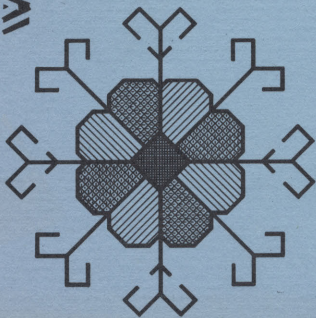




FOLKDANCE EVENING

PROGRAM NOTES



Latvian folksongs and dances reflect an ancient way of life that is simple, honest, sincere, and balanced within itself. It is the life of a people that know and honor the land on which they live and gain their spiritual strength by being in intimate harmony with nature about them. Nature for the ancient Latvian is the basic frame of reference from which he develops his entire approach to life and through which he seeks to understand and associate himself with his deity. The deity, his customs, and traditions date back to before Christ and would now be extinct, were it not for the unique geographic location of Latvia and its harsh history, both of which made its people adhere very closely to their culture.

The folksongs in tonight's program relate to the most important holiday of the ancient Latvians — the summer solstice, called Yahnis Day. This festival is on June 24 and celebrates the abundance in nature at the height of the summer growing season. Characteristic of Yahnis Day activities is the singing of special "lihgo" songs that contain a refrain of "lihgo-lihgo," an expression connoting joy, as well as the swaying of fertile and burgeoning nature. These songs were originally meant to insure fertility of house and field and touch upon everything useful to man. In particular, they sing of Yahnis, the personification of the summer. He is a noble and ornate embodiment of the symbols of the festival but at the same time he is so closely related to even the simplest aspects of nature that he is much like the common people, becomes a member of every household and the people are all "Yahnis children."

The festivities begin at dusk of Yahnis Eve, also called Night of Lihgo, when Yahnis children gather in groups and come into a farmyard singing songs, bringing flowers, grasses, oak leaf wreaths, and festive joy with them. They are met and welcomed by Yahnis Mother and Yahnis Father, the hosts of the house, who treat them with plenty of cheese and beer, symbolizing the plentitude in their cattle pens and grain fields. After sunset, fires are lit upon the highest elevations in the surrounding countryside. Usually a barrel of tar or pitchy wood is raised on top of a pole. The blazing fires contribute to the splendor of the festivities and show the way for Yahnis. The night may be spent in dancing or the playing of games; lovers also search for "the blossom of the fern," which, according to old belief, may only be found on Yahnis Night, giving success and happiness to anyone who has the luck to see it.

Just as much as the ancient Latvian liked to sing, he liked to dance and did so on almost any festive occasion all year round. His dances were, like everything else, oriented first of all toward the forms and movements in nature (notice the loud and imposing Thunder Dance, toward the latter part of A Medley of Folkdances for Couples — Part I; or The Star and The Sun Dance — both in Part II). Second, they portray his daily work (note the slow and deliberate sifting of grain in the second dance in A Medley of Folkdances for Couples — Part I; or The Mill — Part II); and last they portray, of course, courtship as well as other events of his life (The Maid's Lead, An Evening in Ludza — Part I; The Bachelor's Dance, Part II, etc.).

MIDSUMMER NIGHT

The following is a selection of the folk songs presented in the prelude of the program.

Chorus: Yahni, beat your drum of brass on top of the highest hill; let all the world resound, so may brothers may hear, while walking foreign roads.

The Caller: The whole year Yahnis was acoming, this eve he arrived; the ground trembled ariding, the spurs rang alighting.

The Singer: What's that ringing, what's that jangling up on the hilltop tonight? Yahnis comes riding down the hill, the bridle of his horse is jangling.

Yahnis has a golden belt, a sword made of silver; the belt sparkles, the sword gleams, when he rides through the gate.

Good evening, Yahnis' Mother, have you been expecting us?
Have you made soft cheese and brewed sweet beer?

The Caller: The sun spun a golden wheel in the yard of Yahnis' Father; Yahnis wheeled a round of dance beneath the wide-crowned oak.

Sešdancis/Dance for Six

The Northern California Latvian Folk Dance Group "Ritenītis"

The Caller: Welcome this day, welcome its passing; this day is crowned with an evening of song.

The Singer: All of God's creation is swaying tonight; the ears of grain, flower blossoms, and the treetops of great forests.

The sun sings in the evening, the herdsmen sing in the yard; dear Mara* herself sing crossing a meadow.

Whoever sleeps on Yahnis Night; will sleep the summer away;
whoever sings on Yahnis Night, will sing all summer long.

The Caller: All flowers blossomed, the fern alone doesn't bloom – it blossoms on
Lihgo Night, shedding a mist of gold.

Come, Laima**, tonight into the crowd of young people, tie one heart to
another with a scarlet thread.

Come dancers, spin a wheel in the farmyard of Yahnis' Father, so that bounteous
rye and barley might grow spinning in his fields.

The Singers: Dance, brothers, strike your heels, make the room resound; clap, sisters,
clap your hands, make your silver rings jingle.

What's that din, what's that noise, why does the ground tremble?
Our brothers, our sisters are dancing.

I went dancing with Yahnis on Lihgo Eve; His spurs rang, and so did my fine silver.

*Mara is the goddess of fertility and patroness of young women.

**Laima, Latvian deity of fate and happiness.

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