

Orchestra as a Marker of Fluid Community in Ēriks Ešenvalds's *Nordic Light* Multimedia Symphony

Abstract. In his multimedia symphony *Nordic Light* (2015), Latvian composer Ēriks Ešenvalds (b. 1977) utilizes video recordings of over twenty storytellers and folk performers from the circumpolar North to construct a narrative of the aurora borealis, accompanied by symphonic and choral performing forces. I argue that while the orchestra's function is seemingly limited to that of the accompanying "soundtrack," its presence on stage signals the formation of the complex framework of this composition's multimedia totality – one of the fluid (changing, transforming) community. Moreover, there are far-reaching ideological, sociological, aesthetic, and cultural implications of the composer's inclusion of the orchestra into the fabric of the piece.

Ešenvalds capitalizes on the iconic value of the symphony orchestra, as it symbolizes a long-lasting tradition of orchestral music and its performing body as a prestigious and aesthetically superior in the Western world cultural project. Moreover, for each performance, any given orchestra becomes a part of a larger evanescent community that includes other live and virtual performing forces – a choir, performers and storytellers projected on the screen, and the audience in a concert hall. On one hand, the pre-recorded performers and storytellers represent a fixed constituent element of Ešenvalds's compositional concept – one of the virtual global community affected by and narrating the experience of the Northern Lights. On the other hand, the orchestra, the choir, and the audience are the transient members of this community, bounded by a particular locality of the performance, as well as the length of the work.

Whereas Ešenvalds's practical objective for *Nordic Light* symphony may have been an expansion of his choral-driven creative locus to larger performing entities, by utilizing a multimedia strategy and engaging a global perspective on a unique atmospheric phenomenon, the composer creates an intricate multi-dimensional system of cultural dialogues inside and outside of his work.

Keywords: Ēriks Ešenvalds, *Nordic Light* multimedia symphony, Latvia, aurora borealis, symphony orchestra, fluid communities, fluid identities.

Latvian composer Ēriks Ešenvalds (b. 1977) has achieved international recognition for his predominantly choral works, often inspired by atmospheric phenomena causing optical illusions – moondogs, sundogs, and the aurora borealis or the Northern Lights. Among the latter is the multimedia symphony *Nordic Light* composed in 2015. In this composition, Ešenvalds utilizes over thirty video clips of twenty-three storytellers and folk performers from the Arctic Circle regions around the world – Alaska, Finland, Estonia, Norway, Iceland, Northern Russia, and Greenland, as well as from Estonia and Latvia – to construct a five-movement narrative of the aurora borealis, accompanied by a symphony orchestra, mixed choir, prerecorded sounds of nature, and a stunning slide show of the Northern Lights by Norwegian videographer Kjetil Skogli.

In this article, I focus on the role of the orchestra in *Nordic Light* arguing that while Ešenvalds seemingly uses the orchestra as an accompanying soundtrack to the unfolding on the screen narrative of the Northern Lights, there are far-reaching ideological, sociological, aesthetic, and cultural implications of the composer's inclusion of the orchestra into the fabric of the piece. I maintain that the performative element of the orchestra's stage presence signifies the formation of a unique framework of this composition's multimedia totality – one of a fluid (changing, transforming) community. In my discussion, I employ Na'amah Rason and Karen Ross' (2012) notion of *fluid identities* that "capture the flexible, overlapping, and at times conflicting identities" (494) to investigate a transient nature of the orchestra's presence in this Ešenvalds work. Contrary to the fixed virtual "membership" of the performers captured on the videos, both orchestra and choir¹ embody what Sumie Okazaki & Anne Saw (2011) observe as "the fluid movement of members into and out of the community" (154). I consider the multi-faceted identity of the orchestra in *Nordic Light* symphony a product of both its internal and external fluidity. The former has to do with an ongoing transformation of the symphonic genre in general, and the latter characterizes the performative idiosyncrasy of the Ešenvalds work that problematizes the orchestra's interaction with other performing resources.

Since its premiere in Riga, Latvia on April 27th, 2015, the work has been performed by two orchestras in Canada, one in the United States, and one in Germany. Sara Cohen (1995) maintains, "social practices

¹ A choral component of this work is left out of the discussion due to its own complexities, separate from those associated with the orchestra's presence. Latvia's rich choral tradition stems from both history of the development of professional music in Latvia, as well as its strong non-professional choral culture that had flourished throughout the twentieth-century as one of the means of Latvia's resistance to being "swallowed" by Soviet cultural propaganda. For additional discussion, see Vilhelms Mikhailovskis (1999) and Janis Kudiņš (2015).

involving consumption and production of music [also] draw people together and symbolize their sense of collectivity and place” (436). However, it is unarguable that individual and collective identities of each given orchestra – the Latvian, the German, the American, and the Canadian ones, as well as a shared identity of a community formed by each performing totality and its audience, may, and do differ from locality to locality, and perhaps, significantly so. Moreover, as an iconic agent of “high art,” the orchestra engenders a certain aesthetic and ideological tension with the rest of the performing forces, and especially, the native people of the circumpolar North filmed in their own environment, and whose presence is embedded in the score of the symphony – a formal professional music document – together with the soundscape of the wind and the sea waves (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. An excerpt from *Nordic Light Multimedia Symphony* score showing embedded video screenshots and soundscape of the wind. Copyright©2015 Musica Baltica. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

And thus, as both a carrier of an iconic value, as well as being “a group of flesh-and-blood human beings whose individualities are made apparent to the eye and ear” (Ashby 1999: 559), the orchestra of the *Nordic Light* symphony signifies a complexity evident in the amalgamation of diverse and conflicting individual and collective identities of all the performing subgroups. In order to explore this postulate, I focus on the two premieres of *Nordic Light*, the Latvian one by Liepaja Symphony Orchestra, and the North American one by Pacific Lutheran University Symphony Orchestra.

A premiere of the piece by Liepaja Symphony Orchestra and State Choir Latvija, conducted by Māris Sirmāis and featuring Latvian ethnomusicologist and folk performer Zane Šmite, was held at the National Opera House in Riga. Naturally, Liepaja Symphony Orchestra is mostly populated by Latvian instrumentalists; when examining the orchestra’s roster, one encounters almost exclusively Latvian names. Moreover, this concert was a part of cultural events within a framework of the European Union educational conference held in Riga in April of 2017. It is a fair guess that, with the exception of the guests of the conference, all live performing forces and most of the audience members were Latvian. Considering this unique context, I propose that the programming of Ešēnvalds’s *Nordic Light* was meant to articulate both Latvia’s strong cultural rootedness in its tradition of celebrating the nature of the land, as well as to claim its positioning within a global Nordic community through a shared experience of the aurora borealis. While I do not suggest that the composer’s use of the Northern Lights as his source of inspiration and a rich in potential artistic concept is indicative of his conscious political or ideological stance, there is nevertheless an intriguing connection between Ešēnvalds’s focused artistic exploration of the circumpolar North and Latvia’s continuing negotiation of its identity, instigated by the fall of the Soviet Union.

In the late twentieth-century, Latvian scholarship was centered on conceptualizing and articulating Latvia’s identity as a unique, independent, and able Baltic nation. For example, addressing Latvia’s intimate connection to the nature of the land, cultural geographer Edmunds Bunkše (1999) writes, “the dominant element in Latvian culture is *nature* rather than history. Latvians are as bound to place, to landscape, to particular geographies, as other peoples are bound to tribal legends and religion” (175). In the same year, from an outsider perspective, American social scientist Katrina Schwartz (1999) points out, “While the liberal sustainable development agenda is explicitly transnational in character, it also draws on traditional pastoral notions of Latvian national identity” (109). Curiously, the importance of the land, the homestead, seems to be a point of intersection between progressive proponents of Latvia’s economic development through globalization, and Latvian agrarian nationalists who believe that only adherence to the ancient agrarian traditions may preserve the nation’s “spiritual, moral, and physical health” (ibid.). And while it is evident that Ešēnvalds’s attraction to natural phenomena as his creative impetus is indicative of the traditional view of nature as essential to Latvian identity, the composer also rejects the insular implications of this inward-looking approach. Instead, it is through nature that Ešēnvalds manifests Latvia’s connectedness to and space within the world outside.

More recent Latvian publications take a critical look on Latvia’s current political, economic, and cultural practices in order to negotiate and forge a constructive path forward. Thus, political scientist Daunis Auers (2018) discusses Latvia’s grappling with the issue of belonging to a larger international community, as it finds itself politically and economically positioned between Nordic and Visegrad states² (103–4). Addressing the country’s cultural standing within the European Union, the author admits, “Latvia is not recognised as a major cultural or heritage centre despite spending a large amount of the government budget on cultural activities ... In truth, Latvia also has little unique heritage to offer ... The same could be said for the Latvian countryside, which is largely flat, forested and boggy” (104–5). Still, while objectively not as “beautiful” or exciting as the nature of the multitude of exotic places on Earth, Latvian countryside is a home of a whole nation, and thus, dearly beloved. But it is also a fact that Latvian countryside is not-quite-Nordic, and geographically, the country is just too far south to claim itself as an aurora borealis community. Figure 2 demonstrates a typical daily aurora borealis prognosis that does not come even close to the latitude of Latvia.

² In his article, Auers examines a current state of Latvia from political, economic, demographic, educational, and cultural perspectives, and conceptualizes possible scenarios of its development going forward. The complexity of the situation is well-articulated in the following statement: “Latvia is a liberal democratic European state. However, it is torn between intensive elite-level political cooperation with the Nordic states ... and occasional domestic policy alignment with the illiberal Visegrad states” (103) [the latter include the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – DL].

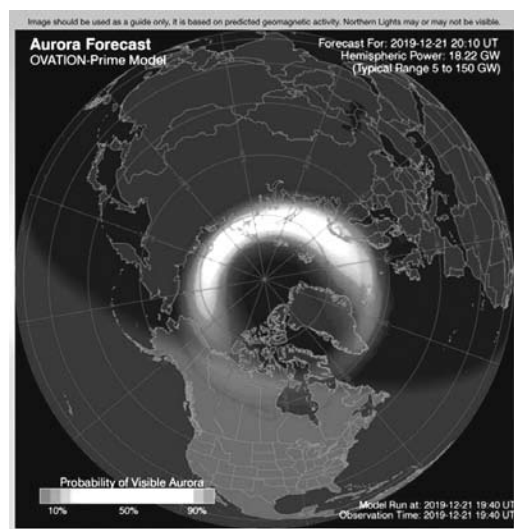


Figure 2. A sample forecast of auroral activity for a given day, dated December 20, 2019.
<http://www.aurora-service.eu/aurora-forecast/>

Still, according to cultural geographers and historians, the aurora borealis has occasionally appeared in mid-latitudes. Shane McCorristine (2013) reports, “A surge in auroral activity, commencing with trans-European display of 6 March 1716, attracted the interest of French and British scientists” (34). Regardless of whether this unusually widespread auroral activity in the early spring of 1716 also extended to the Baltics or there was another such instance at a different time in history, there is a singular Latvian folk song (*daina*) in existence describing an experience of observing the aurora borealis. The text for this *daina* appears in a footnote in Jānina Kursīte’s book *Latviešu folklorā mitu spoguļi* (1996: 345), to which Kursīte herself directed Ešēnvalds when the composer was working on his earlier “Nordic” work *Northern Lights* (2013) for mixed choir, water-tuned glasses, and power chimes. In his Symphony, Ešēnvalds sets this *kavi*³ *daina* twice, in movements III and V, to two different folk tunes selected and performed by aforementioned Latvian ethnomusicologist Zane Šmite. Furthermore, at the Latvian premiere in Riga, as well as all other Latvian performances, Šmite appeared on stage rather than on screen among other virtual folk performers, as it happened at all non-Latvian performances. Her physical presence, wearing a traditional costume and observing aurora borealis’ projected images underscores a nationalistic element of Ešēnvalds’s work, as if Šmite stepped out from the screen to join her native community in a collective experience of the encounter with nature.

When considering this composition in a performative context outside of Latvia, one is confronted with added layers of complexity concerning individual and collective identities of the people and the ensembles engaged in the performance as well as its reception. Pacific Lutheran University orchestra, in particular, is a fluid community by definition, since it comprises, with a few exceptions, innately transient members – the students. Moreover, typically for the higher education institutions in the United States, students come from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds within and outside of the country. In addition, there were two student choirs engaged in the performance, an audience of students, faculty, and residents of Tacoma, Washington, and a fixed video layer of the work. I hypothesize, in this context, and possibly at all non-Latvian performances, the performative totality of the Symphony may lack the focus and clarity of the message of belonging, explicit in the Latvian context, but not a sentiment of the encounter, achieved through a visual and aural experience that engages its participants in an imaginary spatial traveling. Furthermore, regardless of the locality of a performance, orchestra as a performing collective inherently carries within itself yet another narrative – one of the historically elitist entity, gradually transforming itself into a socially responsive cultural project.

In the 1960s–1990s, cultural theorists and sociologists had worked on defining the boundaries between elite culture and “culture with broad popular appeal” (Judith Blau 1988: 433, cited in Waterman 1988: 56). As Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 18) firmly posits, “nothing more clearly affirms one’s social ‘class,’ nothing more

³ *Kavi* is Latvian name for the Northern Lights phenomenon.

fallibly classifies, than taste in music” (cited in Garry Crawford et al., 2014: 485). Scholars agreed that while the popular (or “slob”) culture may differ from region to region, the *élite* (or “snob”) culture rarely does.⁴ Blau (1996: 1161) notes that “support for the arts has conventionally been part of the very process whereby social *élites* define themselves as a dominant class and establish social distance between themselves and populace, drawing on the distinction between popular and high culture to bolster class differences” (cited in Waterman 1998: 57).

If focusing just on music, “*cultivated* music (to be pursued deliberately, approached with some effort and appreciated for its moral, spiritual or aesthetic values)” (Waterman 1998: 56) embodies an *élite* cultural project, and symphony, both as a genre and a performing body, is an example of such.⁵ Yet, during the last decade or so, scholars started to recognize a paradigm shift, observing what Mike Savage & Modesto Gayo (2011) describe as a “fluidity of genres and cultural boundaries” that originated a new kind of an individual, termed the “omnivore” – one who enjoys cultural activities drawn from both *élite* and popular culture (341). Moreover, research by Crawford et al. (2014) suggests that “it is the highly educated middle classes (that is to say, the primary audience for live classical music) who are becoming most notably omnivorous in their cultural tastes” (486). In the current media and technology-driven cultural environment, as well as financial and political pressures of capitalism, symphony orchestras around the world have started to respond to this new cultural context and this new type of a consumer – a music omnivore – with a more “democratic” programming and outreach activities, including shows for children and families, performing film soundtracks and videogame music, collaborating with popular and world music performers, thus attracting much desired younger and “hipper” audience. For example, Ingrid Bols (2017) reports that “Beside the core classical concert repertory, screen music is the second type of music most played by symphony orchestras in France and in the UK” (206), and Ludim Rebeca Pedroza (2014) discusses the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s taking “pride in cultivating symphonic music in a populist atmosphere” at its summer home, Hollywood Bowl (324).

Tina Ramnarine (2011) proposes that an impetus for such an open-minded engagement of a traditionally conservative institution with their potentially core audience is a “combination of self-interested preservation in a modern musical market in which ‘communities’ are ‘audiences,’ and of altruistic tendencies to become involved in the social projects of the communities in which orchestras are located” (329). In her discussion, among other instances of different orchestras’ socially and culturally responsive activities, Ramnarine notes, “Orchestras in Brazil (e.g. Os Meninos de Sao Caetano [The Children of Sao Caetano], a government programme aiming at eradicating child labour) have become well-known for promoting symphonic repertoires in social projects” (328).

Now, let us briefly address a “self-preservation” angle suggested by Ramnarine. It is not a secret that even the idea of commercially-motivated works – be it a film or video-game music, or just stylistically simplified music – has often been an off-putting feature that created an instant bias toward itself among music intelligentsia, with which a typical classical concert goer would probably identify. But as Catherine Provenzano (2008) argues, “It is entirely erroneous to imagine that many of the best-loved ... masterworks of canonic composers had no commercial objectives” (80). As none other than Frank Zappa (1984, quoted in Ashby, 1999: 564–5) articulated, referring to precisely those “canonic composers,” “The composer had to write for the specific tastes (no matter how bad) of THE KING, THE POLITICAL DICTATOR, or THE CHURCH. Failure to do so resulted in unemployment, torture, or death. The public was not consulted. They simply were not equipped to make assessments of relative merit from gavotte to gavotte. If the king couldn’t gavotte to it, it had no right to exist.” Fast-forward to the present, and while a contemporary composer’s faith may not depend on an idiosyncratic taste of a particular “king,” a composer’s success is often a consequence of being in tune with the current tastes and demands of a desired audience.

⁴ Crawford et al. (2014) offer a useful overview of the literature on the transformation of classical music audience within rapidly developing, culturally globalized context.

⁵ I suggest that in the former socialist Eastern Europe, it was intellectual elite that drew boundaries between itself and a popular culture. As Serguei Oushkine (2009) observes, “Deprived of any serious form of control over cultural production and circulation, the intelligentsia of late socialism repositioned itself as the moral elite” (245). However, in the post-Soviet era, this process has been gradually declining: “Traditional forms of cultural involvement (reading, theater, exhibitions), through which the intelligentsia acquired its authority and its set of shared values, aesthetic predispositions, and affective scenarios could hardly compete with newly available forms of commodity-driven (shopping), experience-oriented (tourism), and escapist (entertainment) cultural consumption” (245–6).

Ešenvalds is a composer who is motivated by the consumer market and guided by practical considerations of a specific project's performance demands. *Nordic Light* was conceived as plan B to the original multi-media aurora borealis artistic installation project, for which Ešenvalds struggled to receive adequate funding.⁶ In its symphony orchestra-based format and multi-movemental formal design, the project received financial support from several organizations in Latvia, USA, UK, and Australia. Speaking of *Nordic Light* before its Pacific Lutheran University performance (and, accidentally or not, passing an aesthetic judgement), conductor Richard Nance opined, "The star of the show is the video. ... Basically, we're playing a film score" (Ponnecanti 2017). Ešenvalds himself, however, resists categorization of his music as a soundtrack, asserting that he composed *Nordic Light* as a choral-symphonic work, and added videos at the end of the process (ibid.).

It is not a goal of this study to argue for or against the composer's identification of his work as a symphony; however, it is indisputable that this composition is far removed from the realm of absolute music that originated symphony as a genre and symphony orchestra as a performing entity. Also, I doubt that Georgina Born's (2011) conceptualization of musical sound as "non-representational, non-artefactual and alogogenic" (377) was on Ešenvalds's mind while the composer was creating his work. But arguably, precisely because of its abstract properties, music simultaneously resists and invites being interpreted as a narrative, and in his creative output, and specifically in *Nordic Light*, Ešenvalds capitalizes on the latter. With its five-movement dramaturgical design, the orchestra functions as formal, timbral, and narrative backbone of *Nordic Light*,⁷ thus articulating its significance as an agent of a modern-day globalized musical-cultural context. Whereas the composer's practical objective for *Nordic Light* may have been an expansion of his choral-driven creative locus to a larger-scope instrumental genre, by utilizing a multimedia strategy and engaging a global perspective on a unique atmospheric phenomenon, Ešenvalds created an intricate multi-dimensional system of cultural, social, and ideological dialogues within, and beyond his work.

In his outlining of possible scenarios of Latvia's progress forward, Auers (2018) proposes: "Latvia's unique song and dance traditions need to be maintained and institutionalized through a modern concert hall, and steps should be taken to establish Riga as a northern European centre for classical and choral music" (110). Whether subconsciously or not, with his *Nordic Light* Symphony, Ešenvalds has taken a constructive step toward this goal by positioning Latvian cultural heritage within a context of the globalized culture of the North, thus embracing and celebrating an encounter with the "other." Furthermore, this Ešenvalds's work contributes to the interdisciplinary discussion on "reinterpretation of community in the sense of its being real or imagined, place-bound or spread beyond geographical boundaries" (Wichman 2015: 28). A shared experience of observing, conceptualizing, and performing aurora borealis unites storytellers, choir, and formerly elitist institution of the symphony orchestra into one fluid virtual transnational community.

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⁶ Personal correspondence between Ešenvalds and the author (2019).

⁷ Detailed structural considerations of *Nordic Light* are outside of the scope of this paper.

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Orkestras kaip takios bendruomenės žymuo Ēriko Ešenaldo *Nordic Light* multimedinėje simfonijoje Santrauka

Latvių kompozitorius Ēriks Ešenaldas (g. 1977) populiarumo pasiekė su savo chorine kūryba, ypač reflektuojančia Šiaurės pašvaistę (*Aurora borealis*). Multimedinėje simfonijoje *Nordic Light* (2015) Ešenaldas pasitelkia poliarinio rato regionų gyventojų pasakojimų įrašus, taip konstruodamas *Aurora borealis* naratyvą, akompanuojamą simfoninių ir chorinių pajėgų. Išryškindama orkestro vaidmenį kūrinyje, autorė argumentuoja, kad kol orkestro funkcija, atrodo, yra apribota iki akompanuojančio garso takelio, pats jo buvimas scenoje signalizuoja apie šios multimedinės kompozicijos kompleksinę sanklodą – apie vieną taktišką (besikeičiančią, besitransformuojančią) bendruomenę.

Ešenaldas išryškina ikoniską simfoninio orkestro reikšmę: jis simbolizuoja ilgą orkestrinės muzikos tradiciją ir reprezentuoja atlikimo instituciją, užimančią prestižinę ir estetiškai vertingesnę vietą Vakarų pasaulio kultūriname modelyje; be to, jis kalba apie profesinius ir tarpasmeninius ryšius tam tikroje muzikų bendruomenėje. Maža to, kiekvieno *Nordic Light* atlikimo metu tam tikras orkestras tampa didesnės, labilios bendruomenės dalimi, kurioje dalyvauja vis kitos gyvos ir virtualios atlikimo pajėgos – choras, atlikėjai instrumentininkai ir pasakotojai (projektuojami ant ekrano), įtraukiant ir auditoriją koncertų salėje. Viena vertus, iš anksto įrašyti atlikėjai ir pasakotojai reprezentuoja fiksuotą sudedamąjį Ešenaldo kompozicinės koncepcijos elementą – vieną virtualią globalią bendruomenę, paveiktą ir atpasakojančią *Šiaurės pašvaistės* patirtį. Kita vertus, orkestras, choras ir auditorija yra kintami šios bendruomenės dalyviai, sąlygoti tam tikro atlikimo lokalumo ir kūrinio trukmės.

Iki šiol *Nordic Light* atliko penki orkestrai keturiose šalyse – Latvijoje, Vokietijoje, JAV ir Kanadoje. Kiekvienas orkestras atsineša savo kolektyvinį identitetą, nulemtą vietinių kultūrinių, politinių ideologijų ir meninių siekių kompleksu. Pavyzdžiui, kūrinio atlikimui Latvijoje tampa bendruomenine erdve latvių „glokalaus“ (globalaus ir lokalaus) identiteto sandorai, kuri pasiekiami per Ešenaldo kūrybinį pareiškimą – *Aurora borealis* traktuojama kaip jo šalies geokultūrinės erdvės, į kurią įeina šiaurės regionai (Islandija, Grenlandija, Aliaska, Šiaurės Sibiras, Suomija, Norvegija), dalis. Sąmoningai ar ne, su *Nordic Light* simfonija Ešenaldas žengė konstruktyvų žingsnį link Latvijos kultūros pozicionavimo globalios šiaurės kultūros kontekste, demonstruodamas tai, ką Tina Ramnarine (2011) įvardija kaip poslinkį „prie orkestro matymo kaip kolektyvo, turinčio sociopolitinį vaidmenį ir galią daryti įtaką visuomenei“.

Kol Ešenaldo praktinis *Nordic Light* simfonijos tikslas galėjo būti jo į chorinę kūrybą orientuotos muzikos plėtimas link didesnės apimties ansamblių, pasitelkdamas multimedinę strategiją ir atverdamas globalią šio unikalaus atmosferinio reiškinio perspektyvą kompozitorius sukuria sudėtingą daugiadimensę kultūrinių dialogų sistemą. Bendra *Aurora borealis* stebėjimo, apmąstymo ir atlikimo patirtis sujungia pasakotojus, chorą, pagal savo ištakas elitistinę simfoninio orkestro instituciją į vieną taktišką, virtualią, nacionalines ribas peržengiančią bendruomenę.