

August, 2023

Song's central role in defining culture

In July, my wife Laura and I had the great opportunity to participate in the College Music Society's International Conference in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia alongside 120 insightful artist-academics busy making sense of the world we live in through music. The program, curated by Program Committee Chair, Heather MacLaughlin-Garbes, was anchored in local knowledge, connections, and expertise earned over her more than 20-years spent visiting and researching within the Baltic States and was generously afforded to CMS members attending the conference.

A lecture-performance and viewing of the large-scale paintings of Lithuanian composer/painter Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis was held in his Vilnius [home turned gallery](#). Concerts at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Music Academy featuring the compositions of Latvia's most celebrated composer Pēteris Vasks were delivered with the composer in attendance. An historical account and performance of the music of Arvo Pärt was delivered in the [Arvo Pärt Center](#): the personal archive of arguably Estonia and the Baltic States' most influential composer.

The robust programming was, too, taken-up by CMS presenters who shared expertise and artistry tied to the stops along our three-country route. Notable was a presentation by Carnegie Mellon faculty member Katherine Pukinskis, whose keynote talk *The Road of Song: Body-Place Memory and the Latvian Song Festival* was grounded in the earth we stood upon.

The abstract of her powerful talk:

History is documented in books and newspapers, in photos and recordings. But the past is also chronicled in physical memory—the experiences we hold in our bodies. It is preserved in the memory of place—the spatial memory of furniture in a room, traveling down a road, the smell of the air. Cultural and collective memories forge and feed narratives that imbue meaning into specific events, locations, and as is the case for many social movements—song.

In 2023, Latvia marks 150 years of their national Song Festival. The celebration is, at once, an historical artifact and a distinct marker of the present; it constantly toggles between what has happened before and what is perched on Latvia's musical horizon.

The location for some of the largest events in the Song Celebration—a forested, open-air stage on the outskirts of Rīga called the *Mežaparks*—has been home to the Festival's grandest choral concerts since 1955. The amphitheater has been renovated and remade in its near-70 years, but the location of performance has remained the same. The *place* holds its own narrative history, influenced by and stored in the embodied memories of hundreds of thousands of people who have stood on its stage or taken a seat in the audience to participate in the festival traditions. What role, then, does place have in our conception of the Latvian Song Celebration? How does the literal, physical space influence, enhance, and limit the impact of the musical performances it holds? Further, how do participants and observers store the history of the Song Celebration in their own physicalized bodies? This keynote posits a topo-corporeal—place- and body-based—framework for approaching the Latvian Song Festival traditions, deepening the relationship between song, singer, and the location of performance.

But what happened next – a once-in-a-lifetime experience only made possible when venturing toward the unfamiliar – enlivened the heart of Dr. Pukinskis's message about space and experience. We attended the 150th Anniversary [Latvian Song and Dance Festival](#), enveloped by the voices of the more than 16,000 choir members who took the stage and took our breath away. More than a concert defined by logistical challenges akin to hosting the Olympics, this was a gathering of Latvians from across the globe who came together in song to celebrate a heritage that has been under siege for the expanse of its history.

Throughout our time in the Baltic States, the one constant was song's central role in defining the culture that surrounded us. It's how the people retained their national identity when it was being systematically stripped from them; it's how the people survived Russian and Nazi oppression and occupation for so many harsh years.

Our travels' soundtrack was one of joy, laughter, and the music we shared: experiences we will hold in our bodies for years to come. If you are a CMS member who has not yet attended an international conference, I want to encourage you to do so. It's a great investment in career and life. The conferences are defined by the high-level of recurring attendees' participation – folks who have made CMS their home for music-making, idea-crafting, and friend-forging – and they'd welcome you to join in the adventure.

Many thanks to Program Committee Chair, Heather MacLaughlin-Garbes and her team for their vision. My gratitude to the CMS staff (particularly Charlie Chadwell) who executed that vision with great detail and care. [Here's a photo diary](#) of our time together.

Thanks for joining the conversation and I hope to see you in Bogotá, Colombia in 2025.

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