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# THE MUSIC OF ROMUALDOS KALSONS: TEXTS AND SUBTEXTS

"I like fast music. It is more common for Latvian music to have slow tempos. I'm more like Haydn's symphonies: three fast parts, one slow part. Latvians have one slow part, then an even slower part, the third part is slightly faster, and the fourth part is slow again. That's the way it is. I have fast music..."<sup>1</sup>

With these words – half jokingly, half seriously – Romualds Kalsons (b. 1936) has etched out his place among Latvian composers. On the one hand, one could say it is an accurate self-description; the dynamism, motor-like quality, dance-like element and spiritedness resulting from faster tempos are characteristic of Kalsons' music. On the other hand, this self-description is quite incomplete because it does not reveal several significant aspects of his music. What are these aspects? This article was born out of an attempt to find at least a partial answer to this question.

In order to understand a composer's creative personality, one must keep in mind his or her sources of inspiration. For Kalsons, one of the most significant of these is literature. His taste in this sphere is manifested, primarily, in vocal music, whether it is chamber works, choral compositions or opera (such as his lifework, *Pazudušais dēls* (*Prodigal Son* (1996))). Since the beginning of his career as a composer, Kalsons has been attracted to poetry not simply as a generator of mood or emotional backdrop but also as a refined and complex art; his compositions of vocal music are based on modern day poetry with philosophical or psychological subtexts. The meaning of a poem is revealed as clearly as possible, and the current trend of simply turning a text into a sonic element has more or less completely passed Kalsons by. "[...] he loves poetry very much – a superbly interesting text is a huge plus for vocal music," says Ieva Parša, a notable chamber singer and interpreter of Kalsons' music, about one of the characteristics of the composer's vocal works.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of his career, at the turn of the 1960s, Kalsons focussed on poetry by foreign authors, in contrast to the then-dominant trend of national motifs. He put to music the words of Omar Khayyam (*Song Cycle*, 1958), Maurice Carême (*Five Songs*, 1959), Jacques Prévert (*Six Songs*, 1960), Federico Garcia Lorca (*Six Songs*, 1961) and Yevgeny Yevtushenko (*Seven Songs*, 1962), in the Russian language at that. Latvian poetry dominated his later compositions, in particular the works of Kalsons' contemporary and acquaintance Ojārs Vācietis, whose words provide the foundation for more than 40 of Kalsons' compositions. The composer said of this collaboration: "He's the best poet in the Latvian world of poetry and the one I've used the most [...]. [His poetry] has both humour and sarcasm, [...] saturation and philosophy. Even his children's poems have subtexts – children understand one thing, but adults can see the subtext."<sup>3</sup>

These words characterise not only Vācietis' poetry but in part also Kalsons' own compositions. In a way, he can be considered a spiritual relative of Mahler and Shostakovich in Latvia (musicologist Inga Žilinska also mentions Schnittke as a counterpart<sup>4</sup>); the humour, sarcasm and even parody mentioned in the quote above are unmistakable elements of his style. In Kalsons' music, the use of popular genres and simple, dance-like formulas combined with ambiguous poetry texts often lead to philosophical or psychological subtexts. One vivid example is the third song from the cycle *Etīdes par nebeidzamību* (*Studies on Infinity* (1975)), which has the keyword fear; in it, Vācietis' ironic message about the fear of others (who are hiding a fear of themselves) is presented in a waltz rhythm, albeit with an uncharacteristic, squarely grotesque melody. The rich use of popular genres' elements is apparently based on impressions from the composer's childhood: "My family loved music – I still have an old photograph of my grandfather playing the clarinet and my father playing the accordion. [...] I watched my father play the accordion; it was a 120-bass accordion. I later propped it up on a club chair, stood next to it and then played *Kur tu tecī...* [a popular Latvian folk song – B. J.]. Then came Strauss waltzes and, of course, popular music – other kinds of music were rarely heard in Jelgava [the town where Kalsons grew up – B. J.]."<sup>5</sup> These unique transformations of popular genres attest to the composer's desire to create a dialogue, or confrontation, between various worldviews.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Latvian music was hit by the so-called folklore-wave. This was manifested in a heightened interest in folklore materials, especially the oldest, pagan elements thereof. Kalsons' music was also influenced by this wave; for his compositions in the 1970s he chose texts by contemporary Latvian poets, which often contained motifs from folklore, including the vocal chamber cycle *Ķēžu dziesmas*

(*Songs of Chains*, text by Māris Čaklais, 1974) and the cantata *Atvadvārdi (Parting Words)*, text by Ojārs Vāciētis, 1979). And here we see the principle of dialogue/confrontation between two worldviews that is so close to Kalsons – the composer does not so much accent the authenticity of archaic folklore as he focuses on the interaction with a different worldview (not an epically generalised one, but an individual and psychologically refined, even nervous, modern view). Such dialogues between the folk and the conditionally contemporary – one switching to the other, as if in an associative flow – are characteristic of many vocal compositions by Kalsons. In this sense, a fine example is provided by the first of four etudes in *Etīdes par nebeidzamību (Etudes on Infinity)* for voice and instrumental ensemble. The vocal melody with its joyous and fearless promise of loyalty and betrothal (“Here is my hand, here is my life...”) has a diatonic, folk character, while the accompanying flute part follows a diminished scale (alternating between tones and half tones), which adds a completely different, subjective expression of doubt, concern and sorrow to the piece. And here we must note that the diminished scale is an almost ubiquitous attribute in much of Kalsons’ music; one could even say it is almost the main scale used in his music. Kalsons himself describes the diminished scale as “a feature I cannot get rid of”.<sup>6</sup> His music, however, does not reflect the formerly common usage among composers (for example, Rimsky-Korsakov) of the diminished scale to associate with a fairy tale or science fiction mood; for Kalsons, the diminished scale primarily describes dramatic, tension-filled and psychologically contradictory characters.

The juxtaposition of different worlds is most visible in Kalsons’ opera *Pazudušais dēls (Prodigal Son)*, 1996). Its premiere was among the biggest events in late 20th-century Latvian music, and the work was justly awarded with the prestigious Latvian Great Music Award. The opera is based on the drama written by Rūdolfs Blaumanis in 1893, which, in turn, as the title suggests, is based on the well-known parable of the Prodigal Son. In Blaumanis’ version, however, the son of a patriarchal, proper and wealthy Latvian farmer incurs many debts due to his undisciplined way of life. In despair, he decides to clear his debts by secretly seizing his father’s money and then genuinely beginning a new, better life. One night, during a storm, as he tries to quietly steal into his father’s room where the money is kept, the father hears the noise and, possibly not recognising his son and mistaking him for an intruder (the drama does not clarify this issue), shoots him. This plot, used by Ojārs Vāciētis and Jānis Streičs as the foundation for their libretto, inspired Kalsons to an expressive juxtaposition: on the one hand, the portrayal of life in rural Latvia through a pastoral and vital folkloric tone and, on the other hand, the mood of fatalistic foreboding that continues throughout the opera, symbolised by the above-mentioned diminished scale, albeit in the form of very varied and individualised melodies. The foreboding that smoulders in the subtext starts at the very beginning of the work. Sometimes it powerfully breaks through to the forefront, only to abate for a while, until it reaches its culmination and fulfilment in the opera’s finale. But there is a third sphere to the opera, which Blaumanis outlined only vaguely but Vāciētis’ libretto and Kalsons’ music, corresponding to their styles of art, addressed in more depth. This is the grotesquely sarcastic – or Mahleresque, in the broad sense – sphere associated with the tavern scenes. The interaction of all these spheres comprehensively reflects the various aspects of Kalsons’ style.

In addition to vocal compositions, instrumental music has always formed just as important a part of Kalsons’ creative work. Style-wise, the music follows three general principles. The first involves very pronounced allusions to the Neoclassical and Baroque (the 2nd symphony *In modo classico* [1968], *Concerto grosso* [1977, 2003 and 2005, the second one is titled *Hendeliāna*], the concertino *Serio é buffo* [1993]). Kalsons’ distinctly polyphonic style is also a reference to the Baroque tradition. This draws parallels with the already discussed sphere of his vocal music – Kalsons’ attitude towards poetry texts and the counterpoint between direct thought and subtext reflects this polyphonic thought process. In his instrumental music, the polyphony is sometimes announced right in the title of the work (*Prelūdija un kanons* for two flutes [1987], *Polifoniska studija* for orchestra [1992]),



Romualds Kalsons  
with his spouse,  
singer Irēna Kalsone,  
first performer  
of numerous  
compositions by  
Kalsons

but it is manifested more often simply as a principle of development, for example, the exposition of the main theme according to the principles of the fugue in the first part of String Quartet (1973). As an aside, this string quartet has gone down in the history of Latvian music as one of the few examples of the 12-tone technique; due to the conservative nature of Soviet cultural policy, this technique arrived fairly late in Latvia. In describing the international significance of this composition by Kalsons, Agne Stepiņa, a former member of the Riga String Quartet and currently an associated professor at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, remembers: "The Riga String Quartet played this piece in a number of countries, and it was always very highly regarded."<sup>7</sup>

The second general principle in Kalsons' music – the Neoromantic aspect – is revealed in a variety of works, including *Romantiskā poēma* (*Romantic Poem* for orchestra (1968)) and the 4th symphony *Jauni sapņi no vecām pasakām* (*New Dreams from Old Fables* (1977)). Musicologist Inga Žilinska comments: "Perhaps the conversation [in Kalsons' music – B. J.] takes place between the various aspects in himself – the slightly gloomy and the reserved romantic and the man of sharp-tongued, youthful humour. In his youth, the composer loved Tchaikovsky's music, and was himself rather romantic in his music. As time went on, life tempered his style, sometimes making it outwardly splintery and biting but, when light allows itself to be revealed, the music sounds warm like a folk melody."<sup>8</sup>

The third principle, noticeable even in Kalsons' instrumental music, is the echo of the new wave of folklore, which can be heard in his suites *Kāzu dziesmas* (*Wedding Songs* (1979)), *Gadskārtu ieražu dziesmas* (*Seasonal Songs* (1985)) and *Precību dziesmas* (*Betrothal Songs*, (2003)) for orchestra. These are some of the most outstanding examples of orchestration in Latvian music, which can apparently be explained by several factors. First, Kalsons studied composition under Ādolfs Skulte, who is known in Latvian music as a great master of orchestral colour (in describing the richness of Skulte's orchestral colour, researchers have sometimes used the extravagant hues of the South, which are in such contrast to the reserved Northern tones common in Latvian music). Another explanation for Kalsons' vivid orchestration might be his second higher education; in addition to studying composition at the Latvian Academy of Music (1960), he also studied symphony conducting there under Leonīds Vigners and Jāzeps Lindbergs (1971). Later, in the 1970s, he worked as the assistant to Vassily Sinaisky, who was at the time the artistic director of the Latvian radio and television orchestra and later the conductor emeritus of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. Regarding this period in his life, Kalsons has said, "Sinaisky gave me the most; it was with him that I finally understood what conducting really means."<sup>9</sup> It was during this period that Kalsons composed *Kāzu dziesmas*, which is one of the most popular works of Latvian symphonic music from the second half of the 20th century. In his book *Latviešu mūzikas virsotnes* (*Highlights of Latvian Music*), musicologist Jānis Torgāns discusses several of the interesting orchestration effects used in this piece of music, for example, the metallic clinking, jangling, twanging and rattling timbres in the third part, which, paradoxically have been achieved "even though percussion instruments are used very frugally ([...] except the xylophone)".<sup>10</sup>

Also among Kalsons' orchestral works is a composition that, like his opera *Prodigal Son*, can be considered the quintessence of his style. It is the *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* composed in 1977, which is, along with Pēteris Vasks' concerto *Distant Light* (1997), one of the most often played concertos beyond the borders of Latvia. The four-part piece contains distinct drama and spirited frenzy (in the first part), grotesque and sarcasm (in the second part, the scherzo) and allusions to music of the past as a symbol of all that is pure and clear (particularly in the slow section of the third part, in which the beginning and end contain variations in the spirit of an ancient Baroque dance, while the middle section contains variations of a Latvian folk song). The concerto ends again with a grotesque, sarcastic mood that is associated with the aggression of the masses against the values expressed by the symbols of the past. Only in the coda does this wave of aggression abate, and the composition ends ambiguously, without resolution, in a contemplative mood. Alongside the

emotional vividness of the music, an essential factor that helped determine the success of this piece is, of course, the composer's superb knowledge of the possibilities of the violin (Kalsons himself once seriously studied the violin); the violin part is beautifully complex but also gratifying for the player.

Despite the great emotional tone of his music, Kalsons has always been a composer who finely hones the form of his compositions. The careful planning he invests in them reveals the intrinsic intellectual and rational aspect of his music. In many cases, the very title of a composition hints at some quality of its structure. For example, it turns out that Kalsons has an affinity for mosaics, and he has composed *Mozaika* for piano four hands (1982) as well as for orchestra (1991). Interestingly, Kalsons himself emphasises the principle of concentricity, the most consistent manifestation of symmetrical order, in the titles of two compositions: *Fantāzija un pasakalja par koncentrisku tēmu* for organ (*Phantasy and Passacaglia on a concentric theme* (1992)) and *Koncentriskas aprises* for orchestra (*Concentric Contours* (2000)). Musicologist Līga Jakovicka also focuses on the composer's attention to structure: "Even in as traditionally free a genre as the vocal chamber cycle we see a similarity with the four-part symphony cycle (*Etīdes par nebeidzamību*)."<sup>11</sup>

It is apparently no coincidence that we examine the aspect of structure when characterising still another side of Kalsons' work, namely, his many years as a pedagogue at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, where he has been a professor since 1987. After winning the 2010 International Rostrum of Composers Award, Kristaps Pētersons, one of the professor's students, described studying under Kalsons and specifically accented the attention paid to structure: "Before then, my approach was intuitive; but, if you lack the structure, then it's a very dangerous road."<sup>12</sup>

It should also be noted that Kalsons perhaps also instilled in Pētersons his great interest in literature that is rich in psychological and philosophical subtexts. On the whole, however, Kalsons' students represent a very broad range of personalities. In addition to Pētersons, his students also include Santa Ratniece, Alviņš Altmanis and Māris Lasmanis. This variety of creative signatures among his students<sup>13</sup> might be linked to another quality of Kalsons mentioned by Pētersons – his great tolerance towards his students, allowing each to develop his or her own individuality, as did Kalsons' own teacher, Skulte.

Of course, this article provides only a general glimpse into Kalsons' creative personality and aspects of his musical style. Many of his compositions would each warrant a full study (and several already have). But, above all, they deserve to be heard and have earned the attention of audiences not only in Latvia but worldwide. In Kalsons' music, a vital spiritedness interacts with a deep and meditative self-immersion, a lyrical melodiousness with a sharp and often dance-like sarcasm, allusions to the Baroque with Latvian folk songs, tonal harmonies with serial technique. All of the above, plus Kalsons' specially selected and always high-quality literary sources, bear witness to him being a noteworthy representative of postmodernism – a composer whose music vividly and many-sidedly, through texts and subtexts, reflects modern life as well as the context of the past.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Romualds Kalsons by Līga Paegle. See: Līga Paegle. *Romualda Kalsona "Etīdes par nebeidzamību": stilistikās iezīmes un atskaņojuma alternatīvas*. Master's thesis (at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music), Riga, 2015, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Kalsona balss [materials prepared by Gundega Šmite]. *Mūzikas Saule*, 2011, no. 5, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Romualds Kalsons by Alise Koknēviča. See: Alise Koknēviča. *Kora loma Romualda Kalsona operā „Pazudušais dēls”*. Bachelor's thesis (at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music), Riga, 2012, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Kalsona balss [materials prepared by Gundega Šmite]. *Mūzikas Saule*, 2011, no. 5, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ilze Šarkovska-Liepiņa. Romualds Kalsons. In modo classico. *Mūzikas Saule*, 2005, no. 5, pp. 22–25.

<sup>6</sup> Ilze Šarkovska-Liepiņa. Romualds Kalsons. In modo classico. *Mūzikas Saule*, 2005, no. 5, pp. 22–25.

<sup>7</sup> Kalsona balss [materials prepared by Gundega Šmite]. *Mūzikas Saule*, 2011, no. 5, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Kalsona balss [materials prepared by Gundega Šmite]. *Mūzikas Saule*, 2011, no. 5, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Romualds Kalsons by Alise Koknēviča. See: Alise Koknēviča. *Kora loma Romualda Kalsona operā „Pazudušais dēls”*. Bachelor's thesis (at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music), Riga, 2012, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Jānis Torģāns. *Latviešu mūzikas virsotnes*, 2010, pp. 175–176.

<sup>11</sup> Līga Jakovicka. *Romualda Kalsona vokālie cikli*. Thesis (at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music), Riga, 1977, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> Kalsona balss [materials prepared by Gundega Šmite]. *Mūzikas Saule*, 2011, no. 5, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.