

Konstantins Dravnieks

Dravnieks was born in Petrograd of Latvian parents, May 21, 1914. After WWI the family returned to Latvia where Konstantins studied mechanical engineering, graduating from the University of Riga. In 1949, following the domination of the Baltic nations by the Soviet Union, he came to the United States, one of some 100,000 Latvians who emigrated in the post World War II era. Settling in Chicago, then Fort Atkinson, then Madison, then, for the past ten years, in Thiensville, Dravnieks continues to follow his engineering profession.

Latvians, beset alternately by German and Russian empires, have been especially concerned with preserving a sense of cultural identity through the generations. Since at least the early 19th century, when Elias Lonnrot's Finnish epic, the Kalevala, sparked the documentation of folklore in the Baltic countries, Latvians have recorded their folksongs and tunes, and have sought to preserve their traditional instruments, of which the kokle is foremost. The instrument has achieved a particular importance in the United States where the children of immigrants learn to play it as a means of expressing their cultural heritage. Indeed the Latvian-American community generally demands that the kokle conform to some arguable standard of ethnographic correctness: its pegs must be wooden not metal and its soundboard must be ornamented with solar designs.

Konstantins Dravnieks was attracted to the kokle like his fellow Latvian-Americans, but his interest extended further. Amidst his travels as an engineer, he visited museums and made drawings of kokles, relying on skills of precise measurement acquired in his profession. Eventually he met with Leonids Linauds of Reading, Pennsylvania, an immigrant stained glass artist and kokle maker. Inspired by Linauds, Dravnieks tried making a kokle about 1961. The result was successful and he kept on, exhibiting his instruments, at Linauds' suggestion, at a kokle festival in Philadelphia. Soon orders for instruments came in and Dravnieks has been making kokles ever since.

He has made some 80 in all, experimenting with materials, design, and dimension. Generally his bodies are of maple or basswood, two woods indigenous to Latvia but also readily available in American lumberyards. His tops are of European spruce (although many others use Sitka spruce). In order to minimize the tendency of wooden pegs in a wooden instrument to go out of tune, Dravnieks employs the exotic and oily cocobolo wood for his pegs. Music wire has proven "the simplest, the cheapest, and the best" for strings.

Beyond making the instruments, Dravnieks has given public presentations on the kokle and has conducted extensive research: visiting museums and instrument makers, taking precise measurements, making pictures and maps. He has also kept a careful record of each of the instruments he has made and has rubbings of them all. And he has a remarkable library of volumes on traditional musical instruments.

His instruments have been played by Latvian-American ensembles throughout, especially those inspired by the immigrant musician Andrejs Jansons.

the United States

Supporting materials: 1) taped interview and index; 2) a brochure on the kokle.

Availability: Dravnieks currently has four kokles on hand of which any one might be chose for exhibition.

Special Considerations: The various etchings, plans, maps, historical photographs, and so on assembled by Dravnieks might be used selectively to great advantage in the exhibit. Dravnieks also knows of a film made in Canada about the construction of a kokle and its cultural significance and he might be able to dig out ordering information.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for
Cedarburg Cultural Center
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): December 19, 1989
Interviewee: Konstantins Dravnieks
Address: [REDACTED]
Thiensville, WI 53092

Phone: [REDACTED]

Equipment Used: Superscope C-202LP
Stereo: no Dolby: no
Tape Brand/Length: TDK D90
Amount Used: Side 1: all
 Side 2: blank
General Subject: musical instrument
 making
Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary

Recording Location: Dravnieks home
Other People Present: Mrs. Dravnieks

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

I met with Mr. and Mrs. Dravnieks in the living room of their Thiensville home. They were quite interested in the seriousness and quality of the exhibition, having been involved in various programs and displays of Latvian and Baltic culture over the years. Consequently we talked for about 45 minutes prior to the recording and Mr. Dravnieks also brought out various information regarding the kokle and related instruments: books, brochures, maps of distribution, sketches of variant instruments, photographs, precise technical drawings. He also showed me five kokles of the 80 or so he has made. Part of this prelude was for the purpose of showing me what they already had that might be useful for an exhibition, another part was to impress on me the importance of accuracy. Mr. Dravnieks has been interviewed before by an ethnomusicologist who made errors and caused considerable controversy in the Latvian community. Finally we settled in to a 45 minute interview with Mr. Dravnieks holding forth eloquently on the kokle, his own work with it, its construction, and its cultural significance.

TAPE INDEX

Tape 1, Side 1

1. Announcement.
2. Born May 21, 1914 in Petrograd of Latvian parents. After WWI family returned to Latvia. K studied mechanical engineering at University of Riga. During WWII transferred to Germany until close of war. Came to USA in 1949, has worked ever since as an engineer.
3. Came to Thiensville, ca. 1979; had lived for 19 years prior in Madison; two years in Fort Atkinson; six years in Chicago.
4. Had a friend in PA, Leonids Linauds, a stained glass artist. K had looked at kokles in Latvian museums before and had taken notes. Leonids had been building the instruments. Showed K how they were designed and built. K couldn't find one to buy from anyone. Decided to try himself. After a while didn't know what to do with all he'd made. Linauds' suggested K exhibit at a Latvian gathering. Sold three and then made more.
5. Andrejs Jansons, oboist and composer, saw some of Linauds and Dravnieks kokles. Learned to play from Linauds and convinced some composers to compose for kokles. An annual festival began in Philadelphia. 600 people in the audience. K made a presentation about the kokle and related instruments in the Baltic region. Relied on the organological classifications of Curt Sachs. Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Karelia is the locus of the Ugro-Baltic psaltery instruments.
6. As an engineer Dravnieks was involved with acoustics, trying to reduce noise in air conditioning systems. The intention is the opposite with musical instruments. How can you increase sound. K experimented with different strings, materials, thicknesses of sound boxes, different woods. Usually made three instruments at a time: one standard length, one shorter, one longer, but with same woods, thickness of sound board, strings, pegs. Also began to experiment with, vary, ornamentation of the instruments.
7. Leonids Linauds of Reading, PA, designs church windows but "is running out of churches."
8. K reckons he started to make kokles 15 years ago [later we determine that it was actually ca. 1961.]
9. On K's researches on the kokle. At the annual Philadelphia festivals participants brought in different instruments, which K measured. The Chicago Lithuanian Center has an extensive library with many books of musicology and K was able to learn quite a bit there, including various names. As an engineer K traveled extensively and visited museums and instrument makers roundabout, also accumulated a good library of books on traditional musical instruments. Began to combine all this information; may try to author some kind of comparative work. Has done a map of distribution as well as a chronological chart. Judging by the Kalevala and assorted sources, the kokle and related instruments are perhaps 1,000 years old.
10. Materials. Has used maple and basswood for the body. Tried cherry, but

reckons fruit woods are "dead" for musical instruments. Maple is more sonorous, louder, but doesn't sustain the tone and is sharper sounding with an emphasis on high frequencies. Basswood is softer, quieter. Both woods native to Latvia. For soundboards, quarter cut spruce from Europe. Expensive. Many people use Sitka spruce. Not quite so expensive. Some use plywood. [DHD?]

11. The soundboard vibrates and holes must be made in the board to let sound escape. Too little holes and too little sound, too big holes and sound diffused. The soundboards are often decorated with round circles suggesting the sun. K wonders if German furniture making, which influenced chip carving and involved the use of the compass, influenced the circular designs on kokles. Germans occupied Latvia for several centuries. In Finland chunky not circular openings are more common on kanteles.

12. Anyone who makes something sees the finished product in his eyes. Then you get the raw materials and cut out what you don't need. With kokles, you buy the material for the body, hollow it. Buy materials for pegs. Shape the outside. Then take the soundboard material, cut the holes and ornamentation. Then glue the soundboard to the body. Some put ribs under soundboard, K uses slightly heavier material but no ribs. Then make the U-shaped string holder and glue it. Wooden pegs and wooden bodies are complex because they alter with moisture and temperature change--hard to tune and to turn. This problem has never been resolved. K uses cocobolo wood for pegs, but it is toxic and irritates his skin. The wood is oily and holds its shape. Metal pegs go against the purist concepts of those who would be traditional and ethnographically correct. K uses music wire for strings: the simplest, the cheapest, and the best. Has tried brass and silver wires without much success. Old kokles often had horsehair strings, but that's a different sound.

13. Wood can be gotten from lumberyards (not home centers). Can usually get unfinished, kiln dried maple. In Wisconsin you can go to a sawmill. K goes to a supplier near Slinger who harvests local woods, saws and cures. Very expensive to buy through magazines.

14. On Latvian versus American kokles. Nearly 100,000 Latvians in USA since WWII. They are trying to stay as close to ethnographical examples as possible in their productions of cultural artifacts. In Europe Latvians have taken another path with framed soundboards lacking holes, metal pegs, and influence of "foreign" tunes. Also ensemble playing by families of instruments emerged in eastern Europe. Need for standard instruments that can be played together and have a uniform sound. Several instrument-makers in Latvia established a standardized instrument form there. The instrument has a tight scroll and a rounded bottom.

15. On the symbolic importance. Latvians are telling people that they have many folksongs, many melodies. Several hundred thousand songs, some 10,000 melodies. Notion that Latvians are always singing, and their songs describe all phases of life. Some of the songs seem to go back nearly a thousand years. A girl sits on the circle of stones at her parents's grave--in tune with features of archeological diggings. In the USA many young people came to play the kokle because they could express Latvian sentiments without knowing the language. "That was kind of a uniting factor." [DHD?]

16. Under Russian occupation Latvian folksongs became a way of expressing cultural identity without being obviously political.
17. K really didn't look for buyers for instruments, but just exhibited the instruments. Got letters from people who were playing. For a while there was a boom, but it has dwindled. K figures the market is saturated.
18. Has made instruments mostly for people concentrated on the east coast, but also in Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg, Dakotas, Seattle, California, "all over the place."
19. Never sold knowingly to someone who would not play the instrument. Some lately want to buy just to display. Something like this could be slapped together, doesn't have to sound right. It takes 200-300 hours to make one, and K doesn't want to spend his time just for something to hang on the wall. [good quote for DHD with editing.]
20. Has two instruments in the basement that he started in the Spring. Doesn't know when he'll work on them again, but usually tries to finish some for the annual Latvian song festivals which includes exhibitions of handicrafts. Weavings, woodworkings, instruments.
21. K sympathizes with the time involved in listening back to tape recordings.

[end of session]