

Views of the Baltic German Press on the Traditions

*of Other Nationalities in Riga's
Music Life in the 1870s–1880s:
The Influence of the Political Context*

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ABSTRACT

The history of German presence in the territory of Latvia began in the thirteenth century, when Germans arrived here as crusaders. From that time until the nineteenth century, they played the dominant role in the economic and political life of the region. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the situation changed. After the abolition of serfdom (1817–1819), Latvians greatly improved their economic and educational status, and the new Latvian intelligentsia expressed its opposition to German dominance in the region. The Latvian national revival of that period was supported by the Russian authorities with a somewhat selfish interest.

The aim of this paper is to answer the question: how did these processes affect the descriptions of music life in the press, or, more precisely, one aspect of press commentaries – the Baltic Germans' views on the traditions of other nationalities?

It has been found that many reviews confirm the Baltic Germans' interest and openness towards other national traditions. At least some of the German music critics do not deserve to be criticised for ignoring the music life of ethnic Latvians as described in Latvian periodicals. The political context, however, comes to the fore when discussing not the music itself, but the press publications or speeches that include some 'provocative' elements – be it claims to the premises of the Rigaer Stadttheater voiced in a Russian newspaper, or efforts to deny the inspiring role of Germans in Latvian cultural history.

Keywords: Latvians, song festivals, Russians, opera

INTRODUCTION

'Baltic Germans' is a notion applied nowadays to a relatively small group of people who are no longer united by a common homeland (though a large proportion of them now live in Germany), but rather by an interest in the cultural and historical heritage of their ancestors – the former German inhabitants of the present-day Latvia and Estonia. However, a century-and-a-half ago Baltic Germans were the most influential national community in the then Ostsee governorates of Russia, both economically and politically. Estonian researcher Ulrike Plath describes the period of Baltic German history from the eighteenth century up to 1918 as follows:

In this period of time, Baltic German cultural domination reached its peak, but also started to decline due to the constant growth of nationalism, followed by the final migration of Baltic Germans back to Germany between 1905 and 1941.¹

¹ Ulrike Plath, 'Heimat: Rethinking Baltic German Spaces of Belonging', *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture*, 23/3-4 (2014), 55.

This paper only discusses two decades, the 1870s–1880s, out of the longer period covered by Plath. However, many politically important processes were concentrated in these two decades. The aim of the article is to answer the question: how did these processes affect the descriptions of music life in the press, or, more precisely, one aspect of press commentaries – the Baltic Germans' views on the traditions of other nationalities? In addition to discussing the purely aesthetic values, were these descriptions of music life also influenced by political processes, and in what ways?

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of German presence in the territory of Latvia and Estonia began in the thirteenth century, when Germans arrived here as crusaders. From that time until the nineteenth century, they played the dominant role in the economic and political life of the region. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the situation changed. The new political context has aptly been characterised by historians Karsten Brüggemann and Katja Wezel. They describe the position of the Baltic Germans in the Russian Empire as coming under attack

from two sides, the central Russian government and the emancipation movements of the local majorities, the Estonians and Latvians. What had been a more or less unchallenged and widely accepted role, the position of being the masters of the region gave way to a growing feeling of being a tiny ethnic minority under demographic, cultural, and eventually also political threat.²

After the abolition of serfdom (1817–1819), Latvians greatly improved their economic and educational status, and the new Latvian intelligentsia expressed its opposition to German dominance in the region in many ways. In the first years of the so-called Latvian national awakening, an especially important role was played by the weekly newspaper *Pēterburgas Avīzes* (1862–1865) whose position is described by the historian Kevin C. O'Connor as aimed at ridiculing the Baltic Germans' cultural and political superiority.³

² Karsten Brüggemann and Katja Wezel, 'Nationally Indifferent or Ardent Nationalists? On the Options for Being German in Russia's Baltic Provinces, 1905–17', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 20/1 (2019), 39, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/kri.2019.0002>, accessed 1 July 2024.

³ Kevin O'Connor, *The History of the Baltic States* (Greenwood, 2015), 62.

It must be admitted that the Latvian national revival in this period was supported by the Russian authorities with a somewhat selfish interest. The policy of Tsar Alexander II, who ascended to the throne in 1855, was aimed at weakening the Baltic Germans' position in the region by all means available. Historian Leo Dribins rightly concludes that Latvians did not resist Russification because that process limited the rights of the Baltic Germans and took away German regional autonomy, which had resisted the national aspirations of the Latvians.⁴ All this background influenced the attitudes that prevailed in the Baltic German community, as manifested in press publications of various types.

GENERAL TENDENCIES IN BALTIC GERMAN MUSIC CRITICISM IN THE 1870S–1880S WITH REGARD TO OTHER NATIONAL CULTURES

Many articles in the Baltic German press confirm that music critics were interested in works reflecting various national (folk-like) influences and expressed their views in colourful descriptions. For example, in the guest performance by the Benjamin Bilse orchestra (1878), an especially important final chord was provided by Stanisław Moniuszko's 'Mazurka' from the opera *Halka*, played as the last piece. The newspaper *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* describes the impressions from this concert as follows:

This Mazurka delighted the audience to a great extent, but it was also a really captivating composition, which was played so excellently that I would not have been surprised if the listeners had jumped up from their seats and danced the Mazurka.⁵

Elements of Hungarian music attracted special attention. In an 1873 review by the prominent critic Friedrich Pilzer (1837–1911), 'the fiery temperament

and the rhythmic aspect' of the *Hungarian Suite* (*Die ungarische Suite*) by Heinrich Hofmann was highlighted.⁶ The same critic noted that the *Hungarian Dances* (*Ungarische Tänze*) by Johannes Brahms arranged by József Joachim have significantly helped to bring out the qualities of Ferdinand Laub's violin playing – its liveliness, 'wealth of contrasts in rhythm and timbre'.⁷

However, regarding certain cultural phenomena, another attitude also manifested itself – skepticism or even scorn dictated by political considerations. Developments in the opera genre should primarily be mentioned in this context. Press publications show that authoritative Baltic German music critics felt somewhat disappointed that the Italian and French opera gained such popularity in Riga. In search for alternatives, activities that upheld the German traditions were praised, among them – the founding of the Riga Bach Society. In 1872, the already cited Friedrich Pilzer described recent tendencies in concert life as follows:

As a convincing proof and example of how little connection there is between operatic life and other musical events in the city, I will only mention the following circumstance: Since the tasteless operas of a certain Verdi have occupied such an important place in the theatre repertoire, and the French grand opéra, supposedly so seductive and disorienting, has affected the pure understanding of music, [at the same time] interest in more honest non-theatrical music has increased rather than fading. Precisely at the time when the triumphal march of the modern grand opéra began, the most beautiful upsurge in the activity of the 'musical society'⁸ has taken place, and when the said triumphal march reached its heyday, our 'Bach Society'⁹ was founded.¹⁰

6 '[...] ihr feuriges Temperament, die rhythmische Seite.' Fr[iedrich] P[ilzer], 'Concert', *Rigasche Zeitung*, 247 (23 Oct. 1873), 1.

7 'Reichthum an Contrasten der Rhythmik und der Tonfarben.' Fr[iedrich] P[ilzer], 'Concerte', *Rigasche Zeitung*, 32 (8 Feb. 1873), 2.

8 Pilzer refers here to the Riga Music Society (*Musikalische Gesellschaft zu Riga*), founded in 1759, which was the main organiser of symphonic concerts in the city in the period under review.

9 From the mid-1860s onwards, members of the Bach Society (*der Bachverein*, also *Bach-Verein*) contributed to Riga's first performances of many oratorio-type works.

10 'Als einen schlagenden Beweis dafür, in wie geringem Rapport das Opernwesen mit den sonstigen tonkünstlerischen Aeußerungen einer Stadt steht, führe ich nur den Umstand an, daß z. B. seit der Zeit, in welcher die dem Geschmack so verderblichen Opern eines Verdi einen so wichtigen Platz im Theaterrepertoire einnehmen und die französische große Oper vermeintlich so verführerisch und ablenkend auf den reinen Musiksinne wirkt, – das Interesse für die gediegenere

4 Leo Dribins, 'Vācu un vācbaltiešu loma Latvijas etnopolitiskajā vēsturē', in Ilze Krokša, Aina Balaško, and Leo Dribins, eds, *Vācu kultūra Latvijā: ieskats vācu-latviešu novadu kultūras un vācu biedrību vēsturē = Deutsche Kultur in Lettland: Einblick in die Geschichte der deutsch-lettischen Regionskulturen und die deutsche Vereinsgeschichte* (Riga, 2009), 6–10.

5 'Diese Mazurka begeisterte das Publikum in hohem Grade, es war aber auch wirklich eine ungemein packende Composition, die so vortrefflich gespielt wurde, daß es mich nicht Wunder genommen hätte, wenn das Publikum von den Stühlen aufgesprungen wäre und Mazurka getanzt hätte.' –y–, 'Bilse', *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*, 190 (18 Aug. 1878), 3. All the translations of quoted texts come from the author of this paper.

In Germany itself, a large number of the then music critics had a negative attitude not only to Giuseppe Verdi, but to Italian and French opera in general. Musicologist Laura Tunbridge mentions debates about the importance of cultivating a national style or school and supporting musicians from one's homeland. These concerns became especially relevant with the rise of Wagnerism in the second half of the century, as one of the typical trends of that time.¹¹ Tunbridge points out elsewhere that the emphasis on national unity characteristic of music journalism resonated significantly with the political situation; namely, with the political manoeuvres of Otto von Bismarck, which culminated in his appointment as Prime Minister of Prussia (1862), and the establishment of the German Empire in 1871.¹²

Research allows us to conclude that the range of attitudes towards non-German music was wide and ambiguous. The following subsections examine how this ambiguity manifested itself in evaluations of the musical life of Baltic Germans' immediate neighbours living in Riga – Latvians and Russians.

THE FIRST REVIEWS OF LATVIAN ART MUSIC

The earliest reviews of Latvian art music in the German press discuss the First All-Latvian Song Festival that took place in 1873 and was the first assembly of so many ethnic Latvians from different regions, who met in Riga – the administrative centre of the Russian Governorate of Livonia. The festival programme included not only vocal performances but also a parade of Latvians dressed in varied folk costumes in the then-German Riga; many patriotic speeches were also delivered.

How was this event perceived by Riga's German community? The Latvian newspaper *Balss* of 11 August 1879, comments on this subject with a certain bitterness.

außertheatralische Musik eher zu- als abgenommen hat. Gerade in der Zeit, als die Herrschaft der modernen großen Oper begann, nahm auch die "musikalische Gesellschaft" ihren schönsten Aufschwung, und als jene Herrschaft in vollster Blüthe stand, ist unser "Bach-Verein" entstanden.' Fr[iedrich] Pilzer, 'Das Rigaer Musikleben sonst und jetzt', *Rigascher Almanach für 1872*, 15 ([1871]), 15.

¹¹ Laura Tunbridge, 'Constructing a Musical Nation: German-Language Criticism in the Nineteenth Century', in Christopher Dingle, ed., *The Cambridge History of Music Criticism* (Cambridge, 2019), 173.

¹² Tunbridge, 'Constructing a Musical Nation', 182.

The correspondent, comparing the First Latvian (1873) and Estonian (1879) Festivals, notes:

Riga had neither the soul nor an understanding for a Latvian national celebration, which, honouring her [Riga], was celebrated within its boundaries. [...] The Baltic German newspapers of Riga did not publish a single congratulatory comment during the Latvian celebrations.¹³

And further:

Let us hope that the Baltic German newspapers and population [...], with R. D. Ztg. [*Revalsche Zeitung*], will pay attention to the example thus set, and will not have such a cold and disinterested attitude towards the second Latvian festival.¹⁴

It must be noted, however, that the Latvian author is not completely objective. Both largest German newspapers, *Rigasche Zeitung* and *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*, described the festival in a positive light. An example is a review of a sacred music concert, published in *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* of 29 June 1873:

Vocal performances included four works for mixed choir and five works for male choir. They were written mainly in a simple homophonic style, but several of them included some figurations, and one, 'Vater-Unser' by Rinck, was even a fuguing [composition]. The performance was generally surprisingly good.¹⁵

However, unlike the (mostly well received) musical aspects, the speeches delivered during the festivals sometimes caused concern and even led to condemnation. For example Theodor Pantenius, writer and editor of the *Rigasche Rundschau*, describes a reception held during the First Song Festival in the Riga Latvian Society as follows:

Among the beverages, beer and carbonated water, a soft drink, prevailed, but a Rhine wine was also drunk. Almost all speeches reflected peaceful patriotism. Only Mr Kronwald, inspired by

¹³ 'Rīgai nebij ne sirds ne saprašanas priekš Latviešu tautas svētkiem, kuri, arī viņai par godu, tika viņas robežās nosvinēti. [...] Rīgas Vācu laikrakstiem nebija Latviešu svētkos neviena apsveicināšanas vārda.' 'Igauņu otrie vispārīgie mūzikas un dziedāšanas svētki. I', *Balss*, 62 (11 Aug. 1879), 1.

¹⁴ 'Cerēsim, ka Rīgas Vācu laikraksti un iedzīvotāji [...] no N. D. Ztg. [Neue Dörptsche Zeitung – B. J.] doto priekšzīmi ievēros un pret Latviešu otrajiem vispārīgajiem svētkiem vairs tik auksti un vienaldzīgi neizturēsies.' 'Igauņu otrie', 2.

¹⁵ 'Die Gesangsvorträge bestanden in 4 gemischten und 5 Männerchören. Die meisten derselben waren im einfachen homophonen Stil gehalten, einige enthielten figurirte Stellen, einer, das Rinck'sche Vaterunser, sogar fugirte. Die Ausführung war eine durchweg überraschend gute.' 'Ueber das lettische Gesangfest in Riga', *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*, 147 (29 June 1873), 2.

fanaticism, was unfortunately unable to refrain from manifesting his sentiment in a very unfortunate way.¹⁶

This comment refers to Atis Kronvalds (Kronwald, 1837–1875), who, in his festive speech, sharply reacted to the words of the director of the Vidzeme Teachers' Seminary Jānis Cimze (1814–1881), who claimed that Latvians must thank German schools for developing their singing traditions. Kronvalds received such a stormy ovation from the audience that the elderly Cimze, obviously insulted, quietly left the festive reception.¹⁷

Cimze's name also deserves attention in the context of other Baltic German press publications. Cimze was the editor of *Dziesmu rota* (The Garland of Songs, 1872–1884) – the first collection that included many Latvian folk song settings. They were the dominant repertoire of the first All-Latvian Song Festivals. *Dziesmu rota* has been popular among choir members both then and nowadays. However, the most radical representatives of the Latvian national movement, such as Kārlis Baumanis (also Karl, or Carl Baumann, 1835–1905, composer of the future Latvian national anthem), criticised Cimze for an insufficiently careful selection of songs, that is, for including tunes of non-Latvian origin, for example, German songs, in addition to Latvian folk melodies. Cimze was defended by the Baltic German pastor Karl Konrad (Carl Conrad) Ulmann (1829–1890). In an article published in *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*, Ulmann notes:

The primaevial folk song is the same for all peoples, both in terms of melody and text. [...] Folk song and its melodies are subject to constant change. [...] And if the people include phrases and bars from Russian or German music in their melodies, but sing them as their own, then no critical B.K. can oppose it [...].¹⁸

Kārlis Baumanis sharply criticised this viewpoint by asking a rhetorical question:

Indeed, what is your genuine, primaevial folk song, which in terms of melody is the same for all nations and, being universal, differs from the songs of other peoples only in language? Does such song really exist? No, it is as unlikely as [...] an abstract human.¹⁹

The intervention of *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* in the conflict significantly contributed to its escalation. Baumanis was defended by the newspaper *Mājas Viesis*, which noted:

[...] we sincerely want peace and especially also live in peace with the local Germans. Therefore, we consider it our task to reject such incitement and to remind the newspaper *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* that it has enough to take care of in its own house.²⁰

Meanwhile, *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* was supported by another highly influential Baltic German newspaper, *Rigasche Zeitung*. It seems that the words 'its own house', which emphasise the separation of the two national communities and presumably deny the right of the Germans to intervene in the internal disputes of Latvians, occurred to the *Rigasche Zeitung* as particularly offensive. An anonymous author (or editor) recalls the role of several Baltic German pastors in collecting Latvian folksongs. It should be admitted that their contribution was significant, although representatives of the Latvian national movement tended to diminish it, because of their already mentioned opposition to German dominance in the region. *Rigasche Zeitung* thus notes:

The "Mājas Viesis" would do well to understand for once what would happen to our shared home if it occurred to us to shut ourselves off from each other in such a way that everyone sees their roommates as strangers. [...] What would have happened to our Latvian folk songs if Baltic Germans, correctly understanding that what is good for the lower strata of our folk is also good for all of us, had not collected and published them?

No, no matter how inconvenient it may be for Latvian poets and writers of certain orientations, the educated strata of our people – regardless of whether its individual representatives are native speakers of German or Latvian – will always retain control over

¹⁶ T[heodor], P[antenus], 'Allerlei vom lettischen Gesangfest', *Rigasche Zeitung*, 149 (30 June 1873), 2.

¹⁷ Matīss Kaudzīte, *Atmiņas no "tautiskā laikmeta un viņa lielākiem aizgājušiem darbiniekiem*, Vol. 1 (Cēsis, Rīga, 1924), 188–189.

¹⁸ 'Das ursprüngliche Volkslied, nach Lied und Melodie, ist bei allen Völkern gleich [...]. Das Volkslied aber und seine Melodie sind in stetem Wechsel begriffen. [...] Und hat das Volk russische und deutsche musikalische Phrasen und Tacte seiner Melodie einverleibt und singt sie als sein Eigenthum, so kann ihm das kein kritischer B. K. wehren [...].' [Karl Konrad Ulmann,] In Sachen des lettischen Volksliedes und seiner Melodie, *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*, 265 (13 Nov. 1874), 2.

¹⁹ 'In der That, welcher Art ist wohl Ihr echtes, ursprüngliches Volkslied, das nach Lied und Melodie bei allen Völkern gleich wäre, und das, allgemein-menschlich, sich von dem Liede anderer Völker nur durch die Sprache unterscheidet? Hat solch ein Lied eine reale Existenz? Nein, ebenso wenig wie [...] der Mensch an und für sich.' [Karl Baumann,] 'Folgendes "offene Schreiben [...]"', *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*, 293 (15 Dec. 1874), 5.

²⁰ '[...] mēs no sirds vēlējamies mieru un īpaši arī ar šejienes Vāciešiem mierā dzīvot. Tādēļ mēs ieskatām par savu uzdevumu, tādu kūdīšanu atradīt un tai avīzē "Zeitung für Stadt und Land" atgādināt, ka viņai pašai diezgan darba pietiek savu pašas namu apkopot. 'No Rīgas', *Mājas Viesis*, 4 (25 Jan. 1875), 2.

them [i.e. those writers and poets], and no matter how hard they try to shake it off, any such effort is doomed to failure.²¹

The statement made in that last paragraph apparently reflects a principle important for the Baltic German press, since even in reviews of later Latvian song festivals, celebratory speeches were always discussed along with the musical aspects. An example comes from a review of the Second Song Festival in Riga (1880), in which Krišjānis Kalniņš, head of the Riga Latvian Society, received sharp criticism for mentioning class inequality in his speech to Baltic Germans (whose song festival was taking place at the same time), which still divided Germans and Latvians.²² The reviewer's comments on the folksong arrangements performed at the festival are, conversely, overwhelmingly favourable:

[...] we can hardly recall when a performance of folk songs gave us a similar impression and pleasure. These are peculiarly captivating melodies, mostly in minor keys, and hardly any sensitivity can resist their frequently admirable charm, unless someone complete lacks a sense of beauty.²³

It should be concluded that the German press was more interested in the development of Latvian culture than its Latvian contemporaries (for example, the previously mentioned Kronvalds) were ready to admit. However, in the specific historical conditions of that time, this interest

was not destined to develop into a closer cooperation between representatives of the two national cultures.

VIEWS ON RUSSIAN ART MUSIC IN RIGA

Until the 1860s, Russian music was rarely performed at Riga's concert halls. In the 1870s, however, soon after the establishment of Riga's first influential Russian newspaper *Rizhsky Vestnik* (1869), Russians began to aspire more and more persistently to an important place in the cultural life of the city, including music, and initially even attempted to share premises with the Riga German Theatre. This caused heated polemics in the press, reflected, for instance, in the *Rigasche Zeitung's* article titled 'Noch einmal die russische Bühne im Stadttheater' (Once More about the Russian stage in the City Theatre). The newspaper quotes a rhetorical question asked in *Rizhsky vestnik* in this regard: 'Why is it that what is possible in Petersburg should not be possible also in Riga? Why does the Russian Alexander Theatre open its door wide hospitably to the German troupe, and Riga's common theatre shuts the door even to the very idea of a Russian troupe?'²⁴

The *Rigasche Zeitung* answered: 'A real difference in the size and grouping of the populations is the main reason why what is necessary in one city is not possible in the other one.' The newspaper emphasized that the number of rehearsals in the Riga City Theatre is also limited compared to Saint Petersburg because all performances are much more expensive, taking into account the smaller audience, so that sharing the premises with another theatre could have unfortunate consequences.²⁵ *Rizhsky Vestnik* was far from satisfied with such an explanation, and the sharp polemic continued in an article by its editor, Evgraf Cheshihin (1824–1888), who reproached the Germans of Riga for their ignorance of the stage masterpieces of Russian literature and music.²⁶

21 'Der "Mahj. Weesis" würde gut thun, sich einmal zu Gemüthe zu führen, was wohl aus unser Aller Hause werden würde, wenn es uns einfiele, uns so von einander abzuschließen, daß ein Jeder in seinem Zimmernachbarn einen Fremdling erblickt. [...] Was wäre wohl aus unseren lettischen Volksliedern geworden, wenn nicht deutsche baltische Männer, in richtiger Erkenntniß, daß, was unseren unteren Volksklassen zu Gute kommt, uns Allen zu Gute kommt, das lettische Volkslied gesammelt und herausgegeben hätten? [...]

Nein, so unbequem es einer gewissen Sorte von lettischen Poeten und Schriftstellern auch sein mag, sie werden die Controle seitens unserer gebildeten Volksschichten, möge die Muttersprache der einzelnen Glieder nun deutsch oder lettisch sein, nicht los und sie können sie nicht los werden, sie mögen sich derselben erwehren, soviel sie wollen.' 'Riga, 28. Januar', *Rigasche Zeitung*, 22 (28 Jan. 1875), 2.

22 'Nachklänge', *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*, 145 (26 June 1880), 1.

23 '[...] wir uns kaum erinnern, je durch den Vortrag von Volksliedern einen ähnlichen Eindruck erhalten, einen gleichen Genuß gehabt zu haben. Es sind eigenthümlich reizvolle, meist in Moll gehaltene Melodien, deren oft wunderbarem Zauber sich wohl kein Gemüth verschließen kann, dem der Sinn für das Schöne nicht etwa gänzlich fehlte.' v. G., 'Das lettische Sängerfest. II. Das weltliche Concert', *Rigasche Zeitung*, 141 (20 June 1880), 1.

24 'Warum ist das, was in Petersburg möglich ist, nicht auch in Riga möglich? warum öffnet das russische Alexandertheater gastfreundlich seine Thore sperrweit der deutschen Truppe und das rigasche allgemeine Stadttheater schlägt die seinen vor dem bloßen Gedanken an eine russische Truppe zu?' 'Noch einmal die Russische Bühne im Stadttheater', *Rigasche Zeitung*, 107 (10 May 1875), 1.

25 'Der reale Unterschied zwischen der Bevölkerungszahl und Bevölkerungsgruppierung ist es ja, was in der einen Stadt nothwendig macht, was in der anderen unmöglich ist.' 'Noch einmal', 1.

26 E[vgraf] Ch[eshihin], 'Eshhe raz russkaja scena v gorodskom teatre', *Rizhsky Vestnik*, 110 (16 May 1875), 2.

However, already in the late 1870s the opera *Zhizn za tsarya* (*A Life for the Tsar*) by Mikhail Glinka became the first Russian opera to be staged in Riga. *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* appreciated the Russian elements in the opera and at the same time emphasised parallels with German music. The reviewer saw a similarity in the very fact that the opera seeks a counterbalance to the Italian and French dominance in this field and resembles similar efforts in German music: ‘The Russian composer was evidently not unaffected by this turn in German music.’²⁷ The first chorus from the introduction is described as follows: ‘In addition to its genuinely national Russian character, we see a product of genuine German artistry in the magnificent development of the fugue with its powerful conclusion.’ At the same time, the reviewer admitted that *A Life for the Tsar* is closer to an oratorio than an opera.²⁸

In the 1880s, a Russian theatre was founded in Riga (1883) and Russian music started being heard much more frequently than before. At that time, a clearly dominant position was formed in the Baltic German press: an enthusiastic attitude towards Pyotr Tchaikovsky and a quite reserved (not to say dismissive) one – against The Mighty Five. If we compare the reviews of the premieres of *Eugene Onegin* at the Russian Theatre in Riga (1888), we can see that it was the Baltic German author who saw (better than his Russian colleagues) the historical significance of this then quite new opera composed in 1879. Regarding the production of *Eugene Onegin*, the newspaper *Rizhsky Vestnik* wrote that a large part of the audience left the premiere with a sense of certain disappointment. While highlighting several beautiful moments in the opera, the newspaper claimed that the composition lacked dramaturgical intensity and several episodes were boring – especially Scene Two in Tatiana’s room (‘Tatjana’s Letter’). *Rizhsky Vestnik* claimed it was not the fault of the performers. It was the composer who evidently lacked a sense of lively dramaturgy.²⁹

The German reviewer Hans Schmidt (1854–1923) was much more enthusiastic. He noted:

As *Faust* for the Germans, so *Onegin* is truly the national poem for the Russians. The figure of Tatiana embodies the Slavic girl character – as Gretchen does the Germanic one [...]. But what Goethe could not become in Gounod’s setting, namely, a like-minded musical treatment that could match the poetry, Pushkin received to a full extent from Tchaikovsky. The composer knew how to create music that is truly congenial to the poetry [...].³⁰

In the continuation, Schmidt highlighted what he considered as the most beautiful fragments, including the scene of ‘Tatiana’s letter’. He concluded that in this opera Tchaikovsky reveals his soul and the ‘tones of the heart’.³¹

The person of the German reviewer deserves a separate note. Hans Schmidt was also a poet (incidentally, the author of the *Sapphische Ode* set by Brahms) as well as an excellent pianist and chamber musician who, as the musicologist Natasha Lodges notes, collaborated with many prominent artists of the time, including the tenor Raimund von Zur-Mühlen: ‘Schmidt was possibly the first dedicated professional song accompanist, and zur-Mühlen was one of the earliest figures to offer full song recitals’.³² Presumably, it was the finesse developed in his capacity as chamber musician that allowed Schmidt to appreciate the lyrical qualities of *Eugene Onegin*, which his colleague from *Rizhsky Vestnik* found boring.

CONCLUSIONS

The above-discussed research leads to the following conclusions regarding the reflections of music life in Riga’s German periodicals in the 1870s–1880s.

- There are few press polemics between supporters of different musical directions, although the music historian William Weber views them as essential for the cultural space of Western Europe in the second

27 ‘Der russische Componist ist offenbar nicht unberührt geblieben von diesem Umschwunge, der sich in der deutschen Tonkunst vollführte.’ –y–, ‘Das Leben für den Zaren’, *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*, 52 (6 Mar. 1879), 3.

28 ‘Neben dem echt nationalrussischen Charakter desselben, erblicken wir in der großartigen Durchführung der Fuge mit dem gewaltigen Schluß ein Product echt deutschen künstlerischen Schaffens.’ ‘Das Leben’, 3.

29 – e m –, ‘Russkaja opera’, *Rizhsky Vestnik*, 229 (18 Oct. 1888), 3.

30 ‘Wie Faust den Deutschen ist Onegin den Russen recht eigentlich das Nationalgedicht. In der Gestalt der Tatjana, der Verkörperung des slawischen Mädchencharakters – wie Gretchen die des germanischen – lebt es in Aller Herzen. [...] Was aber Goethe von Gounod nicht zu theil werden konnte: eine ebenbürtige, gleichgesinnte musikalische Behandlung, das ist Puschkine von Tschaikowski in vollem Maße widerfahren: es sind dem Dichter wahrhaft congeniale Töne, die der Componist anzuschlagen gewußt hat.’ Hans Schmidt, ‘Jewgeni Onegin von Tschaikowsky’, *Rigasche Zeitung*, 241 (21 Oct. 1888), 5.

31 ‘[...] Herzenstöne.’ Schmidt, ‘Jewgeni Onegin...’

32 Natasha Loges, *Brahms and His Poets: A Handbook* (Woodbridge, 2017), 371.

half of the nineteenth century.³³ On the contrary, the competing newspapers, *Zeitung für Stadt und Land* and *Rigasche Zeitung*, defend each other in the polemic with Kārlis Baumanis concerning *Dziesmu rota* by Cimze. The absence of sharp polemics between Riga's German periodicals can probably be explained by the situation of this community itself. Although still the most influential in Riga, it nevertheless gradually began to lose this influence precisely in this period. The atmosphere of Alexander II's Russification-oriented reforms was also perceived as a threat. This could have led to Baltic German society to strive for unity of views – in various areas, including music.

- At the same time, many reviews confirm the Baltic Germans' interest and openness to other national traditions in the art music. At least some of their music critics did not deserve the above-mentioned criticism levelled against them in Latvian periodicals for ignoring the music life of the ethnic Latvians.³⁴
- The political context, however, comes to the fore when discussing not the music itself, but the press publications or speeches that include some 'provocative' elements – be it claims to the premises of the Rigaer Stadttheater voiced in a Russian newspaper, or efforts to deny the inspiring role of Germans in Latvian cultural history.

Research so far also encourages further comparative studies. Music criticism was of great importance in the German-language periodicals of the nineteenth century. Talented writers and musically highly educated authors (such as the already mentioned Hans Schmidt) worked there, but their contributions to the German-speaking cultural life outside of Germany and Austria are still very poorly researched. Delving deeper into this topic would provide new and essential insights into various aspects of music history, including the main topic of this article: the mutual connection between politics and musical life.

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³³ William Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms* (New York, 2008), 237–238.

³⁴ See footnotes 13 and 14.

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