

Jāzeps Vītols 6th International Choral Conductor Competition

To continue the more than a century-long tradition of choir singing and choir conducting, the Department of Choir Conducting, Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music (JVLMA), is holding the 'Jāzeps Vītols 6th International Choral Conductor Competition' in Riga on 22 – 26 October 2019.

This is a regular five-day event in Latvia that brings together young conductors from all over world to challenge themselves to work with professional choirs in front of a jury made up of renowned international experts. An particularly high artistic quality is guaranteed by the cooperation with three eminent choirs – the *Latvija* State Choir, the Latvian Radio Choir and the *Ave Sol* Riga Chamber Choir. The mixed choir and symphony orchestra of JVLMA also takes part in the competition programme.

Prize-winners of the former choral conductor competitions include many internationally renowned artists, such as Mārtiņš Ozoliņš (Latvia), Modestas Pitrenas (Lithuania), Stefan Vanselow (Germany), Alexander Humala (Belarus), Ainars Rubiķis (Latvia), Dmitry Matvienko (Belarus / Russia), Martynas Stakionis (Lithuania) and many others.

To continue the tradition of the Baltic States choral conductor competition which started in the 1970s and to mark the 75th anniversary of the Department of Choir Conducting, JVLMA, the Jāzeps Vītols 6th International Choral Conductor Competition testifies to the high standards of Latvian choir culture and the global achievements of Latvian choral conductors. This competition also marks the 100th anniversary of the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music.



Awarding ceremony of 5th International Jāzeps Vītols Choral Conductors Competition – two 1st prize winners Martynas Stakionis (on the left), Head of Jury Stojan Kuret and Dmitry Matvienko – © Eduards Kapša

Jāzeps Vītols

Jāzeps Vītols (1863-1948) is considered a patriarch of Latvian music. He was a great and even legendary personality: he was the leading figure in Latvian music for more than a half century, a composer, a teacher, a critic, a public figure and an undoubted authority. For more than 30 years he was a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire where he nurtured the idea of an academic institution for music education in Latvia. Finally, in 1919, after Republic of Latvia was proclaimed in 1918, the Latvian Conservatoire (now Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music) was established. The institution serves the purpose and principles set out by its founder up to this day.

The life and art of Jāzeps Vītols was influenced by trends in world music to a much higher extent than the lives of his

contemporaries. Prominent musicians like Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Glazunov, Anatoly Lyadov, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, Vincent d'Indy, Karol Szimanovsky, Erkki Melartin crossed Jāzeps Vītols' path, since he was a member of many international organisations and attended various conferences and meetings.

Creativity was the essence of Jāzeps Vītols' personality. His music is clear, deep and human; the composer was striving for harmony. His rich and complete personality shines through the musical textures.



Jāzeps Vītols and choir music

There are two fields of activities that bind Jāzeps Vītols, the founder of the Latvian Conservatory and its first rector (1919-1944), with choir music. One was his work as professor, composer and creator of choir music, the other as a conductor, producer and interpreter of his songs. It might seem that the scale is tilted more towards his compositions, full of meaning, with more than 100 original choir songs, about 100 folk song arrangements together with cantatas and other vocal and instrumental pieces, hymns and different arrangements for a choir. Furthermore, among the original songs, there are a number of songs without which the repertoire of classical Latvian choir songs today would be inconceivable.

However, delving deeper into the historical evidence, we

realize that without the practical experience as a conductor the creative side of the scale would not have been that rich and of such high quality because Vītols was able to learn about a choir 'from the inside' throughout his period working as a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

Choir music in the widest sense of the word followed Vītols throughout his creative life: his first two songs were written as an assignment in the department of composition under Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, while the last one was dedicated to the 'Goldsmith' men's choir conducted by Roberts Zuika, which was given to the conductor on the last day of the professor's life. Significantly, even the first early songs, 'Birch Tree on the Moor' and 'Prayer', bear many of the signs by which we recognize the hand of Vītols in the prime of his life: harmonic purity, rich timbre, extremely flexible flow of voices together with a vividly marked pattern development in each song. These qualities are present in all our particularly favourite songs although different in genre and content from ballads ('The Bard of Beverīna', 'Three Sacred Oak Trees', 'The Castle of Light', etc.) and dramatic songs ('The King's Daughter', 'Dies irae', etc.) to the romantic ('The Day is Dawning', 'The Sun's Revelry', 'The Forest Lake', etc.) and national songs ('Autumn', 'In Rīga I Bought I Bought a Grey Horse', etc.). They form the 'golden repertoire' of the choirs given that, in terms of musical expression, they are relatively simple.

However, over time the composer's requirements for choir music and the performing standards demonstrated by the choirs changed. We can sadly agree with Vītols who confessed in 1933 that his songs had become too complicated for the choirs of that time. On the other hand, Vītols had placed his compositions in the prosperous stream of Latvian choir songs which gave fruit in last quarter of the 20th century and are still alive today. This is a chapter of Latvian choir literature that considers the choir to be a technically

independent, mighty and magnificent instrument. These pieces cannot be sang by every amateur choir. A composer does have the right to speak any language but nobody will ever be allowed to neglect the logic of the music! These words of a Master apply equally to both the art of composition and the art of interpretation.



About choir conducting traditions in Latvia

The Jāzeps Vītols 6th International Choral Conductor Competition will be held in 2019 when the Department of Choir Conducting marks its 75th anniversary. Since the foundation of the department and establishment of the professional choir conducting school, remarkable success has been achieved and more than 700 choir conductors have graduated from Jāzeps Vītols Latvian State Conservatory and JVLMA. Latvian choral art and conducting schools have gained wide international recognition in choir and choral conducting competitions and festivals. The Latvian Radio Choir, the *Latvija* State Choir and the *Ave Sol* Riga Chamber Choir, alongside several leading Latvian amateur choirs, participate in concerts organised by professional music producers and agencies all over the world. Generations of outstanding professional choir conductors such as Teodors Reiters, Imants Kokars, Ausma Derkēvica, Edgars Račevskis, Sigvards Kļava, Kaspars Putniņš, Andris Veismanis, Māris Sirmāis, Aira Birziņa, Mārtiņš Ozoliņš, Ainārs Rubiķis,

Kaspars Ādamsons, Jānis Liepiņš, Jānis Ozols and many others have favoured the continuity and development of the Latvian Celebration Song tradition, as well as their own worldwide identity with artistically magnificent programmes.

The professional level of the conductors lies at the basis of the Celebration Song tradition, i.e. to ensure multi-voiced *cappella* choir singing. The prestige and development is only possible by setting up high professional standards in general and particularly in music education. The role of choir conductors and music teachers in the Latvian cultural environment is inestimable as they bring worldwide recognition to Latvian culture and music.

The aim of the Jāzeps Vītols International Choral Conductor Competition is to promote the culture of Latvian choral singing and the tradition of the Celebration Song worldwide, to strengthen the continuity of the Latvian and European choir conducting traditions and the prestige of the profession. The Celebration Song tradition has developed into the most significant modern Latvian national brand. It was largely possible thanks to the approved high professional criteria and their appropriate implementation ever since the foundation of the Department of Choir Conducting in 1944.

About the Competition

The competition consists of three rounds.

Round I

- Conducting with the piano
- Work with the Mixed Choir of the JVLMA

Round II

- Rehearsal and concert with the Latvian Radio Choir and Ave Sol Riga Chamber Choir

Round III

- Rehearsal and concert with the *Latvija* State Choir, the Mixed Choir and the Symphony Orchestra of JVLMA



The repertoire of the competition includes both Latvian and Western European music. In order to promote Latvian composers, choir songs by Jāzeps Vītols will be mandatory in Round I and II. The repertoire of Round II consists of eight *a capella* songs created by the best contemporary Latvian composers. In the third round and the Gala, participants will be asked to perform compositions for choir and orchestra by Johannes Brahms and modern-day Latvian composers. The programme of the Competition also includes motets by Josef Gabriel Rheinberger and Francis Poulenc.

Young choral conductors, regardless of their nationality and born no earlier than 1989, are welcome to apply for the competition before 1 June 2019!

Please find detailed information at www.vitolakonkurss.lv

The international professional experience and success of the academic staff of the Department of Choir Conducting together with their practical experience in holding previous choir conductor competitions followed by the artistic achievements of their winners places the competition as an event of high artistic value among the few worldwide competitions dedicated specifically to choir conductors.



Aira Birziņa has been the conductor of the Riga Cathedral Girls' Choir TIARA since 2000. She is one of the most outstanding conductors in Latvia who works mostly with female choirs and teaches choir conducting at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music. She has been the principal conductor of the famous Latvian female choirs DZINTARS (Riga) and RASA (Ogre) for many years. Aira Birziņa is also one of the conductors of the Latvian Song and Dance Festival (XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XXVI). She leads various workshops, participates in conferences, and works as a jury member at international competitions in Latvia and abroad. She was awarded with the Acknowledgement of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia in 2018, the Order of the Three Stars and the "White Sparrow" Culture Prize of the Riga Municipality in 2015, the Annual Culture Prize of City of Ogre in 2018 and 2017, and the Ministry of Culture's Prize in Folk Art in 1999. Email: ccc@jvlma.lv