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Relics of burial laments in Latvia

1. Introduction¹

Until recently there has been no documentation of lament or lament-like phenomenon in Latvia. Not long ago a discovery changed this condition, and one was suddenly faced with the necessity of rethinking the issue of lament in Latvian traditional music. Naturally, a detailed investigation of the newly found phenomenon was also needed. First, the field research was carried out in a small rural area in the east of the country where the lament-like phenomenon was found, in order to record it and to document its anthropological contexts. (Two research trips – in February and October 1997 – were conducted: two groups of singers in two villages were visited and their performance and their individual interviews with five persons were recorded.) After the preliminary description and analysis of the lament-like recitatives was made, the history of the issue of lament in Latvia became traced back and the hypotheses of the former existence/non-existence of Latvian laments were formed by researchers from different fields (history, folklore study, and folk music research) and examined in order to clarify the probable historical status of the newly found phenomenon. Its singularity (in the context of Latvian traditional Music) has made the comparative approach especially important. Conclusions concerning the comparative aspect are drawn in this article on the basis of the investigation of a large Estonian (Setu), Lithuanian, Belarussian and Russian material – recordings and transcriptions of laments.

2. The issue of laments in Latvian traditional music

It is well known that the two main genres of lament – burial lament and bridal lament – are represented in the traditional music of the eastern, southern and northern neighbours of Latvians: in Russia, Belarus, Lithuania and Estonia. In most Russian, Belarussian and Lithuanian laments there is an alternation of two kinds of expressions: an alternation of a melodic recitative and a stylized sobbing or weeping, which are also common in other countries across the globe. The recitative is usually a short syllabic formula having narrow melodic range. The element of weeping can be real weeping or its imitation, although most frequently it is a continuation of the recitative adding more expression of grief ("reciting by tears" or "reciting on the verge of weeping"). This "weeping" lies in a deeper register than the melodic formula, so that the melodic line

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brakes into two pitch zones.

M.M. ♩ = ~ 164

A ha - lu - bčik moj da - ra - he - ne - (čki ž moj),

A na - što ž ty nas pa - ki - (dau, ku - da ž ty sa - brau - sja)? etc.

Example 1. A burial lament from southeastern Belarus. *Lament for son* sung by E. I. Grunza (1920) from village Majskae (district Žlobin, Gomel region, Belarus). (Source: BNT 1986, 463, No.23.)²

An essential trait of these Russian, Belarussian and Lithuanian laments is that the transition from the higher pitch zone to the deeper is formed as an expressive moan. Often the second pitch zone is represented rudimentarily - by only one tone/syllable – and all expression of grief is concentrated in the moan, which is then the final element of the melodic line.

M.M. ♩ = ~ 108

A pra - ščaj, ma - ja sja - stry - (ca),

A pra - ščaj, ma - ja da - ra - ga - (ja),

A bo - li ž ja cja - be ni uba - (ču), etc.

Example 2. A burial lament from eastern Belarus. *Lament for sister* sung by L. L. Cybul'skaja (65 years old) from village Sledzjuki (district Byhau, Mogilev region, Belarus). (Source: BNT 1986, 459, No.18.)

The study of Latvian traditional music has already more than 120 years long history

² Transliteration of the texts of Belarussian laments (ex.1 and ex.2), Belarussian names, etc., is made in this article after the ISO standard.

but until recently, no survivals or traces of phenomena related to the laments of the neighbouring countries were found. In the western and northern regions of country, Latvian traditional music performed in the mourning rites has almost no specific stylistic features to compare to the music of other genres. There are many districts known where the same melodies are used at both mourning rites and weddings, baptisms and midsummer festivals (of course with different texts). Moreover, from the western regions one finds rich information from the 18th, 19th and even 20th century about singing party songs and dancing as an integral part of the mourning rites (s. Ignāte 1929, 160 - 169; Siliņa 1939, 75 - 79; Straubergs 1956, 103, etc.). (Such tradition may be connected with the belief that tears and crying during the funeral will make the dead restless in their graves.) In the Eastern Latvia some folklorized forms of Catholic music (which will be discussed later) play a very important role in the mourning rites.

Despite the lack of any field material in the studies on Latvian burial rites and music, it is often expressed that the Latvians have had laments in their repertoire since the Middle Ages (s. Ancelāne 1957, 580; Straubergs 1956, 104; Vītoļiņš 1971, 285 - 286, etc.). The arguments for such conviction were drawn from some fragments of the 13th century chronicles telling about the fight of the old-Latvian peoples against the German crusaders and the burial rites performed after the battles. There are three such fragments. Two of them are from the *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae* (*The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*; s. ChrHL 1961, 98 and 102), a third one is from the *Livländische Reimchronik* (*The Rhymed Chronicle of Livonia*; s. RChr 1874, 262). The analysis shows that there is no evidence to assume that these fragments tell about the laments: the respective statements are too short and vague for exact definition of their subject.³ One has to recognize that the interpretations made by the above-mentioned authors are rather products of a romantic approach to the historical sources than the results of a critical evaluation of them.

Besides the chronicles, some studies have referred to various 17th century sources. These sources are of two types. In the first case there are few texts reporting on loud crying and yelling in the burial ceremonies, e.g., A. Ancelāne and J. Vītoļiņš refer to a report of D. Zelak - Lutheran pastor from Alūksne (town in the north-east of Latvia) –

³ E.g., there are often references made on a fragment from the *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae* telling about an offensive of Curonians against Riga. After the failed attack the Curonians "[...] transita Duna triduo quiescentes et mortuos suos cremantes fecerunt planctum super eos" (ChrHL 1993, 138): "After crossing Dvina [Daugava - M.B.], they rested for three days while cremating their dead and mourning over them" (ChrHL 1961, 98). According to the authors mentioned above one has to regard the statement "fecerunt panctum super eos" as a sound evidence that the Curonians after the battle have performed laments and that those were an integral part of their repertoire in the 13th century. It is interesting to compare different translations of the respective fragment into the modern languages: In a German translation from 1857 "fecerunt panctum super eos" is translated as "[sie - M.B.] erhoben über ihnen [den Toten - M.B.] eine große Klage" (ChrHL 1857, 143). In an other German translation made more than 100 years later the very fragment is translated as "[sie - M.B.] vollzogen über ihnen die Trauerfeier" (ChrHL 1959, 115). In the English translation from 1961 the already mentioned capacious form "mourning over them" is used. I would like to add that other fragments from the 13th century chronicles are even more problematic than the one mentioned above.

describing Latvian burial rites (s. Ancelāne 1957, 580 and Vītoliņš 1971, 287). This source shows clearly that ritual crying was an integral part of the burial rites in the surroundings of Alūksne in the 17th century. However, the question, whether the ritual included the performance of laments, remains open.

In the second case references were made to a large 17th century description of the burial rites in eastern Latvia (s. Straubergs 1956, 100 - 101). The text containing description was discovered in the 1930s by the historian B. Brežgo (Brežgo 1937). It contains a clear statement of the performance of laments in the burial ceremonies of East-Latvian peasants. The only problem is that the latter source is not a historical one but a novel written by a Polish 19th century writer of a romantic background.

In the Latvian ethnomusicology of the 1980's and 90's nobody speaks seriously anymore about the lament as a real component of the Latvian traditional music of the past centuries. The rich information and many reports on the Latvian mourning rites from the last five centuries let rather the impression arise that the Latvians have indeed performed the rituals without the laments. In this context it is easy to understand that the discovery of the lament-like recitatives in February 1997 was a great surprise. But before this phenomenon is discussed in more detail, the contexts in which it was found have to be shown.

3. Region

Latvia is usually regarded as a Lutheran country belonging to the part of the Baltic area where the North-German and Scandinavian influence has formed the local cultural identity to a great extent, although the eastern influences are important there as well. Often one forgets that a large region of the country belongs to the sphere of influence of the Roman Catholic Church. (This territory, besides Ireland, is the northernmost region in Europe where the Catholicism has a compact distribution and is the absolutely predominating form of Christianity.) This part of Latvia is called Latgale



Figure 1. Relics of burial laments in Latvia (indicated by square markings, ■).

Latgale is situated in the east of the country. It borders with Belarus and Russia in east, with two north- and west-Latvian regions: Courland (and Semigallia) and Livland in north, west and south. Unlike the mentioned Lutheran regions of Latvia where the German influence was strong, Latgale was under the Polish rule for 210 years, from 1562 to 1772, and Polish influence has played a similar role there as the German influence has in the western and northern part of Latvia.

Because of the unfavourable geographic location, conservatism of rulers and some other factors (e.g., the serfdom in Latgale was abolished only in 1861 while in other Latvian regions it was done already in 1817 and 1819) Latgale was and still is the most

underdeveloped region of Latvia.

Another specific feature of this region is that the High Latvian language is used by the majority of population. This form of Latvian has its own literature and the relation between the Low Latvian of the Lutheran regions and the High Latvian makes indeed a similar analogy to the relation between the High German and Low German.

Unlike the west- and north-Latvian regions, Latgale was incorporated in Russian empire in 1772 (after the collapse of the Polish empire), and became a subject of russification in the early 19th century. Since 1863 the Russian government has carried out a systematic russification of this region. The institution which barred the way to this process was the Catholic Church. It was almost the only institution, which used and developed the Latvian (High Latvian) language in Latgale during the period Russian rule (1772 - 1918). The Catholic Church has also easily repulsed the attempts to spread the Russian Orthodoxy (*pravoslavie*) among the Latvians.

4. Catholicism and traditional culture in Latgale

The two dominants of High Latvian (Latgalian) culture are the Catholicism as a real religion of the people, and the folklore. (Because of the slow economic progress and slow development in the education, numerous old traditions and rites together with folklore and traditional music have survived in Latgale and are still an integral part of the peasants' life.) It must be stressed that these two factors - Catholicism and folklore - live in this region in permanent interaction. One finds many synthetic phenomena there that have emerged because of the mingling of the Catholic sacred music and poetry on the one hand and folklore and traditional music on the other hand. (This point is very important in order to understand the emergence of the musical phenomenon - lament-like recitative - which is discussed further in this paper.)

Until lately, the interaction of the Catholicism and traditional culture was ignored by the Latvian ethnology, folklore studies and ethnomusicology. There are at least two reasons: First, the Latvian folklore and folk music studies have had a narrow definition of their subject since their beginning at the second half of the 19th century. The result of this is the ignorance of the religious (Christian) folk traditions as non-Latvian and therefore not belonging to the peoples culture. Secondly, during the Soviet rule it was simply dangerous to study subjects which could provide a true idea about the depth of the influence of the Catholicism on the local culture. Only in the late 1980's the first recordings of the sacred traditional music were made in Latgale and there are no studies written on this subject until now.

5. *Officium defunctorum* and burial rites in Latgale

The lament-like phenomena were found in a very specific musical context. Over the whole territory of Latgale, there is a musical mourning rite distributed and the main content of it are the psalms. The original name of this genre is *Officium defunctorum* ('Office of the Dead').⁴ *Officium defunctorum* is a long musical ritual: its performance

⁴ People in Latgale do not use the Latin term *Officium defunctorum*. They call this genre and ritual simply 'psalms' (*psalms*) and 'psalm-singing' (*psalms dziedošana*).

takes from one-and-a-half to two hours. The singers sit around a rectangular table on which there stands a crucifix and two burning candles, in some districts a loaf of bread is placed on the table as well. The number of singers, mostly women, is usually about ten although often group consists of only five or six singers. There are also cases where even 15 or more persons have taken part in the performance. The singers are usually divided into two groups, and this division equals the antiphonal practice of singing. Every group has its own leading singer. There is a subordination between the leaders: one of them is the chairman of the session - she or (more seldom) he takes the end of the table. The singers use Catholic prayer books from the 19th or the beginning of the 20th century. During the performance the capture *Lyugšonas par nūmyrušim* ('Prayers for the Dead') becomes used.

Officium is performed when somebody has passed away. The performance takes place every night until the burial. The next performance takes place in thirty or forty days. One year after the death the ritual is repeated at the funeral repast. Besides that, the *Officium* becomes performed on 2 November, All Souls'. The singers are usually relatives and neighbours of the deceased, although famous leader-singers from distant villages could be invited as special guests and chairmen to the session.

Officium defunctorum is an office, formulated at Rome prior to the 8th century. First it was a part of the so called Roman Breviary (*Breviarium Romanum*): the liturgical book assigned to the Canonical Hours, the daily recitation which is obligatory for all in major Catholic orders and upon certain groups of clergymen. Later it became a complete office for all the Canonical Hours to be recited on 2 November, All Souls' Day. The performance of the *Officium defunctorum* in the Catholic tradition was normally the obligation of priests and other clergymen. The language of the *Officium* was Latin. In Latgale a High Latvian translation of the *Officium defunctorum* was introduced by Jesuit missionaries in the late 18th century and in the 19th century it became an integral part of the traditional culture there.⁵

Performance of the *Officium* is usually introduced by approximately 20 minutes long reciting of Rosary. The following 1st part of the *Officium* is the *Matins* (Matutinum). The introduction of the *Matins* are the Invitatorium and Psalm 94 and it consists further of three Nocturnes, each of which takes about 15 minutes and contains psalms, antiphons and three biblical lessons. (Unlike the other sections of the *Officium*, lessons are performed *solo*.) The 2nd part - Lauds - takes about 25 - 30 minutes. It contains psalms, Canticle of Ezechiass, Canticle of Zachary (*Benedictus*) and antiphons. Lauds ends with a long prayer. After the Lauds the singers sing in honour of the Virgin Mary and the Saints. The choice of the songs is made by the leader-singers and the organizers of the session.

The High Latvian translation of the *Officium defunctorum* was first printed in 1786 in a prayer book. After that, until 1916, there were numerous publications of the same translation without any noteworthy changes in different prayer books (s. NKC 1786 and 1798; GL 1811, 1820, 1833, 1836, 1839, 1845, etc.; PGL 1857, 1868, 1870, 1883, 1900, 1901, 1903, 1905 and 1906; AZ 1912 and 1915).

No singer remembers an occasion, where the melodies used in *Officium* would have been sung by priests or during the mass. The performance of the *Officium*

⁵ One finds almost no information about "folklorized" forms of the *Officium defunctorum* in other countries. The only parallel known to me is represented in the district Białystok in eastern Poland (s. Bartkowski 1980, 102 - 103).

defunctorum is nowadays a tradition, which is independent from the Church as an institution. Melodies of the psalms are transmitted orally, and nobody remembers that a priest or other clergyman would have participated in the performance or have taught the melodies or texts of the psalm's to the singers. Like the prayer books and traditional music of other genres, the singers inherit these melodies from previous generations: their mothers, grand-mothers, aunts, etc.

Officium defunctorum is well known everywhere in Latgale and there are numerous local versions of it. Some of them are monophonic, although more often one finds polyphonic versions. (It is homophonic multipart music, based on a functional harmony.)

6. Lament-like recitatives in the solo sections of the *Officium defunctorum*

The group performance of the Nocturnes becomes interrupted by solo singing: recitation of lessons - biblical prose fragments from the Book of Job and Book of Isaias. The melodic material of the lessons has Gregorian features in almost all recorded versions of the *Officium*. An exception in the recitation of lessons is made in the villages Sosnīcas and Žīguri in the very north of Latgale (s. map). The characteristic traits there are *parlando rubato* manner, the irregularity of lines (non-strophic form), improvised variation, narrow compass of melody and a moan at the end of each line. This kind of recitative performance of lessons resembles more the Belarussian or Russian laments than the recitatives in other villages and districts in Latvia. And this kind of recitative has nothing in common with the so-called *teiktās dziesmas* ('spoken songs') - a recitative style widespread in both Lutheran and Catholic regions of Latvia.

♪ = 240 - 280 ms

1. At - laid man, Kungs,

2. Aiz tuo di - nas mu - nas ir por ni - ku, V

3. Kas i cylvāks, kad paj - aug - sty - noj jū?

4. A - ha kuo-piec uz vi-nu gri - zi si - ry - di To - vu? V

5. Ap - rau - gi vi-nu, ap - gais - muo un pieš - ki da - vī - rēj jim. V

6. Leidz ku-ram lai - kam na - pi - dū - si man, etc.

- ˙ accent coinciding with the normal syllabic stress in a stream of speech
- v purely musical accent
- ♯ ~ 1/8-tone
- ♮ + ~ 1/8-tone
- ♭ ~ 1/4-tone
- ↑ + ~ 1/4-tone

Example 3. The lesson 1 (Book of Job 7, 16 - 21) from the Nocturne 1 from Sosnīcas. Transcription of a recording was made 23rd of February 1997. Soloist Adele Bukovska (1933) from Sosnīcas.

7. Final note

In conclusion I would like to offer a hypothesis about the emergence of the subject under discussion – a hypothesis which to me seems to be the most organic one, although it is, of course, possible to construct different hypothetical schemes as well:

It could be assumed that the laments were a component of the local repertoire in Sosnīcas and Žīguri in the 18th century. In the late 18th or early 19th century the Jesuit missionaries have introduced the local people to the *Officium defunctorum*. Soon after the introduction, in 1820, the Jesuit stations were closed and the missionaries left Latgale. The music of the *Officium* started to live as a form of the oral tradition. In such a situation the functional overlapping of the burial lament and *Officium* and the (partial) similarity of the lament and Gregorian recitation of lessons could easily lead to the integration of the lament in the *Officium*.

An important question arises about the origin of the population of Sosnīcas and Žīguri: It is possible that the population consists of assimilated Slavs or Balto-Finns, and, thus, the non-Latvian origin of the lament-like melodies could not be excluded. Besides, cultural influences – borrowing from the east – could not be excluded either: Russian border is only some few miles eastwards from both villages.

The discovery of the lament-like phenomenon in Northern Latgale might not change the common opinion that the Latvian traditional music does not have the laments as a special feature as have the neighbouring Baltic and East Slavic countries, especially because it is the only documented case and the Latvian origin of the material is doubtful. On the other hand the phenomenon discovered in Sosnīcas is until now the only lament-like example in Latvian language and regardless of its origin as a unique phenomenon, it deserves detailed study. Besides that, the *Officium defunctorum* is a genre definitely deserving special attention: up to two hours long form with its orally transmitted psalmody and biblical Old High Latvian text, it is absolutely unique in the Latvian traditional culture.

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