

The logo for the record label ONDINE, featuring the word "ONDINE" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Above the letters 'O', 'N', and 'D' are several vertical black lines of varying heights, resembling a stylized musical staff or a barcode.

ONDINE

# PĒTERIS VASKS

Oboe Concerto

Vēstījums

Lauda

Albrecht Mayer

Latvian National  
Symphony Orchestra

Andris Poga





PĒTERIS VASKS

**PĒTERIS VASKS** (b. 1946)

**Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra (2018)**

**33:30**

- |   |                        |       |
|---|------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I. Morning pastorale   | 7:01  |
| 2 | II. Scherzando         | 14:11 |
| 3 | III. Evening pastorale | 12:17 |

*Commissioned by the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra  
with the support of Latvia's Centenary Celebration Programme.*

4 **Message (Vēstījums)**

for Two Pianos, Strings, and Percussion (1982)

**16:08**

5 **Lauda**

for Symphony Orchestra (1985)

**19:02**

Albrecht Mayer, oboe (1–3)

*Albrecht Mayer appears courtesy of Deutsche Grammophon GmbH*

Latvian National Symphony Orchestra

Andris Poga, conductor

Around the world, **Pēteris Vasks** is the most performed Latvian composer of contemporary classical music. From his early days as an avant-garde protester speaking a modernist musical language, Vasks grew into an artist who depicts the eternal battle between good and evil in all of his vocal and instrumental compositions.

Vasks has much in common with other composers, such as Arvo Pärt, Giya Kancheli, Valentyn Silvestrov, and like them, is an idealist. His work speaks of the essentials of the human condition: the battle between light and darkness, the existence of terrifying monsters, the way nature is reflected in sound, the echoes of his beloved birds, the possibility of catharsis, while also contemplating the destiny of his people and humanity as a whole with a sealed past, chaotic present, but with hope for the future.

Pēteris Vasks was born in a pastor's family in the city of Aizpute, Kurzeme, and his childhood was closely tied to the Aizpute Baptist church and choral singing. Early in his teens, Vasks embarked on an independent life when he moved to Rīga to attend music school. He later went on to study double bass in Vilnius and concurrently played in several professional symphony orchestras in Lithuania and Latvia.

Vasks showed an affinity for composition from an early age, but it took years for him to gather up the courage to share the music that was taking shape in his heart. Vasks started studying composition in Rīga in the mid-1970s, but wider audiences only came to know him as a composer when he was well over thirty.

Pēteris Vasks' body of work includes three symphonies; several small-form symphonic works; ten pieces for string orchestra; concertos for flute, oboe, English horn, viola, and three for violin, two for cello; music for one and two pianos; several works for organ; a number of chamber music pieces for strings and wind instruments; as well as sacred and contemporary choral music both *a cappella* and with instrumentation.

Above all, Pēteris Vasks finds inspiration in the beauty of Latvian nature, the sound of birds singing, and the starry heavens. The sacred eternal is always present in the composer's life and his music, and his work is unimaginable without the presence of the forces of light and darkness or the interplay of doubt and certitude.

Motifs and themes characteristic of traditional Latvian music are an integral part of Pēteris Vasks' music. These are not, however, quoted directly but rather expressed as sound combinations emerging from deep genetic layers, which instantly create a sense of belonging in those who know Latvian folk music. Pēteris Vasks grew up with Baptist church music and by the time he reached university the longstanding tradition of sending young composers and musicologists on folklore collection expeditions had come to an end. The

only explanation is by way of an archetype that found in Vasks a way to address audiences of the twentieth and 21st century.

Today it might be difficult to image the tremendous stimulus Pēteris Vasks' music gave to Latvian culture in the 1980s, when it was still under Soviet rule. It was a clear and direct, enthralling and painful outcry at the time when as part of the Soviet Union, Latvia reached its highest point of stagnation under Brezhnev, endured the state funerals of three leaders, and witnessed the arrival of Gorbachev and perestroika, which inevitably led to the Latvian national revival and ultimately separation from the Soviet Union. This album includes two deeply dramatic works from this period – *Vēstījums* (*Message*, or more precisely *Tidings*) and *Lauda* – both highly praised by Latvian, Lithuanian and Russian critics, and also reverberated widely by others. This album also includes Vasks' Oboe Concerto, one of the newest and brightest works by the composer.

### **Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra (2018)**

This is Vasks' third concerto for wind instruments – the previous two having been written for English horn and flute.

Pēteris Vasks: "In my view, the oboe is a pastoral instrument – drama and tragedy do not first come to mind when thinking about the oboe sound and its possibilities. Overall, the concerto could be viewed as akin to a human life with its beginning, period of maturity, and departure. However, I would prefer to think of it as something more like a long cosmological day which lasts, say, a hundred years."

The first part is the *Morning pastorale*. The strings start the morning in a clear, quiet D major and, as is not unusual for Vasks, the opening dynamic is *pianissimo*.

Pēteris Vasks: "The morning blooms slowly, birdsong is heard and the first musical theme of the first part draws the Latvian landscape with a restrained, yet rejoicing voice. The middle section continues with a well-developed melodic line and following this cantilena, the original theme, slightly altered, returns – diatonic and bright. It says this is how we live here and this is what my country sounds like. I usually do not think much about the key signature – it tends to arrive on its own. Major keys are usually not one of my areas, but the Oboe Concerto is possibly one of my brighter works."

The second part brings music full of the power and energy that arises from traditional culture. Early in the second minute a melody takes shape hinting at the Latvian folk song



where "Three young girls sit in a rose garden". A more lyrical theme in a major key emerges later in the third minute. The composer invites us to imagine a more active theme in the form of an interested suitor. The girl with the braid and a white linen headscarf constitutes the more lyrical theme, while at other moments motifs akin to summer solstice refrains can be discerned.

Pēteris Vasks: "The mood here is kaleidoscopic. Festivities begin in one farmstead, then another, and yet another. They light up one home, then another. A cadence or oboe monologue begins in the middle with a variety of episodes – lyrical, dramatic, and sharply dotted. This monologue offers a different point of view, when you are alone and by yourself; when you are no longer together with the orchestra you think differently, feel things differently, perhaps more deeply."

Vasks acknowledges that he is not enthusiastic about extended or non-traditional techniques in the case of the oboe. However, he does in reality make use of the instrument's entire range in the cadence.

An overflowing, festive energy follows the monologue. Around 13:30 the woodwinds offer the Latvian folk song that stands as a strong symbol of our being, "A-singing I was born, a-singing I grew up, a-singing I spent my life", this time as a direct quotation. This is undoubtedly the music of high summer. The forests and the fields inhale and exhale with invigorating greenness, while gardens drown in seas of white cherry and red apple blossoms.

The opening of the Concerto's third section is conceived *attacca*, allowing the fateful key of B minor to ring out without pause, or with as little as possible. Then we hear the oboe's lonesome relative, the English horn. Pēteris Vasks: "While the oboe's palette is richer, the English horn's capacity for expression is arguably more vivid, but also more limited."

At 9:30 we hear a line that resembles the folk song "So dark is the night, so green the grass, [that night] I let out my steed". One German journalist recently told Pēteris Vasks that the music of Latvian composers is melancholy but hopeful. Pēteris Vasks: "I do not feel it that way, but the third section of the Oboe Concerto might have some of that."

One might think we might have come to the end of the short summer night but no, on the threshold of audibility, a string tremolo begins, the oboe sings out with the voice of a bird, the percussion join in, and within the timespan of a small coda, something new has bloomed in front of our eyes.

Pēteris Vasks: "At the end of life, much is understood and seen differently. Whether more wisely or more clearly, who knows. But definitely more deeply. The composition ends with an uncharacteristically full sound – like the first ray of sunshine or even the moment

before the first bright ray that presages the dawn of a new day or another life.”

The Concerto received its premiere on October 5, 2018, at the Large Guild Hall in Rīga, one month before the culmination of Latvia’s centenary celebrations. That night Albrecht Mayer and the LNSO performed under the baton of Andris Poga, as they did on this recording in the very same hall.

### ***Message (Vēstījums) for Two Pianos, Strings, and Percussion* (1982)**

This is one of Vasks’ relatively early works, based on the elements of piano duo, percussion, and string orchestra, with roots that can be found in his previous compositions.

In the Latvia of the 1970s and 1980s, the piano duo of Nora Novika and Rafi Haradžanjans were two of very few people championing new music or even interested in contemporary music. In the 1970s, Vasks composed his *Music for Two Pianos* (1974), *In memoriam* (1977), and *Toccata for Two Pianos* (1977) for them. The second element in *Message* is the percussion. Following a suggestion by Aikaz Akopjan, principal percussionist of the Latvian National Opera, Vasks wrote the Concerto for Timpani and Percussion (1979), directed at the premiere by the composer himself. The third element is the string orchestra for which he wrote *Cantabile* (1979).

Pēteris Vasks: “I wanted to talk about how exquisitely beautiful the world is and what we, in our hubris, are doing with it.”

The work begins with quiet movement of the earth and a gradual swell until 1:48 when the cymbals bring news of the sunrise. A moment of ecstasy follows, once again in a minor key as is common in Vasks’ music. Pēteris Vasks: “This is like the feeling you get in church, when you receive absolution and can go in peace, although in reality this is just the beginning.”

At 2:40, the work’s central motif arises in the strings: a minor third upward, then a major second, then a fourth downward. At 3:57 the activity is heightened by the second characteristic motif. It is broken at 4:25 and something new begins. Clouds appear, joy is obscured, everything becomes more complex. At 6:06 the timpani increase the tension but a moment later an icy peace sets in, gradually growing warmer. Pēteris Vasks: “The world is full of wonderful sounds which I endeavour to include in my orchestration.”

At 8:18 the two foundational motifs meet. At 9:04 the miraculous beauty of the world blooms in hope. In the twelfth and thirteenth minute the tension reaches its zenith. Pēteris

Vasks: "The cosmos rejoices. We, the insane, will be lost but the miracle of the world will remain."

At 13:25 the first motif rings out with uneclipsed clarity. The final climax in an assertive A minor is intoned in frequencies of the second and sixth step of a scale and a piano cluster comprising the entire diatonic range.

In her 1983 review, music historian Ingrīda Zemzare speaks of Vasks' gift for augury. Through the medium of birds signs, he speaks out passionately about the future of this endangered planet – his credo then and throughout his lifetime.

The work was premiered on April 9, 1983, in the Great Hall of the University of Latvia with Jānis Zirnīs conducting the LNSO.

### ***Lauda* for Symphony Orchestra (1985)**

*Lauda* is Vasks' first work for large orchestra if we do not count his capstone thesis composition *Rush hour* (1978), which until recently he declined to include in his catalogue despite of its quality.

In 1985, the 150th anniversary of Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923) was celebrated in Latvia. Barons is the most famous and possibly the most prolific collector, folklorist, and publisher of spoken (not sung) Latvian folk songs. Even though Latvia was still ruled by the Soviet Union at the time, change was in the air since Mikhail Gorbachev had already come to power on March 11 of that year.

On October 31, Krišjānis Barons' birthday, his gravesite in the long abandoned Great Cemetery (which had been partially turned into a poorly maintained park) was lit up with countless candles on this late autumnal evening, giving rise to rather unworldly festivities. This evening attracted members of ethnographic and folklore groups who had gathered for a competition, writers, prominent visitors from abroad, and other interested observers. This was a tremendous moment of light in the autumnal darkness.

That same year Pēteris Vasks composed *Lauda*. Pēteris Vasks: "'*Lauda*' was my form of spiritual protest. It is an anthem to my nation, my culture, the very existence and being of my people."

As is often the case with Vasks' work, this is a song of praise infused with the minor key (4:20) and it hit its mark. An intensive folklore movement had been taking shape since around



1980 with songs drawn from authentic sources taking their place beside the decorative forms of folk expression. The direct and unwavering, rough-edged sound of resonant women's voices rang out across Latvia alongside the voices cultivated in the academy. The fire of the people had once again begun to burn.

*Lauda* begins with a relatively rare instrument, the alto flute, offering a simple and supple motif, like the subdued song of an oriole. Following the bass clarinet bridge, the double basses and cellos pick up the motif that will weave throughout the work. Music historian Ingrīda Zemzare calls this a motif of growth, and it really does grow to its first major climax held together by the regular beat of the timpani. An irregular chord pattern begins at 5:30, alternating woodwinds (with harp and marimba) and strings. Pēteris Vasks: "This might be a sentinel. Here we stand on guard for that which requires guarding."

Following a folk dance episode and a third climax (9:30), a polyphonic segment begins with an expansive fugato which leads us into an aleatoric, explosive danger zone, where the composer directs his interpreters to extreme intensity (ending at 13:10). Ingrīda Zemzare observes, "Here the composer has managed to include some element of the emotions felt by the intelligentsia of our day when thinking about the revival period".

We tend to speak of the late 1980s as a singing revolution which allowed Latvia with almost no bloodshed to declare independence in 1990 and actual regain it in 1991. In *Lauda*, Pēteris Vasks somehow foreshadowed this path. It is a different issue that a new era of errors and mistakes followed when the greatest challenge involved the internal transformation required of every individual. But *Lauda* stands as a deeply driven pier that will serve to undergird the edifice that is our spiritual space.

*Lauda* received its premiere on April 4, 1987, at the Large Guild Hall in Rīga, when the LNSO was directed by Jānis Kaijaks, composer and principal conductor of the Rīga Musical Theatre.

**Orests Silabriedis**

(Translation: Dace Veinberga)

**Albrecht Mayer** studied with Gerhard Scheuer, Georg Meerwein, Ingo Goritzki, and Maurice Bourgue. Mayer began his career in 1990 as the solo oboist of the Bamberg Symphony. In 1992, he accepted the equivalent position with the Berlin Philharmonic.

As a soloist, Albrecht Mayer is much sought after internationally. In pursuit of his personal sound ideal, he founded his own ensemble, New Seasons. Accompanied by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Mayer made his debut in 2007 in New York's Carnegie Hall. In 2008, he was the "Artiste étoile" at the Lucerne Festival. In addition to his solo career, Albrecht Mayer appears regularly as a conductor.

In seeking to develop a new repertoire, Albrecht Mayer adapts for the oboe works for other instruments or the voice. Especially convincing are his transcriptions of pieces by Bach and Handel, which have even found a place in the German pop charts. His CD "Auf Mozarts Spuren" [In Search of Mozart] with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and Claudio Abbado appeared on the German Record Critics' list of Best Recordings. Other releases have made it into the charts for classical music. In 2006, 2008, and 2010, Albrecht Mayer was awarded an ECHO Klassik Prize; and in December 2006, he received the E.T.A Hoffmann Cultural Prize of the city of Bamberg. In 2013, he was taken into the Gramophone "Hall of Fame" and was awarded the Bavarian Cultural Prize.

Albrecht Mayer plays an oboe and an oboe d'amore built by the Mönnig Brothers. He is the founder of the Albrecht Mayer Foundation ([www.albrecht-mayer-stiftung.de](http://www.albrecht-mayer-stiftung.de)).

[www.albrechtmayer.com](http://www.albrechtmayer.com)



ALBRECHT MAYER

The **Latvian National Symphony Orchestra** is one of the cornerstones of Latvian national culture, its history spans almost a century. The LNSO is a six-time winner of the Latvian Grand Music Award. Since 2013 the music director of the LNSO is maestro Andris Poga, a conductor sought after by top orchestras from around the world.

The orchestra's most notable former music directors are Jānis Mediņš, Leonīds Vīgners, Edgars Tons, Vassily Sinaisky, Olari Elts, and Karel Mark Chichon. The LNSO's guest conductors include the world-famous Latvians Arvīds Jansons, Mariss Jansons and Andris Nelsons, as well as Valery Gergiev, Neeme Järvi, Paavo Järvi, Kirill Kondrashin, Kurt Masur, Krzysztof Penderecki, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, Yevgeny Svetlanov, Yuri Simonov, Kristiina Poska and many others.

In recent years the LNSO has performed at the Philharmonie de Paris and the Théâtre des Champs Élysées, the Alte Oper Frankfurt and the Grand Théâtre of Aix-en-Provence among many other important European concert halls. The orchestra has participated in music festivals in France, Germany and Switzerland as well as the renowned Bratislava Music Festival. On its most recent tours the LNSO teamed up with the dazzling Latvian violinist Baiba Skride, the outstanding cellist Alexander Knyazev, the brilliant pianists Nicholas Angelich and Boris Berezovsky, and the rising stars Lukas Geniušas and Lucas Debargue.

[lno.lv](http://lno.lv)

**Andris Poga** has been the music director of the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra since the 2013/14 season. He will commence his tenure as the Chief Conductor of the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra starting the 2021/22 season.

Highlights of recent years have included concerts and tours with the leading orchestras of Germany, France, England, Japan and other countries. After the first successful collaborations he has been invited back to the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester Hamburg, WDR Symphony Cologne, Munich Philharmonic, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, NHK Symphony Orchestra, Hong Kong Philharmonic. He has also conducted the Wiener Symphoniker, Orchestre National de France, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Sydney Symphony among many others.

In 2010, Andris Poga won the First Prize of the Evgeny Svetlanov International Conducting Competition. He became an assistant to Paavo Järvi at the Orchestre de Paris, and from 2012 to 2014 he worked as an assistant conductor for the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

[www.andrispoga.com](http://www.andrispoga.com)

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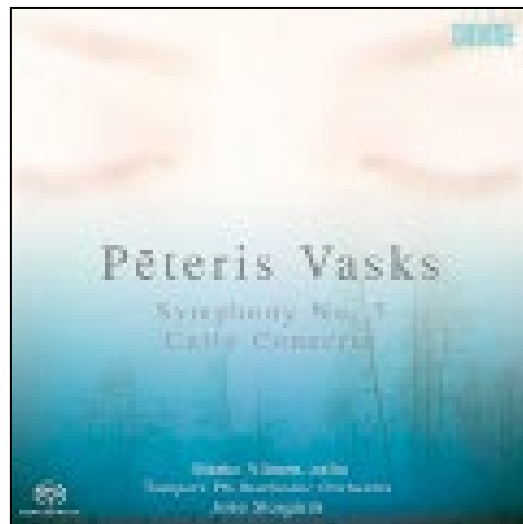
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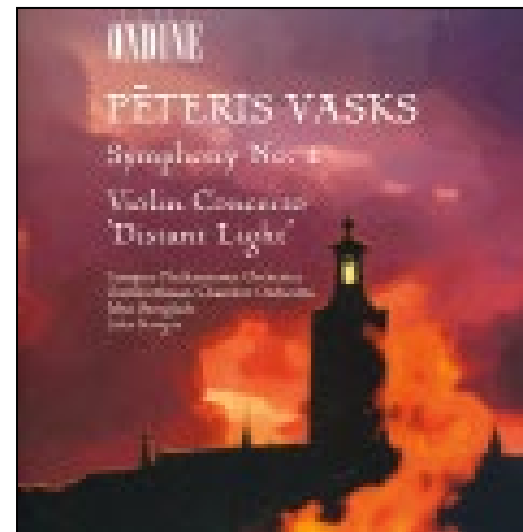
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ANDRIS POGA



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