



Singing with wineglasses.

Water-tuned glasses in Ēriks Ešenvalds' choral music

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Summary

The choral music of Ēriks Ešenvalds represents a significant part of the composer's work. However, in addition to the vocal element, they often contain other instruments – whether as an accompaniment or a solo instrument. A specific group of Ešenvalds' compositions are those in which a nontraditional instrument is added to the choir – water-tuned glasses. The article examines the instrumental part of the glasses and the non-musical context that anticipates the formation of the Stars, which is one of the composer's most famous work.



The music of the contemporary Latvian composer Ēriks Ešenvalds (b. 1977) is still unknown to many listeners in Slovakia. However, in the United States, but also elsewhere in the world, he is a popular composer. Numerous commissions of new compositions, concert premieres, awards and recordings of his works testify to this. In the last ten years (2011–2021), ten albums of Ešenvalds' music have been released. In addition to these “solo” albums, his compositions regularly appear on various compilation albums along with the music of other composers.¹

Ēriks Ešenvalds is the author of approximately 220 works,² which include instrumental, choral, vocal-instrumental music, electronic music, and multimedia symphonies with video projection. Given the fact that the composer graduated in composition from the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music in 2004, relatively recently, this number is admirable.³ Compositions for choir (whether male, female or mixed; a cappella, accompanied or using solo instruments) represent more than half of the composer's work.⁴ Even though Ešenvalds does not like if his work is reduced in any way, and he is titled

as a “choir composer,”⁵ the fact remains that it was the choir music that made him famous and ensured his international popularity.

If we want to characterize Ešenvalds' compositional style at least briefly, we could say that he is a versatile composer, mastering a wide range of compositional techniques. His choral compositions are mostly built on a tonal basis with a clear harmonic structure, but he often uses extended chords, extended tonality, and segments of pandiatonicism.⁶ For Ešenvalds, the harmonic component of music is essential. The composer himself admitted that his composing starts with harmony. If his compositions are for a mixed choir, he is not satisfied with a traditional four-part setting, there must be at least six voices.⁷ The eight-voice setting with double voices (SSAATTBB) most often appears in his choral works.

Ešenvalds' relationship to choral singing is influenced by the cultural background of his home country (Latvia is a country with a strong choral tradition),⁸ but also his own empirical experience. From 2002 to 2011, he sang as a tenor in the professional State Choir Latvija.⁹ In his choral compositions, he sets to music texts of both sacral and secu-



lar origin. He composes for professional and amateur choirs, which shows his ability to adapt to the possibilities of a specific group of singers.¹⁰

Water-tuned glasses in Ešņvalds' works

I would like to focus my paper on choral compositions, in which the composer also added a not quite traditional instrument – water-tuned glasses. Although it is not a new-discovered invention, it is an interesting phenomenon in the choral work of Ēriks Ešņvalds, which gives a specific colour to his compositions.

We already know the playing on *musical glasses* from medieval China and Persia. From there, this instrument spread to Europe and later, thanks to the inventions of Richard Pockrich (*angelic organ* or *glass harp*) and Benjamin Franklin (*glass harmonica*), has been improved in the 18th century.¹¹

In his compositions, Ešņvalds uses separate glasses tuned only in a few selected tones. For the first time he used them in his work *Stars* (2011). In this composition, he set to music a poem by an American poet Sara Teasdale (b. 1884–1933), which speaks about the astonishment of observing the starry sky. The composition, commissioned by Salt Lake Choral Artists with conductor Brady Allred, became one of his most famous and most frequently performed,¹² probably also thanks to the use of this non-traditional non-vocal element.

Ešņvalds himself said in several places that the idea of using a glass filled with water in a composition came to his mind while washing the dishes: *"I remember being out in the country in my native town in Latvia to celebrate Christmas with my parents. After dinner, I went out to have a silent walk in cold winter night. I was impressed by the view in the sky – the stars were so bright and spoke to me in a special way. I couldn't name it, but I did catch the feeling of an added dimension. Later, while washing dishes I kept thinking about that feeling. I decided to try to play a wet wine glass, filled with some water (in the sink). That*

was it! The sound was almost equal to the feeling grasped from the sky! I called my wife and oldest daughter to play their wine glasses tuned to different pitches than mine. After hearing our glass trio I knew that the new piece for Brady's choir would have water-tuned glasses and that the song would be about the stars."¹³

The composer also offers instructions on tuning and playing the glasses in the introductory note on the first page of the score: *"Choose resonant glasses and use as little water as possible to produce the required pitch – the less water, the more resonant the sound. The glasses are played with a wet fingertip. Each singer plays one glass, and the pitches of each glass chord should be divided equally between the players."*¹⁴ Thus, chorists also become instrumentalists with the difficult task of adding correctly timed tones of glasses to the singing. At the end of the score, Ešņvalds also recommends the choirmaster: *"Where can you find glasses? The best option is to ask your singers to check their kitchen at home. Thin wine glasses, or other glasses, filled with water will produce the right sound. Don't buy all the glasses from the same store as they might make the same sound; different glasses will have a different tone. You need six different pitches for this piece. If, for example, your choir consists of 30 singers, then for a good balance between the voices and glasses I would suggest 24 glasses (4 glasses per pitch)."*¹⁵

Stars became a phenomenon and a kind of shortcut to Ešņvalds' music. In the following years, the composer used water-tuned glasses also in other compositions (in chronological order): *Seneca's Zodiac* (2011), *Northern Lights* (2012), *The New Moon* (2012), *Aqua* (2013), *Earth Teach Me Quiet* (2013), *Trees* (2013), *Sonnet 71* (2014), *O Magnum Mysterium* (2015), *Wandering Heart* (2015), *Translation* (2016), *Tonight* (2020) and the latest *Winter Stars* (2020).

When we take a closer look at the instrumental part of the water-tuned glasses,

we notice the individual differences across mentioned compositions. In some, the glasses appear from beginning to end constantly (e. g. *Stars*, *Trees*) or in a significant part of the piece (*Tonight*, *Winter Stars*). In others, they alternate with a “pure” choir (*Northern Lights*, *Earth Teach Me Quiet*) or join only in a contrasting part (*The New Moon*) or in the final coda (*Translation*). The instrumental part of the glasses contains solely tones and chords in long rhythmic values (see Fig. 1). From the construction point of view, chords from simple double voices or triads to more complex extended chords are heard among works (Fig. 2). The biggest chord we have found so far in the scores of the mentioned compositions

is the seven-toned chord in the work *Tonight* (Fig. 3).

Conclusion

In my paper, I introduced water-tuned glasses used in the choral music of contemporary composer Ēriks Ešēvalds. Although the very idea of playing glasses filled with water is not new, in the composer’s works it represents a specific group of compositions with a unique sound colour. In addition, the way in which Ešēvalds rediscovered this musical instrument for his own music is unique. This is evidenced by statements of the composer himself, linked to the genesis of the work *Stars*, which has become one of his most popular.

Notes

- 1 Ēriks Ešēvalds. *Recordings*. [online]. [cit. 05.10.2021]. Available on <<https://www.eriksesenvalds.com/recordings>>.
- 2 Update current to April 20, 2021. See ref. 4.
- 3 For more information about biography and discography see HORVÁT, J. Ēriks Ešēvalds – súčasný hudobný skladateľ. In *Ars et educatio VII. zborník konferenčných príspevkov doktorandov*. Ružomberok: Verbum, 2021. (in the press).
- 4 According to list of compositions created by the author from available electronic sources (<https://www.eriksesenvalds.com/works>; <https://www.musicabaltica.com/en/composers-and-authors/eriks-esenvalds/works>; <https://www.lmic.lv/en/composers/eriks-esenvalds-2524#work>).
- 5 WORDSWORTH, D. (ed.) *Giving Voice to my Music. Choral Composers in Conversation*. London: Kahn & Averill, 2021. ISBN 978-0-9957574-5-5, p. 42.
- 6 CALLAGHAN, P. J. *The Imitation of Roman Catholic and Byzantine Chant in Ēriks Ešēvalds's Passion and Resurrection*. [Doctor of Musical Arts Project]. Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2015. Available on <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/music_etds/46>, p. 28; SADIE, S. (ed.) *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Vol. 19. Oxford University Press, 2001. ISBN 978-0-19-517067-2, p. 29.
- 7 WORDSWORTH, D. (ed.) *Giving Voice to my Music*, p. 44.
- 8 CALLAGHAN, P. J. *The Imitation of Roman Catholic and Byzantine Chant in Ēriks Ešēvalds's Passion and Resurrection*, p. 3.
- 9 See ref. 3.
- 10 JACKSON, G. CD booklet. In *Northern Lights & other choral works*. Hyperion Records, 2015, p. 4.
- 11 BOONE, Ch. – GALLOWAY, M. – RUIZ, M. J. Fun with singing wine glasses. In *Physics Education*, 2018, No. 53. DOI: 10.1088/1361-6552/aaae89, p. 2.
- 12 On the *Spotify* streaming service, the *Stars* performed by various choirs reached more than 3 million hearings. Update current to October 10, 2021. Available on <<https://open.spotify.com/>>.
- 13 EŠĒVALDS, Ē. Notes on the works by Ēriks Ešēvalds. In *There Will Come Soft Rains*. CD booklet. Signum Records, 2020, p. 7.
- 14 EŠĒVALDS, Ē. *Stars*. Riga: Musica Baltica, 2012. MB 1264. ISMN 979-0-69795-163-1, p. 3.
- 15 EŠĒVALDS, Ē. *Stars*, p. 8.

Pictures

Fig. 1 Instrumental part of water-tuned glasses from the work *Stars* (b. 1–4)

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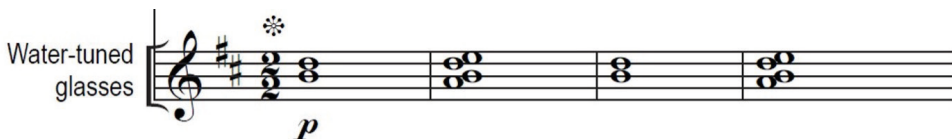


Fig. 2 Instrumental part of water-tuned glasses from the work *Northern Lights* (b. 67–69)

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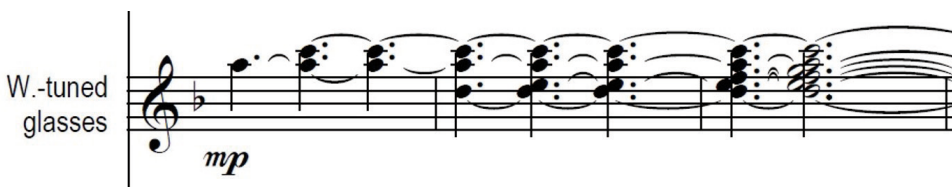
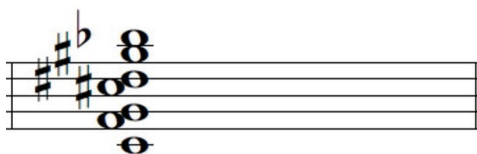


Fig. 3 Instrumental part of water-tuned glasses from the work *Tonight* (b. 34)

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Resumé

Sborová hudba Ęriks Ešenvaldse predstavuje významnou časť skladateľova diela. Kromě vokálního elementu však často obsahuje i jiné nástroje – ať už ve funkci doprovodu nebo sólového nástroje. Specifickou skupinou Ešenvaldsových kompozic jsou ty, ve kterých se ke sboristům přidává netradiční nástroj – vodou laděné poháry. Příspěvek zkoumá instrumentální part pohárů i mimohudební kontext, který předcházela vzniku skladby *Stars*, která patří ke skladatelovým nejznámějším.

Klíčové slova: Ešenvalds, Stars, poháry, sbor, skladatel.

Keywords: Ešenvalds, Stars, glasses, choir, composer.

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