

# PHENOMENON OF THE BALTIC SINGING REVOLUTION IN 1987–1991: THREE LATVIAN SONGS AS HISTORICAL SYMBOLS OF NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE

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## ABSTRACT

The denomination *singing revolution* (coined by Estonian artist Heinz Valk, b. 1936) is commonly used for events in Baltic States between 1987 and 1991 that led to the restoration of the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Three songs – the folk song *Pūt, vējiņi!* (*Blow, Wind!*), the choir song *Gaismas pils* (*The Castle of Light*) by the national classical composer Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948) and the song *Saule, Pērkons, Daugava* (*Sun, Thunder, Daugava*) by the composer Mārtiņš Brauns (1951) – at that time in Latvia had a special significance in society. Each song represented references to different layers in Latvian cultural and political history. The characteristics of the three songs in the *Singing Revolution* process are based on the approach and methodology of distant (objective) analysis of cultural context and recent historical experience. As a result, this article reveals the meaning and reception of the three songs as symbols of *nonviolent resistance* during the fall of communist regime in Latvia in the late 1980s.

**KEYWORDS:** fall of communist regime, *singing revolution*, Latvian cultural-historical traditions, songs, symbols

In 1988, the Estonian artist Heinz Valk (b. 1935) published a paper after the Estonian Song Festival in Tallinn, and the term that he coined, *singing revolution* (Valk 1988) immediately gained wide usage and was relevant to all three of the Baltic States –

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. *Singing revolution* characterized broad societal political manifestations and events, at which hundreds of thousands participated to protest against the Soviet occupation. In all three Baltic States, these grandiose national manifestations were characterized by the spontaneous singing of various songs. In each of the Baltic States many songs with a patriotic theme crystallized. Those included folk, rock and choir songs. It is interesting that a rock song written by two Latvian authors – Boriss Rezniks (music) and Valdis Pavlovskis (lyrics) – with the symbolic title *The Baltics Are Waking Up!* became very popular on account of its text being in all three of the Baltic languages – Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian, and became a symbol of the *Baltic singing revolution*.<sup>2</sup>

Thirty years after these historic events, societal, cultural and musical questions of the impact of the *singing revolution* on the fall of the communist regime in the Baltic States gradually appear more often in the forefront in the fields of the humanities and social sciences. To a certain degree, this was predictable. At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, as well as during the first decade of renewed Latvian independence, there was a dominant desire primarily to accent the emotional experience of the events that had occurred. Over the last thirty years, *singing revolution*, in its various meanings, has been actively described in papers and serves as an important element in the explanation of national identity. At the end of the 1980s, the characterization of the *singing revolution* process reflected a link to both the national awakening of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when there was a gradual crystallization of the idea of self-determination for all three Baltic nations, as well as the formation of independent states in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the time between the two World Wars. The time of the loss of independence after World War II was notable for a hidden resistance, which was spontaneously activated at the end of the Soviet Union, during the period of perestroika. In this way, today the term *singing revolution* has become a notion that is topical in the explanation of the histories of the Baltic States.

Another notable local trait of the *singing revolution* in the three Baltic States is the link between the independence movement and the Song Festival tradition. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Estonia<sup>3</sup> and Latvia,<sup>4</sup> and chronologically later also in Lithuania<sup>5</sup>, a tradition of singing in choirs and gathering in large, grandiose choir concerts developed. This tradition was preserved in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the time of the Soviet occupation. In turn, at the end of the 1980s, the Song Festival tradition was one of the impulses that stimulated the practice of spontaneous singing in the political manifestations.

2 Atmosas Baltija, Bunda Jau Baltija, Ārgake Baltimaad, The Baltics Are Waking Up! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKtdBAJGK9I&list=PLzw16m6yrbPMkvMXmFYyGOLPQIxb9xNzN&index=3&t=0s>

3 <https://estonianworld.com/culture/estonian-song-celebration-timeline/>

4 <https://dziesmusvetki.lv/en/about-the-celebration/history/>

5 <https://www.dainusvente.lt/en/history/>

It should be noted that, until now, the main focus has been on the research and revelation of various social, political, and cultural-historical aspects of the Estonian *singing revolution*. This is confirmed by information about research and sources (Subrenat 2004; Vesilind 2008). Perhaps this is because that it was in Estonia that the term *singing revolution* appeared, and, since then, it has been identified with Estonia, even internationally. However, six years ago, in 2013, Guntis Šmidchens, professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, published his extensive monograph *The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution* (Šmidchens 2013). Up until now, it is one of the largest additions to the research of the *Baltic singing revolution*. Also in Lithuania, many authors have published research at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century regarding the *singing revolution* (Martinelli 2014; Miniotaite 2002).

The key terms in the research of this phenomenon are *nonviolent resistance* and *singing tradition*, as well as references to the unique cultural-historical experience of the three Baltic States. Still, as one of the researchers of this questions writes, "As yet only little is known about the actual musical mechanisms by which songs affected people, expressed national identity, proposed action derived from that identity, and moved historical events" (Kaire 2016).

One can truly agree with this statement, since research into the various aspects of the *Baltic singing revolution* has really only just begun. It is also important to characterize in detail the unique local aspects of each Baltic nation. That is why I will cover three examples or symbolic songs and their cultural-historical context relating to the *singing revolution* in Latvia.

\* \* \*

Regarding the Latvian folk song *Pūt, vējiņi* / *Blow, Wind*, the first time this song text was published was at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the melody was first published at the end of the same century. One of the first professional composers of the era of Latvian national awakening, Andrejs Jurjāns (1856–1922), arranged *Blow, Wind* for choir in 1884, and since then this arrangement has become very popular.<sup>6</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other composers in Latvia created arrangements of the song, but Andrejs Jurjāns' version has always been the most popular and has become one of the most significant songs in the Song Festival repertoire (see Example 1). Additionally, over time, this folk song has gained new aspects in societal reception.

6 Jurjāns, Andrejs. *Pūt, vējiņi*. *Latviešu kordziesmas antoloģija VI / Anthology of Latvian Choral Music VI*. Rīga: Musica Baltica, 1999, 120.

3. Pūt, vējiņi

Mēreni

S.  
A.

Pūt, vē - ji - ņi, dzen lai - vi - ņu, aiz - dzen ma - ni Kur - ze - mē.

T.  
B.

Rainis (1865–1929), one of the most significant Latvian national poets and writers in the first half of the 20th century, created an epic love drama in 1905, partially rooted in the Latvian ethnographic environment and it was given the title of this folk song – *Blow, Wind*. This play by Rainis is today a Latvian national cultural symbol. It is interesting to note that, during the Soviet occupation, in 1973 in Latvia, the Riga Film Studio made a film based upon the play. One of the most distinguished Latvian 20<sup>th</sup> popular music composers, Imants Kalniņš (b. 1941), composed the music for this film, using the folk melody. Based on testimonies found in current research, society in Latvia considers this film and its music as a kind of resistance symbol to the Soviet regime. That was also certainly the genius of the composer Imants Kalniņš, as he gave this Latvian folk song a unique musical vividness in a rock music style.

When considering the previously discussed topics, one finds a basis for concluding that, even before the historical events of the end of the 1980s, the Latvian folk song *Blow, Wind* had already gained significant meaning in Latvian national culture. However, what can be considered unexpected is the fact that this song became one of the most vivid symbols of resistance to the Soviet occupation. One reason for that was the first true manifestation of a national spontaneous reaction, which began in 1986 in Latvia, protesting against the plans of the Soviet regime to build a gigantic hydroelectric power plant on the Daugava River.

The Daugava is the largest river in Latvia and, in the second half of the 20th century, large power plants were already built on it. The Daugava is treated as a mythical symbol in Latvian folklore, literature and poetry, and this is why the decision by the Soviet regime to build yet another gigantic power plant on it was viewed very negatively by Latvian society. Taking advantage of perestroika, begun by the final Soviet leader Gorbachev, Latvians began actively gathering signatures against the building of the power plant and to gather in protests. And it was at that time that, completely spontaneously, large groups began to sing the folk song *Blow, Wind*, turning it into a protest song (King 2012).

Later, but particularly in 1988, 1989 and 1990, *Blow, Wind* became an essential political element of the *Singing Revolution* – it was always sung at gatherings. It is interesting to note that, at that time, an idea was circulated to make the folk song *Blow, Wind* the Latvian national anthem when state once again became independent. A vivid example is the Song Festival that took place in Riga in 1990. On stage were gathered a record number of singers, twenty thousand, a number never exceeded in the history of this

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festival. *Blow, Wind*, was sung in an atmosphere that was unique, especially when one considers that on 4 May 1990 the independence was once again declared in Latvia.

Still, the representation of all the political protest and unity in the musical symbol of this one folk song included a paradox. The text of the folk song *Blow, Wind* follows:

<p><i>Pūt, vējiņi, dzen laiviņu, Aizdzen mani Kurzemē. Kurzemniece man solīja Sav' meitiņu malējiņ'.</i> <i>Solīt sola, bet nedeva, Teic man' lielu dzērājiņ'.</i> <i>Teic man' lielu dzērājiņu, Kumeliņa skrējējiņ'.</i> <i>Kuru krogu es izdzēru, Kam noskrēju kumeliņ'?</i> <i>Pats par savu naudu dzēru, Pats skrēj' savu kumeliņ'.</i> <i>Pūt, vējiņi, dzen laiviņu Aizdzen mani Kurzemē.</i></p>	<p><i>Blow wind, drive my boat, Drive me to Kurzeme. A woman from Kurzeme promised me Her daughter as a bride. She promised, but didn't fulfill the promise, Calling me a drunkard. She called me a drunkard And a horse racer. Where is the tavern in which I drank too much, Whose horse did I run down? I drink for my own money, And ride my own horse. Blow wind, drive my boat, Drive me to Kurzeme.</i></p>
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The folk song itself is about love, possible drama, and there is also an indirect indication that the young man is a drunk, and that is why the girl's mother turns him away. Thus, one of the most significant political protest songs at the time of the fall of the Latvian communist regime, was a folk song with an unpretentious text. Perhaps it was a confluence of circumstances. After the renewal of Latvian independence, the song *Blow, Wind* lost its previous symbolism of political protest. Today it represents mainly the Song Festival tradition and exists in texts about recent historical events. If *Blow, Wind* became one of the characteristic musical symbols of national political manifestations during the time of the fall of the communist regime, then there was a slightly different situation with the choral song *Gaismas pils / The Castle of Light*.

\* \* \*

The text of this song involves a link to the National Awakening period in Latvia in the second half of the 19th century. The poet Auseklis (1850–1979) initially published a poem, in which there is encoded a message concerning the freedom of the Latvian people. Later, at the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one of the composers of that era, Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948), composed a choral song with the text of Auseklis's poem.<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the choral song *The Castle of Light* became a

7 Vītols, Jāzeps. *Gaismas pils*. *Latviešu kordziesmas antoloģija I / Anthology of Latvian Choral Music I*. Rīga: Musica Baltica, 1997, 51–56.

fundamental part of the Song Festival repertoire. The epic and musically expressive message of the song became, over time, one of the most recognizable symbols of national music culture (see Example 2).

12. *Gaismas pils* Ausekļa vārds

Andante

S.  
A.  
T.  
B.

*p*

Kur - ze - mī - te, Diev - ze - mī - te, brī - vas tau - tas auk - lē - tāj!

In turn, after World War II, when Latvia was under Soviet occupation, *The Castle of Light* gradually became a symbol of secret resistance in various musical events. This was related to the communist regime's political censorship and the song was banned from the Song Festival repertoire of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was on account of the clearly expressed idea of the freedom of the Latvian nation and independence. However, regardless of political censorship, it only facilitated the popularity of *The Castle of Light*.

In 1985, when the former Soviet Union initiated a more liberal politics, or *perestroika*, the 19<sup>th</sup> Song Festival took place in the summer in Riga. Political censorship had again removed the song *The Castle of Light* from the grandiose concert of many thousands of choir singers. However, during the concert, there was a spontaneous event that today is considered one of the initial impulses for the fall of the communist regime and the beginning of the restoration of national independence in Latvia. Disregarding the presence of representatives of the occupying regime, thousands of singers and audience members spontaneously requested the performance of this song, and there was a public call for the conductor Haralds Mednis (1906–2000) to come on stage, even though he had been prohibited from participating in the concert. Without a single rehearsal, the Song Festival choir performed the song *The Castle of Light*, the event immediately acquiring the significance of a nonviolent resistance in Latvia.

In contrast to *Blow, Wind*, whose melody can be sung by anyone at mass political manifestations, *The Castle of Light* was created within the genre of art music. This is why the representation of this song in the *singing revolution* related chiefly to the highly developed choir singing and Song Festival tradition in Latvia. This tradition was also one of the most vital elements of the Singing Revolution. In the summer of 1990, a few months after the declarations of the restoration of independence in Latvia, a Song Festival took place, in which *The Castle of Light* was received by the public as one of the particularly notable musical symbols of the revolution.

It is interesting that the songs *Blow, Wind* and *The Castle of Light* had already gained broad popularity prior to the events of the *singing revolution* at the end of the

1980s. The *singing revolution* process gave these songs new meanings, relating to the protests against the communist regime. Still, these songs were not written during the events of the revolution. The third example or song, however, was indeed born during the *singing revolution* process.

\* \* \*

In the summer of 1988, the premiere of a theatre play of the poet Rainis's play *Daugava* took place in the Valmiera theatre. The music for this performance was written by composer Mārtiņš Brauns (b. 1951). One of the musical numbers in the play was the song *Saule, Pērkons, Daugava / Sun, Thunder, Daugava* with lyrics by Rainis. The composer called this song a *Latvian Mass*. A year later, the song was sung at the Latvian Youth Song Festival in Riga and immediately became very popular, and also became a part of the political process of the *singing revolution*, the main reason for this being that the text was about the Daugava River as a significant symbol in Latvian history and culture.

What is also interesting is the text and music synchronization of the song *Sun, Thunder, Daugava*. The song text refers to aspects of Latvian folklore prior to Christianization or pagan culture and mythology, describing objects of nature as sources of godly power.

In turn, in the song's music is clearly a reference to the Christian church chorale genre. This synthesis of various cultural elements in the song possibly reflects the composers conscious artistic manipulation of text and musical symbols in one composition. At the Song Festival in the summer of 1990 in Riga, *Sun, Thunder, Daugava* attained the status of a *Singing Revolution* musical symbol among Latvian society. Similarly to *Blow, Wind* and *The Castle of Light*, the song *Sun, Thunder, Daugava* has also been, since that time, a consistent element of the Song Festival repertoire.

Saule Latvi sēdināja  
Tur, kur gali satiekas  
Balta jūra, zaļa zeme  
Latvei vārtu atslēdziņa  
Latvei vārtu atslēdziņa,  
Daugaviņas sargātāja.

Sveši ļaudis vārtus lauza  
Jūrā krita atslēdziņa.  
Zilzibēņu pērkonš spēra,  
velniem ņēma atslēdziņu.

Nāvi, dzīvi Latve slēdza,  
Baltu jūru, zaļu zemi  
Saule Latvi sēdināja  
Baltas jūras maliņā  
Vēji smiltis putināja  
ko lai dzēra latvju bērni?

Saule lika Dieviņami,  
Lai tas raka Daugaviņu.  
Zvēri raka, Dieviņš lēja  
No mākoņa dzīvūdeņi.

Dzīves ūdens, nāves ūdens  
Daugavā satecēja.  
Es pamērcu pirkstu galu  
Abus jūtu dvēselē.

Nāves ūdens, dzīves ūdens  
Abus jūtu dvēselē

Saule mūsu māte-  
Daugav - sāpju aukle.  
Pērkonš velna spērējs  
Tas mūsu tēvs.

Latvia was put down by the Sun,  
Where the ends came together.  
White sea, green land.  
Latvia had the key of the gate.  
Which Daugava did protect.

Foreigners tried to break the gate,  
The key fell deep into the sea.  
The ground was struck by blue lightning,  
The key taken from the devil.

Death and life Latvia locked in,  
White sea, green land.  
Latvia was put down by the Sun  
On the white sea's land,  
Wind blew over the sand.  
What will the children of Latvia drink?

The sun ordered God,  
To dig out Daugava.  
Animals dug it out,  
God filled it with water from a cloud.

Water of life, Water of death  
Filled the river up,  
I dipped in a finger tip,  
And felt both in my soul.

I dipped in a finger tip,  
And felt both in my soul.

Sun was our mother,  
Daugava the nanny of our pain,  
Thunder was the devil's kicker,  
That was our father.



It should be noted that, in contrast to the two previously mentioned songs, the song *Sun, Thunder, Daugava* regularly appears in various extra-musical cultural and political processes, even after the fall of the communist regime and the renewal of Latvian independence. In the last twenty years, there has been discussion in Latvian society about how *Sun, Thunder, Daugava* should become the new national anthem, partly based on the song's symbolic significance in the *Singing Revolution* process. However, it is considered that the anthem is a national symbol and it is a very complex process to change it, and so this suggestion was not implemented. In addition, another reason for the song not being appropriate for a national anthem is its changing time, which regularly moves between 3/4 and 4/4 (see Example 3).

The song *Sun, Thunder, Daugava* in a certain way is also a unique example of how a musical symbol of social and political change process in one nation can also be taken over and adapted to similar processes in another nation. In 2014, it became known that the song inspired representatives of the Catalan independence movement and the music was used in a new song with a text in Catalan – *Ara és l'hora* (*Now is the Time*). The political process in Catalonia in recent years has been, to a great degree, similar to the events of the *singing revolution* in Latvia thirty years ago. Catalonia has also experienced large national political manifestations, and one of the elements is the singing of various nationally important songs. The fact that a song symbolic of Latvia's *singing revolution* has been carried over to another nation's political process, which is similarly focused on the idea of independence, is of a particular interest.

## SAULE, PĒRKONS, DAUGAVA

Rainis

Mārtiņš Brauns

1 *p* unis.

S. A.  *p* unis.  
Sau - le Lat - vi sē - di - nā - ja

T. B.  *p*

6

S. A.  Tur, kur ga - li sa - tie - kas, Bal - ta jū - ra, za - ļa ze - me

T. B. 

10

S. A.  Lat - vei vār - tu at - slē - dzi - ņa. Lat - vei vār - tu at - slē - dzi - ņa,

T. B. 

14

S. A.  Dau - ga - vi - ņa sar - gā - tā - ja, Sve - ši ļau - dis vār - tus lau - za,

T. B. 

\* \* \*

To conclude, I would like to emphasize again that the end of the communist regime and Soviet occupation in the Baltic nations thirty years ago was reflected in the events of the singing revolution. Three songs of various styles – folk music, academic choral-music and popular music – became symbolic elements in the political process in Latvia. As a result it is possible to assert, the meaning and reception of three songs as musical symbols of nonviolent resistance during the fall of the communist regime in Latvia in the late 1980s. Certain songs in the context of historical changes are primarily perceived not as musical artefacts, but as deeply symbolic messages.

A significant impact on the recent revolution that has been labelled *singing revolution* in Latvia and the Baltic States was made by the historical tradition of the Song Festival. This is why in Latvia, during the fall of the communist regime, songs of different genres were so important, not only in the area of popular music (especially in rock music) as was the case in other countries, but also in the field of classical style *a cappella* choral songs. This is an aspect of the fall of the communist regime in the late 1980s in Latvia (as also in the other two Baltic States - Estonia and Lithuania) which is characterized by a special local cultural context and musical aspect.

In turn, the analysis of such musical messages allows us to reveal references to different layers of culture and specific local traditions and their resonances nowadays within the framework of one national culture. And it is possible that further research into the historical experience could include questions of cultural memory and cultural trauma in social, psychological, semiotic, and communicational aspects in society.

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## ЈАНИС КУДИНШ

ФЕНОМЕН БАЛТИЧКЕ ПЕВАНЕ РЕВОЛУЦИЈЕ 1987–1991: ТРИ ЛЕТОНСКЕ ПЕСМЕ  
КАО ИСТОРИЈСКИ СИМБОЛИ НЕНАСИЛНОГ ОТПОРА

## (РЕЗИМЕ)

Термин *певана револуција*, који је сковао естонски уметник Хајнц Валк (Heinz Valk, 1936–), реферира на збивања у балтичким земљама између 1987. и 1991. године, која су довела до поновног успостављања независности Естоније, Летоније и Литваније. Масовне демонстрације против совјетске окупације започеле су након свеобухватне либерализације совјетског режима. У Москви су се надали да ће не-руске нације остати у оквиру Совјетског Савеза, захваљујући уклањању ограничења у вези са слободом говора и коришћењем националних симбола (попут локалних застава из раздобља пре 1940. године и сл.) Међутим, ситуација се до те мере погоршала да су још пре 1989. године започете кампање за ослобађање балтичких нација из окова Совјетског Савеза. Грандиозне манифестације на којима су људи заједно певали биле су карактеристичне за све три балтичке државе. Песме, као симболи протеста и ослобођења, сигнализирале су крај комунистичког режима.

Три песме – народна песма *Pūt, vējiņi!* (*Дуни, ветре!*), хорска песма *Gaismas pils* (*Замак светлости*) летонског националног композитора Јазепса Витолса (*Jāzeps Vītols*, 1863–1948) и песма *Saule, Pērkons, Daugava* (*Сунце, гром, Даугава*) композитора Мартинша Браунса (*Mārtiņš Brauns*, 1951–), имале су посебан друштвени значај у Летонији тога доба. Свака песма је садржала референце на одређене слојеве летонске културне и политичке историје. Свака од ове три песме имала је другачију судбину након пада совјетског режима и поновног успостављања летонске независности. Стога, фокусирање на ове песме пружа нијансиран поглед на различите културне и политичке контексте пада комунистичког режима у балтичким државама, посебно у Летонији.

У приступу овим песмама, карактеристичним за певану револуцију, примењена је методологији дистанциране (објективне) анализе културног контекста и скорашњег историјског искуства. Последично, овим чланком се осврћемо на значење и рецепцију ове три песме као симбола ненасилног отпора у време пада комунистичког режима у Летонији, крајем осамдесетих година прошлог века. Могуће је закључити да се поједине песме, у контексту историјских промена, не доживљавају као примарно музички артефакти, већ као дубоко симболичне поруке. Заузврат, анализа ових порука омогућава нам да откријемо референце на разне слојеве културе и специфичних локалних традиција, као и њихових данашњих одјека у оквирима традиционалне културе.

Кључне речи: пад комунистичког режима, певана револуција, летонске културно-историјске традиције, песме, симболи