

UDC-78

DUE NORTH: ĒRIKS EŠENVALDS AND *AURORA BOREALIS* AS A CLAIMED ARTISTIC SPACE

Dina Lentsner
Capital University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

Summary:

Latvian composer Ēriks Ešenvalds (b. 1977) has been rapidly gaining recognition in the global choral world with his consumer-conscious in terms of musical style and technical execution, and yet, textually complex compositions. A significant number of Ešenvalds's works are inspired by the phenomenon of the Northern Lights (aurora borealis), including at least three compositions for choir, a multi-media symphony, a piano piece, and a clarinet concerto. I focus on Ešenvalds's composition Northern Lights for mixed choir, power chimes, and water-tuned glasses, utilizing excerpts from the journals of 19th-century Arctic explorers – American Charles Francis Hall and Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen – in combination with the ancient Latvian folksong. This well-crafted choral work demonstrates main features of Ešenvalds's current style, including uncomplicated harmonic language and structural design. The ways in which Ešenvalds sets, highlights, and layers chosen texts, however, are sophisticated and effective, resulting in a powerful narrative. Drawing upon writings of cultural geographers, ethnographers, historians, and literary scholars, and using Ešenvalds's Northern Lights as an example, I argue that, through his "Northern" creative output, Ešenvalds discovers, negotiates, and, finally, authors his cultural identity as both a Latvian and, more broadly, a "Northern" composer.

Keywords: *Ēriks Ešenvalds, Latvia, aurora borealis, cultural identity, geography, artistic space.*

Latvian composer Ēriks Ešenvalds (b. 1977) has been rapidly gaining recognition in Europe and Northern America for his choral and choral-symphonic works. His popularity may partially be due to his careful consideration of the consumer market: the majority of Ešenvalds's works are in English and stylistically accessible, with appropriate for specific ensembles voicing and textural execution. This "practical" approach to composition, however, is not unique to Ešenvalds, and it is not the purpose of this essay to discuss a harmonious co-existence of pragmatism and creative integrity in this composer's oeuvre. Rather, it explores the concept of an artistic space that arises when considering the complexity of Ešenvalds's compositional process – one beyond any technical considerations.

An overwhelming number of Ešenvalds's works are inspired by natural phenomena – stars, constellations, volcanos, and atmospheric occurrences, such as sundogs, moondogs, and especially, *aurora borealis*, also known as the Northern Lights. The latter has occupied Ešenvalds's creative mind for quite some time: a few years of scientific, folkloristic, and literary research, multiple travels to Northern Norway to chase *aurora borealis* and then all around the Arctic North with the video crew resulting in several choral works, as well as a multi-media symphony. I propose that Ešenvalds utilizes his fascination with *aurora borealis* in a twofold way: 1) as a path to finding a "global" community for himself, and perhaps, for his motherland, Latvia, to belong; 2) as a means to claim his own, unique artistic space. I use Ešenvalds's composition *Northern Lights* (2013) for mixed choir, power chimes, and water-tuned glasses to demonstrate my point.

Indeed, a concept of an "artistic space" is connected intimately with one of an "artistic identity." Arguably, these two may signify the same thing (or things), for both may be claimed or

negotiated. Moreover, in this article, I use the term “space” in both the figurative and physical sense. I am following the lead of literary scholar Susan Carvalho, who writes: “Most contemporary cultural geographers, and the humanists who have benefited from and expanded upon their work, now recognize that identity of the individual and texture of her landscape are inseparable and reciprocally influential. In the words of feminist geographer Liz Bondi, ‘the question “Who am I?” ...becomes “Where am I?” ’ (p. 98)” [1]. I find it intriguing that, while residing and working in his native Latvia, Ešenvalds discovers and celebrates the natural world, stories, and legends of the regions farther up North from his homeland – Finland, Norway, Northern Siberia, Greenland, Iceland, Alaska, and Northern Canada. While one may argue that interest in the Arctic North does not make Ešenvalds any less Latvian, the question arises: What is “Latvian”?

I am fully conscious of the truism that this question is not for me to answer – I am not Latvian. However, Latvian scholars, such as cultural geographer Bunkše [1999] and musicologist Kudiņš [2015] point out Latvia’s historical struggle with its cultural identity. This small country had been ruled and, consequently, culturally impacted by Baltic Germans for six centuries, and then by Russians in the 20th century. Polish scholar Gustaw Juzala notes, “Germans and Russians considered Latvians a small underdeveloped community without their own culture or history” [189]. This harsh, however truthful, characterization of the relationship between external powers and oppressed Latvians resulted in engendered nationalistic resistance – one that was expressed in the conscious and intentional, even if subdued, generation and protection (in these circumstances, read: vitality) of the spiritual, creative, economic, and scientific heritage of this small nation. According to Mikhalovskis [1999], since Latvian folklore and cultural customs were not subjected to the official Soviet censorship during the 20th century [and I would add, rather, they were used as propaganda of the supposedly unified ideology of the Soviet “brotherhood” – D.L.], Latvian non-professional theaters, educational societies, dance groups, and especially choirs and consequently, song festivals, flourished. For generations, in their traditional songs, called *dainas*, Latvians would convey connectedness to the nature of their land in order to manifest and perpetuate a sense of national consciousness. Discussing Latvia’s cultural narrative that spans centuries, Bunkše proposes that the “dominant element in Latvian culture is *nature* rather than history. Latvians are as bound to place, to landscape, to particular geographies, as other peoples are bound to tribal legends and religion” [175].

Thus, on one hand, Ešenvalds’s fascination with the natural phenomena seems to be deeply rooted in his Latvian DNA; on the other hand, the composer’s geographic “transpositions” – as reflected in his interest in, and exploration of the nature and cultures of “others” – may be viewed as an effort to magnify, “globalize,” and therefore, re-contextualize his nation’s cultural heritage, and consequently, his own cultural identity. Examining what she calls “geopolitics of identity,” feminist literary scholar Susan Friedman posits, “Identity often requires some form of displacement – literal or figurative – to come to consciousness, [...] for leaving home brings into being the idea of “home,” the perception of its identity as distinct from elsewhere” [151]. Following Friedman, I maintain that Ešenvalds’s preoccupation with *aurora borealis* is symptomatic of the composer’s desire to re-contextualize his creative self while displaced, whether physically or imaginary.

Cultural historian and geographer Shane McCorristine [2013] describes *aurora borealis* as “a natural luminous light phenomenon that is commonly observed in the night sky at polar and sub-polar latitudes, and less commonly in other latitudes of the northern hemisphere. *Aurorae* are caused by the collision between charged particles from the solar wind and atoms in the earth’s atmosphere, resulting in a glowing manifestation that can appear in a variety of forms and colours” [30]. The sightings of a natural spectacle like this had led to the Northern Lights being prominently featured in the folklore of people in many different parts of the world, expressing diverse interpretations of the phenomenon. For instance, some indigenous inhabitants of circumpolar North believed in the intercommunication with aurorae, while others thought of the Northern Lights as torches of the spirits of recently deceased. For Medieval and Early Modern Europeans, McCorristine notes, *aurorae* signaled approaching war or famine” [ibid.].

The scientific exploration of the Northern Lights originated in the 18th century. Patricia Fara [2006] describes a dramatic display of *aurora borealis* in England in 1716 that “was one of many which occurred unusually far south during the eighteenth century” [39]. The author notes that such an outburst of the auroral activity in the 18th century led to increased interest in this phenomenon by European and American scientists and explorers. Prior to that, however, Scandinavians, who at that time were establishing their own learned academies as well as national identities, had already produced some scientific reports on the Northern Lights, and “capitalized on the widespread interest in the aurora to reinforce their own status” [41]. In relation to the thesis of this essay, I find it intriguing that *aurora borealis* has been functioning as a claimed cultural space since the very beginning of its exploration.

A focused systematic geographic, scientific, and cultural exploration of the Arctic regions developed throughout the 19th century. According to McCorristine, there was “a series of expensively equipped expeditions in search of the Northwest Passage through the Arctic [...] and the North Pole... [31]. Additionally, “land-based travellers collected legends, stories, and testimonies from indigenous informants and fur traders” [ibid.]. As seen from this period’s travel writing, the 19th century’s poetics of Romanticism, as well as ideologies of nationalism, undoubtedly affected an overall objective of the circumpolar expeditions, as well as scientific interpretation of the data gathered by the Arctic explorers. In the case of Ešenvalds’s work *Northern Lights*, the journal excerpts that the composer utilizes are emotion-fueled accounts of the encounters with *aurora borealis* by 19th century American explorer Charles F. Hall (1821-1871) and Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1830), as seen in Fig. 1:

It was night, and I had gone on deck several times. Iceberg was silent; I too was silent. It was true dark and cold. At nine o’clock I was below in my cabin, when the captain hailed me with the words: “Come above, Hall, at once! The world is on fire!” I knew his meaning, and, quick as thought, I rushed to the companion stairs. In a moment I reached the deck, and as the cabin door swung open, a dazzling light, overpowering light burst upon my startled senses!

- Charles Francis Hall

Oh, the whole sky was one glowing mass of colored flames, so mighty, so brave! Like a pathway of light, the northern lights seemed to draw us into the sky. Yes, it was harp-music, wild storming in the darkness; the strings trembled and sparkled in the glow of the flames like a shower of fiery darts. A fiery crown of auroral light cast a warm glow across the arctic ice. Again at times it was like softly playing, gently rocking silvery waves, on which dreams travel into unknown worlds.

- Fridtjof Nansen

Fig.1. The excerpts from journals by Arctic Explorers Charles Francis Hall (1821-1871) and Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) utilized in *Northern Lights*. Courtesy of Ēriks Ešenvalds. Used by permission.

The Latvian folksong that the composer uses to frame the explorers’ texts – the only known *daina* referring to the occurrence of the Northern Lights in the Latvian sky [Ešenvalds, 2019]¹ – contains a version of the archetypal European fearful construal of the Northern Lights mentioned above, as a premonition of war (Fig 2):

¹ According to Ešenvalds [2019], the composer discovered this “kāvi” *daina* in a footnote in Kursīte, 1996, p. 345.

Latvian folksong	English translation
Cik naksnīnas pret ziemeļi Redzēj' kāvus karojam; Karo kāvi pie debesu, Vedīs karus mūs' zemē.	Whenever at night, far in the north I saw the kāvi soldiers [i.e. Northern Lights] having their battle, Having their battle up in the sky; Perhaps they might bring a war to my land, too.

Fig. 2. Latvian *daina* used in *Northern Lights*. Courtesy of and English translation by Ēriks Ešenvalds. Used by permission.

How does the composer layer these diverse texts in his choral setting to recreate his own *aurora borealis* experience?

Listening to *Northern Lights* for the first time, I thought that it was “beautiful.” While I routinely resist using this arguably indefinable and arbitrary term, it was my honest initial reaction. The combination of the water glasses, clear, straight-tone voices in the performance by State Choir *Latvija*, thought-through but uncomplicated harmonic language, a masterful setting and layering of the texts – all contributed to the effectiveness of the piece. Ešenvalds structures his work as a diachronic music narrative that lives in a synchronic/palindromic form, as shown below (Fig. 3):

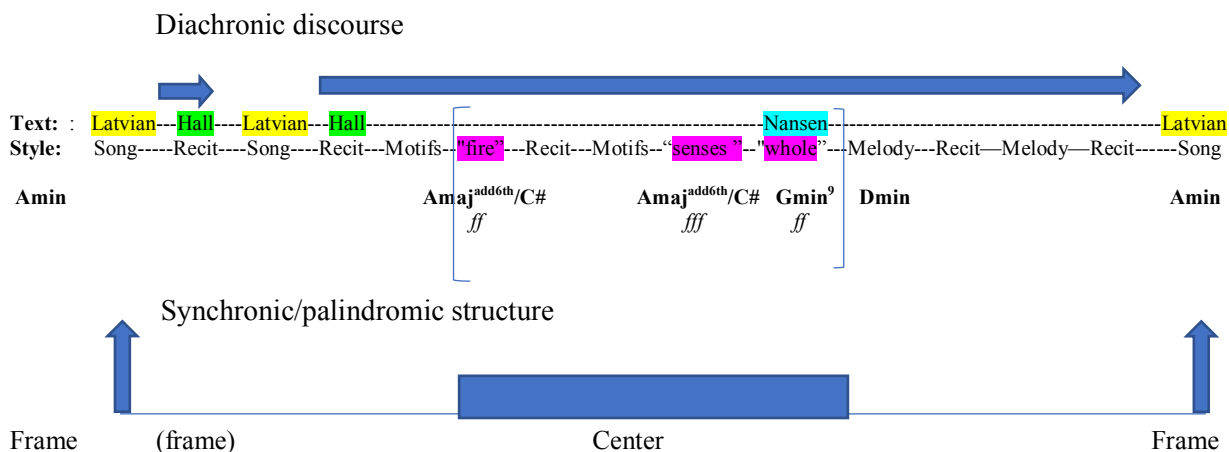


Fig. 3: Twofold synchronic/diachronic structural design of Ešenvalds's *Northern Lights*

The Latvian folksong, sung by the tenor solo with the choral harmonic background frames the structure, unequivocally signifying Ešenvalds's “rootedness” in Latvian culture. As Fig. 3 demonstrates, while there is a prominence of the narrative element in this work, it is strongly “grounded” by the composer through recurrence of the folksong that interrupts the narrative that barely started. Since there is no ethnographic transcription of the tune of this “kāvi” *daina* available, at the suggestion of ethnographer Janīna Kursīte, the composer searched for authentic melodic material in the field of “Vēja māte, Veļu māte, Māršava, Māra – spirits who had power over giving life and death” and found a tune “Vēja māte” (Mother of the Wind) [Ešenvalds, 2019]. In his piece, Ešenvalds utilized a popular version of this tune in combination with the authentic text of the “kāvi” *daina* (Ex. 1).

Solo *mp*
Cik nak - snī - nas pret zie - me - li re-dzēj' kā - vus ka - ro - jam,
Solo *mf*
Ē, re-dzēj' kā - vus ka - ro - jam;

Ex. 1. Latvian folksong melody in Ešņvalds's *Northern Lights*. Copyright@2013 Musica Baltica. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

The lyrical essence of the melody coupled with its simple harmonic execution projects innocence, vulnerability, and fragility rather than sentiments of fear and disturbance that are implicit in the text. I find this dissonance between the text's semantics and its setting intriguing and telling, as I discuss shortly. Moreover, the lyricism of the song creates a stark contrast with the recitative-like, formulaic nature of the narrative sections, drawn from Hall's and Nansen's journals, respectively. The composer clearly articulates a triple-climactic point of his form with the three high A's in soprano part (Ex. 2):

ff fire,
fff sens - es!
ff whole
ff fire,
fff sens - es!
ff whole
ff fire,
fff sens - es!
ff whole
ff fire,
fff sens - es!
ff whole

Ex. 2. Three structural peaks in *Northern Lights*. Copyright@2013 Musica Baltica. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

These structural peaks correspond to the words “fire,” “senses,” and “whole” in mm. 37, 52, and 54, respectively, seamlessly connecting the two explorers' narratives into one continuum and semantically evoking a sensory overload. The word “senses” is the center of the structural palindrome that Ešņvalds superimposes over the narrative unfolding of the Hall and Nansen texts (demonstrated in Fig. 3 above). Moreover, if contextualizing a larger-scale harmonic structure of the piece, the first two peaks, “fire” and “senses,” both are harmonized by A-major triad with an added sixth, functioning as V/iv in A minor, while the third peak, “whole,” with its harmonic

undercurrent, deceptively resolves (as if) overflowed “senses” to Gmin⁹, thus propelling musical narrative forward and simultaneously articulating a turning point in the palindromic structure of the composition.

In this “senses”-centered context, it may be intriguing to consider a concept of “sensescapes,” proposed by Bunkše [2012]. Advocating “including all the senses in theorizing and planning landscapes” [10], the scholar grounds his argument in the idea of “home” – in both geographical and metaphorical sense: “In the emerging paradigm shift from word and image to that of the senses lies a path to a sense of home in the landscape” [13]. Even without digging deeply into Bunkše’s intriguing argument (especially intriguing since, coincidentally or not, both Ešenvalds and Bunkše are Latvians), I find his terminology useful when interpreting the clear structural and expressive emphasis that Ešenvalds places on the word “senses,” for in my view, it signifies the internalization of the experience of discovery, be it a discovery of a place, an idea, or oneself. Strikingly fitting Bunkše’s proposition that “the senses and sensory perceptions exist in cultural contexts; and that such contexts vary over time” [14], Ešenvalds broadens his “cultural context,” his idea of belonging, of home, through a sense-driven experience of an encounter.

In my critical reading of *Northern Lights*, the “bare-bones” nature of the material in its narrative sections is a manifestation of Ešenvalds’s bold effort to draw listeners’ attention to the story of exploration and discovery, rather than music *per se*, and almost at the expense of music. On the other hand, Ešenvalds frames the explorers’ texts by a delicate, tuneful melody that creates an internal conflict with its own text, perhaps symbolizing and memorializing one’s rootedness in his, however complex, cultural past. I propose that the tension between two counterparts of *Northern Lights*, as well as within one of the counterparts, intimates Ešenvalds’s own twofold “sensescape,” where *aurora borealis* functions not just as an impetus for the composer’s focused creative response, but also as an ontological symbol of exploration of oneself while displaced in a geographical or imaginary space.

As Anne Heith [2007] puts it, “Identities are fluid, they exist on various levels and shift in response to changing contexts. Sometimes they develop in overlapping discourses. One way of dealing with this is to think of identification as a constant negotiation of symbolic and concrete borders” [227]. Ešenvalds’s partly fictional, and partly non-fictional “travel writing,” as articulated by his “Northern” compositions and exemplified in *Northern Lights*, affords him both global and internal creative space to discover, to claim, and finally, to author.

Works cited:

1. Carvalho, S. *Contemporary Spanish American Novels by Women: Mapping the Narrative*. Woodbridge, UK: Tamesis Books, 2007.
2. Bunkše, E. "God, Thine Earth is Burning: Nature Attitudes and the Latvian Drive for Independence." *Nature and Identity in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Buttimer and L. Wallin, 1999, pp. 175-187.
3. Kudiņš, J. "The National Music Identity in the Global Cultural Crossroad. Some Still Topical Local Problems in the Latvian Music History Writing." *GESJ: Musicology and Cultural Science*, 2018, No.1 (11), pp. 37-45.
4. Juzala, G. "Folklore in the Modern Culture of Lithuania and Latvia." *Ethnologia Polona*, 2012-2013, Vol. 33-34 pp. 185-195.
5. Mikhailovskis, V. "My 365 days in 1999." *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, January 5, 1999, No. 1 (1461), <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/20622>.
6. Friedman, S. *Mappings. Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton University Press, 1999.
7. McCorristine, S. "'Involuntarily We Listen': Hearing the Aurora Borealis in Nineteenth-Century Arctic Exploration and Science." *Canadian Journal of History*, 2013, XLVIII, pp. 29-61.
8. Fara, P. "Northern Possession: Laying Claim to the Aurora Borealis." *History Workshop Journal*, Autumn 1996, Vol. 42/1, pp. 37-58. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/1996.42.37>
9. Esenvaldš, Ē. Personal communication with the author. January 24, 2019.
10. _____. *Northern Lights* for mixed choir, power chimes and water-tuned glasses. Riga: Musica Baltica, 2013.
11. Kursīte, J. *Latviešu folklorā mitu spoguļi*. Riga: "Zinātne," 1996.
12. Bunkše, E. "Sensescapes: or a Paradigm Shift from Words and Images to All Human Senses in Creating Feelings of Home in Landscapes." *Landscape Architecture and Art*. Proceedings of the Latvia University of Agriculture Landscape Architecture and Art. Jelgava: 2012, Vol. 1/1.
13. Heith, A. "Fluid Identities and the Use of History: The Northern Lights Route and the Writings of Bengt Pohjanen." Proceedings of the conference *INTER: A European Cultural Studies Conference in Sweden*. Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden (AC SIS), Norrköping, June 2007. Linköping University Electronic Press: www.ep.liu.se/ecp/025/

Included: 3 figures, 2 music examples

Article received: 2019-06-20