

Vitol, in Russia, was known as Iosif Ivanovich. In this commentary, the forename 'Yasep' is used (adopting that used by Ludmila Pis'mennaya in her monograph). Vitol was born on 14/26th July, 1863, at Vol'mar (German -Wolmar), Courland, now Valmiera, Latvia.¹ The family, described as 'of the Latvian intelligentsia, with roots implanted in German culture' spoke German. Not until later did Vitol learn Latvian and Russian. He received his first musical education at Mitava (German -Mitau), now Yelgava, a centre of learning.² Here he was schooled in West European music, isolated from Latvian culture and folklore and received sufficient musical training to enable him to enter St. Petersburg Conservatoire in 1880.³

Vitol's initial instruction is said to have been in viola. Later he moved to fuge with Yu. I Joh(g)ansen,⁴ then to special theory and composition, where in 1883 he came to meet Rimsky-Korsakov,⁵ about whom he wrote, 'That brilliant artist who exerted his great influence on all of my following journey as a musician'. At that time, other young, aspiring Latvian composers were at St. Petersburg Conservatoire, studying alongside Vitol-those mentioned include E. Melngailis, Alfred Kalnyn, E. Darzin', and others. Vitol wrote of the beneficial influence of the teaching staff at the Conservatoire, in helping to stimulate an interest in Latvian music.⁶

A further great formative influence was the Latvian, Andrey Yur'yan (1856 -1922), an earlier graduate of St. Petersburg Conservatoire, and reputedly the first professionally trained Latvian composer, who alerted him to the wonders of Latvian folk music and the listener to Vitol's songs.⁷

At the same time, Vitol was exposed to Russian art and literature and, above all, to the music of the Russian nationalists and Tchaikovsky, which was 'a determinative influence on the formation of the opinions of the young Vitol.'⁸

Glazunov writes interestingly about his first meeting (in the spring of 1885) with Vitol, then studying with Rimsky-Korsakov, and how the latter told him about Vitol's beautiful piano sonata which Glazunov should hear. At an agreed time, Glazunov appeared and was introduced to Vitol, whom he described as 'firmly built, rather short, fair-haired, with a characteristic, somewhat prominent face, and a searching look, a little shy...my new colleague created a pleasing impression on me.'⁹

Glazunov was delighted with Vitol's sonata in every way. It is one of the earliest works to be found in the Belaieff catalogue and the only example in this form published by that firm before Skryabin's Op.6 of 1895. Regrettably little played, its merits are described by William S. Newman as 'fresh, short, compelling, harmonically deft.'¹⁰ The work was performed in public, for the first time, by N.S. Lavrov on 5th November, 1886, in the fourth Russian Symphonic Concert of that year.¹¹

In 1886, Vitol graduated from the Conservatoire, with Antipov and A.A. Petrov. As a graduation test, he composed a symphony in the key of E minor which, according to Glazunov, displayed a still greater independence than the sonata. Its first movement was performed at the Conservatoire in May of that year. The symphony, as a whole, received its premiere on 5th December, 1887, at the fifth Russian Symphonic Concert of that season.¹²

Following graduation, Vitol remained in St. Petersburg's Conservatoire as a teacher for thirty-two years, becoming a professor in 1901 and assuming control of Rimsky-Korsakov's class in musical form after the death of the latter in 1908, and, some years later, the class of special composition.¹³ He also took an increasingly active role in the administration of the Belaieff enterprise¹⁴ and was in demand as second violinist in Belaieff's 'Fridays' gatherings.¹⁵

Vitol, for seventeen years, was music critic of the German language journal, 'St. Petersburg Zeitung'. According to Glazunov, Vitol owed this position to a recommendation by A.R. Bernhard,¹⁶ a German by origin, a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov and later professor and director of the Conservatoire. Vitol's work as a critic also found favour with Larosh, despite divergent views on art.¹⁷ Pis'mennaya describes Vitol, in his

4. Yuly Ivanovich Joh(g)ansen (1826-1904). From 1866, he was professor of the theory of music at St. Petersburg Conservatoire, and director from 1891 to 1897.

16. August Rudolf Bernhard (Avgust Rudol'fovich Bergard), (1852-1908), was condemned by Rimsky-Korsakov for his resistance to attempted student reforms at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire in 1905, leading to Bernhard's resignation and to Rimsky-Korsakov's dismissal.