

THE PIANIST'S PERCEPTION OF FIGURATIVE TEXTURE IN PIANO WORKS BY LATVIAN COMPOSERS

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Abstract

Tracing the development of texture in Latvian piano music from the performer's point of view, including historical and stylistic aspects, it becomes apparent that figuration is one of its most prominent specific elements which demonstrates the uniqueness of texture as well as reflects stylistic transformations. The aim of this paper is to highlight the different types of interpretation of the instrument – colourful illusionary and real motoric pianism as well as their synthesis in the context of several compositional techniques of the musical language of Latvian composers. All of these aspects are particularly important for the performer.

Keywords: *texture of piano music, figuration, Latvian piano music, artistic research.*

Introduction

It is interesting to investigate how Latvian piano music was formed and developed, and how it was influenced by the functioning of historical models of textures. The roots of professional music in Latvia had already appeared in the 13th century – this is mentioned in research by musicologists Maruta Sīle [Sīle 2003: 6] and Zane Gailīte [Gailīte 2003: 18]. However, starting with the 15th century, when the first keyboard instruments appeared in the Baltics and the first international performers arrived, – Vita Vēriņa [Вериня 1991: 1] and Ilze Šarkovska–Liepiņa [Šarkovska–Liepiņa 1997: 22] have written about this – one can also begin to discuss piano music.

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Even though keyboard music in the territory of Latvia was composed and performed beginning in the 15th century, one could only receive a professional music education in Latvia starting at the end of 1919, when the Latvian Conservatory was founded.

The origins of Latvian professional music coincided with the awakening of national consciousness and the blooming of the national school in the music of other European cultures. Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948) wrote the following about this period: *“At the time, when Russia was consumed by the arguments between the genius Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, when Grieg was already being performed in Norway, in Denmark – Svendsen’s darkly sweet sounds, when Sibelius was growing in stature in Finland, then Czechia was praising Smetana – during this time, we Latvians were still musically illiterate, and our only excuse was that our culture was forcefully repressed and choked, and our only hope was the completely untouched virgin soil in the field of art. (..) Our folk song rescued the music of our nation; if we had forgotten our folk songs during these dark days, the Latvian nation would be non-musical – those five decades that we needed to achieve any kind of European cultural level would have been drawn out to maybe as many centuries”* [Vītols 1964: 218].

Technically sophisticated works were only written (in all genres except musical theatre) in the 1880s and 1890s, when academically educated Latvian musicians began their work. The first Latvian composers’ amateur piano works were mostly salon music. For example, dances by Pēteris Šancberģis (1841–1923) used conventional texture formulas, quadratic structures, and elementary harmonies.

When researching the historical and stylistic development of Latvian piano music from the performer’s point of view, it becomes clear that **figuration**¹ is one of the most specific elements which reveals the uniqueness of the layout and reflects stylistic transformations. For this reason, the aspect of Latvian piano music is the focus of this paper.

Textural Features of the Romantic Period

Until World War II and the Soviet Occupation, Latvian piano music was more or less dominated by the trend of romanticism – for example, works by Jāzeps Vītols

¹ Figuration is one of the most significant elements of piano virtuosity. A figurative drawing reflects the phonic, coloristic, and dynamic characteristics of the texture, and reveal their belonging to a specific genre and style. Additionally, there are specific features in it, including those that determine the artistic interpretation. That is why it is often the uniqueness of the figuration drawing that is the centre of attention for the performer [Zandberga 2015: 63]. It is possible to define figuration as a component of texture, which ornaments or embellishes the sound fabric with small figures, enriches the elements of the layout or creates the entire texture from motor, melodic, chord or rhythmic elements (figures), which, in certain cases, periodically repeat or enrich the coloristic of the texture with sonoric combinations.

(1863–1948), Emilis Melngailis (1874–1954), Alfrēds Kalniņš (1879–1951), Jānis Zālītis (1884–1943), Jēkabs Graubiņš (1886–1961), Harijs Ore (1885–1971), later Jānis Mediņš (1890–1966), Lūcija Garūta (1902–1977), Arvīds Žilinskis (1905–1993), Jānis Ķepītis (1908–1989), Ādolfs Skulte (1909–2000), and others. However, in a few of the works one can sense an interaction with a refined impressionistic colouring, for example, in Jāzeps Vītols' *Sonatina b moll* (1926) or Lūcija Garūta's *Etudes for the Sostenuto Pedal of a Steinway Piano* (1936). However, even though the obligatory trend of national romanticism among Soviet composers in the 1950s was followed by techniques that were still new in Latvian music in the 1960s and 1970s – dodecaphony, aleatory, sonorism, and others, and then in the 1970s and 1980s with the *new folklore wave* and searches for new melodic and simplicities – the romanticism and its features in piano texture were preserved and are still relevant today.

Latvian piano music was already a part of the European national pianism school in the second half of the 19th century, and it developed in the frame of the pianism traditions of that era. The fusion of melodic and harmonic figuration and its varieties relate to the unique characteristics of the harmonic language in the era of romanticism, and it was broadly and with great variety used by Latvian composers up until the middle of the 20th century. For example, a broad Rachmaninov-like figurative layout can often be encountered in *Daina* No. 7 *Fis dur* (1931) by Jānis Mediņš, where the agitation is achieved with extensive figurations in the left-hand part (in some episodes the range reaches more than three octaves), as well as the *endless* melody in the right hand ornamented with refined triplet figurations.

Even in 21st century music, the figurative texture based on harmony in works with romantic imagery (at times one can see even impressionistic or sonoristic traits), relating to instrumental specifics is relevant. For example – Romualds Jermaks' (1931) *The Waterfall of Pērse* from *Vidzeme Notebook by Watercolours* (2002).



Figure 1. Romualds Jermaks *The Waterfall of Pērse* (mm. 2).

In this way, romantic pianism approaches (figured doubled voice or layer, polyphonised figuration, polyfigure textures, vibrato, tremolo and genre figuration) organically fit with the characteristic genres of the era of romanticism – variations and miniatures, hence this texture is often encountered in the piano works of Latvian composers from the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th till contemporary piano music.

Figurative Elements of Impressionism

The figurative texture of Latvian piano music in the first half of the 20th century is notable for impressionism trends with a different concept of movement, which is mainly associated with the style aesthetic with an emphasis on contemplative illustrative colourfulness and new timbral searches:

- **vibrating background figurations**, which vividly appear in Jānis Mediņš' *Daina* No. 17 *cis moll* (1947), where in the background of the *più mosso* section are heard fast five note figurations in a *pp* dynamic. An example of the usage of the impressionistic texture tradition at the end of the 20th century is Juris Karlsons' (1948) miniature *On a Foggy Morning* (1992), from the cycle *Three Preludes for Piano*. Throughout the entire work, the characteristic layer is heard – a tremolo of thirds, upon which the melody is applied, gradually covering all registers, as well as the bass line, which, via its doubled fifths, is reminiscent of the piano works of Debussy and Ravel;
- **rhythmically clear ostinato figurations** are encountered in the multi-layered and timbrally rich *Etudes for the Sostenuto Pedal of a Steinway Piano* by Lūcija Garūta. For example, the third etude *Bells* is dominated by a multi-layered texture with many levels: the tonic organ-point in the bass, the melody in the middle voice (over the course of the work, it periodically can be heard in an even higher register) and a rhythmic ostinato figuration in the upper voice, which gradually becomes richer;

Figure 2. Lūcija Garūta *Bells* from *Etudes for the Sostenuto Pedal of a Steinway Piano* (mm. 23–24).

- **illustrative figurations**, which imitate specific sources of sound, for example, the flow of water in Dace Aperāne's (1953) *Water Patterns* (2018).

The Real Motoric Figurative Texture

Around the middle of the 20th century, motoric figurative texture appeared in Latvian piano music. A **linear figurative texture** was a trademark style of many of the piano works of Latvian composers in the second half of the 20th century, including Jānis Ivanovs (1906–1983) [Ivanovs 1980: 121–122].

A similar construction of positional scale-like passages can be encountered in the creative work of other composers; however, they can also possess other semantic nuances. For example, Tālivaldis Ķeniņš (1919–2008), the Latvian born composer who resided in Canada, in his *Sonata Fantasy* (1981), unites four sound positional passages with both long, unbroken lines, which function as a release of tension, while rhythmically separately form a rhythmically pulsating background for the episodes that are full of tension.

A linear figurative texture is often associated with **polyrhythm** – a relatively simple example is the hémioles in Pēteris Plakidis' (1947–2017) *Toccata d moll* (1964). A more complex example is the *Allegro espressivo* in the final section of Pauls Dambis' (1936) *Etude No. 6* (from *Ten Etudes for Piano*, 1983), where quadruplets and sextuplets are stacked on the quintuplets in the left-hand part. A notably more complex scope can be seen in Gundega Šmite's (1977) piano work *Mercurium* (2004), where in one measure at least three different rhythm groups are combined: three eighth notes against five sixteenth notes, three sixteenth notes against five thirty-second notes, and four sixteenth notes against three sixteenth notes.

Figure 3. Gundega Šmite *Mercurium* (mm. 48).

The **percussive motoric texture**, characteristic of pianism, is particularly vividly revealed in works of the toccata or dance genre. For example, while still a student, Pēteris Plakidis composed *Tocatta d moll* (1964) and typical characteristics of the use of (this) genre typical characteristics of genre treatment can be felt in the linear figurative layout developed in Tālvāldis Ķeniņš' *Tocatta – Dance* (1971).

20th Century Compositional Techniques of Latvian Piano Music

Due to historical reasons, new compositional technique innovations at the beginning and the first half of the 20th century, only appeared as clear trends in the works of composers living in Latvia in the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, Latvian piano music of the final quarter of the 20th century is renowned for novelties in varied textures relating to new stylistic tendencies which, to a certain degree, are still relevant today:

- textures with features of dodecaphony and pointillism;
- textures with elements of sonorism (cluster technique, sonic effects);
- texture with aleatoric elements;
- textures of minimalism and repetitive techniques.

It would be risky to conclude that the mentioned trends are equally expressed in Latvian piano music. With regards to the characteristics of the instrument, some of them are revealed as diverse and colourful, but other innovative features occur minimally.

1. Texture with Elements of Dodecaphony and Pointillism

In most of the piano works by composers living in Latvia in the second half of the 20th century, a consistently used series technique is rarely encountered, however, other forms of dodecaphony are represented more often. Additionally, the features of **serialism** were used very rarely – there are only a few examples by composers living outside of Latvia – for example *Con forza*, the sixth of Tālvāldis Ķeniņš' *12 Studies in Contemporary Styles for Young Pianists* (1961), written for teaching purposes, and Gundaris Pone's (1932–1994) *Piano Work I* (1963).

An example of **12-tone harmony** usage in the piano works of Latvian composers is Romualds Kalsons' (1936) *Variations* (1960). Pianist and musicologist Maija Sīpola notes the work is created on a characteristic descending sad (tritone) intonation in varied repetition, seeing a similarity with the *soprano ostinato* variation form [Сипола 1990: 252]. Disregarding the music's clear tonal foundation – *b moll*, already in the first measure of the theme all 12 chromatic sounds can be heard, creating a 12-tone harmony.

In the first book of *Watercolours* (1966), Romualds Jermaks used not only the 12-tone field technique, but also 12-tone rows and 12-tone chords [Jermaka 2003:

12–16]. For example, in *Latgale Landscape* (No. 2), the 12-tone rows are heard seven times in the right-hand part, but only once in the left-hand part. A similar approach is used in the brightly lyrical *Ežezers* (No. 8), where the 12-tone rows with small changes are heard a whole 18 times in the refined magnificent figurative texture.

A bright example of the **pointillistic texture**, using the 12-tone field principle, is *Dripping icicles* (No. 6). It is formed with an interpolation approach – sounds, freely repeating, gradually attach themselves to one another, as a result the *number of dripping icicles* constantly increases, additionally, every sound remains in the same octave where it is heard the first time¹.

Ruvidamente (♩ = 66)

Figure 4. Romualds Jermaks *Dripping icicles* (beginning).

At the end of the 20th century, composers turned their attention to a stylistic aspect to the **serialism texture**. A vivid example of that is Gundaris Pone's *Webern from Vainode* – the sixth section of *Postcards from Kurzeme* (1992), where the composer used not only a modified 12-tone series from Anton Webern's Variations op. 27 [Kurpniece 1995: 18–19], but also Webern's characteristic pointillism texture, additionally, as a stylistic contrast between the reversed and mirror like exposition of the 12-tone series, fragments of the Latvian folk song *Kur tu skriesi, vanadzini* are dispersed in the contrasting tonality (*Des dur*) of the chorale texture.

¹ With regards to compositional technique, it is possible to see parallels with Olivier Messiaen's second rhythm etude (*Quatre Études de Rythme Nr. 2 Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, 1947).

2. Texture of Sonorism

Continuing the late romanticism and impressionism traditions, notable features of sonorism can be observed in Latvian piano music on the second half of the 20th century. Sonoric effects (such as **clusters**) as a trend in Latvian piano music appeared in the 1960s. One of the first examples were works by Pauls Dambis – *Third Piano Sonata* (1968), the cycle *Small Guide to Geometry* (1974).

In Violeta Przech's research of sonorism in the piano music of Polish composers in the second half of the 20th century, many innovative approaches of piano technique are noted [Przech 2004: 98–107]. These can also be applied to Latvian piano music:

- **using the piano keys** – striking the keys (clusters with the palm, fist or forearm). For example, the noise effect, which is achieved with a string of palm clusters and concludes with a forearm cluster in the concluding section of Pauls Dambis' *Etude No. 9*, or a traditional approach in development – a glissando in the upper register in Ģederts Ramans' (1927 – 1999) *Allegro cariccioso*, or the impressive broad range of the glissando in the culmination section of Rihards Dubra's *Etude* (1996);
- **playing the strings** – striking a key and, with a finger, fixing the corresponding string, throwing varied objects onto the strings, scraping the strings – pizzicato approach, sliding along the string with a hand or with various objects (also with a *glissando* movement), a tremolo technique on the strings, damping the string with the hand or with various objects, etc. Many Latvian composers have used this kind of playing directly on the strings – for example, Santa Ratniece's (1977) *muqarnas* (2009), Santa Buš's (1978) *Transparent* (2010), Asija Ahmetzanova's (1992) *Ortus* (2012), Dace Apeŗāne's (1953) *Cimbala* (2013);
- **resonance effects** – both with the sostenuto pedal, as well as with the help of the damper pedal – the conclusion of Selga Mence's (1953) *Impressions of Salvador Dali* (2011), where a particularly colourful approach is seen – the left hand presses the keys *d*, *A*, *D*₁ without sound, and with the help of an aleatorically free, maximally quick passage, the concluding chord, created from overtones in D Major, becomes illuminated.

The image shows a musical score for piano (Pno.) in G major, 3/4 time. The right hand part features a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) followed by a glissando up to D5. The left hand part features a triplet of eighth notes (G2, A2, B2) followed by a cluster of D3, A2, and D2. The score concludes with a chord of D major (D4, A4, D5) and a 'lunga' marking. Below the score, there are asterisks and a note: '* Press keys without sound.'

Figure 5. Selga Mence *Impressions of Salvador Dali* (the end).

3. Texture with Aleatory Features

Aleatoric elements appeared in Latvian composers' piano music in the 1960s and 1970s. This compositional technique was inspired by a certain level of performance freedom, as well as the creating of unique textures – this is also emphasised by American musicologist Steven Stucky: “The goal is twofold: to accommodate the performer by restoring his interpretative role, and to realize specific textures of enormous microrhythmic complexity and variety” [Stucky 1981: 110].

One of the first examples of the **aleatoric texture** is in the outer sections of Imants Zemzaris' diptych *Play Time* (1974). With the freely interpreted sound duration notation, whose notes and their groups, fermata and rest length are dependent on the performer's choices, and due to the slow tempo and uniqueness of the sound of the piano (after pressing a key, the sound slowly dissipates), the texture of the work distantly resembles pointillism. The lengths of a sound group indicated by seconds is also a characteristic element in several Pēteris Vasks' piano works – for example, *A Little Night Music* (1978) and *The Landscapes of Burned-out Land* (1992).

Aleatoric features can be encountered in piano works that include playing on the strings (*pizzicato*, microtonal *glissandi*, clusters in the extreme registers), or other sections of the body of the piano, or using additional items, which, as a result, inevitably create coincidental elements of performance.

4. Texture with Features of Minimalism and Repetitive Technique

However, when the repetitive technique united with minimalism, a new stylistic trend appeared in the 1970s – *a new simplicity* (a consonance based on linear thinking and harmonic beauty). The neoromantic orientation, or, as it was called by Jānis Torgāns, *the new wave of romanticism* was in opposition to the one-sided *harsh style* in the 1960s, as it strived for the pure, beautiful, and ideal [Torgāns 2010: 266].

One of the first examples of the **new simplicity** trend is Imants Zemzaris' miniature *Early in the Morning* (1975) – a bright, meditative continuity is reached in it, thanks to the figuration that is held for almost the entire work in the left-hand part, upon which is layered an expressive melody in the upper register. Imagery without conflict and a repetitive texture, characteristic of *new simplicity*, dominates many of Georgs Pelēcis' piano works, beginning with *New Year's Music* (1977) to *Autumn Music* (2011), as well as six suites for piano (1980–2008).

Features of repetitive technique can often be encountered in many other 21st century Latvian piano works: Pēteris Vasks' *White Scenery* (1980), Ēriks Ešenvalds' *Seascape* (2000), Santa Ratniece's *muqarnas* (2008), Indra Riše's (1961) *Path Signs* (2011), and others.

A completely different – an energetic and joyous imagery – overwhelms the elements of minimalism and repetition techniques that saturate the works of composers of the youngest generation. They are dominated by the previously mentioned tendency

towards a different stylistic (Paul Griffith calls this *unholy minimalism*)¹ [Griffith 2010: 348] and a **motoric pedal-less** layout. Vivid examples are Svens Renemanis' (1983) etude *Bells* (2002) and Edgars Raginskis' (1984) *A Little Electronic Music* (2012) – a reflection on the electronic dance music genres – *drum'n'bass*, *techno* and *dubstep*, where rhythm is often more important than other forms of musical expression. Energetic and lively rhythms are slowly layered on top of each other in a phased approach of development, characteristic of minimalism, and the range gradually expands, but the layout slowly becomes even more rhythmically complex. The third phase of development is based on fast, palm on strings dampened rhythmic chord figurations in the lower register, whose sound creates interesting sonoric effects and imitate a synthetic, electronic sound. The rhythms slowly become simpler, and all the voices of the textures synchronize in the fourth and final episode – *House music*².

The contemporary Latvian piano music panorama would be incomplete without the unique stylistic opposition to minimalism and *new simplicity*, in other words, the *new complexity*. For example, Andris Dzenītis' piano works *Dorada* (2010) and *Octagon* (2015), which astound with their vivid register and rhythm contrasts, richness of timbres and usage of the extreme dynamic grades. In Gundega Šmite's *Hungarian Pianoscapes* (2013) the features of *new complexity* appear both in the

The image shows a musical score for piano, measures 47 to 51. It consists of five staves. The top two staves are in treble clef, and the bottom three are in bass clef. The time signature is 7/16. The score is marked with *sfz* (sforzando) in several places. There are various rhythmic notations, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The piece is in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The score shows a complex, layered texture with multiple voices.

Figure 6. Gundega Šmite *Hungarian Pianoscapes I* (mm. 47–51).

¹ The English musicologist Paul Griffiths, in his research of 20th century music styles, when considering the direction of a work's programmatic direction, identifies multiple stylistic trends relating to the repetition technique and minimalism: *holy minimalism* [Griffiths 2010: 257–264], *new romanticism* [Griffiths 2010: 265–284], *new simplicity* [Griffiths 2010: 285–297] and *unholy minimalism*, where movement and kinetic energy are in the foreground [Griffiths 2010: 348–353].

² *House music* is an electronic dance music genre which originated in the 1980s in Chicago.

complex rhythm (the maximally fast rhythmic pulsation – metronome 440 bpm), which creates metrically irregular and changing structures in varied registers, as well as the polyphony of the second section, a metrically different five-layer texture that covers almost the entire diapason.

Conclusions

The piano pieces of Latvian composers until the first half of the 20th century were closely related to aesthetics of romanticism and conventional types of musical texture of the time. Tāivaldis Ķeniņš also emphasised the significance of the tradition of romanticism: “*Latvian music is, with regards to tradition, new music (though I am not speaking about our rich folklore heritage), enriched the most by romanticism, and it is simply not possible to discuss Latvian music and not discuss romanticism*” [Zemzare 1994: 221].

As to the relevance of the romantic tradition, it is also essential to emphasize the influence of folklore and a developed choir culture, which comparatively often manifests itself as a usage of *singing* linearity and choral textures in Latvian piano music.

Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, the broadly represented varied figurative approaches relate to many compositional techniques (piano textures with elements of dodecaphony, polystylistic, and *new complexity*) often over the course of one work.

When analysing piano music of Latvian composers of the 21st century from the performer’s point of view, it is obvious that modern composers in their musical language, use different elements of compositional techniques and, as a result, it is difficult to identify the types of textures or figurations that are used most often. This can be applied to many captivating piano works created in the past few years and premiered by pianist Diāna Zandberga, for example, Pauls Dambis *Bells of the Wind* (2016), Mārīte Dombrovska (1977) *Impressions for Piano and Electronics* (2018), Imants Zemzaris *From Springtime* (2019), Selga Mence’ *Summer Visions* (2020), whose priority is richness of timbres, along with searches for new features of figurative piano texture. That is why the imagination and originality of performer comes to foreground as well as emotional content of every work – the disciplines to be examined through the methods of the artistic research [Doğanton-Dack 2015: 32]. It depends also on pianist’s perception and experience. Finnish pianist and researcher Eveliina Sumelius-Lindblom has written:

“I consider that in this context the perception analytically focuses our attention, while experience is by nature more immediate and more communicable. Experience is also inextricably linked to emotion and to the free

mental associations that occur somewhat on the margins of intentional self-consciousness or self-control. That is to say that both sides of perceptual experience (phenomenology and interpretation) are present when playing the piano and we cannot “switch off” the one part, while using the other” [Sumelius-Lindblom 2019: 89].

Thus, it is possible to conclude, that the figurative texture in piano works by Latvian contemporary composers also can be linked to both – analytic and holistic perception of pianist.

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