

Jānis KEPĪTIS

PIANO MINIATURES FROM THE MANUSCRIPTS, VOLUME ONE

SONATINE IN B MAJOR

SEVEN MINIATURES

THREE CAPRICES

TWO LULLABIES

FIVE PRELUDES

Nora Lūse

JĀNIS ŅEPĪTIS: PIANO MINIATURES FROM THE MANUSCRIPTS, VOLUME ONE

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, Ņepītis 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, such as the Prelude in D flat major (1937) [1], the *Caprice* in A flat major (1939) [6] and *Eddy* (1940) [14].

After completing his studies, Ķepītis embarked on an intense 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

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 also 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

and his 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 observing the 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 of smaller pieces, for a huge range of instrumental

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.

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*.

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 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 also became music teachers and concert musicians. Ķepītis was perhaps most aptly described in an essay by a chamber-music student of his, the pianist Jautrīte 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 as a whole, his piano music is unknown: only five pieces in this album, for example, were published – the *Prelude* in D flat major [1], *Lullaby* in A flat major [9], *Latvian Dance* in G major [11], *Elegy* in A flat major [12] and *Sonatine* in B flat major [18–20]. All the remaining pieces are in manuscript, held in the Museum of Literature and Music in Riga.

The five Preludes recorded here were composed between 1937 and 1975 and thus not intended as a set. It was melody, harmony and formal structure that were particularly important to Ķepītis in his creative process, combined with an excellent sense of the specific capacities of the piano. Although each of these Preludes exists as a separate entity, taken together they show a full range of feeling, from fervour and passion to resignation and moments of reverie, and they present interesting rhythms, dynamics, harmonies and colours. In the first of them, in D flat major [1], composed

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

in 1937, when Ƙepītis was in his late twenties, his mastery of structure is already in evidence. By bouncing the ascending sixth in the melody between both hands, inserting sequences, a virtuosic cadenza and a *religioso*-like chordal episode, he expands what is basically a simple ABA scheme to a lively five-part structure. The second prelude, in F minor, dates from 1949 [2], and bears the title ‘1940’. It is part of a collective cycle by Latvian composers with the title ‘Letter to Stalin’ and was intended to mark Stalin’s 70th birthday in December 1948; ‘1940’, of course, was the year in which Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union. Shaped as a diptych, this prelude shows a full range of feeling, from deep frustration in the beginning, unfolding into a contrasting hymnic conclusion. The third prelude, in F minor [3], Ƙepītis composed immediately after Stalin’s death in March 1953. In the Soviet Union composers were expected to discuss one another’s work, and the critical comments addressed to Ƙepītis in the Latvian Composers’ Union have been preserved: he had chosen an inappropriate rhythm (habanera); Lisztian Romanticism shone through the piece; the themes were melodically uninteresting and the general mood was impersonal. (The choice of a key as gloomy as F minor for these two ‘Stalin’ preludes is far from coincidental.) The Prelude in C sharp minor (1951) [4] demands virtuoso pianism and features frequent, often unexpected, changes of harmony. In 1951–52 Ƙepītis assembled ten short piano pieces into a suite, *Rīgas skati* (‘Views of Riga’), from existing piano works, and he included this prelude. The last of these five preludes, in C major, dates from 1975 [5] and takes the form of a continuous flow of triplets.

The three *Caprices* present the more playful and humorous side of Ƙepītis’ musical imagination. They were likewise composed over an extended period, but have a rather complicated history. The *Caprice* in A flat major [6] was the first to be composed, in 1939. Ten years later, in 1949, he wrote the E flat major *Caprice* [7] and headed the score: ‘4 Kaprisies. Jautrie zēni [‘The Funny Boys’ – crossed-out]. 1’. On 5 January 1954 he returned to the genre and composed two further works, in C major [8], which he marked as No. 2, and a fourth one, ‘No. 3’, in A minor and $\frac{6}{8}$, not included here since it is unfinished. The A flat major *Caprice* is a witty and cheerful composition evoking associations with clowning, whereas that in E flat major is rather simple-minded and

might suggest young people whistling. The *Caprice* in C major may in turn evoke some humorous story of its own.

The two *Lullabies* present a nostalgic world of contemplation. The first, in A flat major [9], dates from 1943 and may have been intended as a gift to the composer's son Andris, born in 1940; Ķepītis offered no explanation of the impulse behind it, although it may not be too fanciful to interpret its unexpected changes of harmonic language and its dreamy mood as the musical portrait of a three-year-old toddler. The *Lullaby* in F major [10] dates from ten years later (1953) and was dedicated to the young pianist Ieva Arāja (1929–2015) with the double purpose of encouraging her to continue her career as a soloist and help her put her kids to sleep. The swinging rhythm and steady movement of the chords create a more conventional mood appropriate for the genre.

As with the five Preludes, the seven miniatures on this album were written independently but are presented here as a set of lyrical programmatic pieces. The first one, a *Latvian Dance* in G major [11], combines inspiration rooted in folk-music with the witty use of pianistic virtuosity. This piece was composed no later than 1932 and was first performed by Ķepītis himself in 1934, a concert broadcast by Radio Riga – in the 1930s he was very active as a piano soloist and chamber-music performer. The others are short and melancholic, sometimes with ethereal, sensual harmonies. The *Elegy* in A flat major (it, too!) [12] is undated on the manuscript, but its pianistic techniques – sequences, positions, octaves, cadenza-like episodes, dynamic waves and so on – are characteristic of Ķepītis' style in the mid-1930s. Four of the other pieces – a *Sketch* in F sharp minor from 1940 [13], *Autumn Sketch* in B minor written in 1974 [17], *In the Evening* in F sharp minor from 1953 [16] and *Rest in the Garden* in F major from 1951 [15] – span three-and-a-half decades. As with the 1951 Prelude in C sharp minor, *Rest in the Garden* was included in the suite *Rīgas skati* (1951–52). The programmatic miniature *Eddy*, in F sharp minor, written in 1940 [14], stands out in this company: it is characterised by a strong influence from French impressionism, especially the style of Ravel, whom Ķepītis much admired.

After the introspection of many of those miniatures, this first volume in the first-ever recording of Jānis Ķepītis' piano music concludes on a jolly note, with a buoyant

Sonatine in B major (1948) in three movements. Intended for young pianists, it was the only piece of this kind that he completed.⁷ The *Moderato* first movement [18] uses a Scarlattian technique of energetic runs of continuous triplets. The short second-movement *Andante con moto* [19], set in a languid waltz rhythm, requires hand-crossing and pedalling from its young players, and the contrasting final *Allegretto* [20] asks them for the kind of light-footed jumps you see in a flock of sparrows.

This album may throw a further, unexpected light on Jānis Ķepītis' personality. I suspect that, like many composers (Liszt, Rimsky-Korsakov and Skryabin are examples), he experienced synaesthesia, strong and systematic music-to-colour associations that correlate particular keys and colours; other synaesthetes might, for example, associate colour with particular sounds or numbers.⁸ One of Ķepītis' favourite hobbies was painting, and in his piano music he chose the title 'Mood Paintings' on two occasions. My assumption is that Ķepītis unconsciously associated each tonality with a particular colour. There are three pieces here in F sharp minor (*Sketch* [13], *Eddy* [14] and *In the Evening* [16]), which is often felt as a desperate key, full of anxiety and worry. Three other pieces (the first *Caprice* [6], the first *Lullaby* [9] and the *Elegy* [12]) are in A flat major – a warm but sad key. Such an experience of colour when listening to music generally remains the private experience of the synaesthete, but it might indicate a tantalising further dimension to these short pieces which most of us may not be able to perceive as strongly as perhaps Ķepītis did, though it does at least alert us to be attentive to the colours of the keys he chose.

⁷ There are two other simple *Sonatinas* for beginners among Ķepītis' manuscripts: an undated *Sonatine* in C major in three movements (the third movement, in $\frac{9}{8}$, is incomplete) and a *Sonatine* in G major in three movements (1955), both testifying to his interest in expanding the repertoire for children.

⁸ Vanessa Hawkins, 'Music-Color Synesthesia: A Historical and Scientific Overview', *Aisthesis: The Interdisciplinary Honors Journal*, Vol. 13 (2022), No. 1, pp. 36–43 (<https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/aisthesis/article/view/4635>).

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 music history. 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.



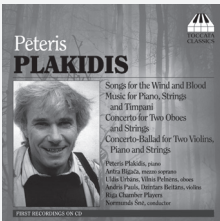


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