



ON SEVERAL DISTINCTIVE PRACTICES OF LATGALIAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC

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Latvian traditional music has two large historical layers – the old and the (comparatively) new or late one. The styles of the *old layer* are rooted in the pre-Christianisation culture of the Baltics and are closely linked to ancient family, seasonal and work traditions and customs. The melodies have mostly narrow melodic scope, modal, and their texts are the so called classical folk songs texts – a very specific type of ancient poetry. It is assumed that the *late layer* began to form in the 18th century, mainly due to impulses coming from Central Europe. One of the most distinctive representations of this layer throughout Latvia are the so-called *ziņģes* (from Germ. *sing-*) – late songs with rimed texts. A distinctive feature of Latgale is that several Catholic styles are massively represented in the late layer – psalmody (e.g., the Office of the Dead) and Catholic songs.¹ People know the melodies by heart and pass them on orally, while the source of the texts are Catholic prayer books. The spread of this music in Latgale was mainly associated with the

¹ In the course of the 16th century, Latvia became Lutheran, but its southeastern region of Latgale soon, under Polish rule returned to Catholicism. In Latgale the High-Latvian (Latgalian) language is spoken. Numerous old traditions are still an essential part of the life there.

activities of Jesuit missionaries in the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th century. This brief review includes both old and late musical phenomena of Latgale.

The Drone Singing in Northern Latgale

The drone is a single tone or repetitions of the same tone that accompanies an entire stanza or, as it is most common in Latvian case, the choir section of the stanza which follows the section of the soloist. In Northern Latgale drone singing was used when the joint labour on the field took place: during the winter the cattle-shed accumulated the manure in great volume, and as a valuable fertilizer it had to be brought to the fields and distributed there for later being worked into the ground. Farmers called upon neighbours, relatives, and friends to help them accomplish this major task on the tacit understanding that they in turn will reciprocate whenever the latter needed help. This type of joint work was called *māslu tolka* (~ the manure-help). The drone singing took place on the field during the work breaks and was performed by the women and girls scattering the manure (*uordietojas*). The folk term for that musical phenomenon was *tolku bolss*: 'the tune (lit. voice) of the manure-help'. Workers sang down the wind and very loud – so that their singing could be heard from far away. Strong, thorough, far-reaching singing was for the whole vicinity a sign of large, successful community work and, accordingly, an acoustic indication of a strong, well-organized and successful farm.

The forced collectivization following the Soviet re-occupation of Latvia at the end of WW2 brought the traditional *māslu tolka* to an end, and the drone singing lost its original functional niche. However, it remained in the memory of people and later found its way into the repertoire of folklore ensembles. *Tolku bolss* is one of the oldest Latvian musical phenomena having survived to the present day and has acquired the status of a musical symbol of Northern Latgale.

Bolsi (voices) in Auleja and Izvalta

The noun *bolss*, in Latgalian – *bolss* (plural form *bolsi*), has several meanings. Two are widely used: the voice of a human or animal – the result of the vocal cords working, and part in polyphonic music. However, in Latgale, as already has been noted in the section on Northlatgalian drone singing, it has also the meaning *tune*. The habit of calling melodies of the old layer *bolsi* is particularly prevalent in the region that encompasses the former parishes of

Izvalta and Auleja. There, when referring to a tune, the noun is usually accompanied by an attribute that indicates the use of the tune in question. For example, if a melody is called the *lopu bolss* (voice of leafs) or *pavasara bolss* (spring voice), it means that it was used in spring customs, while the *ūgu bolss* (berry voice) was used by berry-pickers. In Auleja and Izvalta, there are several *kuozu bolss* (wedding voices), *lynu bolss* (flax voice) for flax harvesting, *sīna bolss* (hay voice) for haymaking, *olus bolss* (voice of beer) for drinking sessions, etc. Each *bolss* was associated with its own special body of text. *Rudzu bolss* (the voice of rye; it shows similarities to the harvest songs of southeastern Lithuania and Belarus) was a tune used in rye harvest customs and rituals. Sometimes it was called *Juma bolss* after the agricultural twin-deity *Jumis*, who was believed to live in the grain and was symbolized by two ears of grain on a single stalk, two fruits or berries growing together, etc.

Late polyphony

Whenever Latgalians gather for celebrations or festivities, polyphonic singing arises. Admittedly, with rare exceptions, the polyphony that emerges, is not the old drone singing, but rather late harmonic polyphony. The melodies that are used in such cases as the principal parts of the polyphonic songs, have mostly broad melodic range and are in a major or (much less frequently) minor key, but it also happens that the late polyphony “sticks” to an old modal folk tune which as the result becomes, to use musicological terminology, *majorized* – transposed into the major key. Late polyphony has found its way into a wide variety of traditions, and there are parishes in Latgale where it encompasses the entire local song repertoire. The ubiquity of polyphony and its coverage of nearly the entire region distinguishes Latgale from other regions of Latvia. The melody in this polyphony, usually lies in the upper part, and it is most often a two-part polyphony, but often the lower accompanying part branches out, creating episodic or even constant three-part polyphony. Interestingly, the spread of the late type of polyphony in Latvia largely coincides with the spread of Catholicism, and it is also richly represented in the Latgalian Catholic vocal repertoire – Catholic songs and, in many regions, even the psalms are polyphonic. There is no precise data about when the late polyphony started to spread in Latgale, but there is reason to believe that it did not happen before the 18th century.

A special subtype is *polyphony with the upper solo accompanying part*: in the case of this subtype, one of the accompanying parts is placed not below the melody, but above it. It is sung

by a single female singer, who has a particularly high and strong voice. This is important because the melody and lower accompanying parts are normally sung by several singers each but she alone needs to be able to keep up with them. This variety of polyphony is commonly referred to as “the singing with a half-voice”: *dzīduot ar pusbaļsu*. The ‘half-voice’ (*pusbaļss*) is the folk term for the upper solo accompanying part and it is called so because it usually comes in during the second half of the stanza and thus it covers up only the second section of the stanza. Polyphony with the upper solo accompanying part (half-voice) has been documented mainly in the north and northeast of Latgale, but traces of it are also found elsewhere in Latgale. Songs of spring, wedding songs, songs of summer and autumn works were sung in this way.

Song duels

Many societies around the world hold competitions that focus on music in one way or another: competitions (contests) in mastering a particular instrument or repertoire, competitions in improvisation, which in the case of vocal music also means improvising lyrics, competitions for the most beautiful performance, etc. Latvian traditional culture also has a practice where the spirit of competition and enthusiasm reigns, although primarily in the realm of poetry/text.

In many traditional celebrations, festivals, and festivities, the community of participants has a binary structure, i.e., the group of celebrants consists of two groups or parties, each with a different status and role: at weddings, they are the groom’s people (*vedēji*) and the bridal people (*panāksnieki*); when the manure-help takes place these are the host, his wife with their folks on the one hand and the helpers invited from neighbouring farms and relatives’ farms on the other hand; in Midsummer celebrations – the hosts with their family and guests; in addition, at various gatherings and celebrations, young men and women form two parties. All of these binarities in Latvian case have the potential for musical and poetic competition. The practice based on this is called *apdziedāšanās*, which can be roughly translated as *song duel*.

The song duels are competitions in wittiness: the opposing sides exchange sung jeers, such as at weddings, when the bridal people arrive, the groom’s people sing:

Še atbrauca ponuoksnīši Saluopītom capurītem. Liksim, bruoļi, pa grošam, Pierksim jaunas capurītes!	Here come the bridal people [bridal party] With the patched-up hats. Brothers, let's pool money, To buy them new hats!
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The bridal people feel provoked and do not remain in debt:

Lobi byutu vediejini, Kab lobuoki sartuceni; Peles pūgas apgrauzušas, Dīgi vīn karinej.	Good would be the groom's people [groom's party], If only the suits would be better; The buttons are gnawed by mice, Only the threads are hanging down.
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In this case, the characteristics of the participants mentioned in the songs are fictional – who would come to a wedding wearing a torn hat or a suit with missing buttons? But sometimes real events or characteristics are picked up and then immensely hyperbolized. However, this should not turn into mockery – that would ruin both the event and the relationship. But it is okay to poke fun. There is an unwritten rule that one should not take offense at being the subject of humorous singing. A dialogical competition ensues. There is usually no real winner, because most often the “clash” ends with a reconciliation between the parties, and both parties are satisfied with the exciting event. A song duel is thus a witty dialogue, a game – it has an entertaining content. However, it is also part of rituals and, as such, has its own seriousness. In ancient times, it was probably linked to magic. This can be explained through a simile: St. John's celebration (Midsummer) includes (similar to some other customs) the participants being whipped with the St. John's krauts. This (symbolic) whipping is a form of purification – according to belief, it drives away illness and vices. Song dueling is also a kind of “whipping” – purification, only it happens by means of satirical word. This aspect is reflected in the participants' statements that a song duel has to be “thorough, rigorous,” then the involved will benefit from it. This brings us to the circumstance that the process does not always have to be dialogical – in certain situations, there is no singing back and forth, but rather singing about: there is no dialogue, no reciprocity. For example, the newlyweds are seated at the wedding table and those present address the bride and groom first with satirical/derisive verses, then praising verses, or the groom's party sings mocking verses to the bride, but prising verses about groom and vice versa: the bridal party sings mocking verses to the groom, but prising verses about the bride.

When the song duels take place usually recitative melodies are used, however sometimes rhythmic dance motifs may appear. Sometimes each side uses its own distinct melody.

Psalmody in oral tradition – Office of the Dead²

Those who carefully read the section about the voices of Auleja – Izvalta may have noticed that, alongside work, wedding, and seasonal tunes (voices), there was no mention of funeral or cemeterial songs (voices), or anything similar. This is because in Latgale funerals, memorial services, etc. are entirely the responsibility of the Catholic Church and in the respective cases special genres of Catholic music are used. And here we come to the Latgalian Office of the Dead and funeral rites.

The Office of the Dead is a sub-type of the Catholic Church's Liturgy of the Hours. It originated around 800 AD, presumably in Rome, and was performed as part of the funeral liturgy on the day of burial, but also on the eve before, and on several other occasions. After the Council of Trent (1545–1563) it continued to be a duty to recite the Office of the Dead during the wake as well on November 2 (All Souls' Day) and on the funeral day. The Office of the Dead consists of three canonical hours – Vespers, Matins and Lauds.³ It is known mostly as a prayer of the clergy. It is surprising to come across the Office of the Dead in Latgale as part of the folk repertoire executed in the Latgalian version of Latvian – as a folklorised phenomenon, the music of which is orally transmitted. It is locally called 'the psalms' (*salmes, salmys, salmas*, etc., depending on vernacular).

The Office of the Dead was most often recited at home, usually without the presence of a priest. In Latgale it belonged (and still belongs) to home life, just as death itself. People in rural Latgale in the late 20th century died in their homes and not in retirement homes or hospitals. And even nowadays it is not uncommon for the confined body to remain at home until the funeral: in a granary, veranda, or other cool, clean place instead of being taken to the morgue. Several days may pass before the funeral, and during this time the relatives prepare for the funerary services.

² Chapter is based on the study by Martin Boiko *The Office of the Dead (salmes) in Latgale*. (In CD/DVD: Aigars Lielbārdis and Martin Boiko *Psalmu dziedāšana Latgalē. Officium defunctorum. The Office of the Dead in Latgale*. Riga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts: 2012, 30–44.

³ In Latgalian folk practice the Office of the Dead includes only of Matins and Lauds. (Vespers are either left out or performed separately.) One full execution of this two-part cycle takes about one and a half to two hours. Both, Matins and Lauds consist of psalms, lessons from the Book of Job, responsories as well as a few lesser structural elements. The Office of the Dead is a large and complicated composition. When asked about the sources of their performance skills, interviewees always referred to previous generations of singers.

The Office of the Dead is performed in the evenings before the farewell. In earlier times it was sung every evening, but in the 1990s and the 21st century this tradition persists in only a few places; elsewhere it is sung only on the last or last two evenings. Members of the household, neighbours, friends and relatives came together to recite the Office of the Dead. In the 1980s and 90s (and in the 21st century) most often small mobile groups of semi-professional singers known in the surroundings were invited. The table in the living room is covered with a white linen tablecloth. Singers are seated around the table. On it are lighted candles, a crucifix, and often also a saucer with a pinch of salt and some slices, sometimes a whole loaf of ryebread symbolising the home's blessing.

The Office of the Dead may also be sung at home on the anniversary of a person's death or as part of a memorial service held annually by the family to commemorate all deceased family members. This tradition has significantly declined after World War II. The 1920s and 30s were the heyday of the tradition, when the Office of the Dead was held in almost every home during the dark time of the year around All Souls' Day, in October or November. These events were/are an important opportunity for the whole family to come together. When getting together for a shared prayer (Office of the Dead), the members of the family call to mind their dead, and thus the event becomes a meeting of the quick with the dead over the threshold of life and death. In this sense, the whole family is truly together again.

In church the Office of the Dead is sung once a year, on All Souls' Day, November 2. The churchgoers arrive a few hours before Mass and perform the Office. If not yet completed, it becomes interrupted when priest appears, and Mass starts. Since the fall of the Soviet regime the Office of the Dead takes place in a similar fashion in cemeteries: on the day of a cemetery festivity (*lv kapusvētki*, lit. *cemetery celebrations*), singers arrive a few hours before the priest turns up and hold the Office in the cemetery's chapel or at the large cross at the cemetery centre.

To understand value that Latgalians place on Office of the Dead some dogmatic contiguities have to be displayed: In the Roman Catholic doctrine alongside Heaven and Hell, Purgatory plays a special role. It is the torturous, temporary abode for souls of the deceased where they undergo purification before being able to enter Heaven. The belief is, that the prayers of the living can ease the suffering of souls in Purgatory and shorten the time they spend there. The Office of

the Dead is one of the most impressive services/prayers for souls in Purgatory. For people it is a way they express their love for and offer their support to their loved ones after they have passed away. This awareness of being able to participate in a loved one's destiny through Office of the Dead even after his/her death, the hope of influencing his ultimate fate, helping him/her in some way – was/still is a powerful motivation that maintains the practice.

The Office of the Dead was introduced among the Latgalian peasants in the late 18th century by Jesuit missionaries as the answer to the still flourishing ancestor worship. In some sense the Office of the Dead is a continuation of it in a Christian wrapping. The Latgalian translation of the Office's text for the first time appeared in a printed form in a Latgalian prayer book of 1786. In the course of 19th and 20th century this same Jesuit translation was many times republished in diverse Latgalian prayer books.

May Devotion⁴

One of the most remarkable Jesuit projects was the introduction of the May Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Soviet regime almost succeeded to arise this practice but in the 1990s it experienced a unexpected come back. The popular services to honour the Mother of God in the time before the consolidation of the Soviet regime after World War II regionwide took place every evening in May (Our Lady's Month) at the large landscape crosses, which were decorated for the occasion with bouquets of spring flowers and garlands.⁵ The crosses were located either by the main road, at the side road connecting the farmstead to the main road, in the village

⁴ Chapter is based on: Martin Boiko *Maija dievkalpojumu pirmsākumi Latgalē* [The Beginnings of the May Devotion in Latgale]. (*Mūzikas akadēmijas raksti XXI*, edited by Lolita Fūrmane and Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča. Rīga: Jāzepa Vītola Latvijas Mūzikas akadēmija: 2023, 59–102).

⁵ There are several ways to describe this type of crosses in Latvian: *ceļmalas krusti* (roadside crosses), *sādžas krusti* (village crosses), *brīvdabas krusti* (open air crosses), etc. However, none of the terms fully covers the phenomenon. In order to eliminate logical contradictions and create a diversity encompassing term, the form *landscape crosses* (*ainavas krusti*) is introduced.

In the 1950s and 60s Latgalian crosses were systematically destroyed by the Soviet regime. Antons Rancāns, a protagonist in the research and conservation of Latgalian woodcarving traditions, a prominent wood sculptor himself, wrote in 1998 that by his estimation only about 10% of Latgalian landscape crosses survived the Soviet time and reached the 1990s. (See: Antons Rancāns *Krucifiksi.lv. Virtuālā Latgales krucifiksu enciklopēdija* [Crucifixes.lv. Virtual Encyclopedia of Latgalian Crucifixes]. 1998. <https://web.archive.org/web/20080430125312/http://www.krucifiksi.lv/> (18th August 2025).)

centre or where the main road enters the village, in the nearest graveyard or in the churchyard, some of them surrounded by a low railing, with benches inside the railing.⁶

The landscape crosses were the object of veneration on various occasions throughout the year, however May with its nightly services was the period when special attention and care was devoted to them. A Latgalian May devotion includes the Litany of Loreto, the Rosary, basic Catholic prayers, edifying readings, meditation, spiritual exercises and Marian songs. The organization and performance were in the hands of the people themselves. The people called the May devotion *singing/prayer at the cross* (*dzīduot/lyugtis pi krysta*). The services were lay-led, officiated by a local expert-singer – usually an older woman, a respected leader, familiar with the structure of the service, knowing all the melodies, able to start them at the most appropriate to the participants pitch and having a strong voice. A special component of the services was the “drawing of lots” – *značku/značkeņu vylkšona*. The word *značka* is of Polish origin. A *značka* is a rectangular note/card with a number on it that refers to a task in a prayer book – a pious act or commitment, a spiritual exercise that the person who drew the note must perform within a specified time frame. The May services were musical events where especially the Marian songs were a major attraction for many. (Songs about Mary’s life and suffering, prayer songs to her, etc. form a large and particularly popular part of the rich Latgalian Catholic song repertoire).

The Latgalian May devotion is a local version of a broader popular Marian movement that was widespread in the Catholic West from the 18th century onwards. In Latgale it emerged around the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries in the result of the targeted and well-conceived cultural transmission project by Jesuits. There are reasons to believe that when transplanting this practice into the Latgalian environment, Jesuits manipulated the old local heathen springtime singing habits so that they switched to “feed” this for the Latgalians new Catholic practice. The source of the Latgalian May devotion was the book by Italian Jesuit Annibale Dionisi (1679–1754) *Il mese di Maria o sia il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria* (*The month of Mary or the month*

⁶ The landscape crosses in Latgale and Lithuania, as well in some remote Alpine regions, here and there in Bavaria and Austria are reminder of an early modern Catholic popular trend: “Between 1680 and 1750 there were crosses everywhere [in Catholic Europe – M.B.]. A real frenzy had seized the countryfolk, who set them up in great numbers, in east and west alike. Research which is still at its beginning [...], shows how extensive this movement was. Crosses appeared in the fields and on the heaths, on the tops of hills and in the depths of valleys.” (Louis Châtellier *The religion of the poor. Rural missions in Europe and the formation of modern Catholicism, c. 1500–c. 1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1997, 115)

of May consecrated to Mary) first published in 1725. (However, it is possible that the Dionisi's original and Latgalian version were mediated by a Polish translation.) In Latgalian Dionisi's May devotion was first published in 1799 and experienced numerous editions throughout the 19th and some in the 20th century.

Catholic songs⁷

Latgalian Catholic songs were already mentioned when telling about May devotion. This music has accompanied Latgalian people for centuries in their daily lives and celebrations, in times of joy and sorrow, in their homeland and far away, and is an integral and important part of their lives and culture. Alongside folk songs in the narrow meaning of the term, namely songs with the classical folk texts (for example, voices of Auleja and Izvalta, tolku bolss in northern Latgale, etc.) Catholic songs are one of the basic categories of Latgalian traditional music. They are folk songs in terms of their distribution, forms of transmission, and functioning. Some of them are particularly popular: Should someone start the song *Sveika, Jyuras Zvaigzne* (*Hail, Star of the Sea*), *Loba nakts, o Jezu* (*Good Night, oh Jesus*) or *Kas grib Jaunavai Marijai kolpuot* (*Who Wants to Serve the Virgin Mary*), almost every Latgalian will be able to join in. The largest groups consist of songs intended for the periods of the liturgical year (Advent songs, Lent songs, as well as Marian songs, which are sung most often in May) and Catholic celebrations (Christmas, Easter, Pentecost). Of course, song groups overlap in their use in many ways, for example, Marian songs are sung not only in May at prayer crosses, but also on many other occasions. Certain songs are also sung during important events in a person's life – baptisms, funerals, and memorial services. The Catholic song repertoire is extensive and has several general characteristics.

1. Performance is based on the initiative of believers themselves – their sense of religious duty, the joy of singing, and quite simply a deeply rooted habit – tradition.
2. The basic repertoire of Catholic melodies is transmitted orally: just like folk songs in the narrow sense of the word, their melodies are passed down from one generation to the next, with people learning them from each other by ear. The lyrics of Catholic songs however are provided by the taken from prayer and song books.

⁷ This chapter is based on the study by Martin Boiko „Jezuītu lauku misiju grāmatas un latgaliešu tradicionālā mūzika. Dažas piezīmes, pieņēmumi un atziņas” [The Books of the Rural Jesuit Missions and High Latvian (Latgalian) Traditional Music. Notes, Assumptions and Conclusions] (*Grāmata un sabiedrība Latvijā līdz 1945. gadam*, edited by Andris Vilks, Sanita Brižkalne and Ieva Jansone. (Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, Zinātniskie raksti 4(XXIV)) Rīga: Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka: 84–93.)

3. The melodies and lyrics can be considered anonymous, at least in the sense that the performers usually do not know their authors, and do not care if there are some.
4. Just like folk songs, the melodies of Catholic songs vary greatly.

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This brief overview covers the main categories that characterize the diversity of Latgalian traditional music, but it is by no means exhaustive. Anyone interested in Latgale and its music has large opportunities to discover and learn much more for themselves.

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