

JOSEPH WIHTOL

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Jazeps Vitols, whose name is often expressed in the German form as Joseph Wihtol, was born on 26th July in Valmiera in Latvia, the son of a local schoolteacher. At the age of seventeen he began his studies at the St Petersburg Conservatory with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

Rimsky was born in Tikhin in 1844 of an aristocratic family. He wanted to be a sailor but music became a real interest. He was impressed by the music of Glinka and met and was further inspired by Balakirev. His ambition to be in Russian Navy was, however, fulfilled during the years 1862- 1865. In the final year he composed his Symphony no. 1 often referred to as the first great Russian symphony. By the time Wihtol came to the Conservatory, Rimsky had composed the operas *May Night*, the Symphony no. 2, entitled *Antar*, and the Symphony no. 3, the symphonic poem: *Sadko*, a string quartet, a string sextet and a piano quintet.



Michael Kennedy, who probably regards himself as a musicologist, writes a lot of nonsense and shows his prejudice. He claims that Rimsky was less talented than his nationalist colleagues which is as absurd a remark as anyone could make. Rimsky's orchestration is the very best of the nationalistic school and he was the finest teacher of his time, his most famous pupils were Prokofiev, Myaskovsky and Stravinsky.

Wihtol's first work was his Piano Sonata in B flat minor, Op 1, of 1866 the year he graduated. It is in two movements and is clearly influenced by Rimsky and may show some signs of Tchaikovsky. The opening movement *Allegro con passione* begins with a memorable theme which soon modulates briefly into D major but without the key signature being changed. The first section is repeated before the music, now without a key signature but clearly hovering between D major and A major, constitutes a well-constructed development of the theme. The opening two pages are then repeated with minor changes. While some may disagree, the movement is basically monothematic. It is good music.

The second movement is a theme and variations largely steeped in E flat minor. The theme at an andante pace seems very simple but it retains some of the character of the first movement thus making the work coherent. There is an *energico* variation with big chords and left hand leaps. There is also a variation in octaves and some brilliant writing followed by a gentle *allegro scherzando* in B flat before the key of E flat minor returns at a slackened pace with some rich chromaticism before the B flat / G minor music returns.

It may be interesting to note how many pupils of Rimsky were encouraged to write in E flat minor. Prokofiev's finest symphony and Myaskovsky's masterpiece, his Symphony no. 6 are both in this remote key. Rimsky's Symphony no. 1 was originally written in E flat minor.

Wihtol stayed on at the Conservatory teaching and was granted the status of Professor in 1901.

During 1886 -1888 he composed his Symphony in E minor. The following year he became a critic for the *St Petersburg Zeitung* to which he contributed up to 1914. He was a member of Mitrofan Belyayev's *Weekly Fridays* where distinguished Russian musicians would meet. Belyayev was born in St Petersburg in 1836 and was the music publisher of Wihtol's work and other composers. The weekly *Fridays* began in 1891. A collection of pieces *Les Vendredis (Fridays)* for string quartet were written by various composers in Belyayev's honour.

A Dramatic Overture by Wihtol Op 21 appeared in 1895.

Wihtol wrote a string quartet in 1899 but chamber and orchestral music were not his forte. He composed a

symphonic poem *Spriditis* Op37 in 1907 and a symphonic ballad *Herbstlied* in 1928. However his choral music has become popular with Latvian choirs most of which is published by *Musica Baltica Ltd* in Riga. In 1891 he composed the *Ballade Der Barde von Beverina* Op 28 for baritone and orchestra which he revised in 1900.

But to return to 1892 when Wihtol had reached his Opus 6, another substantial solo piano work, the *Variations on a Lette* (Latvian) theme, a simple theme which is a nationalistic folk song. His predilection for many flats puts the piece in B flat minor again. The second variation is gracious recalling Brahms and the second is marked *brillante* also recalling Brahms's *St Anthony Choral variations*. The third variation is energetic with double octaves and big chord which is followed by a *presto* beginning quietly and building up quickly to a marvellous assault on the piano, a movement that calls for a cool head and steel fingers. Variation five is marked *sostenuto* followed by a piece marked *con forza*. The seventh variation is telling, highlighting the melody over a rocking bass with octave jumps in the left hand which are not always easy to play legato which the very nature of the music demands. Variations eight is an *allegretto* with dramatic contrasts of tone colour. The next variation, *allegro molto*, calls for unison runs and the finale is marked *passionato* and like the *Piano Sonata* deals with the conflict between five flats and sharp keys. There is a lot of E major and some F sharp major.

If there is a weakness in this work it may suffer from being in five flats all of the time although there are very brief modulations. The variations would benefit from some of them being in different keys. Some of the musical grammar is wrong in that he uses double flats when a natural is correct and when he modulates it might have been better to change the key signature to avoid the difficult consequential reading of the text. The variations are probably too short to serve any real purpose but this problem could be overcome if the work was played without a break.

The reliance on the theme and variation method may suggest that working with comparatively little material calls for less expertise. You have a template and produce the models from that with decoration.

It must also be noted that there is very little difference in style and content between his opus 1 and opus 6. In fact his musical style remained constant throughout his life.

His *Three Preludes* Op 16 of 1895 starts with a prelude in five flats, as you may expect, although most of it is in the major key. Here a more fluid impressionism may be obvious. The second prelude is in five flats again but now in the minor while the third prelude is in C sharp minor and is a brilliant piece if played with panache.

There is a set of two preludes and an etude Op 19 which also date from 1895. As with many preludes the effect is atmospheric only, or, to put it into common parlance, all vegetables and no meat. The opening A major prelude has a good range. The second prelude is badly written in a sort of arabesque form and is full of unnecessary problems most of which relate to timing and note values. It is written in an awkward way and could have been expressed in more logical terms. The etude, mainly in D major, is a good piece calling for finger dexterity.

Joseph Wihtol made friends with Alexander Glazunov and Liadov, two extraordinary musicians. Lyadov (1855-1914) was a lazy individual and his works are generally short and inconsequential. He was the first choice to compose music for *The Firebird* but was so idle and not wanting or able to compose a major work and, therefore, the project was given to Stravinsky. It seems incredible that Liadov was a professor of composition at the St Petersburg Conservatory.

An underrated composer was Alexander Glazunov (1865 - 1936). He has been lampooned for allegedly giving a disastrous premiere of Rachmaninov's *Symphony no. 1*. Glazunov became the director of the St Petersburg Conservatory in 1905 and, among his compositions, are eight very attractive symphonies. The ninth symphony was never completed.

In 1897 there appeared Wihtol's Three Morceaux Op 25 which are certainly worthy of attention. The piano writing is good and the opening Etude, an allegretto in E minor merging into G sharp minor and returning to the original key is impressive. The second piece begins in six flats and is marked molto sostenuto. The last piece is again in six flats and is a very pianistic allegro.

The three preludes Op 30 date from 1903 and the opening piece is again in six flats and a tripping allegro. The second is a gentle allegretto which has a theme and the finale is an allegro con brio which, if played as instructed is a brilliant piece and worthy of good pianists everywhere.

He composed as his opus 32 Eight Latvian Folk Songs for piano and the cantata Das Lied Op 35 for soprano, choir and orchestra dates from 1914. In 1910 he tried a concerto- style work with his Fantasy on Latvian Folk Songs Op 42 for violin and orchestra

After the war, in 1918, Wihtol returned to Latvia which had now gained its independence and he was appointed to conduct the National Opera in Riga. In 1919 he established the first Latvian Conservatoire of Music which was renamed the Jazeps Vitols Latvian Academy of Music and he was professor of composition there from 1919 to 1944. He was regarded as the father of Latvian music, the first real Latvian composer. While in Russia he had conducted the local Latvian choir and become fascinated by Latvian folklore and became homesick.

In Riga he established the Latvian Composers' Society in 1923 and among his pupils were Janis Ivanovs and Adolfs Skulte neither of whom are mentioned in Michael Kennedy's Dictionary of Music.

The first of Wihtol's Three Silhouettes, Op 38 were dedicated to Fraulein Grete Martinsen, all of which were published in Riga. The opening piece is in six flats and shows a slight change in direction in his compositional style in that the piece of sixty one bars has many variations in texture and tempi. The second is dedicated to Fraulein Edda Ottho and is a weak piece which more that suggests Chopin. The third silhouette is also dedicated to another young lady, another student one would imagine, Fraulein Hedwig Adelheim. It is best piece in the set but again it is merely a slice of atmosphere.

It must not be taken that Wihtol's was the only composer to write music of this kind. Debussy was a leading exponent of music that is predominantly atmospheric or one might call it impressionistic. Debussy was about a year older than Wihtol. Ravel also wrote what is called impressionistic piano music but his music succeeds in that it has substance and a virtuosity which elevates it above other such music.

Wihtol made many folk song arrangements, wrote over 100 songs and about the same amount of choral songs. In 1943 he composed his Easter cantata Die Bergpredigt for baritone, women's choir, organ and orchestra.

In 1944 he moved to Lubeck in Germany and lived there until his death on 24 April 1948. It is not clear why he moved to Germany particularly when you consider it was the last year of World War II. In 1993 his remains were returned to Riga.

His music is conservative in style but his best work is worth hearing. His preoccupation with short character pieces may suggest he was limited, but the Russian school produced many composers who wrote works like this and that many explain their neglect although an investigation into these composers may provide some gems.

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