

Ilze Šarkovska-Liepīņa

LOOKING FOR A HOME FOR MUSIC

The "Great Amber", Liepāja



The "Gors", Rēzekne



Latvia has some two million residents, among whom nearly one-half live in the capital city of Rīga. This metropolis of Latvian music is home to the Latvian National Opera and the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra. Also in Rīga is the Latvian Academy of Music, and the city is always full of intensive musical activities. Rīga has many concert halls, including the Arena Rīga (the largest multifunctional arena in the Baltic States, with more than 10,500 seats) and the Great or Song Festival open-air stage at Mežaparks (space for 10,000 singers and 15,000 listeners). Also in Rīga are acoustic concert halls in the city centre and in various neighbourhoods. Musicians are forever trying to use sound to bring back life to forgotten, recently renovated or very new concert venues.

During the summer music literally breaks into live and flowering nature, with audiences sitting among wonderfully beautiful corners of Latvia that sink under greenery and are full of fresh air. Whether these are large or small castles, museums and cultural centres or the “Nature Concert Hall” that each year finds room under the open skies in a forest, by the sea, or at abandoned farms.

Rīga is by no means the only place for good music. Though the process of urbanisation continues to bring people to larger cities, which empties out the countryside, regional centres in Latvia try to gain new life thanks to economic and cultural investments, particularly in terms of the development of infrastructure and the establishment of a new network of concert locations and halls.

During the last five years, new acoustic and regional concert halls were built in Latvia’s historical regions – Kurzeme (Western Latvia), Vidzeme (Northern Latvia) and Latgale (Eastern Latvia), largely thanks to co-financing from the European Fund for Regional Development.

The first hall to be opened was the “Latgale Embassy,” which is also known as the Eastern Latvian concert hall GORS (the word for “spirit” in the Latgalian language). It was opened in Rēzekne in May 2013 and is the first brand new concert hall in Latvia. Design work began in 2008, with the Latvian architects Daiga Bikše and Uldis Balodis producing the blueprints for the hall. The building is based on Scandinavian design, emphasising its practicality, functionality, laconism and respect for the surrounding environment – the Rēzekne River Valley and the surrounding terrain of hillocks. The building resembles a kiln for clay, reminding us of the typically creative and business-like thinking of Latgalians. The flames, red design elements and dynamic forms of the building symbolise a creative spirit. The two acoustic auditoria in the building seat 1,000 people (or 3,000 standing people) in the Large Auditorium and 220 (1,000) people in the Small Auditorium. This is a home for professional music, pop culture and entertainment, as well as amateur performances and traditional culture, including a local professional orchestra and amateur performance groups. Swedish experts from the Akustikon company in Gothenburg, including Jan-Inge Gustafsson, helped to ensure outstanding acoustics. Thanks to a successful partnership with local manufacturers of acoustic elements, GORS can be proud of the best acoustics in Latvia at this time.

The mission for the “Latgale Embassy” is to become a centre for international impressions and global trends, but it is also a regional venue in that it creates and transmits the story of Latgale. Local cultural heritage is important here, largely influenced by Poland, Belarus and Russia, the locally dominant Catholic Church, and the ancient Latgalian language that is spoken by local residents. That does not mean, however, that the Latgale region focuses on a single venue. Less than 90 km away is another jewel of Latgale – the Rothko Art Centre, which was opened in Daugavpils in 2013 and is a multifunctional art centre in the historical Daugavpils Fortress. The pride and joy of the centre is a set of paintings by Mark Rothko, who was born in Daugavpils. This is the only collection of his works in Northeastern Europe. The centre has an acoustic hall with 200 seats, and it has become a citadel of modern art in Southern Latgale and Daugavpils.



"Cēsis" Concert Hall

Vidzeme, which covers central and Northern Latvia, has had a different history, with closer links to Estonia, in particular, during the Livonian era. Since the 16th century, Protestantism has dominated Vidzeme. Since the 18th century, there have been intensive choir performance traditions that are based in the religious practices of the Hernhutians. These lost their importance during the 20th century, but the choir movement that supports the tradition of Latvian Song Festivals, has been preserved in the region, as has piety toward a professional musical education and the ability to work hard on publicly important projects. Cēsis is one of the intellectual centres of Vidzeme. An 800-year-old and beautiful Livonian town along the banks of the Gauja River, Cēsis has wonderful historical buildings and cultural traditions. Musical enthusiasts in Cēsis have always come together in larger or smaller orchestras. In 1981, for instance, the Vidzeme Chamber Orchestra was established with the aim of bringing together musicians of various generations from Vidzeme. The nucleus was made up of teachers from music schools in Vidzeme, as well as students and graduates from the Cēsis High School of Music and the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music. The orchestra performed more or less regularly, and it may be for this specific reason that symphonic music can now be heard outside of Rīga at places that have symphony orchestras and music high schools. The new network of regional concert halls is also based on such centres.

The Social Association building that was built in Cēsis in 1914 confirmed active public and cultural life. One of the walls of the historical building was torn down in 2010, and Latvian architect Juris Poga designed the Cēsis Northern Vidzeme Concert Hall by merging the old building with an innovative addition. The mission for the building is to be a multifunctional cultural centre, and most financing for the project came from the EFRD. The building has an acoustic concert auditorium with 800 seats, a chamber auditorium with an organ restored by the master restorer Jānis Kalniņš from Ugāle, another chamber auditorium for film showings, space for the Alfrēds Kalniņš Cēsis High School of Music, rehearsal rooms for the Vidzeme Chamber Orchestra and amateur ensembles, as well as an art gallery. The graphic symbol for the building was designed by the artist Ilmārs Blumbergs, and the logo features a geometric ornament that represents the basic values of Latvian identity. It is a sign of the inheritance and continuation of history. The symbol has five waves from the Gauja River as lines for notes, as well as a dot as a nucleus and centre for the content. The silhouette of the new hall stretches upward above the roofs of the ancient town, offering a view of the lovely Vidzeme landscape. The building is laconic and functional, and the much-beloved grey background emphasises the warmth of the birch wood that was used as part of the building's design, as well as the brilliant objects of art that are highly visible against the laconic background. The clearest benefit, however, is the outstanding acoustics of the concert hall – better acoustics than almost anywhere in Rīga.

The “Great Amber” concert hall in Liepāja will be opened in November 2015. Liepāja is an important regional centre in Kurzeme and a port on the shores of the Baltic Sea. It is rich with resources, including a professional theatre, a symphony orchestra, ancient musical traditions, and much potential for creativity. It was no surprise that the idea for a new concert hall was initiated by the conductor of the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra, Imants Resnis. The orchestra performs important and regularly scheduled concerts with much international attention, and this, along with close links between the orchestra and the field of musical education in Liepāja, were the decisive factors in deciding to build the new hall. After several bills for tender, a contract was signed with the Giencke & Co. architectural firm from Austria. EFRD co-financing was provided for this project, too. The eight-story building will include a large auditorium with 1,080 seats and a chamber auditorium with 200 seats. It will provide a home for the Liepāja Emilis Melngailis Music High School.

The exterior of the building is reminiscent of a giant piece of amber found on the shore. It is naturally asymmetrical and with the typical colours of amber. It goes without saying that amber is one of Latvia’s symbols, and it can be found on the shores of the sea in Kurzeme, including Liepāja, quite often.

There is still the idea of a large and new acoustic concert hall in Rīga that would satisfy modern needs and would be acoustically appropriate for large symphonic and choral concerts. The Rīga Great Guild, where orchestras work and perform at this time, was not built as a concert hall. It has been adapted for concert purposes and is by no means ideal in acoustic terms.

There was the idea of building the acoustic concert hall on the AB Dam in the Daugava River, but the project stopped because of unforeseen technical problems and the economic crisis that nearly destroyed Latvia’s economy in 2008. It had a painful effect on musical life and infrastructure, and the idea remains on paper at this time.

Meanwhile, the new Latvian National Library, which was opened late in 2014, also offers new opportunities for concert performances. The so-called Castle of Light is one of the most important 21st century building projects in Latvia, and it is a modern and globally important centre for information and culture. The initial design was produced 20 years ago by Gunārs Birkerts from the United States. He is the world’s most distinguished Latvian architect, though his creative potential has mostly been manifested outside of Latvia. In this case, Birkerts has created a new cultural symbol that merges humanism and culture and makes reference to history, literature, music and the performing arts. Even more, it expresses the architect’s love for his country and its history. Concerts are offered in the Ziedonis Auditorium, which is an outstanding hall with more than 400 seats. On the 11th floor of the National Library there is a lovely view of the historical Rīga skyline, and it has already hosted various musical events, including the “Speak to a Composer” cycle of discussions that is organised by the Latvian Music Information Centre. Participants have included the composers Pēteris Vasks, Maija Einfelde and Imants Zemzaris.

Economic stabilisation and a symbiosis between state cultural planning and private initiative during the new century suggest that cultural policy in the musical sector is maturing, and this means not just more favourable development of the performing arts, as well as an improved infrastructure for concert performances. There is a greater offer of innovative, multimedia and complex musical projects, and this encourages the search for ever-new venues for music in a country in which music has become one of the most important forms of artistic life.