

Buvo dūda Vilniuj- There Was a Horn (Bagpipe) in Vilnius

Lithuanian folk song

Variations by Jonas Tamulionis

This song is in the “sutartinė” style. The first written record of it is found in 1911. The original manuscript states: “They say there was an uncle in Vilnius. They also say there was a horn in Vilnius, a little horn in Vilnius”. The song is more than 100 years old, while the choral arrangement was written by Jonas Tamulionis in 1985. How did this song come into existence? And what is this horn?

The Swedish historian Magnus Olaus makes the first mention of bagpipes in Lithuania in his book “The history of Northern Nations” published in 1555. That same year Grand Duke Žygimantas, in a letter to the magistrate of the Orša region, states that bagpipe players and musicians with performing bears must be taxed. They can only be allowed to perform after paying the tax.

The instrument is mentioned in 1565 in the regulations of the Lithuanian parliament: “... party goers gather before Holy Mass and their bagpipes and drums are disturbing the peace. Therefore, the drums need to be punctured and the bagpipes destroyed...” There were other prohibitions against using the instrument, all of which contributed to the decline of the bagpipe.

In her article “Forgotten Musical Instruments: the Bagpipe in Lithuania”, Rūta Žarskienė claims that originally the bagpipe was the primary, if not the only instrument used for weddings, baptisms, and other village celebrations. This is prior to the ascendance of the violin and other string or wind instruments.

The bagpipe consists of a bag shaped bellows with a mouth blower, and 2-3 hornpipes. The bellows were made from the skin of a calf, goat, pig, woodchuck, or dog – or the stomach of a sheep. It was considered that the best bag was from the skin of a dog, because it didn't sweat.

R. Sliužinskas explains that the inside of the skin was lubricated with raw egg whites, to soften it and close any pinholes.

One, two, or sometimes three hornpipes are built into the bottom of the bellows bag. The musician blows air into the bag through the mouthpiece and squeezes the bag with his elbow, so that air would reach the hornpipes. Both hands are used to play a melody by covering the holes in the hornpipes. The sound is loud and strident, and carries for a long distance.

In the Middle Ages bagpipes proliferated throughout Europe, mostly played by shepherds and peasants. In the later Middle Ages, the instrument was played by travelling musicians. In France in the 18th century the bagpipe (musette) was even used as an indoor – parlor instrument.

Song Analysis

From the 19th century onwards, the bagpipe is mentioned in official writings of the Vitebsk, Vilnius, and Minsk regions.

The bagpipe became popular in Lithuania in the first half of the 16th century. It was used mostly in Lithuania Minor and Eastern Lithuania, with continuing use in the Eastern Lithuania highlands until the middle of the 20th century. Depending on the region, various names were used for the bagpipe: the Alvitas horn, the Labanoras horn, the Vilnius horn.

Bagpipes were played by musicians with performing bears, beggars, raftsmen, and wandering musicians. They would play marches, dance music, and accompany popular songs as well as religious hymns. The term “horn” came to include musical instruments of later invention, such as piano, concertina, mouth harmonica, tuba, clarinet, and others.

Folk ensembles from the latter half of the 20th century have been using the traditional bagpipe. The compact disc “Quiet Sounds of Labanoras” is part of the Lithuanian UNESCO project “The Horn of Labanoras”, which seeks to revive the bagpipe tradition in Lithuania.

Sources: Information about the bagpipe: www.dudmais.lt.

Additional information about the song: scientific paper by ethnomusicologist Daiva Račiūnaitė-Vyčnienė – Weaving of Two Rudiments – Vocal and Instrumental – in the Sutartinė “Buvo Dūda Vilniuj”.