



Celebration



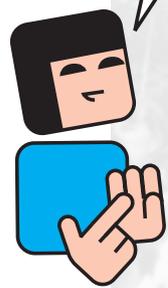
ESTONIAN SONG AND DANCE
CELEBRATIONS

laulupidu.ee

Estonian Institute, Tallinn 2014



900 CHOIRS,
22 000 SINGERS ON STAGE,
THE AUDIENCE OF 80 000



Singing with thousands of voices

There is nothing easier than organising a three-day general song and dance celebration. The first thing you need is a nation of about one million. This nation should start singing from a young age, and naturally their own songs. The music suitable for a proper song celebration bridges generations. It is sung by toddlers in kindergarten, by their parents and by their grandparents.

There are thousands of choirs, folk dance groups and orchestras in Estonia. Rehearsals take place after school and after work, several times a week. With admirable patience, the singers and dancers polish their syllables, steps, notes and harmonies. After a year of polishing, the best make it to the big party.

Finally on the festival grounds, the singers and dancers spend several days adjusting the arrangement of dances and the harmony of songs: they have, after all, come from various places, near and far. At the celebration, they must perform as one.

At the celebration, thousands sing and dance, nearly a hundred thousand listen and watch. For three days. In any weather. People eat, drink and are together. There is no hurry.



+ 140 years × 1000 choirs =



But why? Why do they all come and sing and dance and make music?
And why does the audience enjoy it?

Every nation wants to feel proud of something collectively. The foundation of identity for many nations is a sacred battle or two, a triumphal religious war or some other heroic deed. Estonians do not have the habit of worshipping their military past, because as far back as the memory goes, our land has been ruled by strangers. We have therefore had to keep our unity alive in some other way. Instead of fighting together, our sacred heroic deed has been singing together.

Singing helps to ease grievances, and encourage dreams. Singing keeps the mother tongue alive and kicking; the echoes of songs determine the borders of your homeland. Singing makes you one!





A battlefield requires outstanding heroes, just as the most accurate marksman on a hunting trip receives accolades. In choir singing, on the other hand, every ego dissolves. Choir singing is the opposite of egoism. The best choir singer in the world is someone whom nobody knows, someone who skilfully dissolves in the choir as a whole. And the best folk dancer in the world is someone who blends into the pattern on the dance lawn. Estonians have thousands of “best choir singers and folk dancers in the world”.

The Estonian choir singing tradition has two supporting pillars: the ancient form of folk songs, the runo, where the choir repeats the words of the lead singer, and the movement of the Herrnhuter brotherhood, which reached Estonia in the 18th century and, unlike the official church, favoured singing together. Other nations have obviously sung together, but we still claim that choir singing has not developed into national identity the way it has in Estonia.



The song celebration procession shows how the mass media and social media in the pre-literacy and pre-electricity eras were the same. The procession was the news programme and Instagram of its time. Some came to show themselves and others came to look at them.

The procession is made up of choirs and ensembles from across Estonia and from abroad. They are happy and proud, because they have been chosen from among many applicants, and they have

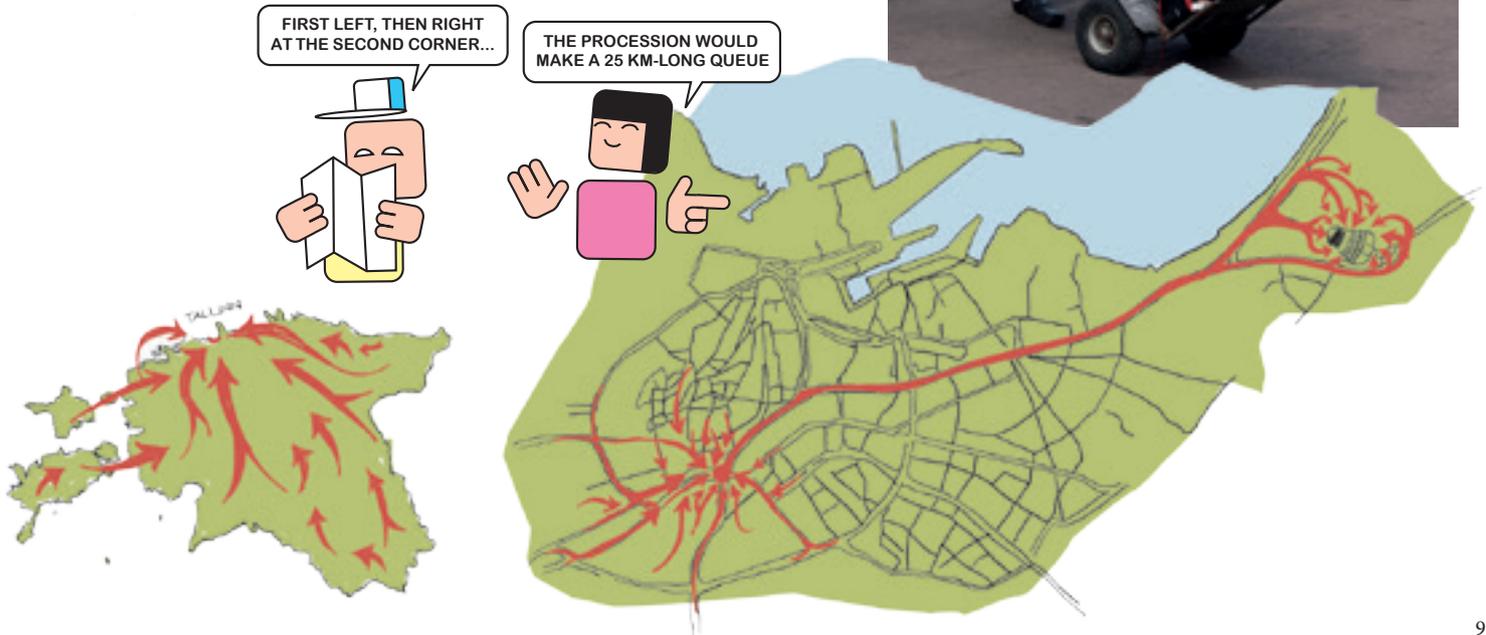
5 kilometres of choirs



been practising their songs and dances for this huge festival, which is about to begin. They are proud of their home, flags, colours, national costumes and themselves. The procession is the last place where each choir reveals its unique voice and colour, before they all blend into one big whole.

The procession moves through the town. Traffic is halted. People come to see the procession from far and near, take pictures and cheer. The singers and dancers flow like a long river towards the festival grounds and the bystanders imagine themselves amongst them. Cheering the procession provides a sense of participation for those who cannot actually get into the celebration. The cheering people are rightfully convinced that they contribute something to the common undertaking as well.

When the procession has arrived at the festival site and the public has settled in, the crucial moment is finally here: the festival fire is lit. The party can begin.



Fire, walk with me!

Maybe in some parts of the world people practice ceremonies of carrying water around, or perhaps earth or air. The song celebrations definitely have the tradition of carrying fire.

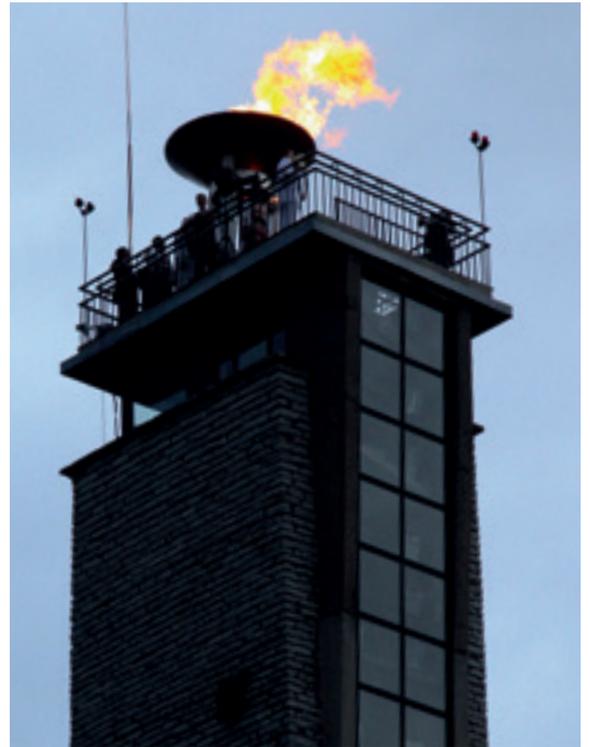
Fire has a powerful purifying effect; fire eliminates everything excessive, leaving nothing but embers. Singing has a similar effect. If you sing at the top of your voice, your brain stands still, nerves calm and you forget your stomach ache or bank loan. Only the good remains. You are free!

Fire unites us, linking the past with the future. In recent years the song and dance celebrations have taken place in Tallinn, but the original fire was lit in Tartu, the cradle of our song celebrations. The fire was lit and united the gathered peasants into one nation.



Thus every festival summer the fire travels from Tartu to Tallinn, accompanied by singers, dancers and musicians, men, women and children. The fire does not often move along the straightest roads, but travels across the country, inviting everyone to come along, spreading the spirit of singing and dancing. Sometimes the fire travels on a horse-drawn carriage, sometimes in a lorry or on a bicycle, sometimes on boats along rivers and the sea.

Finally the fire arrives at the festival site. Once there, it climbs to the top of the tower and stays there until the celebration ends. Some years later it is back again.



**Code of
conduct:
enjoy!**



The success of the song celebration largely depends on harmony between the performers and the audience. There are tens of thousands of performers, and many times more viewers-listeners, but they are in balance. One would not exist without the other.

It is fairly simple for the performers: they have been working hard for years to get to this festival, and once there, their actions are determined by the programme. The audience, on the other hand, is free and more disorganised, so their role is more decisive in the success of the whole undertaking. The audience of a nationwide song and dance celebration is generally well aware of what is expected of them. Those who come unawares soon catch on.

To be present here and now: this is the special feature of a great festival, which can never be reproduced again. Visitors are thus advised to enjoy everything to the full. Besides songs and dances, the party mood is also determined by the sun and clouds, mobile phones ringing and children shrieking in delight. All this is part of the great festivity and such details become fragments in people's memory kaleidoscope.

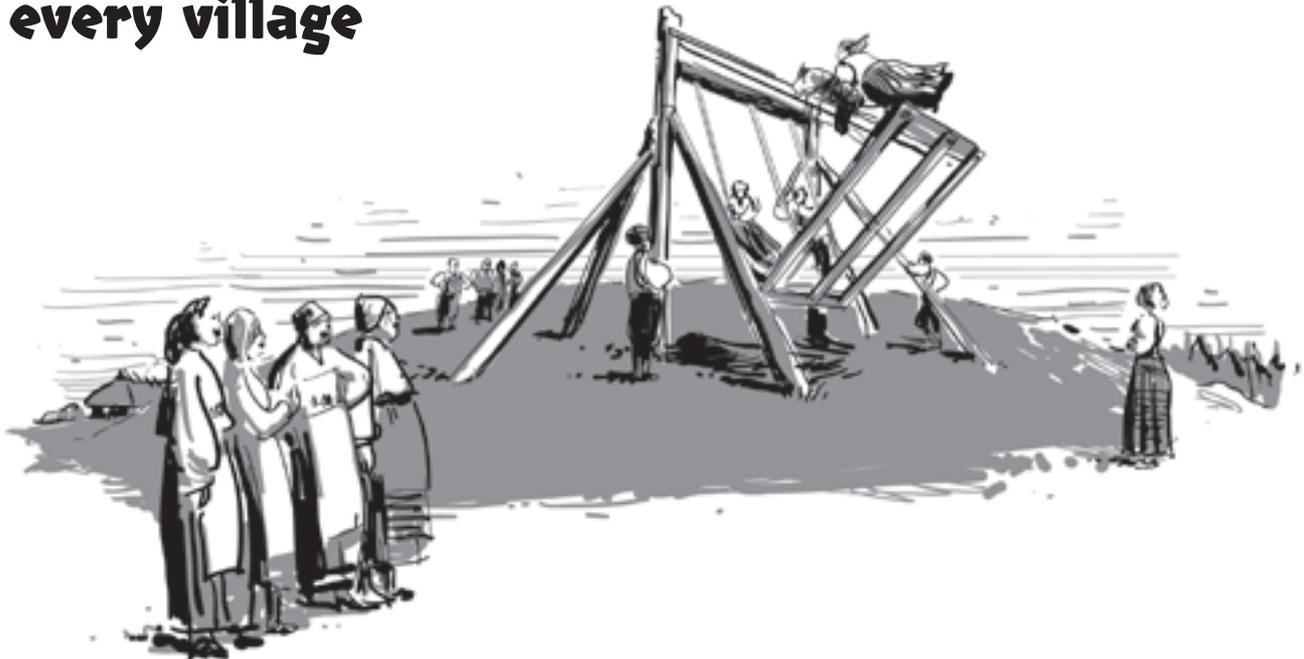
Therefore, dear visitors, be happy. You are all significant parts of the festival, as are the gusts of wind and raindrops on your face.





For unknown reasons, the Estonian coat of arms displays three lions with magnificent manes, although an Estonian is historically a farmer and a lion is hardly likely to plough a field. There is no doubt that a song festival grounds would be much more appropriate on the Estonian coat of arms. For an Estonian, this kind of site certainly has the most powerful aura. For one nation, a place with such a solemn status would be a stadium, for another a mountain, for others the central squares in their capital cities, and for some their monarchs, but Estonians prefer their song festival grounds.

A place in every village



There are thousands of them across the country. Every self-respecting village has one. The particular piece of land operating as the song festival grounds has a special status. Nobody would dream of herding pigs, sowing rye or planting trees there. The value and contribution of a song festival site is spiritual. People gather there and the site thus turns the gathering into a cultural event.

Village people gather at the song festival grounds to forget any ill feelings they might harbour towards one another. The grounds spread positive vibrations. There is no rivalry, no life-and-death struggle, quarrels are forgotten. Since time immemorial, the Romeo and Juliet clans have danced folk dances here together.

This is how it is. The charm and pain of a rural area. As most farmhouses are located quite far from one another, song festival sites act as places where people come together, places to sing and dance and check out the new jolly and single people. It would be silly to waste this crucial time trading punches. Those who do die out, and thus people who have survived the natural selection process on song festival grounds indeed seem to be truly mild-mannered. Estonians, normally clammed-up, sing a lot, and loudly.

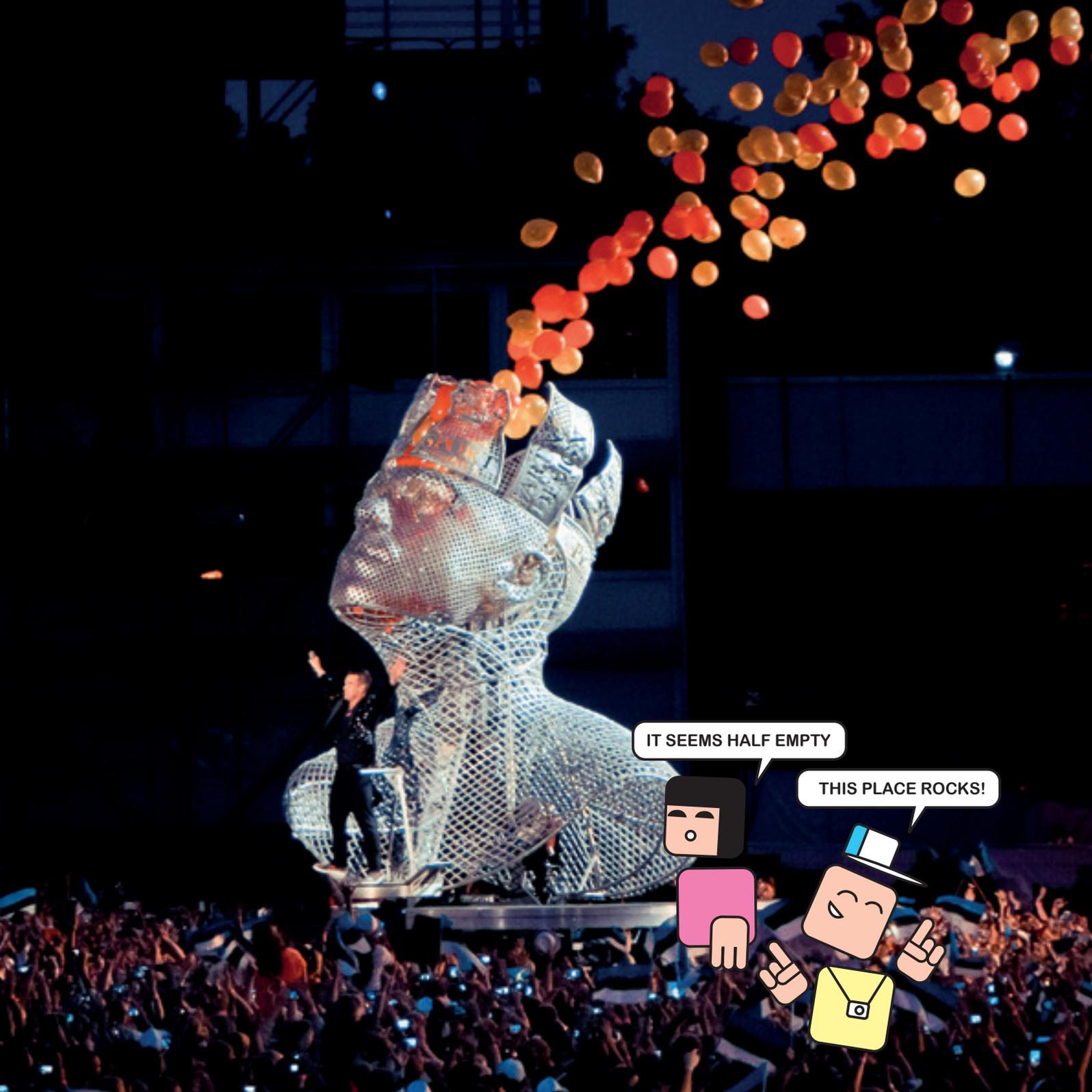




The most important of the song festival grounds is naturally the one in Tallinn, where the biggest parties take place and people sing the loudest. However, the grounds does not sit empty between festivals. In summer, it has various open-air concerts, and in winter its slopes are enjoyed by people with skis, sledges and snowboards. The “singing revolution” of 1988 naturally took place here, and might in fact have not happened at all elsewhere, because no other place in Estonia has quite the same powerful aura.

Independence immediately introduced totally new phenomena and the song festival grounds was conquered by rock’n’roll. The first Rock Summer festivals attracted the most daring Western performers for several years. Whoever wishes to listen to a superstar in Tallinn in this century can most likely do it once again at the song festival grounds, whose stage has been graced by the Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Metallica, Robbie Williams and many others.

Still, not one pop singer has managed to attract such enormous crowds as the song celebrations do.



IT SEEMS HALF EMPTY

THIS PLACE ROCKS!

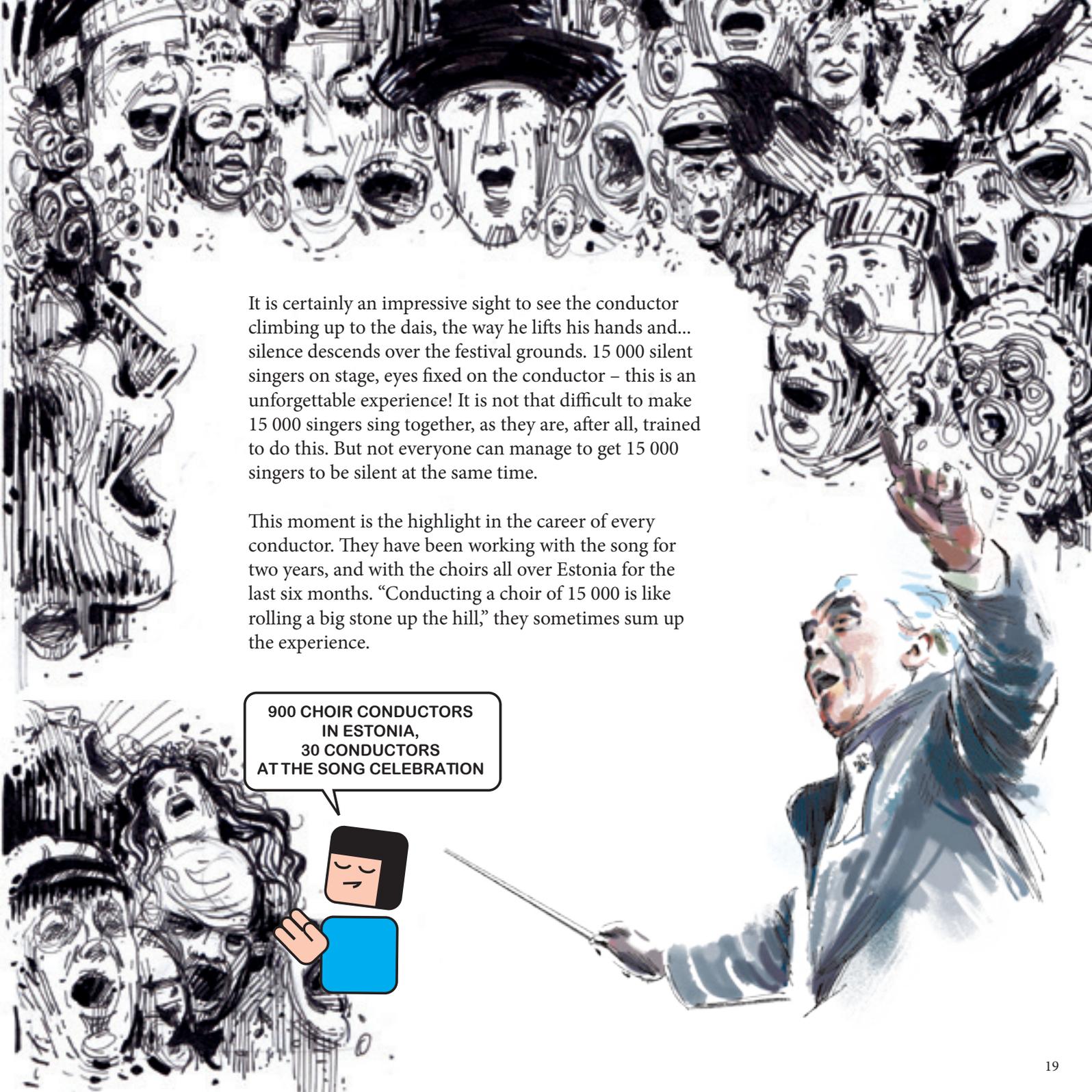
How to silence 15 000 singers?

We can praise the choirs, song celebrations and the audience, but finally we are inevitably faced with the question: how is a song released from a choir? Who produces the rabbit from the hat? This is the job of the conductor. Trust between the conductor and singers and faith in each other's abilities form a wonderful foundation for music, which enriches the world's musical legacy.

Although there are many choir singers (or perhaps because there are so many), a conductor and democracy have nothing in common. A true conductor is an enlightened monarch, the leader and teacher of his choir.



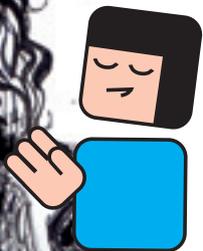
A conductor's crucial attribute is his face. The more musical the face, the more successfully a conductor can elicit delicate subtlety from his choir. Sometimes a conductor is photographed from below, as if a still image of someone waving a baton against the background of clouds endows the conductor with more power and sublimity. All wrong. This kind of image exudes solitude. A proper conductor always has people in the background. While conducting there is only the audience and, when the conductor bows to the audience, his background is the choir.



It is certainly an impressive sight to see the conductor climbing up to the dais, the way he lifts his hands and... silence descends over the festival grounds. 15 000 silent singers on stage, eyes fixed on the conductor – this is an unforgettable experience! It is not that difficult to make 15 000 singers sing together, as they are, after all, trained to do this. But not everyone can manage to get 15 000 singers to be silent at the same time.

This moment is the highlight in the career of every conductor. They have been working with the song for two years, and with the choirs all over Estonia for the last six months. “Conducting a choir of 15 000 is like rolling a big stone up the hill,” they sometimes sum up the experience.

**900 CHOIR CONDUCTORS
IN ESTONIA,
30 CONDUCTORS
AT THE SONG CELEBRATION**



Dress code: striped

estinst.ee/eng/information-booklets/

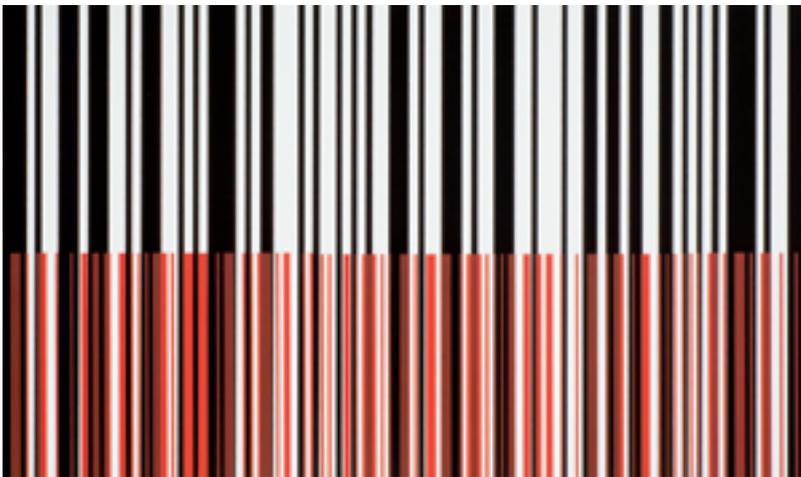
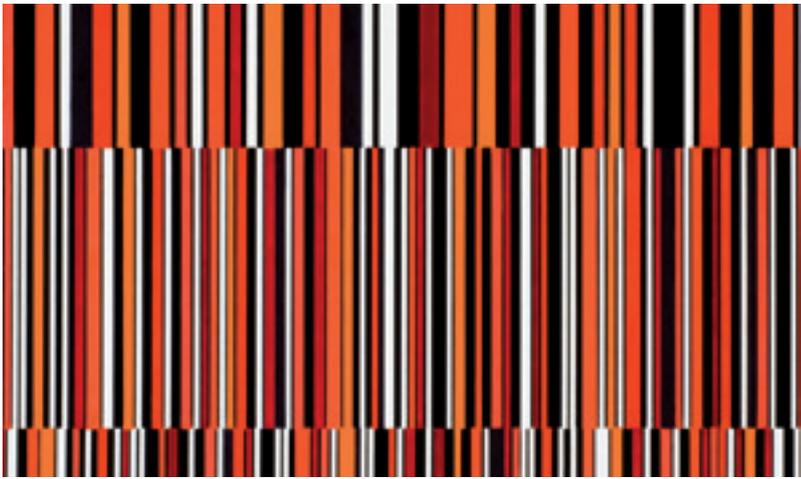


Quite a few things have changed in Estonia. We can be pretty certain, for example, that no folklorist used to tell people what kind of national costumes they should wear at a party. National costumes were like national dishes: people put on what they thought pretty, just as they ate what they liked most. Only much later were clothes and food prescribed and canonised, starting a new era.

Until that time, the national costumes had developed sometimes by natural selection, and sometimes by divine intervention. This free-flowing state of affairs came to an end and national costumes began a new life as mummified museum exhibits. Every piece of clothing got a name, a code and a user manual: what type of primitive footwear goes with what apron, what belt needs what knot, what kind of brooch suits a coif. Today all this is taught by folklore experts so everyone is now reassured that they have their trousers and shirts on the right way round.

This kind of canonisation is in fact useful as it protects national costumes from fashion and artistic manipulation. Thus at least part of our wardrobe and some of our values are kept pure, away from modern fashion fads. Now that national costumes are no longer a part of our everyday life, their patriotic-therapeutic function prevails. They instil hope that in the grip of global tempests we will still have a secret seed hidden away in a dark cupboard corner to tie us to our ancestors.





A bird's-eye view of history



Singing together produces a sense of belonging together. In the distant past choir practices were like club meetings, where people gathered to discuss local matters. When singing together finally escaped the boundaries of home and villages in the 19th century and turned into one huge song celebration, there was no turning back. Another half century of nationwide song celebrations, and the hoped for miracle was indeed born: “the forest and the land were ours!” Through singing, the peasants became a nation and the nation became more confident, daring to proclaim their own state and defend it.



The song celebration is a place where people live in memories and dreams. It is a place where it feels good to be amongst your own people, without necessarily exchanging a single word with your neighbour. Everyone's vocal chords are quite exhausted by the evening after a day spent cheering the choirs. Estonians have always found it difficult to talk to one another, so they sing together.

Song festivals have naturally been organised by other peoples as well, before the Estonians. The latter gratefully embraced the custom, domesticated it and made it into something truly grand. The first organisers here, for example, were certainly inspired by the local Baltic German song festivals and the spirit of the romanticist era, which took an interest in peripheral cultures.

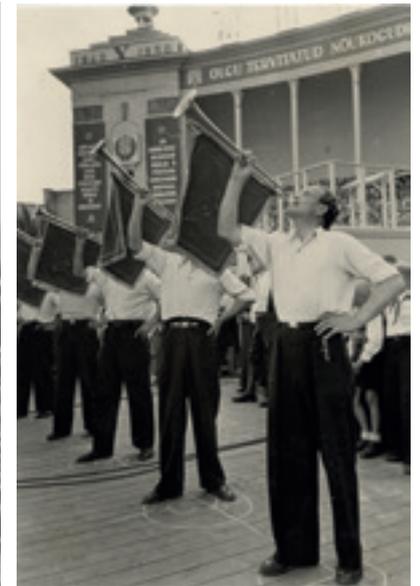
The first Estonian song celebration took place in 1869 in Tartu. Estonia was then part of tsarist Russia. In 1928 the festival moved to Tallinn. By that time the country had become independent and was called the Republic of Estonia. The song festival site acquired its current look in 1960, when Soviet Estonia was part of the Soviet Union. At the jubilee song celebration in 1969, the biggest choir ever performed: over 25 000 singers sang together! The “singing revolution”, as it is known, took place at the song festival grounds towards the end of the 1980s and, after a period of exaltation, Estonia joined the European Union, and brought its song festival grounds and dance arenas with it.





Only male choirs took part in the first song celebrations, which was quite natural considering the accommodation possibilities, customs and public morals. In 1891, mixed choirs were accepted as well and in 1933 women's choirs performed for the first time. The picture became even more diverse later, when student and regional song festivals were introduced. More festivals have emerged in recent years, such as night song festivals, e-song festivals, punk song festivals and others. In 2004 the song celebrations of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians were added to the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage.

Since 1960 song celebrations have ended with the song *My Fatherland is My Love*. At various times of oppression, this song encouraged a faith in the hearts of both singers and listeners that there could be no other homeland besides Estonia, and nobody can take this faith from us. People can be deported to prison camps or exiled from Estonia, but Estonia cannot be taken away from the heart of its people.





1710

**The Russian tsarist time (1710–1917).
Development of the idea of Estonian
independence**

song
celebrations:
1869
1879
1880
1891
1894
1896
1910

1869 1st song celebration

**1918 The first period of independence
(1918–1940)**

1923
1928
1933
1938

1934 1st dance celebration

1940 Soviet time (1940–1991)

1947
1950
1955
1960
1965
1969
1975
1980
1985
1990

1962 1st youth celebration

1991 Regained independence (1991–now)

1994
1999
2004
2009
2014

How about dancing?



Dance may be just as old as song, but the Estonian dance celebration is much younger than the song celebration, more than half a century younger. The dancers were introduced to the song celebration for the first time in 1928. The first official nationwide dance celebration took place in 1963. The biggest dance celebration so far was in Tallinn in 1970, when 10 000 dancers performed; the oldest was 76 and the youngest four years old.



Estonian folk dances are not flamboyant: there are no acrobatic tricks. The most dramatic aspect is women's skirts flapping and fluttering when the women twirl or when men lift them up. The women's skirts certainly produce beauty and aspiration; everything else is kinetic energy serving this aspiration.

An Estonian dance is generally quite slow; people do not prance or jump about. This passive approach may be due to the exhausting daily work routine over the centuries. Another reason may be that Estonians noticed a significant law of physics a long time ago: whoever jumps up inevitably comes down, and this may harm a caterpillar or a worm, a butterfly or a flower. This should not happen! Estonians are forest people and believe in nature. The Estonian dance is therefore cautious, like dragging one's feet so that worms and snails have time to escape. Only if the soil is free of tiny creatures will the Estonian folk dance, thus emboldened, gradually involve feet thumping on the ground.

Dance celebrations are usually held together with song celebrations, although there have been separate dance festivals as well. Sometimes special dance festivals are organised, such as separate ones for women, men, children, grannies and grandpas, etc.

Every dance celebration for a wider audience usually has a theme, a story told to viewers in the language of folkloric choreography. All dances and movements thus follow certain dramaturgic patterns. The content in most cases tackles the eternal questions: who are we, where do we come from, and where are we dancing to? The replies naturally depend on the current power.

The last dance is always *Tuljak*, whether the winds are blowing from the east or the west.



Born into a choir

Over 40 000 people sing in choirs in Estonia. The number of choirs is 1350 and the number of specially trained choir conductors about 900. Approximately half of all Estonians manage to participate in choirs or dance groups at some point in their life! And they all take part at least once in a song or dance celebration.

There are more people singing in choirs here than in any other country. Choir singing is included as an optional subject in the curricula of most schools. As not all choirs make it to the festival, the competition is quite fierce. In the spirit of modern times, the TV programme “Battle of the Choirs” caused a new boom in choir singing. The seeds of this imported format certainly fell on fertile soil in Estonia. New choirs keen to perform on television were especially numerous from various offices and institutions.







estinst.ee/song2

From Beethoven to pop

Preparations for every song celebration start several years before, beginning with the competition to select the festival theme and the artistic director. The latter assembles a team of conductors of different types of choirs, who then put together the festival programme on the basis of the general theme. The programme is completed about 18 months before the festival. Hundreds of choirs thus have ample time to learn the songs to perfection.

Although performers mostly wear national costumes at the festival, as indeed do many members of the audience, this is not a folk festival. People sing songs written by professional composers or according to professional arrangements. The programme of the very first festival, for example, included works by Mendelssohn, Mozart and Beethoven, church hymns, as well as two songs by the Estonian composer Aleksander Kunileid.





estinst.ee/song3

Arvo Pärt



estinst.ee/song4

Veljo Tormis



estinst.ee/song5

Erkki-Sven Tüür

Today's festivals also present traditional repertoire, as well as contemporary music. Old pieces get modern arrangements, and composers are commissioned to write new works. Recent festivals have also delighted audiences with old favourite pieces of rock music, which acquire quite different dimensions when performed by a huge choir. All this greatly enlivens the general state of choir music.

The range of choirs performing at festivals is diverse: there are children's choirs, boys' choirs, female, male and mixed choirs, with wind instruments and various folk instruments joining in. Joint choirs always gather for the finale of the festival. Singers are placed on the big stage not according to their choirs, but on the basis of voice groups. Some songs of mixed and joint choirs are meant for eight different voice groups.

Three songs are performed at every single song celebration. When the fire is lit, people sing the opening song *Dawn*, followed by the Estonian national anthem; the festival always ends with *My Fatherland is My Love*. Partly because of this, the song has become more sacred for Estonians than the official national anthem.





Sometimes people confuse our song celebration with an ordinary festival and wish to come with their own programmes. However, the programme is the same for everyone, consisting of music by mostly Estonian composers. A choir from abroad wishing to take part must thus learn the repertoire in Estonian. In return for a registration fee, the choir is sent the sheet music. Recordings of all songs are available to make the learning easier, and these are even used by Estonian choirs. After learning the songs, the foreign choir records them and sends the recording to the main conductors. The foreign choirs are informed of whether they have been accepted about six months before the Estonian choirs are, giving them ample time to arrange their travel.

A song celebration usually accepts about 25 groups from abroad, with about 1000 singers. Choirs have come from Finland, Sweden, Britain, Germany, Russia, China, the USA and other countries.

Within a decade, a general song celebration takes place every year ending with 4 and 7, a youth song celebration takes place every year ending with 7 and 2. A dance celebration is also held at the same time.

2014, 4 July – 6 July Song and dance celebration	2017, 30 June – 2 July Youth song and dance celebration
2019, 5-7 July Song and dance celebration	2022, 1-3 July Youth song and dance celebration
2024, 5-7 July Song and dance celebration	2027, 2-4 July Youth song and dance celebration
2029, 29 June – 1 July Song and dance celebration	

Well before the invention of the compass, Estonia was situated at a key crossroads between east and west, on the border of land and sea. Many have come here, many have left and many have passed through. A multi-layered cultural heritage has formed over the course of time, and some fragments of the heritage may have survived here even better than in their places of origin. For example, Tallinn, as a successful Hanseatic town, managed to build a centre which is still one of the best preserved medieval towns in Europe.

European-type culture here, in fact, developed in the sphere of influence of Germany and Scandinavia. A network of hundreds of manor houses covers the entire country, and the manor centres still exhibit grand examples of various European architectural styles, alleys and parks. In 1632, the kingdom of Sweden opened its second university in Tartu (then Dorpat). Besides young Baltic German and Swedish noblemen, gifted Estonians finally made it to the university a few centuries later.

Tsarist Russia also had a major impact. Big factories were set up in towns, and Russian Orthodox churches sprang up among Catholic and Lutheran churches. Thanks to St Petersburg being nearby, many Baltic Germans, and gradually Estonians as well, had access to the advanced world of art and science; it was possible to pursue an academic or a military career. Half a century of Soviet rule also left strong traces, among them numerous examples of pompous and badly built architecture.



**Where is it,
actually?**



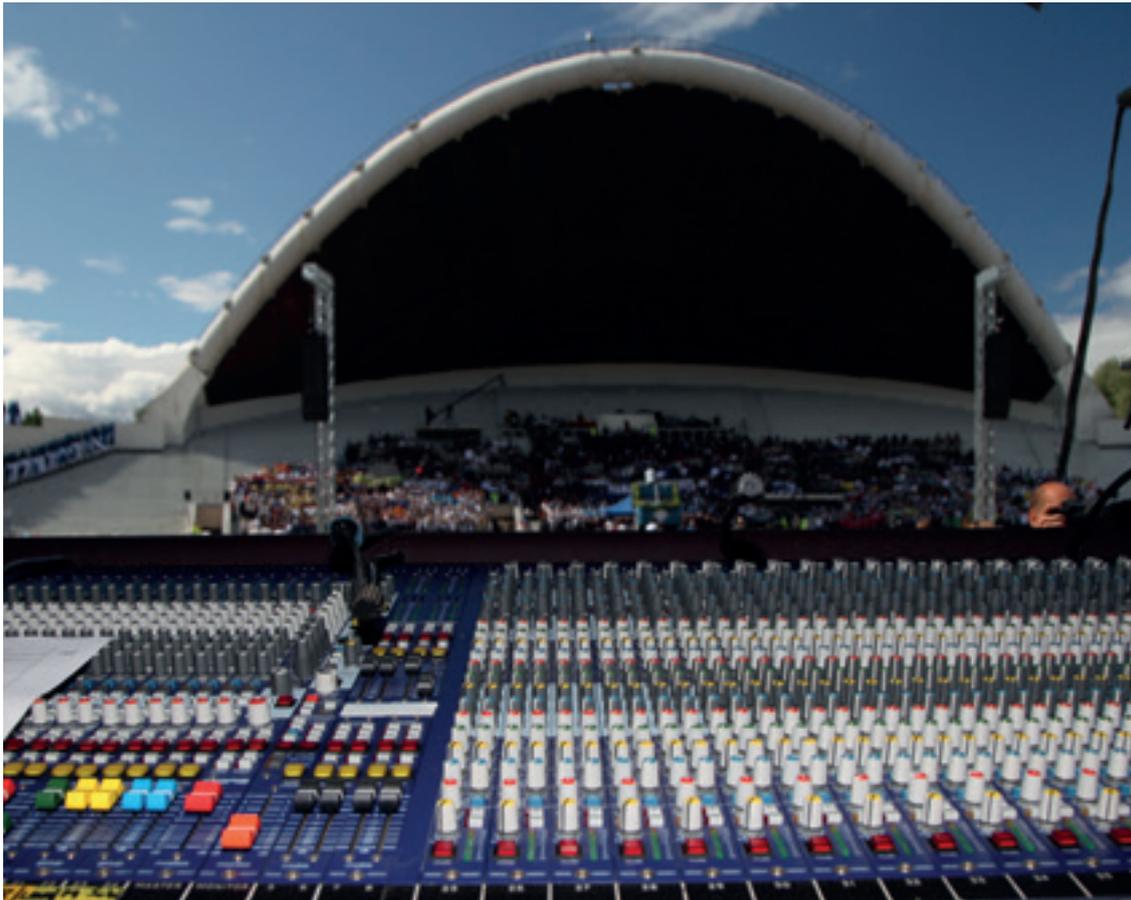
The regained independence made it possible to start anew. A lot has been achieved in the sphere of IT, and the electronic development of the state, in which people and the state communicate via the internet, has been highly successful.

Who exactly are the Estonians? Nobody knows for certain. After the latest ice age we arrived from the south, and we have stayed put for thousands of years. DNA proves that we are closely related to the Latvians, the East and West Baltic groups being anthropologically prevalent, but our language has relatives among Finno-Ugric peoples in faraway Siberia. Both our language and our mindset are thus quite different from all the surrounding Indo-European influences.

A few generations ago most Estonians lived in the country. Today, almost all urban Estonians have their own rural retreat. We tend our gardens, pick mushrooms and berries, and go hunting and fishing. The proper country life always includes a sauna, enjoyed all year round: water is thrown on hot stones, people whisk themselves (or others) gently with birch branches, and race from 100-degree heat to plunge into cool water or even snow. The predecessor of today's sauna is a smoke sauna without a chimney; its fans want to include it in the UNESCO World Heritage list.

The Estonian mainland has about 1500 lakes, and there is almost the same number of islands in the sea. This makes Estonia a paradise for both birds and bird-watchers. The Matsalu National Park in western Estonia has the largest diversity of birds in the whole of Europe, as significant migration routes cross here and tens of thousands of birds build their nests. Estonia is also among the most forested countries in Europe: half of the territory is covered with forest, providing a home for brown bears, wolves, deer, lynx, wild boar, foxes and other beasts. Many people enjoy walking in bogs on special plank paths, but anyone seeking peace and quiet can find a piece of untouched nature.





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