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Composition School, Tradition or a Remarkable Personality? Some Remarks on Jāzeps Vītols' Creative and Pedagogical Work in the frame of 20th Century European Music

Kompozicinė mokykla, tradicija ar ryški asmenybė? Jāzepo Vitolio kūrybos ir pedagogikos aspektai XX a. Europos muzikos kontekste

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Abstract

According to Latvian music historiography, the Latvian composer Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948) was one of the first truly universal masters of Latvian origin whose creative work raised almost all of the main genres to a level of classic perfection and faultless artistry. He is the intellectual father of several generations of composers and the founder of the Latvian Academy of Music. Vītols' had a significant role in the development of Latvian professional music culture. Additionally, not only in St. Petersburg but also in Riga, he was a professor of composition and music theory not only for Latvian, but also other European composers. He was a teacher for many Estonian, Lithuanian, Polish, German and foreign composers and music theorists. What kind of long-term influence did Vītols have in the past, on the creative work of Latvian composers? This issue will be the focus of this article. It is hoped that this analysis will provoke a fruitful exchange of views about the topic of the compositional school in different aspects.

Keywords: Jāzeps Vītols, compositional school, personality, tradition.

Anotacija

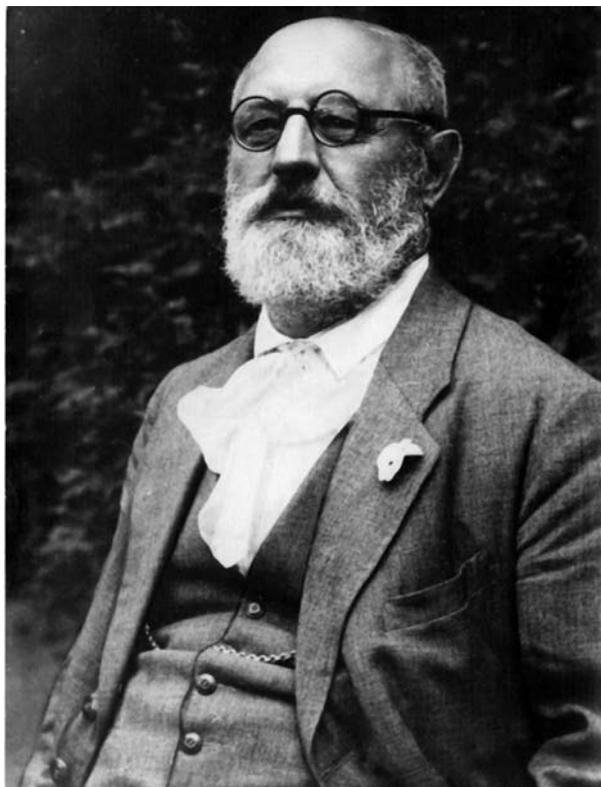
Remiantis Latvijos muzikos istoriografija, kompozitorius Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948) – pirmasis tikrai universalus latvių muzikas profesionalas, kurio darbai visus latvių muzikos žanrus pakėlė į aukštesnį klasikinio meistriškumo ir neabejotino meniškumo lygmenį. Jis išugdė keletą kompozitorių kartų, ikūrė Latvijos muzikos akademiją. J. Vītols atliko svarbų vaidmenį puoselėjant profesionaliąją Latvijos muzikinę kultūrą. Be to, jis dėstė kompoziciją ir muzikos teoriją ne tik Rygoje, bet ir Sankt Peterburge, ne tik latvių, bet ir kitų Rytų Europos šalių muzikos studentams, išugdė daugybę estų, latvių, lenkų, vokiečių ir kitų tautų kompozitorių bei muzikos teoretikų. Šio straipsnio pagrindinis tikslas yra atskleisti, kokią įtaką ilgainiui turėjo J. Vītols latvių kompozitorių kūrybai. Tikimasi, kad ši analizė paskatins pasidalinti nuomonėmis apie skirtingus šios kompozicinės mokyklos aspektus.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Jāzeps Vītols, kompozicinė mokykla, asmenybė, tradicija.

This article focuses on a significant personality in Latvian and European 20th century music history, Latvian composer Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948). His role and impact on music culture was not just in the context of one country's music history. Essentially, it covers a range of issues in European music history overall. According to Latvian music historiography, Vītols was one of the first truly universal masters of Latvian origin whose creative work raised almost all of the main genres to a level of classic perfection and faultless artistry. He is the intellectual father of several generations of composers and founder of the Latvian Academy of Music.¹ In turn, in the last century, some of his musical works have become Latvian national symbols, especially with regards to the national Song

Festival tradition.² How might it be possible to define the creative contribution of Vītols the composer to the leading aesthetic opinions and characteristic stylistic contexts that were dominant in Europe during his lifetime? What kind academic music trend did Vītols represent as a composer and, especially, a composition teacher with notable international renown? What kind of long-term influence did Vītols on have the creative works of composers of varied countries? While searching for an answer to this question, the author first identifies three aspects.

Firstly, a view of Jāzeps Vītols' aesthetic opinions and stylistic orientation in music. In addition to Vītols, one of the trends of 19th century romanticism stands out – in Latvian music history, it can conclusively be



Jāzeps Vītols in the 1920s. From Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music Library Electronic Catalogue (Database of Pictures, Cipher No LF8)

described as a classic academicism in the frames of the aesthetics of romanticism. Vītols is not considered to truly be one of the pure 19th century romanticists – this is confirmed by the expressive elasticity of musical form and a balanced dramaturgy. In contrast with a romantic worldview, which is often characterised by a black and white view and an emotional tension reaching an emotionally raging and fatal incandescence, Vītols chose a reserved emotionality. The basis for this conclusion can be found in critiques of Vītols' music during his time in St. Petersburg, 1880–1918. These critiques are notable for Vītols' affinity with, for example, the music of Johannes Brahms and Alexander Glazunov. On the other hand, he was always very reserved or critical towards the music of Alexander Scriabin, Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss. The similarities of the Latvian composer's views with the expressed viewpoints in the well-known publication *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (*The Beautiful in Music*), outlined by the well-known 19th century music critic and publicist Eduard Hanslick (Hanslick 1854).

Secondly, it is interesting to note, the Latvian composer's relationship with his personally familiar 19th century romanticism style tendencies and the quickly developing aesthetics of modernism at the

beginning of the 20th century. Despite Vītols' cautious views on varied new trends in the stylistic panorama in music at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, the composer reflects the aesthetics and 21 musical language elements of expressionism and impressionism in an individualized manner in his creative work. This allows us to conclude that Vītols should be considered not only as a creator of music that is academically formally correct and, in the stylistic sense, as someone who is frozen in time – he was a refined interpreter of the new trends that were characteristic of his era.

Thirdly, when attempting to define the place and role of the individual style of Vītols' music in European music history at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. It might be observed that the manner of classic artistic expression, that Vītols represents is nowadays, often considered a background element of his era. These conditions answer the question why Vītols' music, when evaluating it in the broader context of the historical experience of European music, is not immediately recognizable. The style and aesthetics represented by Vītols in music are not able to objectively overcome or influence the inertia of the perception and the canons, which exist in numerous research papers and in various languages, and are mainly centred on the analysis of diverse aspects of modernism. In the context of his time, Vītols' music was not as innovative or as provocative to listeners as, for example, new works by Antonín Dvořák, Edvard Grieg, Jean Sibelius or Carl Nielsen. Herein lays the answer to the question why Vītols' music, when evaluating it in the context of a broader European musical history experience, is not present in texts (books, articles etc.). Still, there is a reason to predict that active research into Vītols' creative work and aesthetic ideas will produce new conclusions regarding Vītols as a distinguished European classicist.³

Summarizing the above, in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century, Vītols represented one tendency in academic music, which cultivated classical traditions in a the romantic style framework. This tendency reflected the so-called New Russian School or St. Petersburg composers' group under the leadership of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, aesthetic ideas and it is a very interesting phenomenon in European music history. In a number of his musical works, Vītols represents this stylistic tendency very vividly. Additionally, he was not only a professor of composition and composition theory in St. Petersburg but also in Riga - not only for Latvians, but also for other European composers.

He was a teacher not just for those of Latvian descent or born in Latvia, but also for many Estonian, Lithuanian, Polish, Finnish, German and other composers and music theorists – he taught tens, if not hundreds, of pupils.⁴ Vītols' foreign students of composition included prominent Russian composers Nikolay Myaskovsky and Sergei Prokofiev. Prokofiev studied music theory disciplines as a speciality with Vītols in St. Petersburg from 1904 until 1909, and Myaskovsky similarly studied with Vītols from 1906 until 1911.

Also, the composer and famous theorist of Armenian descent (also related to Georgian musical culture) Sarkis Barhudarian (1887–1973) studied composition as a speciality with Vītols at the St. Petersburg conservatory from 1909 until 1915. The outstanding American music theorist Joseph Schillinger (1895–1943), born to a Jewish family in Kharkiv, in the former Russian Empire, studied special harmony and composition as a speciality with Vītols in St. Petersburg from 1912 until 1917. Victor Babin (1908, Moscow – 1972, Cleveland, USA), another familiar composer of Russian-Jewish descent, studied composition with Vītols at the Latvian Conservatory, in Riga from 1922 until 1928, after which he went to Germany and, before the start of World War II, to the USA. The well-known Estonian composer Juhan Aavik (1884–1982) studied some composition disciplines with Vītols in St. Petersburg from 1907 until 1911.⁵ Well-known Lithuanian composers and musicians also studied with Vītols. For instance, Vladas Jakubėnas – composition with Vītols in Riga from 1924 until 1928,⁶ Stasys Vainiūnas – piano and later composition with Vītols at the Latvian Conservatory from 1923 until 1934.⁷

These facts show that, in the first half of the 20th century, Vītols in both St. Petersburg and Riga became a composition teacher with a notable international reputation. The question remains – what kind of specific method of composition or compositional school did Vītols represent and realise in practice? To determine a starting point for a response, I suggest one reviews some of Vītols' pupils' memoirs about the teacher.

In 1933, when Vītols' seventieth birthday was celebrated, Russian composer Glazunov from Paris sent a letter with such greetings:

We lived with Vitole for almost 35 years in Russia. The time has passed very quickly. Thanks to his sincerity and great tact, we had never been in dispute. Vitole always created a special atmosphere in society. (...) Please, accept, my friend, the best greetings! Live a lot of years for you! Continue to create for us the everlasting art and give honour for the homeland! (Glazunovs 1933: 265, 266)

The Lithuanian composer Jakubėnas sent a greeting letter to Riga with the following words:

Vītols played a great role in the development of Lithuanian music. He provided a strong foundation for many of today's Lithuanian musicians. I consider my time studying with him a very happy stage in my musical development. This method of learning in Riga, will not be easily found elsewhere today. It is a really strict and serious school, and for me it was a systematic development of my musical awareness. [...] Therefore, after my studies in Germany, one thing for me is clear now: Modernism has led to disorganization in music pedagogy, nowadays there are many modern symphony authors, who manage the new techniques of composition. However, they do not have any clarity on proper voice motion in the musical score (Jakubėnas 1933: 272).

Ten years later, in 1943, when Vītols' eightieth birthday was celebrated in Riga, one letter of greeting was sent from Paris, from the conductor, composer and music theorist Nikolay Tcherepnin. Tcherepnin, like Vītols, was a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, and, up to 1917, worked in the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Between the two world wars, Tcherepnin and Vītols were members of the Mitrofan Belyaev publishing house council outside of Russia. In his greeting letter, Tcherepnin wrote:

Vītols was an excellent teacher. Thanks to his genius, Josif Ivanovich quickly won an honorary position in the professorship, and he was really respected and loved by many of his colleagues and pupils. He was very demanding of himself and of his students. He ordered his students to work a lot and he was rigid, like Rimsky-Korsakov. However, he never erased 'the life of the spirit' in his pupils. (Čerepnins 1944: 179–180)

Estonian composer Juhan Aavik also sent a greeting from Tallinn in 1943, and wrote the following sentences:

Vītols was a strict teacher, but his tasks were clear and understandable, they were easy to realize. I remember that he never forced on us his personal tastes, he made it possible to create music according to one's inner convictions. He only gave general and objective corrections. (...) We, the Estonian music community, are united with the Latvian musicians and express our deep gratitude to Jāzeps Vītols for his great life's work, which has international importance and impact. We are grateful to him for the great interest and love for Estonian music, for his noble teaching work, which influenced many Estonian musicians. (Āviks 1944: 198)

In the 1970s, Lithuanian composer Vainiūnas' reminiscences were published in one of Riga's newspapers, where he reached the following conclusion:

Though professor Vītols was strict and demanding, he fought for the true and classical ideals in music.⁸

Therefore, if we review the reminiscences of Vītols' contemporaries and pupils, then we regularly identify key words such as 'the classic ideal', 'classic values', 'strict discipline', etc. In turn, if we recall that Vītols represents the St. Petersburg academic compositional and music theory school, then it is perfectly natural that his ideals in music are associated with classical harmony, polyphony and the study of musical form. It was also the basis for his unique training method for composition. It is symbolic that Jāzeps Vītols' final student, Latvian composer and critic in exile Longīns Apkalns (1923–1999) contains a description of the basic principles of Vītols compositional training in his memoirs written after WWII. Apkalns wrote the following:

It was a mechanical harmonisation technique, which had been brought to absolute perfection. In discussions with the other students in Vītols' composition class, we concluded that in such a way one could learn the basics of harmony and composition almost like algebra and geometry. Vītols' basic model of exercise was the 'modulation prelude' with square musical structures. At the start point, several beats and cadences were written. *Clear beats* needed to be *filled in* with the *correct* harmonies and modulations. In this process, the piece of music could be developed with a hundred or more cycle beats. [...] Vītols pointed out in his memoirs – he never wanted to teach his students about aesthetic issues. His method was based on the thesis that it is not impossible to teach composition of music. It is possible to teach composition technique only in the general sense. And it was also his method. (Apkalns 1999: 177)

Based on the memoirs of many of Vītols' contemporaries, it is possible to conclude the following. The so-called 'modulation prelude' model in musicological literature is known as one of the basic principles, which was created by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov and described in his study on harmony (Римский-Корсаков 1886). However, over time Vītols managed to create his own unique version for this principle and realized it in pedagogical practice. In light of the above, the recognition of this fact allows one to make the following conclusions.

Fundamentally, it is a question of what is really meant by the concept of the 'composition school'. Traditionally in music and other art history, it is the notion of the iteration of specific compositional principles in the next generations. Also, it includes continuing specific aesthetic ideas. However, if we look at Vītols' case, we can't confirm many aspects of compliance with the general concept. It is a great paradox. In Latvian musical history, there is no composer, nor any creative work by any of Vītols' pupils

that confirms a direct continuation of his compositional principles and aesthetic ideas. None of Vītols pupils in other countries has been a clear follower of the Latvian composer and teacher. However, some pupils developed contrary to expectations. For example, Vītols was a great master of refined musical miniatures. However, one of his pupils in Latvia was Jānis Ivanovs – one of the most outstanding composers of symphonic music in 20th century European music history. Also, Lithuanian composer Jakubėnas became a composer with a vivid individual style and he represented the tendency of the so-called moderate modernism.

Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the notion 'compositional school' with regards to the pedagogical work of Vītols. In his practice, it was a system of the basic principles of classical composition and the teaching of their individualized versions. Thus, it is possible to conclude that Vītols represented the universal classic composition teaching method both in St. Petersburg and in Riga. It was not the 'compositional school' as a concept of general perception, but it was an opportunity to learn basic principles of classical composition under the direction of a very talented teacher. It is reasonable to ask an interesting question for further research: how to explain such a paradox - the classical composition principles, acquired when studying with Vītols, allowed many composers to become radical or moderate modernists in their creative activity later in the 20th century. Perhaps, the music and composition theory studies with Vītols stimulated the excellent American music theorist Joseph Schillinger to develop his famous original composition theory system, based on the interpretation of mathematical models? And maybe, when researching 20th century music history, there is not enough analysis of the impact of the theory of classical composition on several modernist tendencies and their interactions?

In this context, perhaps, there has not been enough investigation of Vītols' major role in the musical history of Northern and Central Europe in the first half of the 20th century. For example, nowadays there are many excellent research papers about one great composition teacher in Western Europe at that time, and by this I mean the legendary teacher Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979), who lived and worked in Paris. However, at the same time, in our northern European latitudes, there is an equal *peer in music pedagogy*, and it was Jāzeps Vītols. As one of the greatest music teachers in 20th century European music history, Vītols and his creative work is still open for further study.

References

- ¹ Vītols from St. Petersburg (conservatory pedagogue from 1886, professor from 1901) returned to Latvia, in Riga in 1918, shortly before the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia. In August 1919, the Government of the Republic of Latvia instructed Vītols to establish Conservatoire in Riga. Vītols from 1919 to 1944 (included a short break) was the rector of the Conservatoire of Latvia and head of the composition studies.
 - ² The Latvian Songs Festival has occurred regularly since 1873 and its tradition is an important part of Latvian history and national culture both present and past. Vītols became involved in the festival processes (as participant and organizer) from the Third Festival in 1888, until the Ninth Festival in 1938. See, for example, Liepiņa Ilze, *Jāzeps Vītols un Dziesmu svētku tradīcija [Jāzeps Vītols and the Tradition of Latvian Song Festivals]*, Rīga: Jāzepa Vītola Latvijas Mūzikas akadēmija, p. 52–69.
 - ³ More about Vītols personality see the article by Klotiņš 2013.
 - ⁴ According to Latvian musicologist Oļģerts Grāvītis (1926–2015) collected information, Jāzeps Vītols taught composition as a speciality and harmony and musical form disciplines for dozens of composers from different countries in St. Petersburg and for 135 composers in Riga. He also taught harmony and musical form disciplines for several hundred musicians from different countries (Grāvītis 1999: 18).
 - ⁵ Information is based off the following sources: *Музыкальная энциклопедия* (in Russian, *Musical Encyclopaedia*), Moscow, Sovetskaya Encyklopedia 1973–1978; Brodsky Warren, Joseph Schillinger (1895–1943): Music Science Promethean, in: *American Music*, Vol. 21, No. 1, University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 45–73; Babin, Victor <https://case.edu/ech/articles/b/babin-victor> [last checked 2018 09 18].
 - ⁶ <http://www.mic.lt/lt/baze/klasikine-siuolaikine/kompozitoriai/jakubenas/#bio> [last checked 2018 09 18].
 - ⁷ <http://www.ipmc-lt.com/vainiunas-about> [last checked 2018 09 18].
 - ⁸ From an interview with Stasys Vainiūnas. Please, see: Kriķis Centis. Arī manas dzīves daļa. Rīga, *Literatūra un Māksla*, 1979, May 5.
- 70th birthday], in: *Mūzikas apskats [Musical Review]*, Rīga, 1933, No. 9, p. 262–266.
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- Klotiņš Arnolds, Jāzeps Vītols kā mūzikas fundamentālists un universālists [Jāzeps Vītols as a Fundamentalist and Universalist of Music], in: *Music in Latvia*, 2013, <http://www.lmic.lv/core.php?pageId=754?pageId=754&id=26793&&subPageId=756&action=showSubPage> [last checked 2018 09 18].
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Santrauka

Remiantis Latvijos muzikos istoriografija, kompozitorius Jāzepas Vītols (1863–1948) – pirmasis tikrai universalus latvių kilmės muzikos profesionalas, kurio darbai visus latvių muzikos žanrus pakėlė į aukštesnį klasikinio meistriškumo ir neabejotino meniškumo lygmenį. Jis išugdė keletą kompozitorių kartų, įkūrė Latvijos muzikos akademiją. J. Vītols atliko svarbų vaidmenį puoselėjant profesionaliąją Latvijos muzikinę kultūrą. Per pastarąjį šimtmetį kai kurie šio kompozitoriaus kūriniai, ypač susiję su dainų šventės tradicija, tapo nacionaliniais latvių kultūros simboliais. Visgi įdomu panagrinėti, ar yra kitų aspektų, kurie būtų įdomūs ne tik tautos kultūrinės mitologijos, bet ir platesniame, pasaulio muzikos kontekste. Latvijos muzikos istorijos tyrinėtojai teigia, kad tokių aspektų yra. XIX a. II pusėje–XX a. pradžioje J. Vītols atstovavo akademinės muzikos srovei, derinančiai klasikines tradicijas ir romantinių stilių. Ši srovė, vadinama Naująja rusų mokykla, įkūnijo Sankt Peterburgo kompozitorių grupės, kuriai 1844–1908 m. vadovavo Nikolajus Rimskis-Korsakovas, estetinius idealus. Tai buvo labai įdomus reiškinys Europos muzikos istorijoje. Kai kuriuose J. Vītolio darbuose ypač ryškiai atsiskleidžia ši stilistinė tendencija. Eidamas kompozicijos ir muzikos teorijos profesoriaus pareigas ne tik Sankt Peterburge, bet ir Rygoje, jis dėstė ne tik latvių, bet ir kitų Rytų

Europos šalių muzikos studentams, išugdė daugybę estų, latvių, lenkų, vokiečių ir kitų tautų kompozitorių bei muzikos teoretikų. Tarp jų minėtinas estų kompozitorius Juhanas Aavikas (1882–1982), lietuvių kompozitoriai Vladas Jakubėnas (1904–1976) ir Stasys Vainiūnas (1909–1982), rusų kompozitoriai Nikolajus Miaskovskis (1880–1950) ir Sergejus Prokofjevas (1891–1953), armėnų kilmės kompozitorius ir garsus teoretikas (taip pat susijęs su gruzinų muzikine kultūra) Sarkis Barhudarianas (1887–1973), įžymus amerikiečių muzikos teoretikas (gimęs buvusioje Rusijos imperijos teritorijoje, Charkove) Josephas Schillingeris (1895–1943) bei daugelis kitų. Pagrindinis šio straipsnio tikslas – atskleisti, kokią įtaką ilgainiui turėjo J. Vītolis latvių kompozitorių kūrybai.

Straipsnyje išsakoma būtinybė patikslinti „kompozicinės mokyklos“ sąvoką kalbant apie J. Vītolio pedagoginę veiklą. Remdamasis pagrindinių klasikinės kompozicijos principų sistema, pedagogas pritaikydavo juos kiekvienam individualiam atvejui. Galima teigti, kad J. Vītolis tiek Sankt Peterburge, tiek Rygoje naudojo universalios klasikinės kompozicijos mokymo metodiką (pagrįsta adaptuotu N. Rimskio-Korsakovo vadinamuoju „moduliacijos preliudo“ modeliu). Tai nebuvo „kompozicinė mokykla“ bendraja

prasme, bet veikiau galimybė išmokti pagrindinių klasikinės kompozicijos principų vadovaujant labai talentingam pedagogui. Prasminga kelti klausimą tolesniems tyrinėjimams: kaip paaiškinti paradoksą, kad daugelis kompozitorių, pas J. Vītoli įgiję klasikinės kompozicijos pagrindus, XX a. pasuko radikalaus arba saikingo modernizmo keliu? Galbūt muzikos ir kompozicijos teorijos studijos pas J. Vītoli paskatino didįjį amerikiečių muzikos teoretiką Josephą Schillingerį sukurti savo garsiąją unikalų kompozicijos teorijos sistemą, pagrįstą matematinių modelių interpretacija? O galbūt XX a. muzikos istorijos studijose trūksta analizės apie klasikinės kompozicijos teorijos poveikį kai kurioms modernizmo tendencijoms bei jų tarpusavio sąveikai?

Šiame kontekste galima daryti prielaidą, kad svarbus J. Vītolio vaidmuo XX a. I pusės Šiaurės ir Vidurio Europos muzikos istorijoje nelabai įvertintas. Pavyzdžiui, šiandien parašyta daugybė puikių studijų apie vieną garsiausių Vakarų Europos kompozicijos pedagogų, legendinę Nadią Boulanger (1887–1979), gyvenusią ir dirbusią Paryžiuje. Tačiau labiau į šiaurę nutolusioje Europos dalyje yra jai lygiavertis didis muzikos pedagogas – Jāzeps Vītolis, kurio veikla ir muzikinė kūryba vis dar nėra pakankamai išstudijuota.