

**Sonja Greiner, Kaie Tanner**

# **EUROPA CANTAT XX TALLINN 2018 TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE FIELD OF (IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE**

## **The Tradition of Singing in Groups**

Group singing is a tradition almost as old as humanity. Family members have been singing lullabies to their children for thousands of years and in many communities, singing together was, and remains, an essential form of passing on knowledge and traditions or marking important milestones such as birth, marriage, work, and death.

In Europe, choral singing as an organised form of collective singing – with a group of people coming together regularly, learning and rehearsing new songs, and preparing performances – is a more recent phenomenon. It began with sacred music being sung by monks in the form of Gregorian chants which developed into polyphonic singing related to different religious traditions. Later, non-religious songs were arranged or written for multipart choirs. Subsequently, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, large numbers of choirs were created with certain European countries taking the lead. Many of these choirs were all-male choirs, and some of them connected singing with political engagement. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the types of choirs diversified in size, composition and styles. Today, an impressive 4,5% of the population, or 37 million people in continental Europe (22 million in the European Union alone) regularly sing together with male, female, mixed, children's, girls' or boys' choirs or vocal ensembles, singing all kinds of sacred and secular music (see [www.SingingEurope.org](http://www.SingingEurope.org)).

## **The EUROPA CANTAT Festival**

Every three years since 1961, the European Choral Association – Europa Cantat has brought together several thousand singers of all kinds and ages from around fifty countries to one city to learn and sing together, hear choral music from across Europe and beyond, and meet people who share the same enthusiasm for choral and vocal music, from Gregorian chant to vocal pop. In 2018, the festival was hosted by the Estonian Choral Association in Tallinn, Estonia, a country renowned for its strong and proud choral tradition.



*Vocal Jazz atelier at the EUROPA CANTAT XX Festival*

four to eight days for participants to learn and then perform new music with renowned conductors, and numerous morning sessions allowed singers to discover new genres while conductors attended lectures and workshops with their peers.

The festival was a very special place to be during the European Year of Cultural Heritage – and an inspiring one. When applying for the label of the European Year of Cultural Heritage, the aim was to show the connection between singing and heritage in various ways, contributing to the year’s aim of involving citizens in events that promote a sense of belonging to a common European space, culture and heritage.

### **The Estonian Song Celebrations as Intangible Heritage**

Celebrating Estonia’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence (as well as that of Latvia and Lithuania in the same year), a special anniversary concert was planned on the Song Festival Grounds with



*Song Celebration Grounds*

The EUROPA CANTAT XX Festival in Tallinn in 2018 hosted more than 4000 participants (full choirs, individual singers, conductors, composers and choral managers) in addition to several guest choirs and ensembles, orchestras and instrumental groups, individual guests and volunteers, reaching a total number of over 6000 people involved. 184 concerts and open-air performances were offered during eight days, 31 ateliers were set up over

its enormous sound shell (that was built for 18 000 singers but can accommodate up to 25 000), thus building a bridge to the cultural heritage of the Baltic tradition of huge Song Celebrations.

For Estonians, this tradition began in 1869, when 845 singers attended the very first Song Celebration. In 150 years, the Song Celebrations have clearly influenced political developments in Estonia

and the manner in which Estonians think. The tradition has also had a strong impact on the development of the Estonian language and culture, and twice in history it has encouraged the people of Estonia to stand up against foreign powers and fight for their freedom and independence. This phenomenon has been referred to as the ‘Singing Revolution’ which led to the country’s independence in 1991.

Nowadays, Estonians hold a Song Celebration once every five years when approximately 25 000 performers gather in Tallinn at the beginning of July. Not everyone gets to sing at the Song Celebration – performers have to learn the programme of the Song Celebration concert (around 15 songs in Estonian) and then pass auditions. Since there are over 37 000 choir singers in Estonia, it has become necessary to separate children’s and youth choirs, including boys’ and girls’ choirs, and to organise separate Song Celebrations for them between the regular Song Celebrations, which also takes place every five years.

Following rehearsals with all the performers, important traditional elements of the Song Celebration include a parade of all the performers from the centre of Tallinn to the Song Festival Grounds (approximately 5 km), lighting the fire of the Song Celebration, concerts on two days and the closing ceremony. Hence, taking part in a Song Celebration is challenging for all performers, but the effort they all make leads to the birth of a miracle which unites the whole nation and offers a unique experience to everyone who is there to witness it.



*Estonian Children at the EUROPA CANTAT XX Festival*

Photo by Valdur Lähmus, © Estonian Choral Association / EUROPA CANTAT XX Tallinn

In 2003, the tradition of song celebrations in the Baltic countries was added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list.

### **Cultural Heritage – Alive and Adaptable**

Retaining cultural heritage does not mean that nothing can be changed – it can be filled with life and adapted to different realities and situations. This is why the original Song Celebration was not presented at the EUROPA CANTAT Festival. Instead, it was adapted to the needs of this event: the setting was modified, placing the festival participants and the audience in the sound shell, something non-Estonian singers rarely get to experience, and the workshops and choirs performing on a stage in front of it. However, we also made the shell sing together with some Open Singing songs, to get a taste of what the Estonians generally feel when they gather for their big festivals every five years. Furthermore, the programme was a mix of traditional Estonian dances and songs with modern choral music – including songs presented by an atelier titled *Happy Birthday Estonia* with the same mix, sung by more than 250 participants and supported by several hundred Estonians for the Estonian songs.

### **Songs to Remember Forgotten Languages and People**

There are over 7000 languages in the world, many of which are endangered. The Estonian composer Veljo Tormis dedicated the cycle *Forgotten peoples* to

Fennic ethnic groups that are nearly extinct (minorities in Finland, Estonia and north-western Russia). In the workshop *Forgotten Peoples and Languages*, choirs learned and performed excerpts from this cycle as well as other pieces from 'dying' languages. It was a way to remind people of the rich intangible heritage found in choral traditions around Europe and the need to preserve this unique diversity.



*Choir Night at Tower Square in Tallinn, Estonia*

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### **Singing in Heritage Places**

With the festival concentrated in the middle of Tallinn and the use of venues in the historic city centre, participants were permanently surrounded by beautiful, tangible cultural heritage, as the fairy tale-like Old Town with its Hanseatic streets is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Walking the streets during the festival felt like visiting an open-air museum, yet the town was full of people and live music. Every afternoon, open singing was offered at the Town Hall Square, and festival participants, tourists and citizens of Tallinn alike sang and danced together. During the Night of Choirs, festival participants sang in beautiful courtyards and along the historic city wall, offering a beautiful and special setting to choirs performing traditional as well as modern music.

We also used an important industrial heritage site as a performance venue. The Cultural Cauldron, a former power plant, is located between the Old Town and the sea and was originally built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with various additions made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The building is listed as a heritage monument and is owned by the city of Tallinn. Choirs filled the building with songs from different countries and traditions during the Promenade concert, where the audience could move from one hall to the next every 30 minutes. On other evenings, the venue was used to present modern and popular music as well as innovative cross-over projects such as the performance of EuroChoir, atelier concert of Young Pop, Latin-American music, children's songs from cartoons etc, bringing together different generations.

### **Conclusion**

The EUROPA CANTAT Festival is an example of how cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, can be kept alive through music, combining the old and the new, adapting traditions to new needs, connecting roots to the future.

*EUROPA CANTAT Festivals: [www.europacantat.org](http://www.europacantat.org)*

*Festival EUROPA CANTAT XIX in Tallinn: [www.ectallinn2019.ee](http://www.ectallinn2019.ee)*

*European Choral Association – Europa Cantat:  
[www.EuropeanChoralAssociation.org](http://www.EuropeanChoralAssociation.org)*