



Estonian Song & Dance Celebration

*The tradition of song
& dance festivals*

The song festival is nice. I have been to two. I enjoyed them very much. At the song festival, Estonian people come together and sing. There are many singers and when they all start singing, a shiver passes through your body. Song festivals are a tradition and must be continued. I hope my children and grandchildren can go to song festivals too. The interesting part is the procession. You walk a long way and don't notice at all how time passes.

Triin, 13 yrs.





Tradition

Thousands of feet tread the hot tarmac. They move briskly, merrily, and even old feet occasionally break into a caper. Necklaces jingle around women's necks; at a distance, a low hum of singing can be heard. A carnival of colours flashes by. Whatever is going on here? Nothing exceptional: a song festival procession is making its way through the town. This has been happening for more than 140 years. It is a dignified and joyful scene. Estonian choirs assembled for the first time in 1869 in Tartu. Local Germans

had their own choirs, having started organising their song festivals a dozen or so years before. The idea of a song festival was nothing new at the time. Johann Voldemar Jannsen, the initiator of Estonian song festivals, had – as early as 1858 – pointed to the example of Switzerland: “They sang in Zurich with such intensity that the walls trembled!” Encouraged by enlightened lords of the manor and incited by Estophiles, the first song days were organised by schoolmasters and pastors: In Põlva in southern



Estonia children allegedly sang together as far back as 1855. Soon after, similar tradition emerged in Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia's southern neighbours. The singing was complemented by folk dance, and today, the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian nationwide festivals officially called Song and Dance Celebrations have been included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The tradition was started by male singing. By the 1860s there were more mixed choirs in Estonia than male or female choirs, but they were not allowed to participate alongside male choirs and orchestras in the first song festival, for no other reason than “maintaining high morals”. Altogether 51 male choirs and brass bands with 850 singers and musicians came together in 1869 in Tartu – the first such undertaking now listed as the Song Celebration by UNESCO. Women were not included in the nationwide song festivals until 1891.

“He whose heart is not of stone and whose ears are not blocked, can only tremble and melt on hearing this,” wrote Perno Postimees about the Swiss choir members, and expressed regret that things were so poor in Estonia as far as singing was concerned – even where there were singers, there were no teachers or songs for four voices.



■ *Fredrik Pacius' My Native Land was performed here for the first time; this later became the Estonian national anthem.*

Circumstances in Estonia did not encourage the awakening nation. As a result of the Great Northern War (1700–1721) the country now belonged to the Russian tsarist empire, but German still dominated as a language and as a frame of mind. The intense Russification period started in the mid-19th century, but at the same time, being allowed to buy farms rather than just renting them, began to shape Estonian self-awareness which led to an increasing desire for sovereignty. The driving force of the national movement



became the new elite. They were primarily the emerging intelligentsia and the middle classes of merchants and artisans, but also the clergy of Estonian origin who had already established many choirs. For the peasants, the current political situation dictated by the Russian central powers, and cultural circumstances dominated by the Baltic Germans, had resulted in much rejection, aggravation and inability to make any decisions. Hence the 'awakened' peasantry was motivated to build up their own 'European culture' and national soci-

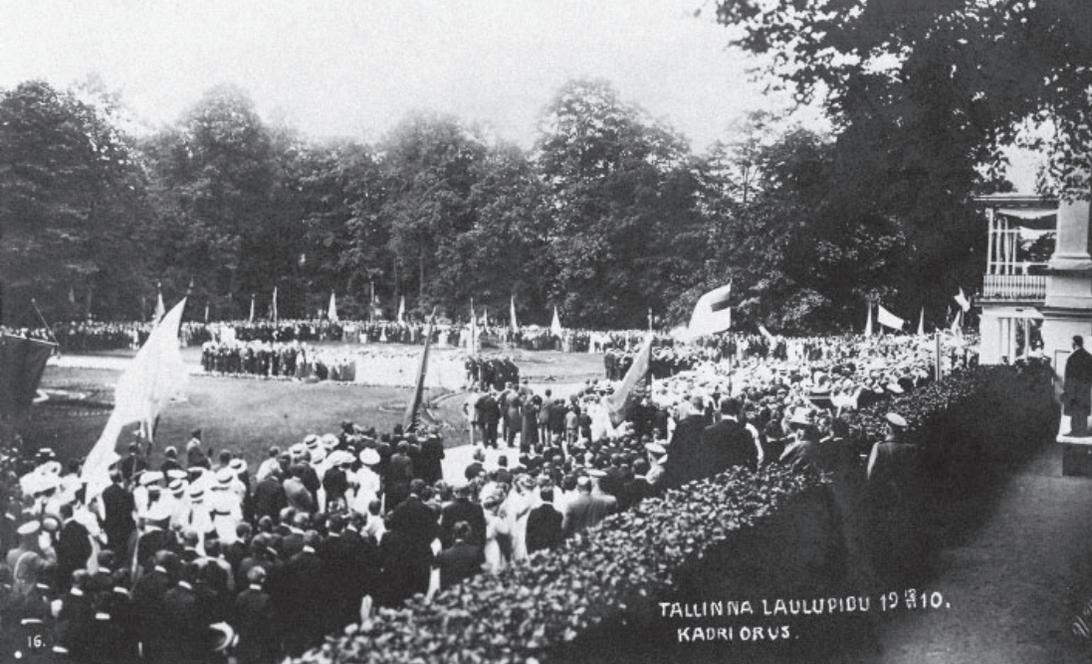
ety alongside the 'ready-made' German and Russian ones, instead of becoming part of them. During the Russification campaign, the central pressure of censorship and surveillance intensified on both German and Estonian national organisations, and a number of societies and newspapers were closed down. Besides agricultural societies, only ones for temperance, education, singing and fire-fighting were allowed. Thus various song, music and drama societies were the only forms of social activity officially available to the Estonians.

Song festivals & politics

In 1896 the Russian paper *Novye Vremya* admitted that singing in the Baltics was full of politics. There was a longer interval between the festivals, from 1896 to 1910. Only when Estonians for the first time won a majority in the Tallinn town council elections was the national song festival again on the agenda. Also, for the first time in 1910 the song festival was not associated with any imperial anniversary, although plainclothes policemen were placed among the singers who had to applaud and cheer the 'right' songs. Over the years, a song festival had to be

held to the glory of foreign rulers, be it the Russian tsar or Lenin-Stalin. None of them, however, succeeded in turning the festival into a eulogy to themselves. After the 'compulsory' songs, people have always sung the ones that come straight from the heart.

Strangely enough, the song festival tradition did not cease during various occupations. Preparations for a festival were made during the German occupation in 1943, but this festival never materialised due to the changed situation on the military front. However, the next song festival,



■ *Standing with their heads uncovered, people burst into My Native Land after the Russian anthem at the end of the festival, without a conductor; while the orchestra played The Pori March, which was banned in Finland because of mass protests. The governor ordered the conductor to be arrested and imprisoned for ten days. The punishment, however, was not carried out because the march was not banned in Estonia.*

the first under the Soviet regime, took place as early as 1947. This was clearly a propagandist undertaking: the authorities demanded that the number of singers had to be definitely bigger than at the previous festival in 1938 when Estonia was an independent country. As many singers and conductors had fled abroad at the end of the war, replacements were hastily sought: despite ration cards, choir members got enough cloth for their singing costumes, they were transported to Tallinn for free and provided with meals throughout the festivities.

During the Soviet occupation, and regardless of the communist rhetoric, there was never any doubt in the minds of Estonians that celebrating singing together was something familiar, essentially Estonian. A festival that was “national in form and socialist in content” suited also the authorities. Singers in national costume performed a repertory approved by the communist party, glorifying “the fraternal family of Soviet peoples” and “great communist leaders and teachers”. This concession was enough to allow people to sing whatever was dear to their heart.

Speech bursting into song is an escalation of vocal utterance, an expressive upgrading of the resources of enunciation. Its earmarks are emotional, whether poetic, lyrical, erotic, religious, patriotic, or magical. Speech alone can incite high emotions, but for true incantatory effect singing is paramount. The Latin verb 'canere' or 'cantare' meant not just 'sing' but 'utter a spell', and 'carmen' (earlier 'canmen') was specifically 'charm, incantation' ('malum carmen' was not a 'bad song' but a 'curse!'). The Greek cognate word of the English 'song' was 'omphé' (from Indo-European 'songhwi'), which in Homer always meant the voice of gods or oracles. Taking a cue from the Latin proverb 'vox populi vox dei', it is arguable that a people's unified voice manifests itself most clearly not in questionable uses and abuses of the ballot box, nor in the shenanigans of a parliament (which literally means 'babble!'), but in collective outbursts of spontaneous choral powers conducive to 'singing revolutions'. It is remarkable that fringe groups have preferentially turned to this kind of vocal culture as an effective means of concentrated self-expression, be they marginalized populations such as Basque, Welsh, Latvian, or Estonian, or oppressed and persecuted ethnic or religious minorities like African Americans or Mormons. Operatic choruses of enslaved exiles or spirituals are stray manifestations of this phenomenon. What an Eisteddfod, Estonian laulupidu, or the Tabernacle Choir have in common can be perceived by a sensitive Estonian or Latvian observer but never quite comprehended by a British, Russian, or American imperial mentality. The pathetic, failed attempts between 1945 and 1990 to sovietise Baltic song festivals by an overlay of Lenin cantatas and an infusion of Uzbek dancers merely confirmed the true nature of such events, which is an impressive affirmation of a small community's profound identity.

Jaan Puhvel

professor of classics and Indo-European mythology







■ *The end of the war was a tremendous relief for everybody and the fact that the song festivals were allowed to take place at all gave the impression, at least initially, that normal life had resumed its course and old traditions were to continue as before.*

Gustav Ernesaks' *My Homeland is My Love* became a sort of anthem where each word acquired special meaning that no alien power could suppress.

How much the authorities actually dreaded the singing people, was evident in the large number of guards and their eagerness to disperse people after the last song was performed. This was why the grounds were drowned in marching music to prevent any outbreak of spontaneous singing or dancing.

Music is the coded portrait of society. The Song and Dance Celebration is also such a portrait, in the most direct sense of the word: every five years, at least one sixth of the entire population takes part in this event, either as singers or spectators. In the course of history, this portrait has acquired special clarity and significance, especially at difficult times: singing together at song festivals helped this small nation, almost declared non-existent, to feel united and strong. Song festivals encouraged people to



■ In 1950, a year after the deportation of more than 20 000 people to Siberia and the forceful establishment of collective farms, the 13th song festival took place. Most of the local administration was replaced by people more to Moscow's liking. In 1955, the 24-member general organising committee only had two choir conductors, the rest were communist nomenklatura.

stand up for themselves and confirmed a national-cultural identity despite foreign oppression. Without the tradition that had lasted well over one hundred years, there would have been no 'singing revolution' that helped Estonia restore its independence. Masses of people, who expressed their will by singing, confused even the most dedicated military men.



■ The festivals were connected with the history of Soviet Socialist Estonia and had to celebrate its anniversary; the era starting with 1869 was carefully censored out of all symbols.



■ *In the late 1980s, people literally evoked independence by singing. No-one can forget the occasion where one third of the entire population gathered at the song festival grounds to celebrate. An exhilarating but at the same time somewhat uneasy feeling.*

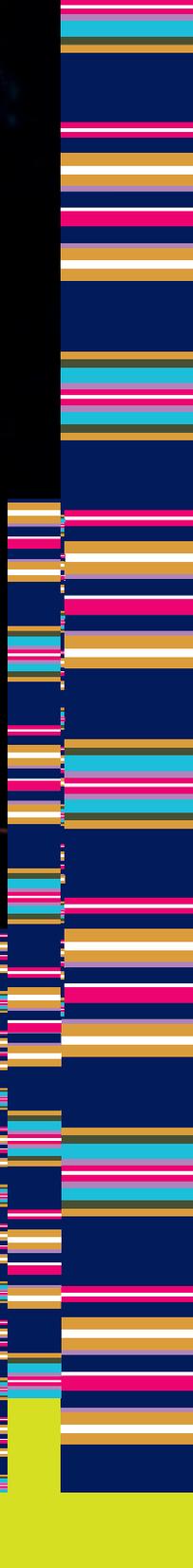
What makes the Estonian fondness for choir singing so remarkable is the fact that singing hymns was by no means a widely spread accomplishment here. Traditional runo song with its rhythmical, alliterative verse differs considerably from church music brought to Estonia by Christianisation. A 17th century source offers the following opinion about

Estonians singing in a Lutheran church: “They do not understand or grasp what they are singing – some of them sing or bleat like stupid sheep.” By the 19th century this epoch was over, Estonians had learned or been taught to sing hymns ‘properly’.



Traditional music was delivered a fatal blow by the hugely popular Moravian movement in Estonia in the 18th-19th centuries: seized by religious fervour, Estonians axed their bagpipes, forgot their old songs, dyed the colourful national costumes piously black and... gradually acquired a totally new (singing) culture. Old heritage, both oral

and material, was again gathered and recorded only in the middle of the 19th century. During the last quarter of the 20th century, choir songs and runo songs finally met. The work of composer Veljo Tormis managed to evoke some deep undercurrents in the Estonians, and old music got a new lease of life and found a new meaning.



Veljo Tormis'

(1930) father was an organist and choir master at the parish church of Vigala in western Estonia. He conducted the local choir and the rehearsals took place at their home; his mother had an alto voice. At the age of 12, Veljo Tormis went to Tallinn to study the organ at the Conservatory. This was a few years after the Soviet invasion forcefully integrated Estonia with the Soviet Union for the next 50 years. The organ class, traditionally related to religious service, was closed, and for a year Tormis studied choral conducting. In 1951 he continued his studies as a composer at the Moscow Conservatory, where his teacher supported his student's interest in national style based on the use of folk music. However, between 1960 and 1965, Tormis adopted modern composition techniques, and his attitude towards folk music became anti-romantic. There were three major factors in this shift; his study of the authentic sounds and rhythms of peasant songs in remote Estonian villages, the influence of the music of Carl Orff in the late 1950s, and his analysis of the choral music of Zoltán Kodály after a visit to Hungary in 1962. At the end of the decade Tormis finished his first great cycle Estonian Calendar Songs (1967) for a male and female choir where the primeval power of ancient folk tunes used as the material for original choral songs was fully manifest.



Songs of the festival

The choir consisting of thousands of amateur singers is a powerful instrument, and only the singers' dedication and hard work make it possible for the huge crowd to improvise under the conductor's baton. The unity of the general choir has been praised throughout the years, especially its rhythmic confidence and precision in its intonation. Conducting a choir of a thousand poses quite a challenge to the

conductor as well: only a true master of the craft is able to make this kind of 'instrument' keep every nuance of the sound.

In addition to joint choirs, their own repertoire is presented by children's, mixed, male and female choirs. Song festivals would not be possible if the years between the festivals were not devoted to



■ *To the singers, the emotional association with their choir conductor is the most important factor in the whole performance: the huge choir, eyes fixed on the conductor's hand, breathes as one single organism and makes the audience catch their breath as well.*

enthusiastic learning of songs. The repertory is compiled by the artistic director of the festival, conductors and the music board of our Choral Society.

Immediately after the first song festival, some complained that most of the repertory was of German origin. This 'error' was eagerly amended, and in 1910, for the first time, almost the entire programme

consisted of works by Estonian composers. Competitions were organised to find new repertory, the first taking place for the 1928 song festival.

Attempts have often been made to direct the preferences of the festival's amateur choirs. At the 1894 festival, when educated choral conductors of Estonian origin tried to turn the occasion into a

EESTI NAISLAUL 21

Tuljak
(F. Karlson)

6 lehek

mf terve vald on kokku aetud, kihelkonnas
p igat seltsi Viru-vanemu kaastegijad
mf kosin'd Männikese enda-le; Marmi,
f
p

The words "The whole parish was assembled..." start one of the most popular songs of all time. The first professional Estonian female composer and conductor, Miina Härma, who wrote over 200 choral works, blended various folk tunes into one, thus producing Tuljak. Arranged for dance, it is also very popular at our dance festivals.

Müsa Harma.

nd Kakkku Kutsuud, Kälä = li = si:

palu = tud! Tonni, parajam peiu,

nobendam neiu, läheb Tonniile mehele.



serious music event, they were faced with the opposition of singers who demanded old beloved songs...

In 2004 the artistic director of the festival admitted that finding new songs was complicated. A festival song must be, above all, simple. A really good song must have a clear and pithy text, although some would like to hear a more complicated repertory at a festival.

In 1999, professional choirs and orchestras performed at the festival, with a suitable repertory. Completely different concerts took place on both days in 2004 as well. One concert featured classical Estonian and world music. The other day belonged to all types of choirs, offering an overview of songs presented at festivals throughout the years.

The girls' choir Ellerhein which won the Grammy award in 2004 is but one example of the fruits yielded from choir singing so



far. Nearly all Estonian schools and many institutions have had their own choir(s) for decades.

The habit of singing has acquired new forms: the TV competitions for toddlers and children have been much loved for decades, and are never short of participants. The recently launched TV shows in the world seeking new pop stars have found a strong rival in Estonia – a programme of competing choirs. To get a chance to perform on this programme,

choirs were formed by groups of friends and even by members of parliament. Singing together is certainly an inseparable part of many a family party. However, you had better not ask an Estonian to perform a solo song. He or she will turn pale, get all flustered and claim not to be able to sing in tune at all. Things are quite different on stage: cheeks aflame, glance fixed on the conductor's hand and expressions, the singers are seized with such a sense of unity that their song could crumble walls. In all, 25 000 singers

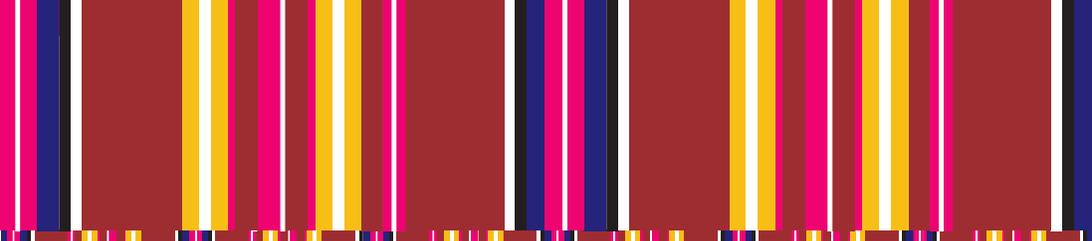
Gustav Ernesaks

(1908-1993) is a legend: his name is primarily associated with male singing, song festivals and one particular song composed by him that the Estonians have listened to, standing, for over thirty years. This song, My Native Land is My Love, the words of which were written by Lydia Koidula, sounds like an anthem or an incantation.

Already as a young man, Ernesaks was known as 'the old chap'; when he was old he was called 'the old man of song'. He believed in the might of music.

Ernesaks was one of the main enthusiasts of the song festival movement; he has been called the people's leader of the 'silent era' and a major figure in 20th century Estonia. His public addresses on TV on New Year's Eve were substitutes for presidential speeches. Gustav Ernesaks' work is extensive, most of it being choir songs, but he has also composed five operas. Many of his songs have been written with regard to the sound possibilities of big choirs.







Faithful copies of old clothes being made at special courses under the instruction of experts. The Estonian National Museum has been offering practical advice in making national clothes since the early 20th century. The wish of the then Museum director, expressed in 1922 that “those areas of Estonia where national clothes are no longer worn, should once again start using and respecting them,” has come true.

will take part in the 2009 Song and Dance Celebration: a huge choir like that will only perform a few joint songs, the rest of the performance is presented by different choirs following the logic of their own repertoires.

By no means everybody gets to sing at the national festival – every choir must go through a fine sieve. Thus, choirs of children, choirs from various societies, universities, institutions etc. and professional choirs keep practising. The closer the festival, the more often the choirs assemble. A song festival means four years of steady preparation, struggling to choir practice through snow and rain, encouraged by nice company and an elevated mood. This is something for life: some participants in the 2009 festival have

been taking part in earlier ones for over half a century.

National costumes have been connected with the song festival tradition from the very start: most choirs and many participants wear national costumes, quite a few of them made by the singers themselves.

Most of the Estonian national costumes used before the Second World War were made by the women themselves at various courses or at school, while the instructors had been trained at the Estonian National Museum. Today's singers naturally do not only wear clothes made by themselves. A need for national costumes as festive clothing has been the factor that has kept them alive and encouraged their production, whether in their original or stylised form.



Dance festival

Nobody knows when Estonians first danced. Maybe at the winter solstice, which they now celebrate as Christ's birthday. By stomping around and making noise, people back then tried to frighten the mythical wolf who had reputedly swallowed the sun.

In the 12th century, the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus wrote about the Estonian warriors: "...in order to hide that their mood had soured, they pretended to be merry by singing and dancing like bacchants ...".

Although the medieval inquisition and local pastors complained that dances were pagan rituals performed to the accompaniment of bagpipes, the practice stubbornly refused to die out. Apparently the Estonians were especially keen to enhance their fertility by dancing.

In the 19th century the world was conquered by the polka, and one hundred years later the Estonians were able to dance it in fifteen different ways. Dance was the most important entertainment for village people. Recording folk dances, like



When the applauding audience stands as one at the end of the dance festival, they are in for a treat – the dancers perform their ‘anthem’, a dance called Tuljak, which is a courting dance. Urged on by enthusiastic applause, this dance was encored already at the first festival in 1934. Tuljak has therefore been performed at all subsequent festivals. The dance shows a love story, starting with timid glances and culminating in a wedding.

the Finns did, became all the rage, and more dance groups were formed. The logical result of all this was the birth of the Estonian dance festivals, now part of the regular song and dance festivals organised every five years.

Today, 75 years have passed since the first dance and gymnastics festival in 1934, called the Estonian Games, when 1500 folk dancers performed between the gymnastics programmes. Inspired by the Nordic countries, the folk dance movement had spread throughout Estonia a



Anna Raudkats (1886 – 1965) studied folk dance at Helsinki University and organised trips to record old dances. She created Tuljak on the basis of folklore in the 1920s. “It came easily, one move after another, with no hard work on my part at all. It just shows how the relationship between a young man and a young woman developed, until the happy ending,” she said.



As if all this were not enough, the Estonians invented and realised the first male folk dance festival in the world, which took place in the small town of Rakvere in 2006. The festival tickets were promptly sold out.



Ullo Toomi (1902 – 1983), the ‘grand old man of Estonian folk dance’, managed to keep the dance festival tradition going despite the Soviet occupation. Inspired by Toomi and Raudkats, hundreds of dance instructors have emerged. At the end of the festivals, the dancers always express their gratitude to them, put garlands round their neck and carry them on their shoulders. A head of state can only dream of such affection from his people.

decade before this. Besides recording and teaching old dances, the movement also created new dances, connecting them with contemporary choreography. Dance festivals in fact grew out of the organised joint performances of these groups. “My pot-shaped cap fell off during the very first dance and remained in the grass to the end. But I felt so wonderful and proud,” said 98-year-old Ilse Tarang in 2004, a participant in the 1934 Estonian Games.

Folk dance is a significant leisure pursuit for many people, helping to secure their links with Estonian folk traditions. Today,



The renaissance of folk dancing is very much in evidence at the folk music festivals where at least half of the young audience can perform the old dances without any instruction. Folk dancing has brought together thousands of otherwise shy Estonians.

lights are switched on in dozens of community cultural centres all over Estonia, where the dance groups practice their steps. The dancers include pre-school children as well as men and women in their eighties. Once or twice a week people come together from as far away as 70 kilometres. These folk dancers total approximately 15 000, but only about half of them can participate in the 18th big dance event in the summer of 2009.

Whoever sees around 8000 people in national costumes forming spectacular patterns in the dance festival arena will

never forget it. One hour and a half of dancing, performed three to five times, requires years of hard work and dedication, in training dance instructors even at universities, in selecting the best pieces from folklore and in creating new dances. Thousands of dancers require schemes for movement and of course constant practice. The makers of special heel-less shoes and the weavers are hard at work. Everything culminates with a week away from home, sleeping on mattresses in Tallinn school assembly rooms and toiling away in daily rehearsals, until finally a miracle of dance emerges.

The Grounds

The Grounds that serve as the stage for our song and dance festivals are situated in an area between the sea and a high limestone slope. They offer a magnificent view, open to anyone standing there. There is an elegant stage with a capacious dais and acoustic screen, a carefully tended lawn on the slope amidst trees, and the silhouette of Tallinn stretching along a strip of the bay.

Alar Kotli designed a grand, dashingly curved stage for the 1960 celebration. This was certainly a remarkable achievement in the world of architecture at the time: the bold construction and suspending structure were all the rage in the 1950s. The main element is the huge arched awning, the curved form of which weighs 60 000 tons. The roof that curves in several directions acts as a huge acoustic screen, with the stage underneath accommodating 15 000 singers or, when the stage is turned into an auditorium, seating 7000.

Until 1960, the song festivals had taken place on an open-air stage completed in 1928 and twice rebuilt, which had become hopelessly cramped and uncomfortable. It is still unclear why the Soviet authorities decided to undertake the construction of a stage of that size: was it a calculated plan to squeeze song festivals into the Soviet mould for good, or did they actually care for the song festival tradition as a keeper of national spirit and a singular cultural phenomenon? It was the period of the 'thaw', 'rectifying the mistakes' of the Stalinist personality cult era. In any case, the huge undertaking was given the go-ahead.





Future of song festivals

No matter to whom the song festival was dedicated at different times in history, whether to a tsarist dynasty or the communist party, people always sang about their homeland. Estonians have forever been forced to be for or against somebody or something. Now when we no longer actually need to be against anyone, the mood of 'resistance' of the song festivals has disappeared. There were some who wanted a more 'professional repertoire', which would have meant a classical choir festival. The old tradition seemed on the verge of extinction.

The 2004 Song and Dance Celebration proved otherwise. There was a heavy rainfall on the very first day, and the organisers decided to cancel the four-kilometre festival procession to spare the people and the musical instruments. In response, people spontaneously gathered together and marched to their destination anyway. Within a few hours it was clear that people of a free and independent country still need their song festival. Defying the downpour, people rushed to join

the procession like a rescue operation, even those who perhaps had not initially planned to take part at all. Everyone realised that singing together was something much more special than the concert of one big choir.

The future of the song festivals is seen quite differently: some would like to turn it into a choir festival, some into a concert dedicated to large-scale types of music. The song festival generations are about to change — at present there are still those who have attended all the festivals since 1938 — and in order to keep younger people interested, a new, more suitable repertory is being sought for them.

The reply to the question whether a song festival is something more than a musical event, is probably Yes. The singers and dancers wearing national costumes have certainly encouraged the tradition of local handicrafts and the birth of new choral songs. International music awards to Estonian choirs have their roots in the song festival tradition. The question now



is how to maintain, and also advance, this heritage. Joint singing has boosted morale even after the Singing Revolution, the non-violent campaign that led to independence in 1991. To commemorate the Singing Revolution and to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia, tens of thousands of people gathered at the song festival grounds in August 2008.

The spirit of the century-old song festival has not vanished; more than ever, people now sing for and not against something. See you at the next song festival.



The joy of singing inspired the world's first punk song festival in 2008. Despite the general opinion that keeping a tune does not quite go together with punk, the 1500-strong punk choir was easy on the ear and proved that the song festival tradition was very much alive. Or, in the words of the press: "The punk song festival turned the subculture into national pride."



A song festival has never been fashionable because it is not a thing of fashion. A song festival is for the heart. Just like the Estonian language and spirit, like love itself.

Lennart Meri

former President of the Republic of Estonia







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