

**Kultūras ministres Daces Melbārdes uzruna**  
**5. Eiropas mūzikas forumā “Is access to music digital?”**  
**Jāzeps Vītola Latvijas Mūzikas akadēmijā 2015. gada 12. jūnijā**

Excellences! Ladies and Gentleman! Dear friends of music!

To begin with, let me welcome you to Riga – our beautiful city whose musical heritage dates back centuries.

If you were to ask me to name all the great musicians that are from Riga or who have spent significant periods of time here, I would have to devote a considerable amount of time in doing just that.

I would have to start with Richard Wagner who was the director of music at the Riga City Theatre from 1837 to 1839 and who composed his first major opera – *Rienzi* – in our city.

It was in Riga where Wagner broke with tradition and began to conduct the orchestra facing the musicians instead of the public.

Here in Riga he developed his first ideas on how to make the orchestra less visible to the audience – these were the ideas that later served as an inspiration and architectural blueprint for the great Festival Theatre of Bayreuth.

Many great conductors have called Riga their home – from Bruno Walter and Leo Blech, to Vassily Sinaisky, Mariss Jansons and Andris Nelsons.

I am especially proud of our Andris Nelsons, who became the musical director and chief conductor of the Latvian National Opera at the young age of 25 and has since then has enjoyed a skyrocketing international career.

He is now the principal conductor of the great Boston Symphony Orchestra and has made significant contributions to the interpretation of romantic symphonic repertoire.

Andris Nelsons often teams up with other Latvian musicians – for instance soprano Kristīne Opolais, violinist Baiba Skride or pianist Vestards Šimkus to perform for audiences around the world.

Another great musician from Latvia is violist Gidon Krēmers who founded *Kremerata Baltica* – an incredibly versatile and energetic chamber orchestra with young musicians from the Baltic States.

*Kremerata Baltica* performs both classical and contemporary music, with Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks at the core of its repertoire.

Our opera house, where Andris Nelsons began his career, has been described as a laboratory and powerhouse of world-class opera singers.

Mezzo soprano Elīna Garanča, tenor Aleksandrs Antoņenko, sopranos Kristīne Opolais and Maija Kovaļevska, bass baritone Egils Siliņš – Latvians are clearly able to cover all operatic roles with world class singers.

Since our opera singers are world class, it means they sing all around the world – not only in Riga, but also in Milan, Vienna and New York. But thanks to the HD broadcasts of opera performances in cinemas, people can follow their careers and enjoy their singing without having to travel to far-off lands.

Also, people from all over the world can watch performances of the Latvian National opera online – on The Opera Platform, which is a new project by ARTE and Opera Europe.

I would recommend you all to watch a performance of the new opera *Valentīna* by Latvian composer Artūrs Maskats. *Valentīna* is a story about Valentīna Freimane, a legendary theatre and film historian who survived the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with astonishing dignity and perseverance.

*Valentīna* is available on the Opera Platform for anyone to watch and appreciate.

Opera is dear to the Latvian people because singing is deeply ingrained in the cultural tradition of the nation. There was even a slogan – “*Latvia, the land that sings*”.

This is not without reason, because almost every Latvian has sung in a choir during their school or student years and many continue to do so until old age.

This remarkable singing tradition culminates in the Song and Dance Celebration, where 14 thousand singers sing together *a capella* with such nuances, technical skill and tonal colour that you forget you’re listening to a crowd of amateurs and believe you’re witnessing the eighth wonder of the world.

People in Latvia prepare for later participation in the Song and Dance Celebration already at kindergarten and school where the first skills in singing and dancing are acquired.

In the Youth Song and Dance Celebration, that also takes place every five years, some 40 thousand young people take part. This ensures sustainability and the succession of these celebrations.

The concept of the next Celebration is developed over a five-year period, the repertoire considered, new works created that are learned and tested in shows and approved at regional celebrations and special warm-up events.

More than 80 thousand people participate in what we call the process of the song and dance celebration – they rehearse at least once or twice a week and thus find their creative expression and perhaps respite from their everyday lives as bankers, shopkeepers, civil servants and software engineers.

Discussing the future of our Song and Dance Celebration, many people in Latvia have expressed concerns about how the digital world will impact the age-old tradition of choir singing.

I can assure you that no adverse effects have been observed so far.

On the contrary, as in every other human activity, the digital world and the Internet can serve as an immense resource, helping people to connect and learn from each other.

Latvian choir singers exchange and look for music scores on the Internet. Gone are the days when somebody could use an excuse of having lost the score for his poor singing. Now everybody can find the desired sheet music on the web and start practising right away from an iPad.

At first I was slightly suspicious of people reading scores from their iPads but some choir music enthusiasts have pointed out that it is a great feature to be able to read music from an iPad without the disturbing sound of synchronous page turns.

Of course, an occasion like our Song and Dance Celebration is also a major social and communal event, which receives much attention on the social media.

Videos from the festival have received thousands and hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube, thus helping people to appreciate what a tremendous event it is.

People can even stream the festival events to their smart phones and tablets, which proves really helpful because not everybody is lucky enough to get a ticket to the live performance.

There have been a number of social media campaigns to raise awareness of the Song and Dance Celebration with people telling stories and sharing their appreciation of this tradition.

In preparation for the most recent Song and Dance Celebration, people were invited to sing online whatever they liked for twenty seconds, and a special app created personalized logos live with ancient Latvian signs assigned to particular musical notes.

The signs created a wreath – a traditional Latvian symbol and a key attribute of the Song and Dance Celebration.

The organizers found masters of this ancient craft and captured their wreath-making skills on film.

The patterns were then examined and turned into computer generated processing scripts. It was now possible to offer a personal experience of the festival to any person anywhere in the world with access to a laptop, Internet and a voice.

Instead of the usual policy of protecting logos and trademarks, it was decided to release the full media potential of our idea by endorsing downloads and granting free distribution among users.

We made it clear that all the logos sung were owned by the people, just like the Song and Dance Celebration itself. More than 20 thousand people created their personalized Song and Dance Celebration logo by singing in front of their computers.

This year we are holding the Youth Song and Dance Celebration in which more than 40 thousand young people are taking part. At this very moment there is a social media campaign celebrating the role of music teachers in training young people in the singing tradition.

So I can assure you that the Internet only helps our Song and Dance Celebration to flourish in the digital age and attract and educate new audiences and participants.

This brings us, I believe, to the core of today's forum and discussion.

The question is – how new technology shapes access to cultural heritage and various forms of contemporary culture?

And what opportunities does the digital world offer cultural institutions for improving access to the arts and especially music?

I mentioned already that Latvians can follow the careers of our world class opera singers, thanks to the live HD broadcasts of opera performances from the best opera houses to cinemas around the world.

In the same way one can listen to live performances of a great orchestra like the Berlin Philharmoniker from the comfort of one's home.

Also, streaming services like Spotify, Tidal or Apple Music, which was announced only this week, are becoming more and more popular.

An acquaintance of mine has given up all of his extensive opera CD collection, because it became useless thanks to Spotify.

Those who have studied music will remember that only 10 or 15 years ago, one had to go to the audio room of a music library to study great recordings of the classical repertoire. Now you can access the entire great musical heritage instantly and listen to it and study it almost anywhere.

Against this background of digital advances, it may seem hard to argue in favour of anything analogue.

I remember a nice cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine some time ago. Two people were standing in front of a record player, as the owner was explaining: *"The two things that really drew me to vinyl were the expense and the inconvenience."*

Undoubtedly newer forms of recording take over the old ones. But this is not so, I believe, in the case of the live and unmediated experience of the arts.

Our experience with regional concert halls in Latvia shows clearly that digital access to music is one thing, but being there at a live performance is something else.

To be more precise – I think that the more access you have to great performances of music digitally, the more willing you are to visit and experience the concert or event firsthand, in the real world.

One has to keep in mind that acoustic and symphonic music has been composed with specific performance criteria in mind.

You need classically trained musicians and a conductor, traditional acoustic instruments and a symphony hall with proper acoustics to perform and, in turn, experience that music to its fullest.

And this, of course, is true not only for classical or symphonic music, but also for folk, jazz, choir and various other forms of musical art where live performance and real people are involved.

Music performance is a social and community building event.

For instance, in 2013 we opened a new concert hall called *Gors* in Rēzekne – a small city of a little more than 30 thousand people. Many expressed doubts at the time as to how Rēzekne will be able to run the new concert hall.

In reality this has been a huge success. Last year alone more than 150 thousand people visited the concert hall for more than 150 events that took place there – not only music, but also performance and contemporary art. There were more than 45 seminars and gatherings as well as 14 exhibitions; the concert hall welcomed 340 visitor groups.

*Gors* has also become a kind of virtual community – they are very active on Facebook and other social media, which helps people not only from Rēzekne, but also from Riga and other parts of Latvia to follow the cultural life of Rēzekne.

I personally know people who travel to Rēzekne just to hear the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra play there, because the acoustics of the concert hall are highly acclaimed. They follow the schedule on the Internet and buy their tickets online far in advance.

I have visited Rēzekne many times – both physically and virtually – and can assure you that local people take pride in their new concert hall; it is always full of people and serves as a kind of melting pot for forging a reinvented sense of belonging to the city.

And also one must not forget about the purely economic impulses that great cultural objects are able to generate. The beneficial effects on employment, city regeneration, local businesses and improving the quality of life are obvious to everybody who has visited Rēzekne.

Similar effects can be observed in Cēsis – another Latvian town where a new concert hall has been built or, more precisely, reconstructed.

This is the Vidzeme concert hall, which has been instrumental in Cēsis becoming an unofficial summer culture capital of Latvia. Cēsis has a great art and music festival, nice cafes and a very charming atmosphere.



It is the same with music as it is with people.

You can communicate with your friends on Facebook or Twitter, you can e-mail or call them, but that is not enough. You need at least from time to time meet them in person – to hug and embrace them and just spend time talking one to one.

It does not mean that digital communication with your friends is not real or is worthless – it certainly is not. It has different advantages – instant sharing of news, for example. But there is something profound and indispensable about real human contact.

So, I think that it is a very good approach to develop both digital and real life access to music.

We know how popular music performers have been faced with the challenges of the digital age. They now make money not so much from new albums and singles, but rather from live performances for which people are ready to pay.

In a way, the question of our forum – Is access to music digital? – means that we have to consider how competitive culture is in the digital environment.

Culture in the digital environment clearly competes with entertainment – popular music, video games, reality television and other forms of entertainment that rarely provide people with the means of spiritual and personal fulfilment.

The reality is that we have to compete with entertainment by investing in cultural education, access to culture and music and by raising awareness of the cultural riches that are at our fingertips.

A sceptic could say that everything or almost everything is available in the digital format already and there is not much we can do.

It is true that you can listen to almost every performance of a great orchestra, musician or choir on YouTube or Spotify.

It is true that you can view an infinite catalogue of artworks on sites like Google Cultural Institute or simply on the Internet.

It is also true that almost every novel or work of fiction that has ever been written is available to read on Kindle or iBooks.

And of course you can watch an entire collection of historical films online, using various streaming services.

But the real question is – will people do that? And why would they choose culture over simple entertainment?

This, I believe, is where the role of cultural and educational institutions is crucial.

Access to culture means speaking with different audiences, educating these audiences and presenting them with the artistic achievements of our civilization in a coherent and attractive way.

One can say that all our cultural policy is in some way a digital cultural policy now.

This is why I believe the role of music education and engagement strategies of music institutions is of crucial importance.

We have to raise the presence of culture in the digital environment not only by digitizing cultural artefacts but also by putting them in context and helping people to make sense of why they are important for them as community members and the inheritors of a cultural tradition.

Thank you.