formation of various revival organizations, are examples of how people (especially in Riga) were beginning to push back.

However, music was the most important form of protest as Latvians fought for their independence during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hundreds of voices combined into one united force is what had given people hope for so long, and this beautiful non-violent offering would be their key to liberation. To this day, the power of song is the heart of Latvia.

*“National identity and the national culture that surrounds and shapes it are not primordial, ageless phenomena. They are constructed in a tradition of nation building...the historic roots of the Baltic Singing Revolution reach back more than two centuries.”*<sup>51</sup>

This quote by Guntis Šmidchens is written in his book titled, *The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution*. This text is a fine piece of scholarship, and is one of the only books dedicated to documenting the events of the Singing Revolution. It is here that Šmidchens clearly explains that nonviolent identity, like national identity, is constructed by culture builders. Even through hundreds of years of oppression, it is uniquely obvious that Latvians are a people group who have never made an effort to fight back with violence, but have nonetheless made an effort to build their culture.

As a desperate push for independence took place between the years of 1987-1991, individual activists shaped the image of a peaceful society by sticking their tradition of non-violent protest. As the “Sing Country,” Latvia decided to remain true to its calling and

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<sup>51</sup> Šmidchens Guntis. *The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture In The Baltic Singing Revolution*. University of Washington Press, 2017. p. 446

decided that singing would be its preferred weapon to fight back against the USSR. During this time, thousands of Latvians gathered at countless events across the country to lift their voices as a form of protest. These monumental gatherings were Latvia's way of standing up to the Soviet Union and demanding their freedom.

### **The 1990 Song and Dance Festival:**

The 1990 song festival was the first sanctioned return of hundreds of Latvians who had fled the country to escape the horrors of Soviet occupation during the early 1940s. This particular gathering was extremely powerful because people believed that after all the impactful events of The Singing Revolution, a record breaking attendance during this event would be the final push needed for independence. During this time, several hundred Latvian refugees returned home by accepting the invitation to attend. A woman participating in the 1990 song festival stated, *"For the first time after the long nightmare years, Latvian choirs from outside also dared to participate in this song festival."*<sup>52</sup>

Latvian refugees returning in 1990 had an interesting dynamic to face as they prepared their voices for the festival. Because of the difficult circumstances that the entire country had to face during Soviet occupation, a handful of Latvian nationals viewed the returning refugees as cowards who only journeyed back for the impending freedom. Regardless of varying opinions, the overall priority of this time period was to collaborate together, in order to produce a powerful demonstration of non-violent resistance.

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<sup>52</sup> Carpenter, p. 105.

Temporarily together, nationals and refugees would have the opportunity to be truly Latvian again, as well as to celebrate both their struggles and their hopes for the future.

The following quote describes the atmosphere:

*“Through the structure, content, and performance of a song festival restored to familiar contours, they (Latvians) expected to repossess their national identity and past aspirations and to project future ones, all the more powerfully because both identity and aspiration could finally be performed at home.”*<sup>53</sup>

A total of 19,000 singers were in attendance at the 1990 song festival as well as over 100,000 people in the audience. These record breaking numbers are a testimony of the passion that was deeply resounding within the hearts of the people. However, the ultimate meaning of the event was accomplished differently between nationals and refugees. For refugees, meaning derived from the restoration of the familiar to native soil, whereas for nationals, meaning derived from the striking unfamiliarity. According to Inta Gale Carpenter, *“For both, known order dissolved, producing a sense of liberation and exhilaration.”*<sup>54</sup>

However, Latvia was still a nation under Soviet regime, and therefore still had to sing Soviet lyrics and wave Soviet flags. This was a new reality to those who were returning for the first time, and as a result created a bit of additional tension.

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<sup>53</sup> Carpenter, p. 106.

<sup>54</sup> Carpenter, p. 107

A young woman participating in the festival reported:

*“People ask me, ‘How can you go there to sing, when you have to sing such songs?’ I said, ‘I simply won’t sing.’ And I thought that would be wonderful, if the entire choir would remain absolutely silent. And perhaps that would have been very effective: such a silent protest.”*<sup>55</sup>

The festival was allowed to be televised because even at this point in time, the Soviets still believed that communism was the only thing being projected because of the limitations that were impeded on the event. Despite the struggles of censorship, Latvians were able to gather together to celebrate their culture and to push forward towards change. With the event being televised, the remaining citizens of the country were able to tune in and contribute their national support alongside their fellow neighbors.

Attached you will find the score for, “Saule, Pērķons, Daugava” a piece written by composer Martiņš Brauns.<sup>56</sup> I had the blessing of being able to conduct this work on my junior recital. The following quote is an excerpt from the program notes I wrote for this piece. To listen to both the 1990 festival recording, as well as my recital performance, please play track No. 5 and 6.

*“Martiņš Brauns was born on September 17, 1951 in Riga, Latvia. As a well-known composer and musician, Brauns has composed many significant choral works. Saule, Pērķons, Daugava (The Sun, Thunder, Daugava) is by far his most influential piece and a greatly treasured part of Latvian culture. This*

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<sup>55</sup> Carpenter, p. 106.

<sup>56</sup> Brauns, Martiņš. *Saule, Pērķons, Daugava*. Musica Baltica, 2003.



*work has become an iconic piece performed at the Latvian Song and Dance Festival, which occurs every five years in Riga. This festival is one of the largest amateur choral events in the world and is a beautiful representation of Latvian culture. With more than 30,000 musicians and dancers in participation, the final concert generally contains a choir of more than 10,000 singers dressed in traditional attire. Composed in 1988, the text of the piece was taken from a play titled Dangava by Latvian poet, Rainis.”*











## Part 4: Freedom & the Road Ahead

On August 21, 1991, Latvia officially declared its independence from the Soviet Union. This extraordinary day was celebrated across the country, as well as around the world. Long awaited headlines affirmed the remarkable news. Newspapers such as the *Washington Post* printed, “LATVIA DECLARES INDEPENDENCE,” in bold letters. A powerful sense of energy was tangible for people everywhere as one by one, all three Baltic States won their well-deserved freedom. For Latvia, this moment in history will always be remembered. As discussed earlier, this period of celebration was preceded by difficult years of protest and non-violent resistance. The unrelenting force behind singing demonstrations and barricades of over 50,000 people proved to be monumental assets that finally led to freedom.

After countless wars and tiresome years of occupation, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was time to rebuild their way of life. Although a large amount of cultural tradition remarkably survived during Soviet occupation, for the first time in over fifty years, Latvians felt the need to rediscover who they were in light of freedom. This interesting realization is one that deserves attention when looking at any aspect of post-Soviet Latvia. As a nation that was forced to live in constant fear, everything was influenced by the weight of oppression. However, for Latvians who had the privilege living into the age of independence or being born after the difficult years, many facets of life had to be reconstructed. Now in the context of an independent nation, Latvians finally had the opportunity to make music in complete freedom.

As we begin to reach the end of this journey, I would like to spend some time sharing about my personal experience with the music of Latvia. I have had the privilege of living in this remarkable country for a total of eight months over the course of three consecutive summers. My first exposure was during the summer of 2016 when I was sent by my college to help teach music in various camps that would be taking place across the country. I found it very helpful that during this time, I was working with an organization that placed me on a team with four other college students.<sup>57</sup> My life was powerfully impacted by living alongside these wonderful individuals for a total of ten weeks. Our responsibilities included preparing for camps, teaching workshops, and most importantly, building meaningful relationships with the Latvian students that we encountered.

There will never be enough words to sufficiently express my thankfulness to the handful of Latvian students who changed my life that summer. These individuals have truly become some of my closest friends, and the power of technology has granted each of us the opportunity to stay in contact regardless of the ocean that lies between the places we call home. For me, the lives that have been lived by these young people are powerful testimonies of the resilience that runs through the veins of every Latvian. From rural farm villages like Vaiņode, to even small cities such as Liepāja, many of these students have faced hardship in their lives. Growing up in a nation of only two million people is not easy, especially when that culture is still dealing with the aftermath of hundreds of years of

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<sup>57</sup> The team was comprised of a total of five people: four Americans and one Latvian



occupation. However, regardless of these difficulties, I have personally witnessed the beautiful characteristics that still make this culture unique.<sup>58</sup>

As an American entering into a new country for the first time, the people I met graciously accepted me for who I was. Although many Latvians have a tough exterior, the trueness of their core is one of humility and warmth. I count it as a blessing to experience this reality everyday as I keep in contact with those who I consider as family.

In the six music camps at which I taught during the summers of 2016 and 2017, I learned firsthand the ways that music is inherently ingrained within the culture. Although beginning students usually struggled with learning chords on an acoustic guitar or piano, not one found it difficult to sing. In multiple settings, I had the privilege of conducting a number of pop song arrangements with a choir that was comprised of all the students at camps. I will never forget the first time I stood in front of a choir of forty Latvian teenagers... the purity and richness of their voices was remarkable. Even though many of these students did not consider themselves “choral musicians,” a few people took the time to explain to me the following: singing has been a part of the culture for so long that they believe that every Latvian has the ability to sing well, whether they like it or not. This experience was the first time I realized how important music is to the country of Latvia.

The level of talent did not waver even as I worked closely with a church choir in Vainode, a small village with a population of just under 2,000 people. In this community, I

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• For pictures, see Fig. 5 in the appendix

directed the only church choir, which depending on the Sunday, was made up of about ten to fifteen members. The age range of this group varied from people in their early twenties, to older men and women who had lived through the Soviet era. It was a humbling experience to stand in front of these individuals for the first time as a nineteen year old during the summer of 2016. As soon as these men and women began to sing, I quickly realized that the language barrier would prove not to be a barrier after all. The energy of their voices and joy in their eyes, communicated to me that everyone in that room was solely there to make music as an offering to their Lord. As long as I was willing to do the same, I would be accepted.

What struck me about working with the church choir in Vaiņode, was not the vocal technique that was inherently ingrained in many of the singers, but rather the sense of fulfillment that singing seemed to bring to these beautiful people. Even in the midst of various mistakes, there was an apparent sense of satisfaction after the choir sang. This feeling was tangible in both the singers, but also in the congregation, who greatly appreciated the gift of song as a token of tradition.

During the summer of 2018, I returned to Latvia with the primary purpose of doing field research for this paper. I knew very well that the summer would be filled with important festivities celebrating Latvia's 100 year anniversary as a country. However, what drew me back more than anything was the 2018 national Song and Dance Festival that would be taking place in Riga during the first week of July. Ever since my internship in 2016, I had become familiar with stories of the legendary festivals that attracted thousands of people from all over the world. Baiba Čīma, a single Christian woman in her early thirties,

has become a wonderful mentor of mine, and answered many of my questions regarding the festival. As someone who has had the opportunity of performing in three major song festivals, Baiba had lots of stories to share with me regarding these events. She provided wonderful insight that helped me begin to understand why this epic gathering means so much to Latvians.

As I prepared for my 2018 summer in Latvia, I knew that I would have to plan accordingly to be able to purchase tickets for the festival. Specifically, for this paper, I had desperately wanted to have the opportunity to witness the final concert of the festival which is the famous gathering of the mass choir made up of thousands of singers. Of course given the vast amount of Latvian pride in the age of freedom, as well as the 100 year anniversary celebration, the 2018 festival was predicting an astronomical attendance and only a set amount of tickets would be available for online purchase. Baiba, as well as other Latvians, warned me that seats for the final concert would sell out in less than a day. I was amazed, “So, you’re telling me that 70,000 tickets will be gone in a matter of hours?” “Yes, without a doubt, they will be gone,” Baiba assured me. Over an online video call, she told me stories of how old women were notorious for standing in ticket lines twenty-four hours ahead of time on cold March days to guarantee a few seats for the festival. “They’re tough!” she said. “If they made it through the Soviet times, they can survive a little bit of cold weather,” she laughed...her eyes were filled with joy.

As I completed my coursework for the 2017/2018 academic year at Wheaton, Baiba and I were planning on trying our best to acquire tickets for the festival, and specifically for the final concert. We kept in touch about the designated day the tickets would go on sale,

but somehow we miscommunicated and were three days late to try to make the online purchase. When I realized we had gone wrong, I logged on to the main ticket website, and to my astonishment, every single ticket for the final concert had been sold. Approximately 70,000 tickets were purchased in less than 24 hours, and all of Latvia had apparently been waiting in line and by their computers the minute they went on sale. It was an interesting moment of panic and amusement as I messaged Baiba to see if anything could be done.

I clearly remember sitting there in astonishment as I tried to process the fact that 70,000 tickets were sold in under a day. Even though I was hoping my plans for attending the festival would still be possible, I was amazed at how a celebration of song and dance was cherished so deeply by an entire country. I wish I could have witnessed those lines and spoken to some of those men and woman as to why they stood there waiting for hours. It would have been a blessing to look into their eyes and hear their stories.

Even without a ticket to the final concert, I decided to return to Latvia to try to gather as much research as possible. Spending time with the people I have drawn close to over the years, was also a priority to me, and so I decided to make the best out of the trip. During my six week stay, I lived in Vaiņode with Baiba. Both of us slept on fold out couch in the upstairs part of the church, cooked potatoes, and traveled to Liepāja and Riga when we could. It was a beautiful and simple life. During this time she told me more stories about the festivals, and assured me that somehow we would find a way to the final concert.

The duration of the festival lasted from June 30<sup>th</sup> to July 8<sup>th</sup>. During this time, the streets of Riga were filled with Latvians dressed in their traditional singing and dancing

attire.<sup>59</sup> As tradition goes, the celebration began with a parade through the streets of Riga. There, people of all ages are dressed in their festival clothes, and made their way through the city. Some people danced in organized groups and others just walked. I was able to live stream this event from Vainode since I was not able to make it to Riga that day. Each town of Latvia was represented by someone waving their town's flag in front of groups of people holding flowers and marching. As the parade journeyed on, Baiba and I noticed that the towns were listed alphabetically, so we patiently waited until the end when Vainode's flag passed by. Some of the girls we knew from the town proudly danced their way through the streets. They zoomed in on familiar faces of the men and women we have grown to love, and we leapt up and shouted from the kitchen table in excitement. Baiba yelling in Latvian, and me in English. It was a wonderful moment.

Even without a ticket to the final concert, I went to Riga a few days later to watch the free concerts that took place in the public parks. Here, vendors sold authentic food and traditional clothing, as well as many other items as folk music sounded through the air. It was a great opportunity to listen to so many diverse folk ensembles. I spent a few days with a wonderful friend of mine, Klāvs Vadonis and his cousin. Klāvs helped with translation, and directing short cuts through Riga.

A day before the final concert, Baiba was able to obtain two tickets from a friend of a friend. For weeks we had been asking many people if they had extra tickets, and the

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• For pictures, see Fig. 6 in the appendix

Lord truly provided just in time. The following day, Baiba met me at the city center and we traveled together on public transport a few miles outside of Riga to reach the concert venue.<sup>60</sup>

When we reached the concert park, the streets were packed with people in traditional clothing, and Latvian flags hung from every lamppost. Baiba grabbed my hand as we made our way through the crowd. As I looked around, I saw that every woman was wearing a handmade flower crown, a symbol of tradition and beauty.

Since the trolley had dropped us off at the edge of the park, Baiba and I made our way towards the stadium and joined the massive crowd moving in the same direction. I was struck by how quiet the area was, regardless of the thousands of people walking on the street, there seemed to be a respectful silence that hushed the many voices. People were preparing themselves for what was about to come.<sup>61</sup>

We made it into the stadium and my heart began to race when I saw the tens of thousands of people who were already seated, waiting for the concert to begin. Baiba and I found our seats, and joined the crowd. There was a huge smile on her face as we looked around the stadium. I could tell in that moment, she was very proud to be Latvian.

The concert began at eight that evening, and choir members slowly made their way to the stage. A total of 16,500 singers were present, as well a few thousand dancers during

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<sup>60</sup> Latvia has built an entire park for the final concert of the festival. The venue itself is an outdoor stadium that can hold over 100,000 people.

<sup>61</sup>

• For pictures, see Fig. 7 in the appendix

various parts of the program. The energy in the air was indescribable, as I sat there listening to over 100,000 Latvians in the choir and audience sing with passion. The concert lasted four hours and demonstrated a wide variety of traditional music ranging from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to more contemporary works. The concert itself was so impactful, that I find it difficult to re-tell all of the details. In order to fully understand what it means to be Latvian, one must experience this event.

Witnessing the final concert of the 2018 Latvian Song and Dance Festival was a remarkable demonstration of unity and nationalism. I am so thankful that I was able to partake in this experience. In every moment that evening, I felt the deep joy those thousands of people had for their country. Never in my life, have I experienced something that beautiful, and for that, I will forever be thankful.

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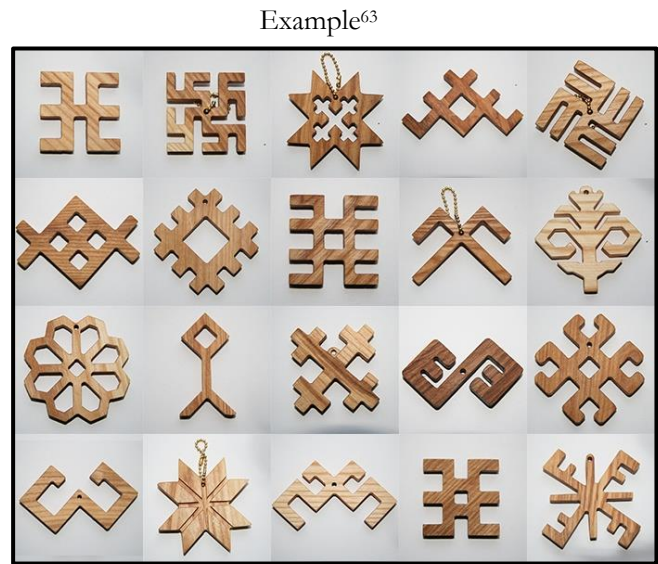
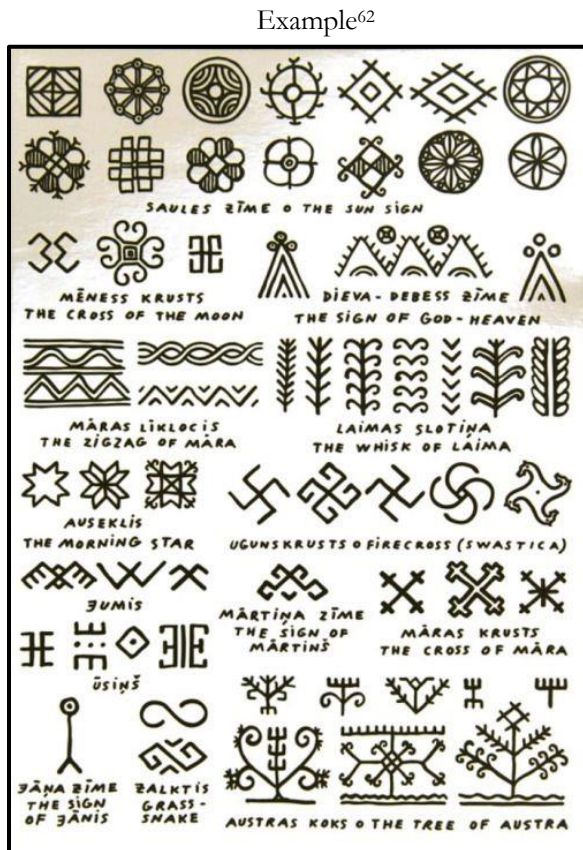
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# Appendix:

Figure 1:

The following are examples of traditional pagan symbols that are still found in Latvia today.



<sup>62</sup> “Symbols and Signs from Latvian Folklore/Mythology.” <https://www.pinterest.com/Pin/95138610857431458/>.

<sup>63</sup> “Traditional Latvian Symbols.” <https://www.dreamstime.com/Latvian-Historical-Signs-Used-Clothing-Jewelry-Pottery-Etc-Latvian-Signs-image102502740>.

<sup>64</sup> I purchased this hat in Riga this past summer and it is an example of how Latvians often use these symbols to create various patterns for fabrics. As a Christian I do not support the underlying origin of the symbols, rather I celebrate the pattern as a design that represents the country.

**Figure 2:**

During the 2018 Song and Dance Festival in Riga, I had the opportunity to hear many folk ensembles that used indigenous instruments, here are some pictures:



For more information about kokles, please visit the following website:

<http://www.dzitari.lv/par-kokli.php?lng=3>

**Figure 3: Dancing, add photos**

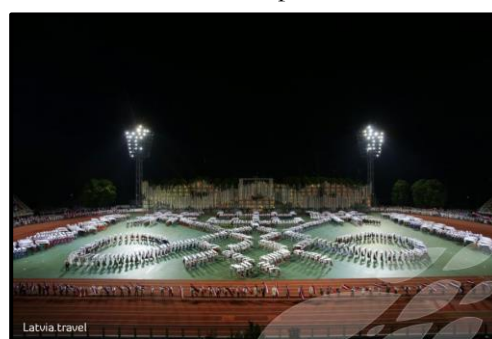
As mentioned in the paper, dancing is a huge part of Latvian culture. Here are some pictures, also to view a spectacular performance, please visit the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07n-I71VfgE>

Example<sup>65</sup>



Example<sup>66</sup>



<sup>65</sup> XXVI Latvian Nationwide Song and XI Dance Celebration. [hoteledwards.lv/xxvi-latvian](http://hoteledwards.lv/xxvi-latvian).

<sup>66</sup> Song and Dance Celebration in Latvia. [www.latvia.travel/en/article/song-and-dance-celebration](http://www.latvia.travel/en/article/song-and-dance-celebration).

**Figure 4:**

During my time in Vainode this summer, Baiba and I visited the largest Soviet military base that was built in Latvia. This base was only a ten minute drive from where we were staying. Baiba has lived in Vainode for many years, and explained to me that over 10,000 Soviet soldiers were stationed at this particular location. For the people living in Vainode, having so many Soviet soldiers so close by, created a constant state of fear.

In the following pictures that I took that day, you can see the bunkers which housed the military supplies. If you notice, the tops of the bunkers were/are covered in grass to hide them from planes flying above.



Figure 5:

Summer 2016



Summer 2017



↑ Baiba



Normunds and Enija



Klāvs



**Figure 6:**

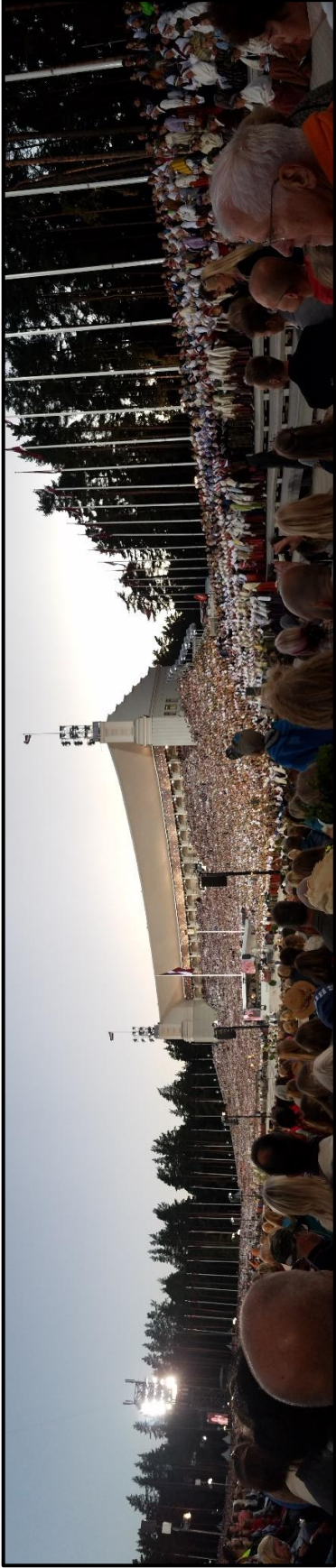
Here you can see traditional Latvian costumes for folk dancing. All of these girls are from Vainode, and I have had the blessing of getting to know most of them!



**Figure 7:**

Here are some photos from the final concert of the 2018 Song and Dance Festival





"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.'"

Isaiah 65:1