

The Singing Revolution: Presentation on the Documentary Film by James and Maureen Tusty

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I was torn between interjecting comments, as we view the film together, and remaining silent, so that you could experience the film by itself. I will follow the second of these procedures. Hopefully, after my comments and the question and answer (Q&A) period to follow, you will see the film again, if not several times, in its entirety. [Entire film shown, 1 hour 37 minutes].

My talk today will not be a formal paper. Rather, I'd like to explain or enlarge upon explanations already available about various elements of this film. My focus will be on Estonian culture and choral music. Rock, as a style which has challenged the status quo, was a vital part of the actual "Singing Revolution" and of this film, but will not be discussed here.

One item seen in the film when the *lauluväljak* or Song Festival Grounds stage is on screen is the large flame at the top of a tall tower to the right, when facing the stage. Inspired by the ritual of the Olympic torch, the flame is carried in relays from the university city of Tartu, the site of the first Song Festival in 1869, through the countryside of Estonia, to the *lauluväljak* of the capital city, Tallinn. The final torch bearer climbs up the stairs in the tower as the united chorus sings the traditional song "Koit" (Dawn) – the one by the early twentieth-century composer Mihkel Lüdig (in the film you will also hear the rock version by Tõnis Mägi) and the audience bursts into applause as the large flame atop the tower is lit.

I just used a term which requires a little bit of explanation: "united chorus." Almost all of the standard terms used to describe the voice grouping of a given chorus are familiar to us: mixed chorus, men's chorus, women's chorus, boys' chorus, girls' chorus and children's chorus. Many choruses in each of these categories perform together in the United Song Festival, which, as you know, takes place about every 5 years. The term I named before, which is used specifically with reference to the *laulupidu* or Song Festival, is *ühendkoor* or united chorus. It is made up of all the other groups – hence the multi-generational nature of the performers. Estonian composers may write specifically for this group, or take a choral song written for another grouping and write a version for united chorus so that it can be sung by 20,000 or so singers at a *laulupidu*. (*Üld* = united, *laul* = song, *pidu* = party or festival.)

A number of the speakers in the film testify to the importance of choral singing and of the *laulupidu* in Estonian culture. A couple of examples should confirm those statements. Living in Tallinn, as I did in 1993-94, I was amazed to discover that many office buildings had a large room with a piano – for rehearsals by choruses made up of personnel who worked there, as well as by other community choruses. The last of my six trips to Estonia was in 2005. I can not say whether or not this practise has continued. I can say that every city and most towns have a small *lauluväljak* with a permanent shell behind the performers – choruses – and benches for the audience. (Similarly, band stands on New England town greens used to bring their communities out in fine weather.)

Let's turn now to two choral songs sung at Song Festivals in the film. In your handout I have given their complete texts and translations. The history and significance of "*Mu isamaa on minu arm*" (My fatherland is my dearest) is amply documented in the film and in the resource materials contained in the three-CD set for educators. My translation varies somewhat from the

one given there since, as a conductor, I always want my singers and audiences to have a word by word, literal translation. If you own the CD of the film you can use it to follow along with the song – when you hear its first performance in 1947 and then at the 100th anniversary Festival in 1969 and finally in the 2004 *laulupidu* at the end of the film.

The second song, “*Ilus maa*” (Beautiful Land), is used in a way that is different from many of the others in the film. The performance, as well as the musical and verbal content of the other songs themselves, is the object of our attention at the time they are sung. Much of “*Ilus maa*” is used that way; in rehearsal scenes of the Revalia boys’ chorus (conducted by Hirvo Surva) and the Ellerhein girls’ chorus (conducted by Tiia-Ester Loitme) and in the 2004 Song Festival performance by united choruses, with Surva conducting. While “*Mu isamma on minu arm*” is a cappella, “*Ilus maa*” is accompanied by a concert band, which opens the piece and is heard at the beginning of the film. All 163 measures of the song are performed there, but as under-scoring, while the narrator speaks and various scenes appear on the screen. The A section of the music, in F# major with a lyrical tune and syncopated rhythms, accompanies bucolic scenes, but when the B section is heard, in e aeolian, then b aeolian, the Soviet or Nazi forces appear on screen, showing the history of the occupation of Estonia by these two oppressors. The change of key is emphasized by a change of timbre from mixed voices to men’s voices alone. The quality of the music communicates the desired feeling to non-Estonian speakers – but the meaning of the text makes these scenes all the more poignant for those who understand the words, which is why I have provided them for you in the appendix:

The land must be filled with children / And filled with children’s children . .
. . And filled with songs and children . . . And fight where possible / Where
possible and necessary / Since life is temporary / And the future belongs to
the children . . .

(In Estonian, the poetry reads like a chant, related in its repetitiousness to the text of an ancient *regilaul* or traditional song.) For the extended coda the last two lines of text of the A section return, the music now in A major. A song that sums up so much of what the film is about needs to be heard again – and so it is, as under-scoring to the bios of many of the film’s speakers and then during the final credits.

Back to some more general observations. Singing was fundamental to the independence movement known as “The Singing Revolution,” but along with it, and communicated in the film, was the characteristic patience and self control of Estonians. There is a cultural approval of patience which, as explained by conductor Hirvo Sirva in the film, was fortified by singing. Patience as a national quality seems to have developed through 700 years of foreign rule which ended, temporarily, in 1920 with the Treaty of Tartu. Having patience was a survival technique.

In South Africa, where I spent 3 weeks this spring, I learned of the vital connection between singing – not only in organized choruses, but by everyone – in the fight against apartheid. And there, unlike in Estonia, group singing is virtually always accompanied by body motions. Organized choruses still sing these songs, never forgetting the political impact they had when, for example, the young people in Soweto demonstrated against the imposition of instruction in Afrikaans in their classes. Unlike in Estonia, many students were killed by government forces.

Without having done extensive research on this issue, my guess is that every revolution has had its songs: Perhaps there are also songs for civil wars. What, then, was so special about the Estonian “Singing Revolution?” There was no one local Martin Luther King or Mahatma Ghandi showing the way for non-violent activism. Tentatively, I can suggest that Estonia’s

history of survival, despite centuries of foreign domination, which encouraged patience as a cultural virtue, combined with the ancient singing of traditional songs throughout their existence, plus the newer tradition of Song Festivals, which remained, until recently, a combination of music and somewhat subdued political action, is what distinguishes the political effect of Estonian choral song from many others. We must note that some elements of this history were shared by the two other Baltic nations, Latvia and Lithuania, yet there were differences in their drives to independence, reflecting different national characteristics. Latvians and Lithuanians considered Estonians to be “stone faced,” never showing their emotions. Venno Laul, former Rector of the Estonian Music Academy (at that time named the *Konservatoire*), founder and conductor of the Estonian Boys’ Choir, and briefly a member of Parliament (gifted Estonians tend to fill many positions because in a country of 1.3 million people there aren’t that many to call upon), Venno told me this story: When the Estonian Boys’ Choir made their first concert tour to the United States they began as a group of young Estonians who sang superbly but without any expression on their faces. By the end of the tour, according to Laul, their faces were as expressive as their singing. Estonians learn quickly. In the film, individual faces in the crowds of singers were expressive – yet I think that this stereotype has had some validity in the past. Firsthand exposure to other cultures in the last 15 years has certainly already modified many aspects of Estonian behaviour.

Before you ask questions of me I would like to conclude my remarks with two questions to which I have not yet found answers:

1. How can one explain the cultural explosion that occurred at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in Estonia (and in Finland)? For centuries, Estonians had been serfs. When freed from that legal status by the Tsar in the early nineteenth century, they were still peasants. Suddenly, many of them (many, relative to their small total population) became professional composers, poets, playwrights, novelists and visual artists as well as performers to present the music and plays. How did they become world-class artistic creators in such a short time?
2. Mass singing can be an expression of intense national pride, particularly during a period of striving for independence or equality. But what circumstances can turn these feelings into Hitlerian chanting of “*Sieg Heil!*”

Perhaps during the next few days some of you can offer answers to my questions. Now it’s time for yours.

Appendix

Resources for more information about the film:

www.singingrevolution.com This web site provides a large amount of background material for the film: the history of Estonian Song Festivals, the composer John Kusiak presents the film score, examples of Estonian folk music, the rock songs that were “the sound of revolution,” about the Tustys and others involved in making the film, an important essay on the Song Festivals, as well as a store through which one can purchase the DVDs, book, and CDs.

The Singing Revolution three-disc DVD set, educational version 2.0, which includes the film, the film with overdubbed commentary by the Tustys, over four hours of additional interview

segments, seven newsreels from the 1930s to the 1950s, numerous printable historical documents and maps and an instructor's guide.

The Singing Revolution – How Culture Saved a Nation, the book by Priit Vesilind with James and Maureen Tusty, based on their film (Tallinn: Varrak, 2008).

Texts and literal translations of two important choral songs heard in the film:

1. **Mu isamaa on minu arm**

My fatherland is my dearest

This song, which became the unofficial Estonian national anthem, was a setting of a poem by the beloved Estonian poet Lyida Koidula (1843-1886). Composed in 1947 by Gustav Ernesaks (1908-1993), the special importance of the song in the independence movement is referred to in the film and its history is given in the Instructor's Guide. Using archival footage, it is heard in the film as performed in earlier Song Festivals. Here is a slightly different translation from the one partially quoted in the film and given in its entirety in the Guide. The following is adapted from a translation by Heli Kopti:

Mu isamaa on minu arm,
kell' südant annud ma,
sull' laulan ma, mu ülem õnn,
mu õitsev Eestimaa!
Su valu südames mul keeb,
su õnn ja rõõm mind rõõmsaks teeb,
mu isamaa, mu isamaa!

My fatherland is my dearest,
To you I pledge my heart,
In joyful song I celebrate,
My sacred land, Estonia!
Your suffering seethes in my heart,
I live and breath your blessed air,
My fatherland, my fatherland!

Mu isamaa on minu arm,
ei teda jäta ma,
ja peaksin sada surma ma
seepärast surema!
Kas laimab võõra kadedus
sa siiski elad südames,
mu isamaa, mu isamaa!

My fatherland is my dearest,
I'll not abandon you,
And if I must die a hundred deaths
I'll gladly die for you!
If strangers seek to defame you
My heart shall glorify your name,
My fatherland, my fatherland!

Mu isamaa on minu arm,
ja tahan puhata,
su rüppe heidan unele
mu püha Eestima!
Su linnud und mull' laulavad,
mu põrmust lilled õitsetad,
mu isamaa, mu isamaa!

My fatherland is my dearest,
And when I breathe my last,
Upon your breast I'll lay me down
My sacred land of Estonia!
Your birds shall sing me lullabies,
Your flowers from my grave shall rise,
My fatherland, my fatherland!

2. **Katkend kantaadist *Ilus maa***

Excerpts from the cantata *Beautiful Land*

This choral piece, with text by the eminent contemporary Estonian poet Hando Runnel (b. 1938) and music by Rein Rannap (b.1953), is used dramatically in the film. Composed in 1982, it was

revised in 1996. In the film it is performed in the 2004 Song Festival. The literal translation given below is by Ell Tabur and Valdar Oinas.

<p>Ilus, ilus, ilus on suvi ja õhtu, loojangu värve langeb me pääle. Ilus on öö, tähtede vöö, võimsaid soove kiirgab me pääle. Tähed, mis õhtuti tõusevad, hoomikul tagasi rändavad Isade maale, isade maale. Õhtud mis öö aega sõuvad, hulguvad, otsivad, jõuavad, pärale hommiku maale, Isade maale, isade maale. Ilus, ilus, ilus on maa, mida armastan.</p> <p>Maa tuleb täita lastega ja täita lastelastega ja lastelastelastega maa tuleb täita lastega ja laulude la lastega ja kõige vastu võidelda mis võõrastav või vaenulik mis vaenulik või valelik ja võidelda kus võimalik kus võimalik ja valjalik sest elu kõik on ajalik ja lastele jääb tulevik ja maa ja kõik see minevik maa tuleb täita lastega ja lastelastelastega kui olev tahab olemist ja tuleviku tulemist maa tuleb täita lastega maa oma enda lastega ja laulude ja lastega maa tuleb täita lastega. Ilus, ilus, ilus on maa, mida armastan.</p>	<p>Beautiful, beautiful is the summer and its evening, The colors of the sunset descend upon us. So beautiful is the night, with the stream of stars, Majestic wishes radiate upon us, The stars that rise in the evening At daybreak travel back To the land of forefathers, to the land of forefathers The evening has rowed all night, Wanders, searches, arrives In the morning at land, To the land of forefathers, the land of forefathers. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful is the land That I love.</p> <p> The land must be filled with children And filled with children's children And with children's children's children The land must be filled with children And with songs and children And fight against all unfriendly things Which are timid or hostile Which are hostile or false And fight where possible Where possible and necessary Since life is temporary And the future belongs to the children And the land and its past The land must be filled with children And with children's children's children When the present needs to be And the future must come The land must be filled with children The land's very own children And with song and with children The land must be filled with children. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful is the land, That I love.</p>
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References

Daitz, M.S. *Ancient Song Recovered: The Life and Music of Veljo Tormis* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2004). See especially chapters II, "Estonian History and Tormis," and V, "The Estonian Choral Tradition."

Discussion Forum: *The Singing Revolution*, four articles in *Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies Newsletter*, XXVIII/1, Winter 2009, pp 3-8.

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Segakoori laulud, Üldlaulupidu Tallinna Lauluväljakul XXIV [Songs for Mixed Choruses, United Song Festival XXIV at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds] (Tallinn: Kirjastus "Muusika," Eesti Laulu- ja Tansupeo Sihtasutus, 2003). Scores for all the 2004 Song Festival songs for mixed and united choruses, several of which are heard in the film. Check availability with the Estonian Choral Society.

Raun, T.U. *Estonia and the Estonians*, Studies of Nationalities in the USSR. (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987; 2nd ed, updated, 2001). If you are interested in reading the details of Estonian history, this remains the fundamental book in English.