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Singing the Nations: Herder’s Legacy

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Choir conductor Haralds Mednis (1906-2000) leading
the collective singing of Latvian demonstrators one day after
the January 13th, 1991 Soviet massacre of people in Lithuania.

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Our cordial thanks go to all those who have contributed to this book, in particular to the authors and to our editorial assistant Sanita Bērziņa-Reinsone — her help in formatting the manuscript was invaluable. We would also like to thank Margita Zālīte for supplying a photograph of the Herder monument in Riga, Margita Gaļtītis, Vija Kostoff, and Aija Ozoliņš for their painstaking work with text editing; Frances Fischer and Tom Wilks for linguistic advice and the WVT for all their patience and support. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the State Culture Capital Foundation in Latvia, the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia, and the State Research Programme “Letonika”.

Dace Bula and Sigrid Rieuwerts

VALSTS KULTURKAPITĀLA FONDS

LETONIKA

LATVIJAS UNIVERSITĀTE
LITERATŪRAS, FOLKLORES UN MĀKSĻAS INSTITUrots
Vaira Vike-Freiberga (Riga, Latvia)

FOREWORD

It is a rare pleasure for me to have an opportunity, as President of the Republic of Latvia, to comment on the work of scholars from all over the world on a range of topics that have been dear to my heart during my former life as researcher and scholar. It is immensely satisfying to see published, side by side, scholars who for so many years had been working in different fields, in addition to being separated by the Iron Curtain. For far too long, the fields of international ballad research and the study of the Latvian dainas and other oral traditions had remained in seemingly watertight compartments, with little or no contact or interaction between them. Worst of all, contacts and exchanges with scholars from the Western world had been strictly controlled, censored and constrained in the communist countries, especially so in the three Baltic countries under Soviet occupation. Happily for all of us, all that is now past history. We now live in a world with fewer and fewer barriers. May we all seize this opportunity and exploit it to the fullness of its potential!

Many of the authors whose chapters are published in this volume have been personally known to me for years, and there are those among them whom I consider as personal friends. I am grateful to each and every one of them for the intellectual stimulation and the warm sense of fellowship that I have found in their company. My husband Imants Freibergs and I remain indebted to our dear friend Luisa del Giudice, who introduced us to the wonderful group of dedicated scholars who gather regularly for the International Ballad conferences. Apart from encouraging us to broaden the range of our scholarly efforts, these conferences were always great fun, as well as an opportunity to visit such attractive far-away places as the Faroe Islands.

We shall never forget the Stockholm Ballad conference of the year 1991. Arriving for the opening session on the morning of August 19, we were greeted by news of the putsch in Moscow by our Swedish colleagues. After three days of unbearable tension, worry and suspense, we were able to celebrate with them the failure of the coup and the official collapse of the Soviet Union.

A new era in history had started, and one of its consequences was the opportunity of former exiles to return to their native country. Although I had just recently repatriated to Latvia from Canada, I had faithfully submitted a paper for the 1999 International Ballad conference. Indeed, I was so serious about keeping up my scholarly life that I had accepted to stand as candidate for election as the next president of the International Ballad Commission. On June 17, after being elected President of the Republic by the Latvian Saeima, I had to send my regrets to my scholarly col-
leagues. I got back a note signed by all the Conference participants, along with the message: “We miss you, but we understand that you got a better offer...”

The choice of Riga, my native city, as the venue for the 34th International Ballad Conference, was for me a long-held dream come true. I am proud of the way Dace Bula and all her collaborators rose to the challenge of organizing an event of this importance and scope. I am pleased that so many scholars from lands near and far came to participate and I am grateful to Sigrid Rieuwerts, as General Editor, for organizing such a broad range of topics into conceptually coherent and thematically compatible sections. The result is a rich tapestry of individual contributions that will reward a wide range of interested readers. I count myself in that number, and look forward to the possibility of referencing some of them in work that I hope to return to some day.

Riga was a fit place to look back on Herder’s legacy and to appreciate the breadth and the depth of the impact that his ideas and enthusiasm have produced over time. During his years in Riga, he discovered the richness and the power of an oral heritage that had survived through centuries of official denigration and oppression. He saw the immense wealth that this non-material heritage represents, not just for each separate nation, but for all of humanity. A heritage in which each carrier has been the individual link in a long chain stretching back into the mists of history. But a heritage as well that branches out across the whole planet to embrace the sum total of human spiritual legacy. The common legacy of us all, preserved for us by scholars and thinkers, as well as by the tellers of tales and the singers of songs.

Riga, A.D. 2007
Vaira Više-Freiberga

DACE BULA (RIGA, LATVIA) AND
SIGRID RIEUWERTS (MAINZ, GERMANY)

Introduction to Herder’s Legacy

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), a German Lutheran theologian and literary critic, is acknowledged as having been a mediator between Western and Eastern Europe, between rationalism and romanticism. Due to his interest in Volkslied — the oral traditions of the common people of different nations — he can also be regarded as an intermediary between the learned society of eighteenth century Europe and the “primitive cultures” residing at its geographical and social margins. But for the main focus of this volume, Herder’s role as an intermediary between different nations and their own singing traditions is of even greater importance. His ideas of the close link between a nation and its folksongs served as influential conceptual frame, shaping the way the liberating nations of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe interpreted and valued their folk culture. They were also a powerful incentive for numerous nationalist movements to start their road to liberation by the cultural activities of collecting and publishing folksongs.

It has been assumed that particularly formative for Herder were the nearly five years spent in Riga (1765-69) where he found himself in an even more eastern part of Europe than his native Mohren; in Riga he enjoyed his close friend’s Hamann’s early Romanticism, and he most probably encountered the uncultivated singing of the indigenous Latvian people whose obvious oppression supposedly propelled Herder’s anti-colonialist stance. It was, thus, self-evident that the 34th international conference of the Kommission für Volksdichtung, held in Riga in 2004, the year of Herder’s 260th anniversary, attempted to reconsider his legacy, and among the special themes of the meeting was the influence Herder’s stay in Riga had on folksong and ballad research.

Consequently, Riga and Latvia as a geographical context for folksong-related activities has been foregrounded in the first section of this volume — the printed outcome of the intellectual process started at the conference. The introductory essay shows Latvia as a country where Herder’s legacy has been particularly influential with regard to both nation-building and folksong research while Kristīna Jāņesko-Porter associates Herder’s thought with the contemporary folklore revival movement. The authors of the section also address the link between Riga and several outstanding personalities in the field of the international study of folk poetry — J. G. Herder, Robert Jarmieson, and Sir Walter Scott. Barbara Bock’s study broadens the history of the international interest in Latvian folksongs in a somewhat unexpected way — their texts (in fact, Herder’s contemporary Hippel’s compositions) are found in Karl Marx’s Volksliedsammlung.
THE MELODIES OF ICELANDIC RÍMUR

THE MELODIES OF ICELANDIC RÍMUR

HANS KUHN (CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA)

The Melodies of Icelandic Rímur

Abstract: Rímur were a form of sung epic poetry with a stanza structure that thrived in Iceland from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. It is characterised by a high degree of metrical sophistication, building on the tradition of skaldic poetry but adding end rhyme and making ample use of internal rhyme. One requirement was that each stanza be a different metre and hence also a different melody, the last note of each stanza being prolonged for as long as the singer's breath would last. It was a form of poetry the Romantic nationalists of the nineteenth century, the promoters of modern Icelandic literature, thought little of, and there has been surprisingly little research both on the literary and the musical side. The first person to collect rímur melodies was the priest Bjarni Jóhannesson, who devoted the last 100 pages of his monumental Íslenzk lýðldög (1906-1909) to them, but it was not until 70 years later that the first professional studies appeared (Hjálmsgótt, Nielsen). In recent years, both the Icelandic folklore archive and the Association of Singers (Kvenkastanafélög) have brought out CDs that include rímur melodies, and that material is used in discussing their structure.

Keywords: Icelandic rímur, metric structure and melodies of rímur, Bjarni Jóhannesson, Íslenzk lýðldög, late Middle Ages.

My subject is one that has attracted little attention in its homeland, let alone abroad, despite its prominence in Iceland during half a millennium. In the late Middle Ages, a time when one on the European continent verse narrative was gradually dropped for what eventually became the novel, the Icelanders, who in the sagas had developed a prose narrative that reached its peak in the thirteenth century, changed over to a form of chanted verse epic, the rímur, which combined the narrative tradition of the sagas, the metrical refinements of skaldic poetry, the end rhyme that came with Latin hymns, and the gnomic poetry of the Elder Edda; in short, all the main strands of literary expression which had flowered on the island. Rímur verse was not continuous like the Chanson de geste or the courtly epic. A rímur would run to about 50-150 stanzas, the quantity of text that would be chanted in one session, one evening's entertainment so to say, and there are indications that in older times, people danced to it. Unlike the ballad, it did not have a refrain, so all the listeners could join in was the last note of each stanza, which the singer would hold for as long as his breath lasted. They were not folk poetry in the sense of being anonymous and orally transmitted and transformed, but works attributed to individual authors, who normally were also the performers, though their names have not always survived. Depending on the length of the story told, a rímur cycle would comprise about 10 to 20 rímur. Each successive rímur was written in a different metre and would hence also require a different melody. Each rímur would begin with a mansðögur, literally a 'love song', about a dozen stanzas in which the poet would speak in his own name and comment on the world, society, or his own affairs, and at the end of each rímur he would announce the end of the session;

these parts were particularly rich in kvenningar, a sort of 'corrected metaphors' that required some knowledge of Norse mythology.

Saga manuscripts were copied time and again and read aloud, but rímur cycles were the truly productive form of narrative until the end of the nineteenth century. But while they remained popular on the farms, the educated middle class, romantic nationalists to a man, rejected them as artificial and unoriginal because, true enough, they were mostly based on written prose sources. More than a thousand rímur cycles have survived but barely more than a tenth have ever been printed, and always text only, without melodies, mostly cheap editions produced by booksellers or printers.

The first person to collect melodies was the clergyman Bjarni Jóhannesson at the end of the nineteenth century who in his monumental collection Íslenzk lýðldög (Icelandic Folk Melodies), which runs to almost a thousand pages, devoted 106 pages to rímur melodies. He arranged them according to metres, which was logical, for unlike most forms of folksong, rímur melodies are not attached to particular texts but, rather, particular singers, and are interchangeable within the same metre. As we will see, a singer can also change melodies within the same rímur. Bjarni's attempt to accommodate rímur chants within the bar system that has become part of European music notation since the Renaissance must, on the oral evidence available, be called misguided. His collection, which appeared in Copenhagen 1906-1909, has remained the only printed source until this day. In the twentieth century, rímur chanting disappeared together with the cottage industries on the farms, which had provided its traditional audience. The Ethnological Institute in Reykjavík did not have rímur among its priorities and collected only a limited number. Two critical studies on rímur melodies appeared around 1980, one by a Icelandic musicologist, Hallgrímur Helgason, based on his Zurich Ph.D thesis and published both in Icelandic and in German (1980), the other by a Danish ethnologist, Svend Nielsen, published in (not very idiomatic) English (1982). While Hallgrímur, using mostly Bjarni's collection of melodies, analysed the stable elements, Nielsen concentrated on the variations that could be observed in the performance of one particular singer. Each came up with a fairly complex system of formal divisions, which do not correspond and which I found of limited usefulness. My purpose is to look at some archive material that has become available on compact disks (Hlyði, Raddí, Sýnishorn), and to comment on them on the basis of some short excerpts.

Singing is very popular in Iceland, but the word used for the performance of rímur is not synge, 'to sing', but kvöð, 'to chant'. Rímur connaisseurs criticize performers that indulge in too much 'singing'; the emphasis is on the text, the story, and the musical rendering should not distract from it. This is said to be particularly true of the most common metre, the four-lined jerskeyt, while in the shorter stanzas more 'singing' is tolerated. I cannot say that I have noticed much difference in my material. The metrical pattern and the end-rhyme scheme of jerskeyt corresponds to the most popular type of medieval Latin verse used both for hymns and for secular purposes (in German

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often called *Vaganenstripte*, and that may well be its historical origin. In most *rímur* performances, the lines are run together without a pause or lengthening of notes, whereas the end of each stanza is marked by an extended note. While line divisions are thus not observed in performance, they are essential for the musical structuring, and in the transcriptions I have marked them by broken bar lines. Basically, chanting is a form of litany, with one note to each syllable. Marked falling or rising movements and, sometimes, glides and tied notes are most likely to occur at the end of a phrase. It is these line endings which are fixed while at the beginning some variation may take place. The melodic range, as with most litanies, is very narrow, often no more than a third; frequently a lower major third and an upper minor third are combined, with amounts to the range of the common cord. If notes above or below the melodic range are only reached in passing, I will call them "under-step" and "over-step".

I will start with two examples of *bragðenda*, a metre that consists of one 12-syllable line followed by two 8-syllable lines. In my first example, the chant remains on the ground note for the first eight syllables of the long line, then steps one tone up and describes a falling fourth, which recurs at the end of the stanza. The second line starts on the fourth step and includes an overstep before descending to the ground note, while the last line starts on the second step before finishing, as said before, with the first-line coda. In this instance, the chanter marks each line clearly by holding the last note. It is the fourth descending to the ground note that gives the chant its character; what precedes it does not matter greatly. It is a truly historical document; it was recorded on an Edison roll in the first decade of the twentieth century:

**Bragðenda:** Hjálmar Lárusson, Raddir 2 (1903-12)

In my second *bragðenda* example, the characteristic coda is a falling second, in lines 1 and 2 from the third to the second step, in the final line from the second step to the ground note. The last line does an under-step before the coda while the first line starts with a sort of upbeat a fourth below the ground note. So here we have two fourth ranges around the ground note, the chant proper belonging to the upper one, but the jump from subdominant to tonic firmly establishes the context. The first and second lines finishing on the second step provides musical suspense and gives the chanting a forward drive. Here, too, the line ends are marked by lengthening, but to a lesser degree than in the first example:

**Bragðenda:** Finnbogi Berndursson, Hljóði 11 (1958)

The *sirkast* metre is usually printed in four lines, 8- and 4-syllable lines alternating; but as lines 1+2 and 3+4 are always run together, it would be just as legitimate to take it as two 12-syllable lines, like the first line of *bragðenda*. As in the first *bragðenda* example, the beginning is most litany-like: nine syllables on the third step of a minor-key pentachord, then one tone up and a falling second, which is the characteristic coda of this chant, too. The first half of the stanza ending on the second step provides a drive for continuation. Line 3 ascends through the whole pentachord and ends in line 4 with two descending seconds, from third to second and from fourth to third step. The first should be minor and the second a major second but this is far from clear; they both tend towards 3/4 tone intervals. This may have to do with pressure on breathing at the end of a stanza; in other cases there is a clear upward movement on the extended final note, which could also be explained by the chanter applying pressure to his dwindling breath resources.

**Úrkast:** Einar Einarsson, Sýniðin 2 (1965)

The metre *skamnmhenda* has an extra syllable in every half-stanza, i.e., twice 8+5 syllables; again lines 1/2 and 3/4 are run together. The monotonous beginning is the same as before; the characteristic coda is here an ascending and descending minor third. In the descent, the leading note below the ground note can replace step 2; this is always the case at the end of the stanza. Line 3 starts a full note below the ground note; in the two previous examples, too, the second half started a full tone below the final note of the first half.

**Skamnmhenda:** Pétur Ólafsson, Hljóði 4 (1967)

The next chanted is the one whose variations Einar Nielsen studied in such detail. Some of these were probably attributable to Bóður Guðjónsson’s age; he was 74 at the time of the recording, and one can occasionally hear him gasping for breath. But it is true that he often varies the chant before the coda. His metre is *færskavat*, the four-line stanza consisting of twice 7+6 syllables, which is also the metre most frequently used in occasional verse. The lines are run together; sometimes a hesitation occurs after the first half of the stanza. The characteristic coda is an ascending and descending third either within steps 3-5 or 1-3 of the major scale. At the end of the stanza, step 2, the second-last note, is lengthened; in the corresponding line 2, the move is mostly directly from step 3 to the ground note. The chanting starts on step 3 and initially remains on that note in a monotone, but increasingly the chanter moves into the third above, thus covering the pentachord of the common chord. In lines 2 and 3, which mostly start on the ground note, there is considerable freedom, here within the lower
third, as long as the coda with the falling third remains the same. I give below two notations for the beginning, because the variants can be reduced to ‘mainly moving within the lower third / the upper third’ but the two types mix and mingle:

Ferskeytt: Börnur Göðlúarason, Raddir 4 (1965)

As said before, the chants are not tied to particular texts but to particular metres. It happens that one and the same performer changes from one chant to another in the middle of a ríma. Sometimes this occurs when the events narrated get more dramatic, but the reason for the change often remains obscure. It may simply be a desire for variety, maybe to give a little jolt to the audience in case their minds wander. In my next sample, where a performer chants 24 stanzas out of a much longer ríma, the change occurs after stanza 11. The metre is gagaraljóð, four lines of seven syllables each. The constituents of the first chant are a returning upward second movement on the fifth step repeated on the third step; they make up the identical lines 1 and 3. Here the monotone occurs in line two, and the last line takes it up in the beginning but continues with a descending third, thus connecting the two levels. The chanter, 69 at the time of the recording, tends to stop for breath after line 3.

Gagaraljóð: Jón Lárusson, Raddir 5 (1942) [to v. 11]

The second chant starts on step 5 in a similar fashion, descending to step 3 but not repeating the upward movement. In the second line, this upward movement from step 5 is extended to a third, in the third line the chanter repeats the top note and descends, as the parallelism with line 1 requires, to step 3, and the last line, starting on the same note as all previous lines, describes a full descending pentachord. So, while the elements keep within the narrow ambit we have come to expect — all the intervals are seconds or thirds – in the course of the stanza, the voice runs through a seventh:

Gagaraljóð: Jón Lárusson, Raddir 5 (1942) [from v. 12]

In the next sample, the chanter — a brother and sister chanting together — uses five different chants in the course of a short 20-stanza ríma in ferskeytt. The first chant, used for stanzas 1-5, is extremely simple, basically a minor third, descending from step 4 to step 2, but with a great deal of variation. The beginnings of lines 1 and 3 can be on step 2 rather than 4, as long as the descent 4 – 2 follows, and this descent can be gradual, in seconds, or as a jump. The last line can be marked with flourishes:

Ferskeytt: Margrét Hjálmarsdóttir & Kjartan Hjálmarsson, Raddir 3 (1966), vv. 1-5

The ambit of the second chant is the pentachord, but the melody mainly keeps to the upper third, ascending and descending. Line 1 starts with an upward jump by a forth which we have encountered as an opening before; in line 3, which otherwise is identical with 1, this is replaced by seconds starting from step 2. Only the coda, after repeating the reverting figure, leads back to the ground note.

Ferskeytt: Margrét Hjálmarsdóttir & Kjartan Hjálmarsson, Raddir 3 (1966), vv. 6-8

The following three stanzas are chanted within the range of a fourth; after the initial upward jump from step 1 to 4 this beginning is optional in lines 1 and 3; lines 2 and 4 start with an upward third (2-4) with a gradual descent to the key note. In the last line the two last notes are extended, which is caused by the last syllable being unstressed in speech and demanding at least equal weight for the preceding stressed one.

Ferskeytt: Margrét Hjálmarsdóttir & Kjartan Hjálmarsson, Raddir 3 (1966), vv. 9-11

For the next five stanzas the chanter revert to a ‘narrow’ tune ranging only over a minor third, like the first one, but of a different shape, with tied notes in the initial upward third in lines 1 and 3 and a snake-like movement in lines 2 and 4; the end is marked by a final flourish taking in the three steps again:

Ferskeytt: Margrét Hjálmarsdóttir & Kjartan Hjálmarsson, Raddir 3 (1966), vv. 12-16

The chant of the last four stanzas is characterised by a descending fourth in lines 1 and 3, a descending third in lines 2 and 4; a flourish again announces the end of the stanza:

Ferskeytt: Margrét Hjálmarsdóttir & Kjartan Hjálmarsson, Raddir 3 (1966), vv. 17-20
HANS KUHN

The two chanters are amazingly well co-ordinated; the change of chants seems to be
done on the spur of the moment, but the second chanter finds his or her feet almost
instantaneously.

Can we, on the basis of these samples, make any general remarks about rímar
chanters? Their litany character is apparent in the ruling one-note / one-syllable match,
the syllables either given equal time or long / shot in accordance with the stressed /
unstressed pattern of the trochaic verse that constitutes the base of rímar metres. There
is no regular beat, no time-measured pauses; the chanter can speed up or slow down
his delivery at will. In most four-line rímar, there is parallelism between lines 1 and 3
and lines 2 and 4; 1 and 3 being more monotonous but also more likely to be varied,
lines 2 and 4 being more fixed because of their identical or similar codas. Intervals are
narrow, mostly seconds or thirds; the largest jumps we have encountered were fourths.
But by superimposing movements within thirds or fourths a chant can, as we have
seen, cover a range of up to an octave. The end of the stanza is invariably weighted by
extended notes and often with flourishes. The nearest musical parallel would seem to
be ranto chanting in Finland and neighbouring areas, and there may well be a historical
connection, which I am not in a position to investigate.

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Possible Points of Convergence in the
Metrical History of Estonian and Latvian Folk Songs

Abstract: The metres of Estonian and Latvian older folk songs share some similarities al-
though the languages are not related and not mutually understandable. In southern Esto-
nia, next to the Latvian border, there is a region in which regīlslād melodies exhibit fea-
tures similar to some Latvian songs: bourdonism (drone singing and irregular rhythmic
patterns). The metres of folk songs in this region have a specific feature that is similar to
the metrics in Latvian songs: certain syllables lost in language history have maintained
their position in the verse structure, and that position is filled by a pause, or the preserved
syllable fills two positions. Whether this can be seen as the result of Latvian influence or
as a spontaneous feature arising from the shortening of words in the language remains an
open question.

Keywords: Versification, folk metrics, Estonian folk song, Latvian folk song.

Although Estonia and Latvia are situated side by side, the languages are different and
mutually not understandable - Estonian belongs to the Baltic-Finnic branch of Finno-
Ugric languages, whereas Latvian belongs to the Baltic branch of Indo-European lan-
guages. Yet, the metres of their folk songs share some similarities - both of them have
a verse line with approximately eight syllables and a trochaic rhythm. The older layer of
Estonian folk songs belongs to the common Baltic-Finnic song tradition called runolaadi in Finnish and regīlslād in Estonian. Since there are no recordings of these
types of songs from the Baltic-Finnic Livonians and Vepsians, it is presumed that this
poetic form dates back to the final stage of Baltic-Finnic linguistic unity (approximately
2000 years ago), when separate dialects of Baltic-Finnic became more and more
autonomous (see Rühdel 121). The poetic form of regīlslād has been used in a variety of
poetic genres of folklore from proverbs to epic songs. The most salient feature of
Baltic-Finnic traditional poetics is regular use of alliteration and parallelism. The clas-
sical and historically probably the most common form of the metre is called the
Kalevala metre after the Finnish national epic; the specific characteristics of the metre
vary, depending on the region and time period. The most common Latvian folk songs
-dainas - are verses usually with four lines. Neither song tradition employs rhyme.

The metres of both Estonian and Latvian folk songs are traditionally defined as
trochaic, but only some features actually correspond to that meter (see Figure 1). The
Kalevala metre is regularly trochaic only insofar as the metric schema defines where
the multi-syllabic words with long or short first syllable can begin: multi-syllabic
words with long first syllable can begin only in strong (S) positions and words with
short first syllable only in weak (W) positions. The number of words per line can vary,
provided they add up to eight syllables.