

Jānis ĶEPĪTIS

PIANO MINIATURES FROM THE MANUSCRIPTS, VOLUME TWO

MOOD-PAINTINGS: IN THE MEADOWS

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MOOD-PAINTINGS

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Nora Lūse
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JĀNIS ŅEPĪTIS: PIANO MINIATURES FROM THE MANUSCRIPTS, VOLUME TWO

by Nora Lūse

The Latvian composer, pianist and teacher Jānis Ņepītis (1908–89) was an outstanding figure in Latvian musical history. His contemporaries spoke of him as a vivacious, witty and humorous personality. His legacy as a composer and a music teacher is extraordinary, although he is almost completely unknown outside Latvia. I was fortunate enough to have known him personally. My impressions of Ņepītis as man and musician date mostly from my years of study at the Latvian Academy of Music in Riga in the 1970s. He headed the Department of Chamber Music, and every academic year it was his task to divide students into classes by professor. I received an assignment to study the piano trio as a genre, but I politely asked him if he could change the schedule since my main interest was in the double-reed repertoire. His kindness and understanding allowed me to specialise in the company of young oboists and bassoonists. The schedule had already been approved, but he was prepared to change it because of me! As for Ņepītis as a composer, he also left what for me, personally, is an amazing musical souvenir: his Sonata for Bassoon and Piano, dedicated to the Latvian bassoonist Andris Arnicāns and to me. One day in July 1978, in the street, he made us a gift of the manuscript of the Sonata, with a few jesting words about young performers.

Jānis Ņepītis was born in 1908, in the small village of Trikāta, in north-eastern Latvia, between the capital, Riga, and the border with Estonia; he was the youngest son of a teacher and a seamstress. His first steps in music were made within the family, since his parents loved music, and so the boy was introduced to the piano when he was only three years old. He made steady progress and in 1926 graduated from the music school in Valmiera, the nearest large town to Trikāta. There he was appreciated as a performer of the classical repertoire, but also was a sought-after

musician at social gatherings, playing music for entertainment. He also played the organ in church services, occasions he used to develop his professional skills in improvisation.

After study at the Latvian Conservatoire in Riga, from 1926 to 1934, Ķepītis graduated with no fewer than three degrees: Composition, Piano Performance and Conducting. His teachers were three of the most important names in Latvian music: the composer and conductor Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948 – himself born in Valmiera),¹ the pianist-composer Pauls Šuberts (1884–1945)² and an all-round musician, Jānis Mediņš (1890–1966).³ Ķepītis' extraordinary talent was recognised in a competition that earned him a scholarship to go to Paris (1935) and to Wiesbaden (1936) for further studies. Interestingly, the influence of the French music of the time can be heard in many of Ķepītis' works, especially in his solo-piano miniatures.

After completing his studies, Ķepītis embarked on an intensive career as a soloist, chamber musician and a recording pianist at Latvian Radio. The 1930s saw the composition of his First String Quartet (1933), his First Piano Concerto and First Violin Sonata (both 1937) and his Harp Concerto, First Piano Quartet and First Piano Quintet (all 1938). He continued working as a musician in Latvia through the Second World War, as far as circumstances allowed,⁴ and kept composing. A horn concerto and his

¹ Vītols himself graduated from the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1886 (Latvia was still part of the Russian Empire at the time) and remained there to teach, his students including Myaskovsky and Prokofiev. He founded the Latvian Conservatoire (which now bears his name) in 1919, the year after his return to the newly independent Latvia.

² Šuberts, another graduate of the St Petersburg Conservatoire (where he studied with Anna Esipova), is best remembered for a number of popular songs but was an important pianist in his day, accompanying Chaliapin among other prominent singers. He died on a refugee train outside Dresden.

³ Like Vītols, Mediņš – a generation younger – was a driving force in the musical life of the young Latvian republic, writing operas and ballets, composing orchestral, chamber, choral and instrumental music, conducting at home and abroad, teaching orchestration and conducting at the Latvian Conservatoire (1921–44) and acting as Artistic Director at Latvian Radio (1928–44). On the second Soviet invasion of Latvia, in 1944, Mediņš fled westwards with his family, spending some years in refugee camps in Germany before finally settling in Stockholm in 1948.

⁴ Like the other two Baltic states, Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia underwent a series of cruel occupations. The dictatorship established by Kārlis Ulmanis in 1934 came to an end in 1939 when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact assigned Bessarabia, Estonia, Finland and Latvia to the Soviet sphere of influence (Germany claimed Poland and Lithuania), and Soviet military bases were established in Latvia. Then, in June 1940 the Soviet Union occupied the entire country, to be followed in July 1941 by a German invasion, one reign of terror replacing another. In late 1944 the Red Army pushed most of the Wehrmacht out of the Baltic countries, and they remained under oppressive Soviet control until they regained their independence in 1989.

First Violin Concerto appeared in 1940, and the First Piano Sonata in 1942. Dozens of songs and choral pieces had emerged between these larger scores, and for the last three years of the conflict it was on these smaller works that he concentrated. By 1945, though, he had completed his first opera, *Minhauzena precības* ('The Marriage of Munchausen'). In the post-war period, not wanting to conform with the political content prescribed by the Soviet dictatorship, Ķepītis concentrated his composing mostly in more abstract genres, such as chamber music, which were less directly subject to censorship, as well as on music for solo piano, which presents the finest examples of his work, though he continued to generate compositions of some scale. He produced his First Symphony (of no fewer than six) in 1956, and his tally of larger works includes three piano and three violin concertos (1937, 1953 and 1973, and 1940, 1978 and 1983), as well as concertos for bassoon (1975) and cello (1952) and a set of *Concert Variations on a Latvian Folksong Theme* for two pianos and chamber orchestra (1973). Among his choral-orchestral pieces are an oratorio, *The Ballad of a Rifleman's Mother* (1968), and the 'Poem' *A Song about an Eagle* (1950), to a text by Gorky – the 'eagle' doubtless being Stalin. Other titles – such as the orchestral song *I Ask for Peace on Earth* of 1982 – show him working under the same political constraints that were brought to bear across the Soviet Empire; no composer could escape this kind of pressure.⁵ But the sheer quantity of Ķepītis' chamber and instrumental music shows where his heart lay. There are six piano trios (1934, 1940, 1957, 1972 and two in 1979), as well as other works with the piano in trio combinations, two violin sonatas (1937 and 1974) and sonatas for bassoon (1978) and viola (1976), all with piano, a sonata for harp and cello (1974) and another for five cellos (1963); three piano quartets (the first from 1938 and third from 1975; the second is undated), two piano quintets (1938 and 1947) and three string quartets (1933, 1946 and 1975), as well as dozens and dozens of smaller pieces, for a huge range of instrumental combinations. His piano music is generally on a smaller scale, although it does include a *Latvian Rhapsody* (1962), an early set of variations (1930), three sonatinas (1948 and 1955; one is

⁵ The Polish-Russian Mieczysław Weinberg (1919–96), for example, based in Moscow, wrote a large number of works with the word 'Peace' in the title (or, antithetically, 'War'), and in 1949, in neighbouring Estonia, Heino Eller (1887–1970) composed a symphonic poem entitled *The Flight of the Eagle*.



Photograph: Keņģis family archive

*The young Jānis Keņģis,
from around the time
of the composition
of Snowflakes and Portraits*

undated) and three sonatas for solo piano (1942, 1949 and 1963) as well as two works for two pianos: an undated *Prelude and Scherzo* (no later than 1932) and a *Rhapsody* (1972).

Notwithstanding the scale of his multi-dimensional compositional output, Ķepītis is perhaps best remembered as a major teacher – at least in the hearts and minds of his students. He taught chamber music at the Latvian State Conservatoire and was elected head of department. During his long years of teaching, he worked with a large number of students, who in time became also music teachers and concert musicians. He was perhaps most aptly described in an essay by a chamber-music student of his, the pianist Jautrite Putniņa (1929–2017), as ‘a man with a miracle in his heart’.⁶ Anecdotes about his personality and musicianship reveal a consistent thread of humour and wit, along with a profound love of music and of his homeland. Ķepītis spent his retirement years in a house on Lake Baltezers, on the north-east outskirts of Riga, composing, playing and teaching music until the last day of his life.

In common with Ķepītis’ wider output, his piano music is as good as unknown, and so it is all the more illuminating that the piano pieces in this second volume of miniatures show such stylistic diversity, with these five cycles,⁷ written between 1939 and 1974, allowing the evolution of his style to be observed. Basically, only one cycle in this album – the *Mood-Paintings* – was published (in 1956); the remaining four are held in manuscript in the Museum of Literature and Music in Riga.

The piano literature – especially in eastern Europe – is rich in cyclic pieces intended for young pianists. In Latvia this tradition was begun by the father-figure of Latvian music, Jāzeps Vītols, in 1927, when he composed a cycle of eight miniatures for children that became his Op. 68. Ķepītis’ *Snowflakes*, a set of eight miniatures for children, is another contribution to the genre. This Christmas-themed cycle was completed on 21 June 1939 and first performed, by its composer, on 24 December of that year in a live broadcast from Latvian Radio. The imagery of the music is combined with technical demands intended for pianists of the youngest age. An important element in

⁶ In Lolita Fūrmane and Baiba Jaunslaviete (eds.), *Ķepītis*, Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, Riga, 2010, pp. 181–88.

⁷ There is perhaps a musicological debate to be had as to whether some of these works are suites rather than cycles, but Ķepītis himself used the Latvian term ‘cikls’, indicating where his own thoughts lay on the matter.

performance is the pedalling required to bring out the colour of the timbres Җeҗitis created. The harmonic framework of the cycle is established by its opening and closing keys: the introduction, 'A Little Cloud' [1], is in E minor and the closing 'And Spring Again' [8] in E major. The lyrical high point of the cycle is found in 'The Story of the Flakes' [4], with the most dramatic piece, 'Thaw' [7], placed in penultimate position, as a reminder that when the spring thaw comes to the Baltic, it can be quite a lively event.

The cycle *Portraits* was composed in 1946, with Җeҗitis using music to draw sketches of friends and family members in a set of delicate psychological essays. He employs a diverse range of piano techniques (such as trills, leaps, chords, scale-passages and *martellato*), skilfully organised. Two of the *Portraits* include Latvian folk-melodies: the first, 'Andulis' (the name of the composer's son Andulis Җeҗitis, born in 1945) [9], paints an expressive picture with motifs from a lullaby – the Latvian folksong 'Aijā, Ancīt' ('Aye, Auntie'); and the sixth, 'Niko' [14], contains the folksong 'Aiz ezera augsti kalni' ('High Mountains behind the Lake'). 'Elvira' [10] is the composer's attempt to portray his wife, Elvira Volšteine (1912–90), who until 1960 was among the leading mezzo-sopranos at the Latvian National Opera, and so a quotation from *Carmen* can be heard here twice. She also took part in performances of Җeҗitis' vocal works, often with him at the piano. 'Nanny' [11] is a tribute to Milda Freiberga at Christmas 1946, characterised by regular unison chord sequences to suggest her manner of walking. The portraits of two more women in the cycle – 'Vija' [12] and 'Biruta' [13] – are tributes to a family friend, the musicologist Vija Muške (1927–88), and to the composer's cousin, Biruta Rubule (1916–2011).

The third cycle presented here, *Mood-Paintings* (1956), provides its performer with an occasion for pianistic display, with Җeҗitis using the emotions indicated in the title of each of the seven pieces to vary his textures and explore intricate detail, requiring a far more virtuosic technique than the earlier cycles in this album. The vivid variety and rapid harmonic changes in miniatures like 'Anxiety' [16], 'Delight' [18], 'Frolic' [19] and 'Laugh' [20] catch the ear in their dramatic depiction of the emotions at issue. By contrast, the dramaturgy of the more slowly moving pieces – 'Evening Song' [15], 'Sadness' [17] and 'Solace' [21] – follows a steady emotional intensification, suggesting programmatic



Jānis Ķepītis with his wife, the singer Elvīra Volšteine, and their sons Andulis, Egils and Uldis – two of them featured in Portraits

narratives based on human experience. The first and the last of these pieces – ‘Evening Song’ and ‘Solace’ – are linked by a dotted motif. The cycle concludes majestically with wave-like chords and a thickening of the texture – Ķepītis’ favourite piano technique.

The 1960s was a period in Latvian musical history where its composers explored new directions, some Neo-Classical or Neo-Romantic, others experimenting with the new techniques being used by composers abroad. Ķepītis, too, took part in this search for a new language, as can be heard in the cycle *Mood-Paintings: In the Meadows* (1965); in its five movements he deploys serialism, minimalism, aleatory and dodecaphony. His increased interest in sonority is reflected in ‘A Ray of Sunshine’ [22] and ‘The Black Cloud’ [25]. He often duplicates the melody in parallel thirds or sixths, and gives rhythm

a decisive role in miniatures like ‘Butterfly and Boy’ [23] and ‘After Rain’ [26]. Regarded as a whole, *Mood-Paintings: In the Meadows* is distinguished by its logical construction, musical dramaturgy and rationally linear texture.

Impressions of an Evening, composed in 1974, was Җепітис’ last cycle for solo piano, a triptych where he used the traditions of minimalism – and in the Baltic countries there are indeed a number of independent minimalist folk-traditions, among them *dainas* in Latvia, *surtartinės* in Lithuania and *regilaul* in Estonia: it was not an import from West-Coast America. The opening *Moderato* [27] establishes a contemplative mood; the second movement, marked *Andante tranquillo* [28], presents a short but impulsively agitated narrative; and the third [29], which bears an inscription from Җепітис: ‘Dzīvi, ne par ātru’ (‘Live, not too fast’), exploits a wide range of tonal changes. The thematic material of the first and third converges to lend a sense of coherence to the cycle as a whole.

Something of Җепітис’ charismatic personality can be discerned from his own performance at the piano – the only surviving example of which is in his ‘Jāņugunis’ (‘St John’s Fire’) [30] from his very first piano cycle, *Līgo Night* (1935). This unpublished work consists of three miniatures – ‘In the Evening’, ‘Fern Flower’ and ‘St John’s Fire’, which he premiered live in the studios of Latvian Radio in 1935. The Romantic music language here is an attempt to depict ‘Ligo’ - the main Latvian traditional ethnic festival, celebrating the summer solstice on 23 June, followed by ‘Jāņi’ (St John’s Day) on 24 June. I offer it here as an epilogue to this exploration of his piano miniatures. It reveals much about Җепітис the pianist: his playing is precise and, despite the fast tempi, there is no impression of hurrying; instead, the typical wave-like Romantic pianism here clearly presents the different emotional directions of its contrasting episodes, and the tone is one of nobility of expression and deep feeling. This recording is a reminder that Җепітис was also an excellent pianist, whose now-forgotten career as a performer was cruelly cut short by the Second World War.

Nora Lūse studied piano with Igors Kalniņš at the Latvian Academy of Music in Riga (1971–74) and then with the legendary Tatiana Nikolayeva and Leonid Roizman at the Moscow Conservatoire (1974–80). In 1980 she won a prize at the Viotti International Piano Competition in Vercelli (Italy), and graduated from the Moscow State Conservatoire with two degrees, one in piano performance and the other in musicology. She has taught piano performance at the Latvian Academy of Music since 1981. Along with her pedagogical activity in Riga, she had a successful career as a concert pianist in major concert halls in the USSR (until 1991, when the Soviet Union was dissolved) and has recorded for Radio Latvia as a soloist as well as a chamber musician.

In 1985 she earned the degree of Doctor of Arts, writing a *History of the Art of the Organ in Latvia* (in Russian). In 2003 she obtained the degree of Doctor of Pedagogy and completed a second monograph, *Latvian Pianists and Pedagogues* (this time in Latvian). Her research interests integrate musicology and pedagogy. She has been a member of the Latvian Composers' Union since 2007, the year in which she also became an Associate Professor at the Riga University College of Economics and Culture.

In 2011, she founded the international 'Jānis Norvilis International Competition for Young Pianists', with the aim of bringing young pianists together to share their extraordinary gifts. In 2012 she created the 'Riga International Competition for Young Pianists', which has a special 'Ethno-Didactical' concept: the combination of an international competition with a seminar for music-teachers and a master-class in Riga.





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'there's an honesty to these works that comes through time and again. These are simply well-crafted pieces written for the sheer joy of creation.

Nora Luse plays with sympathy and enthusiasm. These may be small pieces, but she takes them seriously. And in the process reveals some marvelous miniatures of beauty. I'm looking forward to the next installment.'

Ralph Graves, WTJU,
University of Virginia



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